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Situational Analysis:
Its Potential and Limitations for
Anthropological Research on Social Change in Africa

I. CONFLICT AND CHANGE

The social and economic changes of this century in Southern Africa have been strongly influenced by the presence of a substantial European population, people who had come to Africa with the intention to stay. Though Africa is and was relatively underpopulated, from the very beginning autochtones and newcomers competed for the best lands. Where extractive industries were developed Africans and Whites cooperated within one economic system, and though not in outright competition here, the rigid distinctions of the hierarchy of races overlaying the division of labour aroused the same antagonism, as was the case on the White-owned farms between managers and labour.

These White settlements were culturally, if not also administratively, colonies. Being relatively small in size the preservation of the European identity depended heavily on persistent and extensive contact with the ‘home’ country. Consequently life among settlers remained in stark contrast rather than becoming only relatively different, culturally and economically, from what was found among their fellow-men living in the same country.

The very presence of a ‘White colony’ made the less privileged more aware of the enormous difference in standards of living than perhaps would have been the case otherwise. It presented a great challenge and a plausible reference for all those who in due course came to aspire to another or improved way of life. Many Africans in this society gained firsthand experience with the ‘European’ way of life. Although one can argue that the picture thus obtained was a one-sided and distorted image of life in Europe, it made it appear all the more out of reach.

This is not the place to spell out the special position Whites held among the autochtone people. The employment, education and services they provided were to some extent beneficial but, at the same time, the condition of subordination their presence created became more apparent.

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and made inequality much more difficult to bear. Abundant evidence is at hand to underscore the view that under these conditions the Whites clung to their exclusive privileges, that they held and practised ideologies to maintain and perpetuate their advantageous position in the existing social differentiation. Continued affinity towards 'home', with all the links implied, and made at the almost total expense of local integration, was part and parcel of this attitude.

1. A Functionalist View and a Critique

While colonialism was in its heyday, say from 1918 to 1938, functionalism became the prevailing fashion in the social sciences. It postulated the model of an organism, i.e. assumed balanced complementarity between parts of a system which, out of logical necessity, was considered as closed. Since then a stream of critical appraisals has laid bare the many inherent weaknesses of this approach and the misleading aspects of an organism as a theoretical model in social science. In the thirties however it proved a very appealing and challenging approach which had ardent promoters in the highest ranks of the anthropological hierarchy of the day. Nevertheless already at that time, its hypotheses were found not readily applicable to empirical data, in particular to research data on social change. A number of fieldworkers, though trained in the functionalist school, experienced the need to adopt some alternative assumptions in their research of which they gave account in a collection of essays, *Methods of Study of Culture Contact in Africa*; Malinowski (1938), in an introduction to the same volume, strongly criticizes their heterodoxy.

In practice, the argument is whether it is acceptable to speak of one social entity (society, community) comprising both Africans and Europeans. The fieldworkers point to the co-operation developing between the two sides to support this view. Malinowski, on the other hand, prefers to speak of two different cultures, African and European, existing side by side, for each of which he feels justified to maintain the postulate of internal functional equilibrium, but he concedes the existence of a *tertium quid* (ibid.: xxxvi), a social condition resulting from the contact between the two cultures. He adds: 'the essence of contact institutions is not equilibrium, but change, with compromise, conflict or co-operation' (ibid.: xxxvii). For this third condition, the functional approach in its original form will not work because 'this method, however, has been worked out with the purpose of describing and analyzing one culture, and a culture at that, which through age-long historical development has reached a state of well-balanced equilibrium' (ibid.: xxxvi). It is therefore considered 'not admissible to simplify matters by the assumption that there is only one culture instead of two' (ibid.: xv).

At the more theoretical level the problem recurs with the interpretation of conflict. European and African cultures differ widely and it seemed reasonable to seek the origin of conflict in the discrepancy between
the two. But there existed a functionalist presumption which very much induced this thought: the idea that an established culture (balanced, integrated, in equilibrium, etc.) could not witness serious conflict but as the result of a breach of the rules. Consequently conflicts under conditions of culture contact were owing to the ‘absence of a common factor’ or ‘common measure’, a situation which was assumed not to occur in a customary society (Malinowski 1945: 70).

It appears then that in the interpretation of conflict two sociological problems converge: firstly and generally how society is expected to work, in particular whether conflict and opposing views could be the result of an inconsistency in the ‘common factor’ itself; and secondly, what happens to this normal working of society under conditions of change. In other words can conflict be considered a conclusive indicator of change if not of deviance?

Our theoretical considerations will begin with Gluckman’s analysis of a situation of culture contact or, as he prefers to call it (1968b: 1), social change. It provides a lead for research through a number of Zambian studies of later date into the more general question of social order and conflict.

The very experience which made Gluckman (1968a) make an exception to some implications of functionalism was the opening ceremony of a bridge in a so-called native reserve in South Africa in 1937. He witnessed Africans and Whites co-operate in a well-established way notwithstanding the ever present colour bar. They are mutually conversant in the various languages and show respect for one another’s customary practices. Gluckman (1968a: 9-10; 1968b: 6) then argues that since an agreement or understanding apparently exists between the two sides as to how to interact in a co-operative way, it should be justified to speak of one community, or more neutrally, of ‘a single social body’ of Africans and Europeans. The common designation ‘Zululanders’ is to indicate that within this social context people are united around a common goal and act as members of one social unit rather than as representatives of their respective ‘original’ categories.

It should be stressed that Malinowski, while clearly acknowledging the existence of this type of situations, refused to consider them comparable to other situations lacking the aspect of culture contact since the functionalist approach could not possibly apply to the latter. The ensuing discussion was not free from misunderstandings but it will be sufficient to note that both parties agreed in judging the new approach incompatible with the functionalist point of view. However, Gluckman then argues his right to let observation prevail over theoretical logic, an approach, he said (1968a: 9), ‘I had forced on me by my material’.

It is useful to note at this point that the view promoted by Malinowski was not merely a matter of theoretical obstinacy and a blind eye for reality. The way the various sections of the population lived or lived not together in the Africa of his day came in fact very close to what
he called separate cultural realities. The exclusive European section existed very much in the fashion of an exemplary, symbolic representation in Africa. As their vital interests continued to be vested 'at home' Europeans could afford to be unresponsive to their immediate social environment. A scientist's approach is not only heavily influenced by the current theories of his time, but he is also in general under conservative pressure from the society he belongs to. It is in both these respects that Gluckman with his thesis of 'one community' broke away from the main current of thought, exposing its prejudicial character.

2. Situational Selection

The immediate difficulty is to understand how people can co-operate while the social categories they evidently belong to (colour!) are in so many ways bitterly opposed. To some extent this difficulty, as it was felt by scholars, was a creation of the functionalist theory itself (not to mention the reigning ideology), in particular the postulate of consistency within the set of traits making up a culture. Against this view, Gluckman asserts that there is no ground to presume such a consistency. He then refers to studies of societies and traditions relatively unaffected by modern influences. They indicate that such cultures still do contain a great many inconsistencies from the purely logical point of view. However these conflicts (as Gluckman calls them) seem to be more of an embarrassment to the anthropologists than to the people who 'live' a particular culture.

