

CORRUPTION, UNDERDEVELOPMENT AND THE MASSES IN AFRICA

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Introduction

Two contemporary examples from Nigeria foreground the essence of the argument of this paper. First, in November 2019, a former Nigerian Senator (2010-2015), Babafemi Ojodu, issued a scathing rebuke of his constituents, friends, extended family and political associates in a widely reported “caveat lector”. Senator Ojodu (2019) stated:

Dear compatriots, tell me how many American congressmen and women hired caterers to feed constituents every day he visits his constituency?...Where else in the world are party members paid, fed, clothed and transported to attend party functions? Yet, you talk of corruption. What is the meaning of this corruption? Is it not corruption to demand to be paid before you vote? Don't you think whoever paid you to vote for him will recoup his investment?

Ojodu notes that the title “Senator” was an “albatross” — fellow citizens charged him excessive prices for basic goods and services and made

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requests for assistance regarding their weddings, hospital bills, funerals and children's tuition fees, among other financial demands. Such expectations extend to beliefs of citizens regarding how the senator ought to live. For instance, Ojodu claims that when he shows up in economy class on the plane "everyone begins to look at you as if you have missed your road. That look of what he is doing here with all the money he earns or he has stolen" (Ojodu 2019).

The second example concerns a fraud allegedly perpetrated by Philomina Chieshe, a sales clerk at the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB)⁴ office in Benue State, Nigeria. Chieshe informed a panel of auditors in February 2018 that a snake had swallowed approximately \$100,000 (US) from the organization's sale proceeds in her possession. A report by *Premium Times*, Nigeria's leading online investigative newspaper, notes that Chieshe "confessed that her housemaid connived with another JAMB staff, Joan Asen, to "spiritually" (through a snake) steal the money from the vault in the account office" (Adedigba 2018. Parentheses original).

How do we make sense of these two cases? What do the experiences of the senator and the case of the clerk speak to, regarding the labyrinth of corruption and underdevelopment in Africa? The central argument of this paper is that ignoring the role of the masses makes for an incomplete understanding of the vignettes of corruption and the crisis of development in Africa. The paper argues that corrupt practices by elites and the actions, beliefs, expectations and demands of the masses on the elites are mutually reinforcing, co-referential and ultimately co-constitute the processual production of corruption and consequent underdevelopment in Africa. This is further reinforced in what we have couched as "the irony of the African masses" in the fight against corruption and underdevelopment in Africa. The irony is too compelling to ignore. The African masses demand their share of the national cake through appendages of, or association with political elites who loot the state — one of the major causes of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa.

While we do not attempt to measure culpability — our aims are much more modest — this paper argues that the masses are a significant part of the system that has paralysed human and social development in Africa. Our aim — to the extent that it is accomplished — is conscientiously provocative. The positionality of the masses can no longer be ignored. Much scholarly analyses, with few exceptions, omit succinct engagement with the role of

4 JAMB is responsible for conducting a mandatory national entrance examination into post-secondary institutions in Nigeria.

the masses or non-elites in the fight against graft and underdevelopment in Africa. The interpellation and agency of regular or non-elite citizens is missing in vast volumes of the literature. Without unpacking the role of the masses, academic analyses present a partial and superficial picture of corruption and underdevelopment in Africa. This impoverishes the literature on corruption and underdevelopment.

This is not the first paper to recognize the salience of engaging with the role of individuals in the private sector in corruption by government officials. Nearly 30 years ago, Harsch (1993, 34) argues that the “emphasis is almost entirely on the state sphere, tending to minimise the behaviour of those in the private sector who contribute to the corruption of governmental personnel”. This underscores the role of business executives — contractors, importers/exporters, and other merchants in the private sector. We extend Harsch’s (1993) binoculars to cover the role of the masses — everyday people.

The imbalance in the literature is problematic for several reasons. First, corrupt political elites do not exist in a social vacuum: they are part of the structure of society. In technologically advanced countries, the masses have often taken a greater role in monitoring the management of the public good. Therefore, the question is not merely “who are these elites?”. We also need to grapple with the question “what kind of society produces these elites?”. Second, despite widespread issues in the electoral system, new elites are fabricated regularly. Therefore, stories of previously middle or lower-level employees in various sectors of the economy attaining prestigious positions in the executive or legislative arm of government are not unheard of. However, little positive change occurs in the conditions of living of the masses. A related question therefore concerns why most new elites simply join rather than change the performative and socially consequential fray of corrupt practices. Third, the focus on elites is reasonable but ought to be complemented by succinct exegesis of the role of the masses in the actions of elites. In other words, how are corrupt practices of elites influenced by the masses or constituencies they represent? This recognises the embeddedness of political elites in patronage networks and syndicates as well as the interpellation of their rural and urban constituencies. Fourth, while political or military elites, such as former Angolan president Jose Eduardo dos Santos and ex-Nigerian Head of State, General Sani Abacha and their families and cronies have stashed billions of state funds in Europe and North America, this category of elites arguably represents a relatively small fraction of corrupt elites in Africa. Most corrupt elites do not have access to such gargantuan sums of money. While huge sums of money are stashed overseas, a significant part of stolen state resources circulates within the national system as part of the currency and

mechanism for retaining power, particularly at the local government and regional levels.

