

Views of African Traditional Religion on Corruption: Implications for Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Corruption is a canker worm, which has not only eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian socio-economic, political and religious lives, but also soiled the character and personality of every Nigerian without yet any hope for solution. The traditional societies were not per se sacrosanct of this epidemic as there were elements of corruption here and there but the magnitude and dimension were not so pronounced in traditional societies because of the inseparable attachment the people had with religion which permeated all spheres of their lives which made them dissociate themselves from anything evil, corrupt and abhorred in society. Given the above position, the writer calls for all Nigerian to be more religiously conscious and adopt a live of moral rectitude as those in our traditional societies in order to get present Nigerian society cleansed of its corrupt and decaying qualities while more effective sanctions should be meted to any individuals(s) or public officer(s) found wanting in discharging public duties as an antidotes against corruption.

Keywords: African Religion, Corruption and Nigerian Society.

Introduction

Corruption is a canker worm, which has not only eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigerian socio-economic, political and religious lives, but also soiled the character and personality of every Nigerian. Therefore for us to understand and relay the African traditional religious view of the concept, it is pertinent to define the word "corruption".

Onah (2000:50) traces the concept from its Latin etymological root; 'corruptio – meaning, to decay, to be depleted, to rot, to degenerate, to desiccate, to waste away and to lose dignity and integrity'. With regards to the society, it is a situation where justice, fairness, and goodwill are denied. As a concept, it negates all virtues and principles of life. This condition, which stress more on deprivation of right of the citizenry, is not loath some but also anti-developmental, a crime against love, charity and the law. Corruption therefore is misuse of power for private and personal benefit usually committed by people in positions of trust and authority or power. It is a heinous crime that is committed in secret with no direct obvious victim to either complain or help give evidence. The victim according to Obasanjo (1994) is more often than not the general public and successful persecution of the offender is usually problematic.

Since much of what Nigeria will achieve in her national life and development is essentially a function of the quality of its leadership, corruption badly damages socio-economic, political and religious development in the country. Decision – making process in corrupt nations are usually, irrational as they are motivated by greed to acquire wealth. Most importantly, resources are wasted, as projects are awarded not on the premise of stability but as kickbacks to those in position of authority.

Ehichioya (2000) noted that at the last quarter of 1999, Nigeria was competing with Cameroon and Pakistan for the first position of the most corrupt nation in the world. He attributed the cause of corruption to poverty and uncertainty about the future on one hand and greed, selfishness and wickedness on the other. Odey (2001: 125) remarks that as a result so many people are being persuaded to imbibe the philosophy that the end justifies the means. That is why many more Nigerians are beginning to believe that "hard work no longer pays".

Corruption has become a universal phenomenon, which permeates every establishment in Nigeria with its devastating effects on society. In the education sector, Ekwunife (1995:64) observes, that "the institution has been eroded by corruption at all levels, duplicity, insincerity and lack of commitment". In the military administration, Ayida (1991) noted that one big mistake of all military administration in Nigeria is excessive preoccupation with economic mismanagement of their predecessors without improving on their performance. In the police formation, corruption has become institutionalized as the men at various duty posts and check –point collect all sorts of unspecified amount of money from their victims as well as overlooking crimes in return for a bribe. In politics many Nigerians still have erroneous belief that greatness is achieved by plundering the nation's treasury and converting public funds into private accounts. Odey (2001:125) explains thus:

That is why a wretched pauper of yesterday joins politics today only to become a millionaire tomorrow who has a super-abundance of all the good things money can buy, all to the consternation of those

*who know that he is neither a leader nor rich man but
kleptomaniac.*

Gbenda (2002) opines that, corruption has deeply penetrated all level of Nigerian politics and that leaders are fond of paying lip service to the practical implementation of accountability guidelines.

The foregoing is clear indication that corruption is one of the moral problems of our contemporary society. The gravity is so alarming that Nwala (1980:296) comments "... neither the moral teaching in schools and churches nor our penal codes help". The essence of Christian religion in the school system is to teach moral values or more code and spiritual values, the underlying factor in the cultivation of acceptable behavior and happy life (Gana, 1998). If the church and the school are really beclouded by the general moral problems of the society, then where do we think we are going to 'manufacture' honest and sincere leaders that will shun corruption in private and public life? Stories have been written on the pages of newspapers about some men of God (pastors) who dupe their unsuspecting members some thousands and millions of naira under various guises. What about school teachers and principals who collect monies from students to assist in breaking examination ethics? All these and many more go to buttress the extent of decay in the society.