Gluckman mainly refers to Evans-Pritchard's study (1965) of Azande witchcraft. It substantiates the point of inconsistency by describing the use Azande make of a poison oracle. The oracle is consulted to trace the origin of witchcraft which invariably is held for the cause of misfortune. The Zande people want to identify the witch responsible, in case of death because the dead have to be avenged, and if the case is less serious, to induce the witch to lift the spell before things take a more serious turn. However, at the same time they hold a number of beliefs concerning ways in which an oracle can be corrupted. These beliefs do not undo the general validity of oracular means; they only affect the credibility of particular verdicts.

It is this sort of observation which throws in doubt the assumption that a culture provides exhaustive and unambiguous guidance for behaviour. After having 'collected every fact I could discover about the poison oracle' (p. 82), Evans-Pritchard (1965: 540) concludes that '[beliefs] are not indivisible ideational structures but are loose associations of notions. When a writer brings them together in a book and presents them as a conceptual system, their insufficiencies and contradictions are at once apparent. In real life they do not function as a whole but in bits'. The difference with the observer's point of view is that 'the Azande [in his reference to beliefs] actualizes these beliefs rather than intellec-
tualizes them’ (ibid.: 82-83), selecting in ‘each situation the particular pattern of thought appropriate to it. Hence an individual in one situation will employ a notion he excludes in a different situation. The many beliefs I have recorded are so many different tools of thought and he selects the ones that are chiefly to his advantage’ (ibid.: 349-350). ‘A man in one situation utilizes what in the beliefs is convenient to him and pays no attention to other elements which he might use in other situations.’ (Ibid.: 540.) That is neither a matter of neglect, nor lack, nor violation of social norms. An Azande acting in this way ‘does not deny the doctrines but he selects from them what is most to his advantage in each situation and excludes the rest’ (ibid.: 133). Neither has he to go ‘beyond the limits set by [his] culture and invent notions, but within these limits human behaviour is not rigidly determined by custom and a man has some freedom of action and thought’ (ibid.: 351).

It is Gluckman’s contribution to have applied this idea of non-consistency and its corollary of situational selection to the field of race relations and more generally to social change. The context of his studies was entirely different: Evans-Pritchard had to argue the case of conflict where nobody—for more or less sophisticated reasons—wanted to dispute the unity and consensus among the people he studied. Gluckman, on the other hand, had to combat a general tendency to consider the difference in cultural identity between European and African too wide a gap to be bridged. He did so by describing a particular situation in which people of different races in South Africa co-operated as if there existed no conflict between them at all and, psychologically speaking, in disregard of mutual apprehensions. However, despite the difference in context, the arguments of the two authors are fundamentally the same: a rejection of a monolithic view of culture, i.e. a logical consistency of beliefs, and of a similar view of society as an integrated network of social relations which leaves individuals in their social positions no other freedom than deviance.

By applying the concept of situational selection to the ‘Zulランドers’ Gluckman (1968a: 75) comes to speak of one social body or unit without implying a negation of the inconsistencies between the social attributes of individuals who ‘appear to be faced with an absolute conflict between their own behaviour and the values they hold as members of a group’. Gluckman speaks also of a ‘shifting membership of groups’ (ibid.: 26). As an individual moves on or lives on from one situation to another he actualizes his belonging to various groups or social categories according to the situation. Therefore, when Gluckman (ibid.: 42) posits the emergence of an ‘African-White social system with a cohesion of its own, arising from the common participation of Zulu and Whites in economic and other activities in which they become increasingly dependent on one another’, he does not mean to present it as a grand design in which all people have their allocated place, but just as one of the many relationships upon which one of the many social groupings within society is
based. 'Individuals can then live coherent lives by situational selection from a medley of contradictory values, ill-assorted beliefs and varied interests and techniques' (ibid.: 26, a specific reference to Evans-Pritchard's study) 'since they can act in socially normal ways rationalized by reference to those values which are the raison d'être of the group or relationship as a part in which they act in a particular situation. This applies even where there are strong social barriers between the two groups to which certain values attach: Zulu can act by European values, forming new groups on their basis. For a social system has no consistency in itself: it is systematized by situational selection of individuals' (ibid.: 47). In summary the picture emerging is of a set of not necessarily consistent beliefs which are the basis for co-operation within social groupings in society. These groupings overlap a great deal in membership, and it is in this way that a person belonging to various groups may hold contradictory beliefs.

3. Structural Conflict

It was Gluckman's point that African and White could co-operate on particular occasions despite the major antagonism between them. For an explanation he turns to situational selection to argue that such an enmity need not prevent co-operation if the parties can meet in a situation where their dispute is not relevant. It means that in abstract the relationship between two people can be definable in more than one way, e.g. kinship, being neighbours, etc., but in practice a particular situation contains indications as to which part of the relationship is to be actualized, with the exclusion of other parts which have conflicting behavioural implications.

This alone already exposes an inadequacy of the functionalist view of society. It is now obviously wrong to say that in customary society a person has only one allotted place; he has several places, each with different behavioural patterns attached to it. Situational selection says that a man can be at only one place at a time and therefore inconsistencies need not become practical impossibilities. This does not dispute the role of culture as a factor in behaviour but necessitates an additional factor, the situation, to be drawn into the discussion on social determination of behaviour.

The special interest Gluckman had in using the concept of situational selection made him stress the aspect of avoiding or reducing conflict between people. But already in the study on Azande witchcraft Evans-Pritchard (1965: 540) noted that a situation is not that much of a conclusive determinant as to prevent conflict altogether: 'a single event may evoke a number of different and contradictory beliefs among different persons'. That is the heart of all wrangles in connection with oracular
verdicts in which people find themselves opposed with socially equally valid arguments.

Situational selection may then sometimes be instrumental in enabling people to ignore a conflict potential existing between them, on other occasions the cultural inconsistencies do lead to confrontation. In order to indicate the particular nature of this type of controversy we will call it structural conflict; as it occurs between people, it is a conflict of culturally valid expectations. It is therefore clear that conflict, social friction, is not an unequivocal indicator of deviance or change, or anomie due to change. It is a normal concomitant of social life.

The question is then how people cope with such conflicting situations, and how societies deal with and survive despite this sort of conflict. The material for our next section is taken from a number of studies on village life in what is now the republic of Zambia.

II. -- SITUATION AND PROCESS

Zambia's early history is one of large-scale migrations due to changing environmental and political circumstances, the last but one important change being the establishment of colonial rule which forestalled as well as inhibited further moves. Oral traditions indicate that the forefathers of the modern Zambians wandered all over East and Central Africa, moved by aggression and subjection, occupation and evasion. As a result Zambia treasures among its five million population an unusually wide variety in traditions and languages. Even where political organization on some scale existed, e.g. among the Lozi and Bemba, it was due to military conquest; cultural diversity persisted within these political units. But even among people of the same cultural identity there was very little indeed of large-scale regimentation. The village was the main political unit. The institution of authority in the offices of chief and headman never created a social distance which was not permanently bridged by personal contact between rulers and subjects.

Following the imposition of colonial administration all sorts of troubles arose. Even the more enlightened approach of indirect rule could have some rate of success only insofar as the traditional political system had some affinity with the requirements of centralized government. Kay (1968) has traced for Zambia the history of the colonial administration's directives and restrictions aimed at consolidating the village into the elementary administrative unit it was to be. It is mainly a history of administrative expediency versus traditional residential patterns, with all muddles ensuing. It is remarkable that Kay did his work at the request of the Zambian government. It indicates that remains unsolved the question whether the village, the basic social and economic unit in traditional society, can continue to function within a modern and fast developing nation; whether traditional solidarity and
co-operation can be put to good use in modern nation building and economic development.

