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The Role of Voluntary Associations in West African Urbanization

KENNETH LITTLE
University of Edinburgh

INTRODUCTION

TAKEN as a whole, the West African region was relatively unaffected by the modern world until the end of the 19th century. Modern development of the hinterland began with the British adoption of trusteeship as colonial policy and with the British and French realization that these territories constituted an expanding market for imported goods as well as important sources of mineral and raw materials needed by the metropolitan country. The French were also concerned with the question of military manpower. These factors were finally crystallized by World War II and the events following it. The British war effort demanded greatly increased supplies of palm kernels, cotton, cocoa, and other locally grown products as well as hides, tin, iron ore, etc., which the colonial governments concerned were required to stimulate (cf. Fortes 1945:205–219). Since the War there have been resettlement schemes, new industries and constructional projects have been instituted, and there has been a general improvement in communications by road, rail, and air. With the strategic implications of West Africa in the struggle against Communism also becoming manifest, political development has also gone on very rapidly, and there has been a corresponding expansion of education and the social services.

The consequence of all these technical and other changes is that there are now many more different modes of life and ways of earning a living than existed in West Africa some fifty years ago. It also goes without saying that its inhabitants have acquired a taste for the material elements of Western civilization, including consumer goods of every possible kind. In addition to new economic incentives, Western interests ranging from Christianity and nationalism to football and ballroom dancing have also been generated on a wide scale. In short, there has been produced the kind of phenomenon which anthropologists have customarily studied under the heading of culture contact, or acculturation. This term, however, is not precise enough for purposes of present analysis. First, many of the principal agents of cultural change nowadays are Africans themselves, and second, many Western ideas, practices, and procedures have already been fully assimilated to African culture. Africans became important as “acculturative agents” about the middle of the 19th century when Western-educated Creoles from Sierra Leone went off evangelizing and trading down the Coast. All the way from the Gambia in the west to the Congo in the south they constituted, in many cases, little oases of westernized culture. Consequently, although much of the traditional life has disintegrated, new forms of social organization have arisen out of the older structure. There
are, moreover, considerable differences in the extent to which given peoples and groups of Africans have undergone so-called detribalization, and it is rare to find whole communities which have completely severed all traditional loyalties and obligations. More often is it the case, as I propose to show, that the African individual moving out of the tribal area continues to be influenced by tribal culture. In other words, instead of viewing the contemporary West African situation in terms of the juxtaposition of two entirely different cultures, we shall do better to conceive it as a process of adaptation to new circumstances and conditions. Cultural contacts still go on, but between westernized Africans and other Africans, as well as between Westerners and Africans; so that the changes occurring are no different in kind from those within a single society (cf. Little 1953:4).

THE URBANIZATION OF WEST AFRICA

What, in effect, this transformation of West Africa involves is a social process somewhat analogous to the social changes that resulted in the urbanization of Western Europe during the 19th century. Western contact with Africa, like the Industrial Revolution in Europe, has created new social and psychological needs which life in the countryside is rarely able to satisfy. The consequence is a tremendous migration of men and women to the towns, and to places where money can be earned to pay taxes, to provide bridewealth, and to buy manufactured goods and appliances.

Many of these people are in search of a higher standard of living in the shape of the more up-to-date amenities and better housing as well as the higher income that the town can offer. But this is not the only motivation. A large number of the younger men are looking for further educational opportunities, or are hoping to start a fresh career. Others move as a means of escaping from the restrictions of village life, and some of the younger girls, as well as the boys, out of love of adventure and desire for fresh experiences (cf. Balandier 1955a). As Fortes has written in reference to the Gold Coast: "Labour, enterprise, and skill are now marketable in their own right anywhere in the country. . . . People feel that there is little risk in moving about, especially if, as appears to be the case with most mobile elements, their earning capacity is low. A clerk getting £2.10 a month feels that he cannot go much lower if he moves" (Fortes 1947:149–179). The development of motor transport, in the shape of the ubiquitous lorry, is an important factor in these respects. Not only has it greatly increased local mobility between town and town, and between town and surrounding countryside, but it has created a new and influential social role—that of the lorry-driver, as a go-between between the urban labor market and the rural village.

Most of this migration is in the direction of towns already established as large centers of Western commerce and administration, of the rapidly growing ports, and of places where mining and other industries are being developed. Its effect has been to swell the population of such places far beyond their previous size, as well as to convert a good many villages into urban areas. For
example, the principal towns of Senegal in French West Africa increased their populations by 100 percent between 1942 and 1952 and those of the French Ivory Coast by 109 percent during the same decade. In the Gold Coast there was an increase of 98 percent in the populations of the five largest towns between 1931 and 1948 (Balandier 1955b). Cotonou in Dahomey grew from 1100 in 1905 to 35,000 in 1952 and Lunsar, in Sierra Leone, which was a village of 30 inhabitants in 1929, has a population today of nearly 17,000 (Lombard 1954:3, 4; Littlejohn n.d.).

