



## ETHNO-REGIONAL EMBERS OF CORRUPTION: HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS AND FRAGMENTS OF EVIDENCE IN POST COLONIAL NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

The domineering posture of ethnicity in Nigeria politics cannot be over emphasized, the country's politics pre and post-colonial is perhaps one of the important causes of the pervasiveness of corruption in Nigeria. One of the vestiges of the colonial master was a dubious amalgamation that gives little regard to the natural ethnic lines of the various tribes in the country. The 1914 amalgamation positioned the three major ethnic groups in the country at an advantage over the many other minority ethnic groups. This paper however agreed that, having passed through many stages in the process of nationhood including a very bloody civil war, Nigeria is a nation. The aim of this paper is to provide fresh insight on the causality and consequences of corruption by arguing that ethnic pluralism helped the condoning of corruption and thus make the fight against corruption difficult. The paper concluded that the identity-based politics and screening for public sector jobs can only lead to biases and prejudices that will continue to fan the embers of corruption. The paper recommended that ethnicity should not continue to define and categorize a Nigerian for fair assessment for and on the job. The paper further recommends that international best practices should be employed by the Nigerian government regarding the employment of labour, acquisition of contracts, and other services to reduce corrupt practices whilst the current war against corruption should be sustained. There is also urgent need for value reorientation and moral re-armament.

**KEYWORDS:** Ethno-Regional, Embers of Corruption, Antecedents, and Post- Colonial

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of corruption is so much disturbing to the right thinking of the society that it features prominently during the 2015 election presidential debates that President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan during the debate urged Nigerians to change their mentality and condemn people with ill-gotten wealth. What we see is a situation where somebody gets wealth illegally and goes to his village and they give him a chieftaincy title..." (Goodluck Ebele Jonathan 2015). The ethno-regional condoning of corruption cannot in anyway help the fight against corruption. Osibajo (2017) opined that celebration of someone that is corrupt will not help Nigerians to resolve the problem of corruption in Nigeria and if corruption issue is not resolved it will hurt us very badly as it is hurting us already. The case of ethnic support for corrupt officials deserves scholar's interrogation if these two personalities at the national helms of affairs in different regimes are this concerned about the issue.

Whereas Nigeria is the third most ethnically and linguistically diverse country in the world, after New Guinea and Indonesia Lewis (2009), the 1914 amalgamation positioned the three major ethnic groups in the country at an advantage over the many other minority ethnic groups. By cobbling the different Nigerian groups into a culturally artificial political entity for instance, the British stimulated inter-group competition and mobilization for power and resources in the new state, thereby fostering ethnic conflicts... More important, British colonial policy fostered the uneven socioeconomic and political

development and mal-integration of the various Nigerian peoples Falola & Heaton (2008). The mal-integration thus caused Nigeria to be synonymous with deep divisions, an outlying factor, which since independence have caused major political matters to be vigorously and violently contested along – ethnic, religious and regional lines. Yusuf (2017). States with divisions on major political matters are disposed to be delicate and unstable because almost by definition, they have very little in common with regard to convergence and harmony which are necessary to reduce the centrifugal forces that rip them apart (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:4). Corroborating the above (Allman, 1993) observed that at independence African nations, ethnic groups and classes, were all in flux, processes of active social construction and political contest rather than stable social entities, and they continue to be so up to the present... Even before independence, tenuous ethnic and class coalitions had begun to unravel into competing factions struggling for control over the material rewards of state power.

The minorities who are ever apprehensive of the domination by these major ethnic groups, engage in manipulations just as the major ethnic groups will do whatever it takes to buy the souls of the minorities at their convenience and at any cost. The deep rooted mistrust among the various ethnic groups and the corrupt and inept leadership resulted in the inability to fashion a way out of the many problems of the country according to Atere (2014) each political zone arrived at the 2014 national conference venue armed with the zonal agenda; the Igbo wants 50% derivative or total resource control whereas the North wants the status quo to remain. Because the delegates see themselves first as a member of an ethnic nationality rather than Nigerian, they are at the conference not for Nigeria agenda but for ethnic or even selfish agenda.

