DEVELOPING APPROPRIATE ADMINISTRATIVE INSTRUMENTS FOR THE AFRICAN CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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1. **Introduction**

The performance of administrative bodies in Africa from indications is very low in terms of output efficiency, and responsiveness. Consequently, in the public sector, which this paper will be focusing on, there have been lots of reforms since the independence of some African countries, but these reforms have brought little or no improvement. In Nigeria, for instance, since independence, there have been no less than four to six administrative reforms and commissions of the Public Service, yet the performance of the Public Service, measured against what it was at the time of independence, is apparently worse.

My aim in this paper is to show that these reforms have failed and are failing because they have not touched on the key factors affecting the nature and performance of the public sector in Africa, namely cultural factors. The paper also seeks to demonstrate the nature of the cultural factors that have significant impact on the performance of the public sector and the etiological processes by which this occurs. In addition, this paper tries to show what an appropriate reform agenda (an agenda which should take into serious consideration historical and cultural factors) should be; and make some practical suggestions in respect of tertiary educational institutions in the public sector.

The conceptual and theoretical perspective adopted in this paper is the culture-development thesis that emphasizes the role of culture in the development of a state or community. There is, however, the need to clarify the culture-development thesis, especially as conceptualised and applied here; this is because some scholars, (Africans and non-African) have either shied away or attacked the culture-development thesis because it seems to them a disguise for racist interpretations of development or it hurts their pride. In this regard, let me mention, as an example, the highly polemical article by Henry Cudjoe.¹

Cudjoe sees as disguised racism the arguments of Samuel Huntington, David Landes and others, which tried to show that it is mainly cultural factors that has made Ghana, which was at par with South Korea some 50 years ago, to have a GNP that is

about one-fifteenth that of South Korea in the 1990s. Apart from pouring vitriol on Hungtington and others, Cudjoe achieves little less. He is unable to show that culture does not matter; indeed a proper reading of his paper will show that he, in spite of his objectives, shows that culture matters; this is because in his own preferred classification, he shows South Koreans as having a cluster of key properties that Ghanaians do not have, namely the properties of hardwork, self-discipline, love for education, and thrift. These, and not the shared properties they have such as hospitality, friendliness, and respect for elders are the key factors in economic development.² As a substitute to the culturedevelopment thesis he claims that "development is by invitation": development occurs when the West invites a country to develop; ostensibly, this invitation goes with the packages and assistance that will install development in such a country irrespective of culture, climate, geographical location, natural and human resources, etc. "Development by invitation", apart from being unable to account for the development of South Korea, cannot be applied in explaining the development of India, Malaysia, Singapore, China, etc. What the development by invitation thesis shows, in the end, is the failure of the dependency theory and its conceptual framework. On the perspective of the dependency theory, Third-World States on the periphery of the international capitalist system cannot develop unless the international system is overthrown, but the emerging markets and newly developed countries of Asia show the contrary and some of them share climatic conditions, cultural diversity and colonial history with African States. It should then be obvious that we should pay attention to alternative conceptual and theoretical approaches to development, such as the culture-development thesis.

One major problem with the culture development thesis, generally, is that scholars frequently adopt the theoretical perspective that informs it, namely, that supreme beliefs and values and the values and beliefs derived from them lead to choices in specific situations which has the cumulative effect of enhancing or hindering the achievement of the objectives of development at the national or communal level; but the contexts, causal processes and agencies are not clearly specified.³ This might leave some room for scepticism in respect of the efficacy of cultural factors in the development process of a state. I hope to make clear the above context, causal processes and agencies in this paper. Let me mention here that it appears that one major reason why this is not frequently done

is that it apparently requires a cross-disciplinary approach; an integration of the methodological perspectives and insight of some of the disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities, namely sociology/anthropology, political science, economics, history, and philosophy.⁴ Traditions of scholarship received by Africans from the West are rather inclined towards a narrower basin of compartmentalization, but the need for a cross-disciplinary approach is increasingly glaring especially in the study of development problems/issues and in African studies generally. Consequently, the methodological approach adopted in this paper is a cross-disciplinary one. Let us now turn to the nature of Public Service in Africa.

