ENGAGING THE FUTURE IN THE PRESENT: ISSUES IN CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

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Ethics and the Culture of Corruption in Africa

Kudus O. Adebayo

Introduction

In this chapter, a philosophical contemplation on the place of ethics in thinking about the problem of corruption in Africa is presented. As with other scholars that have written on this topic, the paper agrees that a "culture of corruption" is prevalent in Africa, and that this problem has become more damaging to the welfare and psyché of the people and therefore remains a key source of the developmental challenges confronting the continent today (Dike, 2004; Lawal, 2007; Nwabuzor, 2005; Szeftel, 2000; Timamy, 2005). Beyond this, however, the paper contends that corruption in African states raises serious ethical dilemma that are yet to be accommodated in recent reflections on the subject. The contention is that instead of insisting that the prevalence of culture of corruption in Africa was due to some breakdown of norms, immorality and greed, efforts should be directed at understanding the ethical or moral universe within which those that engage in corrupt practices operate. The argument is that: 1) corruption in Africa is partially due to *complete* lack of ethics; 2) that the problem is more about the *type* of moral principles corrupt persons subscribe to, and; 3) that we will be better served by attempting to identify what ethical principles guide perpetrators of corruption and then reflect on the extent to which these principles promote general welfare rather than satisfying the avarice of individuals and select groups.

After clarifying the main concepts that are employed in this chapter and providing a brief discussion on the nature and dynamics of corruption in the first two sections, the tri-proposition schema articulated above shall be elaborated in section three. We shall explore the implications of our proposal in section four and end with some closing thoughts.

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Defining Ethics and Corruption

We can think of ethics in terms of thinking and action (Lewis & Gilman, 2005). Whereas ethics as "thinking process" involves systematic reflection on morality and moral choices, the goal of ethics as "system of practice" is to serve as guide for action. The first view is generally academic while the second position attempt to encode what is believed to be right and important for practice. Asobie (2001, as cited in Ikeanyibe & Imhanlahimi, 2006) made similar distinction when he conceives ethics as both a science and a system of morals, the former being a field of investigation that is interested in nature, sources and principles that should guide human behaviours while the latter entails pinning down and encoding moral rules to direct actions. It should be noted that the distinction is not clear cut because separating the thinking from the practical side in reality may be difficult.

Every human society has rules of behaviour that members are expected to follow. Through the process of *legalism*, some of these rules, sometimes called norms or customs, are reflected upon, refined and encoded to serve as the foundation on which most formalised ethical principles are based, especially those adopted to regulate the behaviour of public servants and members of professional associations. Within the confines of legalism, the tendency to assume that ethical conduct is only expected from public officials and members of professional groups can be refined to accommodate private citizens, since ordinary people too interact with public institutions and relate with one another. Person-to-person relationship is regulated by everyday ethics but its sources, as against that of public officials and professional groups, are more varied and could be formalised or not.

It is everyday ethics that connect institutionalised or formalised ethical principles with general societal norms of behaviour, and makes all forms of ethics interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Put simply, public ethics – that is, our main referent when we talk of accountability, transparency, integrity and suchlike in governance – is dependent on private and general societal norms, in much the same way that the latter two are interdependent on one another and on public ethics as well. A key reason for making this observation is to underline the fact that prevailing analysis of ethical challenges in governance across Africa largely present public ethics (ethics in government) as being apart from private or societal norms and the triadic relationship they share is less emphasised. As we shall show later on, what is now called culture of corruption in Africa is a clear demonstration of a crisis that emanated through the tension across these three spheres of ethics.

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Before going ahead to discuss dynamics of culture of corruption as it pertains to Africa, a brief explanation of what corruption is seems appropriate. The term corruption is vague and often conceptually confusing. O'Higgins (2006) asserts that serious confusion also exists on its consequences and causes, making the concept infinitely difficult to understand. Corruption has been invoked to describe a wide range of practices and its manifestations are so complex that it defies simple categorisation. Some definitions are based on typologies, scales and specific unethical acts. Common to most definitions, however, is the belief that corruption constitutes an unacceptable situation of usurpation of public office or resources for private gains (Myint, 2000). This does not mean that public officials are the only ones implicated in corruption. Corruption may also involve private businesses and individuals who, through their interaction with public institutions and government officials or while relating with one another, seek to confer unwarranted or unjustified benefits on themselves. Whatever the setting, corruption generally manifests as bribery, extortion, fraud, embezzlement of public funds, nepotism and cronyism, appropriation of public assets and property for private use, and influence peddling (Myint, 2000). In everyday relations, simple rule breaking in heavy traffic situations, arm-greasing, favouritism and other related behaviours normally come under corruption (Smith, 2007).

