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978-0-521-09819-9 - African Women in Towns: An Aspect of Africa's Social Revolution

Kenneth Little

Excerpt

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Introduction

Those authors and editors who so diligently list the hundreds of 'personalities' and 'leaders of emergent Africa' rarely include as many as a handful of women (see Segal, 1961, and *Africa South of the Sahara*, 1971–2), and so we must not be surprised that African women's contemporary role has largely escaped systematic treatment by social anthropologists and sociologists. It is true that a few relatively comprehensive works do exist, including *Women of Tropical Africa*, edited by Denise Paulme (1963), and the authoritative *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life*, edited by Arthur Phillips (1953). The former work, however, is mainly concerned with women's traditional position, and in the latter volume Lucy Mair's important contribution was reprinted in 1969 (see References Cited). This reports Godfrey Wilson's (1941–2) pioneering study of Broken Hill in what was then Northern Rhodesia, and it also includes data concerning women in South African townships and urban locations. For much the greater part, however, it deals with the rural context and has little to say about women's urban situation.

Another anthropologist, Peter Gutkind, has several lengthy articles, but these centre more on the urban family as such than on women's position. The same author has collaborated, in addition, with Aidan Southall in a valuable work entitled *Townsmen in the Making* (1957) which includes a good deal of information about townswomen as well, but in terms of Kampala–Mulago alone. The scope of Laura Longmore's illuminating *The Dispossessed* (1959), is also limited to a single city, and much the same is true of most of the literature which bears directly or indirectly upon the urban position of women in the Francophone countries. Among the most important contributions in the latter context are those by Hennin, Balandier, Bernard, Mercier, Comhaire-Sylvain, Meillassoux and Rivière. Two stimulating articles by Audrey Wipper on the political activities of women in Kenya

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deserve special notice; more generally, the pioneering studies of Clyde Mitchell, Gluckman, and Mayer provide a general background that no student of urbanization can ignore, while the Hannas (1972) have provided an invaluable source book. Very recently, the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* has brought out, under Wipper's editorship (1972), a special number of useful articles concerned solely with women.

The purpose of this present work is to pick up these numerous and varied threads and to weave them into a comprehensive pattern. The basic reason prompting this ambitious task was the observation on the part of this author and of others that African women's relationships with men are gradually undergoing radical alteration. Structural change of such great significance has implications for African social change in general, and so I decided to examine women's adaptation to the 'modern' city because, as will be explained later (Chapter 1), these particular urban populations possess certain social, economic and demographic characteristics in common. This limits the number of variables to be taken into account and so provides a specific sociological context for the general study of women's position.

This procedure, I submit, overcomes part of the objection which can otherwise be justifiably levelled against an investigation which seemingly takes for its canvas virtually the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. Not only does it mean that in methodological terms (see Chapter 1) this book's scope is relatively narrow, but that analysis is confined as far as possible to the bare essentials of women's social relationships. In other words, since this work is not in any sense encyclopaedic, the reader will find no record of customs associated with women unless they are relevant to women's contemporary role in the towns.

But that a book of this kind suffers from certain unavoidable drawbacks is equally plain. For example, I found the greatest difficulty in summing up for sociological purposes the legal situation in a general way. Even in colonial times the law regarding 'modern' matrimonial cases, for instance, varied a good deal and was often by no means clear. Since Independence seems to have made such legislation even more diversified I decided, discretion being the better part of valour, not to go into details over matters that in the circumstances involve legal expertise. A further admission is my dependence upon a large number of other students' work. The main reason for this and for my wide quotations of their writings, is that it is naturally impossible for a single field-worker to cover in depth more than a very limited number of urban situations. True, with the exception of South Africa and

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Zaire, I have visited and spent varying periods of time in most of the towns and urban centres named in the text. This includes some participation in the life and activities of both 'down-town' streets and compounds and residential suburbs, as well as helping farming families to harvest rice. But this experience has been gained over the years, and it clearly does not add to a full-length study on my own of every facet of African urban women's position. Secondly, it is binding on anthropologists to preserve their informants' anonymity if, and when, there is a likelihood of embarrassment being caused. Since, therefore, at the present stage of African urban development the source of particular incidents and categories of information can readily be traced, I have omitted certain case-studies of my own and have quoted in their place the equally relevant material of other authors, especially novelists. The appendix contains a good deal of illustrative material.

