

# TRADITIONAL VALUES AND THE CHANGING PHASES OF CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA

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**Published:** 31 January 2020

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## **Abstract**

Among the prominent features of Africans is the appreciation of values that reside in their cultural heritage. However, the failure of Nigerians to appreciate their indigenous values had led to many anti-social activities among which are corruption and money laundering. While the various foreign methods adopted to tackle the menace of corruption in the country had proved ineffective, the various agencies saddled with the responsibility of curbing the menace are now at their wits end. Thus, corruption becomes the order of the day as efforts are renewed daily to rebrand the phenomenon so as to make it less repulsive. This paper therefore aims at presenting the application of traditional values as an alternative remedy to the menace of corruption in Nigeria. It also aims at underscoring the benefit of this measure and uses it as a model to be emulated in this contemporary Nigerian society. Also, to use the remedy as a leverage to address the evils of corruption, insecurity and money laundering that is prevalent in the country. The paper discovers that corruption in its various dimensions had eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian society and it is gradually becoming a permanent feature of Nigerians; both at home and abroad. The situation therefore requires our urgent and concerted efforts as all hands must be on deck to wipe away the menace before it gets out of hand. It is believed that if this home-grown solution, which contains ethical, religious and cultural values, is involved in the war against corruption in this country, the menace of corruption will be reduced to the barest minimum if not totally eradicated.

**Keywords:** Tradition, Values, Corruption, Re-branding, Phases.

## Introduction

Prominent among the various challenges that are facing Nigeria is corruption. This challenge had been with the country for long and it is gradually becoming the permanent feature of the country. Because this evil had eaten deep into the fabric of the country, it has been mistakenly believed to be part of the system of government at all levels.<sup>1</sup> Corruption is a phenomenon that does not lend itself to a single definition. Nevertheless, corruption, as used in this paper and supported by *The Webster Dictionary*, is an 'inducement to do wrong thing by improper or unlawful means, a departure from the original or from what is correct.'<sup>2</sup> As observed by Udo, corruption covers both institutional decadences and personal decadence such as; bribery, nepotism and prostitution.<sup>3</sup> It has so dented the image of Nigeria as a nation that every Nigerian is refers to as a corrupt person especially in the international communities. Reports from various surveys of countries that engage in international business activities conducted by Transparency International revealed that Nigeria is very deep in corruption.<sup>4</sup>

The evil of corruption is so endemic that it is dangerous for an individual to dare to be incorruptible. Also, the rate at which the youth and children are socialized to continue the evil of corruption in the country is alarming. It is therefore expedient that the need to combat corruption in Nigeria is a task that all Nigerians must embark upon. The demand for our concerted efforts is important if truly we want to ensure positive impact and pave way for an enabling environment for rapid development in all sectors of Nigeria as a country. This step is very important as corruption is not limited to a certain sector but has multiplied itself to all segments of Nigerian society. It is therefore the attempt to tackle the menace of corruption in Nigeria from the traditional point of view that prompted research into this topic.

## Corruption and the Nigerian Situation

Nigeria, a great nation popularly known as the Giant of Africa, is a country blessed with both human and natural resources. However, this resources are been wasted by some corrupt and incredible administrators. In fact, the menace has reached a dangerous dimension in which corruption has been assumed to be part of the government policy. The successive governments in their defences always keep on accusing their predecessors as well as their successors of corrupt practices. Many therefore decried the present situation of Nigeria and attributed the cause of this predicament to the lack of required quality of good leadership in Nigerian leaders.<sup>5</sup>

Today, corruption is very much with the country as it is found in every aspect of the Nigerian sectors. The phenomenon is bearing various appellations according to various localities in the country. For example, among the Yoruba people, the nickname is *Egunje*, among the Igbo people, it is known as *Igbuozu* while the Hausa people call it *Chuachua*.<sup>6</sup>

The effects of this phenomenon are manifesting everywhere in the country. It has led to situations such as: slow movement of files in offices, police extortion on our roads, ghost workers syndrome and electoral irregularities. Moreover, public office holders corruptly enrich themselves by converting government money in their custody to their own use, force citizens to bribe them and citizens in turn also induce the officials with bribe to get whatever they want from government or company offices.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the effect of corruption is telling on our infrastructure in the country. For instance, the epileptic power supply throughout the country is the outcome of the corrupt practises in the sector. The Nigerian Airways that has been on its knees for many years is as a result of the corrupt practices in the organisation. The same thing is applicable to the Nigerian shipping line that has been incapacitated as a ‘result of corrupt financial deals.’<sup>8</sup> The recent 2016/2017 budget padding saga, recovery of huge amount of money from the corrupt politicians at the inception of the incumbent government and embezzlement of money meant for pension and gratuity of the retired workers are recent manifestations of corruption in Nigeria. It must be noted that this official corruption has not only hindered the country’s economic development but has also earned Nigeria a very bad image in the global village. Last but not the least on the menace of corruption in the contemporary Nigerian society, it is on record that new terminologies were invented to rebrand corruption so as to make the odious expression less repulsive.<sup>9</sup> For instance, in the observation of Udo, ‘settling’ or ‘settlement’ was substituted for bribery of political class, ‘catchment area’ for tribalism, ‘rigging’ for manipulation of electoral results and ‘419’ for high tech stealing and organised fraud.<sup>10</sup> With this present situation of Nigeria, one would be tempted to think that nothing was done in the past to curtail this menace of corruption before it got to this level. The next section will address the various attempts in the past to control the phenomenon of corruption in the country.