Although urbanism in terms of "a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals" (Wirth 1938) is not a general characteristic of traditional life, it is far from being a unique phenomenon in West Africa. In 1931, some 28 percent of the Yoruba population of Western Nigeria lived in 9 cities of over 45,000 inhabitants, while a further 34 percent lived in cities of over 20,000 inhabitants (Bascom 1955). However, what distinguishes the "new" African city—"new" in the sense, as Georges Balandier points out, that they were built by European colonists—from traditional urbanism is that a large part of its population is industrial, depending upon the labor market for a living. This is particularly evident in the case of towns of recent growth. In Cotonou, for example, some 10,000 persons out of a population of some 35,000 are in wage employment (Lombard 1954).

A further point is that the modern town is much more heterogeneous. It has groups of professionals, office workers, municipal employees, artisans, etc., and in addition to its indigenous political and social segmentation, it also accommodates a large proportion of "strangers." Not only do the latter frequently outnumber the native inhabitants of the town, but they include a wide diversity of tribes. For example, Kumasi, although the capital of Ashantiland, contains as many non-Ashantis as Ashantis; Takoradi-Sekondi contains representatives of more than 60 different tribes (Busia 1950); and less than 10 percent of the inhabitants of Poto-Poto, one of the three African towns of Brazzaville, were born in that city (Balandier 1955a). In the Gold Coast, as a whole, more than two-thirds of the inhabitants of the big towns have been there for less than five years. A further significant characteristic of these urban populations is the numerical preponderance of young people over old and, to a less appreciable extent, the preponderance of men over women. For example, only 2.4 percent of the population of Cotonou are over 60 years of age. In 1921, men considerably outnumbered women, but by 1952 the masculinity rate had dropped to 111. In an area of Poto-Poto, on the other hand, where the average age of the population is about 25, there are only 515 females to every 1000 males (Balandier 1955a).

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

(a) Tribal Unions

From the point of view of social organization one of the most striking characteristics of these modern towns is the very large number and variety of voluntary associations.¹ These include a host of new political, religious, rec-
reational, and occupational associations as well as the more traditional mutual aid groups and secret societies out of which some of these more recent organizations have developed. What generally distinguishes the latter kind of association is its more formal constitution and the fact that it has been formed to meet certain needs arising specifically out of the urban environment of its members. It is also more "modern" both in respect to its aims and the methods employed to attain them. One of the best illustrations of these points is provided by certain tribal associations of an extraterritorial kind, known in Nigeria and the Gold Coast as Tribal Unions.

These tribal unions range from little unions, consisting of a few members of the same extended family or clan (Aloba 1954), to much larger bodies like the Ibo State Union which is a collection of village and clan unions. In Nigeria, these associations were originally formed by Ibo and other migrants from Eastern Nigeria to protect themselves from the hostile way in which they were received when they took jobs as policeman, traders, and laborers in the towns of the West and the North. Their aim is to provide members with mutual aid, including support, while out of work, sympathy and financial assistance in the case of illness, and the responsibility for the funeral and the repatriation of the family of the deceased in the case of death. The main raison d'être, however, is that of fostering and keeping alive an interest in tribal song, history, language, and moral beliefs, and thus maintaining a person's attachment to his native town or village and to his lineage there. In furtherance of this sentiment, money is collected for the purpose of improving amenities in the union's home town and to provide its younger people with education. Social activities include the organization of dances on festival days and of sports meetings and games for their young people. Some of these unions also produce an annual magazine, called an Almanac, in which their members' activities are recorded (Offodile 1947:937, 939, 941).

Associations based upon membership of the same ethnic group also exist in French and Belgian Africa where they perform somewhat similar functions. In Cotonou, for example, such groups welcome and look after persons newly arrived from the country. They provide a means whereby both the old people and the "évolué" can keep in touch with their rural relatives and friends. Each such association has an annual feast and celebration which brings together everyone from the same region. It is also a means of helping the needy and aged members of the group (Lombard 1954).

In Nigeria there have also been developed home branches of the tribal union abroad; and as a final step, State unions have been created, comprising every union of members of the same tribe. It is not surprising, therefore, that these Nigerian tribal unions have obtained a power and influence far beyond their original objectives. The larger unions have played an important part in the expansion of education. They offer scholarships for deserving boys and girls and run their own schools. In some places, the monthly contributions of members for education are invested in some form of commercial enterprise, and appeals for money to build schools seem to meet with a particularly ready response. One observer claims that he saw an up-country union raise in six
hours and in a single meeting over £16,000 for such purposes. Some higher education overseas has also been provided, and several leading members of the Nigerian Eastern House of Assembly owe their training in British universities to State union money (Aloba 1954). Even more ambitious plans have included the building of a national bank where people can obtain loans for industrial and commercial purposes. In this connection, some unions have economic advisers who survey trade reports for the benefit of members (Offodile 1947). These tribal unions also serve a number of important political purposes and are recognized as units for purposes of tax collection. In addition to pressing local authorities for better roads, dispensaries and hospitals, and other public amenities, they have been a powerful force in the democratizing of traditional councils; in the multiracial centers they were for many years the recognized basis for representation on Township Advisory Boards or Native Authority Councils. They have also provided a forum for the expression of national politics and for the rise to positions of leadership of the younger educated element (Coleman 1952).