A further important difficulty in writing this kind of book is that such is the dynamism of the African situation that one's general frame of reference tends very quickly to get out of date. There are, for example, the results of frequent coups and counter-coups to contend with, and differences in time often make it difficult to assess the actual comparability of seemingly similar phenomena. For this reason, and because of the scarcity in some African regions of compact documentation, I have been obliged to 'telescope' a good deal of material. In consequence, some generalizations are offered for which continuous evidence is lacking, and some of my suggestions owe as much to speculation as to social fact.

My excuse – if there is any for such abuses of scientific method – is a desire to open up the question of African women's position for general discussion. Anthropological readers will be aware already of the difficulties of explaining this matter to the layman, and so for him I have pointed tentatively to some analogies with the American racial problem and with Victorian womanhood. It might have been useful to elaborate on the latter, but as present space does not permit this, I propose to deal with it in a later publication.

Finally, in respect of the data it will be obvious that whereas there is much rich and relevant material for the western side of the continent, the picture presented on the eastern and central parts is more rudimentary. For the latter, the available material is with important exceptions less promising, and its relative scarcity reflects, I believe, these regions' slower rate of change. On the other hand, although more data are available for southern Africa

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than my list of references suggests, I made no attempt to use them because apartheid's existence raised problems which, in my view, would have necessitated an additional chapter.

My wide employment of writings by African novelists may also be noticed. The reason is not simply that the portions cited describe relevant social situations more vividly and more graphically than my own pen could. It is also because the work of writers like Achebe, Aluko and Ekwensi often provides first-class source material which, as 'case-studies', is just as valuable as the anthropologist's own notes. I am not competent to comment on the literary value of these novelists' writings, but I can vouch for their sociological validity. Indeed, in that regard, some passages – as in Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*¹ – are superlative stuff and fully confirm Leonard Plotnicov's observation (1967) to the effect that satisfactory study of the modern African city requires 'the research skills of the social scientist and the sensitivity of a good novelist'. Plotnicov's remark is true because there is an ebullience and vitality which the ordinary academic monograph generally fails to convey to all. Whether it be experienced in the steamy heat of the mid-day sun, within the daylight-clear rays of the dry-season moon, amidst the multifarious odours of the market place, in the bustle of a 'down-town' street through whose doors calypso, high life, and jive pour from a dozen radiograms in competition with drums from an adjacent compound, or even on the carefully clipped lawns of an élite couple's bungalow, there is a special urban 'atmosphere' to capture. Among 'serious' writers only Leslie, whose social survey of Dar es Salaam is accompanied by a 'scenario', has attempted this feat.

Finally, since it is part of my thesis that differences in the possession of formal education and of Western ideas and habits are sociologically significant for social change, my references to various categories of person are intended to carry the following fairly specific connotations:

Educated person: one who has completed a course of study at a secondary school, or its equivalent.

¹ A proposal to make a film out of *Jagua Nana* raised a storm in the Nigerian Federal House of Assembly. Those who objected to the idea argued that to portray a woman of 'Jagua's' type would denigrate Nigerian womanhood in the eyes of the outside world. Such fears were probably justified because the producers of films must necessarily employ stereotypes familiar to cinema-goers who, in the case of the Euro-North American public, would find it difficult to comprehend the subtleties of 'Jagua's' personality without reading Ekwensi's whole book. (See Chapter 6 in this connection.)

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Literate person: one who has attended school for a number of years but without completing his education at a secondary school, or its equivalent. (It excludes, for present purposes, a person who is literate only in Arabic.)

