Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

On the Frontier of Change, Mto Wa Mbu, Tanzania by William Arens
Savanna Town, Rural Ties and Urban Opportunities in Northern Kenya by Anders Hjort

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African Economic History is currently published by African Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin--Madison.
The study of new forms of social organization in the rural sector of African nations is a subject which is beginning to come into its own. Surely one of the most important changes in social organization is the emergence of small urban centers, as the authors of a recent special issue of *Africa* have termed them (49/3 [1979]). I have some difficulty with the characterization of a market town or administrative center in a rural region as "urban." It is as yet unclear either what is specifically urban about these centers or how most of the scholars who write about them define urbanity. An earlier study, Joan Vincent's excellent *African Elite* (1971), describes processes of recruitment and community formation that are remarkably similar to that of the non-urban Iteso among whom her "town" of Gondo is situated. Two issues are at stake here. Because much recent anthropological scholarship has focused on social processes which are common to many types of social formation, significant differences tend to be missed in research reports. This is especially true of Vincent's study. Her formalist orientation to political processes forces her into the position of describing patterns of behavior that are fairly common in societies in which production and consumption center on the domestic group and of neglecting structural differences between Gondo and the surrounding societies. As a study of political process, her work is excellent. As a study of an urban center, it is not so good. It may be that the problem is not entirely her own doing. Vincent's is the first major study of what I would like to call a small rural town, so that its degree of urbanity cannot be prejudged. With the exception of Abraham's superficial study of Kahama township (1961), I can think of no earlier study for East Africa. Thus, her comparative base was virtually nonexistent.

The two studies under review here provide a better base on which to make generalizations because the towns described share similarities, yet display significant differences. In 1961 Aidan Southall distinguished three types of African townships, which he termed A, B, and C. Type A was the traditional town, not found in the interior of East Africa. Type B was the polyethnic urban conglomeration, more properly called a city, and type C the administrative and trading center. Isiolo, the
administrative entry into the old Northern Frontier District of Kenya, described by Anders Hjort in *Savanna Town* is clearly the type C center. Mtu Wa Mbu, described by William Arens in *On the Frontier of Change* fits no set category and has recently been described as "unique" in a review in *The American Anthropologist*. It is, in fact, a classic agro-town, in which a group of settlers from distant areas band together to exploit a region through intensive agriculture. On the other hand, although Isiolo was founded as an administrative center, it is an agro-town also, as Hjort clearly indicates. What these studies and Vincent's book show is that there is emerging in the rural hinterlands of East Africa a series of administrative, trading, and agricultural centers which, as a result of becoming the foci of ties to the metropolis and through their economic significance, might transform the social organization of the countryside. That they have so neglected until these important books is an artifact of the hold that the very idea of an urban-rural dichotomy has on Africanist scholarship. I can confess in my own case that these studies have caused me to rethink seriously my own conception of the rural area in Western Kenya in which I did my own fieldwork, about the same time as Arens.

Of the two books, the one by Arens is the more interesting. This is in part due to the community he studied. He has happened upon one of the most successful examples of unplanned change in East Africa. Mtu Wa Mbu is an agricultural community that makes an excellent living out of marketing fruits and other foodstuffs and has developed an extraordinarily effective community organization as well. Arens is clearly an anthropologist able to take advantage of the serendipity effect in his research. Although he tends to slight the production system in his book, he has provided a splendid and insightful account of community structure with an emphasis on processes of community recruitment and identification. In an unpretentious and jargon-free style he describes the informal organization of the community, patterns of kinship and religious affiliation, and the effect of the community on the assertion of ethnic identity. This book brings together a number of strands that have appeared in earlier articles by Arens, and Hjort makes extensive use of Arens' influential earlier studies in his own book. Arens shows how the assertion of ethnic identity has been muted by the place of the community in the larger economy of the region and that the community members assumed a different "ethnic" identity, that of the "Swahili," in order to differentiate themselves from the surrounding ethnic groups and to provide an ideological basis for the coordination of community activities. Arens' work is an advance over Abner Cohen's classic *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* (1969). Arens takes up Cohen's position in his conclusion and shows that retribalization does not occur in the setting of the small community that he is studying. He also goes beyond Cohen by demonstrating that not only are the
residents of Mtu Wa Mbu able to assume new ethnic and religious identities, as Cohen has shown for the urban Hausa, but that the assumption of those identities and the public commitments to new standards of social and economic behavior has radical consequences for the conduct of social life, a point that Cohen has not fully appreciated.

Arens' account of the relationships among religious, community, and ethnic identities, and the changes in kinship that result from a process of ethnic amalgamation are particularly insightful in this regard. Unfortunately his study does not provide enough information about the economic side of the process of community formation that he describes. That is a small complaint; he has managed to write a major study in short compass and the studies that follow will take his as a landmark.

Hjort's *Savanna Town* describes the administrative center of Isiolo in terms of its setting in the region and its ethnic and economic makeup. While it is not so innovative as Arens, it is particularly good in those areas where data is lacking in Arens, viz. the economic strategies of the entrepreneurs and the relationship of the different strata to the production and distribution systems. Isiolo differs from Mtu Wa Mbu in that it is both an administrative and an agricultural center. It is also a major cattle trading center and a refuge for the groups disrupted by the periodic outbursts of hostility between Kenya and Somalia. Hjort provides fine accounts of the economic life of the townsmen and includes considerable data on subsistence and trade.

Some striking similarities emerge when these two rather different towns are compared. One is that sponsorship plays as much a role in entry to and success in these two small towns as it does in the larger cities. The economics of sponsorship is a subject that will benefit from attention in the future and is one way in which small rural centers and larger urban conglomerates appear to be similar in East Africa. Hjort specifically compares Mtu Wa Mbu and Isiolo in terms of sponsorship and concludes that religion in Mtu Wa Mbu operates in the same manner as ethnic identity in Isiolo, as a basis for sponsorship. The contrast may be overdrawn. Both studies show that the assertion of ethnic identity is drastically affected by economic variables and Hjort's conclusion that indigenous forms of social organization affects the ability of different ethnic groups to take advantage of economic opportunities in town seems contradicted by Arens conclusion that this effect of background cannot be found in Mtu Wa Mbu. One difference may be that the emigrants to Mtu Wa Mbu are separated from their home areas both in terms of distance and in terms of expectation of return, as Arens' careful analysis shows. The proximity of home area to the residents of Isiolo and the expectation of future interaction with these areas may affect the retention of social forms.

What both these studies show is that the small urban center
or rural administrative center and agro-town is coming to play an increasing part in relating center to periphery in East Africa. These two works provide a basis for further study of important economic and social change.

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W.G. Clarence-Smith of the Centre for Southern African Studies at the University of York has written an important book which will challenge many elements of the more conventional scholarly studies of Angola's past. With his conceptual framework based largely on a Marxist class analysis of the local colonial society and concepts from the French school of Marxist anthropology, Clarence-Smith has attacked what he terms the "African nationalist" and "uneconomic imperialist" schools. In selecting "southern Angola" (in fact, southwestern Angola) and in carrying out his conceptual scheme the author has taken on an especially difficult assignment. For in terms of economic history, this area of Angola is among the least developed, with the smallest population, poor commercial development, and virtually no industry compared to, say, northwestern Angola. Although I find the conceptual framework confusing and in some ways as vague and wrong as the two schools of African history he is challenging, I find this book a pioneering work of social and economic history of this little-known region of Angola which is an important contribution to knowledge.

In covering chronology, the work concentrates on the 1840-1926 period, but does make some observations about the period up to Angola's independence in 1975. The book consists of seven chapters: Land and Peoples; The Colonial Context; The