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**Rural-to-Urban Migration in Latin America and Africa:  
A Comparative Analysis of Trends and Motives**

Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, in that order, are the most rapidly-urbanizing regions of the world. Most of this trend is due to rural-to-urban migration; in part, such migration has enabled individuals of lower social and economic status to abandon centuries of stifling rural tradition and depressing poverty, and by relocating themselves, to establish small beachheads on the urban islands of wealth and privilege. This type of migration has occurred all over Latin America. In part, however, rural-to-urban migration has enabled low-status individuals to sustain and upgrade rural lifeways by making temporary visits to such urban areas, during which time they save or repatriate to their home areas as much of their income as they are able. This particular type of migration has been the case over much of tropical Africa.

From much of the Third World migration literature, one comes away with the notion that Latin Americans and Africans have fundamentally different migration motives, and therefore that the processes and the results of urbanization are (and will be) quite different. Based upon more recent literature and a specific case study, this paper argues, to the contrary, that 1) despite some lingering differences, African urbanization is responding to some of the same forces as did Latin American urbanization, with a lag of some 20 to 30 years; 2) despite basic differences in "push" forces affecting migration, such phenomena as the permanence of move, the importance of kinship ties at origin, are similar between the two areas, and thus, 3) African urban and rural areas can expect to face some of the same migration benefits and disbenefits as their Latin American counterparts.

The similarity of the two areas in basic urbanization forces is evident. Within a country, urbanization may be interpreted as a response to widening inequities between rural and urban places; it is a sort of pressure release valve in the national space economy. Where inequities are increasing, as in Africa, urbanization is accelerating; as inequities decline, as in Latin America,

urbanization slackens off. Of course, the rate of urbanization is also a function of the percent urban, being naturally faster at the beginning simply because of its near-zero base, and slower at the end, as it approaches 100 percent. What are these inequities, and how are Latin America and Africa positioned regarding them? There are at least three "inequality curves" that appear related to the onset of accelerated urbanization. Each curve is a graph of the particular type of inequality over time; each is discussed below in order to point out the degree of "lag" of Africa behind Latin America, and to suggest the forces behind a general process of urbanization.

1. Sectoral imbalance. The incidence of one or a very few leading sectors characterizes early development, especially that which is export-dependent. Latin America today is characterized by relatively diversified growth, with manufacturing well-established in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and Mexico and with raw material exports on the decline in favor of import substitution policies. Central America is a major exception to this rule. Africa, with the possible exception of southern Africa, is still characterized by one-dimensional economies, specializing in a few export commodities, remarkably underdeveloped industrially and thus heavily dependent on imports for their technological needs.

2. Urban primacy. Urban primacy refers to the population-size dominance of the largest city in a country over the next-largest or several next-largest cities. Increasing primacy is apparently associated with a country's establishment of trade linkages with the outside world and with the inability of the country to disperse the benefits of trade and industrialization to secondary cities (Vapnarsky, 1969; Jones and Zannaras, 1979).

There is compelling evidence that most Latin Americans live in countries where primacy is on the decline (Fox, 1975), particularly in Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Peru, and Mexico. On the other hand, evidence suggests that most Africans live in countries where primacy is on the increase (Hance, 1970, 240-241), for example, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, and the Sudan. The fact that Central America, Ethiopia, and parts of West Africa do not fit these trends does not detract from the general rule that Latin America is experiencing a primacy decrease while Africa is experiencing an increase.

