A THEORY OF CORRUPTION

Based on a Consideration of Corruption in the Public Services and Governments of British Colonies and ex-Colonies in West Africa.

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There is some corruption in all governments and in the public services of all countries. Some countries, however, suffer from a greater degree of corruption than others. Only very recently and in only a handful of countries has such corruption been so far reduced as to be practically negligible, that is to say so far reduced that it does not normally enter into a citizen’s relations with his government. In most countries throughout most of their known history such corruption has been an accepted feature of life. In extreme cases today it can be a major obstacle to economic development and a major cause of political instability. It deserves attention for its intrinsic interest as part of the ‘pathology’ of bureaucracy, for its practical importance for the political and economic development of the poorer nations of the world, and for the contribution that an analysis can make to sympathetic understanding of what may otherwise be a repulsive feature of some societies. In this paper I try to relate the corruption observed in the British Colonies and ex-colonies of West Africa to the social conditions and histories of those countries and to make some tentative generalisations from a comparison of conditions there and in other parts of the world.

I am not asserting that these West African territories are peculiarly given to corruption; there are many countries in the world where the governments are more corrupt and many more where they were equally corrupt in the recent past; the choice of these countries is dictated only by the accident of the writer’s own experience.

The Effects of Corruption

Understanding is desirable, but it is wrong to underrate the evil consequences of widespread corruption. People sympathetic to African and other nationalist movements are sometimes tempted to brush aside corruption as being a ‘passing phase’ of no real political
or social importance. Whether it is a 'passing phase' or not in West Africa I do not know, though I shall give reasons for thinking that it is at least not a phase that will pass quickly; but I am certain that it is of real political and social importance. Some of the evils which widespread corruption may be expected to bring are:

1. Injustice. This needs no explanation.

2. Inefficiency. In countries where the general standard of technology is low this is a serious matter. Railway accidents are caused by Station Masters corruptly agreeing to load logs that are too heavy for the wagons. Patients in hospitals may be denied treatment they require or bribe nurses to give them treatment they want (in West Africa usually injections), but which may be unsuitable for their condition. Corruption in making appointments may be relatively unimportant in a country where the general standard of competence is high, but in West Africa, where professional and technical competence is still rare, corruption results in the appointment of unsuitable people and the waste and frustration of the right man.

3. Mistrust of the government by the citizen. This is peculiarly serious where the government is anxious to carry out a programme of economic development for which the enthusiasm of the population needs to be enlisted. It also increases the difficulties of enforcing criminal, revenue, and other laws.

4. Waste of public resources. Corruption in the government involves the ultimate transfer of public funds to the pockets of politicians or officials. The businessman who has to bribe to get a government contract ultimately charges the bribe to public funds.

5. Discouragement of enterprise, particularly foreign enterprise. Corruption adds an incalculable hazard to the normal thickets of bureaucratic procedure. The final bribe is never paid. Investors and entrepreneurs are dismayed and frustrated, and may find that the unofficial cost of starting an enterprise is too great for it to be profitable.

6. Political instability. In a country where there is a great deal of corruption, political attacks on people in positions of power are easy to mount and easy to get popular support for. Much of the political history of some unfortunate countries could be told as the 'ins' being accused, correctly, by the 'outs' of corruption; popular indignation at the corruption causing the replacement of the 'ins' by the 'outs', who in turn become corrupt and are attacked by a new group of 'outs'. This process could be demonstrated in detail from
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the history of some local government bodies in West Africa during the past ten years. At the national level it can lead either to political chaos, or

7. Repressive measures. It may be easier to deal with the accusations of corruption than with the corruption itself.

8. Restrictions on government policy. I recall a conversation with an American doctor who was an admirer of the British National Health Service. 'No such service would at the moment be possible in my home State', he said, naming the State, 'the civil service is too inefficient and corrupt to be capable of running it'. A corrupt civil service and police force restricts the range of policies available to a government.

Evidence

There is one preliminary problem which must be faced but cannot be solved; the problem of evidence. Arguments and statements about corruption cannot be demonstrated by factual or statistical evidence of the type normally acceptable as a basis for political or sociological generalisation. There are plenty of reports, histories and trial records exemplifying corruption in different countries, but corruption is not a subject which can be investigated openly by means of questionnaires and interviews. Even if it were, in principle, possible to quantify the phenomenon, there would be no practical possibility of doing so. The reader is asked to accept as a premise of the argument of this paper that there is more corruption in these West African countries than in, for instance, the United Kingdom. This is a view based on my own observations over a decade, broadly shared by other well placed observers and supported by public expressions of concern by indigenous political and religious leaders in West Africa. But it cannot, nor can many of the other statements in this paper be proved in the ways in which statements about less disreputable aspects of society can be proved. Corruption still awaits its Kinsey report. This difficulty must be recognised but we cannot refuse to discuss important topics simply because the best type of evidence is not available.

