

Corruption and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: The Imperative of a Trado-Religious Anti-Corruption Strategy

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Abstract

Corruption remains one of the fastest growing social problems in Nigeria. It is virtually becoming a way of life that permeates both private and public sectors of the economy. Over the years, this pervasive behavioural proclivity has earned the country the notorious status of one of the most corrupt nations in the world. Despite seemingly concerted efforts of past and present administrations to combat corruption, the problem remains persistently endemic with disastrous consequences for the Nigerian society. It is against this backdrop, that the paper specifically explores the upsurge of corruption and its implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. Within the symbolic interactionist framework, the paper maintains that people indulge in pervasive corrupt behaviour as a result of how corruption is perceived and valued. The paper maintains that corruption, especially in the public sector, breeds infrastructural decay, high cost of governance, insecurity and distorted development priorities thus making the hope of achieving sustainable development a mirage. This, no doubt, explains why sustainable development has continued to elude Nigeria despite its abundant natural endowment and robust development initiatives. In order to translate its abundant natural resources into sustainable development, the paper recommends among others, that as a matter of urgent necessity, Nigeria must adopt a trado-religious social control measure in its anti-corruption reforms.

Key Words: Nigeria, Social problems, Corruption, Sustainable development, Trado-religious, Anti-corruption reforms

Introduction

Nigeria is caught in a web of intractable social conditions and behaviours that are incompatible with her most cherished values. The media and personal observations present a vivid picture of unemployment, internally displaced persons, insurgency, kidnapping, violent conflicts and other social vices that are of utmost concern to individuals, state and national governments. The most worrisome of all the social problems is corruption. It is most disturbing because it is a primary social problem from which virtually all other societal ills emanate. Corruption in Nigeria is so pervasive that everybody seems to be involved either as a perpetrator or as a victim.

Corruption in Nigeria has persisted and grown in magnitude. It is almost growing into an indispensable way of life as it pervades virtually all facets of the Nigerian society. This explains why the word corruption is known and used by both the young and old in the society with different names in different languages. The Yorubas call it *egunje*, the Igbos call it *Igbuozu*, the Hausas call it *chuachua* and the *Urhobos* call it *ekpaje*. It has become so entrenched in the Nigeria society that people openly and proudly demand for it, complain when it is not forthcoming and an individual can hurriedly resign if a present position does not give the opportunities for *ekpaje* or *egunje*.

Nigeria's notoriety for corruptible behaviours is known nationally and internationally. Nigeria has been identified as one of the most corrupt nations in the world. This derogatory status emanated from Transparency International in 2002, using global Corruption Perception Index (CPI). Of a maximum score of 10 on the CPI, Nigeria scored 1.6 as the second most corrupt country in the world after Bangladesh. The score, though nothing to be proud of, is an improvement over the 1996, 1997 scores of 0.69 which placed Nigeria as the most corrupt country out of 54 countries in the survey.

The 2009 CPI scores revealed that Nigeria had dropped from its 121st place in 2008 to 130th position out of the 180 countries surveyed. Apparently, the scores and ranking are clear indications that Nigeria has not been able to break out of the status of one of the most corrupt nations in the universe.

Disturbed by the trend and the negative impact of corruption, successive governments in Nigeria have made concerted efforts towards combating corruption. The efforts were made manifest in the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). However, the efforts later turned out to be mere smokescreen meant to make the public from seeing reality. From when the anti-corruption agencies were established, successive administrations in Nigeria have demonstrated lack of commitment in the fight against corruption. In the absence of a strong political will to combat corruption head on, the problem has grown deep and pervasive with severe consequences for the country. It is against this background that the paper explores corruption as an obstacle to sustainable development in Nigeria.