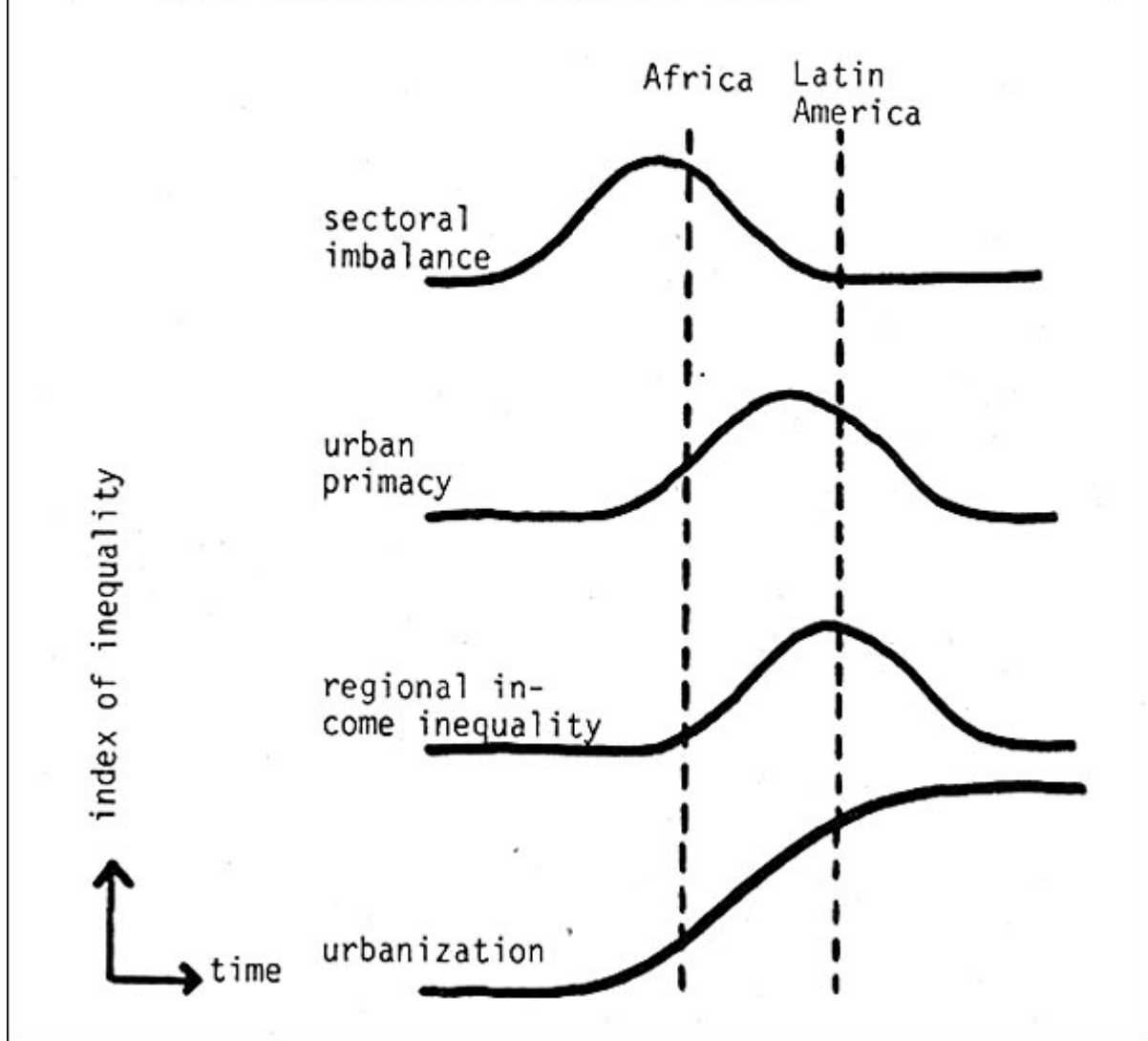
3. Regional income inequality. Even after urban primacy in a country declines,

the maldistribution of wealth among different regions may continue increasing for decades afterwards, simply because the growth of secondary cities generally takes place in a few favored regions, leaving peripheral rural regions as poor as ever. This is precisely the situation at present in Latin American countries such as Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela (Jones, 1979). Although regional statistics on African countries are scarce, data on personal income distributions by percentile classes (Chenery, et al. 1974, 8-9) suggest that: 1) African inequalities are considerably lower than Latin American, at both personal and regional levels; and 2) that African inequalities are increasing while those in Latin America have peaked and may be on the way down, although data on this are not conclusive.