In making philosophical sense of what corruption means, it must be kept in mind that a distinction is often made between high (grand) and low (petty) level corruption (*see* Myint, 2000; Dike, 2004) in order to differentiate persons who engage in corruptive behaviours in order to meet needs and those that do it for other reasons, say sheer greed. While the distinction was meant to analytically separate micro (small-time) from macro (large-scale) corruption, it nonetheless suggests that some corruption may have better moral standing than some others. We contend that this distinction is the source of the chaotic or relativistic ethics that operate everywhere in Africa. While not denying that the disambiguation of the phenomenon is of great importance, the fact that the process created contradictory, though often meaningful, ethical views of corruption makes a philosophical reinterrogation of the practice necessary. We shall turn to this argument in due course but let us for now make quick observation on the culture of corruption in Africa.

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Understanding Culture of Corruption: The African Experience

To assert that a culture of corruption exist in Africa is to simply claim that corruption is a way of life on the continent. But more specifically, such claim insinuates that corruption is a practice that reside in popular consciousness, something sustained and perpetuated, either deliberately or not, and which has a tendency to recycle itself over many generations. Put in another way, in a society where the practice is intertwined with everyday existence, corruption will occupy a special place in people's lives, it will be symbolic, difficult to pin down and it will somehow manage to endure even when the catastrophes it has caused is known to most of the members of that society.

Postcolonial states in Africa are facing many challenges but most are in some ways linked to corruption. Corruption was the main excuse of military juntas that forcefully took control of politics from civilians in the first few decades of independence while accusation of corruptive and predatory behaviours by sitting governments continue to drive interparty discourse and oppositional politics. In 1997, a French magazine reported that 11 Presidents in nine African countries robbed their states of approximately $37.7 billion. It is interesting to note that 82% of this amount was embezzled by three rulers while two Heads of State from Nigeria, that is Sani Abacha ($20 billion) and Ibrahim Babangida ($5 billion), account for 66% of the entire loot (Lawal, 2007). Unfortunately, large proportion of the stolen funds are stashed in foreign banks rather than in their own countries. Daniel Arap Moi reportedly diverted over a billion dollars of public fund to banks abroad (Nwabuzor, 2005).

The role of colonialism and post-independence authoritarianism in creating the culture of corruption must be mentioned. In two separate analyses, Pierce (2006), Everett, Neu and Rahaman (2006) and Hyslop (2005) particularly emphasised how the socio-political arrangements of colonial government prepared grounds for state corruption after independence. Yet, the authoritarianism of post-independence period helped in entrenching the systems through which the culture of corruption became widespread. Through state capture, exclusion, and politics of the belly, post-independence rulers promoted prebendal and *rentierist* views of the state; views that made what constitute acts of corruption nebulous and less intuitive.

But state corruption is not enough to create and sustain a culture of corruption. An almost self-perpetuating phenomenon like corruption requires the embrace of large segment of the society to endure. Indeed, the acceptance of corruption as an inevitable consequence of society by ordinary Africans

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has been most decisive in recycling the culture of avarice, conspicuous theft, and kleptocratic governance. Ordinary citizens are not passive agents in the reproduction of a culture that keeps them impoverished but are very active in its enthronement through beliefs they share and their attitudes and actions and dispositions to corrupt practices. Ironically, the dangers of corruption is not lost on private citizens, as Smith (2007, p. xii) observed in the case of Nigeria:

> [O]rdinary Nigerians are participants in a process wherein they are simultaneously the main victims and the loudest critics... In moments of frustration, it is easy to attribute these problems to some kind of shared national flaw. Nigerians themselves often lead the bandwagon in this regard. Debating and analysing the country's woes is a popular obsession, from the ranks of the intellectual elite to the poorest of the poor. No other national issue so riles Nigerians as corruption. They are acutely aware of its consequences and ambivalent about their own role in its perpetuation.

In Ghana, popular culture is replete with social interpretations that is symptomatic of the generalised feelings towards corruption. Ordinary Ghanaians perceive state wealth as food meant to be consumed, and as blood without which no one can survive (Timamy, 2005). Timamy (2005) insisted that Ghanaians did not perceive state property as belonging to the people as a whole, but as something at the personal, and inexhaustible, disposal of politicians. Average people are on queue to take turn at this unethical consumption while also seeking to impress on themselves the idea that those who criticise politicians will engage in similar avaricious consumption if they too became politicians.

Of course, the ambiguity that marks the disposition of citizens of African states to corruption is understandable if we consider how, in the Marxian sense, material dispossession of more than five decades has shaped their moral outlook, sense of value and self-worth. Nonetheless, we should be conscious of the roles they have played, and which they are still playing, in intensifying the culture of corruption on the continent.

We will turn to discuss the ethical complications that arose from the situation just described. For now, it is worth emphasising that in the account presented thus far, only the internal mechanism promoting culture of corruption in Africa were discussed. The corruption problem in Africa is also reinforced

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by actors outside the continent. These external agents, represented by donor agencies, multinational corporations and powerful nations from the West, are the greatest critics of Africa's catastrophic corruption and its most consistent enablers (Szeftel, 2000; Tangri & Mwenda, 2006).

Africa's Corruption Problem: Is Ethics in Chaos?