Every rational person in Nigeria is concerned about the deplorable state of corruption; hence religious bodies have designed prayers against the epidemic. Nigerian leaders too, having realized that morality, discipline and ethos have diminished considerably, have tried one system or the other aimed at enforcing moral values, and punishing those found guilty. Examples of such measures and policies of government include, Ethical Revolution, Ethical RE-orientation, War against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC), code of conduct Bureau, Operation Sweep, and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). All these efforts have not yielded much dividends, and according to Jimoh (2001: 202) "attempts on the part of the individuals, organizations to eradicate corruption have not yielded fruitful results". Consequently since not much have been achieved in total eradication of corruption in Nigeria and ethical values are often cast to the wind, it becomes imperative to bring to the lime-light the traditional religious views of Africans (Igbos) on corruption with a view to offering vital information, that will have far-reaching implication to the Nigerian society.

African Traditional Religious View of Corruption

The indigenous religious system of the Africa described, as African Traditional Religion is rich in institutions that provide honest leadership, good governance and accountability where corrupt practices and usurpation were not only rare but also unheard of. Since it is impossible to cover the entire African continent, we shall illustrate these deals using the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria as a case study.

The Igbo traditional religion involves all the beliefs, practices and ritual elements handed down from one generation to another. It is one of the richest cultural heritage of the Igbo because as Mbiti (1969:1) puts it, "Africans (Igbo) are notoriously religious and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. For the Igbo, religion permeate into all the department of life so full that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it". Being obstinately religious, the Igbos find it extremely difficult to strain or severe their relationship with their gods. They see it as a place for succor and solace and any thing that will have to crate a yawning gap between them and their gods is always frowned at, condemned and completely avoided. It was in this vain that Kalu (1996:30) wrote that "In the effort to survive, the Igbo wove covenants, enduring covenants with the spiritual forces of their universe. The operations of these powers explain much of the religions and culture of people".

For the Igbo therefore, the survival of individual is depended on how devoted and religiously he keeps his covenantal bond with the spiritual forces. Due mainly to their inseparable attachment to God and other pantheon of divinities they neither find it easy to severe relationship with the gods nor with their neighbours. As a result, in the traditional societies, virtues such as obedience to parents and elders, hospitality, humility, chastity, honesty, trustworthiness were valued and encomiums and praises were always rained on those who kept to them. These rewards had always been in public ceremonies or festivals where many people will have to benefit from such exercises or lessons, (Ugwu, 2002). Consequently, the children in Igbo land were told that the reward of good life is praise here on earth and a very blissful life in the ancestral world while the punishment meant for bad behavior are ostracism, banishment or capital punishment and a life of misery in the ancestral world where one will only be fed with millipedes and centipedes and will hover around the out sketch of the community where refuses are disposed.

With all these injunctions staring directly at the face of the Igbo man, he had no alternative than to live in consonance with the norms, taboos, traditions, customs of his ecological habitat. He thus abhorred, and condemned any corrupt bahaviour or tendencies thereby maintaining an orderly and corrupt free society.

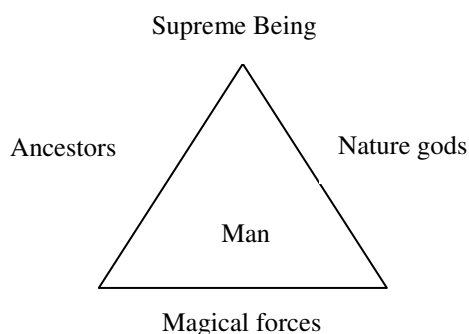
Igbo Attitude to Corruption

The Igbo traditional society was not so exposed to corruption as situations are today due to the fact that they were religious as observed by John Mbiti and had no inclination, tendency and penchant for discussing what will estrange their relationship either vertically (with the gods) or horizontally with fellow human beings. Igbo and Anugwom, (2002:110) argue that “before political independence in 1960, corruption as it exists in Nigeria today was almost unknown and therefore did not constitute a problem as only few Nigerians were in position of power where they could appropriate and misappropriate national resources”.

As already indicated above, among the Igbo of Nigeria the concept of corruption was not known as such because of fears of where the soul will go to after life here. Therefore the lucid presence of God, the gods and the feelings for neighbours in their sub-conscious acted as checks and balances for them. Thus, Igbo attitudes to corruption root in traditional religion, and this controlled excessive quest for materialism and other mal-behaviours.

