

The Rhetoric of Corruption in Nigeria

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Abstract

Any discourse on corruption in the global context is always robustly controversial and multi-dimensional. This is partly so because almost everyone claims to have some knowledge of what corruption means and also because it negatively affects most people thus stimulating fiery contributions from everyone. When these discussions are aggregated, however, it is usually discovered that different solutions are suggested, ostensibly, to cure corruption. This article examines the disciplinary rhetoric associated with corruption within the Nigerian society, and argues that the discourse or rhetoric of corruption garnered, thus far, has not significantly helped in reducing corruption, particularly in Nigeria. It concludes that corruption has shown no sign of abating in the country because the government and the people resort to more rhetoric in discussing corruption.

Keywords: conceptualizing corruption, Nigerian society, Rhetoric, ontological-eschatological-metaphysical implications of corruption

Introduction

Almost everyone claims to know what corruption is. This is so because there is hardly a day that officials of various levels of government do not talk about it as the bane of development. The tabloid, at both local and international spheres, is filled with screaming headlines of humongous corrupt practices committed or alleged to have been committed by one official or the other. As a global phenomenon, different countries have put up anti-corruption bodies to help tackle the menace of corruption. In fact, corruption has not just been thought of as a moral or economic crime against humanity, it is equally now recognised as a human rights violation. In other words, any act of corruption violates someone else's rights to life, means of livelihood,

freedom to live a decent life and so forth. This encompassing description of corruption is important because it demonstrates the seriousness that government and non-government bodies have attached to it. As Matthew Kukah, the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto and a fiery critic has long observed, “if we do not kill corruption, corruption will kill us.”¹ This battle metaphor involved in tackling corruption depicts the depth to which corruption had plunged humanity, particularly Nigeria, which Kukah was more concerned with. The battle metaphor also means that lip service should no longer be paid to anti-corruption measures. Of course, mouthing platitudes has not reduced the human and economic devastation caused by corruption. If anything, it tends to ignore its sore implications while its hydra-head straggles and buds. But in actual sense, Kukah argues that corruption is a symptom of a deep moral decadence in the society. The fundamental thing to do, therefore, is to understand the very factor that triggers corruption and deal with it. If the fundamental cause is addressed, as a tree whose roots have been uprooted, its branches must definitely wither.²

Corruption is transgressive. Here, the reference is not immediately theological, where Christians, for instance, reflect on sin and its forgiveness as very well-articulated in the Lord’s Prayer. While the theological assumption of transgression is instructive, it is Michel Foucault’s assumption that will be emphasised in this context. Transgression can be conceived as “crossing boundaries”; that is, “the ability to go beyond limits and conventions, to deny and affirm

¹ Matthew Kukah, “Hysteria, euphoria & amnesia: Nigeria’s long walk to freedom,” <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/10/hysteria-euphoria-amnesia-nigerias-long-walk-to-freedom-by-matthew-kukah>

² Kukah, “Hysteria, euphoria & amnesia: Nigeria’s long walk to freedom,”

differences, to move against and beyond boundaries.”³ Reimer-Kirkham and colleagues expound the theory of transgression on Michel Foucault’s explanation that limit and transgression are mutually-dependent. According to Foucault, “a limit could not exist if it was absolutely uncrossable, and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows.”⁴ The pertinent task here is to disentangle what becomes of a limit after a transgression has taken place. In this context, we can posit that there is no sector that corruption has not been found – both private and public, secular and sacred. It is so pervasive that even sacred places where corruption is roundly condemned, or ought to be condemned, corrupt practices resonate with furious and smearing consequences. The paradox of condemnation of, and embarking on, corruption is critical to how corruption is conceived and fought. The common attitude that everyone knows what corruption is, and its adverse effects on all, is not only curious and disturbing, but also dangerous in the fight against it. If everyone knows what it is and its consequences, why and how then is corruption so pervasive, fighting back and winning, preaching and converting souls, and wooing and succeeding? Of course, it is no longer possible to argue that everyone hates corruption or that everyone wants a corruption-free Nigeria. To assume so is to think that everyone is unanimous in being disgusted about the ills of corruption and ready to jettison corrupt practices. The thrust of this paper, therefore, is to underscore the fact that, although everyone

³ Sheryl Reimer-Kirkham, Sonya Sharma, Rachel Brown, and Melania Calestani, *Prayer as Transgression? The Social Relations of Prayer in Healthcare Settings*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020, 8.

⁴ Cited in Reimer-Kirkham, et al, 8.

seems to know what corruption might mean, it cannot be argued that such knowledge is not pretentious just as the fight against it rhetorical.

In this article, I will first of all attempt to briefly explain what corruption might mean, define rhetoric as a form of discourse on corruption, present how different disciplines and citizens have described corruption and the solutions they have proffered. Thereafter, I will argue that the inadequacies found in them, as a result of prevalent practical reactions to corruption, do not suggest the readiness to frontally combat the menace of corruption.

Deconstructing Corruption?