Much of the innate faults of colonial administration was epitomized in its dealings with the village headmen and chiefs. These positions were to be absorbed into the lowest rank of local government because the authority the functionaries were assumed to have over the villagers was to be instrumental to get government policy implemented. The whole enterprise was based on an absolutely wrong, if any, appreciation of village politics. In due course the chiefs and headmen, officially recognized as such, proved themselves quite ineffective as agents of the colonial administration. As Kay (1968: 13) has it: ‘Such criticism [of ineffectiveness] ignored the democratic nature of most customary political institutions whose task it was not so much to assert authority of a ruling body, but rather to assimilate, distil and apply the consensus of public feeling.’ A local leader has very little authority apart from popular support. Moreover, his position can only be as strong as the dividing loyalties and tensions among the villagers would allow. There are many problems connected with the adoption of villages as basic administrative units. Far too many are too small for practical purposes. In addition, villages—including the larger ones—shift and split, emerge and disintegrate while, if they do persist, membership fluctuates and changes a great deal. It appears that residence in a particular village as a social attribute of individuals is too much subject to mutation to be of much use. In search of a more unequivocal means of identification of individuals, studies revealed instead a number of organizational principles, none of which was found dominant. In fact, residents of one village adhere to it on the basis of a variety of principles and the village as it stands is more of a conglomerate of sections based on the various principles. That is, residence itself is not much of a social determinant except perhaps for a certain degree of inertia stemming from the negative premium attached to fission and secession. On the other hand, residence and more particularly residential changes reflect the interplay of a variety of factors which in itself is village life. It is for this reason that residential mobility is a suitable ground for research into the dynamics of customary society. Moreover it provides for an interesting comparison between the problems of migration and change in modern society.

1. Continuity and Change: 1

Turner (1957) has substantiated this view of village life for one particular tribe in Zambia, the Ndembu who live in an area particularly varied culturally and tribally, in the north-west of Zambia bordering Zaire and Angola. The undertitle of his book is A study of Ndembu village life and conflict is very much part of that. ‘This book is dominantly a study of social conflict and of the social mechanisms brought
into play to reduce, exclude or resolve that conflict.' (Ibid.: 89.) Two types of conflict are distinguished: ‘... when rules are broken by living persons, judicial action can follow and this action can speedily seal off conflict within the orbit of a single relationship or within a small sector of the social system.’ (Ibid.: 127-128.) ‘But when a breach in social regularity is made by some natural misfortune such as the death of a member of the group, or a famine or a plague, and if the natural order is thought to be sensitively responsive to the moral condition of society, then the calamity allows of a number of alternative interpretations. A wide range of conflicts between persons and factions in the disturbed group is brought to light.’ (Ibid.: 127.) ‘Many such disputes are irresolvable since they spring from contradictions in the social structure itself.’ (Ibid.: 301.)

This is an obvious reference to what earlier has been defined as structural conflict which here is described as a normal aspect of village life. Perhaps it is good to go for a moment beyond the abstract statement and sketch some practical issues. The Ndembu are matrilineal and if a village is to survive, a headman must be succeeded by his sister’s son: ‘... the brother-sister tie which is the socially, although not biologically, procreative link in matrilineal society.’ (Ibid.: 78.) However matrilineal relationship with the headman together with ‘virilocal marriage and classificatory adelphic co-residence, are principles of local groupings which give rise to continual conflicts within the village [...] conflict between the principles of the unity of the matricentric family and virilocal marriage tends to break up the marital group, especially in the early years of marriage, and on the other hand, [...] stable marriage tends to retard the growth of villages by keeping men apart from their uterine sisters with their children. It is to a considerable extent by divorce and widowhood that a village is enabled to persist through time’ (ibid.: 69).

There is a strong tendency for mothers and children to gravitate together as the mothers grow older, yet other principles counteract this: ‘... once the essential link-up [for village survival] between first and third generations after the founding of a village has taken place, new sources of conflict within the settlement come into being. [...] incipient cleavage along lineage lines becomes detectable.’ (Ibid.: 79.) Since these disputes as said spring from contradictions in the social tradition itself, they are ‘ultimately irresolvable’; ‘the most that can be done is to bring about a temporary palliation, to produce, as it were, the illusion of harmony within the disturbed group’ (ibid.: 301). ‘Ritual is then invoked, under the pretext of curing the patient or removing his misfortune, to settle the [social] conflict.’ (Ibid.: 302.) ‘Ritual among Ndembu does not express the kinship and political structure as in a firmly organized society; rather it compensates for their deficiencies in a labile society.’ (Ibid.: 303.)

Obviously, the conciliatory ritual does not remove the socially given potential for conflict, and Turner observes that such problems sooner or
later develop to a stage where illusion is no longer effective. In most cases the efforts of the headmen ‘to prevent the disruption of its [the village] widest span lineage [. . .] are ultimately unavailing since the ecological and structural pressures making for fission are too strong’ (ibid.: 84).

Despite what Turner calls growth and decay (ibid.: 93, 161), ‘in Ndembu society although villages arise and perish, the ideal form of the village persists’ (ibid.: 92). Even fission and secession do not solve conflicts since they do not remedy the social pressure towards—hence the recurrence of—them. Then according to Turner, it is precisely these persistent cultural inconsistencies, as observed in the recurring disputes and schisms, which attest to the continuity of Ndembu society.

The greatest detail on village life studies in the tradition of situational analysis is found in Van Velsen’s *Politics of Kinship* (1964). It strongly supports the thesis of structural conflict which is ‘particularly noticeable in the conflicting demands of the matrilateral and patrilateral kin on the partners and the children in a marriage. I have related this conflict to the inherent contradiction of virilocal marriage and matrilineal descent as the accepted principle of organization. The relative importance attached to the patrilateral bonds should be interpreted as a compromise between these two conflicting norms’ (Van Velsen 1964: 181). The practical result of this state of affairs is that ‘a free-born Tonga (*munangwa*) has many kinship links outside his own hamlet [of residence] which may provide him with alternatives for present economic, political or residential arrangements if need be’ (ibid.: 74). Instead of constituting a consistent and coherent whole, norms are said to be vague and discrepant and ‘It is this fact which allows for their manipulation by members of a society in furthering their own aims, without necessarily impairing its apparently enduring structure of social relationships’ (Van Velsen 1967: 146). These remarks are then related to a description of a widening cleavage and ultimate split in a Yao village (Mitchell 1956) and to Turner’s account of the developmental cycle of the Ndembu village.

In case of a schism one may retrospectively conclude that something must have changed in the intra-village relationships which earlier provided a base for unity but later divided the people to the extent that it disrupted the unity of the village as a whole. As the inconsistencies persist and will result in more conflicts in due course, there appears to be some sort of a possible change under unchanged cultural conditions.