Some caveats are necessary at this stage. First, a dynamic perspective on corruption undergirds the paper. This perspective is anchored on the basic realities of corruption — the “intermingling of cause and effect”, which means “some of the factors...identified as causing corruption may also be its effects” (Alam 1989, 447-448). This approach has fundamental implications for the analysis that follows. Corruption is seen from both the demand and supply perspectives. Second, this paper concerns the salience of corruption in class *relations* rather than class *formation*. Our concern is with how elites and non-elites interact with corruption as a *lingua franca*. We do not focus on how corruption fosters or hinders the emergence of a national or local bourgeoisie. This is admittedly a narrower but more succinct focus. Third, references to “elite” in the paper imply political elites unless otherwise indicated. This recognises the centrality of the state (and therefore positions in government bureaucracies) as the epicenter of struggles over power and other socially valuable resources. Thus, the focus is primarily on elites in elective positions and secondarily on others who owe their offices to political calculations. This category includes government ministers and commissioners who may not be elected but must maintain a modicum of socio-political capital and relevance. Bracketing economic and other elites affords us a sharp focus on the objective of the paper — to demonstrate that the masses are agentic entities and major actors in corruption and underdevelopment in Africa rather than monochromatic or monolithic victims of the system. This is not a “blame-the-victim” approach. It merely engages with a largely missing piece in much of contemporary scholarship on the subject given that when the masses fail to support the fight against corruption, it undermines and renders irrelevant anti-corruption efforts. Fourth, our approach risks presenting a pathological picture of the masses in Africa. This is far from our aim as scholars and persons of African origins. No region has a monopoly on the control of corruption. For instance, despite the widespread association of corruption with African countries, corruption in Africa involves smaller sums of money relative to countries like Russia, France, Italy and much of Eastern Europe (Szeftel 2000). Nonetheless, the relevance of our focus is highlighted by empirical evidence demonstrating that corruption in Africa is much more damaging to socio-economic development and political stability than elsewhere in the world (Szeftel 2000). A 1% increase in corruption levels reduces national growth rate by about 0.72% or, expressed differently, a one-unit increase in the corruption index reduces the growth rate by 0.545 percentage points (Pak Hung Mo 2001).

The final caveat concerns recognition of foreign influence on corruption in Africa. For instance, monetary aid for development often ends up in foreign accounts of corrupt government officials. In some instances, western multinationals encourage and channel corruption in Africa to promote competitive advantage. The US passed the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of 1977 with a mandate to criminalize certain classes of persons and entities to make payments to foreign government officials to assist in obtaining or retaining business (USDJ). In Kenya, elites stashed overseas \$3 billion dollars from aid funds from 1990 to 2010 (i.e. \$150 million per year) (*The Africa Report* 2020). While organizations such as Transparency International, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other supranational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) spotlight various corrupt practices and their social consequences in Africa, state actors such as Switzerland, France, England and the United States remain recipients of corrupt funds for safe-keeping and investments, like real estate, for which too often their conspicuous reticence arguably reflects a double standard when dealing with the continent of Africa. These activities have not generated as much social activism within and outside Africa. While cognizant of these issues, we privilege endogenous over exogenous factors in understanding corruption in Africa. As Bayart (2009, 260) argues, the African state “rests upon autochthonous foundations and a process of re-appropriation of institutions of colonial origin which give it its own historicity; it can no longer be taken as a purely exogenous structure”. In other words, despite the credulity of claims relating to colonial legacy and ongoing neo-colonial relations of exploitation, the African state is in many ways its own entity. Its manifestations are irreducible to its historical or contemporary foreign-induced encumbrance. The salience of autochthonous factors is evident in activities of transnational corporations that are often allowed to operate with impunity in most sub-Saharan African countries in the absence of or failure to implement regulatory framework. This is significant given nearly 60 years of independence of all but a handful of African states.

This paper contributes to the empirical literature on corruption and underdevelopment in Africa. It complements the tenor of available literature. The paper argues that non-elite citizens are non-passive and often enthusiastic recipients of the proceeds of bureaucratic corruption. Corruption by political elites is influenced partly by the demands on and expectations of regular citizens vis-à-vis political elites. These demands and expectations are not an insignificant part of the corruption of the elite. This is neither a pro-elite paper nor one suggesting a teleological or deterministic standpoint. Rather than a pro-elite or rigid unilinear standpoint, the paper attempts to offer a nuanced

and dynamic analysis of how elite behavior mirrors the rest of society and how actions and inaction of citizens affect the conduct of governing elites.

