

Modern Nigeria and the Roots of Corruption: A Historico-Philosophical Reflection

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Abstract

It is very difficult if not impossible to come to term with a universally accepted definition of corruption. Basically, however, it is admitted almost all over the world that corruption or corrupt behaviour involves the violation of established rules for personal gain and profit. In other words corruption is an illegal exchange. The main thrust of this paper therefore, is to demonstrate that the so-called “institutionalized corruption” in modern Nigeria is the result of the loss of the Nigerian identity to the benefit of colonialism and imperialism. From historical perspective, it is evident that pre-colonial Africans in general and Nigerians in particular, were honest, humble and disciplined people with a high sense of love, justice and equity. This study made use of secondary data that were subjected to internal appraisal. This paper posits that there is a strong correlation between corruption and capitalism which appear to be the by-products of colonialism and imperialism in modern Africa. The paper then recommends that if modern Nigerians genuinely and effectively desire to address the issue of corruption there appears to be no other alternative than to go back to traditional or pre-colonial societal values of Africa because a person’s personality and integrity are rooted in his or her culture.

Keywords: Corruption, Colonialism, Culture, Imperialism and Modern Nigeria.

Introduction

Corruption is not only as old as the existence of mankind, it is also known as one of societies’ greatest obstacle to development. One of its main features is that it does not discriminate. For instance, democratic, dictatorial and feudal politics as well as capitalism and socialist economies are not immune to corruption. It does not matter whether a society is Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. Corruption in Africa is said to be one reason why the Continent is so deeply in debt, poverty, famine and deaths (Dieg and Theobald, 2000).

In modern Nigeria for instance, corruption has permeated the psyche of the nation’s political leaders, bureaucrats and even the ordinary citizen (Nnamdi; 2012:2). In Nnamdi’s words corruption in Nigeria today “seems more of an aspect of the nation’s political culture, and social norm than a social vice”. However, the central issue of this paper revolves around considerations like: Was Nigeria originally corrupt? Is corruption a Nigerian-made behaviour/attitude? If no, why has corruption become so endemic in the country? Is there any difference between pre-colonial and modern Nigerian life styles? Can modern Nigeria as a nation genuinely tackle corruption without going back to its roots? Is there any relationship between Nigerian corruption and colonization/imperialism? etc. These are crucial issues that need to be addressed if the challenge of corruption is to be tackled in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular.

Reactions to the above questions will help the authors of this paper in articulating the issue of modern Nigeria and the roots of corruption. In the first instance, the authors will make the reader appreciate the fact that even though corruption is as old as the existence of mankind, it is far from being Nigerian made. Secondly, the reader will have the opportunity to learn that the so-called “institutionalized” corruption in modern Nigeria is the result of the loss of the Nigerian identity to the benefit of colonialism and imperialism. The reader will also learn that in pre-colonial Nigeria people were honest, humble and disciplined with a high sense of love, justice and equity. In all, the reader will also appreciate the fact that: if modern Nigerians genuinely and effectively desire to address the issue of corruption, there in no other alternative than to go back to their traditional societal values.

Pre-Colonial Nigeria and Corruption

The main business of this section, as mentioned earlier, is to make the reader appreciate the fact that even though corruption is as old as the existence of mankind, it (corruption) is far from being a Nigerian made behaviour or attitude. We want to demonstrate that before the incursion of colonialism and imperialism in Africa which brought in capitalism as a way of life, social vices such as corruption, dishonesty, crimes, violence etc. were very minimal if not inexistent. This section therefore claims that in pre-colonial Nigeria, corruption was very minimal or almost inexistent. This is evidenced in traditional Nigerian system of education, politics, economy, social organization, religion and morality.

