

REVIEW ARTICLE

African Women in Towns: An Aspect of Africa's Social Revolution.
 Kenneth Little. London, Cambridge University Press. 1973.
 viii, 242 pp. £4.90.

Kenneth Little, Professor of African Urban Studies at the University of Edinburgh, has shown courage in undertaking a study so problematic as this one. His reason for doing so, he tells us, was his observation along with 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..." Having published a monograph on the Mende of Sierra Leone and books on urbanization in Africa, Professor Little has brought to this assignment a familiarity with the vast range of research on contemporary Africa, as well as his own extensive fieldwork and teaching experience in different parts of the continent.

But the difficulties are truly formidable. African cities and towns (to think only of Abidjan, Kano, Kampala, Dar es Salaam, as a beginning) are strikingly diverse in their historical development, in the forces creating their present growth, and thus in the settings they provide for the drama of men and women experiencing 'social revolution'. Multiple ethnic groups are involved, each with defined indigenous patterns of interrelationship for male and female. Different religions - whether traditional, Moslem, or the varied Christian denominations - provide codes for the relations of men and women and thus add a further dimension to be considered. Political ideologies ranging from socialism to capitalism, different rates of economic growth among nations, varied levels of education and income within nations: all these variables enter into the analysis of contemporary African social change and the part in this of women. To add to this complexity, research studies in urban areas have been carried through at different times and for different purposes; they are uneven in scope and quality, sometimes unreliable, and thus awkward for use in comparative analysis. Statistics on a wider scale - population censuses, labour force figures (of men and women in different occupations), wages and incomes, rates of migration - are not readily available for many of the nations of tropical Africa.

Professor Little imposes order on this wide diversity of urban backgrounds, and gets around the deficiency of 'facts', by setting out broad chapter headings - 'women in the urban economy', 'women in the political arena', 'the world of lovers', etc. - and illustrating his themes with data from selected research studies. He also provides excerpts from novels to give a more vivid picture of the vitality and the squalor, the brilliant sense of style and the self-parody, the strivings to be modern while honouring tradition, all the contradictions and inventive energies of the African urban scene today.

At the beginning he warns, significantly: "The position of African women, consequently, has often to be subjectively assessed." But he does not appear to be aware of the full implications of his comment. He continues, "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." His description, however, is the kind of conventional wisdom that is now being examined, and even contradicted. Critical revaluations in anthropology are posing questions previously unasked and revealing new insights on women's experience in both traditional and modern societies. These studies are based not on the observation and explanation of behaviour through familiar sociological categories but on the analysis of symbolic modes of self-identification. It was Edwin Ardener's paper, 'Belief and the Problem of Women' (1971), which brought to our awareness the problem that was there: the problem of women in ethnographies; of how, for the most part, anthropologists (both male and female) created interpretations of societies from the perspective of male informants while women's models of themselves in relation to society and nature were all but ignored.

Much more needs to be known about women in traditional African societies, but some present research offers new understanding. Harriet Sibisi (1974) tells how Zulu women diviners gain important influence by conducting religious rites, by diagnosing illness and thus guiding medical treatments by male ethnodoctors, and by determining crucial political decisions; they also interpret new experiences and innovate ways to cope with these within the Zulu philosophical system. Dr. Sibisi stresses the paradox presented by the diviners in the Zulu social structure: in an otherwise male-dominated society, women as diviners have a position superior to men in religion, health and disease, and in Zulu cosmology.

In separate studies Judith Van Allen (1972) and Caroline Ifeka (1975) have re-assessed the Igbo 'Women's War' in 1929. They demonstrate that although the riots were triggered by the fear that taxation would be extended to women, the underlying factors were much deeper. British colonial officers, imbued with Victorian values about women's roles, had failed to discern the women's indigenous political institutions through which women protected their individual and collective rights and also were able to achieve considerable status as leaders. By introducing Native Administration with appointed Warrant Chiefs, colonial officers not only cut across the Igbo traditional system of diffused authority, fluid leadership and shared rights of sanction, but they also reduced the powers of women in the accepted balance of male-female relations. Despite the dramatic rebellion of these Igbo and Ibibio women against the colonial government, the full dimensions of their cause have only recently been recognized.