What sort of change is this which either induces an individual to alter his personal circumstances, e.g. by changing his place of residence, or even causes villages to disappear altogether without altering the society’s ‘enduring structure of social relationships’, or affecting the continuity of Ndembu society as Turner has it? It is relevant here to have a closer look at the material of Van Velsen and Turner, keeping in mind meanwhile that this discussion on change may lead to a further assessment of Evans-Pritchard’s remarks on freedom in customary society in terms of latitude for the individual.
2. Social Situations

Van Velsen’s contribution (1964: XXIII-XXIX) to the situational approach is concentrated in his term ‘situational analysis’ and presented as a technique of observation and analysis. His material consists of his own account of the historical events he witnessed rather than a collection of statements made by others about what may be alleged to have been that reality. It is the same type of material Gluckman used for his *Analysis* (1968a), defining a social situation as ‘the behaviour on some occasion of members of a community as such’ (*ibid.:* 9). However whereas Gluckman theoretically accommodates the behavioural variance of given people by reference to different relations in different social contexts, Van Velsen concentrates on successive social situations involving the same people in the same social context, i.e. their village of residence, in order to observe the developments in their relations under conditions of structural conflict.

Due to the vagueness and discrepancies of norms, Van Velsen (1967: 147) states ‘that in any society one is likely to find a large category of disputes where argument is mainly concerned with the question of which of a number of mutually conflicting norms should be applied to the undisputed “facts” of the case. [...] there are no right or wrong views; there are only differing views representing different interest groups, status, personality, and so forth. It follows from this, secondly, that as much as possible of the total context of the cases should be recorded—the cases should be presented situationally—and the actors should be specified. [...] Finally, in the field one seeks interconnected cases within a small area involving a limited number of *dramatis personae*. Such cases should later be presented in the analysis in their social context as part of a social process and not as isolated instances illustrating, more or less aptly, a particular generalization’. It is evident that the use of situations here is aimed at two things: to press the point of cultural inconsistencies through the analysis of conflict situations; and to discern the process of which the consecutive situations are stages. At least it is in this way that Gluckman (1961: 10) summarizes the merits of situational analysis or, as he called it, the extended case method: ‘For I consider that the most fruitful use of cases consists in taking a series of specific incidents affecting the same persons or groups, through a long period of time, and showing how these incidents, these cases, are related to the development and change of social relations among these persons and groups, acting within the framework of their social system and culture.’

It should be noted that Van Velsen (1964: xxv) prefers the term ‘situation’, where Gluckman has ‘cases’. This is consistent from Gluckman’s point of view because his ‘situation’ is a demonstration of a *modus vivendi* while Van Velsen’s situations are disputes over that very mode of co-operation and could be called for that reason ‘cases’. Consequently a series of observations of situations in Gluckman’s terminology would give
an insight into the multifarious reality of different social arrangements, and their respective organizational principles, possible within a particular society; written up in a book its inconsistencies would be immediately obvious as Evans-Pritchard already noted. Though the observations may be done in sequence, the time factor as such is not involved. On the other hand Van Velsen’s series of observations reveal a thoroughgoing development with a corresponding change in the relationships between certain people: where at first solidarity prevailed one now observes cleavage; antagonism has replaced co-operation. That would be in terms of Gluckman’s definition a changing situation.

At this stage it is clear that Gluckman’s version of the term situation is related to a specific group behaviour. Van Velsen’s use (1967: 143) of the term ‘similar situations’ is less clear but there can be no misunderstanding as to his main point that certain situations may be differently interpreted by the various people involved, or by the same people on successive occasions. The problem thus remains: to what extent is a situation a datum for interaction, or itself determined by and during interaction? Gluckman (1967: xi-xx) has in substance supported Van Velsen’s analysis; does it then invalidate his own original “analysis of a social situation”?

Turner (1957: 91), in his study of Ndembu village life, does not speak of situations but instead adopts the term ‘social drama’ which he defines as an eruption of conflict. Nevertheless his approach is the same, except that he did not limit himself to the social dramas in a particular group but observed dramas in various villages. These social dramas under comparison and analysis suggested to him the time perspective of a village life cycle—‘my unit of time is the social drama’ (ibid.: 328)—which is in line with his main concern to observe how people deal with structural conflict and exploit it; how a village can contain, and a society survive, the tensions and disagreements of these basically insoluble conflicts.

As has been stated before, people may belong to a village on the basis of a variety of social links, e.g. different shades of kinship, marriage, etc. There is no single principle which would explain for all residents their respective positions in the village. ‘The structural principles, then, which govern residential affiliation are manifold, complementary, and also conflicting.’ (Ibid.: 226.) This does not lead to disintegration because, Turner argues, while any single principle would inevitably include some residents and exclude others, the multiplicity of arrangements activated from time to time and each based on another principle, results in a maze of cross-cutting relationships. ‘Analysis of the social dramas has shown how persons and groups divided in one set of social relations are allied in other sets.’ (Ibid.: 288.) ‘Each village contains a separate and autonomous system of kinship relations constrained on organizational principles which mutually modify one another [. . .] Concrete behaviour is their mean working.’ (Ibid.: 255.) ‘It is important to note, however, that the effectiveness of any one of these principles varies from settlement to
settlement and depends on such local factors as the length of establishment of the settlement, the fertility of women and men, the strength of marital ties, the reputation and astuteness of the headman and of candidates for headmanship.' (Ibid.: 226.) 'The social drama shows vividly how these [structural principles] operate in practice; how, in a given situation, some may support and others oppose one another; and how conflict between persons or groups in terms of [ . . . ] contradictory norms may be resolved in a particular set of circumstances.' (Ibid.: 93.)

It follows that the solution thus obtained will become obsolete when circumstances change. Which are these circumstances? According to the description above the existence of a village is tied up with the biological fact that families tend to develop from a small group of just a few relatives into a really extended family (ibid.: 301). Initially such a development means growth and prosperity but in the long run its schism potential will become evident as lineages will press to become villages in their own right. In this way villages show the regular sequence of development and decay. 'In one aspect, the social drama is a process which reveals realignments of social relations at critical points of structural maturation or decay [in the existence of a village]; in another, it may be regarded as a trial of strength between conflicting interests in which persons or groups try to manipulate to their own advantage the actually existing network of social relations, both structural and contingent, within the system.' (Ibid.: 161-162.) Therefore, observations at any one time when villagers go through their daily routine would reveal little of the basic factors of village organization; what can be observed is a working compromise, only weakly reflecting some of the organizational principles, a particular social constellation dependent on some specific circumstances. On the other hand, 'The social drama is a limited area of transparency on the otherwise opaque surface of regular, uneventful social life. Through it we are enabled to observe the crucial principles of the social structure in their operation, and their relative dominance at successive points in time.' (Ibid.: 93.)

In conclusion, Gluckman's conception of a social situation as a determinant of behaviour seems incompatible with the other notion of a situation (case, social drama) which leaves actors room for argument, manipulation, option, etc. But then, people do not permanently agitate to further their interests as they perceive them. Turner clearly argues that conflicts are the occasion for everybody to take his chance to press his point of view, but in between these conflicts some sort of compromise prevails, a sort of working arrangement. Disputes disrupt the routine of daily chores but they serve to establish a pattern for relations and common activities on the basis of which daily life can be resumed for some period of time without interruption. Everything then suggests that Gluckman's situations are located between these outbursts of rivalry, in the interval of regular and uneventful life according to Turner. This does not undo Gluckman's argument of different principles of conduct for
different situations. It only proves his situations to be variable arrangements under unchanging cultural conditions, subject to changes in non-cultural factors.

Situational analysis therefore applies to synchronic diversity as well as diachronic variation, but always within a given culture. Its claimed suitability for use in unstable and non-homogeneous societies (Van Velsen 1967: 143) should therefore not be misunderstood as a claim to special relevance for the study of change due to culture contact. The variability it accommodates is part of social life even where there is no question of a major foreign influence. Or our conclusion should be that every society is unstable and non-homogeneous.