Religion and Morality

As Bassey Andah points out: “the cultural heritage of Africans is pre-eminently religious and cannot be divorced from politics, philosophy or economics. African religious concepts involve the African Universe” (1988:110). Religion provided a strict moral code for most traditional African communities and Nigeria is not an exception. However, it is very important to note here that unlike Western religions, most traditional African thought does

not conceive the source of evil to be a fallen god or spirit like Satan or the devil. Rather, traditional African people believed in the immortality of dead ancestors. Such belief helped to bind present living members of family and lineage together especially in times of crisis and difficulties. This function as it was believed, raised the ancestors above the transitory human level and invested them with social significance beyond all. Besides, pre-colonial Africans in general and Nigerians in particular, believed that the source of evil was located in the human world among the ambitions and jealousies of men. To paraphrase B. Andah (1988), the source of evil in pre-colonial Nigeria is thus “demonic humanity: the witch or sorcerer” (106). This was why unlike Western religions, the rights and duties sanctioned by the ancestors both defined and regulated basic social and political relations in traditional Nigeria.

As already mentioned, in pre-colonial Nigeria, gods and ancestors were perceived to play the ‘witnesses’ and ‘guarantors’. They punished men in order to correct immoral behaviour such as lie, stealing and sex-related offences. It is on record that in pre-colonial Nigeria, for someone to convince others that what he or she is saying is the truth, he or she had to swear by a god. The simple reason being that, if it turned out not being the truth, the sanction was punishment by the gods within a stipulated period. This was the same with the case of stealing. History has it that if someone’s things were stolen, the person could invoke a curse publicly. And, if the stolen items were not returned within stipulated period the culprit was expected to be punished in a specific way as requested. This could happen either through fatal accident, mishap or otherwise.

The belief in punishment by the gods or ancestors made adultery or sexual recklessness almost inexistent in pre-colonial Nigeria. In traditional Nigeria, young girls were expected to remain virgin till marriage. Even, after marriage, they were expected to be faithful to their husbands or else childbirth would be impaired by the gods. The dignity of every family was dependent on the status of the young girl before and during marriage. The shame of being declared impure often acted as a serious deterrent to young girls.

For instance, in Onisha society of the eastern part of Nigeria, religion remains a binding force. There is a strong connection between religion and kinship in the Igbo Social System. According to Andah “the Igbo conception of the cosmos is essentially religious and through the idea of god (chi) man becomes a microcosm of the universe and the universe becomes moral in man’s image” (1988:81,79). In Igbo traditional religion, Chukwu is the creator of the visible and invisible universe, but the government of the world has been entrusted by him directly to the good spirits and sometimes partly to the bad spirits, and indirectly to the ancestors.

In Igbo cosmology, all the necessary and indispensable benefits to their life, or that of their families and villages come from Chukwu through the spirits and ancestors, in the form of a providential, daily help, health, the fertility and fecundity of their children and so on. An average Igbo person knows that every just desire rises up to Chukwu in the form of prayer and sacrifice, still through the spirits and ancestors. The Igbo society strongly believe that this continuous exchange between Chukwu and them through the spirits and ancestors, preserves the balance of the world which is however unstable.

Witchcraft was also believed by most Nigerians. As it were, it is a supernatural power used to do evil and cause sickness. However, sequel to the nature of the belief system of traditional or pre-colonial Nigerians, witchcraft happened to play a positive role as far as social order and harmony are concerned. History has it that in some parts of pre-colonial Nigeria, in the Niger Delta, to be more precise, witchcraft was used as check. It is on record that the belief and fear of witchcraft helped many communities to check selfishness and ensured for example, that the rich shared wealth with others if not they would be victims. The belief in witchcraft also ensured that the poor were not oppressed by the rich and powerful, witchcraft helped to restrain ostentation and related vices. Witchcraft made people believe that the spirit of a person killed will torment and haunt the killer; that God or a god oversees everything people are doing and will mete out rewards and punishment accordingly. In such communities, there was no place for foul play and anti-social behaviour.