One curious thing about corruption is that everybody seems to know what it means, but in actual fact, it is very difficult to define it. The concept is not only sly and controversial, it is also transitional and sometimes contextual. The controversial nature of corruption is a given in any society because those indulging in active corruption cunning, tricky, clever and cognitively-sound. It is so in the sense that, at the pinnacle of their thought, they assume that they have been able to manoeuvre statues or laws established to prevent or curb corruption. The interpretation of laws or the ambiguities and lacunas thereof are always exploited by them to wriggle out of the consequences of the laws. Unfortunately, in most cases, laws are framed differently in different societies while the structures of societies are also different. In the same vein, some societies have strong structures and institutions whereas others have weak ones. A case in point is the highly-celebrated Halliburton scam, which involved some transnational individuals. While in the strong societies, the laws are applied dispassionately and convicts are made to face the

wrath of the law, the weak or fragile society like Nigeria could not successfully prosecute ‘partners in that crime’ against societies.⁵ The transitional and contextual nature of corruption can also be gleaned from the fact of differences in societies.

According to Nooman, Jr there is no country in the world that does not treat bribery as bad. Thus, all countries’ laws regard bribery as a crime or corrupt practice. This universal nature of bribery and corruption, he argues, does not immediately suggest that all countries have reacted to the crime in the same way. Nooman, Jr. further posits that bribery is not just a legal crime, it is also a moral violation of society’s laws, which engenders shame and dishonour.⁶ As a consequence, he thought that no one could come out in the open to say he could organise bribe between agents or people. In other words, Nooman, Jr. believes that bribery is a secret deal. However, the transitional and dynamic nature of bribery has shown that there are people who publicly give bribes, at least, in Nigeria, making it look like what Smith controversially denotes as the culture of corruption in Nigeria.⁷

For Keefe, “the word ‘corruption’ is derived from the Latin *corrumpere*, which can mean to bribe, but also to mar or destroy. Yet, on the available evidence, corruption has always permeated so many fields of human endeavour that it may not be corruption of anything – but, rather, a regrettable feature of our natural condition. Accountable

⁵ Oluwadamilare Oyeyebi, “Press Reportage of Corruption: The Role of Agenda Setting in Press Reporting of Corruption in Nigeria.” In Benson O. Igboin (ed.), *Corruption: A New Thinking in the Reverse Order*, Akungba-Akoko: Adekunle Ajasin University Press, 2018.

⁶ John T. Noonan, Jr., *Bribes: The Intellectual History of a Moral Idea*, California: University of California Press, 1984, 702.

⁷ Daniel J. Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

government is an ideal, to be sure. It may also be an aberration.”⁸ The tentacles of corruption can be seen in how it is so “inclusive as to be almost meaningless, encompassing bribery, nepotism, bid-rigging, embezzlement, extortion, vote-buying, price-fixing, protection rackets, and a hundred other varieties of fraud.”⁹ Keefe underscores the fact that corruption is a complex concept to define. This is because it involves many things that range from personal to public, moral to legal. Even though bribery is viewed by many as the commonest index of corruption, corruption discourse has been tilted in the direction of legality. Quite easily, bribery can be spotted. But again, it seems so pervasive that its tonality is being downplayed. For instance, one does not need to travel long on Nigerian roads to see the ‘transaction’ that takes place between drivers and policemen, the latter who ought to prosecute those accused of bribery. The sobering thing is that when drivers claim not to have ‘change’, the policemen readily provide it. The question is: who arrests the arresters and who prosecutes the prosecutors in a weak or fragile state?

Equally widespread in the police public relations service is spinning. Spinning, according to Umeagbalasi, is a method employed by the police...

...to reduce deceitfully, the gravity of causality figures, property destructions and distorting or suppression of general facts associated with social vices or disturbances; for the purpose of manipulating the public opinion and saving police image or sustaining its mechanical legitimacy. In other words, it is a sustained distortion or corruption of facts of the matter or information by the police.¹⁰

⁸ Patrick Radden Keefe, “Corruption and Revolt: Does tolerating graft undermine national security?” (January 2015). <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/19/corruption-revolt> accessed 23rd August, 2015.

⁹ Keefe, “Corruption and Revolt: Does tolerating graft undermine national security?”

¹⁰ Emeka Umeagbalasi, “The true story: distorted police angle” <http://globalreportersnews.com/2016/05/onitsha-bomb-explosion-limits-of-police-spinning-or-distorted-facts/> Umeagbalasi, “The true story: distorted police angle”

Umeagbala argues that spinning is a common instrument used by police mostly in developing countries, which results mainly from failed intelligence, incompetence, graft, inability to perform statutory duties and lack of “effective preventive policy.”¹¹

Sarah Chayes describes corruption as an “odorless gas”¹² that creeps in unnoticed, only to be noticed after it has destroyed the system, leaving its victims helpless and devastated. The fact is that those who are corrupt (like the odourless gas) know themselves and the effects of their action. But that does not prevent them from taking advantage of the system and sucking the blood of their victims like a vampire. This explains corruption as a natural ‘condition.’ If corruption is a natural condition as it has been so ebulliently canvassed, laws alone seem incapable of eradicating it. This, by no means, implies that laws do not constitute a strong bulwark against it. There must be a higher moral instrument that needs to be applied to the conscience of humanity to realise the consequences of their corrupt behaviour.

