

# Religion, culture and political corruption in Nigeria

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For so long, development theories and practices have either deliberately neglected or simply overlooked the possible interconnections between religion, culture and the attainment of development goals. Against this background, this article reviews the literature on corruption, as a major factor of underdevelopment in Nigeria, particularly as it relates to religion and culture in the country. In its analysis, this article argues that corruption in Nigeria, especially in view of the country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious status, must be conceived as a phenomenon transcending legal, political and economic boundaries. The study adopts an interpretative and descriptive methodology for its analysis.

## Introduction

The type of corruption that involves rulers and other categories of holders of public offices is a perennial problem in any politically organised human society. Whether rich or poor, developed or less developed, or ancient or modern, every society has elements of political corruption (Dimant 2016; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka 2016). For different reasons, the phenomenon of political corruption manifests more in some societies than in others (Yagboyaju 2000). It also has deleterious effects in some societies more than in others. Nigeria and many other parts of post-colonial Africa are undeniably major victims of the phenomenon of political corruption (Johnston 1997).

Given the country's abundant human and natural resources, its description in its immediate post-independent years with sobriquets such as the *Giant of Africa* and *Elephant of the Black Race*, among others, political corruption has been the greatest challenge plaguing the government and most importantly causing an obstacle to national integration and development (Yagboyaju 2014). This nature of corruption is one of the major causes for the depleting hope in Nigeria's democratic rule, especially between 1960 and 1966, and late 1998–2017. Political corruption was one of the many reasons given for military interventions, coups and counter coups, which disrupted democratic processes in Nigeria (Akande & Roberts 2010).

What constitutes political corruption? How did it become such a huge problem in Africa, but particularly in Nigeria under military rule? Why is it still so endemic in the country despite the reintroduction of civil rule and democratisation that has, so far, since 1999 been ongoing for 17 years? What are the probable interconnections between the bold character of political corruption and the gift culture and other similar traditional practices across the country? What about the relationship between the deep religiosity that cuts across adherents of African Traditional Religions (ATRs), Christianity and Islam in the country, and the high rate of political corruption in which supposedly religious people are involved? These research questions constitute the focus of this article.

Furthermore, this article sets out to study the extent to which some traditional cultural practices and religious activities worsened corruption in Nigeria's political space. How has the culture of impunity of public office holders in a democratic Nigeria and the period of military intervention weakened public institutions and regulatory agencies to fight or resist corruption in Nigeria? The article relies on secondary sources of data and it is essentially interpretative in its method and analysis. The remaining segments of this article portray the following: the concept of political corruption, historical antecedents and structural bias, and then the place of culture and religion increasing the chance of the corruption in government, followed by a conclusion.

## The concept of political corruption

Political corruption is a branch of corruption that involves rulers, whether selected or elected, and other categories of public officials in charge of the affairs of a state or political community.

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Political corruption constitutes any illegal, unethical, or unauthorised exploitation of one's official position for personal or sectional gain or advantage (Brownsberger 1983; Gyekye 1997; Oladele 2013; Olopoenia 1998; Olukotun 2015; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka 2016; Scott 1972 etc.). Adding the word 'political' to corruption is to distinguish it from the other branches of corruption. Here, 'political' refers to public office holders, official goods and services as well as the agencies and institutions of state or any organised political community that are saddled with the responsibility of managing public affairs or public goods. Thus, political corruption 'is an act of corruption perpetrated against the state or its agencies by a person holding an official position in pursuit of his own private or personal profit' (Dimant 2016; Gyekye 1997:193; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka 2016).

It is imperative to state that the direct victims of political corruption are the state, body politic and its fortunes. This is because a corrupt act committed against a private or non-governmental organisation (NGO), going by the definition here, does not constitute political corruption, even though it is indeed an act of corruption that should attract a form of punishment. In this connection, the widely reported misappropriation of financial and material support for Nigeria's internally displaced persons (IDPs) and even the diversion of date fruits from Saudi Arabia, for Nigerian Muslims during 2017 *Ramadan* fast, are relevant examples.

Put differently, political corruption covers several other forms of corruption such as graft, bribery, nepotism, kickbacks, clientelism, favouritism, misappropriation and stealing of funds, among others, once any of these is against the state or government. In other words, it covers activities and general abuse of privileges such as the illegal transfer of public funds to private domestic or foreign accounts, unapproved reduction of customs duties on imported items by customs officials, deliberate award of contracts for public works in return for kickbacks, lowering employment requirements in favour of relatives while rejecting candidates with better credentials, perversion of justice by police and judicial officials in favour of individuals who offer bribes or other forms of inducement and several others (see Johnston 1997; Nye 1967).

In Nigeria, the official working definition of corruption, as provided by the Independent Corrupt Practices and Allied Offences Commission (ICPC) anti-corruption law, includes bribery, fraudulent acquisition of property, fraudulent receipt of property, the use of pecuniary advantage, gratification, influence peddling, insincerity in advice with a view to gaining advantage, less than a full day's work for a full day's pay, tardiness and laziness. It also includes failure to report any case of inducement to the appropriate authorities (Akanbi 2005).

