

# **Colonial Political Re-Engineering and the Genesis of Modern Corruption in African Public Service: The Issue of the Warrant Chiefs of South Eastern Nigeria<sup>1</sup> as a Case in Point**

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## **ABSTRACT**

There are different ways to look at the subject of socio-political corruption. One approach is to consider it as a moral depravity of persons and groups. In this case, addressing the problems of corruption consists in launching ‘wars against corruption’, which target individuals or groups of people. This essay considers corruption from another angle, namely, more as a structural problem. It argues that an uneven socio-political landscape, where necessary checks and balances scarcely exist and where the ordinary citizens are stripped of the power to demand accountability or call their rulers to order, is a breeding ground of corruption. It argues specifically that colonialism in Africa re-created social and political terrains and introduced a new unbalanced socio-political culture, which has given birth to the monster of uncontrollable corruption in African contemporary public service. Corruption in turn breeds poverty and poverty fortifies the practice of corruption, thus creating a vicious circle. This essay uses the socio-political transformation of the Igbo speaking people of Southern Nigeria, occasioned by colonialism, as a reference point. It argues that confronting corruption realistically would involve structural considerations, which would include fundamental changes in the perception of public office, creating the necessary checks and balances to enable the ordinary citizens exercise sufficient pressures on their public officials.

*Keywords: corruption, colonialism, public service, socio-political re-arrangement, Igbo (Nigerian) societies*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Corruption is frequently fingered as being responsible for underdevelopment and other problems in many countries. The word itself is hydra-headed and so is the phenomenon it represents. However, in socio-political discussions it represents

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<sup>1</sup> South Eastern Nigeria has represented various things in history. In present Nigerian political language it refers to the homeland of the Igbo people (although the Igbo people are also home in Aniomia – west of the river Niger, and in Rivers state both currently grouped into the South-South geopolitical zone). During the first Nigerian republic, the South East (together with part of what is today referred to as South-South) formed the Eastern region. During the era of twelve states (between 1970–1976) created by the Yakubu Gowon administration, South Eastern state referred to what is today known as Cross River state and Akwa Ibom state. The use of South Eastern Nigeria in this essay focuses primarily on the Igbo people (although all of them are not located within present South Eastern Nigeria).

acts of dishonesty and using one's own position to his advantage (more often against what is perceived as the common good of society). Socio-political corruption could be as old as human societies, especially when we consider some age-old regulations and sanctions in various communities, which always aim against corrupt practices. The prevalence of corruption, however, is in various degrees in different societies, depending on the balance between the people and the structures of governance, and the power of the civil society to exercise pressure and hold public figures accountable for their services.

While I recognise the complications associated with discussions on corruption, I intend to argue in this essay that socio-political corruption indicates more of a structural problem than a 'moral depravity' among individual persons. I will demonstrate that the advent of the structures of European colonialism, invented an uneven socio-political landscape, placing public officers over their communities and thus reducing the power of the people to exercise a meaningful pressure on their public figures or calling them to order. This, in the view of this essay is the breeding ground for the endemic socio-political corruption, which has become a monster in African societies. I will try to illustrate how the introduction of warrant chieftaincy by the British in South Eastern Nigeria as an administrative apparatus, altered not only the perception of public office in an African community but also destroyed the local dynamics of checks and balances (which held old forms of corruption within manageable limits) and created a new disproportionate playing field thus, introducing the modern and more elusive culture of corruption in African public life.

## POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION IN IGBO<sup>2</sup> COMMUNITIES PRIOR TO THE ADVENT OF COLONIALISM

To discuss political administration in Igbo communities prior to the advent of colonialism does not mean that all Igbo speaking communities had a homogenous political system. There is a distinction within the Igbo speaking people between *Oru-na-Igbo*. This distinction has also its implications in political organisations. The origin of these words is still problematic. However, there are some sets of agreements among scholars. Don Ohadike (1994: 27) is of the view that the word Igbo means 'the people' or 'a community of people' but encountered a corruption of meaning at a point in history to mean 'forest dwellers', 'bush people', 'backwardness', 'slave' or a term used to refer to outsiders or sanctioned conducts. For Henderson (1972: 41), Oru referred to the "riverain or riverain-derived, slave dealing, kingdom associated peoples; Igbo meant upland, slave producing, kingship-lacking populations." The Oru has a well-defined kingship

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<sup>2</sup> Igbo communities are located both East and West of the river Niger. New living conditions have prompted various forms of migrations of the Igbo people to other parts of Nigeria, African, and to Europe and America.

structure, which moves from the *Obi, Ndi-Ichie* down to the titleholders. The saying *Igbo enweghi eze* (the Igbo lack kingship institutions) is accredited to the *Oru*, in contempt for the Igbo (Agu 1989: 216–217). Nevertheless, it is still said that *Oru na Igbo bu nwanne* (Oru and Igbo are siblings). The different sub-groups that constitute the Igbo cultural area used to live in city-states and defined themselves more in terms of their immediate locality than in reference to a general Igbo identity. “The Aro, for instance, would say that they are not Igbo but the children of God (Chukwu), while the Anioma would point to all the Igbo groups who live on the eastern side of the Niger as *ndi igbo* (Igbo people). The people of Onitsha, Atani, Osamala, and Aboh say that they are not *ndi Igbo*, so do group of towns in the Agukwu Nri area” (Ohadike 1994: 27). He is of the view that a consciousness of a more general Igbo identity, interest and destiny started in the 1940’s after the formation of the Igbo State Union. He argues that “until an Igbo national consciousness was forged in the second half of the colonial period, nearly all the Igbo clans continued to reject the expression *ndi Igbo*” (Ohadike 1994: 27–28).