Corruption: Conceptualisation and Classification

Corruption as a concept has several meanings due to its multifarious manifestations. Whenever corruption is conceptualised, its meaning is always influenced by different socio-cultural contexts and time dimensions. Conceptualisation also varies ideologically, politically and intellectually (Girling, 1997). In other words, the meaning of corruption has continued to be covered by value preferences and differences. This no doubt, poses conceptual and theoretical difficulties in the analysis of corruption (Lipset & Lenz, 2002). However, a broad meaning of corruption entails the breach of established rules for personal gain, effort to secure wealth or power through illegal means, private gain at public expense or the misuse of public power for private benefits (Otite, 1986; Nye, 1967; Shieifer & Robert, 1993; Oloponia, 1998; Johnson, 1996; Ogege, 2006).

In its etymological meaning, the word corruption is derived from a Latin word *corrumpo* which literally means to break, loose value, putrid and useless. Corruption, therefore, means loss of purity or integrity. Generally, corruption is an ethical issue anchored on moral values and conduct. Corruption is a human act, done by a morally responsible individual or group which carries with it moral guilt because such act goes contrary to established and acceptable moral standards in a given society (Alalas, 1980). What this portends is that corruption is not restricted to only public office holders. In lending credence to this view, Murice Coker aptly asserts thus:

Corruption is the misuse of power for private benefit or advantage. This power may, but need not reside in the public domain. Besides money, the benefit can take the form of promotion, special treatment, commendation, or the favours of women or men. Corruption simply means asking, giving or taking a fee, gift or favour as a conduction for performance of assigned responsibility . . . (Coker, 2006:91).

It is worthy of note that corruption is an anti-social behaviour that falls short of acceptable moral standards in a group or society. The act or behaviour carries with it certain gains which could be in form of pecuniary, psychological or status gratifications. Such behaviour falls within the purview of bribery – the use of reward to pervert the judgement of a person in a position of trust; misappropriation-unlawful or illicit appropriation of public resources for private gain; nepotism – bestowal of patronage by reason of inscriptive affiliation rather than merit (Benfied, 1961; Dike, 1999, 2002). According to Osoba (1996), corruption is anti-social behaviour conferring improper benefits contrary to legal and moral norms and which undermine the authorities to improve the living condition of the people.

The classification of corruption varies from one author to another. Some authors identify three types namely; political, bureaucratic and economic (Khan 1996). Other authors added judicial and moral corruption to the classification (Odekunle 1986).

Corruption could be classified into three broad categories, namely: *Non-feasance*, *malfesance* and *misfesance*. The classification is based on behaviour or outcome of the exchange on the part of the recipient (Gardimer & Olson, 1988).

- ***Non-Feasance Corruption:*** The exchange relation in this type of corruption comprises a person being offered something in order for the recipient to ignore at least one of his or her statutory responsibilities upon the receipt of a reward, gift or fee. He/she agrees to ignore or overlook illegal act of the payer.

For instance, a drug baron and a gun runner offer money to security agents at check points for the vehicle conveying illegal wares to be allowed to pass without searching. Another instance is when a student is aided or shielded by the invigilator while he/she indulges in examination malpractice upon the collection of an offer or a reward which could be in cash or kind.

- **Malfeasance Corruption:** In this type of corruption, the recipient is made to engage in an act that is statutorily forbidden. A law enforcement agent could be paid by a politician to snatch ballot boxes during election to enable him or her stuff the ballot boxes with ballot papers. Security agents could be paid to escort a vehicle with illegal items from one point to another. An admission officer could, upon an offer, decide to give admission to the least qualified candidate at the expense of the most qualified ones.
- **Misfeasance Corruption:** This corruption type compels the recipient to engage in an improper performance of an act which ordinarily could be performed properly. For instance, a standard assurance or supervision officer may be offered a reward to approve a building that does not conform with the subsisting regulations. In the case of a contract, the person to certify the work compromises standard upon being offered some money usually referred to as *kick back* or *ten percent* in the Nigerian parlance.

