

Vol. 1 No. 1 JANUARY 2016

ISBN: 978-978-53738-4-4

**JOURNAL OF
PUBLIC GOVERNANCE
AND
ADMINISTRATION**



Published by:
**Department of Political Science & Public Administration
University of Uyo, Uyo.**

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: 1856-1966

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ABSTRACT

Corruption is one of the most resilient diseases plaguing mankind, and is rather difficult to eliminate. It is found in both developed and developing nations of the world. It would appear that the effects of corruption are felt more sharply in sub-Saharan African countries than others, particularly in Nigeria because of the absence of strong institutions to combat the scourge. Over the years, corruption has permeated almost all sectors of the Nigerian society and emasculates the socio-economic development of the country. Most scholars are of the view that, perhaps, apart from genocide (crime against humanity), there is nothing as lethal, as pernicious and virulent as corruption in human society. Indeed, when the situation is viewed against the background of the pre-colonial African society, which was almost corruption free, it becomes necessary to investigate how this alien, but hydra-headed monster made its incursion into the Nigerian landscape and how it could possibly be curbed. This paper therefore, examines the advent of corruption in Nigeria. It also examines some cases of corruption in the colonial Nigeria as well as the immediate post-colonial period up to July 1966, which marked the termination of General Aguyi Ironsi's military regime. The paper adopts a historical narrative methodology.

Key Words: Corruption, Colonialism, Values, Politics, Military

1. INTRODUCTION

One vice that has become a recurring decimal in Nigeria is corruption. The most disturbing aspect of the alien malaise is that it seems to grow and expand with each successive administration. In the colonial and immediate post-colonial Nigeria, some politicians and leading nationalists, such as Alhaji Adegoke Adelabu, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo were accused of corrupt acts and investigated by panels set up by the respective governments involved. Also, the military officers that intervened in governance in 1966 linked their action to the high prevalence of corruption.

Having been entrenched into the fabric of the Nigerian society through contact with the outside world for more than a century now, corruption has consistently undermined developmental initiatives and threatens to destroy the country. As Nigeria's President Muhamadu Buhari noted: "Nigerians must kill corruption, otherwise corruption will kill Nigeria" (The Punch, 23rd September, 2015). In fact corruption now occupies the front burner of national discourse. This paper is an attempt to expose the origin of corruption in Nigeria as well as proffer some solutions on how it could be curbed.

It should be noted that although there are many forms of corruption, this paper focuses on economic corruption with emphasis on the financial aspect. It is divided into four major sections. The first section deals with the nature of the pre-colonial society. The second part creates a nexus between colonialism and corruption as well as examines some corruption cases in colonial period; the third part examines the reaction of the military to corruption from January to July, 1966, while the last section advances some possible solutions to the problem of corruption.

2. CONCEPT OF CORRUPTION

The term "corruption" has no universally acceptable definition. The reason being that corruption is a broad concept and thus, different writers or scholars conceive it in different ways. From its etymology, corruption is derived from the Latin word "corrumpo", literally meaning "to rot", "to decompose" "to disintegrate" or "to decay". In other words, corruption signifies "to lose purity", "impairment of integrity, virtue or moral principle". It also relates to an inducement to wrong doing by improper means" (as bribery)

and “a departure from the original or from what is pure and correct” (Mamadu, 2006).

In its strict sense, corruption is understood as an act of being dishonest with a given responsibility or duty for selfish end. It is the use of position of trust for dishonest and selfish gains. Corruption also involves the violation of established rules for personal gain and inordinate profit-making. Corruption is simply the efforts to ‘secure wealth or power through illegal means; private gain at public expense (Mamadu, 2006).

The World Bank (1997) defines corruption as the “abuse of public power for private benefit”. The Transparency International (TI) considers it as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain which eventually hurts one who depends on integrity of people in position of authority”. Also, the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) Act, (2000), defines acts of corruption to include “bribery, fraud and other related offences”, while the Vision 2010 Committee defines corruption as “all those actions aimed at changing the normal course of events, judgments and position of trusts” which is not limited to public sector.

