In West Africa, migration to the city has resulted in the widespread formation of voluntary associations. In contrast to any stereotype of the city as the loosener of networks, the creator of anomie, the destroyer of community, can be found these manifestations of a still powerful sense of common ties and interests. They may take the form of religious organizations; they may be sports or recreational clubs; they may be concerned with saving to finance investment ventures (for example, Yoruba Esusu clubs) and social security.

Whatever the function, among the strongest bases for organization are the area of origin and ethnic grouping of the members. Associations based on ethnic origin can take over some of the functions of the extended family in its absence or incapacity to meet the new demands of urban life. The new arrival finds ready-made social contacts and assistance in his first major problems, finding housing and a job. Social security and loans may be provided through the same association; for example, small contributions at regular meetings form funds which can be used to cover funeral costs and to assist the family in case of the death of a member. These associations may also be concerned with social control to preserve the reputation of the group and they frequently take an active concern in the development of the area of origin—for example sending money to finance the building of a school or the provision of scholarship loans. The strength of an organization combining these functions, as well as its potential political dangers, is illustrated by the Ibo State Union, inaugurated in Lagos in 1936 and spread all over the Federation, a most powerful social and political force before the Civil War.

Positively, West African voluntary associations have assisted in the adaptation of the rural migrant to urban life, in the provision of social contacts and services, and they have contributed to the development of the area of origin in the case of the ethnic associations. Incidentally, they also illustrate the possibility of community development organized on a non-geographical community in the sense that the members do not necessarily live in the same neighbourhood in cities, though in many cases they do live in their own quarter and they do, of course, have a neighbourhood tie in respect of the area of origin.

Negatively, largely through their involvement in politics, associations based on common or supposed common ethnic origin may well have their share of blame to bear for the development of conflict on tribal lines, particularly in the case of Nigeria.

IN LONDON

If voluntary associations have played such an important role in West African migrations to the city, how important are they in the migration of West Africans to London, and what are the possibilities inherent in their development, both positive and negative? From a small pilot study of students, seeking advice or aid from the Wandsworth Community Relations Officer in South-West London, it would appear that a number of factors may be responsible for limiting the role of these associations in meeting their needs and solving their problems.
Firstly, there may be reasons why they have less political backing at present in London than some may have enjoyed in the past and/or at home. The students of Ghana might, for example, have achieved more for their welfare here through their Ghana Union if they had continued to have Government support (including financial grants) and party (C.P.P.) connections as they had before the 1966 coup. Between then and this year they have been split among different factions and since 1967 without Government grants. The effect of the banning of political parties in Nigeria and the concentration of attention in Government circles on the war at home may be to deprive voluntary associations in London of the support which was vital to their success at home in pre-coup days. These suggestions are tentative in the extreme, especially coming, as they do, from an outsider.

Even so, both national and area associations do exist and do go some way towards meeting the needs of the participants. Certainly, they provide social contacts which can be important in helping the new arrival over his first feelings of strangeness and these contacts may also be useful in providing information about employment and housing opportunities. The contacts may take place at parties organized to welcome the new arrivals, or at Grand Dances, a great favourite among West Africans. For example, apart from Nigeria House functions, there are also numerous student associations from different parts of the Federation. These may meet quarterly (for example the Union of the newly-formed South Eastern State). Apart from providing introductions for newcomers the Dance may also be the occasion for raising money—most effectively done by asking individuals to make their contribution publicly—for development, economic or political, at home.

But the members have other problems different in kind or degree from those the associations were used to meeting at home. Housing and job-hunting provide examples of the limitations in the London situation of the efficacy of personal contacts (though these may solve the problems of some individuals).

Child-minding provides an example of a new problem, which has so far proved beyond the solution of the voluntary associations. In the West African city the working mother can leave her children to the care of the grandmother or any other female relative or nurse. In London the female relatives are unlikely to be available and so is a nurse, even if her services could be afforded. Yet the West African mother is generally under strong pressure to take a job. In addition to the economic need forcing the mother out to work there is the desire to use the opportunity of being in London to acquire qualifications. It may be a once and for all chance to gain, say, a prestigious nurse’s or secretary’s qualifications which can then be put to use back home.

Local Authority provisions cannot meet all the demands made on them nor does the Ministry of Health intend them to meet the needs of mothers who work, in the words of the Minister of Health (in the House of Commons, 19th March, 1968), because “they want to work, but do not have to”.

