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Source: *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Jul., 1981), pp. 461-478

Published by: [Ph.D. Program in Political Science of the City University of New York](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/421721>

Accessed: 26/03/2014 11:11

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Ethnicity and Class at the Local Level

Bars and Bureaucrats in Lisala, Zaire

*Michael G. Schatzberg**

The interactions of class and ethnicity, as well as their relation to state power, are among the most basic political forces operating in contemporary Africa. Unfortunately, their interplay—particularly at the local level—has not been adequately researched. To contribute to a greater understanding of these phenomena, I shall present a case study of Lisala, Zaire, which investigates the drinking patterns and attitudes of local bureaucrats, the distribution of jobs within the party apparatus, and the flow of scarce resources within the commercial sector.¹ To achieve this, I shall follow the tradition of anthropological research in Africa—a tradition being reborn in the guise of the study of up-country towns.

The Mobutu government's policy of rotating bureaucrats and politico-administrative officials outside their areas of origin has made places like Lisala social fields in which the political aspects of both class and ethnicity can be studied. Devised largely in response to the widespread chaos and near breakdown of the central government between 1960 and 1965, these rotations of key personnel, Zairian leaders feel, will contribute to building a sense of national identity by dissolving regional patrimonial networks.² Concomitantly, this policy has also contributed to a recentralization of political power. The presence of "foreign" bureaucrats and political officials in towns like Lisala enables us to isolate, at least to some extent, aspects of class and ethnic behavior in their interactions with the local population and with each other. Are these daily contacts on the basis of class, ethnicity, both, or neither? Under what circumstances and in which contexts do the quotidian interactions of bureaucrats with ordinary folk (and of the bureaucrats with each other), become laden with features that might be labeled as either "class" or "ethnic"?

In this article I shall argue that class and ethnicity coexist and often intersect, and that a full comprehension of African social dynamics is not possible without reference to the ways in which coexistence and contact evolve. Fur-

thermore, both class and ethnicity are important to the actors involved. This point is often overlooked in our quest for paradigms that fit the contemporary drama of politics in Africa and other parts of the developing world. We occasionally forget that although a paradigm of ethnicity, or of social class, may be analytically discrete and intellectually elegant, such abstractions rarely account for the fact that the people under study incorporate both dimensions of social life into their political perceptions, thoughts, and actions at different times, in different situations, and in different ways.

Africanist social scientists have long known that ethnic groups are not immutable. The works of Mercier and others have noted that individuals, clans, and lineages are constantly becoming part of new ethnic groupings even as the old ones are simultaneously disappearing. Indeed, such changes can and do occur without population movements or changes in the "objective" cultures of the relevant societies.³ Not only do ethnic groups pass into and out of existence, it is also possible for individuals to maintain more than one ethnic identity. In the space of a single ninety-minute interview, for example, one of my respondents in Lisala identified himself in reasonably rapid succession as Bwela, Ngombe, and MuNgala. In differing contexts and in response to various questions, he noted that his maternal language was Bwela, that during the 1963-1966 period of ethnic strife he had returned to Lisala because it was a Ngombe city where he felt at home and had some security, and that he was active in the Parti de l'Unité Nationale (PUNA)—the Bangala political party.⁴

Although well established in studies of ethnicity, it has been less widely recognized that social class identity, composition, and boundaries may also vary according to the political, social, economic, and spatial contexts of the moment.⁵ Fluidity in class relations, ambiguity in class boundaries, and inconsistency in class membership must be taken as fundamental starting points if we are to understand the role that class plays in Africa. As one example of many, let us examine collectivity policemen in Lisala. The collectivity is the most brutal and oppressive branch of government in Zaire. The policemen are responsible for maintaining order and are often included in tax-collecting expeditions. These policemen are paid approximately \$16 a month. Unfortunately, owing to the corrupt practices of the chiefs and other local officials, they are rarely paid on time. Or, if paid, the sums received are usually "advances" on the back wages due them. In any given month, therefore, they are likely to receive substantially less than what they are owed. When confronted with this situation, they react as their colleagues in law enforcement in other parts of the world do; they extract what they can from the peasants and villagers under their jurisdiction. Exploiters or exploited? Viewed from the perspective of the village farmers, the answer is clear. Viewed from the policemen's vantage point, it is less certain. They argue, not without cause, that they themselves are being exploited by the chiefs and those immediately

above them in the class hierarchy who are responsible for the irregular payments. On broader social questions, these same policemen are quite likely to identify with the mass of the Zairian people rather than with the interests of the class they serve. Depending on the context, then, they can—and do—identify their interests with different social classes. False consciousness is perhaps one response to this query, but it is an answer not subject to empirical refutation.⁶

Moreover, the highly fluid and unstable political history of Zaire since independence has resulted in a situation in which people are no longer secure in their political and administrative offices. In addition, recent nationalizations have extended this insecurity to the economic sphere. Frequent changes in government, rebellions, and the game of patrimonial musical chairs instituted by President Mobutu have engendered widespread insecurity. An office holder today can lose his position tomorrow without advance warning, and there are numerous cases in which people undergo dramatic rises and falls in the class hierarchy. This insecurity of political, administrative, and economic tenure, when coupled with the overwhelming condition of economic scarcity, creates a dialectic of oppression. The tendency is for people at all levels of the social hierarchy to extract what they can, while they can, from those in contextually inferior positions.⁷ Given these factors, we need to change our way of thinking about social class and apply the insights of those cited above who have studied ethnicity.