3. PRE-COLONIAL NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A BRIEF APPRAISAL

Before the advent of the British colonialists, the chiefs and elders of the respective areas of Nigeria presided over the affairs of the diverse communities. For instance, in Ibibioland, the village head was seen as the father of all the citizens in his domain. As the custodian of the traditions of his people, he had his obligations to his citizens and vice versa. The tradition of his people demanded moral integrity, honesty, reliability, responsibility, love and respect in mutual terms. The ruler of a particular area was appointed according to the customs and traditions of the people and he symbolized the unity of the people and encouraged communal efforts for development.

The dominant values then also included the belief in the Supreme Being, protection of family name, piety, honour, respect for parents and elders and other persons, respect for hard work and productivity. Moreover, emphasis was placed on and overwhelming respect for the sanctity of human life, respect for authority and leadership and so on. These formed the

bedrock for child development by the family in particular and the community in general. There were of course cases of anti-social behaviours, but because of the un-corrupted value system generally upheld as the way of life then, the behaviour of majority of the people tended toward positive attitudinal qualities (Ezekwesili, 1994).

Communal sanctions helped in discouraging vices like cheating and killing. Although wealth was gathered by the adult or matured members of the traditional society, the accumulation was collective in some instances. Great and chronic inequalities might exist in practice, but they were frowned at in theory, and the theory was more than a gesture to the ancestors. Individual greed was discouraged and even punished. Thus, “an act of greed called for punishment since it ignored the community morality in which the good of the individual must be the function of the good of the community rather than the reverse (Esen, 1987, Agedah, 1983).

Since the morality of the common people was then the watchword, oral history confirms that citizens usually display their wares and other farm produce for sale on the roadside without being in attendance. The price (then in cowries) would be placed on each item to guide the prospective buyers. Buyers would get to the spot, collect what they wanted to purchase and drop the correct amount for the different items. It was the culture then that a hungry person who had no money could go to a place where food items were displayed and eat to his/her satisfaction. They were, however, not allowed to take away any items for the next meal (Aluko, 2006).

Such was the degree of honesty, charity and personal integrity displayed at that time. Corruption in the form of stealing or infidelity on the part of an individual was viewed with utmost condemnation. Even traditional rulers were not expected to behave irresponsibly. The belief was that the breach of any societal values would bring corresponding judgment, usually death.

All this was played down by the colonial interlude and the good of the individual came about as a result the deprivation of the community. In other words, corruption which manifests itself as a result of greed for either wealth or position of authority began to rear its ugly head in Nigeria soon after the corruption of

the traditional values by the introduction of external values.

4. CORRUPTION AND THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

Many people have been wondering how corruption made its way into the Nigerian public life. That is really the vexing fundamental question of the genesis of corruption in Nigeria. Indeed, there is a general agreement among existing sources that corruption made its debut on the Nigerian scene as a concomitant of colonialism. Kwame Nkrumah noted that "the impact of Western culture on the African mind brought in its trail as much bad as good. Offences like forgery, bribery and corruption, for instance, were rare in the African traditional society" (Umoh, 1981).

On his part (McMullan, 1964) added that "the colonial regime is the obvious historical source of the conflict between the government and the society", he added that "colonialism and the ...policy of succession government gave rise to corruption". Nwafor Orizu, clearly stated that corruption was introduced into Nigeria by foreign immigrants from Sierra Leone and the West Indies, who came in the 1850s to the territory that later became Nigeria.

As quoted by (Umoh, 1991):

When they came they were able to understand the English language, which Nigerians did not understand. When the British colonial regime commenced, its officials made them interpreters, chief clerks, heads of police departments and so forth. They were also the first lawyers and business middlemen. They had access to the kings, and thus were something of a go-between for Europeans and the African potentates. They took advantage of the situation by initiating a system of bribery never known in the Nigerian political history (Umoh, 1981).