Granted the diversities among the various groups that comprise the Igbo speaking people of Southern Nigeria there is some democratic or republican character that unifies all their political organisations prior to the advent of European colonialism. These communities were either administered by male elders, the age grades, cult groups or interaction between the women elders and male elders. Even where monarchy existed like the Anioma, Onitsha, Oguta, there was the manifest democratic and republican spirit, which characterised Igbo societies everywhere.<sup>3</sup> Decisions were reached through a series of consultations among the elders of the community.

When a decision affecting an Ibo community is to be made, several groups and organisations concern themselves with the issue and within each organization near unanimity must be reached before discussion can be closed. Participation is on such a broad scale that most traditional meetings have no chairman or central direction, take no votes, permit more than one person to speak at a time, have no agenda, and continue for long periods. A decision reached by one organisation within a community that is not acceptable to another organisation can usually not be implemented (Smock 1968: 281).

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<sup>3</sup> Ohadike describes the political organisation among the Anioma as being small scale, without developed centralised institutions, kin-based. “Even in the towns where paramount chiefs were found, the authority they exercised were very minimal indeed. In the first place, they had no police force or a standing army to enforce their authority. In the second place, their positions were fundamentally elective in the sense that every adult freeborn member of the community had some say in the selection of a new paramount chief. Finally government was rooted in the concept of personal freedom and social equality. A paramount chief was simply *primus inter pares* when he sat among other men in the council of chiefs and elders.” (Ohadike 1994: 154)

Simply put, the Igbo people had a remarkable system of government, which involved wide devolution of powers. Government was the affair of every person and the whole community (Onwumechili 2000: 18). Agu (1989: 219) describes this Igbo traditional political organisation as ‘ultra-democratic’.<sup>4</sup> Both where monarchy existed and where it did not, each community had its pattern of checks and balances through which the exercise of public authority was controlled. This system of checks and balances were not only peculiar to the Igbo groups of Southern Nigeria but to some other cultural and linguistic groups.<sup>5</sup> The British found this type of system very detrimental to their interest at that time. In the case of the Igbo groups, Isichei (1976: 142–143) noted that “the patterns of traditional Igbo government were hopelessly unsuited to the needs of the colonial state. Its system of checks and balances, its pursuit of consensus by protracted discussion, its use of religious sanctions, and especially, its small scale, rendered it impracticable.” Ohadike (1994: 153) adds that the British changed the traditional administrative Igbo systems “because they failed to comprehend the working of the Igbo political systems. The Igbo political systems were inconsistent with British notions of governance, and anything that did not meet European standards had to be destroyed, not developed.” Hence the British sought to overturn this system. Overturning these administrative patterns not only introduced new political structures but also removed the dynamics of local control, placing the exercise of public office above the community (no longer within the community) thus creating the gaps of uncontrollable abuses and corruption. The British institution of the Warrant Chieftaincy is a good example.

## THE WARRANT CHIEFS<sup>6</sup>

The option to introduce Warrant Chiefs in Igbo communities (both east and west of the river Niger) and in South Eastern Nigeria (in general) may have appealed to the British because they thought that all African communities must be ruled by

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<sup>4</sup> B. Davidson describes the Igbo from the perspective of their traditional political organisation as one of those groups of people, who organised themselves well and managed their affairs properly “without chiefs or kings”. He further described the political structure as a set-up in which “the common man was his own ruler, though within a complex pattern of community life.” (Davidson 1977: 113)

<sup>5</sup> A good example is the case of the ancient Oyo Empire where members of the Oyomesi were supposed to present an empty calabash to an Alafin when he begins to grow tyrannical. The presentation of the empty calabash signified that the community had rejected him and in turn demands of him to either commit suicide or go into exile. This is an example of how some traditional African communities controlled the activities of their leaders.

<sup>6</sup> Warrant designates the recognition, which the colonial officers gave to whoever they appointed to oversee a particular locality. The authority of these chiefs lay in the warrants, which they receive from the colonial officers. When this warrant is taken away, the chief in question becomes an ordinary native.

kings and chiefs as observable among many African tribes.<sup>7</sup> However, it appears that it was the shortage of colonial staff more than any other factor, which may have made the British to recourse to the system of Warrant Chiefs, as a way of administering their territories with the natives themselves, under the supervision of a colonial officer or few colonial officers. This system is known as indirect rule and it came to characterise the British colonial practice in many of their African colonies.