### **Previous Attempts towards Combating Corruption in Nigeria**

Various attempts have been made in the past to check the alarming rate at which corruption is spreading in the country. Among the numerous efforts is the arrest of the culprits with the aim of bringing them to book. However, majority of the people arrested in the past were often released after few minutes of interrogation or after the bail by prominent Nigerians. Their release is often celebrated with rousing welcome by their family members and political associates. This therefore defeated the purpose of the arrest.

Coupled with the arrest is the establishment of the commission of inquiry to investigate the allegation of corruption against the corrupt officers with the hope that their cases would serve as deterrent to others. However, from the past experience, the results of such commission were never seen by the public before another allegation of corruption came up. In some cases, either for political or religious reasons, the recommendations of such commission were never implemented.<sup>11</sup> Another effort put in place by the successive government so as to check the menace of corruption in Nigeria include; ‘The Ethical Revolution’ which was introduced during President Shehu Shagari’s administration between 1979 and 1983.<sup>12</sup> The target of this programme was to redeem the battered image of the country. However, it is unfortunate to note that, in spite of the aims and objectives of this programme, corruption and indiscipline bedevilled that administration.

Also in 1984, the military administration of General Muhammadu Buhari and Major General Babatunde Idiagbon introduced ‘War Against Indiscipline’ (WAI) to curtail the spread of corruption in the country. The program seemed laudable as it reduced corruption to its lowest ebb. However, the program was ephemeral.<sup>13</sup> General Ibrahim Babangida tried to improve upon WAI by introducing War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC). However,

because of the unprecedented and high level of corruption during his regime, the programme suffered forceful death.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, in 2002 and 2004, the people of Nigeria witnessed introduction of Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and Economic Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) respectively to arrest the menace of corruption in the country. The irony of the whole matter is that, despite the existence of both bodies, up till today, the problem of corruption is still very much with us.<sup>15</sup>

Last but not the least is the effort of Dora Akunyili towards changing Nigerian image through what she termed 'Rebranding Nigeria.'<sup>16</sup> As observed by Akinfenwa, the project has now become the issue of national debate. As opinions are divided on the right approach to adopt, some disgruntled elements in the country are also rebranding corruption so as to make it less repulsive.<sup>17</sup> It is this situation on ground that the current civilian administration, under President Muhamadu Buhari, is tackling frontally. It is therefore the failure of the previous efforts to control the menace of corruption in the country that prompted research into the role that traditional values can play in checkmating the menace of corruption in Nigeria.

### **Traditional Values as Alternative Remedy Towards Combating Corruption in Nigeria**

Having tried various attempts in the past to deal with the problem of corruption and none produced the desired result, a call has gone to Nigerian intellectuals to look at African history for a possible guide that would integrate African social values with the economic fundamentals included in contemporary development theories.<sup>18</sup> This paper is therefore presenting the application of traditional values to the Nigerian scheme of things in handling the menace of corruption in the country. Value, according to Kluckhohn, is a 'selective orientation towards experience imply deep commitment or repudiation, which influence the ordering of choices between possible alternatives in actions.'<sup>19</sup> Thus, values as used in this work are personally held beliefs or socially preferred beliefs that prescribed how an individual ought to behave in a certain situation. Also, Ogbu Kalu in his observation posited that:

Africans, in spite of their various cultures, share some dominant traits which identify them as Africans: their perception of the world the social system especially the kinship, marriage and affinity, social sanctions, economic and property relations, the system and their field of ritual, political organisation, arts and craft.<sup>20</sup>

From all indications, what Kalu refers to as trait is no other thing than values. Every group or community of people have their set of values and ideals which hold them together, guarantee their survival and continued existence.

Appreciation of traditional values in day-to-day affairs is one of the cultural heritages that Nigerians shared with other African communities. It is through these values that ethical and healthy social relations are reflected. The various attempts (use of foreign objects and method) in the past to curb corruption only succeeded in perpetuating indiscipline and corruption in the country. This is because they were only reflections of western values and ethos which do not possess any cultural affinity with our people in the country.

