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RELEVANCE OF YORUBA VERBAL ARTS TO THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: THE YORUBA PROVERBS EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

Corruption is an attitude, albeit man-made, that has threatened the corporate existence of the Nigeria Nation. It is the bane of economic, social and infrastructural development of our nation. As the nation struggles for value re-orientation, it is imperative to speak to the minds of individuals who are stakeholders in nation-building for attitudinal change. To this end, the Yoruba verbal art, especially the proverb is examined in this paper as a persuasive instrument of change in the fight against corruption.

KEY WORDS: *Attitude, Verbal Art, Persuasive Instrument, Change.*

INTRODUCTION

Corruption, in general terms and for the purpose of this paper, means deviation from the proper way of doing things in any given society, proper here being stipulated by convention or by the dictates of the laws of the land. Some notable authorities have attempted to define corruption. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines corruption as dishonest or illegal behaviour, especially of people in authority. It is also the 'act or effect of making somebody change from moral to immoral standard of behaviour'. This definition has identified corruption negatively as something immoral and therefore undesirable.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia, identifies corruption as:

...form of dishonest or unethical conduct by a person entrusted with a position of authority, often to acquire personal benefits. It may include many activities like bribery and embezzlement. (It is) corruption when an office holder or

government employee acts in an official capacity for personal gain.

Corruption, therefore, is immoral; it is bribery and it is embezzlement. Further, corruption has been defined from the perspective of different callings. An Economist, Dan Senior, defines corruption as an action to secretly provide a good or service to the third party so that he can influence certain action which benefits the corrupt third party or both in which corrupt agent has authority. Dan Kaufmann, a banker with the World Bank, harps on the legal corruption whereby those in power make laws to protect themselves. Such is the process in the legislative assemblies of the federal and state governments of Nigeria.

Corruption can also include an abuse of discretion, a misuse of power in decision making whereby a judge would improperly dismiss a case to favour a litigant. It includes favouritism or nepotism behaviour whereby someone relating to the corrupt official (friend, family member or association) is being unduly favoured.

CAUSES OF CORRUPTION

A number of reasons which could be responsible for the prevalence of corrupt practices in Nigeria could be spiritual or material as influence on the attitudes of Nigerians. From the perspective of religion (spiritual) a Pastor, Emmanuel Jigbale (2016, June: social medium) sees the prevalence of corruption in Nigeria as:

....an indication of failure or failing roles of Religion to serve as social control. Social or societal values, beliefs and religion are all interrelated concepts.

Corruption connotes diversion of truth, justice and fair play. The prevalence of corrupt practices in Nigeria has become worrisome for well-meaning Nigerians, hence the clamour for reorientation and attitudinal change. President Buhari, while commenting on the magnitude that corruption has assumed in the country, stated that “it (corruption) is the greatest human rights violation since the creation of the modern public administration”. This is very true judging from daily revelations of the graft that has characterised public offices in Nigeria. Public funds are being stolen in billions of United States dollars. So much so that there is total and general collapse of infrastructure of which the populace are being made to bear the brunt.

Another major cause of corruption in Nigeria is greed. Appointed officials in government see it as a way to amass wealth and secure their future and that of their generation yet unborn instead of doing well in office for the benefit of Nigerians. The matter is even made worse by the immunity clause built into the constitution which protects corrupt officials from being prosecuted.

Ostentatious lifestyle of Nigerians is another important factor that supports the festering corruption in the country. The society expects anybody in power to be living in stupendous affluence, and these officials have not been disappointing in living like emperors and kings while the populace is condemned to living like paupers and being contented with crumbs falling from the tables of the rich.

The custom and attitudes of society towards gift-giving is also partly responsibility for the institutionalised practice of give and take. An average Yorùbá man will say “*da omi síwájú kí o lè tele títù*” literally meaning throw water forward to step on wet ground. This adage seems to justify a situation whereby whoever is seeking favour should first provide a gift to somebody from whom favour is sought. However, carried too far, it has become a basis for people to demand gratification before legitimate service is rendered.

Government officials and traditional rulers will collect gratification in matters of state while invoking the proverb ‘*ibi ti a ba se sí, la n je sí*’ it is where one does that one eats. One has the right to

take, albeit illegally, from the office one occupies. ‘*Eni se nidii pepe, a je nidii*’- He who does beneath the altar will eat beneath the altar. It is said that ‘*bi a ba fun were loko, lodo ara re ni yoo roko si*’- If we give a hoe to a madman, it is towards himself he would weed. All these kinds of Yoruba proverbs have been taken too far in supporting unethical practices in public offices.