Although this is a broad operational definition for corruption, both in the private and public spheres in Nigeria, the idea of making failure to report cases of inducement an offence is quite instructive. It underlines the severity of the problem or

'the existence of a *corruption complex* and the need to deal with the widespread tolerance of corruption among the populace' (Aiyede et al. 2011:208). Meanwhile, it should be noted that societal widespread tolerance of corruption, which worsened at the height of military rule in the country, is a fundamental manifestation. It partly typifies the erosion of age-long communitarian ethos that emphasised public interests among almost all the traditional societies and cultural groups in Nigeria.

## Historical and structural basis of political corruption in Nigeria

It is apt to assert that political corruption became a major public issue in Nigeria when in January 1966 the plotters of the country's first military coup emphasised corruption in public offices as a major factor for their action. However, prior to this time and, indeed, during colonial rule, there were several cases of official misconduct and abuse of privileges that amounted to political corruption.

Tignor (1993), for instance, aptly described the 'British images of African Corruption' as well as the 'African moral and mental failing standards in British thinking ever since the origin of the colonial era', with negative connotations. Citing instances from the Sokoto Caliphate and Oyo Empire, among others, the work described the then native authorities as essentially characterised by 'oppression, exploitation, tyranny and venality' (Tignor 1993:178). This clearly indicates that there were serious elements of corruption in Nigeria's pre-colonial society and traditional institutions.

However, despite the dim images of a dishonest, tyrannical and oppressive character carved for the indigenous political system, it still served as the foundation for the British indirect rule system. Quite importantly, it should be noted that while the pre-colonial socio-legal order may have been adequate 'for the exigencies of its pristine ecology', it certainly could not cope with the challenges of commercial cupidity presented by colonialism (Akinseye-George 2000:14).

Therefore, prominent nationalists such as Herbert Macaulay, father of Nigerian nationalism and founder of the Nigerian National Democratic Party, which is the first political party in Nigeria under colonial rule, and Dr Nnamidi Azikiwe were singled out for punishment and reproach in respect of allegations of corruption. While Macaulay was jailed 'for misapplication of trust funds and thereby foreclosed from election into public office' (Coleman 1986:197), Azikiwe was reprimanded in connection with alleged financial improprieties in the administration of the Eastern region of which he was the premier.

There were, of course, allegations and proven cases of abuse of official positions at several lower levels. The 1954 *Storey Report* on the 1952 investigation of the activities of the Lagos Town Council, for instance, said corruption was found:

in hospitals where the nurses require a fee from every in-patient before the prescribed medicine is given, and even the ward servants must have their 'dash' before bringing the bed pan; it is known to be rife in the Police Motor Traffic Unit, which has unrivalled opportunities on account of the common practice of over-loading vehicles; pay clerks make a deduction from wages of daily paid staff; produce examiners exact a fee from the produce buyer for every bag that is graded and sealed; domestic servants pay a proportion of their wages to the senior of them, besides often having paid a lump sum to buy the job.

Incidentally, the nationalists thereafter found the rhetoric of corruption a useful weapon for undercutting one another and damaging the political fortunes of opponents. The inevitable result was the politicisation of the issue of corruption, thus 'complicating the task of addressing actual cases of corruption' that had begun to spread in Nigeria's public life (Akinseye-George 2000:36). Dr Azikiwe's and Chief Awolowo's celebrated trials and indictment by the Foster-Sutton Tribunal of Enquiry and Coker Commission of Inquiry had elements of this *politics of bitterness*. It should be recalled that Azikiwe was found guilty for corrupt enrichment through the diversion of huge sums from the then African Continental Bank (ACB), while Awolowo was indicted for a similar offence over the funds of the then Western region-owned Cocoa Marketing Board (Osoba 1996:371–386).

Nigeria's First Republic collapsed with the coming of the military coup in January 1966. Several events, including 'the 1962 intra-party crisis of the Action Group (AG), the census crisis of 1962/1963, the federal election crisis of 1964, the Tiv rebellion of 1964/1965 and the crisis-ridden Western region election of 1965' raised the temperature of the polity and made governance very difficult (Yagboyaju 2000:28). However, the coup plotters emphasised the factor of corruption. This implied that corruption and corruptive tendencies were the major causal factors for the other problems associated with nation-building during the country's immediate post-independence era.

The coup failed, but a military regime headed by Major General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi was still put in place. The latter was killed in the counter coup of 1966, in which many other ordinary citizens of Igbo extraction were killed in some northern parts of the country. Several events in the aftermath that in so many ways indicated that the military was already enmeshed in sectionalism, nepotism and such other negative tendencies eventually culminated in the civil war of 1967–1970.

After a 13-year period of military rule, civil rule was reintroduced under a presidential system in October 1979. This Second Republic was accompanied by great expectations and hope of a new beginning. But four years down the line, precisely in December 1983, the Second Republic also fell as a result of another military coup which, as usual, alleged large-scale corruption against many important public officials. At the end, most of those investigated and prosecuted by the

military were found culpable and made to refund stolen properties and funds to the government, while several others were jailed.