A Contextual Theory of Corruption in Nigeria

Just as there are multifarious meanings of corruption, so also are theories that seek to provide explanation on the prevalence and causal factors. In spite of the variations in meaning, the fact remains that across cultures or ideological divides, corruption is consistently perceived as a wrong behavioural pattern. It is always a deviation from right moral conduct. Corruption is a morally loaded concept. As soon as an individual is labelled corrupt, he or she is morally adjudged in a negative way. The question that always comes to mind is why do people still indulge in corruption when they know that it is morally wrong? Quite a number of theories provided explanation on causality. Some of them are public choice, bad apple, organizational culture, clashing moral values, the ethos of public administration, structural strain, pathological and the social constructionist theories. What is fundamental about these theories is not just the explanations they provide but the relevance of the explanations to targeted remediation measures. It is on this basis that the paper adopts the social constructionist theory to provide explanation on the prevalence of corruption in Nigeria.

The social constructionist theory is a variant of the symbolic interactionist perspective. Its major proponents are Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman and Peter Berger (Cooley 1964, Larson 1973, Brown 1979, Turner & Leonard 1986, Schaefer & Lamm 1998, Kendall 2007). This perspective is a micro sociological perspective that is concerned with viewing human beings as living in a world of meaning, definition of situations and the interpretation human beings give to their immediate circumstances. The social constructionist argument is that the reality of behaviour comprises social interactions emanating from the way that behaviour and its outcome are perceived and valued. Individuals' behaviours or actions are founded on the modes in which they perceived the state of things in society. Such actions are products of reality that are socially constructed, expressed and communicated via social interactions and are manifested in signs and symbols.

In applying the social constructionist theory to explain corruption in Nigeria, we are conscious of the fact that corrupt behaviour is a product of individual interpretation and definition embedded in social interactions. It therefore means that corruption is not a ready made reality but a phenomenon that is socially constructed, perceived and valued. At the level of societal shared meaning, every individual makes a bounded rational decision that leads to a deviation from societal norms, and values. Central to this rational decision, every individual either in his or her private or public life tries to maximise utility. In other words, every individual rationally calculates (within the purview of his or her definition of the situation and the opportunity structure) and decides to indulge in corrupt behaviour when its expected benefits outweigh its expected costs (a combination of possible penalty and the chance of being caught).

Corrupt acts such as giving and receiving of gifts and money to pervert justice, misappropriation of public fund and every other behaviours that fall within the purview of moral depravity for personal gain is not interpreted by the actors as morally reprehensive. However, that does not influence behaviour. What influences action is a rational and conscious weighing process of an individual. Thus, deviation from right moral conduct for personal gain is pervasive because it pays to be corrupt in Nigeria because such persons especially those involved in high profile looting and embezzlement are rewarded, celebrated and venerated.

Thus, corruption has become a prevailing value that determines the behaviour of the individual across sex, age, religion, ethnic group and class. The appropriateness of this theoretical framework is that it does not only explain why corruption is widespread in Nigeria society, it also leads to a discourse on corruption control measures that maximise the cost of corruption and minimise the benefit to the perpetrators.

Origin and Trend of Corruption in Nigeria

In reality, the exact date that corruption started in Nigeria is not known. This is due to the fact that most behaviours that consist of corruption are shrouded in secrecy. The act in most cases is only known to the individuals or parties involved and it seldom attracts public scrutiny. There is an erroneous belief among Nigerians that corruption is a colonial heritage. In pre-colonial days, there were cases of moral depravity that found expression in booty of war, perversion of justice, snatching of wives, and the likes. Little was known of monetary corruption because economic transactions were in barter, with little or no zeal for the accumulation of wealth. In other words, corruption in pre-colonial days was just a departure from what was ethically correct and the rates of such behaviours were too minimal to be significant.