The introduction of the warrant Chiefs (among other things), signalled the loss of both independence and the ultra-democratic political system of the Igbo. It re-arranged the Igbo political terrain by introducing a new organisational superstructure (Agu 1989: 247). This new order, which the Warrant Chiefs signified, created a new socio-political climate in which uncontrollable deceit, extortions and various forms of corruption held sway. Unlike in the traditional society where decisions were reached in the presence of the community according to generally accepted customs, the Warrant Chiefs operated under a different system characterised by surreptitiousness. They were accountable only to the colonial officer and not to the people or community. Once the colonial officer was happy with them, then they needed not border about their people. This is because while the colonial officer had the power to unseat them directly, the people did not.<sup>8</sup>

This had series of implications for the local community. In the first place, public authority figures were no longer chosen by the people themselves. They became largely handpicked by external forces and imposed on the people. Thus manipulating the flow of responsibility and commitment of these public officers to their local constituencies (Clarno and Falola 1998: 170). This pattern of

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<sup>7</sup> The absence of such authority figures among the Igbo as kings, who wielded powerful influence over a wide territory as seen among the Edo, Yoruba kingdoms and Hausa/Fulani emirates led the British to erroneously conclude that the Igbo people were living in an ordered anarchy (Uchendu 1965: 46). Other British researchers (namely C.K. Meek, Miss M.M. Green and M. Perham) equally made similar erroneous conclusions concerning the Igbo socio-political organisation. C. K. Meek branded the Igbo as “the most lawless part of Nigeria” simply because of the absence of any central authority as observable among the other tribes (Meek 1970: xi). Miss Green who was sent by the British in the early 1930s to study the Igbo socio-political organisation concluded that since the Igbo had “no paramount chief or other organ of government common to them all, they lack what to other peoples may be powerful symbols of unity” (Green 1964: xiii & 6). For M. Perham the lack of a central administrative authority structure for the entire Igbo area meant that the Igbo were “one of the least disciplined, and least intelligible, of African peoples” (Perham 1937: 219). See also Agu (1989: 215).

<sup>8</sup> A documentary book on the activities of the colonisers in South Eastern Nigeria titled *The Story of Old Calabar* presented an image of the situation. “The introduction of often inexperienced and locally unacceptable chiefs, who had divided loyalty and feared more the government than the people, created confusion and unlimited opportunity for abuse of the position. The much wider powers and opportunities given to the warrant chiefs than the tradition allowed, created a group of very wealthy, corrupt and highly unpopular chiefs which bragged with their private courts, armed attendants and luxuries like the first bicycles, motorcycles, cars and zinc-roofed houses seen in the area.” (The National Commission for Museums and Monuments 1986: 161)

governance goes contrary to the concept of social contract, which Western political thought considers as the basis and legitimation of government. That the people must accept these authority figures implied a type of disfranchisement.<sup>9</sup> Due to the manner of their selection, these public officers themselves never felt any loyalty or responsibility to their own people. As a consequence, authority in the community began to move away from working for the well being of the people to working for the interest of the colonial master – a culture, which has largely remained up till date both in the African ecclesiastical circles and the socio-politics. This has created two extremes in the exercise of public office in present African societies. One extreme is what Ali Mazrui (1986: 16) describes as privatisation of the public service, where there scarcely exists any demarcation between the office and the office holder.<sup>10</sup> The other extreme is a culture of non-commitment to the common good, where public affairs mean nobody's affair.

Professor Adiele Afigbo made an extensive study on the institution of Warrant Chiefs. One of the points he noted was the extensive corruption, extortion and oppression, which caught up with nearly all the Warrant Chiefs (Afigbo 1966: 228; see also Afigbo 1972 and 1981: 316). The Warrant Chiefs grew rich illicitly. They took undue advantage of the authorities bestowed upon them by the colonisers and the linguistic barriers between the people and the colonisers. Justice in the case of settling disputes became a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. They imprisoned innocent people and made some others to forfeit their properties, without any just cause (Isichei 1976: 145). With much of the money, which they acquired through these means, they built 'zinc houses', storey buildings, which placed them high above the entire community. Public office began to acquire the image of amassing wealth at the disadvantage of the community. Above all, since education, which could guarantee one a good position in the new order could only be acquired if one is able to pay the required fees, these Warrant Chiefs were among the few who could afford it. Isichei (1976: 149) remarked that "of the first Igbos who studied abroad and fully mastered the skills of the Western world, a notable proportion were the sons or close relatives of Warrant Chiefs."

Apart from the *modus operandi* of the Warrant Chiefs, the haphazard and arbitrary style of their selection helped to make the whole system as detestable as

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<sup>9</sup> Isichei describes a scene when the natives went to the colonial officer to protest against some issues, which were unpleasant to them. The colonial officer reminded them that the first gun-boat or the first British District Commissioner did not arrive their locality on their invitation. Simply put that they were not there to do their bidding. (See Isichei 1976: 152). Professor Adiele Afigbo recorded the story of a British colonial officer – Sir Ralph Moor – who told the natives that they must understand that the government is their master and exists to control them irrespective of their feelings (Afigbo 1981: 285). Unfortunately, both the native people who worked in the colonial administration and the post-colonial administration in many parts of Africa largely grounded their outlook and activities on this conception that government has a business independent of the people and that it ought not do the people's bidding. This feature has remained till today.