Ethnicity and Class in Lisala

In an overview of the political role of small towns in East Africa, Vincent argues that it is in these places that African politics can be studied most effectively. In addition, she maintains that these microcosms of the larger society provide a locale in which to observe processes of class formation. To this we might add that they also furnish a setting in which it is possible to unravel the interactions of class formation and ethnicity. In any study, however, “the *context* of the situation, both with respect to the larger power structures (in which race, ethnicity and the force of arms all play their part) and with respect to time and place” is crucial.⁸ As mentioned, Lisala is a small up-country town located on the Zaire River in the northwestern part of the country. Its primary function is, and has almost always been, administrative. Lisala is dominated politically and economically by representatives of the state to a degree far out of proportion to their numbers.⁹

The indigenous ethnic group in the Lisala area is the Ngombe, and Lisala’s population has been characterized by a strong Ngombe core with fairly significant representation of other Equateur ethnic groups such as Mongo,

Ngbandi, Ngwaka, and Budja.¹⁰ The Mobutu regime's policy has been to assign bureaucrats outside of their areas of origin, but it is important to stress that this directive has been applied only to certain levels. As far as Lisala is concerned, most of the heads of subregional administrative services were Mongo from Equateur, while most of the politico-administrative commissioners were Kongo or Luba. The Magistrature was dominated by Luba, and the public prosecutor was a Mukongo from Bas-Zaïre. Significantly, the vast majority of the lower-level clerks, typists, and workers were Ngombe drawn from the surrounding area or from Lisala itself.¹¹ The situation prevailing in Lisala, then, was one in which outsiders staffed most of the command positions while the more menial administrative posts were filled by Ngombe.

Despite the rhetoric of the new regime, which, on more than one occasion, has claimed to have banned tribalism from Zaïrian political practice, more than ten years after Mobutu's installation ethnicity remains a vibrant and important political force on the local level. Two examples will suffice; one drawn from the political sector and one from the commercial sector.

In most societies, jobs are one of the main spoils of the political game. Lisala and its environs are certainly no exception, as the zone of Bongandanga demonstrates. Located directly across the river from Lisala, Bongandanga is part of Mongala subregion. The zone is divided from north to south by the Lopori River. This waterway, rather than serving as a link between the two parts of the zone, effectively separates the two main ethnic groups and by giving geographic reality to an ethnic distinction, further reinforces it. The two main groups in this zone are Mongo and Ngombe; the former located to the south of the river and the latter to the north. The Mongo make up approximately 15 percent of the population and the Ngombe 85 percent. The zone commissioner is well aware of the differences between the two groups and points out repeatedly that this ethnic factor cannot be lost from view if the administration of the zone is to function smoothly and, more important from his perspective, be understood by his administrative superiors.¹² The view that these two groups did not get along in Bongandanga was also shared by the principal of the local high school. A Lokele from Kisangani, he found the Mongo proud and the Ngombe nasty and maintained that much of the trouble stemmed from the fact that the Ngombe had many gifted sorcerers intent on making trouble.¹³

A more documentable proposition, however, would be that the two groups have had a long history of strife and conflict. There are some indications that the territory the Ngombe currently occupy was one a Mongo preserve. The Ngombe were pushed south toward the Zaïre River sometime during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the Ngbandi. In turn, the Ngombe probably crossed the Zaïre River between 1810 and 1850 and made further incursions into Mongo territory occurring even after 1891, the date

Europeans arrived in this part of the region.¹⁴ In more recent times, there has also been a history of ethnic conflict between the two groups. The 1958 elections in Mbandaka, the regional capital, resulted in a triumph for Ngombe politicians even though there were fewer Ngombe than Mongo in the city. This shocked the Mongo into forming their own ethnically based political alliance. During the 1962-1966 period of administrative and political decentralization (*provincettes*), Ngombe residing in Mbandaka returned to Lisala because they would be more secure there, among their own people, in their own province. Similarly, those Mongo who had been in Lisala were forced to return to Mbandaka for the same reasons.¹⁵

The tensions remaining from these historical interactions are covered only by a thin veneer of *Mobutiste* national integration rhetoric. In 1974, for example, it was reported that the Mongo in Bongandanga wished to dismember the zone and attach themselves to either Djolu, Befale, or Basankusu—all zones enjoying a healthy Mongo majority. Threatening letters were sent to the territorial authorities in Lisala over this matter, and the writers claimed that if their demands for secession from Bongandanga were not met, the subregional commissioner would not be welcome in the zone.¹⁶

A particular area of competition and tension between the two ethnic groups concerns the allocation of positions within the apparatus of the Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (MPR) and its youth wing, the Jeunesse du Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (JMPR). Although in theory hiring on the basis of ethnic criteria is strictly forbidden in Zaire, in practice certain quotas are observed within the party and JMPR. Within each zone it is usually the case that the JMPR director will come from one collectivity, the JMPR administrative secretary from a second collectivity, and the MPR administrative secretary from yet a third collectivity of the zone. In this way, it is felt, most segments of the population will perceive themselves to be represented in the party. Similarly, there are also recruitment quotas for the members of the Disciplinary Brigade (paramilitary wing) of the JMPR. Here, recruitment is handled at the subregional level, and each of the five zones of the subregion can furnish five brigade members with another ten coming from Lisala. Although this particular quota is drawn along administrative lines, in practice the procedure is designed to result in an ethnically balanced brigade.¹⁷

The question of jobs within the party was a particularly sensitive one in Bongandanga. In 1974, the ethnic composition within the MPR and JMPR was as follows: in the MPR office there were three Mongo, one Ngombe, and one Mongwandi; in the JMPR office there were three Mongo and one Ngombe. In consequence, the Ngombe believed themselves to be severely disadvantaged in the allocation of positions—especially since they made up 85 percent of the zone's population. In addition, the zone commissioner in charge of political affairs was Mongo whereas the JMPR director was

