

African Cultural Values and Corruption in Nigeria: New Insights

Terngu Sylvanus Nomishan^{1*}, Oryina Joel Andzenge², Alegbejo Noah Kolawole³
Peter Luke Oyigebe⁴

^{1,3,4}Federal University Lokoja, ²Akawe Torkula Polytechnic

*Corresponding author, e-mail: terngu.nomishan@fulokoja.edu.ng

Abstract

African cultural values connote core principles and ideals that maintains good, right, fair and just in African societies. This culture is developed over a long period of time, preserved and promoted by all members of a given group or society. Corruption as a phenomenon on the other hand has been variously described as a societal vice. Though research shows that some levels of corruption exist in almost every human society, it is over accommodated in some societies or nations and as such it has notoriously continued to destroy such societies/nations. This is particular to a number of African nations, with Nigeria being among (if not) the worse corrupt nation(s) in the continent. It is not difficult to understand that the value placed on corruption in Nigeria is synonymous to the way cultural values are cherished by people in some nations of the world. In view of this, there is a serious and immediate need to educate the Nigerian public about the consequences of developing a culture of corruption in the country. It seems that some Nigerians take corruption to be a normal way of life, thereby, equating the vice to acceptable cultural values. Today, many Nigerians are not interested in developing and/or preserving amiable cultural values for the nation. Rather, more attention is focus on the promotion of corrupt practices that enables the destruction of even the good cultural values of the nation that were left behind by our forefathers. Therefore, this paper seeks to unmask the importance of developing and preserving good African cultural values that will guarantee unity, patriotism, social cohesion and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: African Cultural Values; Corruption; Traditional deities; Social cohesion; Underdevelopment.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of culture is a very dynamic one. This dynamism is such that it continues to evolve and to develop at all times. Culture is the accumulation of shared meanings, rituals, norms, and traditions that distinguishes members of one society from another (Hofstede, 1980). There are a set of values among African people that guide the behaviour of all members of a given society. These include “values such as hospitality, chastity before marriage, truth, and respect for old age, covenant keeping, hard work and good character” (Awoniyi, 2015). This is in addition to proverbs and maxims used to inculcate social and moral values in order to ensure the promotion of good and acceptable behaviour among members of a given society.

Humanities all over the world develop unique ways of life that guide and sustain their societies. Some of these ways include norms, values, beliefs, arts, laws and customs among others (Tylor, 1871). This is done via the learning processes of enculturation and socialization, manifested in the diversity of cultures across societies. An acceptable cultural norm codifies acceptable conduct in any given society. This serves as a guideline for social behaviour, dress, language and demeanour, which determines the identity of a group of people or society. It also serves as a template for expectations in social groups.

The explanation above is an express demonstration of the fact that, culture determines a people’s identity. Corruption on the other hand constitutes a major obstacle to democracy, impedes economic development and prosperity, and ultimately erodes the social order, peace and stability (Transparency International Report, 2010). Therefore, since culture means the total way of life of a people or groups (Tylor,

1871), corruption which is becoming a way of life of several Nigerians is gradually metamorphosing into a culture for the nation.

Beginning from the early days of Nigeria's independence, corruption has influenced a lot of decisions usually taken by some leaders and many other people in the country. Though, corruption as a phenomenon has been variously described as a societal vice (Odo, 2015; Adagbabiri, 2018; Nomishan, et al. 2021), it is difficult to refer to it as such in Nigeria. It is also true that every human society suffers some level of corruption; however, it is becoming an accepted or normal way of life in others. Corruption has completely destroyed trust, justice, fairness, equity, and unity. As well as the rule of law, sincerity, laws, social stability and even cultural values in many nations of the world. This is particularly true in the case of a number of African nations (if not all); with Nigeria being among (if not) the worse corrupt nation(s) in the continent.

