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THE 'PERSONAL ENEMY' IN AFRICAN POLITICS

EDWIN ARDENER

(with an introduction by David Zeitlyn)

Introduction

THE text that follows comprises the abstract of a paper presented to the 1964 annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Section N) on 31 August 1964. Sadly the full paper is lost. It has not been published before and is now a document of considerable historical interest. It is published here with the kind permission of Mrs Shirley Ardener. Only minor editorial changes have been made.

'The "Personal Enemy" in African Politics' was written early in the period of independence of the once colonial African states, before any of the subsequent coups, civil wars and other bloody events that now affect our views of Africa. Yet it is an ironic tribute to Ardener's analysis that it makes somewhat depressing reading. For little has changed: the litany of reports on the radio and in our newspapers continues along the lines he describes here. Scandal rocks the government in Zimbabwe, suggestions of assassination and worse haunt ministers in Kenya.

Within anthropology, much has been done to explore the different African idioms and metaphors that frame discussions of politics in its local context. But despite such path-making work as that of Horton (1967), or more recently Werbner (1979) and Hallen and Sodipo (1986), which connect concepts of religion, personhood and politics, the link has not been made to a wider political domain as the term is usually understood in discussions of Europe or North America. It

is therefore to be hoped that Ardener's paper may stimulate further discussions between anthropologists and political scientists.

It is timely to publish this paper now because the changes that Ardener signals have begun to occur. A comparison between the bibliographies of two important works by Jean-François Bayart, the most eminent political scientist to study Cameroon, reveals a remarkable change between 1979 and 1989. More anthropologists are cited in the latter work, and they are cited alongside 'orthodox' political scientists. I am sure that Ardener would have approved this widening of the perspective.

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POLITICAL commentators of the weekly journal variety find themselves out of their depth when commenting on the personalities of African politics. More words have been eaten on the subjects of Presidents Nkrumah, Sekou Touré and Tshombe (to name only three) than will bear computation. The sight of the last of these embracing his bitter enemy Antoine Gizenga was the *coup de grâce* for many naïve observers. In similar quarters, the trend to one-party systems has been deplored, or as unthinkingly praised, while vociferous opposition within the *parti unique* has been unnoticed or misunderstood. In one African country, civil servants expelled from their employment for alleged political activities drink at the elbows of their former ministerial masters, in the same club, in apparent amicability. In another, soldiers apologize to the victims of an unconsidered assault. The nature of opposition and conflict and the conclusions to be drawn from them are simply of different kinds from those current in the West. The ethnocentricity of political observers is very marked, a result perhaps of their living in an essentially paper world of manifestos and the press. Faced with African situations, commentary tends to fall into a tedious rehearsal of cold-war clichés on the one hand, alternating with shock and bafflement on the other—especially from self-styled 'friends of Africa' who find it difficult to find a suitable political

bandwagon that will not turn round in its tracks, leaving them embarrassingly facing the wrong direction. Their Eastern counterparts have already coined the term 'tropicalism' to account for their own difficulties.

The African field anywhere, then, provides us with examples of the need to work with an adequate theory of conflict and opposition. I come now to a simple statement of the sort of direction in which, in my opinion, comprehension lies. Taken as formal systems, traditional and modern African political activity appear completely different in kind. On the one hand, we have those systems amply documented in standard works written or edited by Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Middleton and Tait, as well as in more recent studies. Among the latter, one by the president of this section, Professor Lucy Mair (1962), is easily available to the general reader. Such systems, as is well known, range from complex balances of forces operating through families, lineages and clans, to simple systems of hierarchical authority headed by chiefs. On the other hand, we are today presented with a great number of modern state forms—with presidential and parliamentary arrangements, political parties, elections, and the like—which appear to be the image of such systems outside Africa. There has been no formal transition between the old systems and the new. Whatever 'social change' is, there can surely be no more critical case of it than this! The supposition of such a sudden change was reflected in the movement of the study of African politics from social anthropologists to 'political scientists'—whatever is precisely meant by that term—with the results that we have seen: the spectacle of shock, bafflement and the rest, and the departure of the first naïve theorists from the field.

The fault has lain in the misconception of what political systems involve: such sudden 'social changes' are illusory, the exchange of one card house for another. The continuity lies in the forces of 'change' themselves: those conflicts and oppositions that are (as we have already suggested) not transition phenomena, but the essential material of social behaviour, of which formal systems are (we may go so far as to say) merely the epiphenomena. More precisely, they are attempts to describe parts of the pattern of opposition. Perhaps the formulations describe only part of the patterns: the patterns are not thereby abolished. They remain the primary analytical units of political study.

In turning to African politics, therefore, we may ignore both the traditional systems and the modern systems *as such.* The bases of opposition and competition may be sought for and found in various places. I have selected only one for this paper: the concept of the personal enemy. To members of this gathering it will perhaps be unusual to think in terms of your enemies. Even individuals who are in positions of potential conflict do not necessarily become conscious of personal enmities. In modern urban societies the situation is, in Simmel's words, 'comparable to the bottom of a ship which is composed of many watertight compartments—if it is damaged, the water can still not penetrate all of it. Here the social principle is thus a certain separation of the colliding parties' (Simmel 1955: 66). Such a separation did not exist in traditional African systems, and even today such a separation is only partially achieved. Indeed it is only partially

desired, for the well-known African respect for humanity is an expression of a tendency to retain rather than to minimize direct personal contacts.