Conceptualising Rhetoric

Although rhetoric has been understood as persuasively convincing an audience to accept some argument, belief or position, it has also been defined as an act of speech-making that ends up persuading the audience whereas the speech-maker is dishonest and insincere about the contents of the speech. It can also be referred to as pretentious speech that uses elaborate language to persuade the audience towards

¹² Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2015.

¹³ See “Rhetoric,” https://www.google.com/search?q=what+is+rhetoric%3F&rlz=1C1GCEA-enNG842NG842&sxsrf=ALiCzsaPwz00a3FAu99VGoWdc5KgfneexA%3A1651479502355&ei=zpNvYoayFcCD9u8Pi8Sm2AM&ved=0ahUKEwiG0d3IsMD3AhXAgf0HHQuiCTsQ4dUDCA4&og=w hat+is+rhetoric%3F&gs_lcp=Cgnd3Mtd2l6EAxKBAhBGABKBAhGGABQAFgAYABoAHABeACAAQCI AQCSAQCYAQA&sclient=gws-wiz

agreeing with a particular form of argument.¹³ This raises several ethical questions that border on intent and its expected consequences. In most political speeches, this kind of rhetoric is spawned to explain the gravity of corruption. For instance, how sincere are those who claim they are fighting corruption? Hardly does any Nigerian government official make any speech without eloquent reference to the devastating effects of corruption and unrelenting efforts to stamp it out. Such ambiguous speeches are considered deceptive because the speakers merely intend to appear before the people as crusaders against corruption while they soon some on investigation are soon found to have committed worse corrupt crimes against the state.¹⁴

Plato sees rhetoric as “the art of winning the soul by discourse.”¹⁵ For Plato, rhetoric ought to have been a philosophy rather than an art. This is because the persuasive intention of rhetoric does not actually lead to the truth since truth is the thrust of philosophy. He makes the point that truth is more important than the force of persuasion. Plato’s use of discourse in recourse to rhetoric is problematic even though he is more interested in truth. This is as a consequence of the fact that there is no monolithic understanding of discourse as a concept or an art. To some, discourse helps in framing, constructing and interpreting the world around us. Discourse, in this sense, can appeal to the use of metaphors, and exclusion of opposing view to establish and maintain “overarching narratives.”¹⁶ It can, thus, shape interests and identities

¹⁴ Benson O. Igboin, “The Faces of Corruption in Nigeria: A New Thinking in the Reverse Order.” Chris Jones, Pregala Pillay and Idayat Hassan (eds.), *Fighting Corruption in African Contexts: Our Collective Responsibility*, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, 52-70.

¹⁵ See “What is rhetoric? – definition, devices & examples – videos & lesson script,” <http://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-rhetoric-definition-devices-examples.html>

¹⁶ Portia Roelofs, “Framing and Blaming: Discourse Analysis of the Boko Haram Uprising, July 2009.” In M. P. de Montclos, ed, *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*. Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014, 110-134, esp. 112.

as well as concepts and people.

Another school of thought argues that discourse “denotes a gap between what is said and what is true.”¹⁷ In other words, the truth of what is said does not necessarily lie within it or the truth can only be reached through an incisive discernment, which stretches out to the realms of rationalism. The consequence of this is that the truth would not be got but a deft analysis could be done on issues raised in rhetoric. Yet another school holds the view that the kernels of interpretations are embedded in particular discourses and, therefore, we have to look for them and use them to find out what the truth might be. To this school, there are no universal routes to finding or measure the truth. Consequently, it will be safe to interrogate individual discourses on their own merit to determine the truth therein, if any. But the critical point is to engage discourses so that we can unravel what we would have otherwise missed.¹⁸

Aristotle argues that “rhetoric is the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion.”¹⁹ What can be gleaned is that Aristotle is concerned more about the ability to discover “means of persuasion” than “the actual effect of persuasion.”²⁰ Aristotle implies that competency of a speaker sounds more appealing than the thrust of what a speech-maker says. With oratory prowess and style, the crowds or audience can be persuasively swayed to believe or even pursue what is not the truth, which ultimately is to the advantage of the speech-maker. Rhetoric, therefore, can be defined as “empty words or fine political speeches”²¹ devoid of truth.

¹⁷ Roelofs, 112.

¹⁸ Roelofs, 113.

¹⁹ “What is rhetoric? – definition, devices & examples – videos & lesson script,”

²⁰ “What is rhetoric? – definition, devices & examples – videos & lesson script,”

²¹ See “What is rhetoric?” <https://clas.uiowa.edu/rhetoric/about/what-is-rhetoric>

From the foregoing, we may infer that rhetoric, whether or not it uses discourse, is laden with ethical and class problematique between the speech-maker and the audience. The ethical or moral issues inherent in rhetoric cannot be overemphasised in a political clime that gives vent to platitude in fighting corruption. But when a people believe in, or are divided by, rhetoric, they become complacent or resort to mouthing platitudes without active response. Within the circumference of this paper, we maintain that there is rhetoric in all types of speeches and actions; that is, a deceptive, dishonest tact in fighting corruption among the so-called crusaders discussed below.