The solutions adopted at present were rarely felt to be satisfactory by the mothers in the pilot survey. Daily-minding costs up to £3 or even more per child per week, and this sum often does not include the cost of food. Arrangements made through personal contacts were frequently described as unreliable. The new regulations requiring child-minders to be registered and approved by the Local Authority, which came into force this year, may perhaps end some of the more unsatisfactory of these solutions.
Some parents preferred not to bring their children, or to send them home. The Society for the Advancement of Africans (TOFTA) claims it will repatriate up to 1000 children this year. Some parents are forced to put their children in care, either through the Local Authority Children’s Department or a voluntary body such as the Commonwealth Children’s Society, which placed a hundred children last year. If all else fails, advertisements may be tried.

If the child-minding problem were special only in its novelty, voluntary associations might still have been expected to have organized their own daily child-minding nurseries. In addition, though, it raises other difficulties. The difficulty of finding housing has caused widespread dispersal of the different groups of common origin. Yet shared neighbourhood is crucial in the case of young children who cannot conveniently be taken long distances to and from nurseries, as they become too tired, even if the mother has time to take them on her way to work.

Added to this factor are the difficulties of organization among an essentially transient population whose average stay of perhaps 5–10 years may be estimated as far shorter in the mind of the optimistic student embarking on his course. Still, the problem of continuity of individuals may not be as crucial as the neighbourhood problem, given that urban migration may, at least until very recently, have been transitory, especially among Government civil servants in West Africa. Rapid turnover of the student population may, though, have inhibited the growth of an understanding of problem-solving mechanisms in the United Kingdom—for example it takes time to learn how to form housing associations to apply for mortgages and grants from charitable organizations, to set up a nursery; to learn one’s way, in fact, around the tangle of British welfare provisions.

There may be other reasons, too, for the failure so far of West African voluntary associations to come to grips with the child-minding problem, and there may be more important reasons. Whatever these may be, the problem remains unsolved or unsatisfactorily solved for the most part.

WHAT SHOULD BE THE ROLE OF VOLUNTARY ACTION AMONG WEST AFRICAN STUDENTS IN LONDON?

The contrast between the key role played in the past by voluntary associations in West African cities and their relatively less important role in assisting adaptation to some of the difficulties of life in London raises the problem of their future development here. Research done by West Africans themselves might perhaps establish the relative weight of the different factors which inhibit the successful transplantation of older associations to a new terrain. Conclusions could be reached on how they could be assisted in meeting new needs—for example embassies could provide continuity of organization, financial aid and information to societies trying to set up housing associations and day nurseries.

Supposing voluntary effort could be harnessed in this way, and the migrant students helped to help themselves, some burdens might be taken off the British social services, which would be community development insofar as the migrants would be the community. But there remains unanswered the question of how far it is desirable in the long term for ethnic groupings to form the basis of community. Reinforcing ethnic ties through organizing around them has been one of the factors in the tribalization of politics in West Africa.
around the tribe or nationality might be particularly dangerous in Britain at present, since this could also be seen as organization on racial lines. The more successful the organization the greater the possible divisive effect between the immigrants and their white neighbours, who might envy their facilities and organize separately. Conversely, multi-racial organizations to meet a common need, if this is still possible, could be a force for greater co-operation and understanding in other spheres.

The All African Women's Association has made a start in this direction; it is made up of wives from a variety of tribes and nationalities, who are combining to try to start, among other projects, multi-racial day nurseries, taking children on the criterion of need. More ventures of this type could be encouraged, for example with help from Local Authorities and other voluntary bodies in finding premises and in buying equipment.

A sense of community is not a fixed quantity for these migrant West Africans. They have ties with communities at home, and ties with others from their areas of origin scattered over London, and they also evidently have some potential sense of community centred around common needs. Where community development policies can stimulate or discourage these potentials, before deciding which ties to foster it is necessary to consider the long term social and political considerations as well as the short term ease of mobilising self-help.

Community Development Society

COMMUNITY development educators and practitioners, meeting at Columbia, Missouri in January 1969, felt strongly that the community development profession has progressed to the point where a society is needed to further its growth and development, and decided to establish the Community Development Society. The purposes of the Society are to advance the community development profession, to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas, to provide a medium for the publication of professional, scholarly work, and to provide opportunity for the development of common interests among members.

National and regional meetings will be held; these will be of most interest to our North American readers but there will also be a twice yearly journal and other publications. Subscription is $10 a year and the address for further information is:

Chairman
Community Development Society
909 University Avenue
Columbia, Missouri 65201
U.S.A.