Ngombe. The result, to put it mildly, was a lack of cooperation between the party and its youth branch. In addition, the director of the JMPR had three Mongo under his control in the JMPR office, and this, too, created difficulties. The director could never be sure that his secretary would type his letters, or that they would remain confidential. This problem was exacerbated because the Mongo assistant commissioner would encourage the Mongo clerks in the JMPR office to keep him informed of what was afoot. The zone commissioner put it this way:

In the MPR office there is nothing to fear. Everybody is Mongo. While in the JMPR office the Director prepares all his letters at home and he comes to the office to type them only after everyone else has left. No sooner has he left than a veritable burglary of his drawers and files takes place. A Watergate affair!¹⁸

These problems concerning the ethnic distribution of jobs were by no means restricted to Bongandanga. Other zones in Mongala subregion had similar difficulties. In Businga there was resentment between Ngbandi and Ngbaka over the distribution of party posts, and in Bumba the Budja tended to resent anyone sent in from the outside.¹⁹ In these cases, ethnicity was a card to play in an effort to rise in the class structure by gaining access to good jobs.

Ethnic considerations are also important within the town of Lisala itself. For reasons documented elsewhere,²⁰ beer is a scarce commercial resource in Lisala, and the town suffers from periodic and recurring beer crises. Because of the intermittent supply of beer, there is a lively competition among the various bar owners in town to make sure that their bars and clientele will never be caught short. There are approximately twenty-five bars in Lisala. Of these, ten are owned by Ngombe, another ten are owned by members of other Equateur ethnic groups, and five by Bakongo from Bas-Zaïre. In most cases, beer is channeled through two wholesale houses in Lisala that are both local branches of larger firms. The manager of one of these wholesale houses is a Mukongo Angolan who has lived in Zaïre for many years. The second house is managed by a Portuguese. The Angolan often favors his Bakongo kinsmen when shipments of beer arrive. Sales are made at night, in secret, and the Bakongo bars always seem to have more than their fair share of beer—even in periods of crisis. The same is true of the Portuguese manager of the other house. In this case, though, the Bakongo bar owners, most of whom can speak some Portuguese, have managed to ingratiate themselves with the manager so that they are favored when it comes time for distribution of the goods. Naturally enough, the Ngombe and other local bar owners resent this “Kongo combine” and do their best to bring complaints to the local politico-administrative officials. In most cases they are unsuccessful. The subregional commissioner, the zone commissioner, the chief prosecutor, and the three subregional administrative service chiefs in charge of the various financial de-

partments are all Bakongo from Bas-Zaïre. Furthermore, some of the financial officials just mentioned and other bureaucrats from the Bas-Zaïre were themselves owners of an elite bar. Under these circumstances, there is little that the economic affairs officer—himself a Ngombe—could, or would, do to make the distributive system more equitable. The Bakongo bar owners successfully used their ethnic identities to insure their access to a scarce commercial resource. During beer shortages, if there was any beer to be had in town, it could usually be found in their bars. In this case, then, ethnicity was used as a weapon of intraclass conflict—as a tool to preserve wealth for oneself at the expense of other merchants who were, after all, members of the same class.

Shortages notwithstanding, some beer did reach Lisala, and it was during those periods when the taps were open that ethnicity and class could be seen to intersect on a daily basis in choice of drinking establishment and in selection of drinking companions once patrons were inside the bars.

The class and ethnic dimensions of drinking behavior were tapped both in formal interviews and in the more informal settings of the bars themselves. During interviews, each respondent was asked how he got along with the natives of Lisala and then, a bit later, who his favorite drinking companions were and which bars they frequented most. In addition, evenings provided numerous opportunities to observe informally the choice of tavern and companions. In general, responses to these questions, and then the actual behavior of the bureaucrats, displayed a curious mixture of both class and ethnic considerations. Briefly, the selection of bars tended to be governed along class lines, whereas the choice of drinking companions seemed most often to follow ethnic criteria.

There were three elite bars in Lisala that usually charged higher prices for beer than those in the other—nonadministrative—neighborhoods of the city. The prices in these bars were almost always ten to twenty cents higher per bottle of beer than normal (usually because of refrigeration), and this fact alone served to restrict their clientele to territorial commissioners, administrators, school principals, and wealthy merchants—all members of the politico-commercial bourgeoisie. Within these bars, however, the choice of drinking companion usually, but not always, followed ethnic lines. Thus, Mongo, Luba, and Kongo officials could often be seen in all three of the elite bars; but, once inside, each group tended to associate with its own ethnic kinsmen, and three ethnically defined drinking cliques soon became discernible.

We have already noted the history of conflict between Mongo and Ngombe. Since many of the subregional administrative service heads were Mongo, the Lisala context afforded an opportunity to see whether these hostilities have been carried over into the Mobutu regime and, if they have, to assess their intensity. In formal interview situations, Mongo bureaucrats were wont to mention that they usually preferred to drink with their administrative colleagues

and that although they got along well with the local people, they really did not have much contact with them.

[Normally I drink] with those who work for the administration or private companies. We meet in the bars or at the soccer matches. But with natives, the villagers, I have no contact with them.²¹

Even lower-level Mongo clerks tended to share this point of view.

Usually I go out alone but if I find friends we drink together. To remain alone in front of a glass is not fun. Only with friends from work; friends from the neighborhood, I haven't any.

Usually with my work colleagues.

I often drink with the authorities.²²

Other Mongo bureaucrats indicated both professional (class) and ethnic preferences.

I think I am well off here in Lisala. I haven't got much contact with the people here . . . [I drink with] the secretary and some of the clerks or else with the head of the post. And especially with administrative functionaries or my racial [ethnic] brothers.