Paradoxically, the successor military regime headed by Major General Muhammadu Buhari was toppled, about 20 months later, in another military coup that brought in General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida as Nigeria's first and only military president. It should, however, be noted that there were no serious allegations of corruption against Buhari, except accusations of high handedness and violations of human rights.

Nigeria's brand of corruption became bolder and more ravenous right from August 1985 under Babangida, particularly as the 'politics of settlement', characterised by political patronage and lavish use of public resources to keep social critics and other opponents of bad public policies in check, became the order of the day. General Babangida also annulled the result of the June 1993 presidential election, the final in his regime's transition programme that already had in place elected states' governors as well as parliamentarians both at the state and federal levels. And, in view of the large-scale violence in the aftermath of the controversially annulled election results, Babangida hurriedly stepped aside and handed over to an Interim National Government (ING) that was headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan.

Corruption in government returned more ferociously when, in November 1993, General Sani Abacha led another military putsch, which forced the Shonekan-led ING to resign. The many atrocities and grave acts of corruption by Abacha and many other public officials were later exposed in the numerous investigations and prosecutions both within and outside Nigeria. Abacha died in 1998 and was quickly replaced by General Abdulsalam Abubakar who organised the 1999 return to civil rule and commencement of the Fourth Republic.

Seventeen years after the euphoric commencement of the Fourth Republic, political corruption rather than abating appears to have become a permanent feature in Nigeria's public life. Although during this period the rhetorical expression of the need to address corruption and the concern over its consequences have helped in propping up regulatory agencies such as the Code of Conduct Bureau, Code of Conduct Tribunal (CCT), ICPC and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), among others, there is yet no significant reduction in the perpetration of political corruption in the country. Rather, the problem of political corruption in Nigeria, particularly in view of the frequency and magnitude of expositions on official misconducts that have, incidentally, not attracted any serious punishment for big-time offenders, is a clear indication of a chronic malaise (see, for instance, *The Punch* 2016:25).

What are the probable explanations for this phenomenal growth in the perpetration of political corruption in Nigeria? Can it be said that Nigeria has a culture of political corruption?

just as Le Vine (1975 cited in Gyekye 1997) noted in view of the pervasiveness of the problem in Ghana in the late 1960s? In addressing these questions, I offer four postulations that are socioeconomic, political and philosophical in character.

Firstly, it can be argued that political corruption thrives in Nigeria because national, public or common interest is often subverted by other, non-public loyalties and obligations. This formulation draws heavily from the idea behind 'the two publics' theory by Ekeh (1975), in which he emphasised the factor of colonialism, which separated the state from the society in Nigeria. The outcome of the investigation of Senate President Bukola Saraki at the CCT and similar others, in which ethno-religious and such other sectional considerations were openly displayed, clearly showed the prevalence of the effects of Ekeh's views even in contemporary Nigeria.

The somewhat lack of ideological or emotional attachment to the institutions of government in the post-colony, which is at the core of this postulation, can also be found in Chinua Achebe's 1969 novel, *No Longer at Ease*. In the said work, the hero, Obi, is asked – have they given you a job yet? The narrator immediately comments: In Nigeria, 'the government was "they", and had nothing to do with you or me', except when it is available for exploitation. It was an 'alien institution and people's business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble' (Achebe 1969:38). Almost two decades after commencement of the 21st century, evidences from lopsided appointments and recruitment exercises clearly show that the government and its institutions in Nigeria are still largely regarded as good for exploitation (Yagboyaju 2016).

Secondly, the social system, particularly the extended family system in Nigeria and many other parts of the African continent, accounts for the high incidence of political corruption in the country and many other parts of the continent. According to Otite (1986) and Gyekye (1997:196), the individual public official in Africa 'bears a dual responsibility—for himself and for the members of the group', the latter of which can be a family lineage or compound or such other clannish attachments.

Obviously, these responsibilities, which ultimately lead to nepotism, clientelism and patronage, in general are onerous. Experience, especially from societies across the developed world, clearly indicates that the nuclear family system does not encourage as much nepotistic and clientelistic corruption as in societies with the extended family system, where the public official often attends to the needs of hordes of dependants. Indeed, this whole idea of patron-client networks is at the core of the 'prebendal' perspective into Nigeria's politics and public affairs, in general. Richard Joseph emphasised this in his 1987 book, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*.

In another dimension, Bayart (1999:32–48) emphasises the factor of religion in the perpetration of corruption, particularly in public offices. His attention centres on the role of religion

or, according to him, 'irrational belief systems on power, especially the role of witchcraft' (Bayart 1999:38). He identifies the recourse to the invisible as a means of ensuring wealth, position of relevance and worldly success, in general, as a religio-cultural element that supports corruption. This is, for instance, typified in Nigeria by the notion that anything acquired is possible because God wants it so. In the political arena, for example, victory at the polls is often ascribed to divine providence even when such was clearly the result of an electoral fraud. This erroneous notion is obviously behind the idea, in contemporary Nigeria, that anybody holding an exalted public position is said to be placed there by God and any attempt to either remove him from such position or bring him to book is tantamount to working against the will of God.