The various ethnic groups have the “national cake” mentality and this, according to (Ogundiya, 2009) provides a fertile ground for the kleptomaniac politicians and elites, who are obsessed with siphoning public funds for their selfish wants with the aim of hiding under ethnic umbrella (pp. 281-292). The corrupt public officials that are alleged or confirmed to be corrupt are celebrated and defended by their ethnic groups. Amaize, Oghre, and Brisibe, (2016) report that there was wild jubilation in Delta State following the news of the release of the former governor of Delta State, James Onanefe Ibori, from prison in the United Kingdom. His kinsmen at Oghara and other Urhobo communities turned the affair to a carnival as they lined up the major streets dancing. News had it that the former Minister of Aviation, Princess Stella Oduah, who is under investigation for corruption was honored in her hometown on the 7th of June, by the traditional ruler of Ogbaru in Anambra State, Igwe Nelson Ethmal. She was crowned with the title ‘Ada EzeChukwu’ for her outstanding service to Nigeria. As individuals within various ethnic groups are opportune to be in the positions of power, the priority is to serve their own selfish end and those of their ethnic groups thus making the development of nationalistic values and virtues among the citizenry difficult and corrupt act tolerable. Corruption continues to defy solution in Nigeria and its becoming highly tolerable as the various ethnic groups offer support to their own corrupt individual especially in the public service and often celebrate them.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

### 2.1 Ethnicity

The concept of ethnicity has been variously defined by scholars; Cohen (1974) for instance avers that an ethnic group is a collection of people who share some patterns of normative behaviour and form a part of a larger population, interacting with people from other ethnic groups within the framework of a social system Osaghae (1995) defined ethnicity as “the employment or mobilization of ethnic identity and difference to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or cooperation” (p 11).

Regmi (2003) described the phenomenon of ethnicity as:

The expressive aspect of ethnic identities: it involves consolidation, mobilisation, goal setting and goal attainment. Ethnicity is thus a nebulous concept; it is confusing and complex. Originally an archaic word ethnicity has been given new meanings. Despite its ambiguities and shifting emphasis, ethnicity presents a heady cocktail potent in its effect and unsettling to the established order of things. It is part sentiment, pan ideology, and part agenda (p. 5).

According to Nnoli (2007) “In reality, ethnicity is a very complex phenomenon.... It is always closely associated with political, economic, social, religious and other social views and interactions. Hence ethnicity finds expression in political domination, economic exploitation, psychological oppression and class manipulation (p. 78)”. And because Nigerian politics and political parties have presented an image of struggle among various ethnic groups for the sharing of national resources

(Nnoli 1980) there is credence to the assertion by (Smith 2007) that ethnicity is an important sphere in which critiques of corruption can be articulated.

Many researchers have discussed the pervasiveness of corruption and its causality in Nigeria especially in relation to ethnicity. Such authors include Sherk (2000) argues that the ethnic sense of loyalty and obligation provides the starting point for much of Nigeria's corruption when the individuals move out of the village and onto a larger stage such as a district, state or federal government position. Fagbadebo (2007) contended that the country's authoritarian leadership faced a legitimacy crisis, political intrigues, in an ethnically - differentiated polity, where ethnic competition for resources drove much of the pervasive corruption and profligacy. Various sections of Nigeria have used ethnicity as a vehicle to get a fair share of the national cake, this process has being a clog the sustainability of socio-political development in Nigeria and the inability of Nigerian society to coalesce, caused in part by its postcolonial history, is a source of the worsening economic and social tragedy facing Nigeria over the last half a century (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010, p.386). It is common in Nigeria to see a community coming around to defend their kinsmen and women when accused of corruption. Rather than allowing such individuals to receive punishment commensurate to their malfeasance, his ethnic group goes on the defense, and gives corruption another name – witch-hunting and victimization. Individuals, particularly the privileged ones use ethnic platform to cover their atrocity. Hence the perceived celebration of corrupt public officials contrary to what obtained in the past when the locals attempt to probe sources of wealth even before accepting gift from such individual.

The issue of ethno-regional enmity and tolerance of corruption is so much disturbing to the right thinking of the society. President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan during the 2015 presidential election debate urged Nigerians to change their mentality and condemn people with ill-gotten wealth. What we see is a situation where somebody gets wealth illegally and goes to his village and they give him a chieftaincy title..." (Goodluck Ebele Jonathan 2015). Corroborating the above Osinbajo (2017) opined that celebration of someone that is corrupt will not help Nigerians to resolve the problem of corruption in Nigeria and if corruption issue is not resolved it will hurt us very badly as it is hurting us already. The case of ethnic support for corrupt officials therefore deserves scholar's interrogation if these two personalities at the national helms of affairs in different regimes are this concerned about the issue.