There are low class people here . . . One can't have relations with the people here. They are not happy that I am here. They are stubborn. They don't want to apply the rules. One can't get familiar with the people here; it would be to lose prestige . . . I can't take a glass [of beer] with just anyone.²³

In structured situations Mongo (and other) bureaucrats and officials usually adhered to the MPR line that there were no ethnic tensions and hostilities because these had been effectively abolished by the new regime. One Mongo replied to my formal questions as follows:

Things are very well. It's OK. No bad relations. Yes, I have good friends here . . . [I'll drink] with anybody.²⁴

Immediately after the interview, however, I offered to stand my respondent to a round or two in one of the local taverns. After only one beer, this bureaucrat was telling all who would listen about his 100 percent pure Mongo ancestry and how the Mongo were an exemplary race of people. The Ngombe, he asserted, were lazy, vicious, stupid, and generally nasty.²⁵ In private, and especially after a beer or two had loosened their *Mobutiste* inhibitions, most other Mongo administrators voiced similar opinions of the Ngombe, and their choice of adjectives was usually most colorful. One asserted that his branch of

the Mongo were the original inhabitants of Mbandaka and were thus the first people in Equateur to have the “honor” of being “civilized” by the Belgians. This informant freely admitted that he was a racist as far as the Ngombe were concerned. Another subregional service head would wax eloquent singing the praises of the Mongo people, who, he said, were intelligent, hard-working, and quick assimilators. He further explained, wrongly, that before independence the Mongo were a single ethnic group but that the Belgians divided them because they did not wish to face a unified group with all of these desirable characteristics.²⁶

One scholar well versed in the politics of Equateur region has observed that in this part of Zaire, “the Mongo ethnic group was the one which, in relation to its neighbors, showed the most aptitude at integrating the contributions of the western cultures.”²⁷ This may or may not be the case, but it seems certain that many Mongo firmly believed that they were superior to the Ngombe in most respects, and their disdain for the local people and culture was usually lurking only a beer or two below the surface of the “authentic Zairian culture” promulgated by the apostles of *Mobutisme*.

As noted earlier, many Bakongo occupied positions of influence and importance in Lisala. Although occasionally one would mention that he did not mind living in Lisala because there were no relatives here who had to be supported,²⁸ most of the others were not happy with their current assignments. One of the officials in the Justice Department found the Bangala “a bit savage” and related that when he first saw Lisala he wanted to cry.²⁹ Most of the other well-placed Bakongo tended to stress social class factors in response to questions. One judged noted:

I rarely frequent public houses. There are two of them that I go to here, the *Case* of the Zaire Hotel and Cafe V [elite bars]. I go alone; I don't go out with anyone. Of course, when I am there that doesn't prevent me from taking a glass with someone that I happen to come across.³⁰

Similarly, a territorial commissioner mentioned that he only goes to “respected places” where there were not likely to be brawls.³¹ Even lower-level Bankongo bureaucrats and merchants tended to place class considerations above ethnic ones in their choice of both drinking locale and companions.

I drink beer alone. If you drink with companions there are always problems. That doesn't interest me. My favorite bar is the Zaire Hotel. There, you are at ease and very well served.

I married a girl from here. The *bokilo* [in-laws] bother me a lot. I don't like to drink with the people here. I drink alone or with another merchant. They [the local people] bother me.

Let me say especially with intellectuals. I have a good relationship with them.³²

It should be stressed that those Bakongo, who placed social class consideration paramount in formal responses, were likely to associate with others from Bas-Zaïre once they had arrived at one of the elite bars.³³

The third, and final, main drinking clique in Lisala was composed primarily of Baluba from both Eastern Kasai and Shaba provinces. The relationship of the Luba officials stationed in Lisala was probably colored, at least to some extent, by the fact that the Luba have perceived themselves to be held at arm's length by the Mobutu regime. The Luba were early modernizers, and in an effort to redress their early advantages, the regime has imposed regional quotas for admission to the university that tend to favor students from Equateur at the expense of those from Eastern Kasai.³⁴ Lisala is the birthplace of President Mobutu and is perceived elsewhere in the country as being in the heart of the *Mobutiste*/Equateur homeland. This was put succinctly by a Luba clerk in the private sector: "*Bangala na MPR balingi Baluba mingi te*," (the Bangala of the MPR do not much like the Baluba).³⁵

This situation was probably manifest in some of the statements of Luba officials concerning people in the Lisala area. In one informal conversation, three Luba magistrates all agreed that the inhabitants of Mongala subregion showed a marked inability in all things organizational. One administrative service head found Lisala completely underdeveloped and the people somewhat "savage." They were, in his words, "*à relever*."³⁶

In their responses to my questions, Luba officials were wont to emphasize social class considerations.

On the social plane I haven't got very much preference. We have a group of functionaries and we can drink together without trying to find someone.

[I drink with] whoever knows me. I can't take a glass with just anyone.³⁷

Like their Mongo and Bakongo colleagues, however, the Luba tended to drink among themselves in the elite bars. When a Luba official claimed to have friends among the local population, close investigation usually indicated that the Ngombe natives perceived the relationship in an entirely different light. One Luba commissioner responded to a question as follows:

It is not a question of native, these are Zairians like me. Yes, I have one or two friends [among them]. I am the President of AFLIS [the Association of Soccer in Lisala] and I have many chums. The relations are good in so far as there are no problems.³⁸

AFLIS, however, was usually a den of intrigue, and the friendships that the commissioner claimed within that body did not exist as far as many Ngombe were concerned. The president of one of the local soccer clubs—one com-

posed primarily of Ngombe players—complained that the direction of AFLIS could generally be counted upon to discriminate against his team. He believed the Luba president of the association and his cronies from Kasai, who were also officers, were against his soccer club because the players were Ngombe. Over a beer or two, he would lament that the Luba were trying to “colonize” the Ngombe.³⁹ I am not familiar with the merits of the particular case that pitted the Ngombe club against the Luba directors of AFLIS; what remains crucial, however, is that the conflict tended to be expressed in the idiom of ethnicity.

