

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE RESPONSE OF YORUBA TRADITIONAL RELIGION
AND CULTURE TO THE ANTI-CORRUPTION CRUSADE IN THE
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

By

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Abstract

Corruption is a canker worm, which has not only eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian socio-economic, political and religious lives, but also soiled the character and personality of every Nigerian without yet any hope for solution. The traditional societies were not per se sacrosanct of this epidemic as there were elements of corruption here and there but the magnitude and dimension were not so pronounced in traditional societies because of the inseparable attachment the people had with religion which permeated all spheres of their lives, which made them dissociate themselves from anything evil, corrupt and abhorred in society. Given the above position, the writers call for all Nigerians to be more religiously conscious and adopt a live of moral rectitude as those in our traditional societies in order to get present Nigerian society cleansed of its corrupt and decaying qualities while more effective sanctions should be meted to any individuals(s) or public officer(s) found wanting in discharging public duties as an antidotes against corruption.

Keywords: African Religion, Corruption and Nigerian Society.

Introduction

In Yoruba traditional Religion, emphasis is placed on moral obligations and there is no demarcation between religion and society. God is regarded as the giver of moral law and order in Yoruba traditional societies. As far as the Yoruba are concerned, the Supernatural Being, God, Divinities, Ancestors and human society are regarded as guardians of moral values and are involved in the imposition of moral sanctions in Yoruba traditional societies Idowu, E. B. (1962). This study seeks to examine the response of Yoruba traditional religion to anti- corruption crusade in Nigeria. As a corollary, It examines the concept of sin among the Yoruba, prevention and detection of crimes, agents of sanctions and the response of Yoruba traditional religion to anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria.

There is indissoluble connection between sin and corruption. According to Awolalu (1979), sin is doing that which is contrary to the will and dereliction of duty. It eludes against God or man, breach of covenant, breaking of taboos and doing anything that is regarded as abominable and polluting. One cannot speak of sin in isolation. It has to be related to God and to man. Immoral acts such as adultery, stealing, falsehood, selfishness, sexual intercourse on the barefoot, witchcraft, murder, disobedience, wickedness and a host of others are altogether regarded as social vices.

Among the Yoruba, There is also the belief that sin brings disaster upon the evil doer and the community. An individual may commit sin for which the whole community will be punished by God, Divinities or any other supernatural power. Prosperity is believed to be the reward for moral uprightness while evil is regarded as punishment for the breach of religious and moral laws. Consequently, the immoral acts invoke punishment and wrath of God, divinities and ancestors.

According to Ake (1996), corruption is a canker worm, which has not only eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigerian socio--economic, political and religious lives, but also soiled the character and personality of every Nigerian. Therefore for us to understand and relay the African traditional religious view of the concept, it is pertinent to define the word “corruption”.

Concept of Corruption

Corruption may not be easy to define, but it is generally not difficult to recognize when observed according to Tanzi (1998). The most simplified and popular definition adopted by the World Bank is ‘the abuse of public power for private benefit’ (Gray,& Kaufman 1998). The different perspectives through which corruption is viewed, notwithstanding, a common ground of opinion conceives it as the perpetration of a vice against the public well-being. Lipset and Lenz (2000) define corruption as an “effort to secure wealth or power through illegal means for private gain at the public expense”. Tanzi (1995) defines it neutrally, as the “intentional non-compliance with arm’s length relationship aimed at deriving some advantages from this behaviour for oneself or for related individuals”. This definition takes care of the exclusion of vital issues, such as corruption in the private sector and in private activities. Tanzi believes that corruption occurs in every human endeavour and it is “often difficult to observe because acts of corruption do not typically take place in broad daylight (Tanzi 1995).

Alatas (2006) briefly define corruption as a situation where two people can act to increase their own pay-off at the expense of a third person. This does not mean, however, that an individual cannot perpetrate the act. The point here is that, most often, it takes at least two people to perfect an act probably conceived by an individual. Gray and Kaufmann (1998) define acts of corruption to include bribery and extortions, which necessarily, involve at least two parties and other malfeasances that a public official can carry out alone, including fraud and embezzlement. According to Akpokigbe (2014), these manifest in governmental activities through the appropriating of public assets for private use and embezzlement of public funds by politicians and high-level officials.

This description combines political and bureaucratic officials. People might assume that only politicians in government are corrupt. Most often, bureaucrats provide the templates for perfected corruption. In fact, most corrupt practices are only exposed by bureaucrats when they are excluded from sharing in the proceeds (Habib 2010). Thus, corruption in government cannot be a unilateral action. Therefore, corruption manifests in all facets of governmental activities – contracts, the allocation of benefits, the collection of public revenues, and judicial pronouncements. Officials involved in performing these duties partake at one stage or the other in the abuse of the processes (Jaiyesimi, 2016).