The preceding points can be summarized in a graph which shows how the temporal increase in urbanization (the urbanization curve) coincides with the three aforementioned inequality curves (Figure 1).

Figure 1

URBANIZATION AS A RESPONSE TO INEQUALITY:  
LATIN AMERICA VS. AFRICA (c. 1975)



The rapid rate of urbanization in Africa at present is associated with the accelerating portion of the S-curve. This high rate of increase is correlated with pronounced sectoral imbalance and both increasing primacy and increasing income inequality, as well as with the relatively large number of potential rural migrants, that is, with the low level of urbanization. The slower rate of growth of Latin American urbanization corresponding to the upper portion of the S-curve, is correlated with decreasing imbalance, decreasing primacy, and pronounced regional inequality. This slower growth is also a function of the fact that several Latin American countries have become so urbanized already that the rate of urbanization must slow down. Temperate South America is now the most highly

urbanized of the world's regions, being more than 80 percent urban.

### **Migration Motives and Patterns: Latin America vs. Africa**

There is little doubt that in sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>1</sup> as opposed to Latin America, rural-to-urban migrants are strongly motivated by a desire to assist their rural kin and villagers and to build a rural retirement base for themselves. In much of Africa, tribal identity is maintained all of one's life, and with this identity go certain rights and obligations; a man who leaves the village and fails to maintain contact may relinquish the right to inherited land or become an outcast among his ethnic group (Nelson, 1976, 736-737). Such "contact" may be in the form of a wife and children left behind to cultivate the land and/or money sent home, and frequent return visits to the homeland. Thus the African migrant's goals are origin-rooted. To use Hirschman's term, his view of success is "group-focused" (Hirschman, 1958, 11-14) in that he believes that his own success and his family's are inextricably linked with that of his extended family, clan, and village. In Latin America, the story is different. Rural-to-urban migrants tend to be motivated by a strong desire to climb the social and economic ladder in the city, with little thought for their rural origins, and thus they are destination-rooted. This is not always the case; for Indian groups in Latin America, especially in Peru, a number of studies have shown strong home allegiances with motives analogous to those for African migrants but the exceptions do not disprove the rule. These Latin American migrants are "ego-focused" (Hirschman, 1958, 14-20) in their view toward success, interpreting it narrowly to include only their immediate families. Many authors have noted that underlying the strong urban preferences held by both rural and urban residents in Latin America there lies a firm base of "success stories" passed on by word of mouth as well as by the media. These are stories of families whose income, social status, and autonomy over their environment all increase simultaneously (Kemper, 1974) and who become intimately involved in the social organization of their destination communities (Mangin, 1967).

These differences in migration motives between the two regions, nevertheless, are not as great as certain authors would have us believe. In Africa, the recent trend in various countries is toward permanent migration and away from temporary migration between home area and urban destination. This alone suggests a change in African migration motives in the direction of the Latin American model. Evidence in support of this trend is discussed at length shortly.

There is also evidence, in a major survey of Ghanaian rural and urban migrants undertaken by J.C. Caldwell (1969) that the return of money to the home village, which is often taken as an index of origin-rooted motives, is weaker than commonly assumed. One question, asked of both rural persons intending migration to a town and urban immigrants recently arrived from a rural village, was what the respondent would do (or in the case of urban dwellers, actually did) with money earned in excess of that needed to pay for food and housing in the city. Now, given what has already been stated about African migration motives, one would expect that nearly everyone would respond "send money back to the village." While nearly all of the rural residents so responded, only 57 percent of the urban respondents did so. Caldwell's explanation, backed by his data, was as follows:

“The earnest potential migrant very much underestimates the demands of consumption expenditure on fashionable clothes, and on the city bars and dancing places (in urban areas). These reduce the potential for saving” (Caldwell, 1969, 124-125).

