

# **CORRUPTION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

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Ronald Wraith and Edgar Simpkins

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DEVELOPMENT



# Corruption in Developing Countries



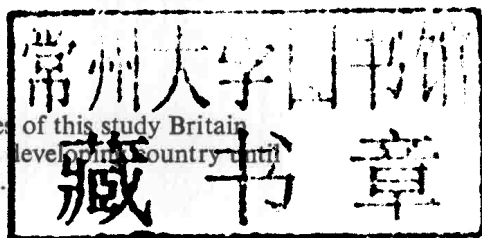
RONALD WRAITH

AND

EDGAR SIMPKINS

*Note*

For the purposes of this study Britain  
is regarded as a developing country until  
about the 1880s.



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**RONALD WRAITH**  
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**EDGAR SIMPKINS**

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# PART ONE

## AFRICA, TWENTIETH CENTURY

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### Foreword



The first part of this book is largely about Nigeria, at any rate so far as practical examples are concerned. This, however, is both accidental and incidental. The only reason why Nigeria figures so prominently is that it is the country, outside Britain, where the authors have lived longest, and they think it is better to write of what they know than of what they have heard at second hand. There are, however, ample reasons for thinking that the actual situations described can be paralleled elsewhere. The authors have indeed come across them in other parts of Africa, but not having this book in mind at the time they failed to document them. They have also heard them discussed by students and civil servants from almost all the underdeveloped countries of the English-speaking world, and it is a fair supposition that the problems are universal.

The book is an attempt by two collaborators to examine a social situation sympathetically. The bulk of it will be a discussion of bribery and corruption in Britain. Its most significant aspect will be an attempt to explore ground which the authors think has not been adequately explored before—what were the factors which led Britain, a country as corrupt as any, to achieve in a particular century a standard of public integrity which is perhaps without precedent. Perhaps even more important, can any threads be traced in the pattern which are meaningful for Britain's former African and Asian dependencies?

It is hardly necessary to apologize to Nigerian readers for citing examples from their country, since the best elements in Nigerian society, at all levels, are themselves the most forthright critics of corruption there; and nothing is written in the relevant chapters which is not already public knowledge from newspapers or official reports.

Nevertheless, the authors wish to repeat with emphasis that the first part of the book is only incidentally about Nigeria, or indeed West Africa.



## CHAPTER 1

# The Problem



Throughout the fabric of public life in newly independent States runs the scarlet thread of bribery and corruption. This is admitted by everybody; very little can ever be proved about it.

The reaction of the educated citizens of these countries to this state of affairs is that of any other people; they are angry, ashamed, indifferent, cynical according to their different temperaments. What distinguishes them from people who live in a more fortunate atmosphere is that circumstances force even the angry and ashamed into a resigned apathy. Those who have tried to live as moral men in an amoral society have generally given way sooner or later under agonizing pressures; the pressure of legitimate ambition which can only be achieved by illegitimate means; the pressure from families, insatiable for help; the slow, insidious pressures of a society in which material success is adulated (even by the standards of the twentieth century), and where moreover material failure is ruthlessly mocked; the pressure of increasing defeatism, on realizing that public opinion stigmatizes the transgressor so lightly, and that so little seems to be gained from trying to swim against the tide. This is the general picture. Within it, some go on trying, a few with rare persistence; corporately they achieve little, since most of them are teachers or civil servants, firmly enmeshed in the system which they want to destroy, and silenced by the terms of their official employment.

The reactions of foreigners to the situation vary from shocked horror to wonderment as to what the fuss is all about. Visitors from several nations, including members of the Commonwealth, have expressed surprise to the writer that matters in West Africa where the writer lives should be considered serious, let alone scandalous, and have justified their attitude by stories of official peculation in their own countries which are certainly impressive in terms of the eminence of the people involved, and the size of the sums of money which change hands. But some of these examples are from business rather than public life (though it is the cross-fertilization of the two which offers the richest spoils) and occasional picturesque financial buccaneering, even when the public sector is involved, is less soul-destroying in itself than in combination with the pervasive, petty

corruption of the poor and the quiet, cynical corruption of the influential; both of which tend to be common, not remarkable, in newly independent countries.