Kupoluyi (2016) contends that corruption is a function of great inequality in wealth distribution, the perception that political offices are the primary means of gaining access to wealth, conflicts between changing moral codes, weakness of social and governmental enforcement mechanism and a lack of a strong sense of national community. Gray and Kaufmann (1998) identify seven factors that engender corruption. These are the value of wages and salaries, presence of strong

opportunities and awareness of how to perpetrate corruption, weak measures against accountability, population, natural resources wealth, lack of political will and indecisive pressure and assistance from the global community. These corruption-enhancing factors vary from one culture to the other and from one political system to the other. One key point to note, however, is that it is possible to identify an act of corruption when it is perpetrated, irrespective of cultural or political background. Hence, corrupt practices are obvious.

Nigeria presents a veritable case for understanding the connection between corruption and political malaise. Ribadu (2006) gives a graphic summary of the situation. He terms the period between 1979 and 1998 “the darkest period” in Nigeria’s history of corrupt regimes. The civilian administration of 1979 – 1983 was bedeviled with profligacy, “wanton waste, political thuggery and coercion... disrespect for the rule of law... bare faced, free-for-all looting of public funds through white elephants projects. He adds that:

corrupt public servants and others in the private sector bestrode the nation, masquerading as captains of business and power brokers with tainted and stolen wealth and demanded the rest of us to kowtow before them. The period of military regime was pathetic. Under them, corruption became the sole guiding principle for running affairs of state. The period witnessed a total reversal and destruction of every good thing in the country (Ribadu 2006).

The Nigeria’s economic and political landscape is pervaded by corruption and abuse of office. The National Planning Commission has noted that:

Systemic corruption and low levels of transparency and accountability have been major sources of development failure. Illegal activities such as the advance fee-fraud (known as 419) and money laundering have torn the fabric of Nigerian society (NEEDS 2005).

Unconventional and fraudulent trade, misappropriation or diversion of funds, kickbacks, under-and over-invoicing, bribery, false declarations, abuse of office, and collection of illegal tolls, among other malfeasant practices, are the forms that corruption take in Nigeria (Kupoluyi 2016). In the international system, Nigeria is rated as one of the most corrupt nations of the world, a ranking that has denied the country its pride of place in the international economic system. It has been noted that: “Corruption is far more dangerous than drug trafficking or other crimes because when it goes unpunished, the public loses confidence in the legal system and those who enforced the law” (Transparency International 2006)

The “kamikaze” plunder by military bandits reduced the “giant of Africa” to a comatose midget as money flowed into the Nigerian government coffers, military dictators went on a spending spree. They frittered away the oil bonanza on extravagant investment projects (Ayittey 2006).

Etymological Root of Corruption

Onah (2000:50) traces the concept from its Latin etymological root; ‘corruptio – meaning, to decay, to be depleted, to rot, to degenerate, to desiccate, to waste away and to lose dignity and integrity’. With regards to the society, it is a situation where justice, fairness, and goodwill are denied. As a concept, it negates all virtues and principles of life. This condition, which stress more on deprivation of right of the citizenry, is not loath some but also anti-developmental, a crime against love, charity and the law. Corruption therefore is misuse of power for private and personal benefit usually committed by people in positions of trust and authority or power.

It is a heinous crime that is committed in secret with no direct obvious victim to either complain or help give evidence. The victim according to Kupoluyi (2016) is more often than not the general public and successful persecution of the offender is usually problematic.

Since much of what Nigeria will achieve in her national life and development is essentially a function of the quality of its leadership, corruption badly damages socio-economic, political and religious development in the country. Decision – making process in corrupt nations are usually, irrational as they are motivated by greed to acquire wealth. Most importantly, resources are wasted, as projects are awarded not on the premise of stability but as kickbacks to those in position of authority.

Ehichioya (2000) noted that at the last quarter of 1999, Nigeria was competing with Cameroon and Pakistan for the first position of the most corrupt nation in the world. He attributed the cause of corruption to poverty and uncertainty about the future on one hand and greed, selfishness and wickedness on the other. Odey (2001) remarks that as a result, so many people are being persuaded to imbibe the philosophy that the end justifies the means. That is why many more Nigerians are beginning to believe that “hard work no longer pays”.