> ...in any given society corruption is a changing phenomenon, some of its aspects and received morality are culturally specific and its conceptualisation is affected by personal interest, cultural values and socio-economic status. (Pardo 2004, p. 2, cited in Harrison, 2007)

What is philosophically interesting about the opening quotation, as far as the problem of corruption in Africa is concerned, is that it points us directly at the longstanding problem of ethical relativism. While signalling the roles of power, politics and social and economic positions in shaping people's belongingness in Moral Universe A, instead of Moral Universe B or C or D, Pardo's statement suggests that those who sustain the culture of corruption may not necessarily lack ethical rules guiding their behaviours: it is quite possible that Africans, irrespective of the position they occupy in the society, subscribe to confl .cting ethical principles that they draw upon whenever it is convenient to do so but which, unfortunately, may not promote the welfare of the society as a whole.

From the perspective of social contract theorist and countless others that produced treatise on society and ideas of justice, human or general welfare remains the primal purpose to which action of people ought to be directed. This proposition has the implication that whatever action or behaviour that negates this goal in the course of organising or acting within the society ought to be jettisoned and resisted as retrogressive. However, it is not always easy to determine which actions negates general welfare absolutely at all times. Even though many tend to agree that corruption hurts people, like other actions that society categorise as wrong, unjust or bad, whether through legalism or customs, claims to absolute truth is never clear cut as grey areas can almost always be identified and given relative moral weight. In other words, when we ask "does corruption cause social harm?" the response will probably be in the affirmative for many, but could we not also be compelled to respond differently if the circumstance under which a corrupt act occurred

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was introduced into our moral calculation? Harrison (2007) gave us feel of what an ethical reasoning process that is cognisant of circumstances will look like when she remarks that:

> ...petty bribery, the kind that makes a young mother lose hope for the future because she believes that securing her child's health requires a "hand under the table," is not the same as the kind of grand corruption that much anti-corruption rhetoric focuses upon... The differences between different practices which are all lumped together as "corruption" lie in the different conceptions of what kind of moral boundary line has been crossed in particular instances. ... [I]n classifying corruption as a simple phenomenon, the diverse ways in which people engage with morality are overlooked (Harrison 2007:675).

Harrison's view reflects typical disciplinary difference between sociological and philosophical enquiry but it yet fits within the bounds of situational ethics which has since become a legitimate stance in moral philosophy.

Another aspect of the challenges of curbing corruption by merely outlining ethical principles to guide behaviours in African society lies in how insignificantly the question of moral autonomy feature in our analysis. While outlining ideals of honesty, integrity, transparency, respect, hard work and others as values that people are obligated to uphold, much thought is not given to whether individuals could on their own decide what moral course of action should be taken at all times, without influences from elsewhere. The view that formalised ethics is sufficient to guide and regulate the actions of institutional actors, and the popular perception that ordinary Africans, as conscience of the society, can, through some divine intuition and natural law, re-set the society aright when "normal" ethics is threatened, allocate too much autonomy to individuals. It assumes that people will always choose the right course of action and take as unproblematic the reality that there are also social and biological mechanism at work whenever people are making moral decisions (Sogolo, 1987).

Hence, apart from moral egoism that philosophers and scholars from diverse disciplinary persuasions have criticised as inherently anti-society, it will be difficult to declare, without caution, that what Mrs A did as a social or

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ethnic minority in order to benefit her marginalised peoples is outrightly unethical, especially when we consider the alternative that the group may face social extinction if she did not "usurp" her office. Similarly, it will be analytically insensitive to ignore the fact that it could be 'gradation of unethical' when we place side-by-side the type of corruption engaged in by ordinary citizens and petty-corrupt bureaucrats and those commonly referred to as grand corruption. We may be persuaded to agree that one is a lesser evil.

Embedded in the forgoing explanation is the idea that the culture of corruption, as being experienced in African, is sustained within, and endures through, multiple ethical universes. The universes exist alongside each other but they are yet to be harmonised to promote common good. An interesting part of this is that corrupt individuals at all levels of the society engage in some form of ethical rationalisation to justify why a certain "unethical behaviour" is indeed ethical. Here, we see a situation in which the integrity of persons wax and wane as circumstances dictate, and a condition wherein formalised and generalised ethical rules stand apart from what people really think to be ethical.

Concluding Thoughts

To recap, we have said in the paper that the culture of corruption in Africa is sustained through everyday practices of ordinary citizens and institutional actors inside and outside the continent. We also alluded to the view that corruption on the continent has its own internal logic and the actors who reinforce and reproduce the culture draw from different moral universes which make the "ethical status" of many corrupt acts fuzzy and complicated. While many people tend to disfavour corruption, they also engage in ethical rationalisation that sometimes compel them to justify and even encourage corrupt behaviours under certain circumstances. The problem with this, however, is that by accommodating "gradations" and making distinction among forms and circumstances of corruption, a chaotic ethical universe was created and ethical standards became relativised.

Under extreme conditions of socio-economic deprivation and impoverishment of millions of people, it will be tough to move above relativistic ethics on corruption issues in Africa. Yet, corruption is a challenge that Africa can no longer afford to accommodate if the continent is to progress and better the lives of her peoples.

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