The remainder of the paper is divided into seven parts. The first part discusses the data and methods. The second part engages with the theoretical and empirical literature on corruption and underdevelopment in Africa. The paper does not cover the entire vast material on corruption, but a purposive selection is employed which focuses on evidence-based research on corruption. The third part presents the empirical findings with contemporary evidence to demonstrate the nexus between elite corruption and the complicity of the masses. This is followed by a presentation of the ethno-clientelist influence on corruption and the agency of youth in dealing with corruption in parts four and five. Part six analyses the implications and continuing consequences of current actions on corruption in Africa. The final section presents conclusions on the involvement of the masses in corruption and consequent underdevelopment in Africa.

Data and Methods

This paper uses a qualitative approach. Four hundred and sixty-seven in-depth interviews were conducted with four sets of actors. These are government officials including parliamentarians, academics, civil society actors and regular citizens. The study involved participants from eight African countries: Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Kenya, Mali, Niger, South Sudan and Ghana. These countries were selected as they were among countries with continuously low ranking in the last ten years on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Snowball sampling was used to identify and engage participants. However, some participants were selected based on their knowledge of and contributions to discussions related to corruption and governance in Africa. The research also targeted participants among everyday citizens to explore their perspectives on corruption in their societies and how it could be addressed. The contacts of the authors in the countries targeted, most of whom two of the researchers had worked with in previous assignments, were instrumental in setting up interviews in the respective countries. Sixty-three percent of the interviewees were males, while 33 percent were females. Additionally, 79 percent of the respondents were between the ages of 30 and 70, while 21 percent were between the ages of 18 and 29. Young people were engaged to have their perspectives on corruption and assess the agency of youth and their interaction with elites in their respective communities. Interviews were conducted from March to June 2020 using

Skype, WhatsApp and telephone as field interviews could not be conducted due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Interviews were transcribed, coded and thematically analyzed.

Corruption and underdevelopment in Africa

The paper adopts a minimalist conceptualization of *corruption*. Harsch's (1993, 33) distillation of a United Nations definition is apt: corruption encompasses "outright theft, embezzlement of funds or other appropriation of state property, nepotism and the granting of favors to personal acquaintances, and the abuse of public authority and position to exact payments and privileges". The approach recognizes that in most developing countries little boundary exists in practice between private property and state resources as well as civil society and the state. Rotberg (2017) makes a similar characterization of corruption, centered on greed and self-interest as its principal drivers:

Greed and taking advantage-self-interest are hardwired into the human condition. Corrupt acts flow from a natural (rational) desire to improve one's position and one's earning potential. Both the giver and the taker of corrupt exchanges fundamentally attempt to better their position/situation/claim, calculating the extent to which direct or indirect responsibilities and results will flow from an exchange of gratuities, an acknowledgment of influence, and the creation of obligation (Rotberg 2017, 16).

The literature on corruption in developing countries is multifaceted, and scholarly engagement with the causal factors and consequences of corruption is diverse. First, there are scholars who adopt a modernisationist approach. Corruption is viewed as an unavoidable phenomenon immanent in preliminary stages of capitalist development (Huntington 1968). Therefore, corruption should decline as the society develops. This is congruent with the experiences of several European countries (Scott 1969; Harsch 1993). This approach represents an organismic perspective of corruption — capitalist development should herald decline in corruption. The second perspective presents a Fanonian orientation towards the national elite of former colonies. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon criticizes the national elites in the postcolony for their primary preoccupation with replacing colonialists and appropriating for themselves privileges and consumption patterns of the metropole

rather than instituting a social system that is fair to all. This perspective is expounded by writers, such as Khalil Timamy (2005), who argues that:

The experience of colonialism led the African masses to correctly view colonial state institutions as forces of usurpation of African resources. It generated the mentality that the state, and all the material resources at its disposal, belonged to 'another', and it was in this context that systemic corruption began (Khalil Timamy 2005, 385).

The principal argument among theorists such as Timamy is that the adoption of the colonial mentality of maximizing the loot of the colony to satisfy the interest of the imperialists stimulated in African elites an exploitative drive towards self-enrichment at the expense of the masses. What these writers arguably fail to appreciate is the fact that the practice of corruption, after over 50 years of independence in most states on the continent, has developed its own autochthonous form albeit shaped by historical configurations and contemporary interactions with foreign interests. These issues point to the fact that contextualisation rather than reductionism may enhance understanding of the manifestations and effects of corruption.

The third current in the literature on corruption focuses on the role of the "primordial public" (Harsch 1993, 34) and the pressure it exerts on bureaucrats as a cause of corruption. This speaks to obligations to kith and kin and the atmosphere of impunity heralded by the lack of normative sanctions against using state resources for private purposes so long as such largesse are distributed to people from an official's local community. Therefore, corruption functions as a tool for political mobilization and maintenance of public support (Szeftel 2000). In some cases, political elites extend resources from the largesse to opponents, with the aim of silencing or winning them over. The expectations of the public and kith and kin as expressed by Ojudu present layers of pressure that stimulate corruption. Hough (2017) argues:

Corruption is on occasion, not the problem per se; it is a response to a problem, and may act as a — perhaps unwelcome, perhaps uneasy — solution. This point is important in understanding not just why corruption happens, but also why generating solutions to corruption problems requires a clear understanding of the context in which the activity is taking place (Hough 2017, 87).