The Prophets and Corruption Rhetoric

Pope Francis argues that corruption permeates every human society both religious and secular. He also points out that the consequences stem from the individual to the entire society. According to him, “each time we accept a bribe and put it in our pockets, we destroy our hearts, destroy our personalities, and we destroy our country. Please, don’t develop that taste for that sugar which is called corruption.”²² He notes that corruption is not just in politics, “it is in all areas of life, just as it believed that even a in the Vatican there are cases of corruption.”²³ He further notes:

I ask myself, can we justify corruption? Just for the mere fact that everyone is corrupt? How can we be Christians and overcome this evil of corruption. Corruption is something that eats inside, like sugar. Sweet, we like it, it’s easy. And then we end up in a bad way. So much sugar that we end up

²² Catholic News Agency, “Full text of Pope Francis’ Powerful unscripted talk with Kenya’s youth,” <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/33033/full-text-of-pope-francis-powerful-unscripted-talk-with-kenyas-youth>

^{23/24} Catholic News Agency, “Full text of Pope Francis’ Powerful unscripted talk with Kenya’s youth.

being diabetic or our country ends up being diabetic. As in everything you have to make a start. If you don't want corruption in lives, hearts and country, start now, yourselves. Because if you don't start than (sic) the person that's beside you won't start.²⁴

Giving ontological-eschatological-metaphysical implications of corruption, Pope Francis opines that the consequences of corruption affect the being of human beings as well as their eternity. Corruption, he observes, "takes away our joy, our peace."²⁵ The individual and group disjunction caused by corruption can further be experienced in the fact that "corrupt people don't live in peace."²⁶ Essentially, "what you rob through corruption will stay here. But also, what will remain is that the hearts of many men and women are wounded by these examples of corruption. What will remain behind was all the lack of good that could have been done. It will remain in the children who suffer."²⁷

The Pope has a vocation: he preaches about corruption and the consequences of it on humanity and eternal damnation of the corrupt. He also indicts the Church, and at the same time the Vatican City, of corruption. Of course these are places where many people would ordinarily think should be free of corruption. That corruption, which many believers in God who think should not be found in the house of God, now being found in the Vatican, speaks eloquently to its pervasiveness. Arguing generally, we are inundated with sermons from all religious fronts and organisations in Nigeria and elsewhere

²⁵ Catholic News Agency, "Full text of Pope Francis' Powerful unscripted talk with Kenya's youth.

²⁶ Catholic News Agency, "Full text of Pope Francis' Powerful unscripted talk with Kenya's youth.

²⁷ Catholic News Agency, "Full text of Pope Francis' Powerful unscripted talk with Kenya's youth.

against public corruption. However, when we hear or observe the corrupt practices that go on within the sanctuaries of God here on earth, we then wonder whether religious rhetoric about corruption is not a mere facade. Apart from the volume of unreported immoral practices that are going on in the churches, mosques and shrines, the case of Reverend King who has been condemned to death by the Supreme Court, the *Okija* saga and Boko Haram are sobering examples of gross corruption of religious authority and abuse of sacred spaces.

Does this not suggest that the religious architecture in Nigeria cannot possibly fight against corruption because of the massive corrupt practices that are inherent? Opinions are divided about this, and it is understandable. The religious spaces assume a moral platform that can be projected as quintessence for emulation or a moral reference point. But the truth is that the religious spaces are not at once sacred and devoid of corruption, and this tells much about what they can offer on the one hand and, on the other, there is the need to carefully remark that all may not be corrupt as members of these spaces. This will be further pursued, subsequently. In the meantime, we shall analyse the rhetoric of some poets.

Poets, Corruption and Rhetoric

It is good to start with a general, rhetorical question whether or not the pen is mightier than the sword in the fight against corruption? For Tayo Olafioye, “we must use poetry for politics/or politics for poetry/our nuclear bombs of the mind.”²⁸ The poets make use of terse or symbolic language to convey deep message to their readers. From

²⁸ Catholic News Agency, “Full text of Pope Francis’ Powerful unscripted talk with Kenya’s youth.

observation, intuition or inspiration, they can deftly pass their messages in words that only the discerning can appreciate or decode. Through the use of satires, imageries, metaphors, euphemisms and so on, the poets freely communicate their thoughts and positions on national issues. One of those whose poetic works fall within the purvey of discussion is Tayo Olafioye, a passionate poet whose poems largely touch on corrupt practices in Nigeria particularly at the turn of the Fourth Republic. He harps on corrupt practices in Nigeria especially the ‘unforgivable’ ones committed by the National Assembly and cognate politicians. According to him,

They awarded contrasts to the dead and themselves the living, and for that, a bullet each to their heads. They made millionaires of their mistresses, concubines and sycophants, and for that, a bullet each to their hearts. They gave “Christmas bonuses” in their millions to themselves, for no justifiable rationale, in the oven of penury and intractable poverties and for that, a bullet each to their throats... let God forgive them after they suffer punishment, for they have created an epicenter of stress in an already decimated society.²⁹

Olafioye’s depictions of the massive corruption perpetrated by the Nigerian politicians against the people who votes them into power cannot be discountenanced. For him, we cannot but be active revolutionaries against the perpetrators of heinous abuse of power in the country. That is why he argues that for each of the corrupt practices committed by the senators, a bullet should be put through their heads, hearts and bodies. The unwarranted corruption and its pervasiveness extend to the point that politicians award contrasts to the dead, that is, they use the names of the dead or fake names to bid for contrasts. At