This was, for example, partly symbolised by the momentous kneeling down by President Goodluck Jonathan at the Holy Ghost Convention of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), and the laying of hand on Jonathan's head by the church's General Overseer (GO) during the preparation for Nigeria's 2011 general elections. Reverend Father Mathew Hassan Kukah of the Sokoto Archdiocese of the Catholic Church, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, then president of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Bishop David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church of Nigeria, among other prominent men of God, also wrote newspaper articles or addressed their congregations as well as the general public about the divine anointment of President Jonathan in the 2011 presidential election (see Obadare 2010).

Meanwhile, when poverty is endemic and the hope of escaping its debilitating effects is low, 'a culture of corruption accepts criminal acts of bribery and extortion as legitimate coping mechanisms' (Aiyede et al. 2011:213; also see Nye 1967). Although, going by the current official definition of corruption in Nigeria, in which failure to report any case of inducement to the appropriate authorities is punishable, silence or concealment is abhorred, it is, in my opinion, another cultural element that encourages corruption in Nigeria.

In particular, it should be noted that the 'loud silence', which coincided with the rise of sycophancy, hero worshipping and 'boot licking', especially during the long encounter with military rule from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, largely contributed to the bold and ravenous character of political corruption in Nigeria at that time and even several years after. Curiously, all the military heads of state at this point in time are Muslims who, according to the teachings of Islam, should abhor corruption and its tendencies. Yet, political corruption ravaged almost every facet of Nigeria's public life.

In summary, the main point to note in all of these factors, whether in terms of the absence of a strong sense of national community, the socioeconomic, cultural or political, is the obvious weakness of social and governmental enforcement mechanisms. In other words, there seems to be a general feeling, particularly among the top-level public officials that



even if their wrongdoings are discovered and they are prosecuted, they are unlikely to be heavily punished because of the weak governance structures in almost every facet of Nigeria's public life.

## Religionisation of political corruption

This section is relevant to this study in quite a number of ways. Firstly, when the notion that 'bureaucratic' or secular government will facilitate prosperity and all round development loses its appeal, religion provides alternative ways of organising society and politics. Secondly, an overwhelming majority of Nigeria's population is religious, and virtually all religions of the world subscribe to a particular set of moral values which, in particular, detest corruption and such other acts that are generally regarded to be morally reprehensible.

Thus, in line with the universal imperative of combating corruption and reducing its deleterious effects, typified by the undermining of public institutions, weakening of government's legitimacy and the confidence of the people in their government, destruction of development agenda, increasing inequalities and poverty as well as unemployment, crime and violent conflicts, among others, religion or any other aspect of life that could be useful in combating corruption may be tested for validity and efficacy. Despite Nigeria's official claim of secularity, available evidences show that the country is better described as a multi-religious state. Not only are public officials sworn into public offices with the use of the Holy Bible or the Glorious Qur'an, almost all government engagements are officially begun and ended with Muslim or Christian prayers. In addition, government at different levels is also involved in funding religious pilgrimages to Mecca and Jerusalem, just as public funds are sometimes used in supporting the building of churches, mosques and acquiring some other items these religious bodies may need.

However, as analysed, in a subsequent section of the article, religion has not only failed to enhance a significant reduction in the perpetration of corruption in Nigeria, it has also been corrupted. Many evidences, as provided in the section, clearly typify the gradual process of the religionisation of corruption by prominent figures in Christianity, Islam and ATRs in Nigeria. For many in this category, religion has become another tool for the manipulation and exploitation of the weak Nigerian political system.

## Christianity and corruption

To start with, it should be noted that on the account of the Bible, Christianity's Holy Writ and, in fact, the point of reference for earlier messages by Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, John and Solomon, among others, the earliest account of corruption should be traced to Adam who, with his wife, Eve, lost God's favour by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:5-24). The general belief in

Christendom is that Adam drew all his progeny into corruption and ruin by that single act of disobedience. However, the Bible also emphasises penitence and retribution for acts of immorality and corruption.

It is, for instance, in light of this that the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) in their pastoral letter to mark Nigeria's independence in 1960 emphasised that nobody 'can be a true member of the church who is not a good citizen of the state' (cited in Aiyede et al. 2011:219). While this implies encouragement for nationalism, patriotism, respect for regulations and laws as well as pursuit of justice, in general, it may also be interpreted as a negation of the Bible's emphasis on mercy as contained, for example, in John 8:7. Here, Jesus Christ challenged whoever was clean and holy to cast the first stone.

However, there are more fundamental aspects of the corruption of religion that are of interest to this article. First, there is the whole issue of Pentecostalism and the several ways in which Pentecostal churches in Nigeria speak directly to the spiritual and material needs of their members. Through their aggressive approach, which includes the use of radio, television and such other social media platforms as well as other public self-advertisement outlets in the newspapers, through handbills and billboards, among others, they promise the people life-changing miracles and breakthroughs.

