

# Corruption and Nigeria's Underdevelopment: a Religious Approach

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## Abstract

The index of Nigeria's underdevelopment is her very low per capita income. This is not based on the level of the Nation's material poverty hence it is a well known fact that Nigeria is wealthier than many of the developed countries of the world in terms of natural, material and even human endowments. Rather, the problem to a great degree, hinges on the level of corruption within the Country's leadership. The purpose of this paper is not necessarily to state the obvious fact that corruption is one of the greatest banes of Nigeria's development but to examine the nature of corruption in the Country in the light of religious ethics and; on the basis of the findings, to proffer a number of recommendations towards achieving a lasting solution to the problem of corruption in the Country. The data for this work were collected from literature and internet sources which were subsequently analyzed and descriptively presented in accordance with sociological research methodology. The solution to the problem of corruption in Nigeria is achievable through a holistic program of socio-cultural re-orientation of the citizenry. This program should be organized in the context of the communities of adherents of the two foreign religions in Nigeria – Islam and Christianity. The essence of the program is to implant in the consciences of Nigerian Christians and Muslims the cultural value of the common good with which Africans were identified before the advent of Islamic and Christian religions. It is a well known fact that those who perpetrate and propagate corruption in Nigeria are the educated Christians and Muslims and not the adherents of the traditional religion.

**Keywords:** Corruption, Capitalism, Materialism, Development and Underdevelopment

## 1. Introduction

Corruption is the most endemic pathological challenge to national development and survival in Nigeria. It has eaten deep into the marrow of public offices, civil service, politics and even religious leadership in the Country. It is now difficult to know who to trust in the Nigerian society. The main instruments of development are depleted by evasion, which leaves the state treasury empty. The allotments from the treasury are eroded by the corruption of project administration at every level (Agha, 2012). Contracts are never executed because the money is embezzled and shared. Integrity is shamelessly slaughtered at the altar of bribery and corruption by public office holders.

Corruption has been defined by the Cambridge Advanced Learners dictionary as “an illegal, immoral or dishonest behaviour, especially by people in positions of authority”. Thus, corruption generally refers to any act of illegality, immorality and dishonesty but, conventionally and for the purpose of this research, it implies acts of financial and material dishonesty.

Corruption in Nigeria is a product of capitalism. In other words, capitalism is the mother of corruption in Nigeria and Africa in general, while materialism is her “elder sibling”. When Karl Marx predicted that capitalism will sow the seeds of its own destruction, he meant that capitalist societies will create the necessary conditions that will give rise to revolutions ([www.sociology.org.uk](http://www.sociology.org.uk)). Such conditions include corruption, exploitation, mass unemployment and dehumanization of the working class by the owners of the capital, thereby giving rise to frustration and depression (Giddens, 1981).

Definitively, capitalism is a system where an individual can own and control a lot of wealth and use it to create more wealth for himself (Giddens, 1981). It is in sharp contrast with communalism which is the African traditional socio-economic system whereby Africans were their brothers' keepers in matters of economic production and possession. With the advent of capitalism with its associated individualism and private ownership of capital, African communalism with its characteristic extended family system gave way to individualistic struggle for private wealth production (Chukwuezi, 2000). This was the condition that gave rise to corruption in Africa, otherwise corruption was not known during the communalist era.

There was a period when the modern capitalist system increased the well-being of significant members of the society as a bi-product of seeking out profit for a few, but today the quest for profits comes into sharp conflict with people's demand for the society leadership to seek the common interest and not just a few in the corridor of socio-economic power. Today capitalism has given rise to materialism which is a situation of high level of greed

and unbridled ambition for excessive material wealth which in turn breeds corruption, especially in Africa and in Nigeria in particular.

## 2. Corruption as a materialistic tendency in Nigeria

Corruption in Nigeria is characteristically materialistic. Materialism constitutes one of the major roots of all vices such as bribery and corruption, kidnapping, armed robbery, terrorism, etc. that are perpetrated in the Nigerian society today. People emphasize material prosperity at the expense of integrity. Hobbes claims that there could be a right to material wealth only if it was acquired according to the stipulations of the law (Samuel, 1996:2820). Locke in Agha (2012:19) maintains that “the right to private property precedes the civil law, for it is grounded in natural moral law”. Therefore there is absolutely nothing wrong in a person having material wealth. But the attitude of pursuit of material wealth by all means is not only materialistic but often results in corruption. Materialism has long been accustomed to onslaught from those who oppose over acquisition of material wealth at the expense of others. It has been treated as an enemy by the church, the moralists and those who want to maintain the *status quo*. Today, with the increasing spate of bribery and corruption, the indictment proceedings from those who want immediate social change in Nigeria affected have increased their agitation. It is well known that everything for which materialists acquire is put in peril in time of war or natural disaster in the world. At crisis, its ideals and glory are equally challenged and engulfed. Common belief is that materialism flourishes only in times of fair social weather.