Reviewing this historical event from what might be called the reformed colonial perspective, Little describes the women's political action as not in accordance with indigenous procedures, by which (he tells us) women took their grievances to the head of the house; thus he perpetuates the view that these women lack their own political institutions. He concludes, "They displayed a degree of militancy associated traditionally with male rather than female behaviour." (It is not clear whether

'traditionally' refers to Igbo tradition or that of Western anthropology.) On the subject of militancy, again recent research has illuminated hidden facets of women's experience in traditional societies. In 'Sexual Insult and Female Militancy', Shirley G. Ardener (1973) discovered similar configurations of women's collective militant action in various African situations and then went on to trace convincing parallels between these and strategies developed separately by modern women's liberation movements in the West.

While Little's book is about women in today's African cities and not about those in traditional societies, a study of social change obviously requires a clear understanding of the past in order to assess the nature and the degree of change. If studies of traditional societies reveal that African women were more important in their structural position than has been previously recognized, more organized into political groups, more militant, more independent, and more achieving, then their active place in the contemporary urban scene might well be interpreted as marking a continuity with tradition and not - as Little would have us accept - a break.

The note on the back cover tells us that the author "dwells on the suggestion - rarely debated in studies in migration - that for women movement into towns has basically a different significance than for men." The difference is, we are told, that young men who migrate from villages to cities tend to rationalize their ambitions in terms of 'progress' while women speak of their desire for 'freedom' and 'emancipation'. The argument continues that girls, wanting to escape rural dullness and adult domination, are tempted by the 'bright lights' of the city, the independence it offers and the hopes of following the latest fashions. But is the case so different for male and female migrants? In my own (limited) experience of talking to African school girls in villages, they spoke of gaining further qualifications in the city and improving their living conditions. "Do I want to spend the rest of my days farming like my mother?" one Igbo girl asked pointedly. And young men are known to move away from authoritarian hierarchies in villages to seek the adventures of city life. As for the urban fashion scene, which can be very vivid and changing, it only takes a few minutes of observation on any crowded city street to note that men are just as conscious of the latest male image in clothes and haircuts as women are about their styles.

What might be called the 'Jagua Nana theme' recurs as a leitmotiv in this volume. Little states that the heroine of Cyprian Ekwensi's novel, Jagua Nana, provides "virtually a sociological case-study of the adventurous type of young woman who has migrated to the more cosmopolitan towns of the West Coast." A case-study in sociology carries the implications of a detailed examination of an individual unit in order to illuminate the characteristics of a much wider group of which it is representative. Can this really be said of Jagua Nana? Little says, "I am not competent to comment on the literary value of these

novelists' writings but I can vouch for their sociological validity." But surely some sensitivity to literary genres and the construction of novels (the interrelations of plot, character, dialogue, style) must go into any assessment of sociological validity. Let us examine Ekwensi's fictional study of life in the city of Lagos during the early days of Nigeria's independence. The novel opens with the central character just having finished a cold bath, admiring herself: "They called her Jagua because of her good looks and stunning fashions. They said she was Ja-gwa, after the British prestige car." Now at 45, she is intent on applying her considerable sexual charms to snare Freddie, an ambitious teacher twenty years younger than herself; she plans to help support his law studies overseas after which he will return to marry her. This main plot is developed with powerful comic sequences, but it can hardly be called a representative situation. At that age most West African women are working hard to help their sons and daughters (or nieces and nephews) gain higher qualifications - not their young lovers. But Jagua has no children (conveniently for the plot) until a few years later when at age 48 she bears a son by a casual lover and the child lives for a brief three days. She hardly mourns, but is off now to Onitsha to become a 'merchant princess'. The multiple sub-plots are equally implausible. For example, Jagua Nana visits Freddie's family in the hinterland; in a succession of comic scenes Jagua uses her magnetic attractions to seduce a chief and by so doing to reconcile two branches of the royal family at war for thirty years. At another stage Jagua becomes associated with a gang of Lagos thieves; this episode comes to a climax with a teenage girl taking a revolver and shooting another young woman in the midst of a traditional ceremony honouring the dead.