EFFECTS OF CORRUPTION

The negative effects of corruption in Nigeria cannot be overstated. As at 2012, Nigeria was estimated to have lost over four hundred billion dollars (\$ 400,000,000,000) since independence due to corrupt practices by government officials misuse of public funds and resources. Some other negative effects of corruption in Nigeria include underdevelopment, lack of basic infrastructure like good road network, misuse of natural resources, inadequate power and water supply, mediocrity in professional and leadership positions, defective leadership output, fuel scarcity in an oil-producing nation, falling standard of education and work output, high rate of unemployment and tarnished image on the international scene.

The matter has been made worse with the culture of impunity being perpetrated by the political class in the country. Checks and balances have almost totally disappeared in the affairs of state. Nigeria has indeed become a country of men and not of law. Yes, as even lawmakers either do not obey the laws they made themselves, or some brands of laws are made to protect and perpetrate them in office. It is therefore not surprising that successive administrations in the country have failed in showing commitment to tackling the problem of corruption in the country.

As an extension of this decadence, various militant and terror groups emerge, further threatening the already lopsided economy of the country. Disgruntled individuals and jobless graduates of Nigerian educational institutions become ready tools in the hands of abduction syndicates and oil pipeline vandals. Inequality in the distribution of National wealth engenders all manner of lawlessness which includes unhealthy agitation for self-determination by some sections of the country. It is now difficult to wake up one day without disastrous news of bombings and gun-toting by some desperate sects in the country. In spite of this state of emergency into which the nation has fallen, it appears that very little is being done by the government to contain these cankerworms. Corruption has now become the rule rather than an aberration.

VERBAL ART

Verbal art is described as the creative expressions such as folktales, myths, proverbs and song composed in primitive or traditional societies and passed on from one generation to another by

word of mouth. It is the totality of verbalised expressive forms and beliefs evolved in tribal societies for social entertainment, and for ordering of societies, passed on orally from one generation to another.

Verbal expressions have qualities of integrating experiences, emotions and ideas of social experiences for pleasure or moral education. It also include creative use of oral form of language, either for symbolic or realistic representation of human behaviour, thoughts, beliefs as shaped by the society and culture.

YORUBA PROVERBS

The proverb is an important aspect of the Yoruba verbal art. The origin of Yoruba proverb is as old as the origin of the Yoruba land. Its usage is an exultation of wisdom of the user in the art of communication.

Finegan (1981) sees proverb as a collection of age-old truth showing the experiences of man. Bada (1985) calls it statements emanating from experience, keen observation and deep thought. It is a way of being circumspect in speech-making. Sheba (2006) says that proverb is very important in speechmaking as it shows wisdom, knowledge and understanding of the Yoruba environment. To Delano (1973), "it is self-evident truth that gives the gist of what one wants to say in a brief and unmistakable form". Akinlade (1982) calls proverb "short sentences full of wisdom which had been in use for a long time as a means of explaining issues".

We can only add here that proverbs are verbal instrument employed to explain certain dicey issues. Expressed in a nutshell, ideas which could otherwise have taken longer time and less tact to express. It is a kind of verbal short-cut. The use of proverb helps the speaker to avoid verbal rigmarole as can be seen in a proverb. "Abo oro la a so fun omoluwabi, toba denu re a di odindi" a word in enough for the wise.

Many scholars of Yoruba have categorised Yoruba proverbs according to use. Sheba (2006) dwells on women-related proverbs. Kareem (1992) categorised proverbs under dos and don'ts. Babade (2008) breaks it down to twenty-one which include those used for better understanding of ongoing discussions, to scientific and natural laws. This further attests to the wide range of issues which the proverb can address.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This write-up is being approached from the backdrop of Yoruba culture making effective use of the Yoruba proverb to speak to the minds of all stakeholders in fighting corruption in Nigeria.

Culture, we know, is a fruit of societal tree. Culture and society co-exist. Societies all over the world have different cultures from which their languages evolve. Since the subject-matter which

evolves from the Yoruba language spoken by the Yoruba people, it is pertinent to work from the backdrop of Yoruba culture. We do this to fully realise the import of Yoruba proverbs being used in this paper.

From time immemorial, the Yoruba people have been accustomed to employing the use of proverbs as an instrument to drive home the truth of any issue. Culturally-inclined critics can be grouped into two viz: those propagating the sustenance of old cultural values; who believe that things should be done culturally as has been done in the past without change, and advocates of the more progressive practices. We agree with the latter as this work supports a pragmatic change in the existing state of prevalent corrupt practices.