2. Public Service in Africa: the Historical and Cultural Basis of an Alien's Public Service.

In his Golden Jubilee Lecture entitled, "Our Values and Orientation", the eminent Ghanaian Philosopher Kwame Gyekye, discussed the fact that the Public Service is called "aban adwuma", an Akan expression that means 'Government work or public enterprise'; and "aban adwuma" is usually used when someone wants to contrast a private enterprise, the entire profit from which will accrue to the private owner, and hence requires his full attention and commitment with a public enterprise (or government undertaking), the failure or success of which he cares less about because the profit or gain from it accrues to someone else to others - that is the government.⁵

The Yoruba of Nigeria express their notion of the Public Service of Nigeria in a manner that is similar to that of the Akan. For the Yoruba, Public Service is 'işe ijoba', government work with similar connotations. Among the Igbo and the Ibibio the expression for the Public Service is linked more clearly and forcefully to its alien origin and distance from the traditional African culture, government and economy: for the Igbo, the expression for the Public Service is 'Olu Oyibo' (this is got from 'Olu', which means work and 'Oyibo' which means 'the white man'). It, thus, means the white man's work; for some, especially the Southern Igbo, it is 'Olu Bekee' – 'Bekee', it appears, is a corruption of the surname of Dr. W. B. Baike, one of the earliest explorers of the territory; for such Igbo, 'Bekee' has become the generic name for white people); similarly for the Ibibio, the Public Service is 'Utom Mbakara' ('Utom' means 'work'; 'Mbakara' means 'white or white man'). It, thus, means the Whiteman's work.

The implication of this is that the Public Service is alien to the people; not only was it not organically developed by the people but rather imposed by an alien colonial power. It brought features and created conditions that were hitherto unknown and very strange, namely: (a) full-time salaried work, this did not exist in the traditional society. It is for this reason that 'Olu Oyibo' is frequently extended to employment in the formal private sector especially the big firms that came in the colonial era, such as John Holt, Lever Brothers, Standard Bank and Barclays Bank; (b) bureaucracy, with its high emphasis on formal relations in the work place, areas of competence and limitations of authority/hierarchy; (c) the sort of mobility of labour, which the traditional system could not have supported, (d) and new social and economic classes. To compound this, all the Public Service was an arm of a State that had usurped the powers of the traditional State, broken down such States and fused them with other States to create an enlarged sovereignty; so the traditional state had nothing to do with the creation of the modern state or with its Public Service. Indeed, the traditional State was as an erstwhile enemy of the forces that created the modern State. Chinua Achebe was, therefore, right in writing in No Longer at Ease that "in Nigeria the government was 'they'. It had nothing to do with you and me. It was an alien institution and people's business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble."6 The Public Service in Africa can, thus, be described as the Alien's Public Service. The people, generally, have no commitment to the state, which it is supposed to be an arm of, nor to the specific institutions, relations, values that constitute and sustain it. People identify with the State basically because they have to acknowledge belonging to it in order to enjoy the privileges they can enjoy from the state, including getting and keeping a Public Service job; beyond this there is little or no commitment to the State or the Public Service it sponsors. Thus, we have a case that we may describe as identification with an institution but without commitment to such an institution or worse identification with an institution but at the same time alienation from such an institution (from hence we shall regard this phenomena as identification without commitment).

The effects of identification without commitment could be clearly seen; they include a perfunctory attitude to work, non-responsiveness, lethargy, inefficiency, and corruption. It is very easy for employees to constitute themselves into working groups