It should be noted that the colony of Sierra Leone, inspired by humanitarian opposition to slavery and nurtured by the British determination to end slave trade in West Africa was founded in 1787 with groups of black settlers from England, Nova Scotia and Jamaica.

Freetown, its capital was made the headquarters of the British Naval Squadron in West Africa charged with the responsibility of averting further export of slaves across the Atlantic. Over time, the colony evolved, such that by 1850 about 40,000 ex-slaves had been settled there, this made it one of the great cultural "melting pots" of the world. Its population was made up of people with different customs, religions and languages originating from almost every ethnic group or nations in Africa from Senegal to Angola (Webster, et al, 1967). Also, the recaptured slaves evolved into a distinct group known as the Creole. Western education developed in the colony and the first university - Fourah Bay College was established in 1876. The educational system produced many educated persons. Necessity made the Creoles an adventurous and exploring race; many recaptured slaves began to return to Nigeria in search of their relations and work.

According to Nduka:

Creoles of Sierra Leone occupy lucrative subordinate positions of trust in both military and civil service of government in four colonies and settlements of the coast - viz: Sierra Leone, the Gambia, the Gold Coast and Lagos...besides this, they were found in every part of the coast...in the capacity of merchants, traders and clerks - in the French colony of Senegal; on the rivers Gambia, Cassamanza, Nunez, Pongas, Shebro and Gallinas; in the Liberian Republic; in the Kingdom of Dahomey; in Abeokuta; in the Niger; at Bonny; Old Calabar; the Cameroons; Fernando Po; the Gabon; and the Islands of St. Helens and Ascension...(Nduka, 1971:11).

The early European merchants were not better than the Sierra Leoneans and West Indians in this matter. They too were partners in the despicable crime of introducing corruption into Nigeria. So that they could gain some advantage in customership and monopoly of trade areas over their European competitors, these merchants offered the chiefs money, gifts, foreign or funny titles and names. "They flattered the chiefs with frequent

visits and patronized the king's regular banquets" (Ayandele, 1964).

In the evolutionary process of colonialism, the Nigerian economy was monetized in 1906 and capitalism began to take its toll on the social formations of the various communities. Capitalism is an economic, political and social system based on the private ownership of property, business and industry, where success is measured in terms of profit (Procter, 1969). In capitalism, the individual acquisition of wealth is the index of success. One's importance is not determined by his or her ancestry or birthright, but by what he or her has acquired. Initially, corruption was minimal, but with monetization of the economy, the rulers and citizens started to chase money and the power it bestowed. The colonial masters used money and power to prop up rulers who did their bidding - rulers, who would normally have been ejected from office by their constituents, became untouchable. The masses came to realize that leadership at all levels was backed by money and power which were beyond their control. This system transcended the colonial era, and unfortunately has remained the *modus operandi* of the post-colonial political system (Aluko, 2006).

The educated elites later aspired for the positions earlier held by the British colonial officers and some of them became the Nigerian replacements for colonialists and inherited the remunerations and mouth watering packages the latter enjoyed, such as fat pay packets and other fringe benefits. Apart from these official sources of income, there were other sources of material acquisition available to what has been described as the "growing tribe of Benzawa" (Agedah, 1993). One of such sources of material acquisition and perhaps, the most lucrative at the time, for the new class of Nigerians were the Marketing Boards. Each of the three existing regions created investment companies and private banks employing "party favourites and favoured allies". Corruption became part of the neo-colonial mode of production and accumulation. Huge sums of money accrued to the regional Marketing Boards as a result of the under-payment of palm oil, cocoa and groundnut farmers that were later repatriated by the British government after World War II were mismanaged by the political class (Agedah, 1993).