Corruption has become a universal phenomenon, which permeates every establishment in Nigeria with its devastating effects on society. In the education sector, Ekwunife (1995) observes, that “the institution has been eroded by corruption at all levels, duplicity, insincerity and lack of commitment”. In the military administration, Ayida (1991) noted that one big mistake of all military administration in Nigeria is excessive preoccupation with economic mismanagement of their predecessors without improving on their performance. In the police formation, corruption has become institutionalized as the men at various duty posts and check –point collect all sorts of unspecified amount of money from their victims as well as overlooking crimes in return for a bribe. In politics many Nigerians still have erroneous belief that greatness is achieved by plundering the nation’s treasury and converting public funds into private accounts. Odey (2001:125) explains thus:

That is why a wretched pauper of yesterday joins politics today only to become a millionaire tomorrow who has a super-abundance of all the good things money can buy, all to the consternation of those who know that he is neither a leader nor rich man but kleptomaniac.

Gbenda (2002) opines that, corruption has deeply penetrated all level of Nigerian politics and that leaders are fond of paying lip service to the practical implementation of accountability guidelines. The foregoing is clear indication that corruption is one of the moral problems of our contemporary society. The gravity is so alarming that Nwala (1980) comments “... neither the moral teaching in schools and churches nor our penal codes help”. The essence of Christian religion in the school system is to teach moral values or more code and spiritual values, the underlying factor in the cultivation of acceptable behaviour and happy life (Gana, 1998). If the

church and the school are really beclouded by the general moral problems of the society, then where do we think we are going to ‘manufacture’ honest and sincere leaders that will shun corruption in private and public life? Stories have been written on the pages of newspapers about some men of God (pastors) who dupe their unsuspecting members some thousands and millions of naira under various guises. What about school teachers and principals who collect monies from students to assist in breaking examination ethics? All these and many more go to buttress the extent of decay in the society.

Every rational person in Nigeria is concerned about the deplorable state of corruption; hence religious bodies have designed prayers against the epidemic. Nigerian leaders too, having realized that morality, discipline and ethos have diminished considerably, have tried one system or the other aimed at enforcing moral values, and punishing those found guilty. Examples of such measures and policies of government include, Ethical Revolution, Ethical RE-orientation, War against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC), code of conduct Bureau, Operation Sweep, and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). All these efforts have not yielded much dividends, and according to Jimoh (2001) “attempts on the part of the individuals, organizations to eradicate corruption have not yielded fruitful results”. Consequently, since not much have been achieved in total eradication of corruption in Nigeria and ethical values are often cast to the wind, it becomes imperative to bring to the lime-light the traditional religious views of the Yoruba people on corruption with a view to offering vital information, that will have far-reaching implication to the Nigerian society.

African Traditional Religious View on Corruption

The indigenous religious system of the Yoruba described, as Indigenous Religion is rich in institutions that provide honest leadership, good governance and accountability where corrupt practices and usurpation were not only rare but also unheard of. Since it is impossible to cover the entire African continent, we shall illustrate these deals using the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria as a case study. The Yoruba indigenous religion involves all the beliefs, practices and ritual elements handed down from one generation to another. It is one of the richest cultural heritage of the Yoruba because as Mbiti (1969) puts it, “Africans (Yoruba) are notoriously religious and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. For the Yoruba, religion permeate into all the department of life so full that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it”. Being obstinately religious, the Yoruba find it extremely difficult to strain or severe their relationship with their gods. They see it as a place for succour and solace and any thing that will have to crate a yawning gap between them and their gods is always frowned at, condemned and completed avoided. It was in this vain that Olutoyin (2014) wrote that “In the effort to survive, the Yoruba wove covenants, enduring covenants with the spiritual forces of their universe. The operations of these powers explain much of the religious, custom and culture of the people”.

For the Yoruba therefore, the survival of individual is depended on how devoted and religiously he keeps his covenantal bond with the spiritual forces. Due mainly to their inseparable attachment to God and other pantheon of divinities they neither find it easy to severe relationship with the gods nor with their neighbours. As a result, in the traditional societies, according to Ojelabi (2013), virtues such as obedience to parents and elders, hospitality, humility, chastity, honesty, trustworthiness were valued and encomiums and praises were always rained on those who kept to them. These rewards had always been in public ceremonies or festivals where many people will have to benefit from such exercises or lessons (Ademowo 2016). Consequently, the children in Yoruba land were told that the reward of good life is praise here on earth and a very

blissful life in the ancestral world while the punishment meant for bad behaviour are ostracism, banishment or capital punishment and a life of misery in the ancestral world where one will only be fed with millipedes and centipedes and will hover around the outskirts of the community where refuses are disposed.