with group loyalties and goals that are diametrically opposed to that of the Public Service and the State. Indeed, it is difficult to see working groups in Africa, especially in Nigeria, that is not based on what Nigerians have come to describe as "you put for me, I put for you"; or "you scratch my back, I scratch your back" (alluding to the Igbo proverb that says "when a goat feels the itching of its back or torso, it rubs it against a tree; but if the back of a human being is itching, he/she asks a fellow human being to scratch it" – this describes the mutual assistance that human beings should render to one another). "You put for me, I put for you" does not however in this context describe simple, positive, mutual assistance, but mutual protection in exploiting the State and the public through bribery and corruption rackets, cronyism, perversion of justice, impunity, undermining of merit and the rule of law, etc. Let us note here that blowing the whistle by a member of a group, exposing his/her group activities or by any other member of staff is seen as a heinous crime for a member of a group, there are two offences: disloyalty and exposing an African brother to the law of an alien state; for other staff it is the latter only. "You put for me, I put for you" thus depicts the activities of what we may describe as negative working groups in the Public Service – groups with objectives and loyalties that are predominantly opposed to the organizational goals of the Public Service The origin of such groups could be traced to the early colonial and the State. administration and it is during this period that the mentality of exploiting the public and the state was formed. The basis of this lies in the fact that the people who were recruited for the Public Service had no political loyalty beyond their traditional states, nor did they have the ethics/philosophy with sufficient universal principles that can enable people appreciate and discharge their responsibilities to the newly created public realm and the diverse people that made it up on the basis of fairness, merit, efficiency etc. This was compounded by the fact that the newly created public realm quickly became the arena for the struggle for dominance by various religious and ethnic groups. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the State itself was created and administered by foreign powers. The effects of negative working groups did not appear a lot during the colonial times because expatriate colonial officers controlled the senior positions in the Public Service. However, when Africans took over the Public Service after independence, the effects of working groups in the Public Service expanded because of political and cultural reasons.

The new state and Public Service created by colonial administration presented challenges to the indigenous populations. But what each country has made of its Public Service and inherited problems largely depends on the pre-colonial (traditional) values, beliefs and practices. Thus, for instance, India, with a culture that valued renunciation, asceticism and desire for the supremacy of the mind over matter (even though it had inherited a huge country diverse in religion, with 12 language blocks, and the deep cleavages of the caste system) apparently could have some people focused on seeking profound perfection in thought and action in spite of the new and challenging situation, thereby making it possible to have sufficient incorruptible and intellectually focused people to run free and fair election and pursue excellence in the education sector, providing India with a stable democracy and the manpower for its knowledge—driven economy.

Let us now look at the traditional African beliefs, ideology/philosophy (values and practice) and institutions and how they have affected the development or rather underdevelopment of the Public Service in Africa. The traditional African worldview and philosophy were mostly unwritten; they were however, preserved in some way for instance in proverbs, folklore, ritual/rites ceremonies; these serve as the sources of traditional thought; we however have to interpret the information from these sources in order to reconstruct traditional thought.

Let us begin with the traditional African ontological and metaphysical outlook. It appears that many African scholars will agree that African ontological view rests basically on the notion of vitalism and vital force. Vitality and vital force are common to all things animate and inanimate in the universe; and this is perhaps because all things that can change (in quality, quantity, location, etc.) demonstrate vitality; vitality is more or less the same as the capacity to change. The force that makes change possible is the vital force. In the African view, everything possesses a characteristic vital force or a set of vital forces that makes such a thing what it is. Vital force is a metaphysical force; the evidence of its existence, however, lies in the specific character and activity of a thing. It follows from this that things are identified by the force and power they display; a thing is, essentially, the force and power it displays. This leads us to the idea of voluntarism in traditional thought. Since things are identified and classified according to the force and

power they display, conscious being should therefore be expected to will the full display of the power of their being. Voluntarism, in the case of human beings, will focus on selfpreservation in this world and the perfection of the self (ego) in a struggle for domination as the highest good. Vitalism and voluntarism (particularly the latter) accounts for the absence of transcendental values in Africa, that is, values that are held over and above life in this world. Among the Igbo, the name Nduka (life is supreme) expresses this idea: life is supreme, values like truth or justice, loyalty are not more important and in situations where there is conflict between the preservation of life and the pursuit of truth or justice, the latter should give way. African voluntarism is rooted in and derived from African vitalism; and it gives rise to what we may regard as the "voluntaristic" personality; a personality that is based on the perception of reality and social reality as the creation of a will that is not governed by objectivity or an objective order. Because there are no transcendental values apart from self-preservation and the projection of the ego, the voluntaristic personality tends to personalize all social relations (that is it tends to be averse to the rationalization of social relations based on formal structures and rules that spell out rights and duties, and which are supposed to be operated as objectively and impersonally as possible); it, thus, tends towards the rule of personality and impunity as against the rule of law.