Thus, we are led to question the original strength of the rural outmigrant's motives, since he is dissuaded by these urban attractions. It may be that migrants either forget or subconsciously alter their original motives for migrating after they reach their urban destination.

What we are suggesting is that the African migrant may be increasingly recognizing the benefits and the costs of urban life and finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional ties with rural areas. Migrants in urban areas of Latin America have already lost most such rural ties. A survey of migrants to Monterrey, Mexico from predominantly rural places (over three-fourths from places of less than 20,000 population) found that only 6 percent of the respondents with relatives at home actually sent money home (Browning and Feindt, 1971). Even when one singles out migrants to Monterrey in the five years prior to the survey, the percentage is only 9 percent. These findings coincide with those of Lomnitz on migrants to a Mexico City shantytown; she found that "home" kinship contacts were likely to be lost entirely after one generation, or sooner with the mother's death (Lomnitz, 1974). Clearly, this loss of contact is not the case in Africa today, but it may become so with the injection of urban values into rural areas through the mass media, coupled with improvements in rural literacy.

If Latin American and African migrants exhibit different motives, which we must concede from the previous discussion, then these should be accompanied by different types and patterns of migration. Indeed, the relative permanence of Latin American migration has often been contrasted with the temporary nature of African migration. A variety of empirical studies, on Venezuela (Dipolo and Suarez, 1974), Brazil (Wilkening, 1968), Mexico (Browning and Feindt, 1971), and Guatemala (Roberts, 1974), make a case for the permanence of Latin American migration. The potential migrants are positively selected from their origin, and thus tend to be more ambitious, harder-working, confident in their abilities, and Independent, the very type of people who are chafed and stifled by rural traditions and compulsory allegiances to kin. Who would expect them to return to their home villages, especially after assimilating urban values and seeing first hand the potentials of urban life? Not surprisingly, the exceptions to the rule of permanence include studies on Peru (Bradfield, 1973), and Ecuador and Bolivia (Preston, 1969), carried out among peasants with strong village ties and traditions, but it is probably true that temporary migration in Latin America has been underestimated and underinvestigated.

Concerning tropical Africa, the consensus until recently was that "migration" is not even an appropriate term for most African population movements; instead the term "circulation" has been proposed (Gould and Prothero, 1975). The propensity for circulatory migration is partially explained by the early predominance of seasonal migration to cacao and coffee plantations, cotton plantations, and mining districts, in West, East, and southern Africa, respectively. With the decline in relative importance of the agricultural export economy in recent years (giving way to certain mineral exports), and with the increased opportunities for urban education and employment, such resource-related migration has waned. Thus, it is rural-urban migration rather than rural-rural or urban-rural, which dominates the African scene today. Other evidence has been presented for temporary migration in Africa, especially in studies among homogeneous tribal groups. Such studies conclude, in effect, that African migrants form a sort of "rural-urban pool" such that:

“At any given time, some members of the family are in the city earning money while others remain at home to cultivate communal or individually-held land and attend to other family interests. Individual members of the family move back and forth between country and town, so that different family members are in the city

and the country at different times” (Nelson, 1976, 723).

Such a rural-urban pool does not involve all family members equally; the tendency is for males to circulate from city to village and for females to remain behind. Permanent moves of whole families to urban areas are infrequent. Thus, we find a sex ratio which is strongly masculine in the large urban areas and strongly feminine in rural areas, just the reverse of the situation in Latin America. In Nairobi in 1962 there were 187 males per 100 females (Elkan, 1976) while in the same year in rural Kisii district, to the west, there were 90 per 100, and in rural Kisumu district, north of Kisii, below 90 per 100 (Ominde, 1971, 217-219). Kenya has been the focus for several empirical studies, among such homogeneous tribal groups as the Luo, Kikuyu, and Kisa, which appear to support the notion of a "rural-urban pool" (cited in Nelson, 1976; and Elkan, 1976).