This argument is similar to those used by participants in this study in justifying corruption among poorly paid and ill-motivated security actors

and civil servants, who they claim solicit bribes to complement their meager salaries⁵.

A fourth perspective considers corruption a basic manifestation of market activity (Harsch 1993). This is a consequence of the overweening influence of the state on activities in the formal economy. Corruption is considered a routine practice that serves certain functions such as obtaining licenses and shaping policy. This functionalist approach holds that corruption helps to ensure allocative efficiency, capital formation and promotion of integration among ethno-religiously and linguistically divided third world elites and populations. This approach is non-static rather than dynamic, underestimates the systemic implications of corruption (Alam 1989) and embodies a teleological orientation.

The Masses and their complicity in corruption and underdevelopment in Africa

As indicated in the introductory section, the interpellation and agency of regular or non-elite citizens is missing in vast volumes of the literature on graft and underdevelopment in Africa. The existing gap has limited the narratives, understating of and the approach to addressing corruption and underdevelopment on the continent. The subsections below explore public perceptions of who corrupt political elites are within the African context and how the relationship and mode of interaction between the elites and the masses stimulate and facilitate corruption and underdevelopment. The analyses also interrogate the ethnic and clientelist texture of corruption in Africa.

Perspectives on corrupt political elites

There are divergent strands of perspectives on how participants define a 'corrupt political elite'. The construction of a corrupt political elite largely depends on one of two factors — the relationship between the masses and the political elite and the ability of the masses to directly benefit from the largesse of the elite. The characterisation of being either a good or corrupt elite by the masses is not just perceptive but depends largely on the kind and level of relationships formed between the elite and the masses. This distinction needs to be explored through the prism of the masses. A Guinean political

⁵ Based on interviews conducted in April and May 2020.

scientist attempts to explain the distinction between good and corrupt political elites within the Guinean context and offers an interesting perspective:

Politicians who are regarded as generous and kind and try to address the almost daily demands from their constituents and families are never regarded as corrupt. They are seen as heroes in Africa. No one questions how they get the money they dish out. All people want is to get more from them. They are regarded as their access to the national cake, as they cannot access the resources directly. These politicians are prayed for by imams and pastors and musicians sing songs praising them and even cry when they call their names, they are the adored and favored politicians. It is obvious that the elites and the masses need each other for corruption to thrive⁶.

The quote above can be cross-articulated with Rotberg's (2017, 16) argument mentioned above, that "greed and self-interest are hardwired into the human condition". These narratives provide an understanding that, in some contexts, social construction regarding the corrupt elite is not necessarily based on the actual definitions or characteristics of corruption used by policy makers and academics. Rather, it is moored to the opinion of the elite or politician being either "greedy/self-serving" or "generous — the People's Man" and how they address the needs of those around them and/or their community members. To the mason interviewed in Sierra Leone, being considered generous excuses the politician from being blanketed with the 'corrupt others' and places them in the good books and protection of their kin. Such understandings open a wider debate on whether corruption can be seen through a binary of functionality or dysfunctionality (Walton 2012).

The problematic then is that political elites must maintain the mode on which their relationship with the masses is defined and built. The resultant effects on the actions of the elite on local development become secondary to the desire of building a patronage system that enhances their relevance and value to their constituents and kin. As a result of the access to the largesse of the elites, some people may only want corruption to end when they are not directly benefiting from the loot. Elites do not have to necessarily provide direct access to their largesse; they could nepotically direct privileges, contracts and jobs to their relatives and friends who may not be qualified for such opportunities. Failure to provide such opportunities leads to elites being designated greedy and self-centered. Thus, as indicated in the quote

6 Interviewee 11, Political Scientist in Guinea, interview conducted via Skype on 22 May 2020.

above, the elites and the masses need each other for corruption to thrive in any setting. A sociologist in Northeast Nigeria⁷ argues:

One of the core reasons people rally behind politicians and public officials in Africa is to get favors from them. The failure by governments to deliver essential services over time has led to people believing that accessing resources in a state depends largely on whom you know and not what you know or what you do. People rally behind their kinsmen and those they know, with the aim of getting jobs, contracts, and other favors at the end. Even at the very top, support for politicians is mostly based on what you can gain when the person is in office. Even when politicians give their relatives and friends contracts, it ends in a give and take relationship, with kickbacks of about 10 to 20% expected by the politician, with the other tribesmen also expecting to benefit from the contract, thereby leaving the resources plundered and the service either ill or undelivered, contributing to underdevelopment.