(b) Friendly Societies

In addition to the tribal union, there are also a large number of tribal societies where objectives are limited to mutual aid and benefit. One of the most complicated of these organizations is run by the wives of Kru immigrants in Freetown. This kind of society is divided into three classes. A member pays an admission fee of one guinea and enters the class of least importance. He or she may subsequently be promoted to a higher class and in this event will be expected to make members of that class a present of several pounds. On his or her death, the relatives receive a sum of money commensurate with the deceased person's status. These societies endeavor to develop a high esprit de corps and have been known to impose fines of as much as £20 on members guilty of unfriendly conduct toward each other (Banton 1956).

Kru men go to sea for a living and so the members of their societies are divided into "ships," named after various recent additions to Messrs. Elder Dempster's fleet, instead of classes. The Kru also have so-called "family societies" comprising the migrant members of a particular class, or dako (a small local federation of patricians). These groups also provide bereavement benefits. In Freetown there are also a number of traditional organizations, including so-called secret societies and dancing groups, which provide funeral expenses, presents, and entertainment for members when they marry. The congregations of mosques, too, usually have what is loosely called a Jama Compin (Compin = Krio, "Company") whose members help each other over funerals. Up country, another Moslem group, composed of women, endeavors to intervene in domestic quarrels and to reconcile man and wife. In this case, a sixpenny subscription is collected every Sunday, and persons joining as new members have to pay the equivalent of what a foundation member has already paid in subscriptions. Some of this money is disbursed as alms, but most of it is used to provide sickness and funeral benefits (Little 1955).

A different kind of mutual aid group is the esusu, which is of Yoruba origin.
Members of the group pay in at regular intervals a fixed sum and the total is
given each time to one of the members. This is an important method for
buying trading stock, expensive clothing, etc. (Banton 1956; Bascom 1952).
In southeastern Nigeria, a somewhat similar kind of "contribution club" is
divided into seven sections, each under a headman. Each member pays one
or more weekly subscriptions. The headmen are responsible for collecting the
shares from their members, and when the shares have all been collected, the
money is handed over to a member nominated by the headman in turn. The
recipient has a number of obligations, including that of supplying a quantity

A further organization serves all three functions—providing funeral
benefits, charity, and helping its members to save. This is the Nanamei Akpee,
or "mutual help" society. It has its headquarters in Accra and branches in
several other Gold Coast towns, including Keta. The Keta branch has well
over 400 members, the great majority of whom are educated or semiliterate
women traders. There is a monthly subscription of one shilling and when a
member dies, the surviving relatives are given at least £10 towards the cost of
funeral expenses. Money for loans is raised at weekly collections which begin
with community singing. All the women present give as much money as they
feel they can afford, and their contributions are written down in a book which
also contains a list of the society's members, in order of seniority. When the
collection is finished, all the money is given to the member whose name takes
first place; the following week it is given to the second, then to the third, and
so on. Eventually, all members will in this way receive a contribution, though
the process as a whole naturally takes a very long time. However, the man or
woman receiving a collection is also given a list showing the amount of money
contributed by other members. This determines, during later weeks, the
amounts he must contribute himself. For example, if A has given B two shil-
lings then B must raise the same amount when eventually A's turn arrives to
receive a weekly collection. In effect, this arrangement means that senior
members, i.e., those who have joined early, receive an interest-free loan, which
they repay weekly by small contributions; those on the bottom of the list,
on the other hand, are saving in a small way, for their own ultimate benefit.
In a period of rising prices, those at the top of the list naturally have the ad-
antage, but on the other hand those who wait longer may receive more be-
cause the society's membership will in the meantime have increased. There is
an element of chance in all this which adds spice to the normally dull business
of saving, and this partly explains the society's popularity. Finally, when a
member falls ill he is visited in the hospital, given small gifts of money, and
so on. At times the society also gives presents and small sums of money to
old and sick people even if they are not members (Carey n.d.).

(c) Occupational Associations

In addition to raising loans through such organizations as Nanamei Akpee,
African market women also form associations in order to control the supply
or price of commodities in which their members trade. Some of the larger markets have a woman in charge, and each of the various sections which women monopolize, such as the sale of yams, garri, cloth, etc. is also headed by a woman, who represents them in relation to customers and the market authorities. In Lagos market each such section has its own union, which discourages competition between women trading in that particular commodity (Comhaire-Sylvain 1951). Another women’s association is the Fish Sellers Union at Takoradi-Sekondi. The members of this association may club together to raise money to buy fishing nets. The group then sells the nets to fishermen on agreed terms. A fisherman who receives a net sells his catches during the fishing season to the creditor group, and the value of the fish is reckoned against the net. In this way, the members are able to obtain the fish on which their livelihood depends (Busia 1950). Women also associate for industrial purposes. In southern Nigeria, for example, there are women’s societies which run a bakery, a laundry, a calabash manufactory, and a garri mill. One of the most interesting of these associations, the Egba Women’s Union in Abeokuta, claims a membership of 80,000 women, paying subscriptions of 13 shillings a year. It operates as a weaving co-operative, and runs a maternity and a child welfare clinic as well as conducting classes for illiterate women.

