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ETHNICITY AND RURAL SELF-HELP INITIATIVE

A Proposal For Field Research

by

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ABSTRACT

I propose to investigate the association between ethnic identity and rural self-help activity, especially that related to educational innovations, in a rural settlement area in Kenya. The rapidly expanding commitment to formal education among rural populations in Kenya is evidenced by the considerable amount of self-help activity devoted to the provision of educational facilities. Self-help as a developmental strategy in this country has been of increasing importance over the last decade, and while the role of ethnicity in shaping the course, content, and extent of the self-help movement has clearly been substantial, it has not been fully comprehended. My work will address the question of ethnic identity as a determinate in self-help activity, and I will be specifically interested in examining a hypothesis concerning the creation and utilization of identity in the organization of such activity. The research will draw upon, and test the utility of, certain anthropological approaches to the study of socio-cultural change and ethnic-group phenomena. The results should be of significance to future studies and programs in economic and educational development in all contexts where ethnic plurality is a relevant factor. Investigation will proceed on the basis of the established anthropological techniques of participant observation and structured and unstructured interviewing. Data will be analyzed with the aid of the SPSS system of computer programs.

Historical Background and Research Objectives.

All the nations of East Africa face critical problems of "unity and identity" (Gulliver 1969:5). They must each struggle with the difficulties of development in the post-independence era within a context of marked ethnic plurality and the divergent interests and loyalties of the national populations which this condition entails.

Although there exists a consciousness of the difficulties posed by ethnic diversity within East Africa, inadequate attention has been paid to the factors which generate and perpetuate this phenomenon. As Gulliver points out, "There are endless references in speeches and writings to the paramount need for national unity, couched in general terms but with rather little examination of the facts fostering disunity" (ibid:6). It is with such "facts fostering disunity" that I am concerned in my proposed program of research.

Since its inspiration by President Kenyatta almost ten years ago, the Kenyan self-help, or "Harambee" movement has gained ever-increasing significance as a medium for rural development, and today it is a major feature of the economic development landscape of Kenya (Winans 1972). The movement has developed in a context where various traditional forms of community maintenance and improvement activities are also present, and it "represents a fusion of traditional social forms with the organization of society generated by a national government..."(ibid:5-6). Most Harambee activity, indeed, has a local and intra-ethnic, as distinct from a national and inter-ethnic, orientation (ibid:4; cf Report of the Kenya Mission, ILO 1972:300).

Available data also suggest a positive relation between the degree of cultural homogeneity and ethnic solidarity within a district or province and the degree of involvement in the Harambee movement. For example, the Luo-occupied districts of Nyanza Province and the Kikuyu-occupied Central Province display the highest rates of self-help projects per capita in the country. The Luo and the Kikuyu are the two largest ethnic groups in Kenya. Both are characterized by a relatively high degree of cultural and socio-political solidarity and both are in the forefront of national political activity. On the other hand, areas of greater cultural heterogeneity and ethnically mixed populations display correspondingly

lower rates of involvement. It is evident, moreover, that pre-existing patterns of cultural and socio-political integration are more significant as determinates of project rate than are such factors as communications, population density and mobility, and marketing activity (ibid:15). In areas where the population is relatively sparse and isolated from the national communications network and political and economic activity on the national level, generally higher per capita rates of self-help projects are reported than for the districts of mixed populations in the former "White Highlands" - a region of denser settlement and greater integration into the national communications network.

Harambee activity has been especially intense in relation to the provision of educational facilities (Report of the Kenya Mission, ILO 1972:233-234; Winans 1972). This is due in large part to the widely held attitude -- one that is reinforced by the facts of the situation -- that the best-paying, most prestigious jobs go to the educated. "Getting ahead" is understood to involve "getting educated." Given this attitude and the fact that Government funds for education are limited, it is a popular tactic of local communities to construct educational facilities (primary and secondary schools, teachers' quarters, etc.) on their own and present the Government with a fait accompli, with the rationale that this action increases the chances of Government involvement in meeting the recurrent costs of these facilities (cf. Holmquist 1972; Winans 1972).

