The Extent and Nature of Political Knowledge in a Sierra Leone Town

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MANY WRITERS (Wallerstein, 1961; Coleman, 1960; Coleman and Rosberg, 1964) have noted that the primary problem of political integration in the African nations today is that of transferring loyalties from traditionally based structures to a constitutionally based structure, the nation-state. The resolution of the problem of national integration depends in part upon the development of communication systems that transcend and connect the traditionally based structures and that subsequently disseminate political knowledge. In this brief study I present data from a simple poll conducted in 1963 in the Sierra Leone town of Magburaka. The poll was designed to probe how much and what kinds of political knowledge were possessed by both literates and non-literate. The results of the poll are interpreted in the light of the possible sources of news available to those who can and those who cannot understand and/or read English.

Public Opinion and Communication

The mass communication media are relatively weak and sometimes absent in Africa, yet African governments recognize the need to develop communication systems (Coltart, 1963). Each party in power acknowledges the need for communication within the party and between the party and the population. Knowledge of government plans and a rationale for them must be conveyed to the people in spite of language difficulties, the high rate of illiteracy and the cost. There is evidence that knowledge of the plans and personnel of government has not been as widely disseminated as some African leaders have hoped, but as Basil Davidson (1964: 16) has noted in a recent book:

Many are still outside the debate. But those who have remained outside, in surviving

1 It is recognized that there is an integration problem with respect to urban migrants as well as villagers.
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isolation, are many fewer than ten years ago, fewer still than five years ago, fewer again than one year ago.

Public opinion does exist in Africa and African leadership is in varying degrees responsive to it. In general, however, the observation of Jones-Quartey (1963: 147) is still true: "... for the present public opinion tends to come into operation mostly as a compelled, or at least induced, endorsement of action already taken, rather than as a guide to action before it is taken or as a sanction against action after it has been taken."

Yet what is the nature and composition of the public whose opinion is referred to by Jones-Quartey? What has been called the elite-mass gap (Coleman and Rosberg, 1964: 686), namely "... the gap between the modernizing political elite and the traditional mass," is apparent to all with experience in Africa (Pye, 1956). It is evident that most parties in power in Africa attempt to bridge this gap in a number of ways since they see the intrinsic danger in the lack of such integration. Hunter (1962: 305) has put this fear most succinctly:

In the colonial era, it often seemed that the focus of trouble was in the towns, where politics ran high, and the focus of progress in the country. It would be well to consider whether this may not now be reversed; that while the new ministers rule confidently in the capital city, trouble may begin to stir far out in the bush.

Mass Communication Media in Anglophone West Africa

Throughout the period of agitation for independence, African leaders railed against colonial governments through the nationalist press. In self-defense the colonial governments expanded their public relations departments and information services to meet the nationalists' propaganda attacks and to explain and gain support for government's actions. This situation greatly stimulated the development and expansion of the mass communication media. When they had achieved power, the nationalist leaders were quick to appreciate the utility of mass communication. Wallerstein (1961: 19) has observed: "... everywhere in independent Africa we see an immediate creation or expansion of the government information service, of a radio station, of official newspapers."

Although a few wealthy and educated West Africans had previously owned wireless receiving sets, radio became important only with the introduction of the "rediffusion relay service." Sir Arnold Hodson, who served as Governor of Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast, was responsible for introduction the radio rediffusion service and it was subsequently adopted in Nigeria, Gambia and elsewhere. Recent growth in broadcasting facilities has been impressive, but Hartland (1961: 194) has estimated that "... radio in sub-Saharan Africa still reaches only a little over 17 million out of a population of 175 million or roughly 10 percent." By 1959, Radio Ghana, a national institution since 1954, estimated (Jones-Quartey, 1963: 157) that wireless sets plus the relay service receivers were reaching roughly 750,000 people. Jones-Quartey also observed that Radio Ghana had a strong local bias, a situation that prevailed as well in Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Subsequently, this local emphasis has become less pronounced.