SOME RELEVANT PROVERBS FOR FIGHTING CORRUPTION

The relevance of proverbs in fighting corruption is hereby considered as it affects individual stakeholders.

- (i) The corrupt should know that it is no more business as usual as the government of the day is serious about the fight against all corrupt activities. "Afefe ti fe, a ti ri furo adiye"- The wind has blown and we have seen the anus of the fowl. The corrupt had hitherto hidden in secrecy but their activities have been exposed.
- (ii) The corrupt should know that no one has monopoly of wisdom. "Bi eniyan ba mo itoju nkan, ko ma gbagbe eni ti o mo atiwa re"- If one knows how to hide something, he should not forget the one that knows how to find it. No matter how clever the corrupt are in hiding their stolen money and assets, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) is equal to the task of ferreting out the truth. They should therefore retrace their steps and stop corrupt practices.
- (iii) The corrupt should also know that one day they would be caught at their game "Adiye irana ki i seran ajegbe"- Sacrificial fowl cannot be eaten without repayment. No matter how long the evil practice of corruption had been perpetrated, one day the corrupt will give account of his deed.
- (iv) The corrupt needs to know that they are destroying the future of the Youth of this country. It is their deed that threatens the well being of the country. "Agba to roof ika, omo re a je nibe"- If an elderly person prepares evil vegetable soup, his offspring's will partake in the eating.
- (v) Clarion call to all stakeholders to come together in condemning and fighting to eliminate corruption in the country is expressed in "Agbajo owo la fi n soya, ajeki owo kan ko gberu dori"- It is the collection of

fingers that is used to beat the chest, only one hand cannot lift the load to the head. All hands should be on deck to fight and banish corruption from the land.

- (vi) There is special appeal to the elder statesmen to rally round the president, the head of government of the land, to offer sound advice to sincerely fight corruption “*Agba ki i wa loja kori omo tuntun wo*”- An elderly man in the market-place would not allow the baby’s head to be awkward. The experiences gathered by these elder statesmen are needed to move the country forward.
- (vii) The onus is on Nigerian populace not to accord the corrupt people any respect. For they have proved to be incorrigible “*A gun ata lodo, a lo ata lolo, iwa ata ko yipada*” - Pound pepper in mortar or grind pepper on the grinding stone, the character of pepper remains unchanged. Nigerians are also admonished not to act as fronts for those undesirable looters of the treasury. “*Agbepe laja nikan ko lole, eni to gba a sile naa ole ni*”- The one that carries palm oil from the ceiling store is not the only thief, the helper that took it down for him is also a thief. Those abetting corruptions are culpable as well.
- (viii) Corruption can destroy the country. It is therefore the duty of every Nigerians to be concerned in fighting it as its negative effect would be grievous for every one “*Bi ara ile eni ba n je kokoro buburu, bi a ko ba da a lekun, herehuru re ko ni je ka sun loru*”- If one’s neighbour is eating a bad insect and one refuses to caution him, the disturbances will not allow the one to sleep in the night. We should all be concerned about the activities of the corrupt government officials who are unwittingly destroying the country else the back-lash will affect everybody.
- (ix) No reasonable Nigerian would wish corrupt officials well. Instead, they will be happy if they (the corrupt) and in misfortune. It is obvious that the activities of corrupt officials have seriously impoverished Nigerians. “*A ki i fowo ekun raja erin*”- One does not use ill-gotten money to buy good property. Wicked people do not deserve happiness. So, when it became viral on the social network (Facebook) that a former minister of the Federal government of Nigeria was suffering from cancer, nobody seemed to show sympathy

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria is rated very high on the scale of corruption in the world. Recently, corruption assumed such a magnitude that it became a thing of serious worry to stakeholders both in government

and public. As a result, there is a clarion call to all and sundry to help in combating this monster before it finally sinks Nigeria.

The Federal government has instituted a number of bodies saddled with ferreting corrupt practices, exposing and bringing perpetrators to justice. Some of these bodies so created are: Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB).

Nigerians are also called upon to re-examine their ways and eschew corrupt practices in their daily dealings. The president Muhammadu Buhari recently launched a programme named “Change Begins with Me”, the idea of which is that Nigerians, individuals, should emulate the President in the fight against corruption. Let everybody re-examine his ways and begin to think of bringing Nigeria out of her present predicament by choosing not to be corrupt.

As a way of complimenting the effort of the President and other stakeholders, this paper has shown a way to speak to the minds of every Nigerian, and the minds of perpetrators of corrupt practices through the use of Yoruba verbal arts, especially proverbs to tackle the cankerworm of corruption.

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