The term “materialism” as used in this paper does not refer to the philosophical concept which explains matter as everything in the world, including man, which is opposed to spirit. On the contrary, the term is used ideologically to refer to excessive quest for or pursuit of material wealth.

Nigerians have become very materialistic to the extent that religious communities are not exception. In Nigeria today family survival depends largely on the amount of material wealth at the disposal of parents. The needed pleasure and sensuality in the family can hardly be found in a poor family. Consequently, most Nigerians in the present century are working hard to grab the National cake by all means, Christians and Muslims alike.

In the Nigerian society today materialism and politics have become synonymous so much that only those who are rich run for political position because they can afford to bribe their way through. The major political objective now is no longer to develop the Nation or Society but to accumulate wealth for themselves and their unborn generations. This has informed the mad rush into politics at all cost including human lives. In the political life of a nation, corruption arises out of the notion that those who have and those who have not experienced material wealth are equal in some respects, but are unequal absolutely in financial and property possession. Chuta (2004:23) hence laments that:

The sad thing about the materialist in Nigeria is that he is highly admired and then revered by the majority of the people. That is what makes him thrive in the society. As long as he gives money to people to support project in the community and at times, the Church, no one appears to be concerned about how he makes his money.

The experience of great material wealth would invariably lead to lack of patriotism if the wealth was acquired at the expense of the nation's economy.

Today in Nigeria, materialism and its offspring, namely corruption, are experienced in an invigorating social atmosphere. This has resulted in a new definition of wealth as when some politicians say that it is an “end to life” instead of a means to an end. It has also led to new definitions of bribery and corruption as the duo has been referred to these days in terms of “behaviour”, “greeze”, “torch”, etc. Many Nigerians claim that material wealth is an expression of good life no matter how it is acquired. No wonder some people have used their parents, children or loved ones, for money rituals.

To this effect, Nigeria was rated the most corrupt country in the world in 1999 (Chuta, 2004). Reacting to this situation in his broadcast of 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2000 shortly after his assumption of office as an elected President of Nigeria, Obasanjo said, “Corruption is simply bad for the nation. To condone corruption is not only unpatriotic, but also irreligious for Christians and Muslims” (Chuta, 2004:36).

There is therefore urgent need for Nigerians to re-evaluate their traditional philosophy that would discover “the germ of materialism imbedded in it”, so as to help the nation “out of the various circles of corruption and decaying spiritualism. According to Scott in Agha (2012:22), Nigerians have to indicate “the way to achieve real spiritual freedom offered by the material philosophy”. Certainly, materialism is the source of political, and to a great extent, even religious power in Nigeria today. Those who are materially blessed see themselves as the Lords in the society; even those who acquired their wealth through fraudulent means are proudly parading themselves as the blessed of the Lord. Materialism has ruined the political process in Nigeria.

The love and desire for materialism has contributed in no small way, to moral deficiency; virtue and human dignity have been shun and thrown overboard. The divine right permits every individual to inherit material goods from parents. The desire to get rich overnight drives some people to steal, embezzle public funds, indulge in human sacrifice and to kill others. It is the source of the various evils in the Nigerian society today.

The desire to acquire great wealth is one of the causes of proliferation of churches and corruption among pastors in Nigeria. It is a source of religious influence and respect. A Sociologist, Peter Berges in Agha (2012:20) lamented that the only important sphere of influence religion retains today is within the family – that is on a personal level. Materialism has been the major cause of religious apathy in many Nigerians as it has led to the establishment of religious service in every garage and in every available classroom in Schools. Religion is no longer seen as the moral cohesive force in our contemporary society. Materialism has taken the upper hand. Statism, secularism and political ideologies, rather than religion have become the major sources of crisis and division.