<sup>10</sup> Mazrui distinguishes three types of privatisation of public service in Africa. They include anarchic, dynastic and ethnic privatisations (Mazrui 1986: 16).

it was despicable (Isichei 1976: 143). Their selection did not follow a particular order like that of seniority or integrity or general acclamation. Most often the colonisers imposed a candidate of their will, a person who would work for their interest. At times such people were social misfits. Isichei remarked that the British realised at a point that the Warrant Chiefs were both non-traditional and corrupt. The abuses and corruption associated with the Warrant Chiefs formed one of the backgrounds to the Women's war of 1929<sup>11</sup> in Eastern Nigeria.

They were however reluctant either to change them or the system until they were forced to introduce some modifications (but not complete change of the system) due to the Women's war of 1929 (Isichei 1976: 145). One of the reasons adduced for this reluctance to change the Warrant Chiefs was because it served the interest of the colonisers. All their orders were being carried out. Given this situation therefore, the colonisers had no problem retaining the warrant Chiefs even if the people were being hurt by the system. This points to one of the greatest scandals of leadership, which has largely remained with Africans up till date.

## COURT CLERKS

Apart from the Warrant Chiefs, other officials of the colonial administration had the reputation of exploitation, abuses and extortions. Among these included the Court Clerks and Court Messengers. The Court Clerks had some advantages, which made them powerful and enabled them amass much wealth, at times in proportion or even in a greater degree in comparison to the Warrant Chiefs. One of these advantages stems from the fact that after the year 1914, the European officers no longer sat as the Court Presidents (Isichei 1976: 147). The educational edge, which the Court Clerks had over the other workers of the colonial administration, inevitably placed the onus of presiding over Court proceedings on the Court Clerks. The Clerks not only had the educational advantage, they also (through their close collaboration with the European District Officers) had the advantage of understanding the 'esoteric mysteries' of court procedures. They kept records of cases, court proceedings and eventual judgements (Isichei 1976: 147). As Court Clerks under the European District Officers, they could alter records of cases. Since the District officer and the local people did not understand the languages of each other, the Court Clerks equally acted as interpreters during Court proceedings and often manipulated information in this process to the advantage of those who had already bribed them. The Court Clerks knew the

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<sup>11</sup> Though the major resistance to colonial policies and practices in South Eastern Nigeria reached a crescendo in 1929, it was recorded that the first warning of the increasing dissatisfaction came in the Calabar market riot of April 1925. Ibibio and Efik women were protesting against the introduction of market toll fees. "They refused to pay, drove off the labourers building a fence around the Marina market, disrupted the activities at the Bush Market (*Urua Watt*), closed all European factories on the river and assaulted Europeans and the police" (The National Commission for Museums and Monuments 1986: 161).

depth of power at their disposal and they used it fully to their self-enrichment.<sup>12</sup> The local people were equally cognizant of this enormous power. Like the Warrant Chiefs, the Court Clerks “grew rich through corruption, through the use of prisoners’ labour, and through money lending. ‘Some of them own prestigious houses, and possess motor cars, in which they have been known to be driven up to the court.’ Frequently they were expatriates from Ghana and Sierra Leone, or natives of Onitsha or of the coastal areas, so they were not restrained by the fear of public opinion, in an area where they were strangers.” (Isichei 1976: 147).

## COURT MESSENGERS (*KOTI-MA*) AS FOREBEARS OF THE POLICE FORCE

The Court Messengers like other workers in the colonial administration, utilised the advantages of their work for self-enrichment. The Court Messengers had the duty of serving summonses. In collaboration with the Court Clerks, they “built up the same grim record of exploitation and corruption” (Isichei 1976: 147). The Police Force stands in many aspects as the contemporary representation of the Court Messengers (rendered locally in Igbo as *Koti-ma*) in the Nigerian polity. One of the points of relationship is the persistence of the same features of extortions, bribery and exploitation.

What remains striking in the practice of corruption, intimidation and extortions associated with the Police Force in many African countries is the openness with which these acts are carried out. The Police have often turned “every case to an opportunity to make money. Prisoners and accused people were allowed to escape after arranging suitable payments” (Falola 1998: 141). Operators of commercial vehicles are among the most vulnerable to the police extortion and brutality. These commercial vehicle operators are meant to pay regular bribes (popularly today called ‘*rojar*’) to avoid checks and harassments at police checkpoints. The refusal to pay these bribes has always been followed by very grave consequences. Some of these include physical assault, cooked-up charges or even death (Falola 1998: 141). The list of motor drivers or passengers who have been mercilessly beaten up by the police or who have even been shot at police check-points due to their refusal to give ‘*rojar*’ or daring to question its legitimacy, are uncountable in Nigeria.