It should be noted that just as ordinary citizens are made to believe that demonic forces or spiritual attacks are behind illnesses, poverty and other misfortunes, the political and bureaucratic elite as well as public office seekers are told of how these evil forces could also deter political victories and career advancement. Meanwhile, the greater the number of those who believe and embrace this doctrine, the more the influence of Christianity and its followers in Nigeria's competitive multi-religious landscape. This, apart from the probable acts of immorality in discouraging people from imbibing the spirit of hard work, as against the expectations of miraculous breakthroughs, also in a way fuels the insatiable appetite for primitive accumulation on the part of the beneficiary of the corrupt system.

More specifically, the flamboyant pastors, bishops and GOs, especially in the Pentecostal churches, openly associate with politicians and other top public officials many of whom are notorious for abuse of office and privileges. It is, for example, on record that even with the failed illegal attempt by President Olusegun Obasanjo to extend his tenure beyond 2007, the latter remained not only a regular feature but also a much awaited worshipper at the annual Holy Ghost Festival of the RCCG. Evidently, almost every other important public office holder, whether Muslims, Christians or adherents of ATRs, including President Umar Yar'Adua (2007-2010), state governors and such others, is also involved one way or the other. Evidences are provided accordingly in subsequent sections of this article.

Similarly, President Goodluck Jonathan also became a prominent and regular face at most of the very important programmes of RCCG, in spite of the huge allegations of corruption and general abuse that characterised his administration. In addition, but more poignantly, President Jonathan's relationship with Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, one time president of CAN, is quite apt for illustration here. Not only did Oritsejafor speak openly against opponents and critics of President Jonathan, all because of the personal relationship between the two; it should be recalled that it was the private aircraft of Oritsejafor that was used in the illegal movement of hundreds of millions of dollars to South Africa in the notorious arms procurement scandal of 2014. Not only did every leading Nigerian newspaper report this scandal, it was one of the serious cases that most critics of the Jonathan administration expected the Buhari administration to probe in its post-May 2015 arms procurement scam investigation.

Not surprisingly, the manipulations and exploitation of Christian doctrines have attracted criticisms from the Catholic and other orthodox churches that are still sober in their evangelism and sociopolitical activities. In light of this, Akinola (2009) contends:

Whereas authentic religion and genuine worship necessarily involves sacrifice and self denial, what appears to be popular in our environment today however is a religion of convenience that glamorizes wealth, pleasure and power, and makes little provision for sacrificial love, self-denial and self-abnegation. The Indian sage, Mahatma Gandhi, had identified this kind of religion without sacrifice as one of the most deadly social sins of our age. (p. 58)

It should be noted that the rise of Pentecostalism and its several 'excesses', which warranted such a critical observation as contained above, also clearly negate what Christianity stood for at the beginning. In the beginning, for instance, Christianity was a religion of the slaves, the outcasts, the poor and the oppressed, as Jesus Christ himself was born in a manger and, therefore, was poor. His entire ministry was devoted to fighting the cause of the poor and downtrodden (Yagboyaju 2014).

Despite the criticisms that have confronted the emphasis of many of Nigeria's Pentecostal churches on prosperity and some other outlandish claims to miracles, it should be noted that as independent churches, many of them typify the American televangelism tradition and similar others around the developed world. However, in view of the effective and functional character of the American system, these evangelists, according to Aiyede et al. (2011:221):

represent the Christian faith as a message of hope in a condition of hopelessness, generating a confidence in the possibility of change placed on the existence of a power that supersede the premonitions of objective reality.

This is not particularly so in Nigeria. In light of the ineffectiveness and dysfunctionality of the latter system, it exposes the majority of the poor people to exploitative acts,

in their search for the elusive breakthroughs and miracles, while, on the other hand, it emboldens venality and misconduct by public officials who enjoy protection largely because of the easy adaptability of Nigeria's age-long patron-client networks and clientele politics to such abuses.

The point on Nigeria's dysfunctional system and its exploitation in the religionisation of corruption cycle can further be stressed by the abuse of the power of connections to big men by religious leaders. Take, for example, the December 2016 collapse of the 'Mega-Cathedral' of the Reigners Bible Church International, in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, and a similar collapse, in 2014, of the building of Synagogue Church of all Nations, Lagos. While, in the first instance, Governor Emmanuel Udom of Akwa Ibom identified and sympathised with Apostle Akan Weeks, in the second, the then President Jonathan openly fraternised with Pastor T.B. Joshua (see Adelakun 2016:46).

The point to note here is that even with the revelations of human errors in the collapse of the two buildings ('Mega Cathedral' and Synagogue Church in Uyo and Lagos), prosecutors are likely to understand from the body language of the Lagos and Akwa Ibom state governors that these pastors are connected to 'big men'.