## 2.2 Corruption

There is much evidence that corruption has been in the world for (years immemorial) thousands of years. MacMullen (1998) argued that Rome withstood its enemies for thousands of years but the empire finally collapsed in 476 AD as a result of decades of corruption which so weakened the empire that it could no longer stand. The 2016 global report on corruption perception index shows over two-thirds of the 176 countries surveyed in the year's index fall below the mid-point of the scale. The global average score stands at 43, indicating endemic corruption in a country's public sector (Transparency International, 2017)

Jain, (2001) argued that there are different definitions of corruption; and although it is difficult to agree on a precise definition, there is consensus that corruption refers to acts in which the power of public office is used for personal gain in a manner that contravenes the rules of the game. (pp. 71-121). The classical definition of corruption is often attributed to Nye (1967) who described it as "behavior that deviates from the formal duties of a public role (elective or appointive) because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) wealth or status gains" (p 416). Elaine (2007) classified corruption into; sporadic, systemic, political, petty, and grand. Every class of corruption received support of ethnic bigots in Nigeria but the support is mostly applicable to grand corruption or organised corruption which can be described as the abuse of power by high ranking government officials that benefits the few at the expense of the many. Grand corruption involves huge amounts of money running to millions or billions of Naira. It thrives among senior bureaucrats and politicians as well as prominent business men during auctions, privatization or allocation of public assets. A good example of this is the \$2.1 billion Dasuki's arms deal scandal in Nigeria.

The Nigeria public is not indifferent to the issue of corruption; it is just that, for many, it all depends on which ethnic group the culprit comes from. In Nigeria, the perverted culture has always been that anyone who gets into a position of authority holds a knife with which to cut the national cake. He/she must invite his/her ethnic group to both the slicing and eating of the cake. The "national cake" mindset of various ethnic groups that constitutes the Nigerian federation provides an opportunity for the corrupt politicians and public office holders to convert the national wealth for their selfish need with the aim of hiding under ethnic umbrella. It is therefore common in Nigeria to see a community coming around to defend their kinsmen and women when accused of corruption. Rather than allowing such individuals to receive punishment commensurate to their malfeasance, his ethnic group goes on the defense, and gives corruption another name – witch-hunting

and victimization. Individuals, particularly the privileged ones use ethnic platform to cover their atrocity. Hence the perceived celebration of corrupt public officials contrary to what obtained in the past when the locals attempt to probe sources of wealth even before accepting gift from such individual. Nwabueze (2002) sociological approach to corruption is a conceptualization that agrees with this study when he described the phenomenon as:

A form of social deviance in some cases, of criminal deviances, the result of failure or lack of will to respect the norms of social interactions. It is an extra-legal or normative approach to gaining access. It is a form of mal-adaptation involving the acceptance of society's cultural goals and the rejection of the socially approved means of attaining the goals. It is an indictment on the ineffectiveness of society's socialization function; a sign of some defects in the development of citizen's personality system. It indicates the existence of weakness in agencies of social control which should punish rather than reward the perpetuator of corruption. (p.128)

The above encapsulates the rationale behind the seeming acceptability of corruption in Nigeria, whilst the malfeasance is punished, and a thing of disgrace in many developed economies of the developed countries.

### 2.3 Ethno-Regional Embers of Corruption

The various ethnic group did not only support the corrupt officials but glamorize and celebrated them. There are cases where the crowd of supporters may not be in entirety that of the corrupt official's ethnic group but mixed multitude of political party supporters, hired crowd and friends. There are however many cases where it was glaring that the support is from ethnic group. One of the six main attributes of ethnic community is a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population (Smith, 1991, p.21) that there is differences in opinion within an ethnic group on a cause of action does not make any of sides to the cause of action less member of the ethnic group. This position is aptly captured by Jinadu (2003) when he argued that the ethnic groups, like other human groups are oftentimes polarized among themselves (p.3).