The relationship described above is largely marshaled by a predatory approach to governance, which benefits the few against the majority. Oshewolo & Durowaiye (2013, 2) argue that this “disposition has not only popularized the phenomenon of elite capture and corruption, but it has also produced development disjointedness in Africa.”

A corrupt elite who misappropriates public funds for personal aggrandizement is mostly praised for his or her “focus” and “determination to defeat the evil of poverty and destitution⁸. Funds that would have improved service delivery are routed into the personal wallets of the few, who then become ‘philanthropists’ providing hand-outs with the tacit approval of the poor recipients who know the illicit origins of these funds but only focus on what they can directly get from the public official. This was evident during this study, when a group of community people who had just received groceries, including oil and rice from a local politician, were interviewed in Freetown in May 2020. They commented that the politician was ‘generous’, ‘kindhearted’ and ‘caring’⁹. None of them questioned the source of funds for the groceries.

Some societies take a deem view, and are sometimes subject to ridicule, non-corrupt, or ‘not-so-corrupt’ elites who have no material benefit to show for years of public service. Based on salaries vis-à-vis the cost of living, most public officers may never be able to legitimately own a house in countries like Sierra Leone. Family members shame bureaucrats and politicians

⁷ Interviewee 4, Sociologist in Nigeria, interview conducted via Skype on 28 May 2020.

⁸ Based on interviews conducted in May 2020.

⁹ Interviews conducted in May 2020.

because the neighbor, who earns a lower wage, has built houses and possesses fleets of cars whilst their relative keeps talking about integrity, accountability and patriotism. The scenario described above is aptly presented in Ayi Kwei Armah's book *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) on corruption in post-independence Ghana. Armah embodied the non-corrupt African bureaucrat in the story of 'The Man', a character despised and scorned by his family and society for maintaining his integrity and professionalism. His colleagues and friends were admired for the wealth acquired through corrupt means. The spouse of the Man tried to get him to understand the difference between those who become rich and those who remain poor because they are afraid to dip their hands in public funds. The Man recounted his conversation with his spouse:

Teacher, my wife explained to me, step by step, that life was like a lot of roads: long roads, short roads, wide and narrow, steep, and level, all sorts of roads. Next, she let me know that human beings were like so many people driving their cars on all these roads. This was the point at which she told me that those who wanted to get far had to learn to drive fast. And then she asked me what name I would give to people who were afraid to drive fast, or to drive at all. I had no name to give her, but she had not finished. Accidents would happen, she told me, but fear of accidents would never keep men from driving, and Joe Koomson had learned to drive (Armah 1968, 33).

The reference to Joe Koomson, a former classmate of The Man, now a Minister who had "learned to drive and to drive fast" i.e. exploit public funds, is an explanation of the difference between Koomson and The Man, who refused to learn to drive and remained poor and unappreciated by his spouse and relatives. The quote defines the expectations and pressure on public officials, especially by relatives, who regard those who are not corrupt as slow and unable to match their colleagues, who are admired for what they make from the government. The Man was left lonely and despised by his wife and relatives. To them, Koomson was the 'Big Man', which is defined in most African contexts by wealth and influence, while The Man was a small man, who had nothing that society could admire. Not being corrupt seemed like a cardinal sin against society, a sin The Man was reminded of daily.

The pressure from the wider society for handouts can be attributed to the fact that the masses believe politicians have access to resources that they are free to mismanage and deploy for personal purposes, while the masses remain trapped in poverty. Therefore, for the masses, there is the perception that getting money or any form of assistance from public officials amounts

to receiving what is rightfully due them via other means. Politicians who fail to comply are voted out of office by the masses while those who play ball are maintained in office. They are perceived as out of tune with society and frowned upon by their people because of their approach to corruption. Whatever iota of integrity or principles such politicians attempt to cling to are discountenanced. They are condemned as greedy and selfish.

Ethnic texture of corruption in Africa

Ethno-regionalisation of politics in Africa is a critical component shaping the interaction between public officials, the masses and corruption. People support elites from their ethnic groups and regions and defend them when the need arises. Corruption thrives in such settings and going after a corrupt government official could mean inadvertent declaration of bureaucratic war with an entire ethnic group or region of origin of the official. Public officials could also claim that an anti-corruption effort is a mere witch-hunt against them and their ethnic-regional alliances. Elite manipulate the psyche of their supporters and kin. They seek their protection under such circumstances. It then becomes the responsibility of the beneficiaries of the generosity of the public official to protect and defend their benefactor. A Kenyan psychologist argues that¹⁰:

The patronage system built over time provides politicians with the socio-political capital they will require when they are accused of corruption. They quickly conscientise their kinsmen that they are targets of 'witch-hunt' and this sells more in fragmented and socially divisive societies. People rally behind 'theirs' and the tension that mounts shifts the focus from the act of corruption to the division and fragility in the society. Most politicians understand the psyche of their people and how to hide behind them when the need arises. This is truly a socio-political malfunction, a disease that has crept into our society and destroyed its moral fabrics.