A number of cases of corruption by public officers were recorded during the colonial period. One of such was the indictment and subsequent removal from office of Alhaji Adegoke Adelabu of the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) as the chairman of the Ibadan District Council in 1956. Alhaji Adelabu was also simultaneously a minister in the federal cabinet. The Western Regional government which was controlled by the Action group (AG) at the time accused Alhaji Adelabu of corruption and maladministration, consequently, a commission of inquiry was set up headed by a British colonial officer, Mr. E.W.J. Nicholson to probe him (Sklar 1963). The Commission in its findings discovered that the council chairman and three other councilors were guilty of gross official malpractices.

It further proved that Adelabu, on three occasions accepted or negotiated for bribes. The report noted further that based on Adelabu's testimony, he was worth about £20,000.00 in 1955 and that the "Ibadan District Council was a one man affair and not a collective responsibility as officially expected". The report concluded that, "in effect the Ibadan District Council is himself, and I believe no decision is made against his will". Alhaji Adelabu was eventually removed from office and the Board of the District Council was dissolved, in addition he was compelled to resign as a Federal Minister. During the same period, there were other commissions of inquiry which investigated various cases of corruption. For instance, in 1955, the Eastern Regional government appointed a commission of inquiry, to investigate the extent of bribery and corruption in all branches of public life within the region (Agedah, 1993).

The Commission of Inquiry into bribery and corruption, in the Region was headed by Barrister Chuba Ikpazu, with C.C. Mojekwu and Edem Koofrey as members. The main features of the proceedings were two cases which involved the Regional Minister of Lands, Mr. M.C. Agwu, who was accused of impropriety in the allocation of urban plots, and the Minister of Finance, Mazi Mbonu Ojike, who was accused of corruption when he was Minister of Public Works (Ojiako, 1981). The allegation against Mazi Ojike had to do with the construction of the famous Onitsha market estimated to have cost £433,000. It was alleged that he exerted influence to award the contract to the firm of

Borni Prono and Company. In return, he was said to have been paid one shilling on every pound of the contract value, while his accuser, who complained that he was not paid, was said to have been promised one penny on every shilling. Barrister Ikpeazu declared publicly that Mazi Ojike was indeed corrupt. The Premier of the Region, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe eventually asked him to resign (Agedah, 1993).

In 1956, Mr. Effiong Okon Eyo, a former Government Chief Whip and Chairman of the Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation raised an alarm leveling serious accusation bordering on financial impropriety against the person of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, then Premier of the Eastern Region. He alleged that the Premier grossly abused his office with investment and deposit of public funds in the African Continental Bank, being a private bank which Dr. Azikiwe was a principal shareholder. The crisis that followed the allegation resulted in the decision of the secretary of state for the colonies Sir Lennox-Boyd to set up a tribunal of inquiry headed by Sir Stafford Foster Sutton, Chief Justice of Nigeria,

The Tribunal sat for 50 days and after detailed deliberations observed that:

Dr. Azikiwe's primary motive was to make available an indigenous bank with the object of liberalising credit to the people of this country, but we are satisfied that he was attracted by the financial powers his interest in the bank gave him...we consider his conduct in the matter has fallen short of the expectations of honest, reasonable people (Uwanaka, 1982: 34)

According to Ihejiamaizu and Egbe (2001), the first republic marked a watershed of corruption in Nigeria's political history - ten per cent bribes were demanded, contract inflated, mobilization fees collected on contract projects that were never executed as well as private acquisition and accumulation of state resources. During this period the acts of stewardship of a foremost Nigerian nationalist, Chief Obafemi Awolowo were also scrutinized via a commission of inquiry. While commentators do not deny the fact that the primary motive behind the probe was political, however, some of the issues raised in the report

of inquiry cannot be totally overlooked (Akpan, 2015).

The Commission headed by Justice G.B. Cooker, K.O. Kassim, and Akintola Williams examined the financial and investment policies and practices, the management and the business operations of six statutory corporations in the Western Region, since the 1st of October, 1954, with a view to ascertaining the allegations of financial impropriety leveled against the Action Group under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo.