According to Andzenge (2021), "corruption in Nigeria manifest in different forms such as graft, bribery, fraud, extortion, nepotism, favouritism, stealing of state's or private assets and misappropriation of public funds and money laundering among others. The most frequent practice of corruption among Nigerian public officials is the diversion of public assets and funds". For example, Ade Adesomoju (2021) reported that the Supreme Court of Nigeria on 12th March 2021 affirmed a 10-years jail term passed on a former governor of Plateau State, Joshua Dariye, who was convicted of looting 2 billion naira between 1999 and 2007 when he was the governor of the State. Also, Bolanle Olabimtan (2020) reported that the Supreme Court of Nigeria on 7th February, 2020 affirmed the conviction of ex-governor Jolly Nyame of Taraba State, who diverted 1.64 billion naira between 1999 and 2007.

This support the position of Odekunle (2010) that corruption manifest in Nigeria through asking, giving or taking a fee, gift or favour in exchange for the performance of a legitimate task; the perversion or obstruction of the performance of such a task, or the performance of an illegitimate task. Hoarding, collusive price-fixing, smuggling, transfer-pricing, inflation of prices, election rigging, illegal arrest for harassment or intimidation purposes, abuse/misuse/non-use of office, position or power, dumping of obsolete machinery or out-dated drugs, illegal foreign exchange transactions, legal but in obvious unfair and unjust acquisition of wealth, 'gilded crime' certificate forgery, false accounting and claims, diversion of public resources, cooperating or offering persons money or property for indirect personal use, among many others.

The title of this article is deliberate - resulting from a thorough intellectual thought. This is because the authors perceive Nigerian public officials as gradually developing a corrupt cultural system in Nigeria that is synonymous to that of cherished cultural values in other societies of the world. In many societies of the world such as those of the United Kingdom, China, Israel, United States of America, United Arab Emirate, France and Italy to mention a few, cultural values of respect for constitutional provisions, associated laws and establishment acts among others guarantees trust, justice, fairness, truth and faithfulness among public office holders and the general public to some extent.

However, this is a direct opposite of the situation in Nigeria where public officials ignore constitutional provisions and laws of the country to willingly loot public funds that runs into billions of naira and dollars. For example, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) announced on 16th May, 2022 that it arrested a seating Accountant General of the Federation, Ahmed Idris in connection with the diversion of funds and money laundering activities to the tune of 80 billion naira. The EFCC also revealed that 17 properties in Nigeria and overseas were linked to the country's treasury chief (Channels, 2022; Sodiq Omolaoye, 2022; Soni Daniel, 2022; Aljazeera, 2022).

The number of politicians and other public office holders who depends on corruption to live their lives increases on a daily basis. As people in other countries of the world in addition to changing their landscapes, are registering good character as part of their cultural values and identity, many Nigerians are building corruption as a culture for the nation. Rather than built amiable cultural values as heritage for Nigeria, they focus all their attention on the promotion of corrupt practices that enables the destruction of even the infant national cultural value system that was built by our forefathers.

Character in heritage is "defined as a 'place with its own identity' where the objective is to promote character in townscape and landscape by responding to and reinforcing locally distinctive patterns of development, landscape and culture" (Ivor & Jo, 2008). Most of the times, the culture of a people largely reflect their heritage character, which becomes their identity as a people. Therefore, a corrupt character will give rise to a corrupt culture, resulting to a corrupt identity. Does this scenario explain the kind of culture and identity Nigerians are building for themselves and the nation? We shall find out in the next sections of this article.

Method

The patronage of corruption has taken a central stage in the daily engagements of many Nigerians. This is as the authorities have continued to find ways of eliminating the menace. The government has over

time, created several agencies to help in the fight against corruption, but this seems to be impossible. To this end, many Nigerians now believe that a cultural approach which should involve the application of traditional values in the activities of the government, especially the fight against corruption should be considered. Therefore, this research seeks to (in addition to main aim) interrogate the desired interventions of cultural values in Nigeria's war against corruption.