Definition

I shall not attempt a comprehensive or legally precise definition of corruption, and will content myself with the common understanding that a public official is corrupt if he accepts money or
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money's worth for doing something that he is under a duty to do anyway, that he is under a duty not to do, or to exercise a legitimate discretion for improper reasons. Institutions have official aims, the human beings that work them have personal aims. The ideal relation between the individual and the institution is that the individual should be able to satisfy his personal aims in harmony with, and while forwarding, the official aims of the institution. It is nothing to the Home Office that the prison warden has six children to feed, but the prison warden is acting legitimately in working as a prison warden so that he can feed his six children with his salary. Should he find his salary insufficient, however, and take money from the prisoners for doing them favours, he will be described as corrupt. He will be using his position in the prison to forward his personal aims in a way which conflicts with the official aim of the institution. There is a conflict between the attitudes and aims of a corrupt official and those of the service, and an equally important divergence between the attitudes and aims of the member of the public who induces the corruption of the official, and the aims and attitudes of the society as a whole. These divergencies may be defined by reference to the laws and regulations in which the official aims and attitudes are set out.

The Argument

The corruption discussed here is, by definition, illegal. People break laws because they do not accept them, or because they have other interests or desires which they prefer or are impelled to follow. Some laws in a society find almost universal acceptance, other laws are broken by large numbers of people. Head-hunting, for instance, is illegal in New Guinea and in France, but the laws against it are more often broken in New Guinea than in France. Obviously the law against head-hunting in New Guinea is further from the popular attitude towards that activity in New Guinea than is the similar law in France from the popular attitude there. If there is greater corruption in West Africa than in Denmark the popular attitude towards corruption in West Africa must be different from that in Denmark.

Thus far is tautology. The problem is to identify the reasons for the popular attitude. The argument of this paper is that a high level of corruption is the result of a wide divergence between the attitudes, aims and methods of the government of a country and those of the society in which they operate, in particular of the procedures and aims of the government which put particular groups of
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the population at a special disadvantage: that therefore the different levels of corruption in different countries depend on the extent to which government and society are homogeneous.

Pre-Colonial Society

The question of how far corruption can be said to have existed in pre-colonial times in West Africa, and how far present corruption is the result of the persistence of attitudes from that time, is an extremely difficult one. To discuss it adequately would require far greater knowledge of those societies than I can pretend to, and a great deal of space if due regard was to be had to the variety of social and political structures which existed. I shall, therefore, make only three points about pre-colonial society: points which are possibly obvious, but which are too important to be taken for granted.

1. Pre-colonial West African societies were familiar with conflicts between personal aims and official or social aims, hence their laws and customs and the punishments and other sanctions by which they were enforced, but although men wielded political power, judged causes, led armies, and collected taxes, their functions were less precisely defined in relation to those activities than they are in the bureaucratic governments of colonial and post-colonial times. The judicial functions of a chief were not sharply distinguished from his familial function as arbitrator and peacemaker, or his political function as a leader concerned with the manipulation of power, so that impropriety in the exercise of his judicial function, such as favouritism, could less easily be attributed to him as corruption than in the case of a modern magistrate whose sole function is to judge. To say this is to come near to saying that, as there was no public service in pre-colonial West Africa, there could be no corruption of it, but this is not quite accurate. In fact, examples could be given of behaviour clearly recognisable as corrupt (and recognised as such in the pre-colonial society) from the histories and legends of the peoples concerned. Such examples might be expected to be most common among the larger and more articulated political systems such as those of Northern Nigeria, which had evolved many bureaucratic features long before the advent of the colonial bureaucracy.

2. A man may, of course, be bribed with a horse, a woman, or a gun as effectively as with a roll of notes, but the possibilities and utility of bribery obviously increases with the growth of a money economy. In pre-colonial West Africa, money played a relatively
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minor part, though its importance varied from place to place. To take an extreme instance: in an area where the people lived at subsistence level and, as would be likely, had a political structure almost without full-time professionals, there would be neither the need for, nor the means of, bribery. Even more important perhaps, is the availability of the sort of goods and opportunities on which to spend money, that makes money of greater value than any other single commodity. This is relevant to the claim that the Communist Government of China has greatly reduced corruption in that country, once notorious for it. Obviously, corruption must lose much of its attraction if there is little on which to spend the proceeds, and the acquisition of wealth is in itself (quite apart from the question of punishment for law-breaking) looked on with disfavour. Only in a money economy and a society which allows a good deal of freedom to individuals in disposing of their property, loosely speaking a capitalist economy, will the types of corruption we are dealing with be widespread.

