Political Hygiene and Cultural Transition in Africa

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PAUL F. KRESS (1966: 3) has argued that political science and creative literature are, on some level, comparable—"at least in that they are two symbol systems, each possessing some coherent arrangement of internal characteristics, and consequently certain possibilities and limitations."

Kress also draws our attention to Murray Edelman's work. Edelman (1964: 11) has argued: "We may be able to learn something about expressive political symbols from aesthetic theory, for an art form consists of condensation symbols. Its function, like that of the abstract political symbols discussed here, is to serve as a vehicle for expression..."

The crucial idea here is that of "condensation symbols"—symbols which try to capture and condense a world of implications and associations. Like creative literature, political analysis has to resort at times to the use of analogy and metaphor. The strength of metaphor lies in its transphenomenal comparative utility. It brings forth the associations of one category of life to illuminate a different area of observation. In that lies the validation of our concept of political hygiene.¹

Political hygiene is a process by which politics as an activity is kept clean. Techniques and devices are evolved by which politics is purged of some of the less savoury aspects of intrigue, plotting and mud-slinging. When a developed state insists that a candidate for election to a public office ought to publicize his expenses in the campaign, or when a law of that state insists that the successful candidate should resign critical directorships in certain business firms,

¹ I first used the concept in my article "Tanzaphilia", Transition (Kampala), No. 31, June/July 1967, esp. pp. 21-22. In this article I am, in part, elaborating on some of the ideas which were touched upon in "Tanzaphilia". The use of analogy in political science is now all pervasive. Eastonian political science, for example, heavily relies on metaphors like "in-put", "out-put", "para-political", "feedback", etc. And among modernization theorists in political science neologisms like "political culture", "political socialization", "political goods", "political decay" have been creatively utilized.
or renounce certain compromising commercial positions, the law of that state is involved in a quest for political hygiene.

In Africa the problem of achieving hygienic conditions for political life are compounded by the mutability of values, the foreignness of some of the inherited political institutions, and a general fluidity of the infra-structure for national politics. The whole phenomenon of corruption, conspicuous consumption and perversion of governmental procedures has its roots in the ideological flux and institutional fluidity which characterize the transition from tribal traditionality to the complexities of modern political intercourse.

**Corruption and Culture**

A major problem for the whole process of political hygiene is simply the phenomenon of cultural transition. Politics in Africa are sometimes hard to keep clean merely because people are moving from one set of values to another. In no other area of life is this better illustrated than in the whole issue of tribal solidarity and kinship obligations. Pressures are exerted on an African official or politician to remind him of those who share his ultimate social womb. Even an African academic is sometimes subjected to this kind of pressure. Parents from his area or from his clan enquire on how best the well-placed academic might help his kinsman to gain admission into his university. African Vice-Chancellors have also been known to undergo agonizing pressures to get them to help in appointing members of their own tribe to positions of authority and earning power within the universities that they head.

The ordinary people who exert these pressures on them are often oblivious of any moral question involved. It had, after all, always been understood that God helped those who helped their relatives. It was therefore right that a prospective Ibo porter should look up to an established Ibo official for appointment, or that a young Yoruba graduate should look to a more highly placed Yoruba man for promotion. Before a clash of values entered the lives of these Nigerians, there might have been no moral dilemmas involved in such issues. But when a concept of parity among nationals entered the scene, and the idea of rational merit became a criterion for the award of benefits, a clash was inevitable between these new values and the old commitments to tribal solidarity. Nepotism in Africa is often a symbol of cultures in transition. The man on the scholarship committee who is supposed to distribute overseas scholarships on the basis of merit finds himself pulled by the demands of a sub-patriotism. The office of awarding scholarships has emerged from the new culture. The sub-patriotic loyalties towards kinsmen is a residuum of the old culture. Political hygiene becomes more difficult to attain precisely because of this transitionality.

But nepotism is not the only form of corruption that has links with older traditions. Even sheer bribery, or the accepting of a gift in return for an official favour from a position of authority, can be a cultural residuum. Chinua Achebe