The Commission sat for 92 days, called 50 witnesses and submitted that:

The Action Group made generous use of Western Nigeria funds for its various electoral campaigns all over the country and there was no definite line between government funds and party funds...the NIPC borrowed from the Western Marketing Board, £6,000,000.00 loan which was unpaid until Chief Akintola was forced to seize the NIPC properties (Ojiako, 1981: 76).

It was also stated by a witness during the probe that "the Action Group operated a limited liability company which Chief Obafemi Awolowo was the sole holder", and that he used the NIPC to create a financial empire which he headed. According to the findings, between April 1958 and November 1962, the Action Group's led government of Western Nigeria invested £6,500,000 of public funds in the NIPC, between April 1955 and November 1961, a director of NIPC gave £3,600,696 to the Action Group in form of special donations.

Although the commission concluded that Chief Awolowo did not aspire to personally enrich himself, same could not be said of his lieutenants linked with the episode. The Cooker Commission discovered that loan granted to NIPC by the National Bank, ended up in private pockets of some of the Directors.

Also, Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh (the then Federal Minister of Finance) was petitioned to Prime Minister Balewa for financial misappropriation. Balewa appeared to have given support to official corruption by his reply thus:

Well, today he is a minister, tomorrow he may not be a minister

- what does he do if he does not start his own business now (Egbe and Ihejamaizu, 2001: 240).

5. CORRUPTION AND THE 1966 MILITARY INTERVENTION

One of the major reasons why the Nigerian Army aborted the First Republic on the 15th of January, 1966, was because of various acts of official corruption which transcended regional boundaries, or particular political parties. It was indeed a national phenomenon (Ademoyega, 1981). Major Chukuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, leader of the first coup d' etat, informed the nation in his maiden broadcast that his Revolutionary Council was set up to establish strong, united and prosperous nation free from corruption and internal strife.

He declared further:

Our enemies are political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand 10 per cent...those that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds (Ademoyega, 1981: 14).

Also in his maiden speech after assuming power as Nigeria's first military Head of State, General Aguyi Ironsi, acknowledged that there was wide-spread incidence of corruption during the First Republic and promised to probe such acts and deal with the offenders. He strongly indicated the intention of his government to deal ruthlessly with corrupt politicians.

He added:

...the Federal Government will stamp out corruption and dishonesty in our public life with ruthless efficiency and restore integrity and self-respect in our public affairs...the government will study very carefully the question posed by those who recklessly abused their public offices through the acquisition of state land and financial deals (Agedah, 1993:15).

From the above, it is obvious that general Ironsi acknowledged the fact that there were numerous cases of official corruption,

extravagance and waste of public funds by the politicians during the dispensation. Unfortunately, the regime could not effectively tackle the monster of corruption; there is no record to support the fact that he made any bold attempt to deal with it, moreover, his administration lasted for about six months.

Lt. Col David Ejoor, the first Military Governor of the Mid-Western Region also accused the politicians of corruption and added that corruption should be wiped out. On his part, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, Military Governor of the defunct Eastern Region in his maiden broadcast on the 25th of January, 1966, justified the military intervention and described it as "the dramatic culmination of 10 wasted years of planlessness, incompetence, inefficiency, gross abuse of office, corruption, avarice and gross disregard of interest of the common man".

He also noted:

The financial institutions and statutory corporations have been completely misused for self-aggrandizement of a number of adventurers in position of power and influence....Under the system, mediocrities was transplanted overnight from the situations obscurity into positions of affluence and corrupt power....key projects in the National Development Plan were not pursued with necessary vigour. Instead of these, palaces were constructed for the indulgence of ministers and other office holders of public offices (Agedah, 1993:15).

He also condemned the purchase of expensive fleets of flamboyant and luxurious cars by politicians and the tax payer's money that was wasted on unnecessary foreign travels by ministers, "each competing with the other only in their unbridled excesses" (Agedah, 1993).

From the reactions of these first set of military officers in 1966, it is obvious that corruption by public office holders was viewed as an impediment to national development and as such needed to be dislodged.