3. Process, Structure and Organization

It was because of the discovery of structural conflict that a factor 'situation' was introduced in the analysis of behaviour. It served to explain the choice people had to make between a number of incompatible alternatives. But as more data were obtained and insight improved it became clear that a situation in itself not always presents unambiguous guidance as to what behaviour is required. The consensus as to the mutual behaviour expected and due may come under pressure because of changing circumstances, but a fluid conflict situation or social drama may give way to a new, different consensus.

In view of the data referred to, it then appears to be wholly inappropriate to think in terms of a social factor or system imposing itself on people in their behaviour; instead it is the people who draw on the social rules of conduct in their considerations as to what to do, to the extent of exploiting inconsistencies. As a result the social scientist is to allow for more latitude for individuals vis-à-vis their social environment and by consequence is compelled, even for cases where conformity and social peace appear to prevail, to assume more than a simple subjugation of individual behaviour to a social factor.

In other words, reminiscent of a classic point in sociological discussion (Rex 1970: 9), the conclusion must be that the rules of conduct as behavioural factors cannot be identical to the regularities in behaviour as observed at any particular point in time. They cannot even be said to be the sole factors behind these regularities; reference has to be made to other, non-cultural aspects which together with these rules constitute a situation. Besides, rejection in the course of a social drama does not abolish a rule; it can be brought in again on a later occasion and then be adopted in the transactions. It is rejection of relevance, not of validity, which makes the difference between one situation and another. Norms then appear to be a phenomenon separate from the regularity in behaviour and can, at most, be said to correspond to these regularities. And the question is how they correspond.

Raymond Firth (1951; 1954; 1955) has also published a view on the
Theoretical problems in connection with structural conflict although his work does not stand in the tradition of situational analysis. In fact he wrote before most of the material referred to above was published. In our view, Firth's theory is different from situational analysis but not contradictory. It supports the findings of the situational studies but also directs attention to a fundamental limitation of the latter.

The main point in Firth's approach (1954: 8) is the distinction between structure and organization which separates structure from regularities in behaviour observed. Structure is interpretation, the result of analysis of behaviour in terms of mental categories, a model as opposed to reality. 'In the concept of social structure, the qualities recognized are primarily those of persistence, continuity, form and pervasiveness through the social field [...] A structural principle is one which provides a fixed line of social behaviour and represents the order which it manifests.' (Firth 1955: 2.) '... by the structural aspect of social relations we mean the principles on which their form depends.' (Firth 1951: 28.)

On the other hand social organization can be described as 'the working arrangements of society. It is the processes of ordering of action and of relations in reference to given social ends, in terms of adjustments resulting from the exercise of choices by members of the society' (Firth 1954: 10). On an earlier occasion after stressing likewise the insufficiency of structural principles to explain behaviour, Firth (1951: 61) states: 'It is necessary to see how in any given case social activity is the resultant of a complex set of elements, including direct response to structural principles, interpretation of them, choice between them, by regard to personal interests and experience, temperamental dispositions, and the pressures exercised by other individuals striving to accomplish their own ends.' This view is clearly in agreement with the findings of situational studies in that rules of conduct are said to shape events, as well as in the acknowledgement of the human factor, people appraising situations in terms of alternative rules, circumstances, competition and support. Or as Van Velsen (1967: 136) has it: '... norms, general rules of conduct, are translated into practice; they are ultimately manipulated by individuals in particular situations to serve particular ends.'

At this point an example may serve to elucidate how in practice the adjective 'structural' can combine qualities of persistence and form as mentioned, while still leaving people freedom of action. The example is from Turner's book (1957: 112) and describes the deliberate action of a man with political aspirations: 'By giving Kahali an inferior share of his own meat and by eating a major share of Kahali's meat, Sandombu made it clear that he no longer respected Kahali as an uncle and a headman, and would be glad to see the last of him.' This interpretation of the event makes perfect sense to anyone who is familiar with the Ndembu culture and knows of the custom that headmen are given a specific part of animals hunted in the territory of their village. The special point to be noted
here is that the violation of the rule is not a violation against this rule; instead it presumes the validity of the rule and on that basis Sandombu succeeds in expressing and conveying his intentions. This is structure in behaviour, the form and persistence Firth referred to and in this same line of thought it can be understood that reference to structural principles can provide an explanation for the form an action takes but not for the action itself. The function of the principles is that their validity is implied in the explanation like they were implied in Sandombu’s action.

Social intercourse needs form to make communication at all possible; agreement on the purport is another matter. It is the continued articulation of individual intentions and actions in socially given and accepted forms which is the essence of the continuity of a society and its culture. It is this aspect of behaviour that makes individuals constitute a society, the outcome of a most fundamental social process which is not restricted to any particular type of behaviour—be it conformity or otherwise—although it was the study of structural conflict which brought it to light. Through this process a person demonstrates and confirms that he seeks his interests within the social universe of the people with whom he shares the same forms and rules, that he is one of them and identifies with the social unit they together constitute. It is the process which stamps man as a social being.

It is through this social process that behaviour is linked to structural principles. It is only because villagers continue to articulate their interests in culturally given terms that one can understand why they unwittingly re-enact courses of events which their ancestors and contemporaries in other villages have gone through many times before them. Even when they obviously violate a rule as they do e.g. in case of village fission, they still confirm and hence maintain the validity of the rule by the rationalization of their deviance: ‘Both groups, those who go and those who remain, will, in fact, stress the value of village stability and continuity, the original group emphasizing the wickedness or folly of the secessionists, and the latter the exceptional circumstances which compelled them to leave.’ (Turner 1957: 177.) The structural factor in social life is therefore not a system above the daily machinations of individuals; it exists in behaviour. The practical significance of these principles depends on their actualization, application. As Firth (1955: 2) has it: ‘But the continuity is essentially one of repetition.’

Now some remarks on terminology. Though the adjective ‘structural’ has retained a use in the discussion, there is not much use for the term ‘structure’. The idea of a structure as an integrated whole of principles and/or relations is rejected. The pattern of actual relations and behaviour is the result of social organization and should be referred to as organization rather than structure. Something similar has to be said about the term ‘process’ as it is used, e.g. in process of change, maturation and decay, etc. It has overtones of a causal succession of events, reducing events to stages in an unalterable sequence with a causality of its own
over and above actual social life. As the idea of consistency between structural principles had to be abandoned, so should the idea of systematic alternation or successive application of such principles which would presume a similar notion of sequential consistency. So far the only recognition of consistency has been the interdependence of rules and circumstances.

In a way situational analysis elaborates Evans-Pritchard’s point (1965: 351) that even in so-called traditional or customary societies ‘human behaviour is not rigidly determined by custom’. An observer with a deterministic frame of mind can easily mistake this ‘normal’ variability for the variation inherent in social change. The changes in the Ndembu villages as described, or Firth’s organizational change—though caused by external, non-structural conditions—are repetitive and their recurrence does not necessitate the development of new rules. These changes do not amount to social change because they are neither caused by the social factor nor do they affect it. In structural terms, there is no change.