## A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC SERVICE

The colonial administrative practice as described above helped to create a novel thinking about authority and public service in Africa, which has largely remained

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<sup>12</sup> The drama series, which used to play on radios and televisions in former Imo and Anambra states (of Nigeria) titled “*Icheoku*” satirised the corruption and manipulation of information in the colonial courts by the Court Clerk (dramatised by Lomaji Ugorji).

till date. In the first place, it created the idea that authority need not come from the people, rather it is bestowed on someone anointed from above – a complete reversal of the popular saying, ‘power belongs to the people’. This can help to explain the laughable electoral processes in different African countries, where the will of the people are glaringly subverted.<sup>13</sup> The manner in which the Warrant Chiefs and other local officials in the colonial administration amassed huge wealth created the impression that public office is an avenue to get rich quick, secure a stable income, and offer some level of prestige (Falola 1998: 147). This outlook of public office re-echoed in a statement credited to a former indigenous administrator of East Central State, Nigeria – Mr. Ukpabi Asika who claimed that public office is ‘*onye ube ruru ya rachaa*’ – an advantage, which must be utilised to the fullest by anyone who is able to get it. This perception inspired another more general feeling that ‘*onye riri elu Orji, kpata nku ya; maka na anaghi ari elu Orji ugboro abuo*’ – if anyone manages to climb an Iroko tree, he must endeavour to gather enough logs from it; because it is rare to climb an Iroko tree twice in one’s lifetime. Climbing an Iroko tree is used in this sense to qualify the ability to hold a public or exalted office. The brutality and arrogance of power, which accompanied the colonial administration in many regions helped to fashion a political culture in Africa today, which links brutality and arrogance of power with the exercise of public office.<sup>14</sup> Nelson Mandela’s narration of meeting

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<sup>13</sup> One notices how the band of elites who succeeded the colonial masters constituted themselves into uncontrollable monsters, deciding who gets what, who rules, who is to be fired and who ought not to rule – all these in utter disregard to the will of the people. In Nigeria for instance, one reads about the ‘Kaduna mafia’, which has bestridden and colonised the Nigerian politics since independence. There is also the ‘Lantang mafia’, which controlled the Nigerian military till the failed coup attempt of 1976 loosened their grip of the army. Another mafia, which is a miss-mash of retired military generals and politicians is maturing around General Babangida (a former military head of state) and is gaining control of the country’s politics. Other little mafia groups aimed at controlling the politics of their various regions and localities (these smaller mafia groups are often extension of the nationally dominant mafia group at the time) are also existent in the various parts of the country.

<sup>14</sup> Chinua Achebe wrote on the story of Abame (pseudonym), which was razed down for resisting the British (Achebe 1994: 175). The pseudonym, which Achebe used was only a signification of the historical facts, which other history books presented clearly. Isichei described how the Royal Niger Company (the British colonising cum trade apparatus) blockaded the people of Onitsha for refusing to co-operate with its policy of monopoly, how it fought a fierce war with the people of Obosi and Aguleri respectively and destroyed half of Asaba. Other illustrations include the story of the people of Umukoroshe, near Port Harcourt (today called Rumukoroshe for political reasons), whose houses were all burned down, their village devastated and their palm and plantain trees, destroyed; and the story of the people of Ngor (near Owerri) who chased away the District Commissioner and were severely punished by the British. “Like so many other resisters, they lost their homes, their food supplies, and their livelihood, for their trees were cut down, their houses razed and their farms destroyed.” (Isichei 1976: 119–120, 126 & 129). This method of administration by intimidation and ruthless punishment to the so-called dissidents has remained till date in the political drama of many African states. One notices the vehemence with which Robert Mugabe is repressing his opponents in Zimbabwe. In Nigeria, the story of the destruction of personal properties and communities of perceived enemies to the government is common. During the Biafra war (1967–70) federal forces called the people of Asaba together in a ‘stadium’ and

procedures in Thembuland underscores that African traditional politics and administration had different orientations than brutality, intimidations and arrogance of power.<sup>15</sup>

The above account of the operation of the colonial administration in South Eastern Nigeria reflects an example of how the colonial enterprise helped to create a political culture, which has remained with Africa till date. It also underscores “how an emerging elite exploited available opportunities for selfish advantage” thus sowing the seed of the monster of corruption, which has become one of the greatest plagues to many post-independent African states (Falola 1998: 137). The effect of this political re-engineering both on the political landscape and on the social psyche underscores the fact that “any system rapidly creates its own mores, which become difficult for the individual to renounce” (Isichei 1976: 149). For instance during the era of the corrupt Warrant Chiefs who amassed wealth illicitly, “an honest Chief would be stigmatised by his relatives and townsmen as a fool, a blameworthy neglecter of his and their interests” (Isichei 1976: 149). Honest public officers who remain modest or poor after their service are made objects of laughter in comparison to their corruptly rich colleagues who are revered. Hence the culture of looting public treasury has become tacitly canonised in many African countries, a term, which has received the quasi-official name in Nigeria as ‘sharing the national cake’.

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massacred as many as their bullets could touch. In 1976, the military government of Olusegun Obasanjo ordered the destruction of the musical theatre and personal estate of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, a musician, who used his music to criticise the excesses of government. In 1976 also the military government of Olusegun Obasanjo ordered soldiers to shoot students, who were demonstrating against the government. Many students lost their lives. Between 1993 and 1999, the oil producing area of Ogoni was faced with terrible and incessant military actions for daring to question the oil exploration in their locality. In 2000, the civilian government of Olusegun Obasanjo ordered soldiers to raze down the village of Odi in the Niger Delta area. In 2000–2001, the town of Okigwe and the personal properties of Ralph Uwazuruike were attacked on several occasions for raising discussion on the issue of Biafra. In 2001 the area of Zaki-Biam in the Middle Belt of Nigeria was razed and many of its people massacred on the orders of the federal government.