Other occupational and professional associations are concerned with the status and remuneration of their members as workers. Such groups include modern crafts such as goldsmiths, tinkers, gunsmiths, tailors, and barbers, as well as certain trade unions which, unlike Government sponsored trade unions, have come spontaneously into being. One example of these is the Motor Drivers Union at Keta which is now a branch of a nationwide union which negotiates freight rates, working conditions, and so on. Unlike European trade unions, this Motor Drivers Union is an association of small entrepreneurs owning their own vehicles rather than an association of employees. Its main purpose is to look after the interests of drivers generally and in particular to offer them legal assistance and insurance. When a driver is convicted, the Union tries as far as possible to pay his fine; and when a driver dies the Union provides part of the funeral expenses. There are also smaller sickness and accident benefits. The entrance fee is 14 shillings and there is a monthly subscription of one shilling. In addition, the Union organizes meetings and dances (Carey n.d.).

The organization of modern crafts, on the other hand, takes on the form of guilds resembling those of medieval Europe. The first rule of all these guilds in Yoruba towns, where many of them have developed, is that every craftsman, whether master, journeyman or apprentice, must be registered with the guild, must attend meetings, and must pay his dues. One of the guild’s prime functions is to maintain a reasonable standard of work in the craft. It determines the rules of apprenticeship; fixes prices of workmanship; and settles disputes, whether between master and apprentice or between craftsman and customer. On the other hand, the guild does not undertake to care for its members in sickness or old age; neither does it function as a bank, lending
money to members for tools. Most forms of social security are still organized by the lineage—in which the guild members still retain full membership—and not by the guild (Lloyd 1953).

Unions of a different kind which are also concerned with the status and remuneration of their members are associations of prostitutes. These have been reported from Takoradi and also from Brazzaville. In the latter city, the members of such organizations try to improve their own social and economic position by insisting on a high standard of dress and deportment, and by ostracizing other women who are too casual or too free with their sexual favors. Each group has its own name, such as La Rose, Diamant, etc. and is under a leader, an elderly woman, who can set a pattern of elegance and sophistication. Membership is limited and is regulated by a committee. There is also a common fund out of which members in financial straits are helped and their funeral expenses paid should they die. In the latter event, the association behaves as if it were the family of the deceased. Every girl goes into mourning, giving up her jewelry and finer clothes for six months, at the end of which there is a night-long celebration in some “bar-dancing” establishment hired for the occasion (Balandier 1955a:145–148).

(d) Entertainment and Recreational Associations

A large number of associations are concerned with dancing and musical forms of entertainment. Many of these, such as the drumming companies found in Ewe villages in the Gold Coast, still retain much of their traditional character. A number of groups in Brazzaville also perform traditional music, but on a commercial basis. These societies consist of young men who have formed themselves into an orchestra under the presidency of an older man whose compound they use for the purpose of staging an evening’s “social” on Saturdays and Sundays. The public is charged for admission on these occasions and the “band,” which goes by such appropriate titles as Etoile, Jeunesse, Record de la Gaieté, etc. undertakes outside engagements. The receipts are divided among the members according to their position in the society and anything left over goes toward the purchase of new instruments and the provision of further conviviality (cf. Balandier 1955a:143–144). Other such associations, which began as simple dancing societies, have developed under urban conditions into a relatively complex organization and set of modern objectives. A striking example of this kind of phenomenon is the dancing compin of Sierra Leone. This is a group of young men and women concerned with the performance of “plays” of traditional music and dancing and with the raising of money for mutual benefit. The music is provided mainly by native drums, xylophones, and calabash rattles, and is accompanied by singing. The dancing, which, like the drumming, shows signs of Western influence, is somewhat reminiscent of English country dancing. A “play” is generally given in connection with some important event, such as the close of Ramadan, or as part of the ceremonies celebrating a wedding or a funeral. The general public as well as the persons honored by the performance are expected to
donate money to the compin on these occasions. Money is also collected in the form of weekly subscriptions from the members (Banton 1956; Little 1955).