²⁹ Abdur R. A. Shaban, “Buhari appoints Dead People to Boards, Spokesperson dismisses public outrage,” <https://www.africanews.com/2017/12/30/buhari-appoints-dead-people-to-boards-spokesman-dismisses-public-outrage/>; Nwafor Sunday, “Shocker!: Again Buhari appoints dead person into office,” <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/04/shocker-again-buhari-appoints-dead-person-into-office/>

least, on two occasions, President Muhammadu Buhari has given board appointments to long-dead persons, which raised national questions.³⁰ This is with the intention that, eventually, no traces can be made of such corrupt practices in a society where the dead are believed to be sacrosanct and free from probe. The flamboyant and luxurious life style of senators is displayed by the number of mistresses they keep while they also have unhindered access to the treasury which they plunder with impurity. Even though the country is bleeding, the unconscionable politicians are less concerned about the state of its health. It is for these corrupt practices that Olafioye argues they deserve death, and even prayers should not be offered to God for them until they have sufficiently suffered just punishment for their unjust actions against the country.

Judgment, Olafioye suggests, should also be extended to the sycophants who praise-sing the politicians. Sycophants are not only among the highly-placed citizens, but also among the most-decimated who defend them for mere emotional or ethnic attachment to politicians and what they believe they can personally gain.

The question is: who is Olafioye asking to gun down the corrupt officials? He assumes that corrupt politicians will also have the moral and legal authority to confront other corrupt officials. In other words, he suggests that corruption should fight corruption. The masses are already enervated or decimated by poverty of incalculable proportion that they have almost completely lost the power to fight, assuming they had the power before. Ironically, it is these politicians that have access and control of almost all legitimate and illegitimate weapons in

³⁰ Benson O. Igboin, "Corruption and State Fragility in Nigeria: The Rise of #EndSARS as a Contrastive Leadership." In Chris Jones, Pregala Pillay, Purshottama Sivanarain Reddy and Sakhile Zondi (eds.), *Lessons from Political Leadership in Africa: Towards Inspirational and Transformational Leaders*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022, 189-213.

the country. They have thugs and bodyguards apart from the state security personnel that attend to them as part of their paraphernalia of office. The decimated masses who do not have access to food can hardly confront the sophistication of these state-protected and highly-connected corrupt politicians unless they resort to the long-awaited revolution. In addition, Olafioye does not input the fact that Nigerian politicians, especially the executive members, have constitutional immunity. By this, they are not answerable to any court or people while in office. Practically, they consolidate themselves in power as they pass from one office to the other in a bid to be politically connected to protect their ‘state capture.’ However, the rise of #EndSARS in October 2020 demonstrates that a determined and organised people can effectuate a positive change.³¹

God’s interventionist theory appears also to be largely unhelpful because this is a society that rarely believes and practices restitution. Rather, many of the places of worship are highly patronised and handsome donations are made therein. In fact, regular prayers are held for many of the politicians and their presence often unnecessarily extends the length of service where the poor remain in hunger to celebrate their corrupt oppressors. In the scenarios again, it is the decimated masses that suffer, whose time is wasted to ‘honour’ the corrupt officials. The acceptance of these corrupt politicians in the religious spaces and, even offering prayer of protection and God’s blessing upon them, clearly shows the state of helplessness in fighting corruption. In fact, poet Emeka Odiamma in his “Married to Corruption” writes:

My nation is married to corruption,

³¹ Emeka Odiamma, “Married to Corruption,” <https://onlinenigeria.com/poetry/ad.php?blurb=192>

I wonder if she will ever see redemption,
he had come to her with sweet scent and song, his aura full of
attraction...
I wonder if she will ever be free because when I look at her lost
hope is what I see.
I wonder if she will ever have a divorce or is the marriage for
better for worse?
perhaps until death do them part!"³²

Philosophers and Corruption Rhetoric

A rehash of Moses Makinde's inaugural lecture will clearly depict rhetoric and helplessness against the marauding effects of corruption in Nigeria. Makinde, like most other philosophers, diagnoses corruption as a moral cankerworm that has eaten deep into the heart of the country. And as evil spirit, unless it is exorcised, the country cannot be given a clean bill of health. According to Makinde, a philosopher-professor, "Indiscipline and lawlessness, greed and corruption have displaced God and substituted MONEY as an object of worship in our society, to the extent that we are neither accountable to God nor humanity."³³ Interestingly, Makinde uses an all-inclusive language, 'we'. This suggests the pervasive nature of corruption and the inexcusable challenges it portends to every citizen. He wonders why a country that so believes in God and is "God-intoxicated" will be so corrupt. These contradictions and absurdities, he argues, lead to skepticism and faithlessness in the future of the country. There are levels of frightful failure that Nigeria experiences. Nobody is accountable to anybody; the leaders are not accountable to the people and the led are not demanding accountability. According to him, the

³²Moses A. Makinde, "Political Skepticism: Nigeria and the Outside World," *Inaugural Lecture Series* 167 of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, March 9th, 2004, 21.

³³Makinde, 36.