Sophisticated forms and high rate of corruption gradually emerged in Nigeria during the colonial epoch. The colonial era ushered in urbanization, formal institutions and a monetised economy including the payment of tax. Also, many persons were rooted from their cultural base and exposed to office work, money and wealth accumulation. That of course marked the beginning of public office corruption (Varda 1981). By 1954, corruption had begun to gain ground. Thus, in 1956, the Foster-Sutton commission was set up to investigate the first detected official corruption in Nigeria involving Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe's transfer of two million pounds into African Continental Bank (ACB). The Coker commission was also set up in 1962 to look into the misappropriation and stealing of public funds and property in Wema Bank, National Bank, Cocoa House, Wemabod, and Investment House all in the western region of Nigeria (Forest 1995, Robin 1990, Robert 1991).

Nigeria corruption profile was altered substantially in post colonial era. The economy was gradually supplanted by the oil and gas sector following the discovery of oil in Oloibiri (present day Bayelsa State) in 1956. As at the time of the first republic, so much money and an enabling political environment to exhibit corrupt behaviour was evident. Most public office holders became apparently inebriated and conspicuously abused office and power for private gains. The extent of corruption then was aptly stressed by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu thus:

Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten percent... those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office.. those that have corrupted our society and put the Nigeria's political calendar back by their words and deeds (Panter-Brick 1970:82).

It was that pervasive corrupt behaviours exhibited by the political class that led to the first military intervention in politics on January 15, 1966. The first military putsch was to purge the Nigerian state of corruption and to disgorge ill-gotten wealth (Ademoyega 1984, Forest 1995, Richard 1999, Osaghae 2002).

Quite sadly, the General Aguiyi Ironsi's regime was short lived as it was overthrown by General Yakubu Gowon in July, 1966. Sooner or later, the military regime became almost worse than the civilian regime that it came to correct. The Gowon's regime became entangled in the web of intractable corruption. The military rulers and their bureaucrats or super permanent secretaries were audaciously involved in the embezzlement of public funds, inflation of contract prices and other forms of corrupt practices. General Murtala Muhammed seized power on July 29, 1975 and made decisive efforts to ensure that wealth acquired by public office holders were disgorged and he also initiated the suspension and outright dismissal of corrupt military and public officers (Nwabueze 1992).

Members of the ousted regime were not impressed with the ethical revival and cleansing, and the Muhammed's government was overthrown in a bloody but unsuccessful coup. The head of state was killed and General Olusegun Obasanjo, the second in command, then Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters became the Head of State. His government handed over power to Alhaji Shehu Shagari to mark the beginning of the second republic. Corruption was also pervasive in his administration which Alhaji Shehu Shagari acknowledged and lamented thus:

What worries me more than anything among our problems is that of moral decadence... There must be an ethical revolution that is aimed at moving the nation steadily and permanently in a discernible new direction of self reliance and dedication to excellence in leadership ... in honesty in morality ... along with the submission of our country to God in national affairs and personal pursuits (Mazi 1992:17).

Despite his seeming demonstration of determination to stamp out corruption, Alhaji Shagari's administration was characterised by lack of accountability, electoral malpractices, kick backs and the likes. This provided a fertile ground for General Muhammadu Buhari to overthrow the Shagari government on December 31st, 1983. The Buhari/Idiagbon regime exhibited zero tolerance for corruption. This was succinctly captured in their maiden broadcast thus:

It is necessary to reiterate that this administration will not tolerate fraud, corruption, squandermania, abuse of office or graft or other such vices that characterised that administration (Alhaji, Shehu Shagari) of the past four years (Maxi 1992:20).

Apparently the Buhari administration lived up to its commitment to eliminate corruption through the catch word of War Against Indiscipline (WAI). State governors, ministers, commissioners and party stalwarts of the Shagari administration were arrested, prosecuted and convicted by a special Military Tribunal on Recovery of Public Property. However, General Ibrahim Babangida seized power in August, 1985. Although his administration introduced the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and other economic reforms, his regime was shamelessly known for all forms of corruption including the annulment of June 12, 1993 elections. General Babangida stepped aside in August, 1993 for an Interim National Government (ING) headed by Ernest Shonekan. General Sanni Abacha took over the mantle of leadership and put an end to the Interim National Government in November 1993.