3. In considering the relationship between corruption and traditional society in West Africa, observers often isolate the customary exchanges of gifts as the element in traditional life which has led to the growth of corruption in modern times. While not denying the relevance of customary gift exchange to bribery, the facility with which a bribe may be disguised as a customary gift, and, indeed, the genuine ambiguity of customary gifts in some traditional contexts, it is, in my opinion, wrong to isolate one feature of traditional life in this way. There were and are many features of the traditional way of life which, in the context of colonial and post-colonial society, contribute to the prevalence of corruption. My argument is that it is this clash of old customs, attitudes, etc., with the new forms of government that gives rise to corruption. The customary gifts are just one example. Other examples are easily found; the extended family system which leads to the overburdening of an official with family responsibilities so that his pay is insufficient, his family and tribal loyalties which obscure his devotion to the national community, the absence of an established class system which makes it hard for the official to cultivate the aloofness which perhaps must, for most people, be the accompaniment of official integrity.

Corruption in Colonial and Post-Colonial Times

In modern times my thesis concerns the disharmony between the
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government and the traditional society on which it is imposed and which it seeks to change. Specifically, of course, this modern government was in West Africa the colonial bureaucratic government. It was alien to West Africa in obvious ways: it was controlled from a distant land, and the controllers were subject to pressures and had aims often quite unrelated to the situation in West Africa; its key men were foreigners, often with little understanding of West African society, usually with no understanding of the indigenous languages, while its junior officials recruited from the indigenous peoples struggled to find a balance between their alien masters and the demands of their own people. The disharmonies were innumerable, and I shall consider only two of the most important; the first typical of an economically underdeveloped country, second of a type found universally but which can be seen particularly clearly in West Africa. Before dealing with these, however, there is one important general topic.

The Climate of Corruption

Some years ago, I was escorting an African judge from the court in which he had just sentenced a murderer to death, to his car. The large crowd which had assembled to hear the case lined the path, cheering and dancing to express their pleasure at the verdict. One phrase was shouted over and over again, and was eventually taken up by the whole crowd and chanted in chorus. The judge asked me if I understood what it meant, and I said that I could catch the first words, 'You're a good judge . . . ' but could not understand the rest. 'What they are shouting', said the judge, 'is "You're a good judge, we thought you had been bribed, but you haven't"'. With that he got into his car and was driven away.

No one there was surprised. A wryness of tone was the judge's only comment on the compliment that he was being offered. No one in the crowd saw any reason to disguise the implication that there would have been nothing surprising if the judge had been bribed. We were all living in a country where corruption was a very normal part of the scene and the assumption of corruption was part of everyone's equipment for his daily business.

Such a climate of corruption is in itself an important factor. There is a continuous interaction between the willingness of people to pay bribes and the willingness of officials to receive them. People normally behave in the way that the people they live with behave. In a
society with a high level of corruption, hardly any citizen can carry out his business, avoid trouble with the government, and generally get through life comfortably, without acquiescing to some extent at least in the prevailing corruption. There are not a few such societies in the world, and persons from more fortunate countries must, when visiting them or doing business with them, conform (or at least acquiesce), unless they prefer empty gestures which will inconvenience themselves to no useful purpose. At the other extreme, in an ideally uncorrupt society, the single corrupt man would offer to give or receive bribes in vain.

*Divergencies Between Government and Society*

The two examples of divergence between governments and West African society in Colonial and post-colonial times which I shall discuss are:—

(a) that between a literate government and an illiterate society, and (b) that arising from laws in conflict with popular attitudes.

(a) *Literate Government in an Illiterate Society*

Colonial rule in West Africa was and is the rule of an illiterate society by a literate government. The government operates in accordance with and by means of written rules and regulations. No one who cannot read and write can hope to occupy effectively any position in the public service. Entry into even the lowest grades is only for those who can read and write. Not only is reading and writing essential, but reading and writing in English, a foreign tongue. The majority of the population is illiterate and has little or no understanding of English. (Literacy and understanding English, are in these countries, almost synonymous). Friction between the literate public servant and the illiterate population is inevitable, and is, of course, greatest at the base of the public service pyramid, where functionaries and contacts with the public are most numerous, and it is at this level that the greatest *volume* of corruption occurs (the amount of damage done and money involved may well be greater at higher levels). Between the public and the functionaries with whom they most often deal, there is a constant flow of presents and bribes, given willingly or unwillingly, pressed on the official or extorted from the public.