Constitution is merely viewed as a book containing fairy tales. Since indiscipline has become a common national badge, so to speak, it is hugely better to maintain a skeptical option. He submits: “My skepticism rests on my suspicion that these, truly, are incurable for now or in the near future, especially as they have grown their wings from top to bottom.... This situation is so bad that it has become spectacularly scandalous.”³⁴

Makinde argues that, since the religious spaces particularly the missionary religions have proved incapable of fighting corruption in Nigeria, it is necessary to sound what the Yoruba refer to as *agogo eewo*. Makinde is not alone in advocating the sounding of *agogo eewo* in Nigeria. Ade Dopamu, a professor of African and Comparative Religion, also believes that there is the urgent need to sound *agogo eewo* in the country if corruption would be effectively tackled. To be sure, *agogo eewo* is a Yoruba mystical or forbidden gong that is believed to have the powers to destroy all corrupt officials in society within a short while. Dopamu asserts:

When it is sounded, criminals, people into fraud and corruption, evil doers, adulterers, law breakers and robbers shivered with terror because they would soon die. Nigeria needs *agogo eewo* today. It should be taken to the ministries, institutions, financial houses, military headquarters, police headquarters, national assembly, government houses and other places instituted to prosecute victims or financial mismanagement, money laundering, fraud and all form of corruption. *Agogo eewo* did not spare anybody, whatever your culture, Hausa, Igbo or

³⁴ Ade P. Dopamu, *Religion in the Service of Humanity: A Farewell Lecture*, Ilorin: Library and Publications Committee, 2009, 35&36

³⁷ Benson O. Igboin, “A Critical Exploration of African Spirituality and Democracy in Africa,” *Journal of Africana Religions*, 2/4 (2014): 435-456.

Yoruba. With *agogo eewo*, sanity will return to the society, corrupt practices will reduce and insecurity will be a thing of the past.³⁵

As interesting as this sounds, the rhetoric therein is, who sounds the *agogo eewo* and upon whose authority will it be sounded? Haven't there been priest-craft even amongst the custodians of the mystical drum? More importantly, will the corrupt officials and citizens, assuming they believe in the efficacy of *agogo eewo*, not, as it is usual, subscribe to removing the potent element in the act?³⁶

African Traditional Religion and Corruption

The Oba of Benin in Edo State, on March 9, 2018 actually sounded the Benin form of *agogo eewo* when he invited all the chiefs, native doctors, market women to place curses on sponsors, perpetrators and collaborators of human trafficking in the kingdom. The Oba warned that oath of secrecy being administered on the victims should be stopped immediately, because any native doctor found violating the royal decree would be sanctioned accordingly by the ancestors. The Oba expected human trafficking would be stopped since the curse had been placed on the culprits. According to him, "from today, we no longer want to hear of human trafficking in Benin. I hope those who have been involved in this illegal trade will stop from today."³⁷

The intriguing thing is that government officers and institutions charged with dealing with human trafficking were present at the royal cursing session. According to Nduka Nwanwennee, the zonal commander of the National Agency for the Prohibition in Trafficking

³⁸ Alemma-Ozioruva Aliu, "Oba of Benin Moves against Human Traffickers, Cultists," *The Guardian*, 10 March, 2018.

³⁹ Aliu, "Oba of Benin Moves against Human Traffickers."

in Persons (NAPTIP), the royal curse would help the agency, better from that moment, than before in the fight against human trafficking. He says: “Before now, victims of human trafficking rarely open up to give evidence in court because of [the oath] they have taken.... Now that those oaths have been nullified by the monarch, our power of prosecution has been enhanced and we can now rescue more victims.”³⁸ The former Nigerian Senate President, Bukola Saraki, also argues that the Oba of Benin has contributed immensely to the fight against human trafficking with the invocation of curses.³⁹

The critical twist is that government does not agree that there is state failure in the recourse to, and recognition of, traditional cursing of human traffickers. The syndicates are known and they must have likely always paid their way through. Those who administered secret oaths on the victims, as the NAPTIP official claims, are known. It is, therefore, reasonable to think that corruption could have compromised the agency as well. Beyond that, since the state recognises the traditional means of fighting corruption as more efficacious than the state anti-corruption agencies, why has it not adopted it?

However, Stephen Ellis details a more devastating account of the history of corruption or organised crime in Nigeria. According to him, political corruption has ripple effects on the development of the country because it encourages disregard for the rule of law as well as weakens the establishment. However, the resort to mystical powers to protect oneself against the law is rife.⁴⁰ An annotation on the book depicts Nigeria as “the notorious epicenter of global illicit trade,

³⁸ Nnenna Ibeh, “We need more of this – Saraki commends Oba of Benin for revoking curses on victims of trafficking,” <https://www.naijs.ng/1156772-saraki-hails-oba-benin-revoking-curses-victims-trafficking.html>

⁴⁰ An annotation on the book depicts Nigeria as “the notorious epicenter of global illicit trade,

engaged in organized crimes as diverse as 419 frauds, trafficking in sex, drugs and the country's plentiful oil wealth. Cults, mysticism and secret societies that entrenched themselves in Nigeria's post-colonial transaction have created a society where becoming rich is a theology, and the importance of *jujus* outweighs that of justice."⁴¹ Ellis' chronicle of corruption in the country and the admission of the use of *juju* or metaphysical forces to manoeuvre the Nigerian system for personal gain raise questions about the traditional means of combatting corruption in Nigeria. There is hardly any Western scholar of note who has come to terms with the scientific recognition of the efficacy of *juju* that adds a critical dimension to the complexity of combating corruption in a country that is "notoriously religious."