In one of these organizations, which are particularly numerous among Temne and Mandinka immigrants in Freetown, this amount goes into a general fund to cover corporate expenses of the society's activities—rent of yard, provision of lamps, replacement of drum skins, etc. Then, when any member is bereaved, a collection is held to which all must contribute. However, quite an elaborate procedure is necessary before the money can be paid. The bereaved person must first notify the Reporter with a reporting fee. This is passed on to the company's Doctor, who investigates the circumstances of death, for the company will fine any member who has not notified them of a relative's illness so that they can see that the sick person receives attention. The Doctor washes the body and sends the Prevoe (Provost) round to the other members, telling them to gather that evening when they must pay their contributions. When anyone avoids payment without good cause, the Bailiff may seize an item of his property of equal value. The evening's meeting is organized by the Manager. He will bring the company's lamps, for members are under an obligation to take part in a wake which will last into the early hours. At the wake the bereaved person will provide cigarettes, kola nuts, bread, and coffee, and will employ a singer. Another duty of the Doctor is to examine members before admission, and to attend them if sick. The Commissioner or Inspector is the disciplinary officer and he can arrest or eject trouble makers, the Prevoe acting on his orders. The Clerk or Secretary keeps accounts and writes letters, and the Cashier receives from the Sultan for safe keeping any money accruing to the society. The Sultan is the chief executive; his female counterpart, who has charge of the women members, is the Mammy Queen. For the dancing there is a leader who directs it, and a Conductor who supervises the band. There is also a Sister in charge of the Nurses, young girls who bring round refreshments at dances, often in white dresses with a red cross on the breast and the appropriate headgear. If there is no woman Doctor, an older Nurse or Sister may assist the Doctor with the invalids, or the washing of the corpse. There may also be further officials, such as an Overseer, an M. C., a Solicitor, a Lawyer, Sick Visitor, etc. Many of these titles involve no work, but they can be given to honor even the least deserving member and to strengthen his identification with the group's company (Banton n.d.).

Other groups concerned with recreation range from Improvement Leagues and Women's Institutes to cricket and football clubs. Some of the latter are characterized by such colorful titles as Mighty Poisons, Hearts of Oak, Heroes, etc. (Hodgkin 1956). Football teams are also run by associations of the former pupils of certain schools, known as Old Boys Associations, which also organize receptions and "send-offs" and sometimes hold evening classes. Most organizations of the latter kind are modeled rather closely on European lines, particularly the so-called "social club." This is constituted for dining and drinking purposes as well as for tennis, whist, billiards, ballroom dancing, amateur dramatics, and other European recreational and cultural activities.
For the latter reasons, "social clubs" are mainly confined to the most Westernized section of the population, including well-to-do professionals and businessmen as well as teachers, clerks, and other white collar workers. Such clubs are open to persons of any tribe, but members are expected to conform to European patterns of social etiquette. Europeans themselves are frequently admitted either as members or as guests. Examples of this kind of institution are the Rodgers Club in Accra, the Island Club in Lagos, and the Bo African Club in Sierra Leone. In the latter association, all official business and proceedings, including lectures, debates etc., are conducted in English. At the weekly dance, which is one of the club’s principal activities, the general rule is for the women to wear print or silk dresses (without the head tie), and the men open-necked shirts with a blazer or sports jacket. On special occasions evening dress is worn by both sexes. In addition to its ordinary activities, this club undertakes a number of public functions, including special dances to honor visiting notables. It also entertains the teams of visiting football clubs, and its premises are used for such purposes as political meetings and adult education classes (Little 1955).

Women, too, have their social clubs which broadly complement those under the control of men. These are very often known as Ladies' Clubs and Women's Institutes. Many of the latter have been formed under the auspices of churches. A large number of literate husbands have nonliterate wives, and some of these women's clubs reflect the sociological situation in that they are divided into "literate" and "illiterate" sections which hold separate meetings. "Literate" activities consist mainly in sewing and crochet work, in practicing the cooking of European and native dishes, and in listening to talks about household economy. Individual literate women given instruction in these arts to the "illiterate" meeting, and in return nonliterate women sometimes teach the literate group native methods of dyeing, spinning, basketry, and traditional songs and dances (Little 1955).

Women's Institutes are primarily the result of the initiative of educated women. For example, the President and leading officers of the Keta Women's Institute in the Gold Coast are teachers, although the bulk of its membership consists of market women. It is principally a social club, but it has certain other more important interests. For example, it has acted as a "pressure group," intervening with the Urban Council in support of a plan for improving amenities at the local markets. Among other local changes, the women achieved the provision of ambulance services, and the employment of a larger number of female nurses at the Keta hospital (Carey n.d.).

THE ORGANIZATION OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

Before we attempt to generalize about these voluntary associations, it is necessary to distinguish between three rather different types. The first is still basically concerned with traditional activities, although with some slight modification; in the second type, traditional activities have been deliberately modified or expanded to suit modern purposes; and the third type is wholly
modern in organization and objectives. It will be convenient to term these three types respectively "traditional," "traditional-modernized" and "modern."