The compatibility of Firth’s view with situational analysis seems complete on the issue of normal variability in social life, that is, apart from the complications of social change. The developments in Turner’s social dramas and in Van Velsen’s situations are in Firth’s terminology organization-in-progress resulting in the working arrangements of Gluckman’s situations. But there comes a point where Firth (1955: 2) forges ahead of situational analysis. ‘The concept of social organization has a complementary emphasis. It recognizes adaptation of behaviour in respect of given ends, control of means in varying circumstances, which are set by changes in the external environment or by the necessity to resolve conflict between structural principles. If structure implies order, organization implies a working towards order—though not necessarily the same order.’ ‘Again, this ordering of social action may coincide with and support the structural features of the society, the major principles on which its form depends. But it may vary from the structural principles, and even bear against them in some particulars. Ultimately, the social structure may have to give way through a concatenation of organizational acts.’ (Firth 1954: 10.)

Evans-Pritchard (1965: 351) argued that men in traditional society need not go ‘beyond the limits set by [their] culture and invent notions’ to have freedom of action and thought—but sometimes they do. What is this change which has people invent notions, under what conditions does it occur? Firth (1955: 2) suggests that structural and/or external changes may ignite renewed organizational activity. We have seen that structural conflict itself does not lead to structural change. What about these external changes? It depends, and to clarify that issue we now turn to another Zambian study in the same situational tradition, Watson’s *Tribal Cohesion in a Money Economy* (1958). If ever African customary societies had to cope with a formidable external change, it must have been
because of European colonization and the ensuing labour migration. The question is: how does situational analysis handle these changes?

4. Continuity and Change: 2

Migration is a change that gets easily associated with disorder because it often was, and is, caused by natural disasters or war, and the students of ‘culture contact’ in Africa on the basis of their theoretical premisses could not consider it differently. Migrants were thought of as uprooted people. In colonial times they posed a great problem for the administrators of law-and-order, be it in ‘native’ affairs or in urban government and industry. Moreover, some available studies supported the view that in rural areas labour migration caused ‘impoverishment of tribal life, accompanying hunger and deterioration of tribal production’ (Gluckman 1958: viii).

However some people appeared more successful than others in meeting this challenge. The Mambwe, in the northern part of Zambia bordering with Tanzania, demonstrated more resilience as a society than their immediate southern neighbours, the Bemba, who, according to Richards (quoted in Watson 1958: 226), were much more affected despite living on similar soils with lower population densities and clinging like the Mambwe did to their tribal loyalties.

In the light of the functionalist presumptions prevailing at that time, one expected disintegration but Watson found, as he phrased it, tribal cohesion persisting in a money economy. Since then, much effort has gone into the theoretical question of how it is possible that a new institution like labour migration can be introduced and become widely accepted in a customary society without causing disorder and (partial) disintegration.

However, the discussions produced mainly deflecting arguments, deflecting because the view is promoted that it was not much of a novel challenge anyway. Labour migration is then likened to the practice of raiding prevalent in precolonial times, and the challenge to live in unfamiliar conditions to the tests connected with initiation rites. Another view acknowledges in principle that man normally cannot remain unattached and insensitive to his actual social environment, viz. the migrant in town, but then recourse is taken to the idea of situational compartmentalization to argue that whatever connections or habits a migrant may adopt or develop while in town need not affect life ‘at home’ because that is an altogether different situation.

It is indeed arguable on the basis of the postulate of specific situational relevance that migration and urban experience need not and should not affect rural life. However as times and eras passed independent Africa has seen its rural areas urbanize as it happens everywhere else in the world. Rural migrants today are not illiterate poverty-stricken people with nothing to lose, but school leavers or older people with other
skills who are moving to where they feel it is the right place for them to stay. Likewise in towns, there are important and extensive developments to be observed, namely the so-called informal sector which clearly bears the marks of the people's and the continent's customary-rural history.

Rural and urban are not, or at least have not remained the separate realities they were assumed to be, but are merely differently dosed mixtures of customary and modern. The question is whether situational analysis is an adequate sociological method of study under these conditions of cross-fertilization. Migration is one of the more visible aspects of these rural-urban intercourse and it should be made use of to understand more fully the unprecedented changes taking place before our eyes.

In colonial perspective the two assets to be exploited in Africa were land and minerals. ‘Social’ policies were equally exploitative as they were directed by the concern to secure a sufficient supply of labour for the profit maximizing enterprises. The matter of equitable remuneration of labour did not arise nor did the question of improving skills.

The extractive industries of Central and Southern Africa required thousands of ‘hands’. At first, these were hard to recruit but gradually the modest savings of the migrant workers became indispensable in the rural family budgets, and labour migration a standard feature in many societies. As in due course the colonial conditions were taken for granted (that does not mean that they were accepted with good grace), labour migration became a social institution and rural youth began to grow up with the idea that one day it would be their turn to travel to distant places for work. Irrespective of the intentions of administrators and employers this system induced the workers to transcend the limits of their traditional world.

Watson (1958: 40), studying the effect of labour migration on Mambwe society, hardly found a single man who had not been away for employment: ‘Wage labour is now an accepted part of a man’s life.’ Apart from money for the marriage payment, a man must have ‘the sophisticated air and fashion of the urban worker’ (ibid.: 43) to be taken seriously as a marriage candidate, and sometimes women go ‘to extraordinary lengths to get to the towns’ (ibid.: 45).

As the migrants move in groups, migration is on no account a break-away from home. After an initiating trip to the sisal plantations in Tanzania and by then usually married, a man heads for the Copperbelt but the pattern remains the same: ‘They tend to congregate in the same labour markets, and take up similar work, and this association keeps their social ties in constant use.’ (Ibid.: 221.) This statement holds true as well for rural-urban links since children are left behind in the custody of the home folks and a rural court can get in touch with a man in town cited in the case before them (ibid.: 64, 114). In short, living outside the confines of traditional villages does not sever relations. Instead of crumbling customs and institutions, social disintegration and the ensuing
disasters like famine, Mambwe society shows coherence and gains materially from migrant labour (*ibid.*: 226).

The point is that migration does not mean a real departure from one's home area, but only a temporary absence. The return home upon retirement entails a more active involvement in village politics which traditionally is a concomitant of advancing age anyway.

If then the question of change as a result of urban experience is to arise at all, it is at once clear that this does not take the form of an outright rejection of tradition, of social disintegration, or of a sudden spectacular change. In this respect it is interesting to note Watson's remarks on a relatively new feature of village politics, the ascent of commoners to the prestigious position of village headman, and its connection with experience abroad.

In the old days a chief would allow the establishment of a new village in his territory only under the headmanship of an older son who, being born before his father's assumption of office, was excluded from the chief's succession. Despite the existence of this customary pattern more than half of the greatly increased number of villages had a commoner headman at the time of study. Who are these new elite?

The cash economy penetrating the rural economy through the wages of migrants had created 'a group of trader-farmers' (*ibid.*: 211) who are all *de facto* if not also *de jure* headman of their own village. The facts are that all of them except one have held positions in the chief's court and have wives from the royal clan (*ibid.*: 208). The new contenders for social prominence, in this way, pay their respects to the chief as they assume the role of son-in-law which traditionally exemplifies a position of dependence like in the oral tradition on the establishment of the hierarchy in the royal clan.