Another basic feature of the traditional African worldview is that its ethics is particularistic and communitarian (the scope within which people are bound to act morally is limited to the traditional community, namely the lineage group, and the sociopolitical organisation formed out of it such as the village, village-cluster, town, clan, kingdom); these also were the jurisdiction of the gods of the lineage-group and/or tribe, who were seen as the source and/or enforcer of the ethical codes and laws.

Although traditional African thought sponsored a voluntaristic personality, the traditional African society was not chaotic. This is because there were laws and ethical codes mostly established and enforced by the deities that were meant to ensure peaceful and harmonious relations in our communities. Because of the theocratic character of the traditional societies, laws and ethical codes were mostly authorized and ultimately enforced by the deities. Communities were strict in the enforcement of laws and ethical codes because failure to enforce laws and ethical codes involved incurring the wrath of

the gods on the part of the political authorities. In addition, the abuse of power by those in authority was checked by some metaphysical provisions. However, it should be said here that the order and harmony in the traditional society was founded principally on the power (the fear of) of the metaphysical entities to which communities were committed and not on any transcendental value; so a diminishing of the power of the divinities to inflict terror will push the African voluntaristic personality in the direction of impunity and disregard for rules and the rule of law. Colonization and the activities of missionaries in destroying the traditional gods have apparently produced these effects (it appears that Africans are in transitory period, because Christianity, which largely replaced the traditional gods, has not yet effected a widespread transformation of the voluntaristic personality type sponsored over centuries by the traditional system). Ada Mere in discussing the values of the Igbo captured aspects of the inadequacies of the African voluntaristic personality in relation to the modern sector and the Public Service:

The urban Igbo, if he is educated, invariably his education is Western and carries with it the import of Western values. His daily living is a mixture of new and old values. Where ultimately employed in government establishment or in industry the organizational set up, the hierarchical system he encounters reflects Western values and standards of competitiveness, a success and achievement oriented individualism, a code of behaviour to which the Igbo has to adjust; and his adjustment is unique even if only in the sense that it naturally reflects his own original values orientation. For instance, the impersonal nature of obligations in employee-employer relationship is suited more to the 'inner directed' personality of David Riessman whose inner resources provide the appropriate moral code of job conduct more than to the traditionally directed person who is the product of a system where each party manipulates relationships to his personal advantage and balance is thereby maintained. Without an external force within the industrial system strong enough to check Igbo manipulation of his relationship with industry he can go beyond bounds, he can extract so much from the relationship that he impoverishes or exploits the system. 8

Apart from the destruction of the traditional gods, the other cultural factors that tend to push the African voluntaristic personality towards impunity and disregard for the rule of law, namely some features of the prevailing social motives and interactive skills derived from the traditional system are the very high cost of discharging basic social responsibilities such as burial and weddings, the very high and dysfunctional social and

economic cost of gaining social recognition, such us getting chieftaincy titles; and the expectations of kinsmen.⁹

In the traditional system, the world hereafter is more or less a replica of the mundane material world. The power, status, material means, etc. of a person in this world is carried over to the world hereafter. It is for this reason that people were buried with as much display of material wealth and pageantry as could be mustered by the surviving member of a family – the funeral ceremony and the display of such material wealth announced the status of the deceased to those in the spirit world and, thus, the place they should make available for the deceased; it was also an occasion to display the status and accomplishment of individuals and families; respect for individuals and families depended partly on such displays. The religious reasons behind this high cost has changed since the change in religion, but the high cost remains. These days it is more of an occasion to display individual and/or family status and accomplishments. The cost of funerals weighs a lot on individuals; pushing people into debt at times. In Ghana, the cost of funeral ceremonies is 2000 - 3500 dollars, while the average income is about 480 dollars. Some 45% of the people live on less than a dollar a day, 79% or less than 2 dollars a day. ¹⁰ The average cost of traditional wedding in Ghana is estimated to be about 1000 – 1500 dollars. These costs are comparable with the costs of burials and traditional weddings in certain parts of Nigeria (particularly the southern parts). In Nigeria, the cost of getting a traditional title could be quite high; in Onitsha, for instance, an estimated minimum cost for the Ozo title (which is the third category of titles in the town) is about 15,000 dollars, in 2005 – 2006, while the GDP per capita at Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) for Nigeria is 1,500 dollars.