### **3. Corruption and Development in Nigeria**

Corruption is a bane to national development the world over. In Nigeria, the problem is peculiarly hydra-headed. The present researchers consider it as the strongest factor of underdevelopment in the Country. Okeke (2002:128) laments that, “The problem of corruption among developing nations particularly Nigeria has reached epidemic proportions and it appears to be defying solution. Corruption in Nigeria has long been recognized as a very serious national malaise. It is one of the greatest obstacles to nation building: the most aggravating and disastrous social problem in Nigeria. As Onah and Ugwu (2008:64) observed “institutionalized corruption is at the root of the social, political and economic problems of Nigeria, and has in essence, impoverished the greater majority of the Nigerian people”. The BBC English Dictionary (1992:254) quips that corruption in any form entails dishonesty, something that is illegal and morally wrong. Obasanjo (1980:15) claims that it is the general public that are more often than not the victim and that successful prosecution of the offenders is usually problematic.

Corruption in Nigeria is cancerous. A flood of resources put into the pipeline at one end come out from the other end reduced to a trickle or even swindled. Some times corruption takes the form of “legitimate” expenditures, such as bullet proof cars, building estates in every capital city, new road construction, etc. The abysmal poverty of the masses contrasts sharply with the astronomic material wealth of a handful of politicians, landlords, businessmen and other tycoons. The stratification in the wealth in Nigeria is much sharper than in the developed nations. Corruption breeds poverty, which gives birth to strife and rancor. No wonder St Augustine of Hippo (1917-1920) affirms that when government becomes corrupt rebellion may be ethically obligatory.

It is true that scientific and technological skills and tools are the greatest means to social development but this is not as serious as lack of integrity. Unfortunately, Nigerian leaders lack both integrity and the basic important factors to really develop the nation’s society and economy with the rich resources with which she is endowed. Thus, lack of knowledge, skills and in most cases, the means to develop the economy contributes in making the nation poorer and more dependent on the developed nations of the world. A nation like Nigeria that has an uncontrollable sense of dependence on other nations cannot but suffer underdevelopment. Pierre Jailee (1960:64) corroborates this point in his analysis of the Third world economic crisis thus, “the Third world is growing more and more dependent on the developed capitalist countries which depend less and less on the Third world”. The above situation is very typical of Nigeria’s economic condition, hence her low level of social development.

The clearest index of Nigeria’s underdevelopment is her low per capita income. Developed countries of the world have per capita income as high as \$39,000 and above while that of Nigeria is \$2,748 (World Bank, 2010). Other indices of Nigeria’s underdevelopment include lack of adequate Medicare, poor transportation and communication, unemployment, poor minimum wage, low quality of food intake in terms of dietary standard, lack of portable water supply, environmental pollution and degradation, etc. Comparatively, however, it appears incontrovertible that the problem associated with the leadership of the Country is the greatest challenge to social and economic development in the Country. This becomes clear when one considers the fact that there are countries, even in Africa, that are worse hit with factors of underdevelopment, yet they are more developed than Nigeria.

The problem of corruption in Nigeria is complicated by bad leadership (Achebe 1983). Basically, in this respect, Nigeria lacks stable democracy, free press and political associations. A country that had totalitarian regimes or dictatorial military administration through the greater part of her existence as a nation like Nigeria usually lags behind in matters of development fundamentally, because of corruption among her leaders. Conversely, corruption does not have room in the developed European and American countries because they have people-oriented democratic system of administration and rule of law where freedom of association, expression, etc. is maintained; human rights are observed; the judiciary is independent and citizens are politically responsive. But in Nigeria, like in many African countries, the citizenry are experiencing one form of dictatorial regime or the other where the political leaders are practically above the law. Even the democracy that is enthroned in the Country is quite fragile and not people-oriented. There are various machinations to subvert the will of the people. Accountability is not the watchword of the leaders. This is the bed rock of corruption in the national life of the Nigeria.

The gravity of this national problem lies on the fact that it does not only entail the political leaders wantonly

carting away the nation's financial wealth but worse than that, it entails black-naming and blacklisting the Country thereby making it difficult for her to attract foreign investments. How then can the Country develop beyond the status quo left behind by the colonial masters and her founding fathers? Thus, apparently, the indigenous political leaders of the Country are more responsible for the Country's underdevelopment than the colonial administrators.