Below are historical antecedents and fragments of evidence in post-colonial Nigeria;

### 2.4 Adegoke Adelabu (Penkelemesi)

The issue of support for corrupt politicians by their ethnic group did not start of recent, it has been on before independence. One of the earlier cases is that of the case of Adegoke Adelabu, a colorful politicians from Ibadan. Adelabu having left the parliament in 1956 was appointed a Federal Minister of social services and also the chairman of the Ibadan Divisional Council But political enemies were at work and an enquiry into the workings of the Ibadan District Council was appointed. The commission found heavily against him and the council. He reluctantly resigned his post as federal minister, but refused to resign as Council Chairman, until the Council was dissolved two months later. According to Kehinde, F (2017) during this trial, his admirers went on the street of Ibadan to sing and eulogize him with the popular song- "*Adelabu ma ko owo wa na! Igunnu loni Tapa, tapa loni igunnu!*" i.e. "*Adelabu steal our money the more! Igunnu owns Tapa, Tapa owns Igunnu!*" "The song in English means "Adelabu, continue to steal our money, as Tapa (a tribe in Yoruba land) is the owner of igunnu masquerade and the igunnu masquerade is the owner of Tapa. What support could be more than this for corruption, it is a case of an open cheque for public office holder to deal with the commonwealth as he deems fit.

### 2.5 Diepreye Alamieyeseigha

Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, the then Nigerian Bayelsa state governor was admitted into bail after been charged for laundering £1.8m in Britain. It was alleged he skipped the bail and escaped to Nigeria after dressing up as a woman out of out of Britain. Rory, (2005) reported; Diepreye Alamieyeseigha returned to his home village a folk hero after apparently escaping Europe in a dress and on a forged passport. Crowds cheered and waved leaves to welcome back the governor of Bayelsa state. Alamieyeseigha later in July 2007, pleaded guilty before a Nigerian High Court to six charges of making false declaration of assets and caused his companies to plead guilty to 23 charges of money laundering. He was sentenced to two years in prison and the court ordered the seizure of his assets in Nigeria.

### 2.6 Olabode George

When Olabode George from Lagos was arraigned with four others on a 163 count-charge of conspiracy, disobedience to lawful order, abuse of office and alleged illegal award of contracts worth N84 billion while he was chairman of the NPA. During the trials, it was always carnival like at the court premises with his ethnic supporters in various Yoruba attires. As a matter of fact they were there at the court on the day he was sentenced. Abdulah, A, Ndiribe, O & Ezema, J. (2009) reporting



for Vanguard newspaper said: After the judgment, the supporters, who were restricted by security operatives wailed and cried, attributing the judgment to a ploy to quench the rising political profile of George... The supporters who wore different Ankara uniforms left the court in anger as the accused were moved to the prison in a Black Maria pick-up van with number-plate PS 523AO/1 at 3.45 pm

The situation was not different when he was released after serving the sentence for about 2 years, it was a rousing and heroic welcome for him as hundreds of his ethnic group and well-wishers gave him a warm reception. Among top politicians that were present at the church service were Gbenga Daniel, Ogun state governor, former President Olusegun Obasanjo, Mr. Ayo Fayose, former Ekiti state governor, Defence Minister, Mr. Kayode Ademola, John Odeh, Gen Tunji Olurin, Mrs. Modinat Adedibu, Deputy Governor Oyo State, Mr. Taofeek Arapaja, Ambassador Musiliu Obanikoro among others. (See appendix VII, pictures3&4). Aziken, et al (2011) reporting for Vanguard newspaper declared thus; Opposition political parties and organised Labour, yesterday, descended heavily on the People's Democratic Party, PDP, describing weekend's celebration of the release from jail of Chief Bode George as a celebration of shame and corruption... He was particularly welcomed in a boisterous celebration that was only tempered by a thanksgiving service where the presiding priest urged him to reflect on his life.

## 2.7 Ibori James

The former governor of Delta state was arrested in Dubai last May 2010 after he lost an appeal against his extradition. He was accused of money laundering in United Kingdom and misappropriation of state funds in Nigeria. This same was earlier on freed of charges of corruption in Nigeria under the administration of President Musa Y'adua by a court in a judgement many Nigerians described as controversial. *Allafrica*, (2011) reports the presence of Ibori kinsmen at the London court at the beginning of his trials that about 110 supporters were in Southwark Crown Court to demonstrate support for the embattled former Delta State Governor. Sporting "Free Ibori" and "Deltans wants Ibori back home" T-shirts, 50 of such supporters were said to have travelled all the way from Nigeria to the UK to demonstrate their support.