Civilized woman: one who possesses 'Western' aspirations and follows certain customs of a 'Euro-North American' kind which have usually been acquired at school.

Semi-literate person: one who has very little or no formal education but can understand or make himself understood in English or French.

Illiterate person: one who has no formal education and who cannot understand or make himself understood in English or French.

African élite (except where more specifically defined): persons in the senior ranks of the administration, including ministers, party leaders, and top civil servants; persons in professional occupations, such as doctors, lawyers, university teachers, heads of important secondary schools and of training colleges; holders of important traditional titles; top-ranking Christian clergy.²

I also attach a specific meaning to the following two expressions:

Tribal group: a group of people who identify with each other, principally on the basis of a common language or dialect and set of traditional customs somewhat different from those of their neighbours.

Ethnic group: usually a relatively large population, sometimes comprising a number of individual tribal groups, but possessing a belief in its common origin which, despite differences in dialect and custom, is strong enough to produce feelings of nationality among the total population concerned.

² This categorization corresponds broadly with the Smythes' definition of the 'top-level' élite in Nigeria (1960, p. 92).

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I The urban situation

In a book of this kind the need to generalize may have an irritating effect upon the reader because what kind of creature, after all, is 'the African woman'? She lives under a wide variety of conditions – 'pagan', Christian, and Moslem – and exhibits outwardly, at least, an appearance ranging from meek submissiveness to complete self-assurance and confidence in manner. Moreover, although some institutions of African life, such as chieftainship, are close enough to European systems to be understood in similar terms, things are different in the case of women. Criteria relevant and valid in the latter culture may have little or no significance in the former.

The position of African women, consequently, has often to be subjectively assessed. Nevertheless, certain aspects can be objectively compared and we can say without much fear of contradiction that in African traditional society the greater part of woman's role is ascribed rather than achieved. Further, we can assume that her status is affected by rules of residence as well as kinship, though broadly speaking she is regarded legally as a 'minor' for the greater part of her life. Sometimes, she is a person of rank and, like the Queen Mother in Asante, has special prerogatives and duties of great importance to society at large. Also, older women, in particular, are usually held in esteem, and are selected, sometimes, as heads of extended families and other kinship groupings. In ordinary everyday life, however, there is generally a good deal of social distance between men and women, including the relationships of spouses. This separation is symbolized as well as reinforced by the sexual division of labour which, none the less, is essentially a form of co-operation. Consequently, it is tempting and fairly accurate to describe the role of women as complementary rather than subordinate to that of men, even though women are, as a rule, under the control of males. This is generally so, both before and after marriage, and is usually the

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case in matrilineal as well as patrilineal systems because in matrilineal a woman comes under the authority of her mother's brother or her own brother. (See Evans-Pritchard, 1965, for a thoughtful discussion of the general nature of the problem.)

The fact that in the above terms the position of African women is bound up inextricably with such fundamental institutions as marriage and kinship, renders it particularly sensitive to fresh developments. It makes the status of women one of the best indices available for judging and predicting social change, especially in terms of their adaptation to the 'modern' city. I say 'modern' in order to distinguish between the old-established, slowly-growing towns whose social structure is basically traditional, and those which are, in the main, of European creation. In making this distinction I follow broadly Aidan Southall's classification (1961, pp. 5-13), which involves two categories of town which he calls respectively types A and B. According to him, in Tanzania and Uganda, and in the former territories of French Equatorial and British and French Africa, most towns belong to A which are, in the main, old established. Type B comprises new populations of 'mushroom growth' and is mostly found in industrialized territories which also have the largest white populations. Southall also draws attention to overlapping, because among those of type B it is some of the Congo (now Zaire) towns which stand nearest to type A, and among those of type A some Tanzanian centres stand nearest to type B. In fact, as Bascom (see his works in References Cited) and other authors have shown, local concentrations of population which fulfil Wirth's well-known minimal definition of the city as 'a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement', though indigenously rare in sub-Saharan Africa, are not a unique phenomenon. In addition to numerous historical cities in the western Sudan, there were, in particular, the many and populous towns of the Yoruba. These urban settlements being based largely on agriculture, the inhabitants themselves were mainly farmers, and kinship was the principal factor in, and primary determinant of, behaviour in every aspect of community life. Indeed, since farming itself depended largely on family and kinship, these institutions set the pattern of life in both city and countryside (Bascom, 1955, pp. 446-54 and 1963-4, *passim*).