Many examples of this process could be given (and it should be borne in mind that the public service in economically under-
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developed and colonial territories is of infinitely greater importance as the main channel of social initiative and the main route of personal advancement than it is in countries like Britain, but as an example of literate government operating in an illiterate society and how it differs from the same situation in an almost wholly literate society like our own, consider the confrontation of a police constable and a farmer. The farmer is barefoot, and the policeman is wearing a pair of large, shiny boots, and this difference may stand as a symbol of their relative ability to protect themselves in modern West Africa. The police constable is literate, he has learnt (at some pain perhaps) not only to adapt himself to a specific set of rules and regulations, but to wield them against others; he is an authority on the law, at least at his own level; he can arrest the farmer, or report him, and he has, again at his own level, innumerable official and semi-official contacts with officers of other branches of government service. The farmer is relatively a child. He is uncertain of the exact contents of the various laws that affect him, and uncertain how he stands in relation to them. He knows he should have a licence for his shotgun but cannot be sure that the one he has is still valid, or if the clerk who issued it cheated him with a worthless piece of paper. He knows he should have paid his taxes, but he has lost his receipt, and anyway there is something called a tax year, different from a calendar year, which they keep on changing, so perhaps he should have paid some more anyway. Even if he feels sure that he has committed no crime, he cannot defend himself against the policeman. To complain to the constable’s superior would not be much good in the face of the esprit de corps of the police. He can defend himself only by going to some other member of the literate class, a letter writer perhaps, or if the case is really serious, a lawyer, but has none of the skills necessary to choose a competent practitioner, and he may be so misunderstood that his real case is never put. Even if he has a good case and wins, it may not do him much good. All the policeman’s colleagues will know about it and sooner or later, of course, he will break a law. Much better give the policeman what he is asking for, or if he is not asking for anything, better give him something anyway so that when something does go wrong, he will be more likely to be nice about it. A man does not, says the Ashanti proverb, rub bottoms with a porcupine.

Consider for a moment a similar scene in, say, the prosperous county of Sussex. In Sussex the farmer would be as well if not better
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educated than the policeman, and will know those parts of the law which affect him better than does the policeman. The farmer may be himself a magistrate or a local government councillor, or know magistrates and councillors and perhaps the Chief Constable socially. For this policeman to demand money from this farmer for doing him a favour or not doing him a disfavour would be a laughable miscalculation.

This contrast may be overdrawn, but serves to make the point. The illiterate man entangled in the toils of a literate government is under a disadvantage for which practically nothing can compensate him, but wealth can help. Sometimes the West African farmer, in addition to his other disabilities, would be poorer than the policeman, though the pay of a police constable in West Africa is not high; but if he were a cocoa farmer, a rubber farmer, a coffee farmer, or not a farmer at all, but one of the large number of persons who, although illiterate, make more money than a police constable, then the temptation for the farmer to compensate himself for his lack of power and knowledge by use of his money becomes clear. Equally clear are the opportunities for an ill-paid policeman to turn his power over wealthy illiterates into a supplement to his pay. This exchange of wealth for power, and power for wealth, is, of course, the typical pattern of corruption.

The phenomenon of a literate government in an illiterate society arose in West Africa with the imposition of colonial rule, but it does not, of course, pass with the coming of independence. The independent governments in Nigeria and Ghana are quite as much committed to literate government as was the colonial regime, indeed, since independence, departments, officials, laws and regulations have multiplied at a great rate. The removal of this particular disharmony cannot be achieved by the abolition of literate government, but only by the abolition of illiteracy in the society.

(b) The Operation of the Law

My second example of persons and groups put under a disadvantage by official policy and thereby becoming a source of corruption is the operation of certain laws. All laws put certain persons under a disadvantage, i.e., those who do or wish to do what the laws forbid. Such persons are a source of corruption in every country. But laws differ:

- (i) in the extent to which public opinion supports them;
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(ii) in the case with which their breach can be detected;
(iii) in the profits to be made by breaking them.
(ii) and (iii), of course, stem to some extent from (i).
If a man tries to land an aeroplane in a suburban garden he will find:

(i) that all the neighbours are anxious to assist the police;
(ii) that his transgression has become instantly notorious;
(iii) that the financial rewards are not impressive.
If he tries to sell alcoholic drinks after hours he will find:

(i) that many members of the public will be very pleased;
(ii) that it can often be done without the police getting to hear of it;
(iii) that it is a source of financial profit.

Obviously, it is breaches of the law of the second sort which are most likely to be a source of corruption. Laws regulating gambling and drinking, for instance, usually have little general support from the population, will be broken by otherwise law-abiding citizens, are difficult to enforce, and frequently broken. They tend to bring all laws into disrepute, and, by the creation of a large class of persons vulnerable to legal action at the hands of the petty officers of the law, they encourage corruption. An extreme example of this type of law was, of course, prohibition in the United States. Post-war rationing in the United Kingdom had similar consequences, fortunately on a smaller scale, but will remind us that such laws are occasionally necessary whatever the price that must be paid for them.