Much as some public officials try to understand and play on the psyche of the masses as expressed in the quote above, the masses also understand how to socialize with and exploit public officials, especially when they lack confidence and trust in the system. The relationship is shaped around exploitation on both sides, with the corrupt officials using part of the resources they steal to be on the good books of the masses. Hence the categorisation

¹⁰ Interviewee 57, Psychologist in Kenya, interview conducted via Skype on 23 May 2020.

of a good and a bad politician as articulated by some participants. The good politician according to an interviewee in South Sudan is “the politician that takes care of his or her people and is not greedy”.¹¹ For this interviewee, generosity defines being good or bad and the focus is not on whether the person is corrupt. The corrupt politician for him is the greedy one. Lack of access to a public official and the inability to acquire money from that politician places the politician in the bad books of their kin or constituents. A public official considered greedy may not necessarily have the protection of their kin when that protection is needed.

“Big man politics” (Soderberg, Kovacs and Bjarnesen 2018; Utas 2012; Sahlin 1963) is a typical form of politics in Africa that encourages and feeds corruption and the participation of the masses. Big man politics is characterized by the pervasiveness of patronage politics and networks, which combines the “institutions of a modern bureaucratic state, including competitive elections with the informal reality of personalized, unaccountable power of patron-client relations” (Soderberg Kovacs and Bjarnesen 2018, 11). Several African leaders have survived for decades in power because of the structures and relationships that they have carved out with their clientele — the non-elite — dependent on that informal relationship for their survival. Writing on the syndrome of big man politics and corruption in Africa, Houeland and Jacobs (2016) questioned why African leaders such as Paul Kagame, Yoweri Museveni (and until recently Robert Mugabe) continue to cling on to power and resist the calls to leave. They concluded by linking power to control of state resources. They wrote:

[...] the Presidency is a family business and there is no future or monetary gain outside politics. Accumulating wealth and business opportunities are tied to controlling the state. So are the economic fortunes of your allies, party officials and, crucially, the President’s family. Once you are out of office, you lose your ability to steer contracts or get a cut from profits. After tenure, the then former President—or, even more so, his allies—also risk prosecution either for embezzlement or human rights abuses¹².

Patron-client relations are usually built along ethno-regional lines, with the grip on the state ensuring automatic control to status and wealth. It becomes the business of the kin of the elites to keep them in power, as losing

¹¹ Interviewee 26, a local leader in South Sudan, interview conducted via WhatsApp on 23 May 2020.

¹² See: <https://africasacountry.com/2016/03/the-big-man-syndrome-in-africa> (Accessed on 28 May 2020).

power may have repercussions in terms of prosecution and completely losing access to state resources. As such, former African leaders such as Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Yaya Jammeh in the Gambia, José Eduardo dos Santos in Angola clung on to power for decades until they were forcefully removed. In Algeria, although for almost a decade Abdelaziz Bouteflika was incapacitated and unfit to rule, his family and those close to him kept him in power. Their principal interest was to maintain the status quo until they could install someone that could represent their interest at the expense of what the vacuum might do to the country. Bouteflika's case accentuates the significance of the role of kith and kin of leaders in corruption and politics in Africa. The consequences of losing power fuel the zero-sum orientation toward politics rendering it toxic. This has resulted in several civil wars in the last four decades and continues to contribute to electoral violence in Africa. Segments of the masses participate in executing and sustaining violence although much scholarly analyses ignore or underestimate the interpellation of the masses in electoral violence.

Participants note that factors such as illiteracy, unemployment and poverty contribute to collusion with corrupt elites. However, some interviewees argue that some educated people patronize and corrupt the system. Besides, the lack of formal education does not suggest ignorance — people are aware of what they are getting involved vis-à-vis transactional relationships with political elites. The collusion of the masses with the elites has immense implications.

Agency of youth and corruption in Africa

The relationship between the masses and political elites also undermines the agency of young people. Young people are mobilized to defend corrupt elites and actively participate in elections to maintain the grip of such elites on power and resources. The re-emergence, as indicated earlier, of the elites after several wars and military coups in Africa has created an impression that corrupt elites cannot be replaced. One Malian youth argues “they are here to stay, so better play ball with them”¹³. As such, there is a ubiquitous patron-client relationship with some young people serving as the thugs of politicians and political parties. Therefore, while denied the socio-economic empowerment they require, some young people believe that access to the

¹³ Interviewee 62, Malian Youth, interview conducted via WhatsApp on 3 June 2020.

big man will provide them with favors that they may not get from the state. A Nigerian youth notes:

Young people are not fools; we know what is happening. We know these people are destroying our future, we have done all we possibly could but they are still in control, so we have to learn to find a way of getting what we can from them, otherwise we lose everything, including our state of mind¹⁴.