Politicians and the Fight against Corruption

Politicians may be conceived as people who are active in politics. They are people who mostly belong to political parties and struggle for political power. In Nigeria, politicians are generally perceived as those who have unhindered access to state treasury at any level of their operations. In the political history of Nigeria, it is not strange to hear politicians make public commitment to fighting corruption. In fact, every government since independence in 1960 has always declared their intention to fight corruption but almost every government or regime left office more corrupt than they went in. Analysing the speeches of some military regimes that have ruled the country, one can note the rhetoric in commitment to fighting corruption. In 1984, General Muhammadu Buhari's regime accused

⁴¹ Stephen Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.⁴² Tuesday Reitano of Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, <https://www.hurstpublisher.com/book/this-present-darkness/>

Shehu Shagari administration of impervious corrupt practices that could no longer be condoned. As such, his coup was justified on the ground that, unless the administration was overthrown, the whole country was going to break down. General Ibrahim Babangida also accused of General Buhari of abuse of office demonstrated in his excessive breaches of the laws and arrogating powers to himself alone, which to General Ibrahim Babangida, were more than financial corruption.

No regime has accepted to be corrupt, which makes the definition of corruption difficult and the fight against it, rhetoric. According to Major Nzeogwu who announced the overthrow of the First Republic on 15th January, 1966,

Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand 10%, those who keep the country permanently divided so that they can remain in office.... We promise that you will no more be ashamed to say that you are Nigerians.⁴²

This is the prototype of regime change speeches that characterised the history of Nigeria. But in actuality, no meaningful change has been experienced.

In practical context, for instance, Sani Yerima, former governor of Zamfara State, who extended the scope of *Sharia* law in 1999 was formerly one of the ‘big’ officials of Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). When he turned a proponent of *Sharia*, he publicly confessed and apologised for stealing public money in the CBN. “But when asked whether he would repay the money that he had embezzled, he said, No.”⁴³ Again, the case of James Ibori, who served a jail term in the United Kingdom is instructive for the fact that he was not found guilty

⁴³ Baba Grumpy, “Major Kaduna Nzeogwu’s Nigeria – as it was in 1966, so it remains in 2018,” <https://www.thecable.ng/major-kaduna-nzeogwus-nigeria-1966-remains-2018>

in Nigerian courts of the allegations for which he was eventually jailed abroad.

Buhari's administration that was voted with the expectation to fight corruption has been described, as almost certainly, the most corrupt in the history of the country. The former chairman of his party, All Progressive Congress (APC), publicly announced that if anyone from other parties joined the APC, their sins would be forgiven. In fact, in April 2022, two former governors jailed for corruption while in office were granted mercy and released.⁴⁴ Buhari's preferred chairman of the party, Muazu, who crossed from the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) to the APC became the consensus candidate for the position in March 2022 national convention.

It has been observed that politicians do not see themselves as corrupt. They speak with much confidence about their zero-tolerance for corruption that a simple mind would believe that they mean what they say. But it has become very obvious to many observers that politicians do not mean what they say and say what they mean not. According to Bolarinwa, a former speaker of the Ondo State House of Assembly, politicians do not think the way others think; they have their peculiar way of thinking and viewing issues.⁴⁵ This suggests that the politicians cannot be rated on a surface level of discourse; the society must view their talk with a pinch of salt.

The People and their Rhetoric on Corruption

The definition and boundary of who should be referred to as 'the

⁴⁴ Johannes Harnischfeger, "Boko Haram and its Muslim critics: observations from Yobe State." In M. P. de Montclos, ed, *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014, 24.

⁴⁵ See the Editorial of Vanguard, "Pardons for Nyame, Dariye Unacceptable," <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/04/pardons-for-nyame-dariye-unacceptable/>

⁴⁶ A personal discussion with Felix Bolarinwa.

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⁴⁷ Matthew Kukah, "Hysteria, euphoria & amnesia: Nigeria's long walk to freedom,"

⁴⁸ See <http://m.facebook.com/baronstical/posts/10154085576391407>

⁴⁹ Kukah, "Hysteria, euphoria & amnesia: Nigeria's long walk to freedom,"

⁵⁰ Kukah, "Hysteria, euphoria & amnesia: Nigeria's long walk to freedom,"

⁵¹ Noonan, Jr., 554-555.

people' in Nigeria are difficult to carve. This is partly because in the preamble of the 1999 Constitution, which reads *inter alia*: "we the people....," has consistently generated a considerable arguments. A school of thought maintains that the constitution was not a product of 'the people's' deliberation but rather decreed into existence by military fiat. Thus, it would be logical to conceive the military as 'the people' insofar as they did not consult or were not representatives of 'the people.' Another school of thought holds the view that 'the people' would mean representatives of the citizenry. Because there was no vacuum in government and the military regime in power then was constituted by Nigerians, it would be logical to say that they represented 'the people' and acted rightly in the context. The third school is of the view that the first two schools only talk about 'the people' in a privileged mode. Those who should be referred to as 'the people' are actually without voice to say that they are 'the people.' It is therefore not clear from the foregoing who should be referred to as 'the people.' But in any case, it is the fact that representatives of 'the people' at any particular point in time make certain decisions for the citizenry whether or not such decisions are popular.