The controversial removal of Jim Obazee as the Executive Secretary of the Financial Reporting Council of Nigeria in January 2017 is another apt example. Although Obazee was reported to have been removed for acts of insubordination to his supervising minister, Okechukwu Enelamah, the removal raised a lot of dust because of its closeness to the stepping down of Pastor Enoch Adeboye as GO of the RCCG in Nigeria and the general disposition of several other prominent church leaders at that point in time. It should be noted that if the preaching of Christ remains the focus of the Church in Nigeria, Obazee's implementation of the Not-For-Profit Organisations Governance Code, 2016, which, among others, is primarily to sanitise corporate and religious activities, should not have generated so much heat.

## African traditional religions and corruption

As for the examination of the nexus between ATR and the perpetration of political corruption in Nigeria, it should be clarified that ATR typifies a plurality of experiences, practices and doctrines. Unlike Islam and Christianity, ATR is usually associated with particular cultures and linguistic groups. In Nigeria, Ghana and several other African societies, while the concept of the High God, also described as the Supreme Being, cuts widely across, belief in the small gods varies from place to place. The High God or Supreme Being, known as *Olodumare*, according to the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria, *Ubangiji* to the Hausa of the north, *Chukwu* to the Igbo of the south-east of the country or *Nyame*, *Mawu* and *Nyonmo* by the Akan, Ewe and Ga people of Ghana, is generally held to be creator of the world and everything in it as well as the source of all powers operating in it (Durkheim 1959; Opoku 1978).

Most of the small gods live in, or are associated with, nature objects such as rivers, ponds, lagoons, thunder, iron, forests, rocks, mountains and the sea, among others. As part of the belief in the small gods and the ATR belief system, in general, there is also witchcraft, sorcery and magic.

Traditional religions across Africa have elaborate system of morals and levels of discipline for most of society. Egberongbe (1988:69–87), for instance, observes that the traditional *Ifa* corpus associated with the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria imposes several dos and don'ts on the activities of humanity in relation to nature. *Ifa* 'encourages hard work, emphasizes honesty and devotion to duty, abhors dictatorial actions given to human mentality, promotes more consultation with the esoteric for divine guidance towards good governance on earth' (Aiyede et al. 2011:228–229). All of this is to conscientise an individual on his role in the community, to be a good citizen and contribute to social stability, prosperity and advancement, in general.

Indeed, it is common to hear arguments in respect of bad leadership and the erosion of values in Nigeria as being caused by the abandonment of Africa's traditional belief systems and cultures. It is also often argued that politicians and many other categories of public officials who take false oaths of office with the Qur'an and Bible dare not do same with oaths taken traditionally by using, for example, symbols of the gods of iron or thunder (see Egberongbe 1988). The perceived efficacy of the supernatural powers that are supposedly deployable in ATR is so huge such that protection against evil forces is often sought from traditional religious priests. In fact, it is this kind of belief in the supernatural powers of these traditional religious priests that partly popularised the activities of the Oodua People's Congress, the Bakassi Boys and such other groups with widely acclaimed connection to these priests. Incidentally, all of these increased with the 1999 reintroduction of civil rule, most probably because of the high intensity and largely unregulated political contestations that often warrant the deployment of all kinds of methods, fair and foul, in the struggle for the attainment of victory.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that in these unrestrained struggles, opportunities for abuse arose on the part of the traditional priests. There are, for example, instances where politicians, in addition to the oath of office taken in public, took secret oaths for purposes not directly for public interest. The much publicised Okija shrine oath-taking debacle of 2003, in which the then Governor Chris Ngige of Anambra State and his political sponsor, Chief Chris Uba, were involved, is a clear point of reference here. In this particular instance, it should be noted that the attempt to seize the rein of power from Ngige, the four-day riot and the wanton destruction of public property were all traceable to the secret oath at the Okija shrine, on which Ngige attempted to renege (Agbo 2004:18; Ayoade 2008; Ayoade 2014).

There are several other instances where traditional powers were sought or deployed to carry out clearly immoral or

corrupt sociopolitical and economic activities. These, for example, include the activities of notorious armed robbers such as Lawrence Anini, who terrorised residents of Benin city, in the then Bendel State in the mid-1980s and different shades of fraudsters who appear on television and in the print media, from time to time, for offences connected with hypnotism, intimidation and stealing by trick, among others (Human Rights Watch 2007; Marenin 1987; Okoosi-Simbine 2005).

Finally, although there are strong evidences to confirm that corruption grew in Nigeria under colonial rule as well as in the post colony, it is incorrect to totally link this to the relegation of ATR as if there were no cases of corruption and immorality in the traditional African societies. Several studies, including Tignor (1993), have documented cases of corruption, venality and autocratic tendencies against several African traditional political systems in the pre-colonial era, just as the role of traditional rulers in the immoral and barbaric slave trade is often cited.