The function of the "traditional" association is generally limited to the organization of some particular religious, occupational, or recreational interest, such as a cult, a trade, or some form of dancing or drumming. Space unfortunately prevents description of religious associations in general. These exist alongside Islam and the ancestral cult, and according to Hofstra (1955) they may be divided into four categories: (1) Christian churches organized by missionaries, (2) so-called African churches, (3) looser, smaller groups of a syncretistic character, (4) irregularly organized movements of a messianic or prophetic kind. In the traditional type of association some provision may be made for mutual benefit, but this is incidental to the main purpose of the society. Membership in the group is usually confined to persons belonging to the same village or ward of a town and is often related to other traditional institutions, such as an age set. For example, drumming companies among the Ewe are organized on a ward basis, and usually there are three in every ward. The first comprises children up to the age of about fifteen; the second consists of the so-called "young men," ranging in age from about fifteen to thirty; and the third comprises "elders," i.e. the male population over thirty or so. The senior companies usually give themselves names such as "Patience" or "U.A.C." (abbreviation for United Africa Company), and some of these are, in effect, associations of semiprofessional entertainers who travel about the country in search of engagements (Cary, n.d.). Although the organization of such "traditional" associations is generally quite simple and informal, a number of them have adapted to modern conditions by incorporating literate persons as officials and by widening the scope of their function. In the traditional economy of the Gold Coast, for example, each trade or occupation normally had a chief-practitioner who settled disputes and represented his associates in relation to outsiders. This is largely true today, but in addition some of these groups have turned themselves into local branches of a nationwide union. In the case of the goldsmiths, this involved appointing its chief-practitioner as Life-Chairman of the association, while an educated man who could deal adequately with its business affairs was elected President. Similarly, the semiliterate president of the Carpenters Union now has a literate secretary and treasurer to help him (Carey n.d.).

It goes without saying that the great majority of people who belong to "traditional" associations are unlettered. The number of persons who can read and write or speak a European language is larger in the "traditional-modernized" association, but what mainly distinguishes the latter is its syncretistic character, its relatively formal organization, and the variety of its functions. A particularly striking example of the latter point is La Gombé, a Moslem and predominantly Dioula youth organization for both sexes in the Ivory Coast. This combines the functions of emancipating young women from family influence; assisting the process of marital selection; providing, on a contributory
basis, marriage and maternity benefits (including perfume and layettes for the newborn); preserving the Dioula tribal spirit; running an orchestra; and acting as the local propaganda agent for Rassemblement Démocratique Africain. It also maintains its own police force (cited by Hodgkin from Holas 1953:116–131). In addition to a written constitution which embodies the declared aims and rules of the society, this kind of association sometimes has its own name and a special uniform of its own, and generally follows such Western practices as the holding of regular meetings, keeping of minutes, accounts, etc. The wearing of a uniform type of dress is probably more characteristic of women’s societies than those formed by men. The women members of Nanemei Akpee, for example, all dress in white for meetings, and the practice of appearing in the same kind of dress, including head-tie, necklace, and sandals, is followed by other women’s groups on formal occasions. Finance plays an important part in its affairs, and there is a regular tariff of entrance fees; weekly or monthly dues are collected and fines are sometimes levied. These funds are administered by a Treasurer or Financial Secretary, sometimes supervised by a committee which also conducts the everyday business of the association, including the sifting of fresh applications for membership, settlement of disputes, etc. Related partly to the wide diversity of functions performed is the large number of persons holding official positions in some of these societies. Many of these office-bearers, as exemplified by the dancing compin, have European titles, or, as in the case of the Kru women’s societies, are known by the native equivalents of such titles. This enactment of European roles, as in the dancing compin, is a fairly common feature of associations of the “traditional-modernized” type. It has been termed “vicarious participation in the European social structure” by J. Clyde Mitchell, but as Michael Banton points out (1956), this possibly places too much emphasis on the process of westernization and too little on the independent process of change in the tribal group. An assistant official sometimes has the duty of conveying information about the society’s activities to the general public as well as to members. La Goumbé, for example, has a number of town criers, members of the griot caste, to carry news through the town (Holas 1953).

The organization of the “traditional-modernized” association is also rendered more elaborate by a tendency toward affiliation. This ranges all the way from a fully centralized organization of individual branches to a loose fraternal arrangement between entirely autonomous branches of the same movement. Affiliation of individual branches sometimes seems to be the result of traditional conditions. Thus, the “village-group union” of the Afiako Ibo of Nigeria is apparently modelled largely upon the indigenous age-set structure of the people concerned (cf. Ottenberg 1955:i–28). The Goumbé movement comprises a number of local “cells” co-ordinated by a central committee, which settles disputes between them and lays down general policy (Holas 1953). The dancing compin movement, on the other hand, consists of a large number of separate societies which occasionally exchange visits and information and extend hospitality to each other’s members, but are otherwise entirely independent.
Finally, although membership of these associations tends to be tribally or regionally circumscribed, this is not invariably so. Even tribal unions sometimes have persons from more than one tribe among their members. The Benin Nation Club (Nigeria), for example, provides facilities for all natives of the Benin Province (Comhaire-Sylvain 1950:246 ff.). Several occupational and other groups recruit their members on an intertribal basis, and this also applies to some of the societies run by women.

The “modern” association has already been briefly described in terms of the “social club,” and so it will suffice merely to add that its organization is broadly the same as that of any European association of a comparable kind. Like its European counterpart, it is often a medium for social prestige.