## 2.8 Abdulrasheed Maina

It was alleged by the senate committee investigating pension scandal that N469billion of pension fund was mismanaged by Maina-led pension task team. It was alleged that he used N1bn for jamboree in the name of verification abroad. He spends more than N8m every two weeks on personal security. He refused to honor the committee invitation whilst the Inspector General foot dragged on the Senate resolution directing him to arrest Maina. His supporters moved into the streets of Abuja to stage a counter protest to that of the civil society calling for the sack and prosecution of Maina. According to *Sun newspaper* reporter Dennis Mernyi, reported that the Supporters of the embattled chairman of the Pension Reform Task Team, PRTT Mr. Abdulrasheed Maina yesterday in Abuja disrupted traffic flow within Three Arms Zone area, linking the Federal Secretariat and the Supreme Court, as they protested at the entrance of the National Assembly. The protesters, mainly, youths under the aegis of Pensioners' Children said they were at the National Assembly to protest against the witch-hunting of Maina by the Senate. It is instructive to note that these faceless youth must have been organized by Mania's kinsmen. This can be implied from the report of (Mac-Leva, 2015) that youths and elders from Biu emirate council met in Abuja in August, 2015 and endorsed this same man as their choice for the position of Borno state Deputy Governor against the state ruling political candidate Madu Mohammed Biu. The man absconded from duties and he was subsequently dismissed from service by the Federal Government.

## 2.9 Stella Oduah

She was the Minister of Aviation, in October 2013 it was alleged that with her approval, the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority purchased two bulletproof BMW cars at an allegedly inflated rate of N255m. On December 19, 2013, the House endorsed the report of its committee and agreed that the minister breached the 2013 Appropriation Act. It therefore asked Jonathan to review Oduah's appointment for approving expenditure of over N643m for the NCAA to procure 54 vehicles last year. There was a protest on October 24, 2013 the day the House of Representatives Committee on Aviation probed the minister. Nigerian News2 reported that some pro-Oduah protesters gathered at the secretariat chanting solidarity songs in favour of the embattled minister. The protesters, numbering about 30 women and a few men, maintained that the minister committed no offence. Speaking on behalf of the protesters, the National Coordinator, Grass Roots Movement for Unity and Stability – a rights group, Mr. Edisemi Yiki, said, "We are concerned that certain persons have constituted themselves into a cabal with the sole aim of undermining and rubbishing the development effort of the aviation minister.

There was another protest on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> December 2013, Soni Daniel (2013) reported that Business activities were on Saturday, paralyzed at the Akanu-Ibiam International Airport, Enugu, although temporarily, as hundreds of Igbo youths, under the aegis of Igbo Progressive Union (IPU), embarked on a peaceful protest against the calls for the sack of Oduah over the controversial armored cars. The kinsmen of the embattled minister from Ogbaru local government area of Anambra State, led by High Chief George Nwabueze, also exonerated her from any wrong doing in the purchase of the cars.

### 3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper concluded that there were demonstrated evidences of ethnic support for corrupt individuals regardless of the effect of their unpatriotic actions on economic stability and the image of the nation. Therefore, corrupt individuals found solace in ethnic support particularly when the political journey turned out to be so rough and there is little or no possibility of escaping punishment. The gullibility of the citizenry and endemic poverty made the citizenry readily available to be used to provide the needed cover for corrupt individuals.

The paper therefore recommended:

1. Institutionalization of the war against corruption rather than turning it to social media event.
2. Public enlightenment on the need to embrace the loss traditional values that abhorred corruption and stigmatized individuals with ill-gotten wealth
3. The judiciary should be strengthened to rise above corruption in order to fulfill their constitutional responsibility in the war against corruption
4. The educated elites should live above board in the blind support for individual with questionable character with a view of securing political positions
5. The government must develop the needed political will to confront corrupt practices rather than the impression that a section of the public rightly or wrongly held that it was a war against directed against political opponents.

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