

De-Institutionalising, African Style

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Some time ago, a television programme dealt with the state of affairs in Uganda—a country that has gripped the news media for a long time. It gave the impression that the army and police were instrumental in the horrors perpetrated against the population. The police and army were set up in Uganda, as in other countries, by the colonial powers to defend the population from violence and crime at home, and aggression from outside the country's boundaries. In so doing, the colonial powers transplanted their own institution of social control.

What was intended to help the local population has become in fact in Uganda, for example, an institution of violence, aggression, crime and exploitation of the very people it was supposed to protect. Hopefully, Uganda is an extreme case but it is not the only country in Africa where governments act in a like manner. Thus one of our western institutions, established for the good of the community has become quite the opposite of what was really intended.

The army and police are not in fact the only ones to have gone this way. Throughout the years that I spent living and working in the rural areas of East Africa, I constantly came into contact with doctors, nurses and other members of the medical profession working in hospitals and clinics run by the Government or the missions. One constantly heard the same story from doctor or nurse, man or woman, black or white, government or mission employed that they were frustrated. Desperately sick patients would be brought to them only to die after a short period in hospital. "If only they had been brought in sooner, we could have saved the patient so easily!" was the cry of anguish one so often heard. At other times one heard of patients brought to hospital whose original condition although not too serious, had been fatally aggravated by the remedies and ministrations of the local medicine man.

However, to be honest, one also heard from the patients equally horrific stories of the treatment—or lack of it—that they had to endure, such as bribing the staff to give them the medicines that had been prescribed for them.

Again, we have the same thing as above, the western institution of medical care, life saving or life healing were gradually, al-

most inexorably turned in the minds of the people into death centres. One went to hospital to die, and the sicker one went to hospital the more likely they were to die, the more they died, the more the hospital came to be seen as a place that one went to die; the more one did not want to go, the sicker one became and so on.

Not only did we impose our own institutions and ideals of health care, but we even gave them our own version of a "free" health service. As this service lurches from one financial crisis to another in this relatively wealthy country, we have obliged many of the countries of the Third World to become international medical beggars depending on drug handouts from UNICEF, WHO, or pay exorbitant prices to the multi-national pharmaceutical companies.¹

One of the first of our institutions to go by the board was, of course, the political. Throughout the late fifties and early sixties, the liturgies of Independence were re-enacted up and down the length and breadth of Africa. Within days, months or at the very most, a couple of years, the ideal of western 'democracy' became a victim of power hungry demagogues who imposed one-party states, or simply did away with parties altogether. In place of elections we had coups and assassinations. Instead of open and frank discussion in parliaments modelled on London, Paris or Brussels, we now had empty monuments or sycophantic echoes of their leaders' speeches.

In education, a similar state of affairs exists. The formal educational system so lovingly put together at such great expense in time, money and personnel was the chief hope for a speedy development of the country from traditional to modern life. It has, in fact, become an elitist system, benefiting a few, biassed in favour of the male population, the wealthy, the privileged and those in the urban areas. It is wasteful with large enrolments at the bottom and empty places at the top. As each step of the educational ladder is geared to the next step up, primary as a preparation for secondary, secondary for tertiary, and in this way alienating its clients from their background, creating hopes and aspirations which it cannot fulfil, and once you have entered the educational rat race, any return to the parents' background is a sign of failure. It is, in fact, irrelevant to the real needs of the rural areas. The better teachers flock to the town, and in the secondary system there is too great a dependence on expatriates. It completely bypasses the masses of illiterate adults and those who never had a chance to go to school, and this constitutes a growing majority in

¹ The makers of Valium were accused of making up to 6,000% profit on the sales of certain drugs in South America. A Kenyan minister of health was encouraged into buying bulk supplies of Penicillin so that much of it would be out of date before it could even be used.

these countries. Attempts are made to reform its internal efficiency, and adapt it to the needs of the country, but nothing is done to create an educational system that is universal and relevant.

The civil service is appalling as anyone who has tried to apply for a work permit to enter an African country can testify. The red-tape that is proverbially part and parcel of any bureaucracy in any part of the world becomes a noose round the neck of the African civil servant, and a source of frustration and despair for the poor client. Inefficiency, graft and corruption are the order of the day. Documents are lost, your passport is used to prop up a shaky table, right documents are issued to the wrong people, and wrong documents to the right people, and everything has to be completed in duplicate, triplicate and God knows what else. The civil service becomes the country's biggest employer, as papers and documents are handed from one man to another.

The European civil servant with his usual *savoir faire* desirous to help a client, can often cut a path through red-tape, find exceptions to the rules, but for the African this is not possible. More likely than not, the colonial administration has left behind its procedure so complex and convoluted that only strict adherence to the rules and regulations will help him wade his way through the civil service minutiae. Meanwhile other things are considered more important than sitting in offices. Births, deaths and marriages of close or distant relatives have to be attended. In efforts to speed things up, get them done, win favours, the universal bribe makes its presence felt. In countries where there is more than one language, and the *lingua franca* is a European language, declining standards in school cause a declining command of that language, further slowing down the pace.