Despite their wide variety, one objective common to all types of voluntary association is that of sociability and fraternity. Not only is the serving of refreshments, including such beverages as tea, palm wine, beer, or stronger drink, an integral part of any formal gathering of members, but the latter are expected and encouraged to visit each others’ homes, especially in the event of illness or bereavement. Again, although some groups, including certain guilds and occupations, are confined to persons of the same sex, it seems to be a fairly common practice for women to be admitted into associations under the control of men, and for men to be members of certain associations in which women predominate. Some associations organized by men deliberately encourage the recruitment of female members but have them under a more or less separate administration, with the women’s leader responsible to the head of the society. A further fairly common feature of all kinds of voluntary associations is the fact that most of their personnel are young people. Indeed, some societies expect their members to retire at the age of thirty (Holas 1953), and it is rare for persons over middle age to play an active part in their affairs. This, however, is less typical of the “traditional” organizations that it is of the other types of association which, nevertheless, quite often like to have an elderly man or woman as an honorary president. The role of such a person is to uphold the association’s reputation for respectability and to help its relations with the wider community. The fact that he is not infrequently a person of importance in tribal society is indicative of the desire of such associations to keep on good terms with the traditional authorities. The size of membership is a more variable factor. It ranges from a mere handful of individuals to several hundred or even thousands, in the case of the larger tribal associations. In the smaller societies, which are often very ephemeral, the amount of support given is probably bound up as much with the personality and personal influence of the leader as it is with the popularity of the institution.

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS AS AN ADAPTIVE MECHANISM

It was suggested earlier that the social changes resulting from culture contact may be seen as an historical process of adaptation to new conditions. Adaptation in the present context implies not only the modification of African institutions, but their development to meet the demands of an industrial
economy and urban way of life. In effect, as Banton has shown in reference to Temne immigrants in Freetown, this sometimes amounts to a virtual resuscitation of the tribal system in the interests of the modernist ambitions and social prestige of the younger educated element concerned (Banton 1956:354–368). The unpublished findings of Jean Rouch seem to give even greater emphasis to this kind of phenomenon, which he has labelled "super-tribalization." Some of the immigrants into the Gold Coast, whom he has studied, have gained sufficient solidarity through their associations and cults to dominate over the local population, achieving monopolies in various trades (cf. Forde 1956:389). A further important effect of this kind of development, as both Busia (1950) and Banton (n.d.) have pointed out, is to inhibit the growth of civic loyalty or responsibility for the town concerned. Modern urbanism, in other words, is the conditioning factor in contemporary African society as well as the culmination of so-called acculturation. West African urbanism of course differs from comparable Western situations in being less advanced, although it is probably more dynamic. It involves a particularly rapid diffusion of entirely new ideas, habits, and technical procedures, and a considerable restructuring of social relationships as a consequence of the new technical roles and groups created.

Voluntary associations play their part in both these processes through the fresh criteria of social achievement that they set up and through the scope that they offer, in particular, to women and to the younger age groups. Women, and younger people in general, possess a new status in the urban economy, and this is reflected in the various functions which these associations perform as political pressure groups, in serving as a forum for political expression, and in providing both groups with training in modern methods of business. Equally significant is the fact that women's participation in societies with a mixed membership involves them in a new kind of social relationship with men, including companionship and the opportunity of selecting a spouse for oneself. In particular, voluntary associations provide an outlet for the energies and ambitions of the rising class of young men with a tribal background who have been to school. The individuals concerned are debarred by their "Western" occupations as clerks, school teachers, artisans, etc. and by their youth from playing a prominent part in traditional society proper; but they are the natural leaders of other young people less Westernized and sophisticated than themselves. This is largely because of their ability to interpret the "progressive" ideas they have gained through their work and travel, and through reading newspapers and books, in terms that are meaningful to the illiterate rank and file of the movement.

It is, in fact, in relation to the latter group, particularly the urban immigrant, that the significance of voluntary associations as an adaptive mechanism is most apparent. The newly arrived immigrant from the rural areas has been used to living and working as a member of a compact group of kinsmen and neighbors on a highly personal basis of relationship and mutuality. He knows
of no other way of community living than this, and his natural reaction is to make a similar adjustment to urban conditions.

This adjustment the association facilitates by substituting for the extended group of kinsmen a grouping based upon common interest which is capable of serving many of the same needs as the traditional family or lineage. In other words, the migrant's participation in some organization such as a tribal union or a dancing compin not only replaces much of what he has lost in terms of moral assurance in removing from his native village, but offers him companionship and an opportunity of sharing joys as well as sorrows with others in the same position as himself. (Probably an important point in this regard is the large number of offices available in some associations, enabling even the most humble member to feel that he "matters.")) Such an association also substitutes for the extended family in providing counsel and protection, in terms of legal aid; and by placing him in the company of women members, it also helps to find him a wife. It also substitutes for some of the economic support available at home by supplying him with sickness and funeral benefits, thereby enabling him to continue his most important kinship obligations. Further, it introduces him to a number of economically useful habits and practices, such as punctuality and thrift, and it aids his social reorientation by inculcating new standards of dress, etiquette, and personal hygiene. Above all, by encouraging him to mix with persons outside his own lineage and sometimes tribe, the voluntary association helps him to adjust to the more cosmopolitan ethos of the city (Banton 1956; Offodile 1947:937, 939, 941). Equally significant, too, is the syncretistic character of associations of the "traditional-modernized" type. Their combination of modern and traditional traits constitutes a cultural bridge which conveys, metaphorically speaking, the tribal individual from one kind of sociological universe to another.