With all these injunctions staring directly at the face of the Yoruba man, he had no alternative than to live in consonance with the norms, taboos, traditions, customs of his ecological habitat. He thus abhorred, and condemned any corrupt behaviour or tendencies thereby maintaining an orderly and corrupt free society.

The Place of the Ancestors

Ancestral veneration is one of the major elements in the understanding of Yoruba Traditional Religion. The recognition, and respect they give to the ancestors are due largely to the fact the ancestors are perceived to be living and keeping surveillance over the affairs of living, (Metuh 1987). The Yoruba also believe that the filial love and attachments, which link them with their parents should be constantly greased for continuity of the lineage.

Quartcoopome (1987) is of the view that the serious attachment to the ancestors by the Yoruba is because the (ancestors) are the guardians of morality and invisible policemen of the individual families. Consequently, any sin or misdeed, no matter how innate, is not ignored by the ancestors and as policemen, they can arrest, subject you to trial and get you incarcerated (Ojelabi 2013). The Yoruba therefore do not hesitate in taking Oaths by the Supreme Being, Ancestors, Nature gods, Magical forces, Man names of their progenitors, and as a result behave in accordance with the interest of those living dead to avoid any catastrophe that may befall their clan or lineage.

Detection of Crimes in Yoruba traditional society

There are various ways of detecting crime among the Yoruba. The detective means are discussed below.

Trial by ordeal:

Some crimes among the Yoruba are made to confess their crimes through subjection to ordeals. Trial by ordeals varies. In some cases, when a person is suspected of stealing, coin of money are put in water to drink by the culprit. It is believed that if the suspect commits the offence, serious repercussions will follow.

Among the traditional Yoruba, Ogun is regarded as the presiding divinity over oaths and covenants or pacts. At times, swearers are asked to partake of water into which a red hot iron from the smith fire has been dropped or in which an emblem of Ogun has been washed. It is believed that any one who swears falsely by Ogun or breaks an oath, will die or be mutilated through gunshot, machete or accident. People accused of murder are sometimes asked to drink the sand from the grave of the dead. In the words of Elechi (1982), if the accused really commits the offence, he will die seven days after drinking the sand.

Swearing:

People who are suspected of criminal acts are taken to the shrine to swear with serious curses. False swearing has negative implications. If he swears in order to avoid public ridicule, the effect of the curse will expose him as an evildoer.

Oracle:

The use of oracles for detecting crimes is very pronounced. Among the traditional Yoruba, Orunmila is a primordial divinity believed to be gifted with knowledge and wisdom. Oracles are believed to be the media through which divine answer, one scud to problem, puzzles or questions beyond the reach of man, a classic example of which was the Jewish *Urim* and *Thmin* in use before the coming of Jesus Christ (Exodus 28:30, Lev. 8:8). The traditional Yoruba consult oracles to detect crimes.

Agents of sanction:

Agents of sanctions in Yoruba traditional communities include supernatural being, that as God Divinities and ancestors. The other earthly and societal agents include kings, Baales, Priest, Priestess, Elders, chiefs title holders and public opinion in Yoruba communities.

Response of Yoruba Traditional Religion to Anti-Corruption

It is said earlier in this paper that the Yoruba belief system is deeply rooted in morality. Consequently, the response of Yoruba traditional religion is positive to anti-corruption, from time immemorial, Yoruba traditional religion has been consistent and resolute in its pursance of anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria. Just as it is indicated earlier in this study, in the Yoruba world- view, religion and society are interwoven, intertwine and interrelated (Ojelabi 2013). The Yoruba according to Olutoyin (2014) believe that society is Gogs' ordinance. God and His functionaries, Divinities, Ancestors, sprits are guardian s of moral value in the Yoruba traditional societies. Man is able to respond to deity's command because he is created a moral agent and endowed with conscience capable of distinguishing between good and evil. Man is conceived by the Yoruba as a created being in to God, his creator, and his fellowmen. Thus, the Yoruba regard corruption as a heinous sin and crime that should be off in Nigeria. Different mechanism of preventing and detecting crimes among the Yoruba are discussed earlier in this paper. A typical example of this mechanism is the emblem of Ogun god of iron which is used for swearing among the adherents of traditional religion in the law court sat every level today in Nigeria. The oath is administered by handling a piece of iron to the witness to kiss or to touch with life forehead. Swearing by the god, (Ogun) is severe form of swearing because of the implications it is believed to have on the swearers (Odejobi 2013).

Implications for Nigeria

Having discussed briefly the Yoruba attitudes to corruption and religious culture as they affect the dispensation of justice, social control, and honest leadership in Yoruba traditional society, it is imperative to apply the ideas of the sacred with the aim of averting corruption and corruptive tendencies in the Nigerian society.