## Islam and corruption

Islam, according to the Qur'an, is a total way of life, which must permeate every aspect in the life of a Muslim adherent of the Islamic faith. Adegbite (2006), in this connection, had this to say:

Islam is not a religion or faith in the Western sense, nor is it linked with their sort of power, politics and state. It cannot be reduced to any of them, though it must include each of them. It is a total and unified way, both religious and secular; it is a set of beliefs and a way of worship; it is a vast and integrated system of law; it is a culture and a civilization; it is an economic system and a way of doing business, it is a policy and a method of governance; it is a special sort of society, a way of running a family; it prescribes for inheritance and divorce, dress and etiquette, food and personal hygiene; it is a spiritual and human totality for this world and the other world. (p. 146)

With such a broad coverage that hardly omits any aspect of human existence and, even death, there is probably no other religion or belief system that is more encompassing, in its focus, than Islam. In a way, this explains why many Muslims, particularly in several parts of northern Nigeria, felt that the introduction of shariah with the coming of civil rule in 1999 will drastically discourage and reduce corruption in the country's public and private life.

Furthermore, the core Islamic value system, upon which public trust, accountability and purposeful governance as well as all that abhor corruption rest, is founded on three basic principles. These are *tawhid* or unity of God, the Almighty, *Khilafah* or vicegerency and *Al-adl* or justice.

*Tawhid* signifies not only the oneness of Allah who is the supreme being but 'also the uniqueness of all its sublime qualities' (Abdul-Hammed 2016:8). No creature is comparable to any of Allah's infinite sublime qualities for it is He who created all. The whole of Chapter 114, Suratul *Ikhlas*, of the Holy Qur'an is devoted to explanations on the



unity of God. Any belief that is contrary to this, by a Muslim, is regarded not only the height of corruption but also blasphemous and heretical.

The principle of vicegerency requires the human being, as the vicegerent of Allah on earth, to perform his or her duties with the fear of his or her creator. Doing so will safeguard the world, which also belongs to Allah, and will guarantee man's final abode in heaven; otherwise, he or she will finally go to hell unless he or she repents and gets Allah's forgiveness. Qur'an 6:165 emphasises the importance of vicegerency, while Chapter 2:60 of the Qur'an admonishes against all forms of abuse on the surface of the earth.

*Al-adl* or the principle of justice demands that man should not inflict any form of injustice (cheating, deprivation, exploitation, oppression or any other form of corrupt act) even on his bitterest enemy. This admonition, which is in Qur'an 5:8, is particularly instructive because it advises the Muslim to be just even to his or her enemy. This implies that even an enemy in Islam should not be denied what is due to him or her. Qur'an 16:90, which, incidentally, ends almost all *Khutbah* (sermon) in every mosque across the world, during the Friday (Jumuah) worship, extends the needs for justice and good deeds to one's kin, family members, neighbours and society at large, regardless of whether they are friendly or unfriendly. Several other sections, including Qur'an 31:17, 6:152, 2:188 and 11:85, warn against cheating in business transactions, giving inaccurate measure, concealment of evil and criminalities, etc.

Quite importantly, the central concept of *Jihad*, which essentially connotes every form of struggle or effort to improve humanity and in which the *Al-mujahid* (the one who struggles) first and foremost struggles against his own soul (self) to follow the commandments of Allah, typically abhors corruption.

In addition to Islam's emphasis on the reward of heaven for good deeds and hell for unrepentant acts of negativity and injury to others as well as the endless mercy of Allah to His repentant creatures, it also makes provisions for punishing offenders through appropriate judicial and legal procedures. And, this is why, for instance, offences such as armed robbery and drug trafficking attract death penalties, while other forms of criminalities attract other various punishments in Saudi Arabia and some other countries where shariah operates.

However, despite these prescriptions, many Nigerian Muslim public officials have been involved in various acts of political corruption over the years, while, in some other more disturbing instances, some Islamic scholars have not only condoned corruption but also indirectly encouraged their followers, particularly those in public offices, to abuse such positions.

Take, for example, Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha who, despite being professed Muslims, have been linked by many reports to several cases of corruption and

abuse as Nigeria's heads of state at different points in time. The instance of civilian governors, some of whom promised the implementation of shariah, but who ended up being charged with corruption and abuse, is however more poignant. Governor Sani Ahmed Yerima of Zamfara State, for instance, not only proclaimed shariah in the state between 1999 and 2007, but actually effected several decisions that were in line with shariah.

With this, the governor came into the limelight and searchlight, both as a hero and a villain. The adoption of this legal code, in October 1999, to cover personal, civil and criminal aspects of the justice system was applauded by many Muslims, even beyond Zamfara State, while those against it felt it was a major political confrontation to Nigeria's newly introduced civil rule at that point in time (Danjibo, Oladeji & Nolte 2011:194). The 1999 date of adoption also implied that Zamfara set the pace for the other 11 northern states, which subsequently adopted the legal code. Thus, Yerima of Zamfara State became a man to watch for different reasons.

It was, therefore, not a surprise that the press, particularly in southern Nigeria, vigorously advocated for investigation into how much shariah prevented Governor Yerima from abuse of office and privileges at the end of his tenure in 2007. Incidentally, the former governor was listed along with several of his counterparts, from other states, by EFCC for corruption charges which, nine years later Yerima and several others have yet to be cleared of.