The latter point is also indicative of various ways in which these voluntary associations substitute for traditional agencies of social control. Not only are positive injunctions to friendly and fraternal conduct embodied in the constitution by which members agree to bind themselves, but many associations have rules proscribing particular misdemeanors and what they regard as antisocial behavior. In this respect, the frequent inclusion of sexual offenses, such as the seduction of the wife or the daughter of a fellow member, is very significant. The association also sets new moral standards and attempts to control the personal conduct of its members in a number of ways. For example, the Lagos branch of Awo Omma Patriotic Union resolved not to marry any girl of their town so long as the prevailing amount of money asked for bride-wealth was not reduced (Comhaire-Sylvain 1950). The dancing compin will withhold its legal aid from a member unless the company's officials examining the case feel that he is in the right. Also, there are women's groups concerning themselves specifically with the settlement of domestic quarrels, which expel members who are constant troublemakers in the home and among other women. More frequently, punishment takes the form of a fine, but the strong-
est sanction probably lies in the fact that every reputable association is at pains to check fresh applications for membership (Offodile 1947: 939, 941). In other words, a person who has earned a bad name for himself in one organization may find it difficult to get into another; and this form of ostracism may in some cases be as painful as exile from the tribe.

A final important point is the extent to which disputes of a private or domestic nature, which would formerly have been heard by some traditional authority such as the head of a lineage, are now frequently taken to the head of an association, even when the matter is quite unconcerned with the life of that particular body (Kurankyi-Taylor n.d.; Offodile 1947:28).

CONCLUSION

Theorists of Western urbanism have stressed the importance of voluntary associations as a distinctive feature of contemporary social organization. Wirth, in particular, has emphasized the impersonality of the modern city, arguing that its psychological effect is to cause the individual urbanite to exert himself by joining with others of similar interests into organized groups to obtain his ends. “This,” wrote Wirth (1938) “results in an enormous multiplication of voluntary organizations directed towards as great a variety of objectives as are human needs and interests.” However, this thesis has not been strongly supported by empirical enquiry. According to Komarovsky (1946:686–698), who studied voluntary associations in New York, the old neighborhood, the larger kin group, might have broken down, but they have not been replaced by the specialized voluntary groups to the extent usually assumed. Floyd Dotson, who conducted a similar investigation in Detroit, also failed to find a wholesale displacement of primary by secondary groups. He concludes that the majority of urban working class people do not participate in formally organized voluntary associations (Dotson 1951:687–693). Perhaps more significant for the present context is the fact that the same writer found even less participation in voluntary organizations among the working class population of Guadalajara, the second largest city of Mexico (Dotson 1953: 380–386).

The quantitative methods used in obtaining the latter results have not as yet been employed in African towns, so it is impossible to make exact comparisons. Also, the investigations concerned appear to have been made among relatively stable populations. Further study is therefore needed of the two factors which seem to be largely instrumental in the growth of these African voluntary associations. The first of these factors is the existence of an urban population which is largely immigrant, unstable, and socially heterogeneous. The second is the adaptability of traditional institutions to urban conditions. Possibly, it is the existence and interrelationship of these two factors rather than “anomie” which creates the essential conditions for the “fictional kinship groups,” which, according to Wirth, substitute for actual kinship ties within the urban environment.4
African Voluntary Associations

NOTES

1 Michael P. Banton (n.d.) estimates that some 130 registered societies were in existence in Freetown in 1952. The number of unregistered societies is unknown. Pierre Clément (1956:470–471) reports some 62 "authorized" and "unauthorized" societies from Stanleyville, Belgian Congo. There are very few data concerning individual participation, although J. Lombard (op. cit.) reports of Cotonou that out of 35 persons who belonged to one or more associations, 20 belonged to regional groups, 17 to professional associations, 13 to political groups, 3 to musical societies, 1 to an athletic club.

2 For example, Chelenyoh, Secretary; Weiilunyon, Treasurer (Banton n.d.).

3 "Added . . . is the internal discipline which is often maintained among members of well organized tribal unions. Where there is perfect control of extraneous activities of the members, it is hard to see two litigants in court being members of the same tribal unions. I remember at Makurdi the Ibo Federal Union there had a strict regulation, which was observed to the letters . . . that no Ibo man shall send another to court under any pretext without first bringing the matter to the union for trial and advice. The result of this was that in that town the Ibo deserted the courts, except if drawn there by members of different tribes or by disloyal members of their own union, but this later case is rare" (Offodile 1947).

4 It has been noted in this connection that voluntary associations among Mexican immigrants in Chicago are participated in by only a small minority. Nevertheless, they play an important role which directly and indirectly affects the life of the entire colony (Taylor 1928:131–142).

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