<sup>15</sup> “At first, I was astonished by the vehemence – and candour – with which people criticized the regent. He was not above criticism – in fact, he was often the principal target of it. But no matter how serious the charge, the regent simply listened, not defending himself, showing no emotion at all. The meetings would continue until some kind of consensus was reached. They ended in unanimity or not at all. Unanimity, however, might be an agreement to disagree, to wait for a more propitious time to propose a solution. Democracy meant all men were to be heard, and a decision was taken as a people. Majority rule was a foreign notion. A minority was not to be crushed by a majority. Only at the end of the meeting, as the sun was setting, would the regent speak. His purpose was to sum up what had been said and form some consensus among the diverse opinions. But no conclusion was forced on people who disagreed. If no agreement could be reached, another meeting would be held.” (Mandela 2004: 25)

## THE ELUSIVE FIGHTS AGAINST CORRUPTION

The structure of public administration introduced by colonialism created the opportunities that began to nurture corruption from the very onset. Since the colonial government was based on uneven landscapes, it produced African states based on the same lopsided visions of governance. However different attempts were made to address corruption. “In June 1950, a few students of the King’s College, Lagos, a high school, formed a club known as the league of Bribe Scorners, with the objective never to give or receive bribes for the rest of their lives” (Falola 1998: 154). When one considers the plausible act of these few students in the 1950’s to scorn bribes, on the one hand and on the other, think about public service in Nigeria today, which has almost become synonymous with bribery and corruption then the inevitable question would be, what became of such efforts as recounted above in the fight against corruption. Or if one considers that a good number of the students of the King’s College, Lagos during the 1950’s were among the public officers and politicians in 1966 when Major Nzeogwu staged his coup on the ground that public service was swimming in corruption and that politicians/public servants were receiving 10% kick-backs for all awarded contracts, then we cannot but pause and ask questions on what became of the efforts of the students who formed the league of Bribe Scorners in June 1950.

Another example of the attempt to fight corruption is seen in the coup led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu in 1966. He announced that “their intention was to rid the country of irresponsible politicians, incompetent and corrupt bureaucrats, restore respectability and accountability to the Nigerian public service” (Mbaku 1998: 48). After about eight years stay in power as military head of state in Nigeria, General Gowon said that his continuing hold to power was to eradicate corruption in the country. Brigadier Sani Abacha (who announced the military take over on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1983) claimed that the military “was compelled to seize power from the Shagari government to save Nigeria from rampant corruption, ineptitude and profligacy that had characterised both the federal and state governments of the country” (Agbese 1998: ix). The Buhari-Idiagbon administration declared the War Against Indiscipline (WAI). The Abacha administration launched the War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC). President Olusegun Obasanjo dedicated a big part of his inauguration speech on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1999 to talk about the fight against corruption and the beneficiaries of corruption, which his administration intended to embark upon. The coup of Ft. Lt. Jerry Rawlings in Ghana was also justified on the ground of cleaning up corruption. Nevertheless, it does not seem that much success has ever been recorded in any of these attempts to fight corruption in African public service.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The late Lagos-based musician, Fela Anikulapo Kuti described the series of administration changes in different African countries and their claims to fight corruption as “*soldier go, soldier come*”. In the case of Nigeria specifically, he described it as “*army arrangement*”. These terms were used by him simply to convey that the fights against corruption in Africa have been huge jokes or cosmetic projects, aimed to deceive the people and designed to fail by the governments.

Today corruption has become a canker worm, which has eaten so deep into the fabrics of many African societies. It has reduced the art of political governance to a laughable enterprise – making it lose the confidence of its people and making it difficult to function effectively. It has led to what J. M. Ela (1996: 132) describes as the several islands of wealth in the seas and oceans of poverty (Ela 1996: 132). It has almost blurred the distinction between ‘the office and the office holder’.<sup>17</sup> It has offered the reason for the countless military incursions into African politics since the 1950’s. Various governments have launched crusades against corruption in public life. However most of these crusades are either lip service or specifically targeted at the perceived enemies of the government.<sup>18</sup> In all therefore, the enigma remains that the practice of corruption assumes hydra-headed and uncontrollable dimensions with each passing day.

### THE WAY FORWARD: FROM *ORU BEKEE (OYIBO)* TO *ORU OHA*<sup>19</sup>

Public service is generally understood in Igbo communities as *oru bekee (oyibo)*. This description dates to the beginning of the colonial enterprise. Public service was seen as working for the European colonial master. The agenda of governance was set by him and for his advantage. Public service had little reference to the well being of the governed. Decision making process largely excluded them. The local communities became important when it comes to issues of collecting taxes and other contributions aimed at the well being of the colonial officers and their

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<sup>17</sup> Worthy of note here is the case of Barkin Zuwo (the governor of old Kano state Nigeria between October and December 1983). After the military coup of December 1983, the soldiers who came to search the government house discovered over three million Naria cash in Barkin Zuwo’s official residence. When he was interrogated concerning the money, he accepted that the money belonged to the government but was amazed why government money should not be kept in the government house since he was the highest executive officer of the state government. (Agbese 1998: x). A similar instance is that of Mobutu Sese Seko who argued that “what belongs to the country belongs to the ruler but what belongs to the ruler doesn’t belong to the country. In 1982 Mobutu admitted that he had assets worth than \$4 billion.” (See Ibid., p. xx). The instances of Barkin Zuwo and Mobutu are simply tips of the iceberg in the general practice of governance in many parts of Africa – where government (public) officials “had commingled their personal bank accounts with government bank accounts”, and single-handedly donating “large sums of money on behalf of governments to people and organisations of their choice.” (See Ibid., p. xii).