Despite this evidence, there are few authors who do not acknowledge that temporary migration is rapidly giving way to permanent migration in Africa. Nelson's comment is typical:

“Current African and South Asian patterns of temporary migration will almost surely give way to permanent patterns, as has already happened in some other areas of the world” (Nelson, 1976, 732).

Consider Elkan's review of recent data on Nairobi (Elkan, 1976). The following points, here summarized, offer unmistakable evidence in support of Nelson's statement above: 1) the sex ratio in Nairobi decreased from 187 males per 100 females in 1962, to 159 per 100 in 1969; 2) labor turnover rates in the city decreased by a factor of five between 1953 and 1973; in the latter year, the average employee had held his job five years; 3) a study among Luo migrants to Nairobi indicated a median residence time in Nairobi of 17.6 years; and 4) another study, from a comprehensive sample of migrants to Nairobi, concluded that temporary migration is now a minority occurrence there. Such evidence is seconded by Caldwell's extensive migrant interviews in Ghana. Among recent migrants to the four major cities in Ghana, the sex ratio was only 120 males per 100 females, while for the earliest migrants, it was 200 to 100. This suggests that in Ghana, as Kenya, the migration 'process is now involving whole families as well as many single females and that seasonal migration (chiefly involving males) is being eclipsed by longer-term migration (Caldwell, 1969, 44-45). Caldwell also



found that although a majority of younger migrants in urban areas intended to return home to the village, many of those past retirement had not actually done so because at retirement a man often had more close relatives and other ties in the town than in the village (Caldwell, 1969, 187).

The reader will conclude from this literature review that there is considerable disagreement on whether rural-urban migration in sub-Saharan Africa today should be characterized as largely temporary and motivated by village kinship/ethnic ties, or (as Latin American migration) largely permanent and motivated by a self-centered desire to succeed at the urban destination. The truth probably lies between these two, but there is little disagreement that African migration is rapidly becoming more like Latin American migration in its motives, its patterns, and in the permanence ("efficiency") of the migration streams. The two regions lie on the same urbanization curve, with Africa approaching an urbanization level reached by Latin America some 20 to 30 years ago.

### **Comparative Out-migration Potential: Aquitania, Colombia vs. Kisii, Kenya**

To test several notions concerning the differences in motives for Latin American as opposed to African migration, the first author surveyed 117 highland Colombian peasants in July, 1977, using many of the same questions employed by the second author in a summer, 1975 survey of 606 highland Kenyan peasants (Garst, 1976). Both surveys dealt not so much with actual migration behavior as with perceptions of life in rural and urban areas of the respective countries. The questions on perceptions were thus designed to measure rural out-migration potentials. Such potentials serve as valuable predictive measures of current and future levels of rural-to-urban migration in a country. Elsewhere, it has been illustrated that place perceptions can closely reflect concurrent migration behavior (Jones, 1978). The basic hypotheses to be tested were that: 1) the African (Kenyan) peasants would exhibit lower levels of preferences for urban life than the Latin American (Colombian) peasants; 2) origin forces (push factors) such as land shortage and kinship ties would be more important determinants of urban preferences among the African peasants than among the Latin American peasants (for whom pull factors at the urban destinations would presumably be more important); and 3) age and educational selectivity, whereby the younger and better-educated would prefer urban life the most, would be more pronounced among the Latin American peasants than among the African

peasants. as a function of the supposition that the former are motivated by pull factors at destination. and the latter, by push factors at origin.