The quote above suggests a sense of hopelessness among some young people. Survival is viewed as dependent on being in the good books of the elites. This fatalistic orientation appears common among youth in sub-Saharan Africa (Bangura 2016; 2018). Young people in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone have participated in very violent civil conflicts with the aim of changing political systems and getting rid of elites (Gberie 2005; Youboty 1993). Writing on Sierra Leone, Bangura (2016) states:

Two distinct strands of analyses have been used to explain both the causes and longevity of the conflict in Sierra Leone, both of which are of relevance to the country's young people. Poor governance and corruption have been widely argued to be the main factors responsible for the conflict, while the marginalization of youth and the influence of natural resources are thought to have fueled the extent of the conflict and the severity of its impact (Bangura 2016, 39).

Despite the severity of the conflict and its extensive consequences, it became evident a few years after the end of the conflict that the status quo had not changed and that the elites were still in control. This contextual reality is common in several countries in the region. Thus, the agency of youth is shaped to engage the realities of their social situation and is framed to ensure that they access the largesse of elites, who pass them handouts. The lack of employment opportunities and education among young people in Africa has led to re-engineering of social spaces by some of the youth. In the last decade and half, the continent has experienced the emergence of gangs and cliques and local coffee booths where young people meet to express their grievances and frustrations against the state and political elites (Bangura 2016; Bergère 2016; Philipps 2013; Shepler 2010). Some have taken to arts, using music, comedy, and graffiti to express their views on society and their conditioning to be silent by elites (Adedeji 2013; Weis 2009).

¹⁴ Interviewee 50, Nigerian Youth, interview conducted via WhatsApp on 3 June 2020.

Implications and continuing consequences of current actions on corruption in Africa

Elite corruption and the complicity of the masses continue to shape the trajectory of the fight against corruption and the overall level of socio-economic development in Africa¹⁵. While the focus on corruption has too often been centered on the role of the elite and grand corruption, this approach does not help to understand the extent to which structural forces play a part in shaping either the preponderance of or the fight against corruption. Corruption should convey a negative connotation across most cultures, but how a hatred for corruption and a general acceptance of it cohere in one society complicates any attempt to provide axiomatic explanations of the correlation between corruption and underdevelopment. In other words, how does a society entertain a certain clientelist and patronage political system, but concurrently claim to fight against it is at best baffling and at worst limiting for scholars, who tend to view corruption from its supply side. This paper attempts to fill the gap by focusing on the demand side of corruption in Africa.

In trying to identify the reasons for elite corruption and the participation of the masses in the process and the implications for the continent, some interviewees argue that the model of socialization and exchange of resources crafted over time between political elites and the masses continues to have significant implications for development and stability in Africa. Sierra Leone has for decades suffered from a challenging history. Corruption, unemployment, marginalization and poverty were responsible for its collapse into a violent civil war between 1991 and 2002 (Bangura 2016). Despite the civil war and its root causes, Sierra Leone remains trapped in divisiveness based on ethno-regional politics, mistrust, and tension. These issues serve as a shade for corrupt politicians to hide. Corruption in Sierra Leone is about identity and what the identity group can get from 'theirs'. Identity politics dilutes the fight against corruption, as it becomes laced with suspicions over the integrity of the process and the unwillingness of ethnic blocs to support any fight that targets their kin. A sociologist in Niger¹⁶ states that "Regularly, governments in Africa go after their opponents in the name of fighting corruption. However, when their party members and tribesmen are accused of corruption, their ethnic networks resurface to put pressure on party bosses to let them off". This undermines accountability and leads to a perpetual

¹⁵ Based on interviews conducted.

¹⁶ Interviewee 61, Lecturer, Sociologist in Niger, interview conducted via Skype on 21 June 2020.

cycle of intergenerational poverty and dependence on donors for support. Even countries with huge resources end up depending on donor support because of bad governance and corruption. A development expert in Niger articulates her experience:

You go to a community; there is no clean water, no electricity, and little food to eat. You see mud and thatched houses all over and there is one big and nice house owned by a politician, with nice cars and money. The people worship him and sing his name and he gives them little money here and there and the community remains poor. However, the elders and youth who feed from him like him and yet there is no hospital, no good road and little food. He feeds on fat, they go thin, but they prefer him. He is one of theirs, if he can give handouts, he will remain one of them. What disturbs me most is that the people are not stupid or ignorant, they know what is happening, but they allow it to thrive and this is the case all over Niger¹⁷.

The quote above points at the longer-term challenges to development, as people are aware of what is happening but, in most cases, do not question the status quo. Rather, they promote the interest of elites. Fundamental questions may be asked especially in relation to countries that have experienced violence in the past. Has fatigue or ambivalence set in? Do the masses believe nothing will change even if they stand up to the elites as some did between the 1980s and 2000s, but the elites succeeded in re-emerging?