The disdain and occasional hostility of Mongo, Luba, and Kongo bureaucrats for the Ngombe were mirrored in the attitudes of the Ngombe themselves. When asked what he thought of Mbandaka, a Mongo city, one local Ngombe bureaucrat replied that he did not like it, because there were too many thieves there and because the people were not nice.⁴⁰ The attitudes of the Ngombe bureaucrats—usually low-level ones—should provide a partial control of the analyses of the three ethnic drinking cliques.

First, because there were so few high-ranking Ngombe officials in town, a Ngombe drinking clique was not easily identifiable in the three elite bars. When asked the same questions concerning their drinking patterns and relations with natives of Lisala, the two Ngombe administrative service chiefs replied:

In general, relations are good . . . You try to adapt to the population . . . I like to take my glass in the hotel with my colleagues, the other [administrative] service chiefs.

I am in the habit of going out alone to avoid misunderstandings. With colleagues, no. If I drink with them it is by chance, if I am invited. In private life, I always go out alone.⁴¹

One of the two, then, clearly preferred the company of his administrative colleagues (and, indeed, could often be seen drinking with them at the elite bars). The other, however, almost never put in an appearance at the upper-class watering holes and could usually be seen associating with other Ngombe in the poorer bars of the city.

Significantly, low-level clerks employed by the zone or the collectivity usually stressed that they drank with their colleagues from work rather than with the townspeople—a reasonably clear indication of the importance of social class in associational preferences.

Usually, always with work chums. Not with friends from the neighborhood, no.

First, I like to drink with *Madame*, and after that, with the people I work with.

I don't take a glass often. I drink after work with friends from work and especially with my family.⁴²

In addition, the wealthier Ngombe merchants and traders indicated that they, too, prefer to drink with people of their social standing. The most important Ngombe merchant replied that the subregional commissioner was a great friend after hours and that he often came to his house to share a glass. Fittingly, just as he said this, the commissioner drove up to the front door.⁴³

On the basis of data presented here, it seems clear that both class and ethnicity are at work in the bars of Lisala and among the bureaucrats stationed there. The Mongo, Luba, and Kongo officials can often be heard disparaging the Ngombe they have been sent to administer and serve. Their associational preferences are also clear. Most express a desire to drink and be companionable with people of their own social standing and in locales both respected and appropriate. On the other hand, once the thresholds of the elite bars have been crossed, there seems to be marked preference for fraternizing with members of the same ethnic group. The Ngombe bureaucrats and merchants who are "at home," tend to display a preference for associating with those of a similar social standing. Social class, therefore, seems all-important to them; perhaps because their kinsmen see them as agents of a repressive regime. Nonetheless, we might speculate that in other cities Ngombe bureaucrats stationed away from home would manifest the same combination of class *and* ethnic considerations that the Mongo, Luba, and Kongo do in their drinking preferences in Lisala.

Throughout this analysis I have made much of the preferences of bureaucrats for drinking with their colleagues in elite establishments, and I have implicitly tended to treat this as an indicator of social class. It might be objected that it is entirely normal for most people to associate with their acquaintances from work after hours. To a certain extent this is undoubtedly true. Nevertheless, Richard Jeffries observes in relation to the class structure of Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana, that the

differentiation of various types of hostelry, catering for different social classes, is a far more significant phenomenon than the work of most sociologists suggests. Drinking with friends is a major social activity in Ghana, and the different types of bar present a highly visible indication of social class barriers.⁴⁴

In this regard, too, the Lisala context must be understood against the broader *Mobutiste* background. Most of the officials appointed to Mongala subregion and Lisala are perceived as, and perceive themselves to be, the representatives of the central government. The state in Zaire has become feared and hated. It is used by members of a numerically restricted politico-commercial bourgeoisie to advance their own interests at the expense of those of the mass of the agricultural and rural populations. The local representatives of the state machine jealously guard their privileged positions within the social hierarchy

but are continuously looking over their shoulders as they do. Class consciousness has emerged among the bourgeoisie, and this, too, both fosters and reinforces the sentiments of ethnic derogation that have been examined here.⁴⁵ Because most of the officials in Lisala are members of other ethnic groups, class hostility and ethnic hostility—particularly when viewed from the top down—merge imperceptibly.

Conclusion

A number of conclusions emerge from the preceding case study of ethnicity and class at the local level in Zaire. First, although the Mobutu regime has constantly declared that ethnicity and social class are no longer part of the contemporary Zairian experience, both social phenomena remain alive in Lisala.⁴⁶ These forces cannot simply be abolished by legislative or presidential fiat—a point to which I shall return presently. This essay has shown that both ethnicity and social class are important parts of life in Lisala, and in Zaire more generally. In this light, the argument among social scientists over which factor is more important in postindependence Africa is both sterile and futile. Class and ethnicity coexist and interact. Moreover, these interactions are, in large measure, structured by the postindependence state.

The state structure, even at the local level, provides an arena for the dynamic interplay of class and ethnicity. We have seen that the ethnic tension resulting from the relative overrepresentation of the Mongo in Bongandanga's party apparatus led to Ngombe discontent. In addition, the conflict over the allocation of jobs within the the MPR and JMPR structures tended to reinforce further the legitimacy of the local branches of the state-party as a valid arena of political competition. Ethnicity was used to mobilize power so that access to the state and its rewards might be achieved.

Paradoxically, despite the regime's attempts to banish ethnicity from the lexicon of Zairian politics, the use of thinly disguised ethnic quotas in recruitment for JMPR positions lent further legitimacy and encouragement to those wishing to assert the salience of this phenomenon at the local level. In the case of the distribution of jobs in the Bongandanga party apparatus, then, the state implicitly legitimized the call to ethnic solidarity of the populations involved—the pronouncements of national political leaders notwithstanding. As is so often the case in Zaire, and elsewhere, ethnicity is used as a trump in the scramble for the power and prestige that only the state has to offer.