To enable such a comparison. the survey villages were chosen to represent typical and analogous peasant settings in the two regions. Kisii, Kenya, is a peasant town of 6000 located at 2000 meters elevation some 200 kilometers west of Nairobi; within 100 kilometers are the larger towns of Nakuru (about 50,000), Kisumu (about 30,000), and Kericho (about 10,000). Aquitania, Colombia, is also a peasant town (about 3,000 population), located in the Andean highlands at 3200 meters, some 300 kilometers northeast of Bogota. Within 100 kilometers are the towns of Tunja (about 50,000), Sogamoso (about 40,000), and Duitama (about 30,000). In addition to their similar settings, the two countries (Kenya and Colombia) fall toward the middle of the urbanization curves of their respective regions; furthermore, in both countries. both temporary and permanent migration exist. Random samples of 606 heads of household in Kisii and 117 in Aquitania responded to interview schedules administered by interviewers who were fluent in the local language. The Kisii schedule was much more extensive, but both schedules asked questions on size of farm. family size. educational level and age of family head, preference ratings for the village and for each of four urban centers, perceptions of the home area on a variety of characteristics. and levels of direct and indirect contact with specific urban places in the country. In this paper. we report on preliminary results. To make the comparison easier, 117 Kisii informant schedules have been randomly selected from the 606, so that each of the two villages are represented by 117 heads of households.

Relative to hypothesis one, we find, unexpectedly, that the average residential preference rating given by the Kisii peasants to four Kenyan cities, the capital city and the three other cities mentioned earlier, is significantly higher than that given by the Aquitania peasants to the four analogous Colombian cities. To correct for the possibility that the Kenyans may have simply been more "agreeable" on all the preference ratings, we re-expressed the urban preferences as a percentage of the preference rating given the home village itself. The results still indicate clearly that urban life is relatively more attractive to the Kenyans (the respective percentages are 80.1 for Kisii and 76.4 for Aquitania; if we use only the capital city's preference as a percentage of the village's, the differentials are greater still: 76.7 percent for Nairobi to 62.0 percent for Bogota). Consistent with these findings is the fact that the Kisii peasants had relatively more negative perceptions of population pressure, the adequacy of farmland, and the

friendliness of neighbors than the Aquitania peasants. Thus, it appears that out-migration potential is greater in Kisii than in Aquitania, despite the fact that 98 percent of the Kisii peasants had no kin in the four aforementioned urban areas, and 94 percent had no kin outside Kisii at all (compare to Aquitania's 38 percent and 29 percent respectively). We cannot attribute the greater out-migration potential to either the average age or the average education; the two villages are similar on these two variables.

Relative to hypotheses two and three, our data give some support. Among Kisii peasants, perceptions of population pressure and poor soils were widespread and strongly related to preferences for urban places outside the village. In addition, though most Kisii did not believe their neighbors unfriendly, those who did strongly preferred the urban "outside world." Among Aquitania peasants, none of these rural "push" factors were as strongly related to preferences for urban life as with the Kisii. On the other hand, despite the similarity in age and educational levels between the two villages, the tendency for the young, better-educated villager to prefer urban life was much stronger among the Aquitanians than among the Kisii. This evidence of age and educational selectivity fits the implied conclusion above, that the Kisii are motivated more by "push" factors at the origin than are the Aquitanians. Thus, the Kisii have not migrated despite their relatively high urban preferences and relatively low opinions of certain aspects of village life; evidently, a lack of contact with urban areas, coupled with obligations to local kin, are all that are holding them back. The Kisii have evidently not participated in the rapid urban growth in Kenya in contrast to other Kenyan groups such as the Luo and Kikuyu. As more urban contacts are forged, pull factors at the destination should intensify, age and education; selectivity should increase, and out-migration accelerate.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, urbanization in two regions has been analyzed within an evolutionary model. In this model, rapid African urbanization is seen as a function of increasing urban primacy and increasing regional income inequalities within the national space; a slower rate of Latin American urbanization is due to declining urban primacy and peaking income inequalities. Although not the topic of this paper, it would appear that based on Latin American experience, increasing urbanization in Africa should be welcomed rather than dreaded. In Latin America, it has resulted in family well-being, political representation, and

better education for formerly rural people who, research has shown, have been difficult (if not impossible) to reach in situ in their rural homelands.

## Note

1. From here on, "African" refers to sub-Saharan Africa.

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