This research work adopted an exploratory research design, employing qualitative method of data collection (Key Informant Interview). The data for this paper were collected between the months of October and December 2021. The interview involved the collection of oral information from 92 participants cutting across the six geopolitical zones of the country. The informants comprised 12 academics, 16 civil servants, 10 market men and women, 6 traditional rulers, 16 farmers and 32 students. The choice of each informant was based on their level of education, traditional knowledge, corruption experiences, knowledge of past and present cultural values, and relationship with leaders in public and private organizations among others.

An interview guide comprising eleven sets of questions bothering on cultural values and corruption in Nigeria was used during data acquisition. Interview with each informant lasted for at least an hour. Further, content analysis has been used in the analysis of data collected from the participants. This analysis has been done manually having thematically transcribed all the interviews. In addition to the primary data, secondary data were also used for collaborative purpose and logical presentation of the issues discussed.

Result and Discussion

Cultural values are particularly important as they consist of desirable trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or social entity (Schwartz, 1994, Yeganeh, 2014). Therefore, a society that has sound cultural values controlling the behaviour of its people will lack corruption. This is because such a culture will make it very difficult for its people to indulge in corrupt practices. However, a culture of corruption connotes attitudes, beliefs, and practices so pervasive as to make much of the population tolerant of corruption in public and private life and indifferent to anti-corruption reform through lack of confidence in the possibility of positive change (Windsor, 2020). Corrupt culture significantly influences people, making them to practise it intentionally or unintentionally. To some extent, these practices patronise corruption and make a significant impact on society in several ways (Sakib, 2019).

The government and other formal institutions in the public and private sector can also promote a culture of corruption in a society that upholds high cultural values (Seleim & Bontis, 2009). For example, in a bureaucratic system of government, established structures encourage managers to behave unethically. Once the government hijack everything and decisions are taken only by the central authority, individuals may perceive that it is necessary to work through informal channels to achieve personal goals (Getz & Volkema, 2001). This therefore, induces people to offer or pay bribes and similar dishonest dealings, and it might induce officials to demand or accept bribes (Seleim & Bontis, 2009).

However, in a democratic system of government where decisions are taken at different levels, and where people have a voice in the exercise of power, only sound laws, cultural norms and values, and purposeful supervision can guarantee honesty. The culture of supervision drives honesty, which in turn guarantees development in any given society. A society that lacks the culture of checks and balances grows fast in corruption. In such societies, emphases are on the budgetary and allocation of state resources, but not the will to ensure that such resources are well utilized. Thereby encouraging individuals to divert and/or steal public resources at their disposal.

African Cultural Values and Corruption in Nigeria

There are many cultural values among almost every ethnic group in Nigeria that ensures honesty. Among many of these ethnic groups, there are traditional means of keeping people in check and making sure that established norms and values are maintained. Before the middle of the 19th century, there were cosmological ideas among ethnic groups now found in Nigeria, which formed the basis for a sound system of values responsible for social balance in the society. Anwuorah and Asike (2015) posited that:

central to the Nigerian's view of the world, and the place of man in it, was the belief that the universe was peopled by spirits, some great, some small, some benevolent, but many more were malevolent. All of them were capable of swift and often vindictive anger. The supreme being, the Allah of the Muslims, the Chineke of the Igbos, the Olorun of the Yorubas, and the Abassi of the Ibibios, and also the Ifa, the Fenigbeso, the Ojukwu, and a host of other deities and spirits either inhabited or were guardians of land, sea, and air as well as everything in them.

There exist several deities among the extinct and extant members of almost all the nationalities in Nigeria, which assists in maintaining norms, values and moral standards in their communities. They include the Yemonja, and Orisha et cetera of the Yoruba; the Igbo has Chi-ukwu, Ahiajoku, Muo-mmiri, and Agwu-Nsi, et cetera; those of the Hausa include Maguzanci, Kuri, Uwardowa, Uwargona and Gajjimare inter alia; the Tiv has the Swem and Akombo, among others; Gunnu of the Nupe; Aijenu, Ikpakacha, Ane and Ichekpa of the Igala people; and the Egbesu of the Ijaw people, among many others. These deities had/has specific roles in their various societies. However, the most important thing among them is the fact that they try to check wrongdoing in the society. For example, the Swem is “an ‘Oath of justice’ sworn by the Tiv people to prove innocence and cleanse the land to avert calamities” (Nomishan, 2021). Once the Swem finds an accused person guilty, the only penalty is death.

