Stratification and Nationalism in Uganda

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WRITING just prior to Ugandan independence, L. A. Fallers suggested that one key to the development of nationalism in Uganda would be the emergence of a culture which would unite its ethnically diverse population (1961:677). He also predicted that in Uganda this process could be complicated by the independent identity of the Ganda, the country’s largest tribe, noting that the Ganda would have to either secede from the national federation or accept an extra-tribal system of values and beliefs (1961:685). Now, nine years later and after a revolution that forcibly incorporated the Ganda kingdom into the country’s present unitary administrative structure, the question of the development of an extra-tribal culture, particularly on the part of Ganda, assumes even greater significance for Uganda’s political future. This paper examines the extent to which such a culture is taking root. It appears from observations made in Uganda in 1965–66, including the period of the revolution, that there is an incipient nationalism, but one that is limited to the African elite.

This conclusion is drawn from a study of Africans in the town of Mbale, an administrative and commercial center in Uganda’s eastern region, located about 170 miles north-east of Kampala, the nation’s capital. Mbale’s functional bases, administration and commerce, underlie the division of the town’s African population into two categories, which may be described as elite and non-elite. Most elite Africans are senior civil servants, and most non-elite are unskilled laborers. Both the elite and the non-elite are tribally heterogeneous, with Ganda constituting about 30% of the elite and about 10% of the non-elite.

My analysis of an emergent Ugandan nationalism, as I observed it among the elite Africans in Mbale, is based on a study of behavior in two different contexts: in the routine leisure-time interaction of friendship and during the
political crisis in May, 1966, when the central government’s forces fought with Ganda tribesmen who were defending the Kabaka’s government. These contexts, friendship and politics, are critical because in them choices are possible and when they are made allegiances are revealed.

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Friendship, in this paper, refers to leisure-time companionship. Africans who work in Mbale, like African townsmen elsewhere, have little choice in whom they interact with during the work day; the functional demands of their occupations determine the people with whom they interact while on the job. It is in leisure-time, when they are free to choose, that the friendship choices of Africans in Mbale reveal the principles which underlie their social organization.

Friendships among the elite Africans are contained within the elite and cut across ethnic and religious lines. Their friendship choices are limited to others who are also well-educated, employed in senior positions in government service or in managerial roles in para-government or private firms, and relatively wealthy. In fact, most elite friendships obtain between men who are co-workers and of approximately similar occupational rank. Moreover, 82% of elite friendships are ethnically heterogeneous. Similarly, 84% of elite friendships are religiously mixed. Furthermore, these friendship sets overlap with one another forming, in composite, a single multi-ethnic and multi-religious elite network. The significance of the heterogeneity of this elite network is that it stands in sharp contrast to the divisive ethnic and religious factionalism reported among the general Ugandan population (Burke, 1964; Edel, 1965:362, 366).

The elite’s values, beliefs, and norms about friendship are consistent with their friendship choices and emphasize the extra-tribal framework of their leisure-time interaction. At one level of their friendship ideology, elite Africans say that friendship should be between social equals, by which they mean primarily men who are also in the elite category and secondarily, within the elite, men who are socially at similar points in their occupational and domestic careers. In general, no reference is made to ethnic or religious factors, which may suggest their lack of significance. Other kinds of data support this view. Of (55) elite Africans interviewed about what factors they thought were basic to friendship, 52% said that “common interests” was the single most important element. “Common interests” connotes for elite Africans primarily compatibility; friends are men who, for whatever psychological reasons, find one another good company. Sociologically, however, “common interests” reflect age similarity, with its implications for the kinds of activities expected of “younger”

2 Elite Africans in Mbale are typical socio-economically of elite Africans in Uganda as a whole (Goldthorpe, 1965: 60–63) and of new urban elite Africans outside Uganda (Lloyd, 1966: 4, 7–10).
4 See Jacobson, (1970), for an analysis of the elite’s ideology of friendship.