With this, we disagree with Rodney's assertion that "Europe underdeveloped Africa" (1972:1). It is rather the materialistic and corrupt tendencies of African leaders more than any other factor that is the bane of Africa's development. Even though there are other factors of socio-economic underdevelopment in Africa which, undoubtedly constitute the fundamental challenges to development in Nigeria as discussed above, yet those factors could not have taken much stranglehold on the Country's development if corruption was not there.

#### **4. Wealth Devoid of Corruption: Moral and Religious Perspective**

In the words of Agha (2003:40) "materialism in the moral context presupposes freedom to accumulate great material substance in the right and honourable way guided by moral principles". Agha (2003) quips that morality is an integral part of religion because both of them emphasize human personality in its relationships and both are concerned with conduct. Fagothy (1953:341) sees morality as that quality in human acts which is called "right" or "wrong" "good" or "evil". It is a term used to refer to the goodness or badness of a human act without specifying which (Agha, 2003:40). Titus (1957:181) claims that:

Human conduct creates baffling problems because it is deceptive when least expected and yet it can lead men on to clear conviction as to what is right and what is wrong. What actions constitute standard of moral judgment to which human conduct must conform so as to be regarded as right or wrong? In the general sense, the word right implies conformity to Custom, Law, Conscience and some external authority.

The above statement alludes to the fact that the ownership of material wealth can only be regarded as right if the acquisition conforms to the norms of the society by which the action is judged. Fagothy (1953:62) quips that pleasure is the purpose of life, and that both sensuous and intellectual pleasure combined together may not give the type of pleasure that material substance will give. Material wealth and the love for it may serve as a double-edged sword. Materialism can be the source of power as well as the source of fear. It can as well corrupt a person absolutely.

Thomas Aquinas (1982, 264) asserted that the greatest human good is happiness, the end to which all others are subordinate. On the other hand, he opines that it would be pernicious to a degree, if happiness were a matter of good luck, for that would mean that all other goods would be even more fortuitous, therefore, any attempt to lead a good life would go by the board. According to Aquinas wealth which is the source of happiness, are basically two types – natural and artificial. Natural wealth include: food, drink, clothing, shelter and supplies of natural needs. Artificial wealth is 'money' which was created to facilitate exchange of goods and services. There is also the mineral wealth.

Natural wealth was created to support human nature therefore it cannot be ultimate because it is subservient to man himself. On the other hand artificial wealth has its last end, as it is only a means to natural wealth. From the natural and mineral wealth man creates artificial wealth. Aquinas (1982:153) maintains that these can also be referred to as material wealth. It is only a right understanding of the above analysis that can bring about morality to bear in materialism.

The experience of materialism should be guided by the principle of morality because it could have great effect on the political, religious, and social life of an individual positively or negatively. Aristotle asserted equivocally that property should be privately owned but its use should be common. However, if the use of wealth becomes common, then the enjoyment of a family wealth will disappear. Yet there are some materialists who refuse their family the enjoyment of their great wealth. Such attitude will be morally wrong.

True morality is located in true knowledge and fear of God and this in turn produces the virtue to live in prosperity without being corrupt. The wisdom of God offers a sense of discernment between interior and exterior things. To appropriate this deep philosophical and moral truth in Nigeria, the people, especially the adherents of Christianity and Islam, need socio-cultural orientation in order to return the people's social disposition to the African cultural and religious moral values. The capitalist and individualistic doctrine of prosperity entrenched in the two major religions in Nigeria, which are historically foreign to the people, cannot guarantee a corruption-free society.

Thomas Aquinas (1951:343) quips:

My own explanation begins by drawing a distinction between interior and exterior thing considered in its nature and in utilization. In its nature as subject to the will of God, whose nod all things obey, it does not fall under human power. But for its utilization, man has natural ownership of external things, because through his reason and will he can employ them for human benefit. They were made on his behalf.



A person who appropriates material wealth through honest means may be said to be virtuous but to appropriate what belongs to the public or group of people or an individual through dubious means is a vice. This has unfortunately become the practice in Nigeria today, but one can experience material prosperity in ones life without being involved in malpractices.