Nana (2020) explain that, in Igbo land oaths are taken for several reasons. Some of which include, “the establishment of truth of what is said, second for the maintenance of good human relations, thirdly, to maintain the secrecy of an institution or an organisation and fourthly, they are taken when criminals are being sorted out.” Nana (2020) articulated that:

oath is a fearful ritual and most often, words that connotes calamity and deaths are used to make pledge, stating that a person will keep to one’s part of the agreement. In such rituals, death and wellbeing are used as guaranty to secure the agreements. As summarized by Ikeora (2016) parties to oath taking directly submitted to the supernatural tribunal to settle disputes brought before the deity. Time is normally given within which the offending party is expected to either be killed by the gods or be sick so as to confirm that he is the offending party (Nwakoby, 2004).

Apart from being killed by the deities when found guilty, certain offences required that instead of death penalty, the guilty person(s) were banished from the land. More so, these deities also promoted the belief in ancestral spirits. Expressed in the various ritual practices “connected with the ancestral shrines and subsidiary belief in reincarnation” (Anwuluorah and Asike, 2015, p.190-191). Anwuluorah and Asike maintain that:

the closeness of the ancestors’ spirits helps to support the strong kinship attachments so common in Nigeria. These beliefs provide the moorings of the traditional Nigerian culture. They provide the framework into which the beliefs in witchcraft, charms and magic must fit in. They explain the respect paid to certain elders and traditional rulers who form the visible link between the living and the death, and justify the myths about man’s relationship with the universe.

These deities ensure that all members of a given society respect and maintain justice, faithfulness, fairness and truth inter alia. A culture that was very strong among various groups in Nigeria. Justice and fairness was the hallmark of the past people. The fear of the punishment by the deities made kings and rulers to avoid anything that could make them compromise in their duties, thereby, ensuring the absence of corruption among their people. There was therefore, no room for subjects or community members to indulge in corrupt practices. Therefore, these past Nigerians were characterized by truth, justice, fairness, equity, and hard work et cetera.

However, most of these traditional values and morals have been negatively impacted by Christianity and Islam, Westernization and other forces of globalization. This has led to the elimination or abandonment of many of these traditions. A development that led Gubam and Nomishan (2021) to assert that the abandonment of these ancient cultural practices is one of the major reasons for the unceasing social instability, lack of morality and corrupt practices in the country. Gubam and Nomishan (2021) noted that “any deviation from the accepted norms and values of the society was punishable, and in some cases the deviant was sent out of the land”. Therefore, there was strict adherence to the laydown norms and values in the society.

Today, there is great insincerity, injustice, unfairness, unfaithfulness, inequality, disunity and untruthfulness among a major segment of people in Nigeria. The existence of democracy, Christianity and adoption of several western life styles in the country has made it possible for people to patronize corruption at an alarming rate. At this point the question that comes into the minds of several Nigerians is whether the situation would have been different if the past cultural practices were still in place (Ibiwoye, 2016; The Citizen, 2017; Nana, 2020). Imagine what would happen if leaders are taking oath of office using ancient deities and not the constitution, Bible or Koran. For example, it is believed that if the leaders in Benue State (particularly the Tiv) take oath of office using the Swem, there will be absolute caution and carefulness. This is because anyone who is accused of crime such as theft, deceit, injustice and unfairness among others, is

made to take the Swem oath, and if such a person is found guilty of the crime, the Swem divination pot will cause “their legs and abdomen to swell up, leading to their death” (Nomishan, 2021).