The Igbo Belief in God and Other Spiritual Forces

God is central in Igbo traditional religious belief. Man is also given a paramount position in Igbo belief system hence in the pyramidal structure of African Traditional Religion by Smith (1950:47, presented below, God was seen at the apex of the pyramid with nature gods and ancestors on the either side and at the base magical powers and at the center is man.



According to Oguejiofor (1996:49), “for the Igbo, existence is meaningful in so far as it affects the life of man”. Given this backdrop, the Igbo religiosity has been explained from the view point of their close relationship with God – Chukwu or Chineke and other pantheon of divinities who are the creator and custodians of morality in the land; Oguejiofor further writes that “the Igbo are religious through and through and their religiosity is best understood in reference to their belief in on uncountable spiritual forces”. The argument here is not concerned with whether the Igbo believe in God or the attributes of the supersensible reality, rather the fact that needs to be stressed is that the Igbo believe in God and also have the fear of God and the ancestors in their day-to-day dealing with human beings.

The recognition of the existence of God, the fear of God and the ancestors which can manifest in keeping the laws of God and taboos of the ancestors, other spiritual forces and man in society, the regular offering and full participation in religious rituals in the community, all help to turn the Igbo adherent to a sacred person who may prefer to work assiduously for the ancestral world as opposed to engaging in corrupt practices here on earth. The English adage, which says that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, is a corollary to the Igbo relationship with god and other spiritual agents as indicated in the smith’s model of African classification of spiritual beings.

The Place of the Ancestors

Ancestral veneration is one of the major elements in the understanding of Igbo Traditional Religion. The recognition, and respect they give to the ancestors are due largely to the fact the ancestors are perceived to be living and keeping surveillance over the affairs of living, (Metuh 1987). The Igbo also believe that the filial love and attachments, which link them with their parents should be constantly greased for continuity of the lineage.

Quartcoopome (1987) is of the view that the serious attachment to the ancestors by the Africans (Igbo) is because the (ancestors) are the guardians of morality and invisible policemen of the individual families. Consequently, any sin or misdeed, no matter how innate, is not ignored by the ancestors and as policemen, they can arrest, subject you to trial and get you incarcerated. The Igbo therefore do not hesitate in taking Oaths by the

names of their progenitors and as a result behave in accordance with the interest of those living dead to avoid any catastrophe that may befall their clan or lineage.

The Igbo Religious Culture

Culture has been defined as “defined as “the totality of the people’s ways of life”, (Adetola and Ademola, 1985:38). This concept of totality consists of such elements as the religious, economic, social, political and educational. The religious culture of the Igbo, which is enshrined in their moral code “Omenala” or “Odinala” – (Literary interpreted as traditional customs), helps to form the good moral characters in the traditional Igbo society. According to Metuh (1987:250) “the Igbo words used in describing abomination or pollution, that is behavior contrary to the laws of the land or ‘earth deity’ are ‘Ajo ihe’ mmehie or nso ala. These words are used when speaking of contraventions against approved social and religious norms”. The implication therefore is that the moral code (Omenala) of the traditional Igbo is hedged round with a lot of taboos (prohibitions). This was why Adibe (1992:15) expressly remarked about taboos and “ Omenala or Omenani” thus:

Taboos and ‘Omenani’ as Igbo moral codes are powerful legal sanctions derived from the deity. On them the faith and moral life of the Igbo people revolve. The ‘Ani or Ala’ deity sanctioned the prohibitions or moral norms and the dead ancestors communicated same to the living. The living makes sure that these prohibitions are not broken because of the destructive consequences it will bring to all of them. Therefore no breach of ‘Omenani’ should go unpunished. These prohibitions give security and solidarity to the Igbo as a people.

From the foregoing, it is clear that taboos and Omenala-traditions of Igbo provide enough security to the Igbo system of life and any one from within or without who ventures to contravene or infringe on these will be severely punished. This scared the lazy and never-do-wells and helped the traditional Igbo society to be run free from corruption and corruptive tendencies.

Implications for Nigeria

Having discussed briefly the Igbo attitudes to corruption and religious culture as they affect the dispensation of justice, social control, and honest leadership in Igbo traditional society, it is imperative to apply the ideas of the sacred with the aim of averting corruption and corruptive tendencies in the Nigerian society.