Let us return for a moment to our Sussex policeman. Is there any group of people with whom his relations are similar to the relations of his West African confere with the West African farmer? The answer is Yes. There are, first of all, the professional criminals, those who habitually break the law. Such people he can harrass, and they find it very hard to strike back at him, however unjustly he may beset them. Criminals are a notorious source of corruption in any police force. Next, and perhaps more important, as they usually have more money than the criminal classes proper, are people who engage in trade and activities where the line between legality and illegality is so fine, and the regulations so complex, that they are always in danger of unwittingly committing an offence, nearly always being tempted to commit one, and can therefore plausibly be accused of an offence at almost any time. Notable examples are public-house keepers, bookmakers and motorists. Any
government must, and does, put some activities out of bounds; each
time it does so, however, it puts some of the population at a disad-
vantge and anxious to defend themselves by corrupting those whose
duty it is to enforce the laws.

For obvious historical reasons, these West African territories have
an unusually large number of laws which, by the criteria I have
suggested, are likely to give rise to corruption. A colonial regime,
especially one like the British, responsible to a representative govern-
ment in the metropolitan country, is bound, and indeed most people
in the metropolitan country regard it as duty bound, to frame
its laws with more regard to British than West African standards
of desirable behaviour. Particularly during the early years of colonial
rule, the colonial governments were more responsive to British than
to West African pressure groups. For instance, the abolition of
slavery was brought about by a popular agitation in Britain, but
brought the British Government’s representatives in West Africa
into conflict with powerful and traditionally respectable elements
of African society. Another example is the rules which arose from
the British Government’s adherence to the Geneva Convention res-
tricting the sale of spirits to the inhabitants of protectorates. These
may have been excellent, but did not spring from West African
conditions or West African demands, and were consequently a source
of conflict and alienation between rulers and ruled. The enforce-
ment of these laws was, of course, sporadic and uncertain, so lightly
were the territories administered and policed. Many of the diffi-
culties that might have arisen from the imposition of alien laws were
avoided by the sheer impossibility of enforcing them, and the wide
discretion given to District Officers to adjust the intentions of the
Statute Book to the realities of the local situation. But not all conflict
could be avoided. The Second World War, for instance, produced
a great many laws intended to regulate economic activity. Without
adequate means to enforce such regulation, and without any under-
standing by the population of why such regulation was desirable,
laws of this sort served mainly to corrupt the officers charged with
their enforcement. An excellent example is the Exchange Control
laws. Introduced during the war, when the Imperial Government
understandably required all sterling territories to have approximately
similar laws concerning the import and export of currency, etc., they
were practically unenforceable against the indigenous merchants who
crossed and recrossed the unpatrolled and often undefined land
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frontiers of West Africa. At the same time, 'smuggling' of currency was, and still is, profitable and completely devoid of any 'criminal' stigma; after all, the evasion of currency regulations was widely practised in the United Kingdom, where the population had much more reason to appreciate the need for them. Still, the law was there, and was, through honest zeal, malice, or with intent to extort, spasmodically enforced, so that many who regarded themselves as honest merchants were vulnerable to attacks from officers of the law, and under the necessity of buying them off. Trade across the frontier in West Africa is often extremely profitable, and these laws became a serious focus of corruption for enforcement officers. At some customs stations a pro rata tariff was extracted by the officials from those travellers who wished to import foreign currency, but were too lazy to walk through the bush with it.

Once again, this type of conflict between the government and society first arose with colonialism, but it does not disappear with the coming of independence. President Nkrumah's government, for instance, is more strongly committed to the transformation of Ghanaian society than the colonial regime ever was, and this transformation is bound to involve acute strains between the laws and the behaviour of the ordinary Ghanaians. This is particularly true, of course, of laws controlling economic behaviour in one way or another, inevitable when a government is committed to developing the country as rapidly as possible. High taxation, for instance, will enrol many normally honest people into the semi-criminal ranks of the tax evaders. Any form of direct control of rare resources has the same effect. No society can be transformed without laws that go against the interests and accepted behaviour of some people in it; these laws will set up the sort of conflicts which give rise to corruption. A wise government might be expected, while recognising this regrettable fact, to limit such laws to what it regards as absolute essentials. Such attractive possibilities as the prohibition of nudity, polygamy, or football pools might be thought to be unnecessary additions to the strains and frictions which will be imposed by a nationalist government's essential programme.