Whatever the reasons may be, the consequences of the complicity of the masses in corruption and underdevelopment in the continent are grave. The outbreak of diseases such as Ebola and COVID-19 in Africa further expose the level of underdevelopment and poverty. The lack of basic human security conditions that should enhance the dignity and quality of life of citizens intensifies the exposure to diseases and the potential of dying from them if the World Health Organization (WHO) or humanitarian agencies do not intervene.

Participants in this study provide several recommendations on how to overcome the challenges presented by the complicity between the masses and elites in societies across Africa. The recommendations include intensifying public education and awareness. These include civic education with modules on preventing and addressing corruption in the curricula of schools, colleges and universities. Other recommendations include establishing systems and structures that may reduce direct access to state resources, strengthening

¹⁷ Interviewee 39, Development Expert in Niger, interview conducted via Skype on 1 June 2020.

democracy, good governance and the rule of law, investing in accountability institutions and promoting an inclusive approach to public education and the fight against corruption through constructively engaging and working with community and religious leaders, and civil society and the media. A Ghanaian peace and security expert argues that times are changing and the understanding of who constitutes a corrupt African public official is becoming clearer in most countries in Africa:

African societies are becoming much more enlightened on corruption and corrupt practices. This may be because of the education on the fight against corruption in the continent. Many people now know that when the bureaucrat is not accountable and transparent and gives contracts to relatives and friends that is corruption, when the parliamentarian or councilor siphons funds meant for community development that is corruption, when contracts are given with kickbacks are received by government officials, that is corruption. The establishment of systems and structures and the enforcement of laws and policies to mitigate corrupt practices, alongside public education activities will help to change the current approach to corruption in the continent¹⁸.

Conclusion

The main tenor of the current argument in relation to corruption and development is that the nature of politics and corruption in Africa is the outcome of societal norms, understandings, and culture. As pointed above, perceptions of corruption are influenced not necessarily as a function of societal norms, but as political engineering by elites whose preoccupation for the maintenance of political power promotes in them certain behaviors inimical to good governance and economic development. The behaviors of political elites are too often constructed by the way society functions and this influences the way the public interacts with the elites. This is a dialogic and co-referential relationship.

The common pattern across the continent is the reification of certain social behaviors including corruption to make it appear as the norm. African societies are not socially rooted in cultural and customary practices that promote corruption but continue to be shaped by political elites limi-

¹⁸ Interviewee 28, Ghanaian Peace and Security Expert, interview conducted via Skype on 23 May 2020.

ted in their willingness to promote good governance. What has happened overtime is that the masses — the victims of corruption — have also re-engineered their relationship with the elites. The African masses deploy their agency to navigate patronage networks and ethno-regional sentiments, which strengthens the patron-client relationship. Scholars often ignore this reality. This socio-political malfunction has further enhanced corruption and the impunity that has surrounded it for decades. The existing relationship is now in most cases wrapped in ethno-regional politics where the masses defend ‘theirs’ regardless of their action. As such, although the burden of corruption cannot be shifted to the masses, the argument in this paper is that the masses are not as ignorant or innocent as they are presented. The inability/unwillingness on the part of the elites to change the status quo has led to the masses strategically positioning themselves to derive benefits from the prevailing system. Thus, the agency of the youth has been significantly undermined, as young people in most of the settings studied also engage in corrupt practices, as a means of surviving from the largesse of elites. Elites who fail to give handouts are the ones that are referred to as corrupt, while those who give handouts are considered good politicians.

Regardless of what the challenges are, the ability of politicians to establish transparent systems that depersonalize the public good is critical in shaping popular imaginations of the role of the elites and the function of the state. Corruption is less a function of societal norms, but a product of political systems that have failed to promote accountability. The strengthening of systems that mitigate corruption is fundamental to the achievement of changes in relation to corruption in Africa. Principally, efforts should focus on re-establishing the trust and confidence of the masses in the elites, with the means of democratic distribution of resources and opportunities enhanced in the states. This paper contributes to the argument that the masses may not be as innocent as they are perceived, as some are complicit and enhance corruption in their localities.

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ABSTRACT

Much contemporary scholarship on corruption and underdevelopment in Africa focuses on the role of the elite with scant consideration for the interpellation and agency of non-elite citizens. The paper complements the tenor of available literature. Drawing on a dynamic perspective on corruption, the paper argues that political elites are influenced in part by demands and expectations from regular citizens. These demands and expectations are a major motivation that fuels and validates certain practices which are widely regarded as corrupt. This is not a pro-elite paper. Rather than a pro-elite standpoint, the paper offers a nuanced analysis of how the actions and inaction of citizens affect the conduct of governing elites. Ignoring the role of the masses makes for an incomplete understanding of the vignettes of corruption and crisis of development in Africa. While the paper focuses on Africa, the findings are applicable to other regions of the global south.

KEYWORDS

Corruption. Underdevelopment. Africa. Patronage. Elites.

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