In those African societies with which I am familiar, conflict is clearly personalized. In traditional circumstances no one is too poor or insignificant to lack 'enemies'. Very often these enemies are indicated by their positions in the social structure. In one society I know, men live in suspicion and fear of the families of their fathers' brothers—for these 'wicked uncles' inherit their brother's lands and property should his sons all die. The uncles are believed to hate the sons, and to wish to bring about their deaths by witchcraft. In another society men do not build near their own half-brothers for similar reasons. In Central Africa, says Gluckman (1956: 51):

> the village headman in most tribes is the centre of a constant struggle, both in terms of backbiting and intrigue, and of a war in the mystical world. For he is believed to attain his position and maintain it by using witchcraft against his rivals; and he himself constantly suspects that he is the target of the envious witchcraft of his rivals, and of those whom he has rebuked.

Gluckman gives the telling example of the Zambian headman who kept tapping an ulcer on his face and saying: 'it is the government, it is the government, it is the government'—meaning that because of his position under the government, he had been bewitched with the ulcer. Other enmities have a historical origin, but when they exist they may be perpetuated down the generations: when things go well in the family the 'enemies' are thought to be discomfited, when the family suffers injury or loss the 'enemies' are thought to be laughing or, and here we come to the core of the matter, even to have caused the misfortune.

It should not be thought that politicians operate outside this web. On the contrary, it is their business to utilize it and to understand it. They are also part of it. In the former British Trusteeship of Cameroon the early political movement was split between a KNC (Kamerun National Congress) majority and a KPP (Kamerun People's Party) minority. Their leaders came from the same village—a village ridden by sectional rivalries partly originating in an old conflict from the time of the imposition of German rule. In this village the KNC had a majority. Outside it the KPP dominated another village that had long been in rivalry with the first. Within the second village, however, the personal enemies of the KPP majority supported the KNC. This pattern replicated itself in fascinating detail throughout the area of the ethnic group concerned. The extension of the pattern beyond the ethnic group to the country at large followed similar principles. The rise of yet another party (the KNDP or Kamerun National Democratic Party) in another ethnic area, and its subsequent spread, again followed this pattern. Of course, at all stages in political party growth sectional rivalries of wider range, the so-called 'tribalism' or 'regionalism', were mobilized—so much is now recognized even by political commentators. These terms, however, are misleading. If they represented realities of the first level of analysis, the ethnic map would never fail

to represent the political map. African politicians know that the problem is more fundamental.

A man begins his life with enemies; as he succeeds, they grow in number. A politician, like anyone else, carries his own opposition. The complex of political parties runs down to individuals, in opposition to others in relations of enmity and rivalry. The electorate perceives opposition in this sense. As a result there need be no theoretical end to the formation of parties: no end to the crossings of the carpet, no end to the shifting permutations of alliance and treachery. The revival or stimulation of one enmity may move the whole structure. Some of you may say that something of this sort underlies all political systems. Yes, indeed, that is one of the points of this paper. But with African systems as at present constituted we have the additional feature of the personalization of enmities. There is no doubt that at the lower party levels, and among the more unsophisticated back-benchers, the danger of witchcraft is felt to be an ever-present reality. The death of Adelabu, the minority NCNC (National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon [later, National Council of Nigerian Citizens]) leader in Western Nigeria, occurred in a motor accident, some 50 miles or more from his home town. No one held that the accident was *physically* engineered, yet his supporters wreaked vengeance on hundreds of enemies in Ibadan. It is of course an axiom that enemies may or may not 'exist', it is enough that they are believed to exist. It is not to be wondered that African leaders cannot, and do not, look upon opposition as a formal matter. The more free they are of such sentiments themselves, the more are they conscious of the peculiar basis of their public support. The less they are themselves so free, the less appealing is the notion of opposition. In either event, it is no occasion for surprise that the electorate would gladly be dispensed with by even the most enlightened rulers. As for a single party, they may well think that the ineradicable tendencies to opposition even within this might be enough for any system. It may be said by some of you (especially perhaps any there may be from across the Atlantic) that this is the usual pattern of trends towards dictatorship. If, by this, European examples are meant, the personalization of enmity produces something of another kind. Northern dictatorships are as insulated and impersonal as northern democracies; if perfect northern democracy does not exist in African states, nor at least does perfect northern despotism.

We come here to the final apparent paradox. If the existence of personal enemies is accepted by Africans of high and low status, so also is the need to live with some of them. Like the poor they are always present. Some may vanish from the scene, but others appear. Wickedness may even be renounced and a personal enemy become, at least temporarily, an object of trust. The coldness of the northerner, whose hates are impersonal, inhuman and (thus) consistent, is foreign. So, therefore, the friendly chats with those deprived of their employment, so the return to the fold of those denounced for the most heinous crimes, so the sudden amends to the victim.

It is to be regretted that time and prudence, since I am in Africa, do not permit further illustration of these principles here. I have talked of 'Africa'; I am

fully aware that countries in Africa differ in their political systems as in other ways; I am aware that the phenomena described are not restricted to Africa at the present time; I am aware too that our history and some of our more inbred communities illustrate similar features. This does not matter because I am making no adverse value judgements; indeed, such is the state of this subject that it is necessary to say clearly in any public gathering that there are many elements in the present African situation that are of great interest and of possible human value. The personalization of conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. Experience has shown that unconsidered violence has grown more widespread within countries in the West with the increasing depersonalization of social relations. It is a notable contribution from Africa that it should announce that even enemies are people.

Lest my conclusion should recall the statement of the clergyman in the 'Beyond the Fringe' sketch that, 'we must get the violence off the streets and into the churches', let me repeat my earlier remarks. Without an adequate theory of conflict and opposition, no comprehension of the forces at work in the new states, or in our own midst, is possible. This is a task for comparative sociologists of the most sophisticated kind, and not (if I may end on a critical note) for amateurs enmeshed in the values of formal systems, which are already inadequate to represent the realities of the countries of their birth.

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