<sup>18</sup> Nantang Jua reports that Paul Biya’s slogan of ‘rigour and moralisation’, which was aimed at eradicating corruption, was rather diverted to target only the barons from the Ahmadu Ahidjo’s regime (see Jua 1998: 99–100). While the War Against Indiscipline of the Buhari administration and the War Against Indiscipline and Corruption of the Abacha administration have all been criticised as being merely cosmetic, the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other related Offences Commission (ICPC) of the Obasanjo civilian administration is largely interpreted as an apparatus of intimidating the perceived enemies of the executive arm of the government.

<sup>19</sup> The Igbo expression *oru bekee* (or *oyibo*) means the whiteman’s work. The expression *oru oha* means community work.

homeland. Any advantage that came (like roads, railways, postal and telegraphic services, etc.) were by-products of the colonial masters' establishment of the structures of governance or transportation of commodities to their homeland. The indigenous people who worked in the colonial offices defined their activities from this perspective of raping the environment in which they worked.<sup>20</sup>

Since the colonialists introduced the paying of taxes, which was only made possible by the possession of the white man's currency, people went either to work or trade with the white man in order to earn money to pay taxes (to avoid going to jail) and to be able to participate in the changing economic culture, which was being dictated by the possession of European money. I. Nzimiro (1971: 168) remarks that the movement from the villages to the urban areas was a reaction to the new monetary stimuli provided by trade with the Europeans and also working for them.<sup>21</sup> Consequently one can argue that the initial impetus for public service was to make money.<sup>22</sup> When making money is a primary motive for an activity

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<sup>20</sup> Stories of massive looting of public treasuries by public officers have marked the political histories of many African countries. Nigeria is one example. Apart from the stories of embezzlement, corrupt enrichment and illegal transference of money abroad by public officers in the yesteryears, a Nigerian newspaper publication (*PUNCH* – internet version) of 24<sup>th</sup> July 2004 indicates that this process is still an on-going process. This newspaper publication presents the 2004 report from the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, which indicates that Nigerian public officers have stashed about \$107b abroad against the contrast picture that Nigerians and other countries in sub Saharan Africa are poorer than they were twenty years ago. This report “singled out Nigeria as the Nation with the worst case of capital flight in the region, with more than \$100 billion private wealth kept away abroad, representing an estimated 70 percent of the nation's total private wealth.” The same Nigerian newspaper (*PUNCH* – internet version) of Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2004 also reports that the “suspended Plateau State Governor, Chief Joshua Chibi Dariye, was arrested on Thursday in London for alleged money laundering offences. A Team of British detectives which arrested him, found £80,000 at his London residence. A source told our correspondent that a whopping £2 million was later traced in his accounts in London banks. ... Shortly after his suspension in May, the suspended governor was reportedly arrested in May and detained for one week in London after an unnamed man allegedly helped him lodge £1.3 million in an account in a British bank.” These stories are examples out of many others. These stories indicate the culture of raping public treasuries and the environment, which is characteristic of Nigerian and African public service.

<sup>21</sup> Ali Mazrui differentiates between the growth of European and African urban centres. “In the history of the Western world the growth of cities occurred partly in response to fundamental changes in production. Urbanisation followed in the wake of either an agrarian transformation or an industrial revolution. But in the history of Africa urbanisation has been under way without accompanying growth of productive capacity. In some African countries there is indeed a kind of revolution – but it is a revolution in urbanisation rather than in industrialisation, a revolution in expanding numbers of people squeezed into limited space, rather than a transformation in method and skill of economic output.” (Mazrui 1986: 15)

<sup>22</sup> When making money or increase of wealth is the point of departure of an activity, it produces different effects compared to when public happiness is the point of departure. These two emphases are respectively represented in the thoughts of the Scottish thinker Adam Smith and the Italian economist Antonio Genovesi. Smith taught that the essence of economic activities consists in the increase of wealth. Genovesi taught that the centre of economic activities ought to consist of public happiness. Adam Smith and Antonio Genovesi both lived in the eighteenth century. However the difference between their thoughts is that while the emphasis on the increase of wealth

then its direct consequence is exploitation of other people and every available opportunity in order to achieve it.