Social order/Organization

Despite “the colonial image, which presents pre-colonial Africa as a collection of tiny groups torn by internal strife and tribal warfare sociologically frozen at the stage of a protozoan or amoeba”, (Ki-zerbo, 1962) there is no doubt that pre-colonial African society was highly organised and free from institutionalized corruption. Africans share the same cardinal values: Love, Truth, Justice and Freedom. Other Values such as the authority of the old, solidarity and hospitality were felt and practiced all over Africa and Nigerians is not an exception.

In traditional Nigeria for instance, the notion of property was defined in terms of the family, community or the village and not in terms of the individual (Ngamen, 2010:191). Hospitality was the direct social consequence of solidarity. History tells us that there was nothing like orphans in pre-colonial Nigeria. The country was a ‘classless’ society and therefore egalitarian/equalitarian. It was a society based on the principle according to which “to each according to his need” There was nothing like capitalism with its attendant consequences which are bribery and corruption. Religious wars were absent in pre-colonial Nigeria.

Unlike Western societies, kinship system or family group constituted the backbone of pre-colonial Nigerian system of government. It is on record that the key to the pre-colonial Nigerian culture was ethnic

system, and the bases of the ethnic system were the family group and age-grades, which between them shaped the character and determined the outlook of every man, woman and child. As mentioned earlier, in pre-colonial Nigeria, no one was an isolated individual and everybody's life was founded on this fact economically, psychologically, physically and spiritually. A man or woman was honoured by being addressed as somebody's parent, uncle or aunt. (Ngamen, 2012:45)

Besides, there was no individual titles existing and the land belonged to everyone in the community. Complaints, party systems, wars of capital versus labor were very rare. Paupers were unknown, there existed fairly uniform prosperity and rare social harmony. (Onwuejeogwu, 1978) It is interesting to note that in traditional Nigerian society, the extremes of poverty and wealth, hardship and soul-destroying luxury, prostitution, social unrest were absent.

Education

It is on record that there existed informal educational apparatus in pre-colonial Nigeria and in most African countries. Contrary to what is obtainable in Western cultures, History tells us that in traditional Nigeria, in most cases, youths rather learned in an "open air environment" and under the tutelage of an elderly family member. Market squares, streets and work places were known as places to acquire first-hand information. In African tradition, nature itself is a great teacher. B. Andah (1988:247) sums it up this way:

- In pre-colonial Nigeria system of education, public information was diffused by troubadours, street singers, dancers, actors or story tellers. (247).
- The transmission of official news from the central administration to the people was the responsibility of guild of town criers.
- Major events in the history of a community and outstanding accomplishments of some prominent individuals in that society was carried out by family griots or raconteurs.
- Oral reciters were found in every institution from family lineage to guilds in order to keep the history, tradition and culture of the community.
- The Western-like classrooms were replaced by market places, community wells and the ceremonial parade ground in front of the palace.

All this was done with Love, Justice, Truth and equity – characteristics of African cardinal values.

Corruption in Modern Nigeria

This section is an attempt to demonstrate that the so-called "institutionalized corruption" in modern Nigeria is as the result of the loss of the Nigerian identity to the benefit of colonialism and imperialism. In fact, there is a strong correlation between corruption and capitalism considered here as a western way of life.

Even though "apologists for European imperialism claim that colonial administration established peace and unity, a stable and uniform currency, easy communication, promoted large scale economic organization and increased demand for goods" – (B. Andah, 1988:247) this is far from denying the fact that the same colonialism brought into Africa many disastrous consequences. According to Albert Memi (1965), we have no idea what the colonized would have been without colonization, but we certainly see what has happened as a result of it. To subdue and exploit, the colonizer pushed the colonized out of his historical and social, cultural and technical current. Clarno and Falola (1998) contend that corruption in modern Nigeria arises from a mal-distribution and misuse of power which in turn arise from the combination of two sources: traditional and colonial power structures. They insist that traditionally, Nigerian ethnic groups had organized their societies along patriarchal lines. The relationships were those in which power was concentrated in the hands of one person who used it to protect his numerous dependents. Surprisingly, this relationship did not see forced tributes which the dependent groups and individuals pay nowadays to the central power in the light of corruption.