Unfortunately, the outstanding success of local initiative related to education has created serious problems. These have been noted in the report on Kenya by the Kenya Mission, International Labor Office (1972):

(a) The formal employment sector has been unable to absorb the output of primary and secondary school graduates who have high employment expectations as a result of their education.

(b) Regional differences in educational standards and opportunities have not diminished. On the contrary,

...because localities and local governments have been unequally endowed with financial and other resources, inequalities in the distribution of educational facilities and in the quality of education between districts and provinces have increased (ibid:234).

(c) The Government has been unable to take over or otherwise aid all Harambee schools. Moreover,

Since the trained teachers are bonded or directed primarily to Government-aided schools, the education gap in standards between these and the unaided schools tends to widen. This has certainly contributed to dramatic differences in rates of examination success (ibid: 234-235).

The effect of these problems appears to be the production of "involutionary growth" (cf. Geertz 1963b) in two areas; namely, in the informal sector of the economy and in formal education. Employment in the informal sector of the economy accelerates as that sector absorbs labor but provides no concomitant increase in income. The net result is simply an increase in the population of the working poor. However,

Far from diminishing the demand for education, the increasing imbalance between job seekers on the one hand and well paid jobs in the formal sector and opportunities of earning low incomes in the informal sector on the other has merely intensified it (Report of the Kenya Mission, ILO. 1972:94).

This results in the multiplication of formal educational facilities with no reorientation of educational objectives.

Self-help initiative directed towards education shares with other forms of Harambee participation the tendency to take place in an ethnic medium, so that it "flows directly from community integration and reflects the past as strongly as it projects the future" (Winans 1972:20). In this way, Harambee activity has conformed to the pattern of "stimulated particularism" which has been observed in other contexts wherein newly independent states are emerging from the colonial era (e.g., Geertz 1963a; Gulliver 1969).

Pre-existing patterns of identity, in summary, have exercised a strong influence upon the way in which the Harambee movement has unfolded. This research is intended to focus on identity and to examine the process by which ethnicity not only provides a context for self-help activity, but also emerges within a locale both as an accompaniment to such activity and as a prelude to more extensive future involvement of the locale in the regional and national arena of competition for desired rewards.

In Kenya, it seems that a viable strategy of self-help relies on a basic, ethnic organization of a community -- an "organization to facilitate leadership" in such activity (Winans

1972:20). It therefore seems reasonable to hypothesize that a process of identity creation and/or manipulation will accompany self-help ambitions among a given mixed, or heterogeneous population. The examination of such a hypothesis is the objective of my proposed research.

The research will attempt to establish, in other words, that within a certain heterogeneous population, organization for self-help projects and the rewards they offer involves the modification of pre-existing patterns of affiliation in such a way that a broader identity emerges, either through the creation of a category of ascription different from and inclusive of pre-existing ones or through the elevation of a pre-existing category to incorporate the other(s).

It is expected that this research will help confirm that the widespread commitment to formal education and other forms of community improvement in Kenya and the self-help activity which is a consequence of it (a) has an integrating effect among populations when viewed from the local level, yet (b) may also carry with it negative implications in connection with the development of a pan-national identity which would override traditional and emergent sub-national patterns of affiliation.

#### Theoretical Background.

In contemporary anthropological literature, there has been wide-ranging discussion and debate over such questions as what constitutes an ethnic group and whether the concept has any analytical merit or empirical referents (cf. Naroll 1964; Moerman 1965).

In recent years, however, certain ideas have been expressed which, when assembled, free the concept of ethnicity from some of the difficulties that have limited its analytical utility. What is indicated is a conception of ethnic identity in more relative, less absolute terms. Thus, it is recognized that what we designate as an ethnic group or tribe in one context may not be constant for all contexts. Indeed, ethnicity is situational in its expression and adaptive in function (Paden 1967, 1970). We can perhaps understand it as operating in terms of "segmentary organization," both synchronically and diachronically: units which are distinct at one level may fuse at a higher level, and vice versa. Otherwise stated, ethnicity is a parameter, a quantity or value that varies according

to circumstance (cf. Brass n.d.; Cohen and Middleton 1970; Gulliver 1969; Moerman 1965; Parkin 1969; Ross 1973; van den Berghe n.d.).