The Subjective Element

As I said earlier, there is a constant interaction between the willingness of officials to receive bribes and the willingness of the public to give them. It is part of the general conflict between the aims and
methods of the government and the society which is being governed that the subjective attitude of many officials in these countries should not be in harmony with their objective roles. The official role is not one indigenous to West Africa, but an import from another society where it has grown up flanked and buttressed by many attitudes and social forces missing in its new environment. Many West African officials have successfully adopted and internalised the qualities required for their role, but it is not surprising that many have not been completely successful. The West African official, subject to pressures of which his British colleague knows nothing, is caught and squeezed precisely at the point of conflict between the colonial (or post-colonial) government and the indigenous society. The British official in West Africa is an overseas projection of a well established and understood mode of metropolitan behaviour, protected by traditions of aloofness and difference, and the approval of those that matter most to him (other British officials) from the alien pressures of West African society. This subjective aspect of the question, the question of the individual morality, is of great importance, and I shall touch on it again when I discuss possible remedies for corruption.

High Level Corruption

I have so far been dealing mainly with corruption at the lower levels of the government, the level at which hundreds of petty officials enforce the laws on the general public. Corruption at a high level, corrupt behaviour by Cabinet Ministers, Judges, Ambassadors, presents different though related problems. A Cabinet Minister who accepts bribes is trading his power for money just as surely as is the police constable, but we are here moving out of the realm where sociological generalisation is necessarily useful. A Cabinet Minister may be corrupt in any society, but this may have much more to do with his individual circumstances than any generalisation that can be made about the society. Yet most informed people would agree that these West African territories are more troubled by corruption among Cabinet Ministers or their like than is, say, Denmark. This fact can be related to certain features of these societies.

(a) A climate of corruption in a society will affect Ministers as well as policemen, and, perhaps more important, will lead to public condonation of corruption by Cabinet Ministers. It is a most disconcerting feature of these societies that ordinary citizens will believe,
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and recount, the most fantastic stories, some of them palpably untrue, of corruption among their leaders, with no or very little sense of indignation. Even when official enquiries have disclosed instances of undoubted corruption, this has often had no effect on the political careers of the persons involved.

(b) Politicians in West Africa do not come from an established patrician class. Most of them are ‘new men’ and have therefore had no opportunity to develop standards different from the rest of society, such as can develop in a particular class or group, and are not personally wealthy (at the beginning of their careers at least). Elevation to Cabinet rank therefore presents them at once with new needs for money (see (c) below), and new opportunities for acquiring it by trading their power for the wealth of others.

(c) As Ministers in a British-type parliamentary regime, they are playing rôles not well suited to their own education or to the society in which they are expected to play them. I will give two examples:—

(i) The sharp distinction that has grown up in Britain between the purposes for which public funds can and cannot be used creates special difficulties in a West African context. In England in Henry VII’s day the King’s money was the King’s money, and was used for forwarding the interest of his government in every way. Subsequently there grew up a constitutionally important but by no means wholly logical distinction between those functions of the government on which public money could be spent, and those functions (e.g., the organisation of public support) for which politicians organising themselves in parties were expected to find finance elsewhere. In England, money for political parties is available from the large funds accumulated by businesses or Trade Unions, but in West Africa such sources are not available. As in most other parts of the world, standard subscriptions from ordinary party members are not sufficient to finance this important aspect of government. Governmental corruption, ‘kick-backs’ on profitable contracts, the sale of profitable or prestige-giving appointments, are an obvious source of party funds. A great deal of the corruption at ministerial level in West Africa is to be explained along these lines, and in these cases really amounts to a transfer of public funds from one type of political expenditure (i.e., legitimate by British criteria), to the other type, i.e., party political expenditure.

(ii) In Britain, the distinction between the official and private
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capacities of the holders of high office is widely understood and accepted. As a private person, a Minister of the Crown is not expected to be particularly hospitable or lavish in his hospitality. In West Africa, if a man holds high office, he is often expected to entertain his relations, tribesmen, political supporters, for such generosity may be a condition of continued political eminence.

(d) The desire for wealth, for whatever purpose, is reinforced in many cases by a sense of the impermanence of the new status. It is not easy for a man who has risen from poverty to eminence and riches in a few years, as many African leaders have done, to feel confident that the present affluence will continue. The widespread stories of secret bank accounts in Switzerland and other foreign countries are, if true, to be accounted for by the desire to hoard against possible lean years ahead.