However, a more fundamental issue on the subject matter of Islam and corruption that could probably be interpreted to question the faith – *Iman* of those involved – has to do with the claim of some groups to physically see Allah. This is common among the practitioners of the Sufi Orders. The *Tijjaniya* and *Quadriyya* are two prominent groups in this fold, while several other variants in their category can be found in communities across Nigeria and in some other West African countries such as Senegal and Ghana. Not surprisingly, the activities of these two groups and many others with similar modes of operation, which emphasise 'enrichment and the selling of paradise' (Imam 2005; Kani 2006), have attracted several criticisms for encouraging laziness, deceit and corruption among the groups' leaders and followers.

In view of the lack of connection between such a practice and any section of the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith of Muhammad (SAW – peace be upon him), it could appropriately be classified as *bid'ah* or an invention. Meanwhile, in terms of the values or principles of Islam, invention or innovation, particularly in terms of fundamentals such as belief and worship, is regarded as the worst form of corruption and going astray. And, every going astray, except if forgiven by Allah, leads to hell fire (Hans 1994; Jonathan 2001). Apart from this misleading of the generality of followers, in these groups, corrupt public officials who imbibe the erroneous notion of buying *Aljannah* – paradise – would probably abuse their positions so as to buy special places in paradise.



This exploitation of the ignorance of the people, in so many ways, accounts for the serious demands by various fundamentalist movements, especially in northern Nigeria, for the transformation of Nigeria into an Islamic state. The Izala and Shi'ite movements led by Sheik Abubakar Gumi and Imam Ibrahim El-Zakyzaky are examples of such movements. Incidentally, as typified, for example, by the clash between the Shi'ites and the convoy of Nigeria's Chief of Army Staff, in Kaduna State in December 2015, their demands that are often in form of protests can lead to violence and breakdown of order, if hijacked by hoodlums and other categories of social misfits.

## Conclusion

For a long time, prior to the 1990s, a common opinion in most discourses on the matters of culture, religion and corruption in development is that there should not be an interplay of religion, spirituality and development. Indeed, if there is any, advocates of secularisation such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim gave a number of reasons to overlook or deliberately neglect the possible interplay (Akanji 2010:1–28). This to a large extent had to do with historical trends of conflicts, poverty and underdevelopment within many populations that had put religion at the forefront of their development strategies.

Specifically, instances of struggles for religious domination and inter-religious conflicts, which caused significant levels of poverty, wars and such other strifes, were cited in such ancient civilizations as Medieval Europe, Middle East and many African empires where religion became synonymous with the state. This study, using Nigeria as a reference, partly agrees with these formulations, especially in the aspects of abuse of privileges by public officials under the guise of religion. It is particularly so because clientele and prebendal politics still thrive in Nigeria, while the state and its institutions are mostly personalised. This, in addition to the rising spate of terrorism, which is often opportunistically hidden under the guise of religion, accounts for the renewed advocacy for the separation of politics and religion, particularly in Nigeria and several parts of the less developed world.

Specifically, the article drew instances from Nigeria's 17-year-old democratisation, in which crimes were never punished and, therefore, in a way, bred impunity. Hiding under the cover of culture and religion, many of these criminalities especially by the political elite occasioned violence and even deaths, as exemplified by the 2003 abduction of the then Governor of Anambra State, Dr Chris Ngige.

However, politics without morality and some elements of religiosity and spirituality is also not desirable. In a way, politics devoid of morality embraces the Machiavellian notion of politics, which, incidentally, has long been exploited by sections of Nigeria's political class. This aside, the emerging new dawn of development thinking has increasingly shown how religion, spirituality and faith can

play a more sustainable role in the pursuit of people-led development. And, according to Akanji (2010:3), the more this new worldview gains ground, 'the greater the awareness of the huge lacuna in knowledge and understanding of the workings of faith-inspired development initiatives'.

Documented evidences from well-ordered societies such as the USA, UK, Germany, Canada and several other countries across the world, particularly where religion is moderated by the state just like other aspects of public life, are available to back the argument on the impact of non-state actors in development. Indeed, the rise in the numerical strength and scope of activities of NGOs, many of which are faith-based, also indicate the positive role in to which these organisations could be put.

In light of this, the Religion and Development Programme of the University of Birmingham, between 2005 and 2010, for instance, set out to study and unearth the potentials of religion in development in less developed countries. This series of study essentially focused on poverty reduction and other issues such as corruption and other forms of abuse that are generally regarded as the main causes of poverty in Nigeria and several other parts of the less developed world.

In addition, the World Bank, World Faith Development Dialogues, International Labour Organization and the Islamic Development Bank, among others, have also helped in nurturing alternative development models that accommodate religious ethics and practices (Shattuck 2009).

In conclusion, while not suggesting an unmoderated relationship between religion, politics and public affairs, as a whole, this article cautions any attempt to completely separate politics from religion. Rather, as it is practised in the USA, UK and several other parts of the developed and even developing worlds, religion and religious practices in Nigeria should be managed by the state as a special sector of public life, existing with others such as the economy, foreign relations and defence, among others. By so doing, control of elements of deviation that may grow to become sources of perversion and other societal ills is a lot more certain.

Obviously, this is more attainable in a functional state that is neither personalised nor endemically corrupt.

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