I have heard many a visitor to an African capital city admiring the towering buildings around them, not realising that the traffic lights do not work. The cities, the commercial, administrative and diplomatic centres of their countries are ringed around with fetid slums. Violence and crime are rife. After dark, the streets are deserted. Cities with sewage systems designed for ten thousand people, have now to cope with a million city dwellers. At one time, the cities were meant to be well-planned, well-built centres which would radiate development around them. Now they absorb most of the country's wealth simply to keep them from declining too rapidly.

All of this would seem to be a perfect advertisement for the "National Front" or a racist diatribe by an Afrophobe. It would appear to give credence to those who say "I told you so" or again those who say "we gave them Independence before they were ready for it", and who maintain that all that has happened is that Africans have ruined the beautiful institutions that they inherited from the West. Nothing could be more contrary to the truth.

The colonial countries of Europe came to Africa and divided it up into zones of influence among themselves. Instead of researching into existing institutions, and building upon them, they set about transplanting their very own, presuming that such primitive people had nothing to offer. It was in fact a humanitarian gesture, and most of those carrying out such policies were sincere people believing that they were doing the best possible thing in the circumstances. Traditional society did not have specialist institutions. It was not so fragmented as western society was beginning to fragment itself, but things like health and education, administration and politics were integrated into an organic whole. The same person could play a number of diverse roles in society: father, farmer, builder, educator, hunter, priest, administrator, warrior. Social controls did not need a special institution for the village network held violent tendencies in check. Few if any countries or tribes had standing armies or police forces.

We have outlined the result above, a dual society, almost a hybrid one, with the traditional and the modern coexisting not just side by side, but inside the same person and community. Speech, thought and act are mixtures of the two. Modernisation is at best a veneer. Our institutions demand certain attitudes of mind and values that society impresses upon us over generations. They also demand a number of like-minded people. More likely than not, we have neither Africans nor Europeans but a mixture of the two.

The present tensions are therefore inevitable as these institutions go through a period of radical adaptation to the real needs of the community. What we are witnessing is more likely such a painful process of adaptation rather than a mindless destruction of all that we hold sacred. Before the skills, attitudes and values necessary to manage modern institutions efficiently are acquired, it may be necessary for the institutions to be adapted to an intermediate stage in keeping with the level of skill that has been acquired.

How they will grow after that is problematic as there are so many tensions at work. It would be utopian to imagine that the countries of Africa will be left to themselves to find their own feet. The cold war seems to have shifted from Europe to Africa. Although the gross blackmail of the sixties when the west and the east vied to give aid to African countries appears to be over, the jockeying for influence still goes on and for a while the communist ideal seems to have been in the ascendant. A newer and more horrifying development aid seems to be taking over, the race to give a number of African countries as much as they can handle in the way of arms and ammunition. The various countries in the west, in the usual capitalist struggle are vying with the Communists to encourage military development.

The appeal of communism to the countries of Black Africa is extremely strange. The Western leaders continually point out, as

they did once more at the meeting in 1977 of the EEC heads of state conference in London in May, that they give far more aid than the communist countries, and called on these latter to give as much as they themselves are giving. In spite of this, they appear to be losing the ideological battle, and appear to have little to offer. On the contrary, the more they seem to give, the less their ideology is acceptable. At this same meeting, the economic traumas of the west preoccupied them so much that they were only able to devote minutes to a discussion placed on the agenda during which they were to consider the plight of the poor countries. Perhaps the sop of a few billion dollars worth more of economic aid was expected to make good this deficiency.

But even the choice of socialist mentor is strange. Industrial Russia appears to have more appeal than rural China. One would have expected that the thought of Mao based on the needs of the rural masses would have attracted the African leaders more than that of Lenin whose revolution was based on the workers and the industrialised state, particularly as Africa is more than three quarters rural.

However, it should be remembered that coupled with western aid goes the realisation of western exploitation in the past, of western exploitation of natural resources in the present, and control over development. Furthermore, the west has been ready to put up with any fascist regime provided it was anti-communist. President Carter's address at Notre Dame earlier this year will have to be matched with a policy and action. It is not enough to say one will change such a policy. One has to be seen to do it; and living as we are in an increasingly conservative age, one cannot help having certain doubts.

The communists may well be ruthless at home, as the Gulag appears to inform us but abroad in the Third World they present a far more benign appearance. They can capitalise on the fact that they were not colonialists in Africa, and struggled to overthrow an unjust regime without aid from outside. They can also play on the fact that they do not appear to have ties with South Africa. The capitalist countries appear on the face of it more generous with their aid but this goes hand in hand with an experience of exploitation in the past, and a suspicion of the same in the present. The fact that aid has had so many conditions attached to it that the donor has profited from it more than the recipient.

Probably, and this is only conjecture, this struggle will go the same way as the other institutions have gone. The needs of the masses in the rural areas, who constitute at times more than ninety-five per cent of the population, (notably in Tanzania and Zambia) will have influenced the more enlightened leaders as the realisation dawns that exploitation is not the monopoly of the capitalist west.