Another major source of pressure is the extended family and relatives (this includes people from ones clan, lineage, etc.). The traditional extended family and lineage group operated as a social welfare system to a large extent. The rich and more successful were expected to share their wealth with poorer relatives; in return he gained solidarity, security, protection and services that poor relatives can render (this was a kind of tacit social contract). Modern African States have not developed any significant alternative social welfare system. Individuals still rely highly on family members and relatives for help to pay for health services, education, to find jobs and/or raise capital for

business, to take care of the aged, etc. Relatives, therefore, put a lot of pressure on workers to provide the resources to meet some of these needs and in the situation where the government and the Public Service is taken to be alien, the general ethics is particularistic, excluding the Public Service as an area in which one is bound to act in accordance with the benevolent standards of the traditional ethical code, relatives frequently mount pressure on workers (public servants) to break the rules, embezzle funds, and disregard merit, etc. in order to satisfy the needs of the extended family and clan. Ada Mere also points this out, as she writes:

...the great importance the traditional Igbo attaches to family loyalty is often reflected in the selective process of employment whereby that fact of being closely related to the person in authority rather than merit, often becomes the criterion for employment. Their result is often the wrong choice for a job and frustration for the qualified person. ¹¹

Indeed, the pressure is so much that in many communities, people who are not seen as helping to provide the needs of the extended family and clan when they were in the Public Service, are despised; they are not recommended for traditional titles and other honours. On the other hand, if he/she helped in providing for the needs of members of their community, they were seen as heroes, deserving of titles and other forms of recognition even if they were corrupt, inefficient and ineffective while in office (indeed, there are cases of people, who have been found guilty of some misconduct in the Public Service or government, returning home to take traditional titles or retaining the titles they had already taken).

From the foregoing, it should be apparent that the traditional worldview sponsors dispositions and patterns of action that make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the African to meet the organizational goals of the Public Service in any significant measure. It tends to cancel out the interactive skills and motives an individual should have in order to effectively meet the goals of the Public Service. This is perhaps the major problem of the Public Service; even though there are qualified members of staff (people with proper level of education and certificates), the Public Service still underperforms. This leads to the issue of addressing the interactive skills and motives of the public servants, especially through Public Service reforms.

3. Public Service Reforms

As mentioned earlier, there has been four to six administrative reforms and commissions set-up to reform (or transform) the Public Service in Nigeria. The recommendation of these commissions and the objectives of reform included "Nigerianisation" of the Public Service (appointing Nigerians to senior positions) in the years after independence, harmonization and increase in salaries; professionalisation of the civil service, exclusive training of staff, and the use of modern management methods. All these reforms, in spite of the desirability of their objectives, have failed. The reason should be apparent, they did not address the social motives and interactive skills of the public servant, which are built on identification without commitment, a voluntaristic personality, a particularistic ethics, and which are reinforced by cultural demands and expectations such as burial ceremonies, weddings, the extended family expectations, etc.

The key challenge any reform of the Public Service faces, therefore, is the issue of the transformation of the culturally and historically determined motives and interactive skills of the public servant. In this regard, we can say that the use of such principle as monetary incentives to increase the output of workers is not likely to work - the workers will be glad to have the money, but are not likely to change their motives and interactive skills. This is not to say that periodic increase in wages is not useful, but rather to say that it does not address the underlying problem since they have deep cultural and historical roots. Further, the application of the principle of workers involvement in management, decision-making, etc aimed at loosening hierarchy and getting workers to be more involved, responsible, creative, and committed, in the hope of raising output, is not likely to be fruitful. This is because the absence of commitment, apathy and alienation of the public servant in relation to the state and the organizational goals of the Public Service do not lie in the structures of the Public Service as such, but in the perception of the State and the Public Service as a whole.

The Public Service requires a cultural reorientation and a transformation of the personality of the workers in order to make the interest of individuals and working groups

to converge with the organizational goals of the Public Service. This can be approached by way of reorientation trainings, but this is not likely to be enough and is likely to take many years to make a modest impact. So, in addition to reorientation trainings, there should be a restructuring of the Public Service to make for efficiency and responsiveness given the above problems. The objective of such structural reforms should be the creation of more objectivity/clarity in the operation of the Public Service, more publicity, transparency, more avenues for redressing injustice. Effective supervision of the Public Service, in the African context, seems to lie, firstly, in the public and bodies outside the Public Service such as the media and non-governmental organizations; therefore, measures and structures that will make the public and such groups to determine the level of objectivity, justice, efficiency in the operations of the public in as much details as possible should be developed; and ,secondly, in the inspection, evaluation and cross-checks that can be exacted by one institution on another within the Public Service.