While questioning the ability of President Muhammadu Buhari administration in winning the current anti-graft war, this is what David Ibiyeomie, a famous Port-Harcourt based tele-evangelist has to say: the root cause of corruption in modern Nigeria remains tribalism. (The Guardian 2015:9). He further explained that the seed of corruption was sown by the colonial masters by dividing the nation along regional lines before independence, thus inculcating in the psyche of modern Nigerians regional and tribal consciousness. According to him, the British government before lowering the Union Jack flag ensured that Nigerians remained a divided people who would rather choose to identify themselves first by tribes and not citizenship. This made it impossible for Nigerians to be objective in their assessing of the political leadership since 1960, the cleric concluded.

Mamadu Dia (1962:34 – 37) contends that: "since colonial power imposed the domination of foreign capitalism everywhere, there is naturally, in the mind of proletarian nations, complete identification between capitalism and colonialism between the political system and the economic system".

The negative impact of colonization is felt in almost every aspect of life in modern Nigeria. In his book titled *African Anthropology*, Bassey Andah highlights some of the negative impacts of colonization and

imperialism on modern Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular. According to him: “Western type technology also introduced on a massive scale, has modified or is profoundly modifying interpersonal relationships, hitherto marked by the warmth of historical and mythical ties” (90). More so, Western culture and technology have continued to “disorganize the integrating patterns and to cause confusion and conflict both between members of families and group organizations”. (90). The national societies in particular no longer have the same homogeneous and unitary aspects. They are no longer whole, but are rather increasingly fissured and fragmented. The resultant is the existence of two often diametrically opposed worlds; the ‘classical’ and the ‘modern’ (90). According to him, “In the face of the chaos and confusion following from three to four hundred years of trafficking in human beings, it was possible for Europeans to inject their capital and technical skill unchallenged” (247 – 248). The Europeans introduced and imposed a cash crop economy and free trade in Nigeria. Even though these brought some “ultimate economic benefits”, the fact still remains that they “were normally oriented to the industries, business concerns and other economic interests of the European powers”. For Andah, “such new economic interests and institutions ruined the native craft industry and retarded the development of local industries, arts and technological systems” (248). He insists that Europeans are the ones who introduced the concepts of property and debt into pre-colonial Nigeria. These concepts destabilized and brought a lot of confusion in the socio-political system of traditional Nigeria. The notions of property and debt triggered off the spirit of individualism and competition among Nigerians. In Andah’s own words “often, such a policy ultimately favoured concentration of landed wealth in the hands of those quickest in adopting these new ideas” (248). The breakdown of the extended family in Nigeria today is one of the consequences of the introduction of European economic and other social institutions. With the substantial advent of Europeans, following on the trans-Atlantic slave trade era, traditional Nigerian societies embraced various ways of life hitherto unknown to them. For instance, they were faced with Christianity and Islam as new religious creeds. In the name of competition for economic gains, traditional Nigerians began to embrace legislation affecting their former life style. For instance, in the case of marriage practices, attention was shifted from polygamy to monogamy, biological mothers and less so fathers are becoming the owners of their children, in such settings often investing these with different promises and values. The idea of dowry became problematic. In the name of wealth, women began to work in order to gain their independence vis-a-vis their male counterparts. This was very pronounced among the Tiv and Nupe ethnic groups in modern Nigeria. In these ethnic groups, women have virtually taken over trading. Most of them are wealthier than their husbands thus making them independent in their homes. A situation that contradicts or corrupts the traditional Nigerian life style.

In Eastern Nigeria, especially with the Igbo ethnic group, the situation was slightly different from that of the Tiv and Nupe. To paraphrase B. Andah, among the Igbos there was more of a joint effort between women and men. (1988:248). Through their wealth some Igbo women became strong politicians either via trade or education. This gave them a sense of confidence and independence.