General Abacha's regime was notorious for profligacy, kickbacks, looting of public treasury and the siphoning of public funds to foreign banks. His reign of terror was truncated by his death on June 8, 1998. Consequent upon General Abacha's death, General Abdulsalami Abubakar became the Head of State and he restored democracy in 1999 with Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the president. Since 1999 till date Nigeria's corruption profile has remained worrisome. In 1999, a survey of nations by Transparency International, a Berlin-based Non-Governmental Organisation, ranked Nigeria among the most corrupt countries in the world. In 1999, Nigeria was ranked the second most corrupt country in the world. In 2001, 2002 and 2003, it was ranked the second most corrupt country in the world. In 2005, 2006 and 2007, Nigeria ranked the eighth, twenty second and thirty second most corrupt country respectively among the surveyed countries (Oko, 2002; Ezeoke, 2009; Pogoson, 2009; Transparency International, 2009). Nigeria has not been able to redeem its corrupt image despite the efforts of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC).

Corruption: The Bane of Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Nigeria has all it takes to achieve sustainable development because she is richly endowed with human and natural resources particularly oil and gas. With a real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of USD 58.4 billion and population of about 160 million, Nigeria is among the four largest economies in Africa. Nigeria is the fourth wealthiest nation in Africa, second wealthiest in sub-saharan Africa (World Bank 2007). Over the years, subsequent governments had put in place a plethora of robust development policies and programmes that can indeed steer the nation on a fast tract to sustainability. Regrettably, despite the abundant resource endowment and development initiatives, Nigeria has remained a country of extreme paradox with pervasive poverty in the midst of plenty, with about 74 percent of the population living on less than one dollar per day. Nigeria ranks very low in Human Development Index (HDI). In its human development report, the UNDP put Nigeria's HDI at 0.453 which is lower than the average HDI for sub-saharan Africa of 0.515 (UNDP 2008). Nigeria is currently rated as one of the poorest nations in the globe with devastating youth unemployment, with over ten million youths that are willing to work but cannot find work (NBS 2009, Otto & Ukpere 2012). Majority of the population lack access to health care facilities, pipe borne water, electricity and affordable quality education.

The general dismal performance and the inability of the various regimes to achieve sustainable development in Nigeria is attributed to corruption. What corruption does is to create legitimacy gap in a democratic dispensation. Electoral corruption makes it impossible for election results to reflect the genuine wishes and mandate of the people. This ushers in bad governance or government at all levels that lack credibility, legitimacy and public confidence. This has two implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. Firstly, it creates capacity gap. Since political power is got through corrupt means, inexperienced and evil minded leaders who are not responsible to the plight of the people dominate the political arena. Such leaders put in place institutions and agencies that are incapable of effectively utilising the commonwealth or public resources to provide essential services (health care, affordable quality education, pipe-borne water, security, employment opportunities, etc) and other necessities that the people of Nigeria, especially the poor require to realise their full potential. The continuous absence of these essential services have made sustainable development to be elusive in Nigeria irrespective of its abundant resources.

The second implication of the legitimacy gap for sustainable development is that it creates security gap, fraudulent elections. The inability of the Nigerian leaders to allocate resources for the material well-being of its citizenry inevitably leads to frustrated expectations and make the people prone to violent crimes and conflicts. This of course explains the upsurge of insecurity in Nigeria. The state of insecurity is an obstacle to sustainable development. Firstly, it discourages productive investments and its benefits especially in the sphere of job creation. Secondly, the money that would have been used to induce economic sustainability is directed to security votes.

