

Breaking the "Cake of Custom"

Mlahleni Njisane

West African Urbanization by K. Little (Cambridge University Press, paperback 15s.)

THIS BOOK IS AN IMPORTANT contribution, both for its analysis of voluntary associations as well as for its very useful comprehensive bibliography on various aspects of West African urbanization.

The role of voluntary associations as socialising agents and agents of social change has long occupied the attention of students of urbanization, and Professor Little covers a very vast area containing the continent's largest population. Most of the studies have hitherto consisted of more or less discrete ethnographic accounts of what look like closed systems of culture. Not enough has been made to tie them together by means of theory construction. Examination of the variables of such a construction would help us resolve the problem of conflicting and opposing interpretations. It is clear from reading the various accounts that several variables can be teased out of the present body of data of these studies.

Professor Little makes such a contribution by developing typological categories of associations drawn from empirical studies from all over West and Central Africa. In this approach he breaks through the closed-system approach. The once village-bound, custom-bound African has broken the "cake of custom", and become highly mobile. Houghton, in his South African studies of a rural district in the Cape Province, declares: "The Africans in the district seem to have travelled more frequently and more widely than the average European."

It may appear trivial to remark that the heading of the opening chapter is both unfortunate and inappropriate. "The Lure of the Town" does not seem related directly to the facts that form the discussion in the chapter, and has the ring of frivolous banality about it. But more serious is the recalcitrant reference to "tribal associations" (p. 26) where from the text it is clear that the author refers to region, town or clan. "Having home towns in Nigeria" suggests a common region of origin, and certainly not a tribe. In referring to the membership criteria of one organisation the author says, "All Cape Coast people resident in the town". Similarly in the Accra Zongo of Nima, the Fulani from various countries of West Africa identified themselves on the basis of region of origin.

Whatever the original value of the concept "tribal" it has clearly become an emotive and provocative concept which rather tends to obscure than explain anything. The proliferation of these associations is a measure of the growing needs of the urban immigrant. It seems they tend to follow an ecological pattern indicative of the variable needs of the host ethnoses, the cosmopolitan metropolis, and the immigrant minorities. Empirical studies would do well to

focus less on the associations "colour" or "race", and more on their functional relevance.

WHILE ONE GENERALLY takes these early writings with a pinch of academic scepticism, I wonder what happened to the free West African women they report, "the freest women in the world", and to what extent this is (or may be) related to the modern woman's role in "breaking much the same kind of fresh ground as... the progressive young men". The economic independence of these women has become quite proverbial, and it brings to mind the historical role played by the Negro woman in America in preserving the family under the greatest of strains and stress. The African woman has been very importantly involved in the political struggle for independence, and it seems her role has not received its due deserts.

In describing what Gans (*The Urban Villagers*) aptly calls "the more disreputable of the illegal-but-demanded services", the author, perhaps quite rightly and understandably, refers to them as prostitution, a blanket term that collapses a number of finer variations. These are communities whose morality is fluidity itself, and it seems desirable to view them from a much broader perspective of the whole range of sexual behaviour, and of the morass of ill-defined acts which hinge around the cultural norm of reciprocity. To treat them thus would necessitate a re-examination and more minute analysis which is very relevant to the postulate with which the author starts, namely, "that urbanisation is at the heart of social change, giving rise to a new and larger variety of institutions". Some have been legitimised, but others are in the process of becoming so. ●

On Power

John Clare

Home and Exile by Lewis Nkosi (Longmans 18s.)

LEWIS NKOSI WAS A MEMBER of that remarkable kindergarten of young African journalists who gravitated to *Drum* in Johannesburg during the '50s and, finding for the first time in South Africa an outlet for their literary talents, formed a crusading elite whose style, as much of living as of writing, quickly became almost mythologised. But the flowering, for political reasons, was brief: *Drum* now is an inconsequential shadow of what it was and the elite are mostly in exile.

Mr. Nkosi writes of the period with some diffidence — mindful, one suspects, of his criticism elsewhere of Bloke Modisane, another of the group, for "exploiting" his information of the underground life of Johannesburg's townships. It seems an unfortunate way of putting it. For it is the method not the fact of exploitation that is to blame if the story is a stereotype — even granted the diligence of many of *Drum's* ex-editors and employees. But one feels after reading Mr. Nkosi's account of it that it is not so much that there was nothing more to be said but that perhaps the shebeen talk for all its passion was aimless; that the drinking if picturesque was debilitating, and Johannesburg with its vitality claustrophobic.

None of this has a great deal to do with the book which is principally interesting for the essay *Black Power or Souls of Black Writers*. Mr. Nkosi's twin concerns are for the African writer's relationship with his society and his past. He deals elsewhere with fiction by Black

South Africans but the South's current failure to produce any writing of great merit illustrates the nature of the first relationship. The theme of racial conflict in a society whose answer to it is unsatisfactory, to say the least, is at once too easy and too intractable. Seducing writers of little talent, it paralyses those with greater who find their sensibility shocked by the day to day problems of living in such a situation, let alone creating a work of art out of it.

The relationship of the writer to his past involves his reaction to the impact of colonialism. To his criticism of those who tend to write unhelpfully about the uniqueness of the African Personality, Mr. Nkosi adds a warning against too great and too uncritical a regard for European artistic technique. But the problem finally, he argues, is to be seen in terms of power. For psychological emancipation in those parts of Africa which have regained their independence depends, as much as in those which have not, on some sort of economic parity between the haves and have nots. Thus: "The only remedy is a conscious acquisition of power by the non-white world and the readiness to wield this power as ruthlessly as the white world has done in the past."

The thesis if not new is well put — whether it justifies the occasional journalism which makes up most of the rest of the book is another question. Mr. Nkosi at his best is an acute observer who writes lucidly and with a marvellous lightness of touch. His report, originally for *The Guardian*, of the 1962 conference of African writers of English, is a delightful piece of wry, compact reporting. Two other essays are about New York. One is a highly charged celebration of a Harlem jazz singer but in the other, though much of the writing is fine, the reactions, beginning with the cab driver, seem curiously inevitable. The city is variously described as cold, hard, tough, brutal, chaotic and lonely — but couldn't one have guessed?

Mr. Nkosi refers somewhere to European critics who have 'found it profitable to preside over the rebirth of African literature.' In the circumstances may one say that the book is healthy, but, being partly journalism not fully transmuted to literature, premature? ●