First and foremost, oath taking is a very common feature of Nigeria socio political life. Elected or appointed public officers, namely Counsellors and Local Governments Chairmen, Governors, Commissioners, President and Ministers on assumption of public office take oath to be loyal to their fatherland, to uphold the principles of justice, equity and honesty. In reality, how effective is the oath people take on assumption of office? How many Nigerians have been tried for acting contrary to the oath they took, except for some few scape goats? But the traditional religious system of Igbo people was effective in checking maladministration and corrupt practices in society.

Whatever the leader does was the collective will of the people and for common good of all since he believes that the ancestors are keeping surveillance over the affairs of the society and that any sin or misdeed, no matter how innate, is not ignored by the ancestors who as invisible policemen, can arrest, subject any culprit to trial and get him incarcerated. This is why empty and unfulfilled promises were unheard of in Igbo traditional society and a person in position of authority could be easily dethroned if found wanting in the discharge of his assigned or appointed duties.

In the Nigeria context people aspiring for public offices make false and frivolous promises to the people without fulfilling same and still go unchallenged. However, what is highly needed in Nigeria is accountability of people in private and public service, as well as justice and punishment of defaulters.

In a bid to have a corrupt-free society, the erroneous concept of power, greatness, and wealth must be de-emphasized in our contemporary society. Nigerians are fond of adopting foreign policies in trying to move the country forward, but what we have not embraced is the right attitude to wealth, and power, among others, which are rudiments of country with high moral or ethical standards. As in the traditional Igbo society, Nigeria should introduce effective sanctions against any individual or public officer found wanting in discharging public duties, as antidotes against corruption.

The problems of Nigeria public officers bothers on quest for materialism, excessive demands and expectations by friends, and relations and as a kinsman, he is expected to dish out money freely to all and

sundry. This creates a negative atmosphere, as he demands kickbacks, claiming thousands for travelling, lodging and scores of other frivolous allowances while the economy suffers setbacks.

In some cases, huge sums of money are siphoned out of the country, lying in the coffers of private banks, so that the family can never be poor in generations to come. The Nigerian attitude towards an honest man who retired from public service with little or nothing is quite pathetic and the obvious and funny story is that he is laughed at as failing to bring honour and wealth to his community and so he is rather looked upon as a misfit. This fact serves as a motivating factor for serving public officers to engage in fraudulent and corrupt activities.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Nigerians need some form of ethical and moral re-orientation and reshaping of their negative value system through a return to our worthy while traditions. Quality leadership in traditional ideology is a sacred divine institution and exercise as well as discharge of responsibilities must be in line with the fear of the supernatural.

Education system is one of the ways of portraying what a nation values and want to achieve, thus sound religious and moral education should be introduced at the various level of our educational system. The reason for advocating; this is that there cannot be development and progress in any nation without honest, right attitude to work, devotion to duty, moral obligation and social responsibility. It is common knowledge that men of character are the conscience of society. It is common a slogan in our convocations that certificates awarded in Nigerian institutions are both in terms of character and learning. Unfortunately, the education of our youths today lacks sufficient moral orientation and this being the case, they suffer from gross intellectual poverty, character and learning. Nwala (1980:301) shares the same view when he stated that “ the most immoral are the elites, be hey in business, teaching , government, professional, military or police uniform”.

In Nigeria today, to tell lies rather than the truth is sign of bravery for the youths who are future leaders. This writer agrees with Abdullahi (1999:11) that “ truth, like medicine, is bitter but necessary” Every Nigerian wants to be instant millionaire. What a betrayal of truth? Richness should not be by fraudulent means but by God’s endowment. The foregoing support the writer’ recommendation for a turn or introduction of moral and religious education at all levels.

In conclusion, corruption in all its ramifications is a heinous crime with serious consequences on social order, politics and economic spheres among others. Combating corruption is not just the task of government, but also of individuals and organizations. Since things have fallen apart in Nigeria, there should be a resort to traditional models of exemplary leadership qualities and administration, usually enforced through various traditional institutions, so that we can track down the man who engages in ritual killings in his private room in urban centres, the drug trafficker, the government officers who embezzles huge sums of worker’s salaries, the trader who sells fake and adulterate commodities, the teacher who assist in perpetrating examination malpractices, the banker who forges the signature of his manager, and all the rest of us who are engaged in one corrupt practices or the other and thereby making this society free and enjoyable for all of us and the battle against corruption won.

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