The restructuring of the Public Service along these lines will require the introduction of annual or biennial "administration audit", (a regular and comprehensive evaluation and publication of the operations of an organization in relation to its stated operational standards and organizational goal by an independent body), laws to protect and encourage whistleblowers (it should be mentioned in this regard that although African countries are perceived widely to be corrupt and inefficient, there are no laws protecting whistleblowers in Africa except in South Africa where there is an act that does not offer real protection to the whistleblower).

If we apply this line of thought to tertiary education in Nigeria, for instance, we will notice that one useful thing that has been done to improve the quality of the students admitted to universities Nigeria is the testing of students that are supposed to have passed the Joint Admission and Matriculation Examination by the universities of their choice. This radically reduced the level of fraud in admission. In addition to this, universities should offer provisional admission in which the first year scores should determine whether a student should continue with his/her studies or be advised to leave. On the part of staff, students should be able to objectively evaluate the quality and impact of lectures and a lecturer, through well-structured questionnaires. In respect to staff welfare and development, a regular and well-structured system of assessing staff should be adopted

and the result of such assessments should be publicized regularly (the university community and the public should be able to know who gets promoted, for what number and quality of publications in a given period of assessment). In addition to these, channels of receiving complaints and obtaining redress within the universities and outside the universities should be developed better.

It is possible for us to go on listing the sort of reforms required in the area of teaching/research, finance/administration in the universities but that appears to be outside the scope of this paper since our aim here is to show the sort of radical approach required in order to transform the tertiary education sector, particularly and the Public Service, generally.

NOTES

- 1. Henry Codjoe, "Is Culture the Obstacle to Development in Ghana? A Critique of the Culture Development Thesis as it Applies to Ghana and South Korea" in (eds.) W. J. Tettey, K. P. Puplampu, B. J. Berman, *Critical Perspectives on Politics and Socio-Economic Development in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 335-363.
- 2. Ibid, pp. 335-336.
- 3. J.C. A.Agbakoba, Theoretical Considerations on the Impact of Worldviews on Development" in *Journal of Philosophy and Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2005, pp. 75-86.
- 4. L. Keita, "Introduction: Philosophy and Development" in *African Development*, Vol.XXIX, No. 1, 2004, pp. 1-5.
- 5. K. Gyekye, "Our Values and Orientation" in the *Daily Graphics* (Ghana), 30th May, 2007, pp. 15, 33, 34.
- 6. Ibid, p. 34; Gyekye cited Achebe.
- 7. J.C.A.Agbakoba, "Traditional African Political Thought and the Crisis of Governance in Contemporary African Societies" in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* (JSRI), Vol. 7, spring 2004, pp. 137-154.
- 8. Ada Mere "Social Values Heritage of the Igbo" in *Ikenga*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 1973, p.96.
- 9. Social Motives may be defined as the motives of an individual, which he/she comes to hold on account of the opinions, expectations, and desires of the

members of his/her community. Interactive skills are the sum total of the way an individual regulates - or does not regulate - with the aid of internal control mechanisms, his/her relations with other human beings in the various contexts and roles in which they are encountered; setting out concrete expression of attitudes, motivations, desires of individuals in relation to one another, including one another's property, opportunities, welfare, etc. - See J.C.A. Agbakoba "An Examination of The Impact of the Traditional African Knowledge Systems and Culture On Contemporary Educational Achievement in Africa"; a paper presented at the 20th International Conference of the African Studies Association in Germany, at Johann Goethe University, Frankfurt, 24th - 27th July, 2006.

- 10. The Economist, May 26th June 1st, 2007, p. 45.
- 11. Ada Mere "Social Values Heritage of the Igbo" in *Ikenga*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 1973, p.96.
- 12. F.C. Okoli and F.O.Onah, *Public Administration in Nigeria*. (Enugu: John Jacob's Classic Publishers, 2002) pp. 202-228