The emergence of sons as heirs to their own fathers is another novelty showing the same mixture of old and new. 'The concept of private property, to be disposed of as the owner wishes, is already present' (*ibid.*: 158) and it 'does not represent a novel change in the system of Mambwe inheritance' (*ibid.*: 155). One could continue with examples of this reality of change combined with continuity, whether it is the political role of chiefs in agitation on a national level against the Central African Federation in the fifties or the European as a 'factor in tribal life'—the notion hotly disputed in *Methods of Study.* . . . (1938)—but there is little new in this dovetailing of old and new. The problem was that due to some theoretical premisses one aspect tended to be stressed at the expense of the other.

Change seen in diachronic perspective is often considered as a matter of wholesale substitution of new for old, and tradition as something stubbornly holding out in some peripheral pockets. Gluckman (1963: 38) concluded later: 'Social systems are not nearly as integrated as organic systems [* . . . ] they are open to influences of changes in environment, and to changes due to relations with other social systems, as organic systems
are not.’ Thus, it took many years of study and research to work out the implications of the ‘heresy’ originally contained in Gluckman’s Analysis... and break the hold of the organic model on scholarly imagination.

Mambwe village life is presented as a going concern, with change being a genuine aspect of it. Watson (1958: 220, 224) observes that, with a little more insight into the history and rural life of Africa, this ‘discovery’ would have been much less of a surprise and Kay (1968) argues that while the dispersion into small settlements is a recent change, the previous concentration in larger villages itself was only a phase of deviation from a more archaic pattern of dispersed habitation.

5. *Situational Analysis and the Study of Change*

It transpires then from Watson’s study that labour migration does not present insurmountable difficulties for a customary society. The fact that it was imposed and controlled from outside does not apparently make it incompatible or disruptive to the point of disintegration of a society. It did of course cause some changes.

Permanent migration of workers with their families would have reduced the number and/or size of the rural settlements but as a quantitative reduction would not necessarily and directly affect village life. But under the system of labour migration workers while away continue to belong to and depend on their village and therefore remain a party to village affairs. The absence of most of the males of productive age imposes restraints in the economic and social sphere; it requires reallocation of tasks, adjustment of behavioural codes and some jobs may simply remain undone.

Though Watson (1958: 220) recognizes that ‘Mambwe social life has been continuously modified from without’, he clearly has his reservations when it comes to the effects of labour migration. As an example the change from wattle-and-daub dwellings to brick houses is mentioned, but then it is added that ‘the tribal bond persists’ (*ibid.*: 7), and elsewhere that ‘the widespread use of European material culture has so far brought only superficial changes to tribal life [which] have not yet seriously affected their kinship and political relationships’ (*ibid.*: 221).

Now within the situational analysis approach it would be theoretically reasonable to let the matter rest there and ignore the possibility of any further non-superficial change because there are not supposed to be any intersituational repercussions. Against the backdrop of functionalism Watson’s argument is understandably preoccupied with continuity, that is institutional continuity as we shall see. But what about the assertion that Mambwe society not only survives but does it as a tribal society, if that can be taken to mean no major change in the character of social life?

Labour migration is a main channel through which rural people
became involved in the modern world and one may well expect changes as a result of this involvement. The move from 'home' to town involves no doubt a great deal of adjustment and this new experience is likely to alter the migrant’s outlook on social life, be it in town or at home. Why should this experience fail to have effect on rural life? According to Watson dividing one’s life between rural and urban areas ‘necessitates the adoption of different patterns of behaviour appropriate to each situation’ (*ibid.*: 7) but the migrant ‘need not transfer the behavioural pattern from one sphere to another’ (*ibid.*: 6) – an obvious reference to the notion of situational selection.

The point on the continuation of village life and subsistence agriculture, together with its corollary of tribal continuity, is most explicitly argued in Van Velsen’s article (1961) on labour migration among the Tonga in Malawi. As the migrant’s integration in modern life is incomplete he has to maintain his rural home as a kind of insurance. It is at once made clear that the right to reside and cultivate there is intimately tied up with one’s unconditional membership of a village where one’s social position requires ‘constant vigilance against encroachment’ (*ibid.*: 239), though status and position are twice said to be determined by birth (*ibid.*: 231, 238). The migrant who ‘wants to maintain his status cannot do so only in relation to one aspect of life—he is inevitably drawn into the maelstrom of the total life of the community’ (*ibid.*: 238). That is to say he is necessarily involved in what the author calls ‘the politics of village life’ (*ibid.*: 236).

Watson (1958: 188) subscribes to the same view. As the subsistence economy ‘underwrites the wages earned by the Mambwe’, ‘these rights [to land] are embedded in the matrix of social obligations that makes up tribal society [. . .] The industrial situation is insecure in African eyes, whereas tribal life represents a coherent and understood social order’ (*ibid.*: 7-8).

In the face of large-scale labour migration the proponents of tribal continuity appear to minimize the significance of urban involvement; the claim of total involvement in rural village life together with reference to situational selection seem to aim at just that, yet the thesis of tribal continuity suffers a loss of credibility because of statements from unsuspected quarters. Both Van Velsen (1961: 241) and Watson (1958: 225) suggest that a future change in labour migration policies and conditions might well result in many migrants opting out of rural life. Time has seen this prediction come true, but this is not the sort of reaction one would expect from the Mambwe of whom it is said that ‘tribal discipline is a harness which fits easily: [. . .] it is freedom’ (Watson 1958: 195) or from people who are ‘actively stimulating the traditional values of their rural society’ (Van Velsen 1961: 240).

What change in tribal society was this which could bring about this unprecedented yet expected (?) reaction but still did not find a place in the situational rendering of events in rural areas? Does it indicate that
material continued to be selected as ‘apt illustration’ (Gluckman 1961: 7, quoted in Van Velsen 1967: 140) for the purpose of argument? Why did situational analysis fail to register the early indicators of this change and assert continued cohesion as tribal?

Let us look again at Watson’s statement that the use of European material culture has only superficial effect. Evasion through residential mobility was described as a characteristic of tribal life and Watson (1958: 90) for the Mambwe considered it a check on the authority of chief and headman. Why then would the owners of these better but permanent houses, the wealthy farmers turned farmer-traders, deprive themselves of that freedom to shift house and with it allegiance? Has something happened to that customary authority or might it have something to do with the fact that these wealthy people are becoming a new class of their own? Or, seen from another point of view, what observable quality could underwrite the conclusion that these villages of customary appearance but under commoner headmen constitute a case of change, or for that matter of no change?

The point did not escape Watson (1958: 228) who concludes that ‘in the process of social change, a society will always tend to adjust to new conditions through its existing social institutions. These institutions will survive, but with new value in a changed social system’. Institutions may survive, yes, but how long will a changed value and context fail to have effect on the form itself? Could this in fact not be a ground to anticipate change? For the Mambwe, one can only guess how village life will evolve under the new class of headmen, but Turner (1957: 134) gives us a glimpse of what might happen. He describes how, for the Ndembu, between the two extremes of the older and the younger generation a third one is to be found, made up of individuals who ‘though they had grown up in the era of money-earning, still belonged to a generation which saw success in life as measured by the number of followers a man could acquire. [. . .] But they felt that the royal road to eminence within the village way of life now lay through the acquisition of cash’. But it is clearly a transitory stage: ‘The cash economy to which they were committed was breaking down the structure of the village: and yet it was their ambition to obtain authority over a disintegrating social unit of this kind.’ (Ibid.: 136.) Apparently things had not reached that point in Mambwe society and it is an open question whether it would get that far. Another question is whether it has to get that far before one can conceivably speak of change. It seems that exclusive attention to institutional continuity means just that. One may agree with the structuralist fashion that change in society does not amount to change unless and until institutionalized (Van Velsen 1967: 130). But this approach means a blind spot when it comes to the observation of social change: a new trend before institutionalization is not change yet, while after institutionalization it is not something new anymore.