It is hardly necessary to note that pistol-packing girls are not likely to appear in a sociological monograph of Lagos. All this belongs to a fantasy comic genre, each scene mocking 'reality' from a different angle. The supporting characters are an assortment of stock figures (chief, politician, thief) brought in to provide spicy interludes and a fast-paced narrative. No doubt Ekwensi will be long remembered for his creation of Jagua Nana; she is an 'independent' woman, larger-than-life, full of shallow cunning and concentrated self-interest. But the question does arise: is this a male projection of a female image? There are of course no objections to this in novels, which always present imaginative constructions of human experience from particular points of reference. (It might be added in this context that Flora Nwapa, the Nigerian woman novelist, gives a more sympathetic rendering of women's thoughts and feelings.) A 'sociological case-study', however, is meant to be neutral and unbiased. It would seem that the relation between literary sources and 'sociological validity' is considerably more subtle and complex than Little's approach acknowledges.

The 'Jagua Nana theme' supports Little's central argument about the difference in the significance of migration for women: they leave rural areas to gain 'freedom' from ties with men; then, because very few wage-paid jobs are available and other opportunities for earning a living are scarce, many provide sexual services for money. Little outlines the different arrangements

of prostitutes, femmes libres, courtesans and 'outside wives', but he tends to emphasize the 'freedom' and glamour rather than the precariousness and vulnerability of their situation. Does this really mark 'independence' from men? True, when cities have a surplus of men (including foreigners of all nationalities) and a booming economic situation, then enterprising and attractive women can cash in and live in comparative luxury. But even Jagua Nana was made to see through this one:

She knew that if a girl went to Tropicana every day, that girl was a pawn; a pawn in the hands of criminals, Senior Service men, contractors, thieves, detectives, liars, cheats, the rabble, the scum of the country's grasping hands and headlong rush to 'civilisation', 'sophistication', and all the falsehood it implied (Ekwensi, p. 128).

Related to the 'Jagua Nana theme' is the question of balance and emphasis in Little's study: more attention is given to women's relations with men than to women's activities and achievements outside the sexual sphere. Thus, while detailed material is presented on night club life and the ventures of 'walk-about women', other significant aspects of urban women's experience are left out altogether from Little's analysis. The subject of 'women in religion', for example, might be expected to merit a chapter on its own. In one sentence Little notes that syncretist cults often favour women evangelists over men, but he does not expand this topic. Any analysis of urban social change can hardly be complete without considering the forces of religion in its long-established forms and its numerous dynamic movements. Throughout tropical Africa, women are not only active participants in various types of religious worship, they also become widely known among certain groups as leaders, prophetesses, and faith-healers.

Another subject which demands fuller treatment is 'women's education'. Little provides only a brief background on the educational status of the present 20-40 age group of women. But since education is widely regarded as the key to advancement - jobs in the modern sector, entry to professional life, greater equality in marriage - more space might be given to the present situation. Statistics could be assembled to give a rough idea of the proportions of boys and girls attending school at different levels in various countries. Which areas have made the greatest efforts to expand educational opportunities for girls? And where are girls almost totally neglected? There is no mention of community education - literacy classes, and the types of lectures and radio talks given to help adult women improve the health and nutrition of their children, the conditions of their home life, and their economic activities. Yet these forms of communication are reaching out in African cities in ways that are meaningful to individuals and effective in social change. Nor is any attention given to indigenous processes of transmitting skills and knowledge: the seamstresses with their apprentices learning to cut cloth and use a sewing machine, the traders in textiles teaching their assistants (often young relatives) the

ways to push sales in a highly competitive market, the street vendors of cooked food training their helpers, and so on. While this method of senior women teaching younger ones follows tradition, the skills themselves are adapted to match the demands of the modern urban milieu.

Despite their obvious potential for leadership, no notice in this volume is given to women in universities. They may be very few, but their numbers are growing, and these women will be the doctors, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, even political leaders, in the years ahead. The highly educated women in African nations stand out in significance far greater than their numbers suggest: they are not only themselves, in many cases holding high-level jobs, but powerful images on the screens of the imagination of younger women who emulate them.

Little's final chapter contrasts the differences in the position of women between East and West Africa and gives a salutary discussion of the obstacles and complexities in women's struggle for equality. Most interesting is his appendix bringing together 'portraits' of African women outstanding in education, politics, social welfare, business. These biographies, beginning with the Ghanaian Mrs. Jessica Otumba-Payne, a contemporary and friend of Lord Lugard, make fascinating reading.

In conclusion, Professor Little should be congratulated for taking up this complicated and controversial subject and setting out lines for further investigation. With the announcement in January 1975 of Africa's first woman prime minister, Madame Elizabeth Domitien in the Central Africa's Republic, it is certain that we shall be hearing much more about - and from - African women.

Helen Callaway

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