As mentioned above, the introduction of western life style supported by capitalist spirit gave new dimensions to the concepts of polygamy, dowry and kinship systems. B. Andah notes that, at the outset, or in the “real” traditional Nigeria society dowry was in the nature of a compensation. Under the patrilineal kinship system as practiced in pre-colonial Nigeria “the social group lost all rights over the offspring of the woman who entered her husband’s group together with all right to benefit by her labour, her original group there received material goods in “exchange” cattle, clothing, cloth, and money” (B. Andah, 1988:248-49). With the advent of western life style, the subgroup system got replaced by a dominant subordinate relationship of the class society type, the dowry system was changed. It took on a commercial character and became a means whereby the heads of families could acquire large sums of money and quantities of cattle, or some other form of livestock as the case maybe” (B. Andah, 1988:249) No serious social thinker would deny this as the beginning of corruption in a given society, because in the name of capitalism which means ‘profit’ there is no way illegal exchange can be avoided.

Nigerian Identity and Corruption

In this section, we are to demonstrate that if modern Nigerians genuinely and effectively desire to address and redress the issue of corruption, the best alternative would be to go back to their traditional societal values, that is, to be themselves.

We are our culture. A person’s personality and integrity are rooted in his culture. Culture itself is the sum total of a way of life of a particular set of people. Based on what is going on today in Africa as a whole, it is obvious that there is an urgent need to decolonize our current cultural mentality. The loud condemnation from the Western quarter, which state that the Bantu in common with other Negro are, among other things, cruel, devoid of the virtues of truth and honesty, possessed of strong animal passions and extremely, lustful hopelessly lazy, irresponsible as children, shameless and immodest. (Molema, 1969) simply shows that in their imperialistic and racist journey, Westerners refused to study and understand the African. The outside world thinks it knows the man of Africa. Still the notions of Europeans are extremely vague about the man (E. W. Blyden, 1967). It is a

fact that colonialism, slave trade and racism are the major reasons behind such attitude. These factors have introduced waste and disorder into Africa and prevented the progress of the people.

It is striking and very funny to discover that till date, an average white man considers the Negro as being the European in embryo. Meanwhile according to E. W Blyden (1967). “the Negro and European races do not move in the same groove, on the contrary, they move on parallel lines with a limitless distance between them. It is common knowledge that no amount of training or culture will make the Negro a European; on the other hand, no lack of training or deficiency of culture will make the European a Negro. We should always bear in mind that there is no common yardstick in measuring the moral character of every nation. The people of one nation measure the moral character of the nation by their own ethical standard. As the case maybe, the Bantu people have their own moral code which differs very much from those of other nations. Their ethical beliefs are peculiar to them. Besides, the difference in moral standard does not make one nation “superior” or “inferior” to the other.

It is on record that Westerners came to Africa with the mandate to completely annex the mentality and concepts of the black people. They made Africans understand that being different means being “inferior”. They refused to study and understand the people of Africa. Instead, they categorically and blindly condemned everything African. They took particular interest in African religion, music, medicine and even African proper names. In their attempt to impose their culture on Africans, white men succeeded in dividing parents from children, villages from villages, tribes from tribes and to a large extent, countries from countries.

The Way Forward

The best way forward is a reconsideration of our traditional or pre-colonial societal values. In other words, cultural decolonization is the only viable way for now, to a genuine and durable development in this twenty-first century Africa, and Nigeria is not an exception. This is to be done through the self-actualization of Nigerians and the promotion of Nigerian culture and personality. Nigerians need to regain themselves, trace their steps and look inward. Instead of being ridiculed sometimes by fellow Nigerians, we believe that culture and personality should rather be the bedrock of unity and progress in modern Nigeria.