If ‘observation’ of social change consisted in comparisons made at
different points in time, one could only infer by deductive rationalization how the change may have taken place. On the other hand, considering that social change has causes, historical roots, and goes through a period of development, there must be indications of impending change which one should be able to detect before the change institutionalizes into sociological hardware. What type of approach could bring this change-in-progress into focus?

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Sociological analysis assumes, and aims at exposing a social factor in behaviour, hence concepts like norm and rule of conduct. In a similar manner, the study of change could be taken to mean the study of normative change but, after Evans-Pritchard, it must be considered hazardous to seek sequential logic in changes in what has been described as a loose collection of notions. The issue of structural conflict makes clear that behaviour is not, and should not be treated as, a mere reflection of the rules. Behaviour apart from the rules should have an independent status as data in research requiring analytical consideration of their own.

Situational analysis did a vital step in substituting behaviour for statements on rules (ideal behaviour) as the prime data for study (Van Velsen 1967: 131). It entailed the introduction of a factor ‘situation’ into the analysis and this gave new impetus to the study of behavioural determination and change but it ended up with an explanation of that type of behavioural change or variation which is possible within a given culture. Norms may be valid but they are not always applicable; that depends on the circumstances. Behaviour on any particular occasion is therefore seen as analyzable in terms of norms but always in conjunction with environment, a combination of the social factor with a situational factor. The idea of a particular combination of norm and circumstance is contained in the term actualization.

Actualization implies practicability on the side of norms, an intrinsic correspondence which presumes normative assessment and interpretation of environmental conditions as well as adaptation of the norms to these circumstances. As the environmental changes described in the studies referred to before are basically generational and seasonal they are repetitive and so are the corresponding behavioural changes. These changes do not necessitate a normative development or adjustment; they are only a matter of alternate application or actualization of existing norms.

However the applicability of such rules is not as much a foregone conclusion as in a mechanical or even organic stimulus-response model. Situations are ambiguous even beyond the now established presence of structural options; rules are not conclusive and environmental changes not always and fully repetitive. Apart from situational selection there is also an element of subjective assessment and interpretation. Gluckman (1963: 39; see also : 24) doubts whether conditions are ever so much
the same as to justify without reservation the terminology of repetition and cyclical change. Firth (1951: 61) concurs with this view: ‘Social events are not a simple reflection or exemplification of elements of the social structure. They affect situations in such a way that action becomes irreversible, new sets of choices are needed, and by the carrying into effect of new decisions the structure of the society itself is laid open to modification.’

It is this notion of creative potential which is lacking in situational analysis and this lacuna, as we see it, is caused by an uncritical introduction and use of the concept situation. It was said that the behavioural significance of a situation partly depends on some conditions beyond a society’s control. In terms of social process it is also clear that the practical relevance of a structural principle depends on such conditions to occur and recur. It follows that a change in such conditions, e.g. an unprecedented population growth or land shortage, absence of certain categories of people due to labour migration, etc., would create unprecedented conditions and make others not recur, calling for new rules and rendering others obsolete.

It appears then that situational analysis brings in these external conditions as complementary factors of behaviour, but these conditions are not considered in their own right in the reciprocal relationship with structural principles, specifically the possibility that a change in these conditions may precipitate a change of principles. The implication is that for situational analysis such unprecedented changes in environment are either irrelevant—which would contradict the basic notion of situational analysis itself—, or they are assumed not to occur, quite a natural assumption from the functionalist point of view but still untenable.

It is the limitation of situational analysis that it assumes events analyzable in terms of established social rules, implying the occurrence of familiar conditions only. No doubt all social events must have familiar customary features, otherwise one could not call it a social event. Situational analysis however fails to capture the aspect of creation, of unprecedented change which is also an element of what Firth calls organizational activity. Though the idea of structure as an integrated whole had to be abandoned because of the recognition that structural conflict is normal, events continue to be studied only in so far as they are reflections of structural principles. Whatever more there may be to a social event remains beyond observation and analysis. In this respect situational analysis remains structural analysis.

The major theoretical issue in the background of the situational studies is of course the undoing of the functionalist assumptions regarding social integration, normative consistency and change. Therefore the main thesis asserts cohesion or continuity as opposed to disintegration—cohesion, that is not in the sense of logically coherent but as it exists between people. It means: there continues to be people who consider themselves and recognize one another as Mambwe.
This necessarily implies adherence to a common culture to make interaction at all possible. A common cultural heritage is a condition for a social entity to be a going concern, but such a heritage has to be continuously actualized otherwise Mambwe society as such would not be a going concern but a thing of the past. That is to say, if one is to argue a case of social change with respect to a certain society, it must be implied that society remains existent during the period of study and remains recognizable as such from within and without despite the changes. This social identity can only find its practical expression in behaviour on the basis of a large body of institutions and notions which are not changing.

To say that a society is changing out of necessity implies a great deal of continuity observable in form and belief, and every change short of complete disintegration will be found combined with institutional continuity. An assertion of continuity should no longer be taken to imply an absence of change. The notion of change is relative, implying comparison between what was and what has come to be; without continuity there is no basis for comparison. Therefore the observation of institutional continuity cannot settle the question of change in one way or the other. Firth (1954: 10) shows a way out with his distinction between structure and organization: 'The two concepts cross-cut each other, as it were, so that organizational results may become part of the structural scheme, and the structural principles must be worked out in organizational ways and decisions.'

In our view, change and continuity are not identifiable as separate behavioural categories but are aspects present in all behaviour. This is the same thing as stating that there is no society in the world without social change. In other words, while people will always tend to interpret situations in terms of custom and common experience, they never entirely escape the exigencies of change, adaptation and reinterpretation. Even if change were to have swept away practically all familiar points of reference, the tendency to follow institutionalized patterns remains. And if there is no social guiding theme to go by, it will be created or an analogy will be applied. One can assume, because of ever ongoing change, that the correspondence between norms and environment will never be perfect, and its accomplishment will remain an ideal.

Social change then does not involve a special mechanism or behavioural process which requires a special approach. As soon as one becomes concerned with explanation rather than description of behaviour, it is discovered that continuity and change, i.e. maintaining, developing and discarding social institutions, are all achieved through the same organizational process of 'working towards order though not necessarily the same order' (Firth 1955: 2; Gluckman 1963: 49). This is what we have called the social process and Firth (1954: 10) has this to say: 'The relation between form and process may be difficult to elucidate; it may be easier for us to make generalizations about form than process. But it does not
absolve us from the necessity of studying process.’ For the study of
social change one should therefore look beyond continuity in form and
belief and search first for presently or locally non-practicable norms (or
rather aspirations if the practical component as such is non-existent) and
second, for the emergence of unprecedented circumstances, because these
are the sort of things that may trigger off social change. It may be
agreed that new aspirations or environmental circumstances are not in
themselves social change unless and until a new correspondence between
ideal and environment institutionalizes, but they still should be observed
and analyzed at that stage because of their very relevance for the study
of origin and development of social change. In this way, one may hope
to overcome the limitations of a study on social change through remote
rationalization and inference, and instead observe social change at first-
hand, as a process of reciprocal adjustment of norms and environmental
conditions.

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