Agha (2004:16) opines that the acquisition of material wealth requires ethics of responsibility, which is theocentric, in which the self and community are dominated by the action of God. Keeling (1973:45) asserts that:

We are responsible for our action in the dynamic sense that we can over come both the external pressures of society and environment and the internal pressures of genetics and psychology and begins to act by the power of God in us, as people who have nothing to fear and noting to lose

The experience of materialism is a personal responsibility that is much concerned with our past actions and the present acts. The ethical problem of material wealth is not on the acquisition of it, but on the wrong means of acquiring it and it is being used to oppress the poor and to corrupt the society. The real value of material wealth lies on its distribution for the economic and social well -being of the less privileged in the society. Adams (1925:138) postulates that good -work efficiently and successfully accomplished brings with it feelings of satisfaction and happiness. From common experience in social life, it is those who give their material wealth for the good of others that never lack. They receive more blessings from God because they contribute to human and community development.

Unfortunately the Church and her sister religious institutions no longer play the prophetic role of condemning ill-gotten materialism. Religious leaders in Nigeria have become deeply involved in the acquisition of wealth. Some have single handedly built Universities and Schools. Some sing the praise of those who cheated to get into the office for material benefits. Makinde in Agha (2012:20) asserted that: “If you want to be a cool millionaire establish a church, deceive with miracles and signs and preach prosperity. Hence the Denominational prostitutes are but rolling stones that gather no moss”. The desire for prosperity and material wealth has the most common incentive for the proliferation of Churches in Nigeria.

We are in agreement with both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas that there is nothing wrong in amassing wealth beyond ones immediate need in the right way. But we are God’s stewards on earth therefore we must not worship material goods as our god. The desire to amass wealth compels people to be involved in robbery, killing and embezzlement of public funds. Dubious means and unlawful means of acquiring wealth in order to meet one’s selfish needs will bring disgrace to one’s family and posterity.

## 5. Recommendation and Conclusion

Capitalism has actually, to a great extent, brought about increased economic production in Africa and Nigeria in particular, but it is far from sustaining social development because it does not agree with the cultural system in Africa, hence the undue revolutionary struggle for survival and high level of corruption in the society. It is therefore imperative that the Country Nigeria and Africa in general should consider reverting to their traditional system of cultural and socio-economic life. Communalism with its ultimate interest in the “Common Good” of the society is the only system that is capable of sustaining the relatively socio-economic development already attained by Nigeria and Africa in general thereby saving the society from the impending destruction inherent in the capitalist system superimposed on a communalistic culture.

Based on the above finding, it is therefore strongly recommended that cultural re-orientation is the panacea for the problem of underdevelopment in Nigeria. There is urgent need to organize a national orientation on the Ethics of Integrity in Churches and Mosques with a view to implanting in the consciences of Nigerian Christians and Muslims the cultural value of the common good which Africans were used to be identified before the advent of Islam and Christianity with their capitalist socio-economic ideologies. This responsibility should be charged on the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO).

The individualistic doctrine of salvation brought into Africa by Islam and Christianity cannot guarantee moral self transcendence needed as a panacea for sustainable development in Nigeria. The agents of cultural orientation in Nigeria should therefore employ the traditional religious doctrine of communal salvation in the task of re-orientating the citizens on the path of faithfulness and integrity. While we are not advocating rejection of Islam and Christianity as religious faiths in Nigeria, we are calling for an ideological reversion to the African traditional religion-oriented communalist system. This should however be done with some significant modification and reformation. For instance, the inherent weakness of the traditional system, namely over-dependence on the family by the individual family members should be discouraged in this modern time. Every hand must be practically on deck in the economic process of the family, community and the Nigerian society at large having in mind the “common good” over and above that of the individual.

Ironically, Nigeria as a country has all it takes, at least averagely, to be a developed country but the cancer and cankerworm called corruption has constituted a serious hitch. The social change among the citizens from the

traditional ideals to the modern has evolved a very negatively influential culture of materialism among the people.

To this effect, the influence of materialism among government officials has regrettably assumed an alarming proportion. The acquisition of material wealth through corrupt means has unfortunately become an intrinsic aspect of the practice of the Nigerian politics. On the other hand, materialism has also influenced the Nigerian Christians and Muslims as well as their leaders. The saying that some of the religious leaders use diabolical and money making ritualistic means to attract people to their circles may not be far from the truth considering the fact that the more the people are defrauded by the “men of God” the more they rush to them.

This situation as it affects religion is worst with Christianity: prosperity gospel has become the order of the day and many have become self-made pastors and bishops for materialistic end. Thus, the Church appears to have become the richest “gold mine” industry in Nigeria as the pastors and bishops have become talented in exploiting the people financially. In Nigeria, today, religion has lost its control of social vices and morality is at the lowest ebb; all as a result of corruption.

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