Ethnicity was also at play in the conflict over the supply of beer in Lisala. The Kongo bar owners were able to parlay their ethnic affiliation into increased access to beer—an especially valued commodity and a source of great wealth in the local context. Significantly, however, they were successful in this venture largely because their ethnic kinsmen held influential positions in

the local state power structure. It was the willingness of these bureaucrats to ignore certain illegal maneuvers that resulted in their success. Kongo bar owners were supported in their intraclass conflict with the local Ngombe merchants by their kinsmen who controlled the local organs of state power.

In the Lisala area, then, ethnicity seems to be most important when there is competition for scarce resources—be they jobs in the party or control over the supply of beer. In addition, it would appear that ethnicity remains a vital force in determining associational preferences within classes (the drinking cliques in elite bars). But it is crucial to bear in mind that these manifestations of ethnicity become analytically intelligible only when they are understood and perceived in relation to the larger, overarching context of the *Mobutiste* state in consistently fostering the aims and interests of a small segment of the population at the expense of the majority of Zairian citizens. Access to the rewards of the state is all-important in Zaire. In this regard I can only concur with Richard Sklar's recent observation that class relations may well be determined not so much by relations of production, but by relations of power.⁴⁷ Ethnicity in Zaire remains crucial, but its significance is played out within the boundaries of a class system shaped and dominated by the state through its various distributive and redistributive policies.

A second major point to emerge from this analysis is that both class and ethnicity are situational and contextual. This appears most clearly in the examination of Lisala's drinking cliques. Both ethnicity and class play a role in determining who drinks with whom, and where a person will drink. Class considerations are uppermost when he is choosing a bar, whereas ethnic factors dominate when he is selecting drinking companions. Both phenomena, therefore, are of importance to the actors involved. Equally clear is the major role of the context in determining whether people follow class or ethnic imperatives. Thus, lower-level Ngombe bureaucrats may well identify with the mass of the population on basic social issues concerning redistribution,⁴⁸ but they will nonetheless exhibit class tendencies in their choice of drinking establishment and drinking companions.

Thus far, I have treated class and ethnicity as separate phenomena—but the social, economic, and political forces that unleash class and ethnic consciousness can be divorced only on the analytical plane. Both ethnic and class relations affect the acquisition, maintenance, and distribution of wealth, prestige, and political power.⁴⁹ Both identities are fluid, intermittent, and contextual. Because each identity—or, more correctly each set of identities—is protean, it is both possible and entirely likely that in some circumstances ethnic identities will become salient whereas in others class identification will come to the fore. Kasfir makes this point cogently, noting that “if categories are fluid, identity may shift dramatically not only from one ethnic category to another, but from ethnicity to class or region” and that “political situations that evoke

participation along class lines may appear and disappear just as they do for participation along ethnic lines.”⁵⁰

It therefore seems reasonable to maintain the following three propositions: First, if the composition of ethnic groups is constantly changing in responses to differing socio-political contexts, so too is the composition of social classes. The informant cited in the introduction can thus easily affirm that he belongs to three different ethnic groups, depending on the situation in which he finds himself at a given moment. Also, a Ngombe clerk may well identify in some situations with the plight of his kinsmen under an increasingly harsh centralized regime but still take part in tax-collecting expeditions designed to relieve them of what few earnings they have accumulated. It is from this perspective, as the example of the collectivity police cited above demonstrates, that the ambiguities of self-placement in the social hierarchy become apparent. Second, ethnic and class identities are maintained simultaneously. Which identity prevails depends in large measure on the context in which the actor finds himself. Thus, Ngombe and Mongo bureaucrats in Bongandanga may well viciously compete for positions in the party structure. In this contest ethnic identity is crucial. Nonetheless, in their relations with peasants of either group, class considerations are certainly paramount. Third, the class and ethnic identities of the actors, and their relative degrees of intensity, will vary depending on the geographic, social, political, and economic junctures of the moment. Of particular importance in this regard is the encapsulating structure of the state, which provides the arena in which the struggle for scarce resources occurs. In the contest for control over the means of “consumption and compulsion,”⁵¹ actors will calculate which identities are likely to serve them in good stead and will behave accordingly.

Finally, there are policy implications to be derived from the experience of Lisala. Many African states, Zaire among them, have tried to eliminate ethnicity from the legitimate realm of political intercourse. Though it may be easy to issue an edict to this effect, it is far more difficult—perhaps impossible—to achieve this end in practice. This study of Lisala has shown that even those one would most expect to have adopted the political guidelines issued by the Mobutu regime (party officials and bureaucrats) still choose their drinking companions largely on the basis of ethnic sentiment. In addition, although they all proclaim *Mobutiste* values in highly structured interview situations, in the relative informality of the barroom, ethnic labels and stereotypes spring readily to their lips. Two obvious points need to be restated: pride in one’s origin is fine and necessary; denigration of the origins of others is not. The Mobutu regime cannot, and perhaps should not, try to abolish the first; its efforts to curb the second have thus far been unsuccessful.

Although a number of states have tried to rotate bureaucrats to achieve national integration, the results are mixed.⁵² In Zaire, the transfer of bureaucrats

to achieve an ethnic melange is counterproductive in some ways. In a context characterized by scarcity, exposure to other ethnic groups within the polity may reinforce rather than reduce ethnic stereotypes. Bureaucrats sent to poorer parts of the country may develop idealized visions of their own ethnic homelands and may tend to ascribe local poverty to a set of pejorative ethnic characteristics of the people among whom they are stationed, thus failing to seek the deeper causes and roots of underdevelopment. Ngombe laziness is neither an accurate diagnosis of Lisala's economic condition nor the basis of a valid policy prescription for alleviating the plight of the local farmers. Of course, even if unfavorable ethnic stereotypes were absent, there would be no guarantee that the representatives of the state would take the cause of the disadvantaged to heart, for their personal interests within the loosely defined, but nonetheless privileged, politico-commercial bourgeoisie might suffer were they to do so. It is indeed in this curious juxtaposition of class and ethnicity that the real tragedy of Lisala lies. It is unnecessary to deny class to assert ethnicity or vice versa. Rather, it is the failure to use these approaches concurrently that can lead only to muddled theory and misguided policy.