Alex Quaison – Sackey (1963) defines African personality as “the cultural expression of what is common to all people whose home is on the continent of Africa”. However, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah appears to be the first African scholar to have given a modern connotation to the concept of African personality. It is on record that during the first conference of independent African states held in Accra in April, 1958, he stated as follows: “for too long in our history, Africa has spoken through the voices of others. Now, what I have called an African personality in international affairs will have a chance of making its proper impact and will let the world know it through the voices of Africa’s own sons.” For Sackey (1963), the African personality is to be defined not only by what it is in the process of becoming, but also by what it was not permitted to become during the century or more of colonial domination, oppression and exploitation.

In his book entitled, *Ethiopia Unbound*, Casely Hayford states that African personality will have its full meaning only and only if Africans are themselves, become themselves. They should not imitate the Europeans. Rather, they should preserve their African culture, the traditions and customs, handed down to them by their ancestors. According to Hayford, African personality was in full bloom before the gigantic incursions of the Europeans. For instance, African personality was in action in the great empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai, also in the powerful kingdoms of Ashanti, Ife and Benin; all of which flourished centuries before the Europeans arrived Africa. Contrastingly, these empires and their rules were relegated, by the colonial powers, to the realm of those things best forgotten. White men said to one another, after all, why let the African learn anything of his past, he might glory in it and reject our God-given duty to civilize and develop him. This is why it is very urgent for the present-day African to rediscover, to re-create, in order to understand who he is, whence he comes; and since he knows that no personality can be fully and effectively realized except in the open air of freedom and independence, he must not only obtain these conditions for himself but recover what his ancestors once had achieved before they finally succumbed, through conquest, bribery, treachery and bad faith, to Western powers.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the twenty-first century African man is condemned to emerge not only culturally and politically but psychologically as well. Besides, we must always bear in mind that African personality is a revolutionary concept. Revolutionary in the sense that its immediate practical aim was to sustain the African nationalist in the struggle against colonialism and then, at the proper time to help him revolt; to revolt first of all, against the feelings that had been inculcated in him that his own institutions, his own culture and even his own personality were inferior therefore under-developed and secondly, that it was “civilized” to accept alternatives introduced by the colonizers

In addition, the concept of African personality will help Africans to secure a rightful place in the harmony of all nations; it will make the world realize that it will not find its true balance, will not become what it aspires to become until the African affirmation has been made and the countries of Africa assume their rightful place among other nations of the world. It is evident that the realization of the African personality is not an easy

task because the affirmation of the African personality, especially by its modern standard – bearers, promises the dawn of a new era of peace in which power may be measured not by the quantities of armaments but by the quality of morality. It is therefore for African leaders to realize the great responsibility they are carrying on behalf of Africa and Nigeria should not be an exception.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In his opening speech in May 29, 2015 this is what Muhammadu Buhari, the current Nigerian President had to say “if Nigeria does not kill corruption, corruption will kill Nigeria”. This paper has therefore attempted to demonstrate that the so-called “institutionalized corruption” in modern Nigeria is mainly due to the loss of the Nigerian identity to the benefit of colonialism and imperialism. It is the opinion of this paper that pre-colonial Nigerians were honest, humble and disciplined people with a high sense of love, justice and equity. During our research, we observed that there is a strong correlation between corruption, and capitalism which appear to be the by-products of colonialism and imperialism in modern Nigeria. We are our culture and besides, a person’s personality and integrity are rooted in his culture. In line with the above, the following recommendations appear very necessary:

- Every Nigerian, irrespective of age or gender, should be proud of his or her original and natural identity.
- Nigerians should understand that being different from Westerners does not make them inferior people.
- Nigerian men and women should bear in mind that no amount of training or culture will ever make a black man become white also, no lack of training or deficiency of culture will ever make the European become Negro.
- Nigerians should understand that cultural difference is never a curse.
- Nigerians should make effort to genuinely decolonize their current cultural mentality by emphasizing their Africanness in thought, value and behaviour.
- Modern Nigerians should, as a matter of urgency, promote their traditional societal values through the actualization of their culture and personality.
- Modern Nigerians should retrace their steps, look inward in order to regain themselves.

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