First and foremost, oath taking is a very common feature of Nigeria socio political life. Elected or appointed public officers, namely Counsellors and Local Governments Chairmen, Governors, Commissioners, President and Ministers on assumption of public office take oath to be loyal to their fatherland, to uphold the principles of justice, equity and honesty. In reality, how effective is the oath people take on assumption of office? How many Nigerians have been tried for acting contrary to the oath they took, except for some few scapegoats? But the traditional religious

system of Yoruba people was effective in checking maladministration and corrupt practices in society.

Whatever the leader does was the collective will of the people and for common good of all since he believes that the ancestors are keeping surveillance over the affairs of the society and that any sin or misdeed, no matter how innate, is not ignored by the ancestors who as invisible policemen, and can arrest, subject any culprit to trial and get him incarcerated. This is why empty and unfulfilled promises were unheard of in Yoruba traditional society and a person in position of authority could be easily dethroned if found wanting in the discharge of his assigned or appointed duties (Ojelabi 2013).

In the Nigeria context people aspiring for public offices make false and frivolous promises to the people without fulfilling same and still go unchallenged. However, what is highly needed in Nigeria is accountability of people in private and public service, as well as justice and punishment of defaulters.

In a bid to have a corrupt-free society, the erroneous concept of power, greatness, and wealth must be de-emphasized in our contemporary society (Okolo & Akpokigbe 2014). Nigerians are fond of adopting foreign policies in trying to move the country forward, but what we have not embraced is the right attitude to wealth, and power, among others, which are rudiments of country with high moral or ethical standards. As in the traditional Yoruba society, Nigeria should introduce effective sanctions against any individual or public officer found wanting in discharging public duties, as antidotes against corruption. The problems of Nigeria public officers bothers on quest for materialism, excessive demands and expectations by friends, and relations and as a kinsman, he is expected to dish out money freely to all and sundry. This creates a negative atmosphere, as he demands kickbacks, claiming thousands for travelling, lodging and scores of other frivolous allowances while the economy suffers setbacks.

In some cases, huge sums of money are siphoned out of the country, lying in the coffers of private banks, so that the family can never be poor in generations to come. The Nigerian attitude towards a honest man who retired from public service with little or nothing is quite pathetic and the obvious and funny story is that he is laughed at as failing to bring honour and wealth to his community and so he is rather looked upon as a misfit. This fact severs as a motivating factor for serving public officers to engage in fraudulent and corrupt activities (Igbuzor 2008).

.Recommendations and Conclusion

Nigerians need some form of ethical and moral re-orientation and reshaping of their negative value system through a return to our worthy while traditions. Quality leadership in traditional ideology is a sacred divine institution and exercise as well as discharge of responsibilities must be in line with the fear of the supernatural.

Education system is one of the ways of portraying what a nation values and want to achieve, thus sound religious and moral education should be introduced at the various level of our educational system. The reason for advocating this is that there cannot be development and progress in any nation without honest, right attitude to work, devotion to duty, moral obligation and social responsibility. It is common knowledge that men of character are the conscience of society. It is a common slogan in our convocations that certificates awarded in Nigerian institutions are both in terms of character and learning. Unfortunately, the education of our youths today lacks sufficient moral orientation and this being the case, they suffer from gross intellectual poverty, character and learning. Nwala (1980) shares the same view when he stated that “the most immoral are the elites, be hey in business, teaching , government, professional, military or police uniform”.

In Nigeria today, to tell lies rather than the truth is a sign of bravery for the youths who are future leaders. The writers agree with Abdullahi (1999) that “truth, like malaria medicine, is bitter but necessary”. Every Nigerian wants to be instant millionaire. What a betrayal of truth? Richness should not be by fraudulent means but by God’s endowment. The foregoing support the writers’ recommendation for a turn or introduction of moral and religious education at all levels.

Conclusion

Corruption in all its ramifications is a heinous crime with serious consequences on social order, politics and economic spheres among others. Combating corruption is not just the task of government, but also of individuals and organizations. Since things have fallen apart in Nigeria, there should be a resort to Yoruba traditional religious methods of finding the truth and the models of exemplary leadership qualities and administration, usually enforced through various Yoruba traditional institutions, so that we can track down the man who engages in ritual killings in his private room in urban centres, the drug trafficker, the government officers who embezzles huge sums of worker’s salaries, the trader who sells fake and adulterate commodities, the teacher who assists in perpetrating examination malpractices, the banker who forges the signature of his manager, and all the rest of us who are engaged in one corrupt practices or the other and thereby making this society free and enjoyable for all of us and the battle against corruption to be won.

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