This point was also made by the Head of Olorisa worldwide, Jamiu Eletu, who said politicians should be made to swear by strong deities in various traditions in the country during swearing into offices, if corruption in the country must be brought to barest minimum (Ibiwoye, 2016). Also, at the quarterly public lecture organized by the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO), in Abuja, the former Governor of Imo State, Rochas Okorocha collaborated this opinion, where is said “our government must begin to adopt our culture in government, if we must succeed. Even in the fight against corruption our (traditional) practices of oath taking should be applied” (The Citizen, 2017).

The present culture of swearing-in leaders into office using the constitution, Bible and the Koran has avail leaders in the country the opportunity to develop a corrupt culture that manifest in different ways. Some of which include;

- i. Abuse of state funds.
- ii. Nepotism
- iii. Favouritism
- iv. Destruction of educational institutions
- v. Prioritization and promotion of personal interests.
- vi. Willingness to give and take bribe
- vii. Theft and privatization of public resources
- viii. Illegal appropriation and diversion of public resources/assets.
- ix. Colluding to deceive and steal
- x. Giving gift for purposes of enticement
- xi. Electoral violations
- xii. Extortion
- xiii. Protecting or concealing information
- xiv. Abuse of power or over exercising power
- xv. Manipulation of information
- xvi. Forgery
- xvii. Hoarding
- xviii. Smuggling
- xix. Police brutality
- xx. Illegal foreign exchange transactions
- xxi. Importation of obsolete machinery or out-dated drugs
- xxii. Enablement of social instability and insecurity
- xxiii. Promotion of immoral society, among several others.

There are some notable examples of corruption involving political office holders and other principal officials in Nigeria from military regimes to civilian administrations. This includes the popular case of corruption involving Late General Sani Abacha and his family, who looted the country's treasury to the extent that the Federal Government has continued to recover the loot till date. Abacha also “made illegal pay off to other corrupt officials in his government such as Chief Anthony Ani, Alhaji Bashir Dalhatu, Alhaji Abdulh-Azeez, Arisekola Alao among others” (Akindele et al. 2020).

During the civilian administration of former President Olusegun Obasanjo many politicians were also “found guilty of inflating budgetary allocation and funds for special projects in the country. For example, Senator Chuba Okadigbo presented a sum of 173 million naira, an amount which he inflated for personal gain. A one-time female speaker of House of Representative was also involved in the misuse of 628 million naira. The then vice president, Atiku Abubakar was also pronounced guilty of corrupt charges as he diverted petroleum technology development fund” amounting to 145 million dollars (Akindele et al. 2020).

According to Global witness (2012) James Ibori the former governor of Delta State was indicted by the court for corruption charges. He embezzled and laundered public funds abroad. Report suggests that he had expensive houses in the United Kingdom and foreign accounts were linked to him. Similarly, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, former governor of Bayelsa State was found guilty of corruption and money laundering. He was impeached and sent to jail by the administration of Olusegun Obasanjo. Bode George, a strong PDP chieftain was also accused of corruption, found guilty and sent to jail. Tafa Balogun, an inspector general of police was also sent to jail on the basis of financial corruption (Global witness, 2012) Mr. Ganduje, the incumbent Kano State Governor is enmeshed in bribery allegations after being caught in a series of video clips receiving dollars from contractors to Kano State (Premium Times, 2020). Mrs Diezani Alison- Madueke was also indicted in corruption case. She was found to have laundered 153 million dollars. Dauda Lawal, a former executive director of First Bank was also involved in the case. Mrs Diezani's properties were seized

and they now belong to the Nigerian government ([Premium Times, 2020](#)). Reports also suggest that there is corruption within the fuel subsidy programme.

Just as mentioned elsewhere by [Seleim and Bontis \(2009\)](#), multidimensional corruption in Nigeria has significantly hindered the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI), negatively affected economic successes, reduced the level of human capital, and destroyed confidence in both public and private institutions in the country among many other problems. This therefore, justifies the recent calls for the adoption of African traditional means of swearing to cultural deities, by subjecting Nigerian leaders to taking oath of office at all levels using cultural deities.