Again, Kukah's insight into the people and their rhetoric on corruption is perspectival. According to him, even though the people believed that General Buhari, for instance, was poised to fighting corruption as the Head of State in 1984-85, the people jubilantly thronged the streets when he was overthrown by the Babangida regime. In fact, most of the people painted Buhari as incorruptible officer, poised to redeem Nigeria during the 2015 campaign whereas they did not defend him as anti-corruption hero when he was

overthrown in 1985.⁴⁶ He argued that there is outright hypocrisy among the people about fighting corruption. His words are apposite here:

In declaring a war against corruption, he lost his job. It is quite interesting that none of all of those who have suddenly become vocal now in the war against corruption went out on the streets to condemn the overthrow of their hero. If Nigerians were so convinced about the war against corruption, why did they all cross to the other side of the street where President Babangida was already offering them a decaffeinated form of war by stating that the overthrow of Buhari had become necessary because in his words on August 27th, 1985: Muhammad Buhari was too rigid and uncompromising in his attitude to issues of national significance?

An interview conducted by a freelancer was circulated via social media in April 2016 at the heart of the fuel scarcity. The interviewer asked the question: “Corruption and fuel availability and no corruption and no fuel, which one do you prefer?”⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, all the respondents from different walks of life said that, when there was corruption there was fuel, prices of food stuff were cheaper; there was availability of power supply and life was more comfortable. However, the President Buhari promised to eradicate corruption, yet no fuel, no power supply, no money to purchase food stuff, and life is insuperable. This apodictically demonstrates the people’s rhetoric on corruption because one of the reasons adduced for voting Buhari into power was that he would fight corruption. This might have made Kukah to submit:

My argument therefore is to say that, no, we should not be talking of fighting corruption, rather, we should see corruption as a symptom of something that is intrinsically wrong with our society, the loss of the moral centre of gravity of our society. If corruption is so evil, how come we are so much at peace with it? If corruption is so rotten, how

come we all seem to enjoy its company? What are the agencies for corruption? What capacity do they have? Are they above the fray or are they also caught up in the same web of corruption?⁴⁸

The situation is so precarious that Kukah may be said to be cynical by declaring:

If we are so much against, it, how is it that we cannot generate a collective sense of moral revulsion? But, if we are a serious people with a sense of history, how many wars have we won in this country? Fifty years after the civil war, MASOOB says Biafra is still alive because those who govern us have refused to admit that in our dishonesty, we have left a few windows open. We did not win the war against indiscipline? Why did we not win the war against illiteracy? Why did we not win the war against hunger despite operation feed the nation? We did we not win the war against armed robbery? We did not win the war against poverty? We did we not the war against insecurity? What makes us confident that we will win this war?⁴⁹

Conclusion

I have argued that there is no serious effort thus far to fight corruption in Nigeria. The political rhetoric is suffusing, and, as such, both the leader and the led are intertwined in mouthing platitudes. Nooman, Jr. sums all the arguments thus: Among the academicians a spectrum of attitudes toward bribery was discernible. For a minority...it was a serious social issue. For the majority, attitudes ranged from formal and uninterested disapproval to acceptance and rationalization of at least some forms of the phenomenon. Theologians downplayed the topic, often provided an excuse for the bribegiver, relieved the bribetaker of the obligation to account to his principal; nonetheless, they considered bribetaking a sin, offensive to God, repugnant to justice. Legal scholars who did not care to investigate bribery still knew that it was a crime and to be shunned. Psychiatric writers,

explaining bribery by childhood deprivations, understood involvement in it as a personality disorder. For anthropologists the concept was a zero, a blank. The social scientists found a positive value in some forms of bribery which were necessary to the functioning of the society – paradoxically for them corruption could, in some instances, be integrative. Journalists... historians ... were with the social scientists. The accusatorial aspect of bribery tradition, so prominent in authors ... had no strong attraction for any of these observers of human relationships. They did not see their purposes served in arranging a group or an institution as corrupt. They found no gratification in judging particular individuals as faithless officials or destructive corruptors.⁵⁰

But is there anything wrong with religion? Is there anything wrong with the Nigerian system? Are poems and philosophy wrong? Is there anything wrong with politics? Conceptually, there may be nothing wrong with them. Desmond Tutu, borrowing from former UN Secretary General, Kofi Anan, says that there is nothing wrong with the faiths, but the faithful. In other words, it is the adherents who have **created the problems ascribed to religions or the faiths. In a more general sense, therefore, we can posit without equivocation that there is no problem with religions, police, politics, philosophy, poems, but there is something wrong with particular believers in religion, policeman, politicians, philosophers, and poets.**⁵¹ In other words, rather than blame institutions, we should blame individuals who corrupt the system or institutions. In the same vein, in order to correct and build a formidable institution, there is the need to build the

⁵⁰ Kukah, "Hysteria, euphoria & amnesia: Nigeria's long walk to freedom,"

⁵¹ Noonan, Jr., 554-555.

character of individuals that make up the system. Most Nigerians in power have not demonstrated such character.

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