The Function of Corruption

What is the social function of corruption in West Africa? Although damaging to official ideals and aims, it is clearly not a subversive or revolutionary phenomenon. It is rather an emollient, softening conflict and reducing friction. At a high level it throws a bridge between those who hold political power and those who control wealth, enabling the two classes, markedly apart during the initial stages of African nationalist governments, to assimilate each other. At the lower level it is not an attack on the government or its instruments by the groups discriminated against, but an attempt by them to reach an accommodation by which they accept their inferior status but avoid some of its consequences. In spite of the damage it does to a government and its policies, it may be of assistance in reducing resentments which might otherwise cause political difficulties. This useful role can be demonstrated by the semi-official recognition given by the British colonial regime to a practice which in the United Kingdom would be classified as corrupt—the acceptance of gifts from local chiefs by District Officers. This well-established, well-known, but never, for obvious reasons, officially recognized practice, grew from the traditional custom of presenting gifts to chiefs when approaching them with requests for favours. It was tolerated by the colonial regime, albeit in a limited form, because of its value for that regime. The colonial District Officer was, to most of the chiefs of his district, an unpredictable alien, wielding wide, undefined, powers according to incomprehensible criteria, whose arrival in the local
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rest house was often a cause of alarm. The courtesies of the offer and acceptance of gifts of eggs and chickens brought this alarming official some way into the chief's familiar world, threw some bridge across the gulf which separated the two men, and created a relationship in which the inevitable frictions were softened by a personal familiarity and a traditional context. This was, of course, of great value to the District Officer in doing his job, and was therefore tolerated by the colonial authorities. A similar softening of what might otherwise be an intolerable relationship between the official and the people he deals with can result from more heinous dealings. Indeed, the greater the corruption the greater the harmony between corruptor and corruptee.

Application and Development of the Argument

I cannot attempt a detailed application of my tentative thesis to other societies, but on a superficial view it seems to have much to recommend it. Countries such as the Scandinavian States, with a marked homogeneity of society, are, it is generally agreed, fairly free from corruption. The shortcomings in this respect of the U.S.A. can be related to its large immigrant populations and its second class races. The rôle of immigrants in the corruption of big city politics is a commonplace of American political science.\(^a\) The corruption in Spain, Portugal and some Middle Eastern countries might be explicable in terms of the wide divergence between the very wealthy classes, who have a considerable voice in government, and the general poor. Despotic and dictatorial government might be found to be more likely to produce and indeed to protect corruption than forms of government more responsible to the views of the ruled. A theoretically interesting limiting case is that of slavery. Slaves are a group under an extreme disability, with an obvious need to protect themselves. Under many forms of slavery, however, they have no money or other means to corrupt their overseers. The extreme degrees of disability therefore may not result in corruption, as they remove the means of protection. The optimum conditions for corruption, according to this theory, surround a group under a harsh disability but still possessed of considerable wealth—a Jewish money-lender in a 19th century Polish ghetto, for instance—a Negro bookmaker in an Arkansas town—a wealthy brothel-owner in London. These conclusions do not seem to be contradicted by what we know of the facts.
M. McMullan

Remedies for Corruption

Responsible leaders in West Africa often make statements denouncing the prevalence and the dangers of corruption and not infrequently launch campaigns to ‘root it out’.\textsuperscript{10} I am unaware of any such campaign which has had any lasting effect, or indeed has even led to many prosecutions. Various remedies from prayer to flogging have been suggested, but none has been seriously tried.

Draconian programmes for combating corruption are sometimes elaborated. These involve extremely heavy punishments together with a highly-trained, well-paid corps of\textit{ agents provocateurs}. The combination of the two is supposed to alarm all potential corruptors or corruptees so much that they are frightened ever to offer or accept a bribe for fear of being denounced. Unfortunately, such violent police pressure unsupported by public opinion would be quite likely to result in an\textit{ increase} of corruption and of blackmail. The\textit{ agents provocateurs} themselves would have to be members of the society in which they were operating and it is hard to imagine that such a job would attract persons whose integrity would be beyond doubt. Frequent change of personnel would be required so that large numbers of such\textit{ agents} would be needed, making it even more difficult to ensure a high standard. Their opportunities for blackmail would be immense, and it is easy to see that such a campaign could only lead to unpleasantness far outweighing any possible beneficial result.

Given the continued desire by the governments of the West African countries for rapid economic development and general modernisation, conflicts fruitful of corruption will continue and are indeed almost certain to increase so that no immediate improvement is at all likely. It will be a long time before the societies are remoulded and homogeneous with the government; even total literacy will take considerably more than a generation. Does this mean that there is nothing useful that can be done except to wait for the slow evolution of the society?

The answer is, I think, that a great many useful things can be done, but none which will have dramatically rapid results. To achieve anything at all, of course, the leadership of the country concerned must regard the problem as really important, and be prepared on occasion to sacrifice political advantage by, for instance, making an example of a corrupt Minister even though he has a
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politically useful following in the country. Given such leadership, and it cannot be taken for granted that it is always available, the following measures suggest themselves:

(a) Exemplary proceedings against Ministers or other important functionaries to publicise the government’s determination;

(b) A slight increase of police pressure against corruption at all levels;

(c) A fairly low-pitched but steady and continuous educational effort in schools, colleges, and in the newspapers, and by other means of publicity. Not just a short and violent campaign, but one continuing over years and becoming a normal part of all educational processes.