First and foremost among these values is moral value. Morality deals with principles guiding the conduct or behaviour of people. It is both ethical and cultural phenomenon which may be influenced by religious ethics.<sup>21</sup> This valuable religio-cultural heritage is fading out in our country. The society is plagued with shameful demeanour as corruption is been publicly displayed in every sector of the Nigerian polity. A cursory look at our society shows that there is a carefree attitude in the people's way of life and proper moral conduct is simply a matter of personal choice. Thus, the moral standard in Nigeria has nothing to write home about as this is evident in the institutionalisation of vices such as corruption and, its twin sister, bribery.

These moral values, which are connected with certain divinities, are designed to promote good, right and societal living. They are to regulate the behavioural lives of people, individually and collectively, for peace and social harmony. The ideal life in traditional setting involves: truthfulness, honesty, rectitude, justice and other virtues. Any attempts by a ruler to act otherwise are vices which are punishable by the gods.<sup>22</sup> People in authority and public office holders in this contemporary Nigerian society should therefore allow the moral values in their various religions to manifest while discharging their official responsibilities.

Another value is the keeping of covenant. According to Fleming, covenant is 'an agreement between two or more persons with laid down conditions and guaranteed benefits, depending on a person's keeping or breaking the covenant.'<sup>23</sup> Covenant has three major components; parties involved, terms of reference and the punishment/reward that will accompany the obedience or otherwise to the terms of the covenant. In the Nigerian traditional society, covenant breaking or oath violation is abhorred because it is interpreted as a crime against humanity and supernatural being. Thus, before any king or ruler can be enthroned, he must pass through certain form of initiation and installation rites. The purpose of this is to enhance good and adequate socio-political and ethical relations in the society.<sup>24</sup>

The religious concept of covenant was introduced into the Nigerian system of government in the form of oath of office which public officers have to swear in order to make them serve the public conscientiously.<sup>25</sup> This oath of office involves pledging of loyalty to perform faithfully the duties associated with the office. However, it is unfortunate that majority of people in authority today do not think about the implications of oath they are breaking. These therefore open ways for corruption through which promises and oath of office are broken at will, innocent and less privileged people are oppressed with impunity; justice is delayed and even denied. Sequel to this, Nigerians are witnessing major setback in the socio-economic development, political stability, cultural development and family integration. With this destabilising effect that corruption has fired into our collective national psyche, hope is still not lost. Our loss can still be recovered if the virtues of covenant keeping, which include: honesty, trustworthiness and adherence to the oath of office and that of allegiance, are observed in our socio-political, economic and ethical life.

Another value is truth and rectitude. These are essential values among the traditional people of Africa especially among the Yoruba's in Nigeria. The Yoruba people are of the opinion that the petition and request of the truthful and upright person are often granted by the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*), divinities and spirit, while that of liars are left unattended to because lying and falsehood are considered damnable. The truthful person always has the

unfailing support of the gods.<sup>26</sup> If people in authority and the entire populace can embrace this value of truthfulness in the country, then things will turn round for good for every member of the country.

Moreover, traditional value in Africa forbids stealing. In the past, thieves are pilloried and eventually killed. The aspersion cast on thieves in the olden days is so strong that people believe that even if a thief escapes the notice of men, he cannot escape the judgement of the Supreme Being. That is why Yoruba people will say, *A mookun jale bi oba aye ko ri o, ti orun n wo o.*<sup>27</sup> Meaning; he who steals under the cloak of darkness, even if the earthly king do not see him, the heavenly king is looking at him. In this present dispensation, the rate at which stealing is spreading is alarming. It manifest in various dimensions such as: embezzlement, bribery, kick back, Obtain by Trick (OBT) etc. These are veritable elements of corruption in Nigeria. Nigerians are therefore implored to avoid stealing in all areas of their callings.

Last but not the least is the appreciation of human values. In traditional African setting, people recognise the sanctity of human life. According to Oyelade, human value means those concept or patterns of behaviour which recognise and seek to protect the supremacy of man within his environment.<sup>28</sup> Human values are therefore the ingredients cementing societal harmony and reinforcing self esteem and worth to individuals in the society. Africans recognise the dignity of human beings and in consequence, hold a deep and unrelenting concern for human welfare and happiness.

However, in this contemporary Nigerian society, recognition given to human value is on decrease. This therefore makes the importance attached to human value to be relegated to the background. In their attempts to cover various corrupt practices by corrupt officers and administrators, many lives have been lost and wasted in this country. Numerous attempted murders and some extra judicial killing were means of covering corrupt practises by some highly placed officers in the country. This, no doubt, has caused a major setback to the socio-economic and political stability in the country as promises and oath of allegiance are broken at will and the less privileged people and are oppressed with impunity.<sup>29</sup> If both the leaders and the led in this country can embrace and adopt these traditional values in their scheme of things, then the menace of corruption will be reduced to the barest minimum.