In accordance with such considerations, Barth (1969), Gulliver (1969), and others (e.g. Cohen and Middleton and their colleagues 1970) have stressed a processual model for the study of ethnic identity. This orientation is symptomatic of the very great concern among contemporary social anthropologists for concepts and models which more adequately account for the dynamic quality of actual social systems -- a quality which was little stressed in earlier analytic schemes. Instead of an idealization of ethnic groups as units which time and tradition have molded into virtually immutable forms, the processual approach invites a view of ethnic identity as being, at any given moment, an intersection of cultural tradition (custom, socio-political organization, etc.) and the contemporary arena of practical affairs (including the ecological, social, and political factors which will determine the availability of assets and their potential control). As Gulliver phrases it, "...people do not simply adhere to tradition in a vacuum, but only in the contemporary context of the struggle for interests, and rights and privileges, and in defense of those they already have" (1969:12; cf. Barth 1969 and Despres 1973).

Such a view of ethnicity requires a complementary concern with the study of change in society. The approach to socio-cultural change to be used here is one which can be especially associated with the work of Barth (1966, 1967a, 1967b), although the relevance and influence of the work of others is clear (cf., e.g., Brass n.d.; Cohen and Middleton 1970; Eidheim 1963, 1968; Fallers 1955; Geertz 1957, 1959, 1963b; Press 1969; Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1966; Swartz and his colleagues 1968; Turner 1957; Wolf 1956). The basic points of this approach which are relevant to the present research project are as follows:

- (1) The various activities of individual actors or other management units are given form and direction, positive and negative reinforcement, by ecological, valuational, and strategic constraints associated with their social system. A social form results from this process, the form simply being a specific set of frequencies of time and resource allocation on the part of such management units.



(2) One way in which the frequencies of allocations are modified, thus inducing change, is through the activity of innovators, who generate new possibilities of transaction -- that is, who produce new opportunities for the conversion of value. A person who engages in local-level political enterprise may sometimes be understood as an agent of this sort.

(3) In producing new information on transactions, innovative activity has a feed-back effect on the opportunity situation of individual actors, compelling modification of the principles of evaluation and the strategic circumstances in terms of which allocative decisions are made. Ethnic identity is one of the elements subject to such modification.

#### Site Selection.

Investigation is proposed for an area within the former "White Highlands," although selection of a specific study site has not been made as yet. A suitable site would be one occupied by a culturally plural or heterogeneous group of people, where the population segments lack a territorial tradition as well as close and long-standing ties with one another. The Highlands area is likely to provide several locations which meet these criteria. A great deal of resettlement has been carried out on lands which were formerly taken up by large European estates, and one now finds areas inhabited by mixed populations of settlers who work smaller holdings in accordance with the Government's program of subdivision and land redistribution (Apthorpe 1968; Chambers 1969; Odingo 1971).

#### Procedures

The first few months of fieldwork will be devoted to language study as well as to preliminary ethnographic investigations and to specification of the study sample. Investigation will proceed on the basis of the established anthropological techniques of participant observation and structured and unstructured interviewing. Critical data relating to the principles and strategies in terms of which allocative decisions are made and modified will be obtained through several avenues. In addition to surveys of household and community production and consumption

activity, extensive observations will be made of the interaction network of the actors involved, with attention directed to the details of the social postures and categories mobilized according to the context of encounter. Following Southall's suggestion (1959), particular attention will be paid to those individuals who represent "nodal points" by virtue of their more active stance as nuclei in the network of relationships.

Measurements of ethnicity will be similar to those employed by Ross (1973). For analytical purposes, ethnicity can be thought of as manifesting itself in different dimensions. It can be viewed in socio-cultural terms, as the exhibition of particular characteristics (e.g., language or kinship patterns); or it can be viewed in psychological terms, as self-ascription or ascription by others; finally, it can be viewed as a behavioral and valuational framework (with attention given, for example, to a person's associations or to his identification with certain beliefs). Ethnicity can therefore be treated as both a discrete and continuous variable in these several dimensions. The SPSS system of computer programs will be employed in the statistical analysis of the field data.

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