A number of such Yoruba towns continue to retain strong links with agriculture and the subsistence economy of the rural areas but in contrast to the traditional 'countrified' urban situation is the 'modern' African city referred to. This was brought into being by European colonialism and capitalist interest requiring administrative headquarters and urban facilities which previously

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had barely existed. For example, Nairobi is now the largest city in East Africa but it began as a construction camp on the Uganda railway which was being built up from the coast at Mombasa in 1899. Kampala, the present capital of Uganda itself, was founded by Lugard on a hill where there had been no previous settlement of any importance; and Dar es Salaam was chosen by the Germans as their colonial capital in place of Bagamoyo (Southall, 1966, pp. 463–93). On the other side of Africa, port towns inhabited by Europeans and partly Westernized Africans had been established at Accra, Freetown, Dakar and Lagos, and these were developed as entrepôts. Later, Enugu grew in response to nearby coal fields, and Port Harcourt was established in turn as a terminus for a railway bringing coal from Enugu to the coast. Also, some up-country towns, which, like Kumasi, had been the capitals of ancient states and chiefdoms, developed into modern urban centres for communications and collecting points for locally-produced commodities such as cocoa, groundnuts and palm kernels. In many other places, the extraction of minerals, including gold, diamonds, iron-ore and tin, was extensively undertaken, and gave rise to urban centres and agglomerations of varying size and significance (Little, 1973*b*).

Physically, urban settlements of this 'modern' kind are characterized, too, by the presence of banks, office buildings, schools, churches, mosques, factories, industrial plants, and so on. In other words, locally established there are many of the state's principal resources, and it is precisely this local concentration of relatively up-to-date economic, technical, educational and cultural facilities which distinguishes the 'modern' city. True, outside the capital or 'primate'¹ city itself the stock of buildings and constructions is usually smaller, but most such 'modern' urban populations have a number of common characteristics, including large proportions of immigrants. Thus, according to the 1970 Population Census of Ghana, Volume II, Statistics of Localities and Enumeration Areas, only 37.3 per cent of the population of Sekondi-Takoradi, some 42.9 per cent of the population of Kumasi, and some 46 per cent of the population of Greater Accra are of local origin. In the Ivory Coast a 1965 estimate is that only 29 per cent of the total population of Abidjan and only some 7 per cent of persons over the age of 20 years had been born in that city.² In

¹ See Breese (1966, p. 48) and Little (1973*a*), among others, for a definition and illustration of the 'primate city'.

² Similarly, in Lagos five in every six householders were born outside that city; but Lagos is largely a Yoruba town and some 50 per cent of its immigrant population are from the nearby Western Region – the Yoruba homeland – (Ejiogu, 1968, pp. 320–30).

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fact, in fifteen West and Middle African towns the percentage of the population born there was on the average about 42 per cent (Hance, 1970, p. 269), while in Kampala it has been estimated that those who have lived continuously in town for five years or more accounted for less than 20 per cent (Gutkind, 1962–3). Further, the Kenya Censuses show a similar movement and how recent an experience urban life is for many Kenyans. Thus, although in 1962 the aggregate population of the ten main towns amounted to no more than some 377,000 people, by 1969 the population of Nairobi alone was 509,286 of whom only 123,013 were born in that city. Also in towns of 10,000–99,999 inhabitants only 53,658 were born in the same district as enumerated against 112,600 born elsewhere (cf. 1962 Census, Vol. III (1964) and 1969 Census, Vol. II (1971)).