### **Implementing Agents of Traditional Values**

With these above suggested solutions what really comes to mind is the issue of implementation. Who and how are these going to be implemented? Among the various agents that are capable of implementing these traditional values is Traditional Authority. This involves traditional rulers with the powers to make demands on their subject for the sake of their individual good or of the society.<sup>30</sup> Tradition rulers as the *Pontifex Maximus*\_(Highest Priest) are the political and religious leaders of their people. They are therefore the chief security officers of their respective communities. This made them to be seen as the ones ‘to whom all heads bow and before whom all kneess.’<sup>31</sup> The mediating roles of traditional rulers in conflict management can also be relevant in curbing the menace of corruption in Nigeria. At a reception in honour of the pioneer Director General of the Federal Capital Territory, Chief Charls Emeka Ofofi advocated for the inclusion of monarchs in the security strategy

adopted in the country. He added that the criminal and corrupt elements are better identified at local level and can be easily isolated by community leaders.<sup>32</sup>

Coupled with the traditional authority is the committee of community leaders. This is one of the structures of traditional government and it involves traditional chiefs, age groups and clan heads. As part of the responsibilities of this committee, it will teach the youth the moral and human values as enshrined in their culture. Speaking on 'The Role of Traditional Institutions in the quest for national security and peace', the Emir of Dass, Alhaji Usman Bilyaminu, expressed dismay that traditional institutions were not integrated into various security committee at the various levels of government. The monarch added that, since these traditional leaders know virtually every one living in their domains and no activity can be carried out within the community without their knowledge, it is therefore easy for them to supervise community policing.<sup>33</sup>

Another agent of compliance is religious leaders. Nigeria as a pluralistic religious state is blessed with at least three major religions, namely: Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity. Each of these religions relates well with the Nigerian society and they fulfil different roles which are deeply rooted in the nature of each one of them. The onus therefore lies on the leaders of these religions to inculcate in their followers values inherent in their religions that were against corruption. Also, religious leaders should accept, as part of their responsibilities, to be inviting members of their religious denominations, who hold public office, for periodic renewals of their oath of office. This, according to Ayantayo,<sup>34</sup> will serve as a constant remembrance of the promises made during their oath of allegiance to the people. However, such religious leaders should guard against any attempt the officers may make at buying them over.

Again, as suggested by Ayantayo,<sup>35</sup> there is need for prospective political leaders to be screened for their moral records by their religious leaders. This can be done by creating a column that will be filled by their religious leaders, vouching that the prospective aspirants will be of good character as they have been doing before. This is very important as their action or inaction will affect the entire citizens either positively or negatively.

In addition, inclusion of indigenous security operatives in the war against corruption in this country will assist greatly in curbing the menace. These security operatives are traditional vigilante groups that see to the safety of their respective ethnic groups. Prominent among these groups is Oodua People's Congress (OPC), which was founded in the Yoruba, south western region of Nigeria due to what was perceived as the failure of the Nigerian police to combat crime and related offences. The Congress serves as security guard and tried to protect the territorial integrity of its ethnic group. In the eastern part of Nigeria, there is also "the Bakassi Boys" who is known as the popular indigenous vigilante group. Like OPC in Yoruba land, the group tends towards total eradication of security threat and crime in the region. Likewise, we have the 'Egbesu Boys' and some others with same vision and mission.<sup>36</sup>

There are numerous cases where these security agents have helped their communities to track down and arrest fraudsters and criminals. With these agents of implementation on ground, it is believed that the menace of corruption will be reduced to the barest minimum if the above suggested traditional values are involved in the war against corruption in this country.

Furthermore, Appreciation of these values would help in cultural evolution and refinement of Nigerian culture, especially those practices that are culturally irrelevant.

### Conclusion

This paper addressed the menace of corruption and its negative effects on the contemporary Nigerian society. From what has been discussed so far, it is clear that corruption is gaining a higher profile in Nigeria as the economic recession continues. It has become a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabric of our national system and it is seriously threatening our very existence as a nation. Various efforts and attempts to stop corruption through modern and foreign means were scuttled by the beneficiaries of corruption. This therefore made all the efforts proved abortive. In spite of the expensive and complex nature of modern social control mechanism, crime rate increases at an overwhelming rate.

The failure of the past attempts to curb corruption in this country prompted this paper to recommend a home grown solution to the menace. Application of traditional values to addressing the evils of corruption in this country would be a better alternative. Among these values are: moral and human values. Others include; covenant keeping, truth and rectitude all which formed the embodiment of cultural values. The paper therefore concluded on the note that if this traditional measure is embraced by all and sundry, then the menace of corruption in the country will be reduced to the barest minimum.

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