Many scholars believe that there are indigenous cultural practices that enable or promote corruption among societies of the world ([Mauro, 1995](#); [Khan, 1998, 2005](#); [La Porta, et al. 1999](#); [Theobald, 1999](#); [Treisman, 2000](#); [Svensson, 2005](#); [Sakib, 2019](#)). This is seemingly the perceived case in Nigeria today. Consequently, [Chinweuba \(2018\)](#) noted that:

corruption fundamentally arises from culture. Worst still, most cultural traditions domiciled in Nigeria even abet and institutionalize corruption by endorsing the mere presence of wealth. Evidently, these cultures acknowledge, respect, appreciate and reward wealthy individuals irrespective of the dubious origins and ugly circumstances underlining their riches. In these cultures, societal authority has also shifted from the elderly and disciplined young people whose noble deeds guaranteed them as cultural models to whoever has lots of money. Even the revered traditional titles and leadership positions have gone the same too.

This point was further explained by [Ani \(2009\)](#) in an article titled 'Corruption and Culture in Nigeria: Between Institutionalism and Moral Individualism. Ani emphasized that:

in the typical Igbo meeting of *umunna*, the opinion of a penniless old man will certainly carry less weight in the light of the opinion of a wealthy young man, because, among many other immediate considerations, this is the same person who is capable of implementing projects concluded in the meeting. On a more immediate level, he will provide refreshments for the meeting, and any or everybody will always harbour some hope of benefiting something from him. The question of the origin of one's wealth or his business identity is relegated to the background in the face of all the prospects of associating with him.

However, this is the direct opposite of the standard application of cultural values in many past African societies. As noted earlier cultural norms and values were fundamental in all human societies and in human actions and activities at all times. Generally, a morally sound society was one that maintained accepted cultural norms and values, which were all together tied to religious belief systems. What constituted moral codes of all Nigerian groups in the past was laws, taboos, customs and set forms of behaviour, all of which derived their compelling power from religion (traditional deities).

Thus, morality was ensured through the adherence to cultural norms and values provided and monitored by the deities and the punishments given to a deviant or those breaking the moral codes were made effective by the deities ([Anwuluorah and Asike, 2015](#)). Therefore, there was strict adherence to the laydown norms and values among these groups. Eventually, this practice has drastically reduced in almost all cultures in Nigeria today. Leaving a few instances where oaths taking or swearing by these deities have continued to strikes great intimidation and fear in the minds and hearts of every member of such groups' ([Nana, 2020](#)).

Further, as stressed by [Ibiwoye \(2016\)](#) [The Citizen \(2017\)](#) and [Nana \(2020\)](#), promoting these cultural values and involving them in the fight against corruption will be of help to the nation. This should be done to ensure that people at all levels of life behave well, respect justice, fairness, equity, faithfulness and truthfulness among others. This will largely reduce (if not end) corruption in the public and private sectors of the country.

There is also a general believe that the lack of morality and good value system among contemporary Nigerians, is as a result of the abandonment of real African cultures and traditions which were responsible for united, peaceful and morally conscious African societies in the past ([Itanyi & Nwankwo, 2019](#); [Nomishan et al., 2021](#); [Gubam and Nomishan, 2021](#); [Nomishan, 2021](#)). Therefore, there is need to apply a cultural approach in the fight against corruption, so as to stop corruption from becoming a culture in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Culture is a guide for people to behave, thus culture contains values and norms that are considered good in society. Corruption is an act of social crime that must be avoided and rewarded for the perpetrators. In this paper, it can be concluded that corruption in Nigeria can be limited by strengthening the cultural

values of the Nigerian people. In general, a morally healthy society is a society that maintains accepted cultural norms and values, all of which are tied to a religious belief system. What shaped the moral code of every Nigerian society in the past were laws, taboos, customs, and forms of behaviours, all of which derive their coercive power from religion. The culture of corruption is thus an effort to eradicate corruption by strengthening traditional culture, which upholds the values of honesty and religion, not only practiced by the community but also needs to be promoted by the government.

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