NOTES

*An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1979 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, The Washington Hilton Hotel, August 31–September 3, 1979. Generous funding for field work in Zaire (1974–75) was provided by the Fulbright-Hays Program. Crawford Young, Jan Vansina, and two anonymous referees made valuable suggestions. They are in no way responsible for any remaining deficiencies.

1. Lisala is a small town of approximately 27,000 people in northwestern Zaire. It is an administrative center of some importance and serves as the headquarters of three levels of administration: Mongala subregion, the zone of Lisala, and the *Cité*—or collectivity—of Lisala. For a fuller description see Michael G. Schatzberg, *Politics and Class in Zaire: Bureaucracy, Business, and Beer in Lisala* (New York and London: Africana Publishing, 1980), pp. 4–9.

2. Jean-Claude Willame, *Patrimonialism and Political Change in the Congo* (Stanford, 1972).

3. Paul Mercier, "Remarques sur la signification du 'tribalisme' en Afrique noire," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, 31 (1961), 64–67. The literature on this point is voluminous. See Jan Vansina, *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (Madison [Wi.], 1965), pp. 14–15; Aidan W. Southall, "The Illusion of Tribe," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 5 (January and April 1970), 34; Enid Schildkrout, *People of the Zongo: The Transformation of Ethnic Identities in Ghana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 16; and the collection of articles in Abner Cohen, ed. *Urban Ethnicity* (London: Tavistock, 1974).

4. Interview, Lisala, 26 June 1975, no. 67, p. 1. For the most forceful and empirically convincing case for the argument that ethnicity is fluid and largely contextual see Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison [Wi.], 1976). As far as Zaire is concerned, the studies of Young, Vansina, Thomas E. Turner, and Robert W. Harms have helped unravel the complexities of ethnic group formation. See *ibid.*, and Young, *Politics in the Congo: Decolonization and Independence* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 232–72; and his "Ethnic Politics in Zaire," (paper presented to the Joint Annual Meetings, African Studies Association and Latin American Studies Association, Houston, 2–5 November 1977), esp. pp. 16, 30. Vansina's *Kingdoms of the Savanna* is relevant, as is his *Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo* (Kinshasa: Editions Uni-

versitaires du Congo, 1966). His recent history of the Kuba notes that there were probably no Kuba much before the sixteenth century. See Vansina, *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples* (Madison [Wi.], 1978), p. 90. See, too, Turner, "A Century of Political Conflict in Sankuru (Congo-Zaire)," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1973), pp. 230, 263-71, 352; and Turner, "Congo-Kinshasa," in Victor A. Olorunsola, ed. *The Politics of Cultural Sub-nationalism in Africa* (Garden City [N.Y.], 1972), pp. 228-40; Harms, "Competition and Capitalism: The Bobangi Role in Equatorial Africa's Trade Revolution, ca. 1750-1900," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1978), pp. 37-38, 79-80; and Harms, "Oral Tradition and Ethnicity," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 10 (Summer 1979), 77, 83, 84.

5. Robin Cohen, "Class in Africa: Analytical Problems and Perspectives," in Ralph Miliband and John Savile, eds. *The Socialist Register 1972* (London: Merlin Press, 1972), p. 243; and Joel Samoff, "The Bureaucracy and the Bourgeoisie: Decentralization and Class Structure in Tanzania," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 21 (January 1979), 50.

6. Schatzberg, *Politics and Class in Zaire*, pp. 59-75.

7. The preceding argument is drawn from parts of Schatzberg, *Politics and Class in Zaire*, where social class is defined as the manifestations of a process by which allied actors obtain or lose, open up or close off, become increasingly or decreasingly conscious of access to life and chances for mobility. See pp. 27-32 for a discussion.

8. Joan Vincent, "Room for Manoeuvre: The Political Role of Small Towns in East Africa," in Maxwell Owusu, ed. *Colonialism and Change: Essays Presented to Lucy Mair* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1975), pp. 115, 124, 127. Emphasis in original. See, too, the collection of articles in Southall, ed. *Small Urban Centers in Rural Development in Africa* (Madison: African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin, 1979).

9. On these points see Schatzberg, *Politics and Class in Zaire*, pp. 4-12; and Schatzberg, "Islands of Privilege: Small Cities in Africa and the Dynamics of Class Formation," *Urban Anthropology*, 8 (Summer 1979), 173-90 which notes that Lisala is by no means unique in this regard.

10. On the Ngombe see Alvain W. Wolfe, *In the Ngombe Tradition: Continuity and Change in the Congo* (Evanston [Il.], 1961); and Mumbanza mwa Bawele, "Les Ngombe de l'Equateur: historique d'une identité," *Zaire-Afrique*, 18 (April 1978), 229-49.

11. Interview data, Lisala, 1974-1975.

12. Zone de Bongandanga, "Rapport annuel des affaires politiques, 1973,1" pp. 20/1-20/2; and "Rapport mensuel de la Zone de Bongandanga pour le mois d'août 1974," (9 August 1974). Unless otherwise noted, all reports and administrative correspondence were consulted in the Archives, Department of Political Affairs, Mongala subregion, Lisala, Zaire.