Finally, corruption breaks the foundation of sustainable development as misappropriation of public funds plunges the populace into economic misery. According to World Bank report, about 80 percent of Nigeria's oil and gas revenues accrue to just one percent of the country's population while 99 percent of the population takes the remaining paltry 20 percent (Akwole 2006). This was corroborated by the former Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFFC), Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, when he asserted that within the past four decades, Nigerian leaders have looted about USD 500 billion (N85 trillion) from the commonwealth of the people (Pogoso 2009). This level of looting has made it impossible for Nigeria to achieve sustainable development even if the natural resources are expanded beyond what they are now.

Conclusion

This discourse apparently reveals that corruption is pervasive and endemic in Nigeria. Since independence till date, both military and democratic administrations are known for corruption. The only difference is that the prevalence gravity and persistence of corruption vary from one administration to the other. Corruption spans a wide spectrum ranging from its petty form in which a bribe is required before normal duty is undertaken to a large scale corrupt practice, where a large sum of money is paid in return for preferential treatment. It has been so entrenched in the Nigerian society that private appropriation of the spoil of office is hardly regarded as morally reprehensible. Rather, what people think is interpretative calculation of the cost and benefits. Those that successfully loot as well as those indicted and or convicted are celebrated, venerated and awarded bogus chieftaincy titles and national honours.

Corruption creates legitimacy and capability gaps that have serious negative implication for sustainable development in Nigeria. These gaps make it possible for essential services and employment opportunities to elude Nigeria. Misappropriated funds have, over the years, trapped many Nigerians in the poverty vortex. This has created a situation in which about 80 percent of the Nigeria population live below the survival line of one US dollar a day, with about ten million people without jobs. In the face of this acute joblessness, the people are being tempted to indulge in behaviours that foster insecurity which gives rise to poor investment climate.

It is against this background that subsequent administrations have initiated anti-corruption reforms. However, none of the reforms have been able to bring out the desired result. The lack of political determination especially at the top has made it difficult in the prosecution of the anti-corruption war. The weak commitment is made obvious by the fact that the authority is always unwilling to react to high profile corruption. They fail to react because at any point in time, those indicted are political godfathers. This is why late President Umaru Musa Yar Adua and Goodluck Jonathan could not bring those involved in the Halliburton bribe case to book. Also, former president, Olusegun Obasanjo, could not probe the former military leader, Ibrahim Babagida on the Gulf oil windfall (Onabanjo 2010).

The anti corruption war appears to be effective only when it is waged against political adversaries. The lack of a virile presidency with a strong political will, a lack of an incorruptible Attorney General and dedicated anti-corruption institutions make the war against corruption a gimmick and a futile exercise.

Recommendations

The exposition so far has shown that corruption flourishes in Nigeria due to the fact that the calculated costs of corruption on the perpetrators are far less than the benefits. In other words, the expected benefits outweigh the penalties and the chances of being caught. Nigerians are therefore corrupt because the system made it easy and profitable. Based on the above, the paper recommends a trado-religious anti-corruption reform. Nigeria should go back to its root and revive their traditional belief system. Every community or region has one powerful deity or the other, such as *Sango* among the Yorubas, *Okija* among the Ibos, the *Onero* and *Eni* among the *Urhobos*. Public office holders and anybody that work in the formal sector should be made to take their oath of office by swearing to these powerful deities.

The advantage of the trado-religious anti-corruption reform is that of *spiritual probing/investigation* and instant negative sanctions of usually mysterious ailments and or death. Christianity abhors corruption but apart from the fact that it defers punishment to the day of judgement, their object of worship is very slow to anger, and its adherents do not impose severe negative sanctions. Islamic religion condemns corruption, also slow to anger but punishment is enforced if a case of corruption is established. Unlike the state anti-corruption laws and agencies that can be manipulated, religious measures are beyond the manipulation of those in power and do not respect the status of the offenders. If this measure is adopted, the costs of corruption will far outweigh the benefits. This will in no small measure, minimize corruption in Nigeria. The moment this is achieved, sustainable development will be a reality in Nigeria with well articulated development initiatives.

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