Culture and Stratification among Urban Africans

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In various towns of sub-Saharan Africa, new elite Africans are separated in friendship interaction from non-elite Africans. This separation between elite and non-elite is also true in the East African town of Mbale, Uganda. This division is understandable partly in terms of the elite’s and non-elite’s different occupational and socio-economic circumstances. That is, for example, the low incomes of the non-elite prohibit them from participating in the leisure life of the elite. However, socio-economic differences do not explain why the elite, with their greater wealth, choose to avoid the non-elite in leisure-time interaction. Rather, it is the elite’s interpretation and evaluation of these differences which explain their separation from the non-elite. Therefore, this paper, in order to examine further class structure among urban Africans, analyzes the elite’s values, beliefs, and expectations of friendship, that is, their friendship culture.

Friendship interaction among elite Africans in Mbale is consistent with their culture, though it is also influenced by socio-economic circumstances which limit the range of people with whom the elite come into contact and thus with whom they become friendly. In analyzing the elite’s friendship culture, it is thus important to describe their friendship interaction within its non-normative context.

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2 See, among other reports, Smythe (1960: 94–102), Lloyd (1967: 149), and Kuper (1965: 99). This pattern of stratified friendships among Africans was first described in a Ugandan town (Jinja) more than a decade ago by the Sofers (1955: 46).

3 Elsewhere I have presented a detailed description of the social composition of the elite and non-elite Africans in Mbale and a statistical analysis of the elite’s friendship choices (1968: 123–138). For the purpose of this paper, I am taking as a starting point the fact that no elite African chose as a friend a non-elite African.
An important aspect of friendship among elite Africans is drinking together, and socio-economic factors create limiting conditions which strengthen the separation of elite and non-elite in their drinking behavior. These factors include most importantly income differences between elite and non-elite Africans. The differences in wealth between elite and non-elite Africans in Mbale are tied to their different occupations, which, in turn, are determined by Mbale's functional bases. Mbale is an administrative and commercial center of some 20,000 in Uganda's eastern region. Of the town's 15,000 Africans, about 125 adult males form the core of the elite. Most elite Africans in the town are officers in government service and a few are in managerial positions in large scale para-government and private firms which have offices in the town. Few elite Africans are engaged in individual commercial enterprise, since most trade in Mbale, as elsewhere in Uganda, is controlled by 'Asians'. In contrast to the elite, most non-elite Africans in the town are unskilled or skilled laborers. The occupational division between elite and non-elite Africans is reflected in their different incomes. The elite's average annual cash income is about $2680. In contrast to the elite, the non-elite Africans are poor, their average annual cash income being about $400, less than one-sixth that of the elite.

The income differences are impressive when related to the problems of transportation to the bars in the town. The developed area of Mbale, which is about one-third of the town, is the only area which has paved roads and street-lighting, while the rest of the town is without these facilities. The developed area includes office buildings, shops, bars, and the residences of elite Africans, Asians, and Europeans. The non-elite live scattered throughout the undeveloped area of the town. From the elite residential area to the bars is about a half-hour's walk or a few minute's car ride, and 85% of the elite Africans have cars. For most of the non-elite to come from the undeveloped area to the town bars, it is at least the same distance or even longer, but most of them do not have cars. Furthermore, there is no public bus service within the town and taxis are both infrequent and relatively expensive. About half of the non-elites have bicycles, but this mode of transportation is neither convenient nor safe, particularly after dark, in getting to the built-up area and the bars there.

In addition to these logistic constraints, there are also the economic constraints of the costs of drinking which limit the opportunities for elite and

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1 The elite Africans in Mbale are typical socio-economically, of African elites outside Uganda. See Lloyd's discussion (1966: 4, 7-10) of the characteristics of new urban African elites. Also, for an analysis of the occupations of Ugandan elite Africans as a whole, see Goldthorpe (1965: 60-63).

2 This figure of 15,000 includes about 4,000 Africans who live outside the town's boundaries, but who come into it daily for work. There are also about 5,000 non-African residents in the town, mostly "Asians" (people of Indian and Pakistani descent). These people do not participate in the friendships of elite Africans in the town.

3 See Fallers (1964: 125, 145-147) and Goldthorpe (1965: 60-63) for an analysis of the limited opportunities for Africans in commercial life and of the significance of government service for modern occupational roles for Africans in Uganda.