13. Field Log, 26 February 1975, p. 47.

14. Mumbanza, "Les Ngombe de l'Equateur," p. 244. Despite Mumbanza's account of these events, Vansina has issued a note of caution. He wonders if "Ngombe" and "Mongo" were, in fact, the ethnic categories perceived during most of the nineteenth century and suggests their appearance may have been later than 1890. Vansina, personal communication, 6 October 1979.

15. See "La province de l'Equateur: présentation morphologique des institutions politiques 1960-1967," *Courrier africain*, T.A. nos. 82-83, 30 October 1968, pp. 12-25; and Young, *Politics in the Congo*, pp. 123-24.

16. "Rapport semestriel: Sur la marche de l'administration de la Zone de Bongandanga et des collectivités la composant," 15 December 1974.

17. Interview, Lisala, 22 April 1975, no. 35, pp. 2, 4.

18. "Rapport mensuel de la Zone de Bongandanga pour le mois d'août 1974," 9 August 1974.

19. Administrative correspondence, 27 September 1971, 19 August 1971.

20. See Schatzberg, *Politics and Class in Zaire*, pp. 86-91, from which this account is drawn.

21. Interview, Lisala, 21 February 1975, no. 8, p. 7.

22. Interviews, Lisala, 21 March 1975, no. 30, p. 2; 3 April 1975, no. 55, p. 2; 25 June 1975, no. 56, p. 4.

23. Interviews, Lisala 27 February 1975, no. 12, p. 4; 13 November 1974, no. 1, p. 3; 14 November 1974, no. 1, p. 6.

24. Interview, Lisala, 23 January 1975, no. 7, p. 4.
25. Field Log, 23 January 1975, p. 29.
26. Field Log, 13 January 1975, p. 25; 23 January 1975, p. 29.
27. Paule Bouvier, *L'Accession du Congo belge à l'indépendance: essai d'analyse sociologique* (Brussels: Editions de l'Institut de Sociologie, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1965), p. 136.
28. Interview, Lisala, 8 January 1975, no. 5, p. 2.
29. Field Log, 7 March 1975, p. 54.
30. Interview, Lisala, 16 June 1975, no. 23, p. 6.
31. Interview, Lisala, 12 August 1975, no. 45, p. 4.
32. Interviews, Lisala, 27 November 1974, no. 26, p. 2; 22 April 1975, no. 60, p. 4; 26 April 1975, no. 61, p. 5.
33. When queried, one Mukongo commissioner mentioned "friends from Bas-Zaïre" as his drinking companions. These are usually high-ranking officials, too. Interview, Lisala, 18 July 1975, no. 43, p. 6.
34. Young, "Ethnic Politics in Zaïre," pp. 25-27.
35. Field Log, 13 January 1975, p. 26.
36. Field Log, 24 February 1975, p. 45; 21 May 1975, p. 78. Significantly, the official cited directly indicated that he had deliberately requested a posting in Equateur so his children could learn the regional lingua franca, Lingala. He perceived this as essential to their future if they were to make their way in a regime dominated by Lingala-speaking Equateurians.
37. Interviews, Lisala, 12 March 1975, no. 16, p. 6; 23 April 1975, no. 47, p. 5.
38. Interview, Lisala, 22 March 1975, no. 36, p. 9.
39. Field Log, 8 April 1975, p. 65.
40. Field Log, 18 March 1975, p. 60.
41. Interviews, Lisala, 24 January 1975, no. 6, p. 9; 19 March 1975, no. 18, p. 5.
42. Interviews, Lisala, 21 November 1974, no. 24, p. 2; 2 January 1975, no. 52, p. 1; 27 March 1975, no. 54, p. 2.
43. Interview, Lisala, 11 June 1975, no. 65, p. 4; also, 22 June 1975, no. 66, p. 8.
44. Richard Jeffries, *Class, Power and Ideology in Ghana: The Railwaymen of Sekondi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 181.
45. For a fuller elaboration of these themes, see Schatzberg, *Politics and Class in Zaïre*.
46. For reflections on Mobutu's war against the bourgeoisie see Schatzberg, "The State and the Economy: The 'Radicalization of the Revolution' in Mobutu's Zaïre," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 14 (1980).
47. Richard L. Sklar, "The Nature of Class Domination in Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 17 (1979), 537.
48. Schatzberg, *Politics and Class in Zaïre*, pp. 155-61.
49. R. Cohen, "Class in Africa," p. 244.
50. Nelson Kasfir, "Explaining Ethnic Political Participation," *World Politics*, 31 (April 1979), 372, 374. A similar point was raised by J. Clyde Mitchell almost a generation ago. See Mitchell, *The Kalela Dance: Aspects of Social Relations Among Urban Africans in Northern Rhodesia*, Rhodes-Livingston Institute Paper No. 27 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), p. 43.
51. The phrase is Sklar's. See Sklar, "The Nature of Class Domination in Africa," p. 544.
52. Owusu, *Uses and Abuses of Political Power: A Case Study of Continuity and Change in the Politics of Ghana* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 106-07; J. L. Boutillier, "Urbanization et comportements socio-démographiques: quelques caractéristiques d'une population de fonctionnaires d'un centre urbain secondaire au nord de la Côte d'Ivoire, in *La Croissance urbaine en Afrique noire et à Madagascar*, T. 1 (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1972), p. 372; B. Steck, "Mokolo dans ses relations avec le milieu rural environnant," *Cahiers ORSTOM*, sciences humaines, 9:3 (1972), 292; Jean Tardif, "Kédougou: aspects de l'histoire et de la situation socio-économique actuelle," *Bulletin et mémoires de la société d'anthropologie de Paris*, 8 (1965), 221; and David Jacobson, *Itinerant Townsmen: Friendship and Social Order in Urban Uganda* (Menlo Park [Ca.], 1973).