6. CAUSES OF CORRUPTION AND WAY FORWARD

Corruption in Nigeria is caused by many factors such as leadership ineptitude, failure to uphold traditional values, poor conditions of service, absence of strong institutions, long period of military rule, external business pressure, nepotism and citizen's ignorance of their civic rights/apathy on their part and so on (Ihejiamaizu and Egbe, 2001, Aluko, 2005). Evidently, some Nigerian leaders see public offices as an avenue to amass wealth and not a place for patriotic service to the nation. Many of them loot the public treasury and transfer the funds to foreign banks.

For corruption to be curbed in Nigeria, a revolutionary departure from the present values system is inevitable. The present individualistic, materialistic and separatist value system promote corruption. The pre-colonial values of communalism, integrity, selflessness and so on should be re-invoked into our body politic. According to Ihejiamaizu and Egbe (2001) reducing corruption in a society involves both a scaling down of the norms thought appropriate for the behaviour of public officials and at the same time changes in general behaviour of such officials in the direction of those norms. The negative aspects of both Western and traditional cultures should be discarded for the salient ones.

Attitudinal change is needed and not noisy corruption campaigns. Less emphasis should be placed on wealth as a measure of status and the traditional values system wherein sanctions against deviant behavior (such as ostracism) and rewards for integrity, probity, and transparency, dignity of labour and social responsibility should be resuscitated in the Nigerian society. In addition, relevant institutions should be strengthened to check corruption (Aluko, 2006).

The nature and character of the Nigerian state promotes and also generates corruption. As a dependent neo-colonial capitalist state, the inequitable structures inherent in this kind of relationship leads logically to the monopoly of power by the privileged class in the society who are bent on primitive accumulation. To this end, all the institutions set up to deal with the problem of corruption are inevitably manned, controlled and operated by, and in the interest of the ruling class members who have vested and entrenched interest in sustaining, even extending corrupt practices. This results in a culture of covering up and impunity. Herein lays

the failure of the many organs and commissions established to deal with corrupt cases (Egbe and Ihejiamaizu, 2001).

Also laws on corruption should be very stern and enforced by the relevant agencies without fear or favour. The citizenry should be sensitized through effective political education and made to imbibe values that are antagonistic to corruption. Also conditions of service should be improved and salaries and wages of public servants enhanced. Poverty should be addressed and diligence and integrity duly rewarded in the society. There should also be the institutionalization of participatory democracy, by this effective political institutions would be entrenched to check the conduct of public office holders. Another aspect of this is for the electorate to refuse corrupt politicians by not electing them or rejecting their appointment. There should also strong collaboration with the international community like the Transparency International, among others. Information technology should be adopted in monitoring fraudulent activities, keeping updated data of people and institutions with dubious disposition and such information shared between countries at the international level.

7. CONCLUSION

This work examined corruption in Nigeria from a historical perspective. It has been discovered that, each person was his brothers' keeper in the pre-colonial Nigerian society and there were viable and vibrant traditional values and institutions that sustained the fabric of the society and checked the incursion of vices such as corruption. The "age of innocence" was altered with the advent of colonialism. A few years before the attainment of independence in 1960, there began to be a shift of power from the traditional elites (rulers and chiefs) to the emerging political class who came to dominate the power structures in the country.

Within the existing three regions, there existed similar political settlements (the power context with regard to corruption in which negotiation and exchange takes place). These settlements were the patrimonial type, which created patron-client relationships with the state as the very strong patron. Corruption therefore, was integrative among members of the network but was much less socially

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destructive because the elites needed to pay attention to development in order to legitimize their hold on power. This reflected in the fact that the two major corruption scandals involving members of the first generation leaders centred primarily on their personalities in their political party roles and little in their personal capacities (Aluko, 2006).

The early attempt by the first military government to stamp out corruption did not succeed as subsequent military regimes embraced and entrenched the scourge into the fabric of the society. Nigeria needs to revisit the foundation and resuscitate the traditional values, create more awareness on the ills of corruption and get the support of the Nigerians particularly the civil society so that the "war" against corruption could be won.

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