This initial climate under which public service developed has continued to shape its vision and the operations of government and public agencies. Many decades after official colonisation ended in Nigeria and many African countries, some of the basic orientations and statutes of governments and public agencies are still extensions of colonial visions and edicts.<sup>23</sup> One of the reasons for this is that those who fought for independence were more interested in the departure of the colonialists than on constructing a better vision of society and governance, which would gather the pieces after the end of official colonialism. The consequence is that after political independence, the European was no longer (officially) in charge of the government but his ideas and his lopsided administrative structure remained and was in fact embraced by the indigenous successors – who have often been described as white men in black skins, almost synonymous with the biblical image of new wine in old wine skins. This inability to construct a social vision to succeed colonialism led to the many bloody conflicts, which greeted some African countries shortly after political independence and also accounts for other myriads of social and political problems, which currently persist in these countries.

Public service has remained *ọru bekee* many decades after political independence. *Ọru bekee* is not just an issue of vocabulary but an issue of the structure, visions and operations of public service in general (which manifests the same patterns of colonial governance as, arrogance of power, exploitation, being above the people, deriving from outside the community, aiming to satisfy other forces to the disadvantage of the local environment, paying little attention to local challenges of the people, being above local control, feeling little or no commitment of accountability to the immediate environment and above all, working just to make money). The same system that raised and nurtured the corruption of the Warrant Chiefs, court clerks and court messengers is still the same system that has survived till date and continues to dictate our public life. It is the beneficiaries of this system or the descendants of these beneficiaries, who still control power.

Confronting this system is a Herculean task. I cannot pretend to have a magic wand to face it. Nevertheless, I think that a better social vision is necessary in order to start a realistic dialogue with socio-political corruption. A better social vision could come about through re-defining the essence and visions of public service. Hence I use the word *ọru ọha* to designate a fundamental change (not simply in nomenclature) but in the structure, operations and dispositions of public

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excludes other people, public happiness involves other people. Smith's thought gave birth to capitalism and the economic liberalism. Genovesi's thought has given rise to what is described today as 'civil economy'. (See Bruni 2000: 242; See also Zamagni 2000: 165)

<sup>23</sup> The Lagos lawyer (who led the National Conscience Party during the 2003 general elections) Gani Fawehinmi is one public figure in Nigeria who has continued to campaign very seriously on the need to abrogate the many colonial edicts and orientations, which are still the bedrocks of government and public service in Nigeria.

service. This will require a re-appropriation of the vision of Igbo traditional socio-political organisation where public justice, peace and administration involve each and every member of the community. While those who work in public service must earn their living through their work, the outlook and orientations of this work must be re-arranged so that stewardship takes precedence over making money. Public service ought to be re-structured as community service. A good example is the parallel between the activities of Town Unions or village meetings and local governments. Many Town Unions (in the Igbo speaking parts of Nigeria) have virtually provided security, portable water, electricity, schools and hospitals in their localities while the local governments only collect taxes and allocations of money from the federal government. These Town Unions are able to achieve these (in contra-distinction to the local governments) because most of the people trust these unions and see them as their own. These town or village organisations in Igbo communities, which evoke much commitment is a representation of what I refer to as *ọrụ ọha*. The officials of these unions are not above the community. The community questions them or removes them when they grow suspicious of their activities. The community can call them to order at any time or demand from them accounts of their stewardship.

When agenda is set from the grassroots rather than being imposed from above, it leads to higher success and commitment. A dialogue with socio-political corruption could realistically begin when there are adequate checks and balances within the community, and when public officers feel that their legitimacy is derived from the community rather than being anointed by a godfather or cabal. But the ability of the people to set the agenda of governance and institute the adequate checks and balances presupposes that they are in control of the apparatus of government. Their ability to choose their public officers (and in turn demand accountability from them) presupposes that the (s)election processes are fair. All these entail that the people must struggle to get back the power, which colonialism took away from them. This is the only way to make public service *ọrụ ọha*.

## CONCLUSION

Almost all successive governments have embarked on some type of fight against corruption. These fights often include enactment of decrees and making public statements against corruption and at times some selective justice (either against some who run out of luck or the perceived enemies of the governments). Many of these efforts spring from the assumption that there are particular individuals who are corrupt who must be fished out and punished in order to clean up the system and make it corrupt free. This premise seems to ignore the fact that though individual persons are unique, free and autonomous, they are above all, products of values and trends of a particular age. They act, reason and live within structures of social interaction. These social structures are constantly being redesigned, which ultimately influences personal actions, decisions and preferences.

The structures of society breed or diminish corruption. The structures of government in Nigeria and in many other African countries have created the open field for bold and unchallenged corrupt practices involving both indigenous and foreign players. The concentration on 'corrupt persons or groups of persons' in the fights against corruption rather than re-thinking the structures of society and governance (as the major stimuli for corruption) neglects a major issue and makes any fight against corruption a mere cosmetic exercise. The structures of governance and public service create corruption, corruption creates poverty and frustration, poverty and frustration multiply corruption. Governments prefer not to pay much attention to the issues that require structural changes because it may lead to their losing some of their privileges. It may also mean that they simply pay lip service to the fight against corruption or that they are its greatest beneficiaries (since they may owe their wealth and authority through the same corrupt system).

Any meaningful confrontation with socio-political corruption in African public life can only begin with a fundamental change in the structures of society and governance.

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**PUNCH** – Nigerian Newspaper, internet version

24<sup>th</sup> July, 2004.

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