Some are naïvely shocked, but these become fewer, since standards elsewhere are not such as to make bribery and corruption a matter for surprise, and those who actually live in these countries have little alternative but to adjust to the prevailing atmosphere. Others, including some in the lower and middle ranks of the commercial world, give way to it without much of a struggle, since they must adapt or go under to less scrupulous competitors.

But aside from those who are too worldly-wise to be of any help in tackling the disease, or who are not sufficiently worldly-wise to live in such countries and be at peace, there are foreigners, and specifically British ones, who adopt an attitude which they believe to be both balanced and benevolent, and which they base upon their knowledge of British history. This has made them immune from shock, while not eroding their belief in public virtue as an attainable ideal.

Briefly, their argument is that the matters of complaint—the sale of office, the buying of votes, the rake-off on the contract, and the many subtle elaborations of these—can all be paralleled in the history of the British people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; that their influence survives into the twentieth; and that they are worse today than they were twenty years ago.

The fact that all these statements are correct does not, however, dispose of the matter satisfactorily.

In the first place, it is the boast of these countries that they are telescoping the centuries. The greatest solecism that the European can commit is to say that in Europe a certain phase of development took 500 years, or the 2,000 years of the Christian era. What Britain did in 500 years Africans in particular are determined to do in fifty. This is legitimate; what is not legitimate is to be selective—to say that for certain purposes Africa will move at ten times the pace of her former guardians in education, the right to vote, parliamentary democracy and technological progress, but reserves the right to travel at a more convenient pace in public honesty.

Secondly, there was never a time in the history of corruption in the public life of Britain when there were not powerful forces fighting against it. In the end these won, and for half a century public integrity was as high as any outside the aboriginal tribe, where corruption does not exist because there are no temptations. These forces have lost some ground of recent years, but the integrity of statesmen, civil servants, the police, and the councillors and staffs of local authorities is still impressively high. In Africa corruption flourishes as luxuriantly as the bush and the weeds which it so much resembles, taking the goodness from the soil and suffocating the



growth of plants which have been carefully, and expensively, bred and tended. The forces ranged against it are negligible; not negligible in fire or indignation or idealism, but quite simply negligible in weight. The calm and balanced attitude, which is held by those who live in Britain rather than in new countries themselves, is, to say the least, inadequate. It assumes that the situations in modern Africa and nineteenth century Britain are comparable, which is untrue. It amounts to little more than drifting and hoping for the best, in the comforting belief that given a free hand Africans today will behave like Englishmen a century ago. Paradoxically it is the same critics who tend to mock the idea that Africans should do this in any other field of social development.

Thirdly, in the century or so of struggle between corruption and its foes Britain was a wealthy country, even if her wealth was ill-distributed, and the supply of able and educated men from her privileged class was sufficient to keep her in the forefront of the nations. Many of these men were corrupt, and their inherited wealth did not make them less so; but others, as public conscience grew, helped to shape and lend it by the fortunate accident of their own wealth and culture. The new African countries are poor, and are trying to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The public men on whom wealth has descended in a sudden and unimaginable torrent are not heirs to a tradition of comfortable bank balances and public responsibility; they are *nouveaux riches* tycoons of public administration. Those who happened to be in the right place at the right time were not all of them cultivated, educated or upright men. They are not to be compared with the men on whom public responsibility descended, in Cabinet, civil service or town hall, in the rising tide of Victorian prosperity in Britain.

Above all, young men from the secondary schools and universities who enter the public service do not see a clear road ahead, along which they will travel as far as their abilities will take them, in the knowledge that merit will be rewarded and integrity will be their greatest asset. They see a jungle of nepotism and temptation through which they must hack their way unaided. The greatest imponderable asset which these countries possess, in the field of public service, is the enthusiasm of young men. That this enthusiasm should turn to cynicism not only in their own formative years but those of their country, is a dangerous and tragic situation.

The study is limited to Britain and a few countries which grew to statehood under British tutelage. The study of corruption in the Near East, in Asia, in Latin America, in America itself would no doubt be fascinating, if unedifying. No one doubts that luxurious and exotic blooms flourish in those jungles. The next few chapters are simply about what used to be called 'British Africa'.