(d) Most important of all, a special effort with the public service. This is the most hopeful line of approach and might produce relatively quick results. If I am right about the effect that development and modernisation will have on these societies, there is no hope of removing the public servant’s opportunities for corruption. It may, however, be possible to train him not to take advantage of his opportunities. Small groups of people can be trained to have different standards in some respects from those of the generality of people, and in any society this is a normal feature of specialisation; each specialised group has special standards in respect of its own work. By educational pressure and disciplinary measures it should be possible to raise the standard of the public service. Such a policy could only succeed, however, if service conditions and salaries were good and the status of the service high.

(e) Careful scrutiny of existing and projected laws to eliminate those that tend to increase the opportunities for corruption unnecessarily.

It will be seen that I have not included in this programme any reference to religious or social emotions sweeping through the population. Such events are, however efficacious, not usually to be invoked by statesmen.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I should like to emphasise two points.

1. In the West African countries under consideration, the colonial regime is the obvious historical source of the conflict between the government and the society. It is not suggested that similar conflicts cannot arise without colonialism, or that colonialism is exceptionally
potent as a cause of corruption. There are countries which have never been colonies in the sense in which the word is used of West Africa, where corruption is much greater than it is in these countries. Moreover, as I have indicated, the succession regimes there are committed to a far more thoroughgoing programme of change than their colonial predecessors, so that the conflicts productive of corruption may be intensified after independence. Moreover, corruption under the colonial regime was limited by the presence of colonial service officials whose standards were those of the British public service. It is not yet certain how far an indigenous civil service can have the same effect.

2. Corruption is an evil, but the avoidance of corruption cannot be more than a subsidiary aim of government policy. If my thesis is correct, colonialism and the modernising westernising policy of succession governments give rise to corruption—but this, in itself, is not a condemnation of colonialism or a modernising policy. Governments must frequently act in ways which result in conflicts fruitful of corruption. The means of control, forced purchase and rationing necessary to deal with a local famine, for instance, are always productive of corruption, but no one would hesitate to pay this inevitable price when people are threatened with starvation. What one may, however, hope, is that a consciousness among policy makers that corruption is a phenomenon with causes that can be understood, will lead to a choice of methods designed to minimise corruption, and to an understanding of the need to strengthen factors working against it—the most important of which is the subjective integrity of the public service.

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2 E.g. President Nkrumah's announcement that the Ghana Government would set up a permanent Commission to investigate all forms of corruption and to receive complaints about it (Ghana Today, 22 June, 1960).

3 In England there are a large number of laws against corruption. The most comprehensive definition is that in Section 1(1) of the Prevention of Corruption Act 1906, which includes not only corruption by public officials, but also similar behaviour by any agent or employee. Of course the type of behaviour which is the subject of this paper is not in West Africa or anywhere else confined to public officials. Similar behaviour is common among the employees of private companies, educational institutions, etc.

4 I can claim no direct acquaintance with Hausa Histories or folk-tales but Hausa friends assure me that bribery is not uncommon theme or incident in them. It seems to figure much less in Akan legends and tales.

5 It is worth mentioning here that in many countries with a largely illiterate population the defence of the unlettered man against government officials is often an important function of political parties. Here the illiterate is buying protection in exchange for his vote or his general support for the party.

6 In West Africa lorry drivers are always complaining about extortion by the police. It is often alleged that the police on road patrol simply collect a toll from all passing lorry drivers. If the driver refuses to pay it is, of course, never difficult for the police to accuse them of some driving offence or to find some detail of their lorry that does not conform to the, inevitably, complex regulations.

7 The allocation of Market Stalls by Local Government Councils in West Africa is a regular cause of scandals. The trouble is that these exceedingly valuable properties are usually let at rents greatly below what they are worth. The difference inevitably transforms itself into bribes. The simple device of charging as much rent as the traders would be prepared to pay does not, perhaps understandably, commend itself to the Councillors and officials.

8 See Chinua Achebe's novel No Longer at Ease, William Heinemann Ltd. 1960, for an excellent description of these problems.

9 The classic statement is, of course, in Lincoln Steffens' The Shame of the Cities and his autobiography.

10 After this paper was written, President Nkrumah announced (see Sunday Times of April 19th, 1961, for a report by Mary Dorkenoo) new measures directed particularly against corruption among M.P.'s and party officials. The tone of the announcement would seem to indicate that this new campaign will be conducted with some vigour.

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