Demographic situations of this kind being due mainly to rural–urban migration, a not unexpected corollary is that the ‘modern’ town’s population is highly heterogeneous. Thus, Accra contains representatives of 80 different ethnic groups and tribes in addition to the ‘indigenous’ Ga-Adangme people (1960 Census, Special Report ‘E’); while the populations of Nairobi and Mombasa appear to be no less diversified (1969 Kenya Census). Dar es Salaam, again, has about 100 different peoples, the most numerous being the Rufiji, the Lugusi and the Ndengerko (Leslie, 1963).

Consequently, unlike the inhabitants of villages, a large proportion of such urban populations are both culturally and personally strangers to each other. The latter point, moreover, is enhanced by the fact that, as explained in the next chapter, much of the immigration upon which the urban population is based is seasonal and ‘circular’. In other words, a large proportion of the city’s inhabitants only reside there for a limited period of time. They tend to come and go and do not necessarily return each time to the same town. For example, in a study made of this phenomenon in Ougadougou in Upper Volta, 73 per cent of the migrants had moved at least once; 47 per cent had moved at least twice; 31 per cent three times (Gregory, 1971). It was also found that, given a person had moved once, the probability of further moves was quite high, and that the largest single group of migrants spent a moderate length of time at each destination before moving on. A specific example of this kind of situation is provided by Nairobi where only 11 per cent of African employees were found to have had five years’ service or more with their current employers (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, 1954). In respect of South Africa, Houghton tells of a man aged 56 who over the past 40 years has made no fewer than 14 separate trips

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to labour centres (1960, pp. 170–90); and according to estimations made in South Africa there are some 2 million workers who circulate in this way. (See also: Hance, 1970, pp. 128–208; Van der Horst, 1964; Warmington, 1956, pp. 16–22; and Wells and Warmington, 1962.) In short, there is a good deal of evidence to support Elkan's conclusion (1960) that

African towns are to be compared with Army Barracks accommodating successive waves of National Service men, and perhaps in addition some also who have 'signed on' for five years, seven or even twenty-one, but sooner or later everybody leaves. So also in these terms permanence is exceptional.

A further feature of the 'modern' urban population is a tendency for young people to preponderate numerically over old.³ This is because most of the migrants are young men and many of the older men retire to their rural towns and villages when their working days are over. What, moreover, is of particular relevance for this study is the tendency for adult men to outnumber adult women. Thus, there were in Accra, in 1960, 111.6 males per 100 females;⁴ while on the other side of the sub-continent Kenyan towns had, in 1962, only 47 women to 100 men; and those in Tanzania had 69 and those in Uganda 54.⁵ According to the 1969 Census, women constituted only some 32 per cent and 38 per cent respectively of the total adult populations of Nairobi and Mombasa. Overall, the disproportion of males to females varies from relatively small differences of about 100 males to 80–90 females in Middle Africa to 100 males to 55–75 females in East Africa, and even lower ratios in some large centres of South Africa.⁶

Further, in such urban centres, quite a large number of town-

³ It is estimated that in Accra (Capital District–C.D.), Tema, Sekondi–Takoradi and Kumasi, the percentage of the population aged 56 and over was respectively 4, 2, 3 and 3.

⁴ In Accra the disproportion of males to females is clearly the largest among people who migrate from the north, and the sex ratios of some of these northern tribes, in terms of men to women, were respectively: Lobi, 187.5; Zabrama, 441.47; Songhai, 522.5; and Fulani, 256.7 (1960 Census).

⁵ Taking individual examples, in Dar es Salaam men and women comprised respectively 40.7 per cent and 27.7 per cent of the town's population; and in Kampala the proportions were respectively 42.4 and 22.5 per cent (Gugler, 1969).

⁶ One of the few large cities where immigration has not resulted in a disproportion of male to female adults is Tananarive, Madagascar (see Southall, 1968).