

# Traditional Method of Checking Corruption in the Pre-Colonial Igbo Society

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## INTRODUCTION

*Corruption is the process or condition of being morally evil, involving bribery and dishonesty; it is to change from the original, usually for the worse<sup>1</sup>.*

Corruption is possibly as old as the human society. Infact. It can be traced to the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. According to this story these first man and woman while in the garden fell to temptation and thus became evil in nature.<sup>2</sup> This affirms that corruption is perhaps inherent in human beings.

A psychologist, J.T. U Nwala has observed that the level of corruption or moral values of any society is a function of the level and character of its social development<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, the social development of a society very much depends on the occupational skills and the way and manner the society produces, distributes and exchanges its wealth<sup>4</sup>. These basic components of any economy are indeed the fertile grounds for corrupt practices. For instance the cancerous disease nicknamed corruption can be found among all the religions of the world, government officials, private and public organizations, politicians, businessmen and academics. A corrupt trader would sell inferior items in place of superior ones and pocket the money. A corrupt contractor would supply inferior items to companies and governments as superior items and claim the money. In the academic circle, corruption include plagiarism, sale of hand-outs to students, examination leakage, fake result, corrupt marking and collection of money from students for favour (extortion). Even corrupt farmers would devise ways of confiscating people's land for farming without adequate compensation. The list is inexhaustible. These vices take place in our society today because of a relatively high level of social development without a corresponding level of moral backing in the society.

In this essay the pre-colonial Igbo society is the focus. Efforts will be made to discuss the nature of corrupt practices prevalent at the time and the traditional method of checking or controlling the social vices. To do this, the pre-colonial Igbo society has been split into two-the period before the Trans-Atlantic trade and the period of Trans-Atlantic trade between 1600 and 1900. This split into two broad eras will enable us perceive and understand the nature of corruption at these periods, how they were controlled as well as the obstacles involved in the control of the social monster.

## PRE-TRANS-ATLANTIC TRADE ERA

In the pre-colonial Igbo society the basic socio-political unit was the village. At the same time the highest economic unit was the village. Components of the village economy were agriculture, local industry and trade<sup>5</sup>. In terms of worship the Igbo society was polytheistic with deities such as *Ala (Earth deity)*, *Anyanwu (sun god)*, *Igwe (sky god)*, *Ibini-ukpabi (god of Arochukwu)*, and a number of river deities. In addition to these were uncountable kindred deities and personal guardian deities. These acted as intermediaries between the people or an individual person and God, the Supreme Being. The society was incredibly religious and thus every facet of the people's life was God centered. People feared the wrath of God or gods should they breach any aspect of the people's culture which were interwoven with the taboos of the deities. The low or zero level of corruption in the society of our discussion is better perceived and understood in the course of studying the operations of major economic structures in the pre-colonial Igbo society before the Trans-Atlantic trade. These included agriculture, (land tenure system and yam crop cultivated), non-agricultural production and trade. In these we find the inbuilt cultural checks, low level of social development, size of business and low ambition that guaranteed almost a corruption free society at the time as can be gathered from the subsequent discussions.

## AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is said to be the mainstay of the Igbo economy. Even Olaudah Equiano's account revealed this when he said "Agriculture is our Chief employment; and everyone even the children and women are engaged in it"<sup>7</sup>. Agriculture involved the use of land to produce crops. Igboland has a very high population density<sup>8</sup>. What this means is that even at that early period, there was land scarcity especially fertile land for farming. Scarcity of land could lead to land disputes, resulting to situations people or communities encroached on the other people's land or even situations people embarked on outright seizure of a piece of land belonging to someone else. But this danger was averted by the existing cultural control measures as contained in the land tenure system of the Igbo. Land in Igboland was communally owned. There was nothing like no man's land. Farming at the time

was purely a subsistence scale, and its organization was communally done through a centrally monitored farming calendar which specified the months each farming activity took place<sup>10</sup>.

At the beginning of each farming season, a particular village land meant for farming that particular year was partitioned among component lineages and kindreds of the village community. Heads of the respective lineages and kindreds in turn made available parcels of land to all adult males of their respective villages for farming. No one was deprived of land for farming, for this was a birth right<sup>11</sup>. Notwithstanding this arrangement, there was a provision in the land culture for those wealthy farmers who needed more lands to secure them from those who had excess land they required for their farming. Poor farmers who acquired land when it was shared might want to exchange the surplus land with stacks of yam from those who needed the land. This made for a symbiosis among people of these wants or needs. Apart from poor farmers who were eager to exchange their land with yams from wealthy farmers, there were those who would not bother the exchange. Such people might not be prepared to expand their farm, or might just be motivated by spirit of generosity. They thus leased out their surplus lands to whoever they felt like helping with land. However, whether the leaser demanded for land kolanut or not, the lessee must offer that to the leaser as the culture demanded that. This could be offered before or after the farming season. Land kolanut involved a number of yam tubers ranging from four to eight in number, and a keg of palm wine as a mark of appreciation to the leaser. It was also a way of acknowledging the leaser as the true landlord.

From the above tradition, the question of anyone seizing another persons land was almost unthinkable, but not completely ruled out. Some corrupt minded lessees after farming on a land for some years laid claim over the land. This occurred from time to time, but in each case the truth and justice were revealed in the end. The community always intervened in the matter since the land was primarily its property. Where there was confusion or stalemate in the course of handling the land dispute by the community, either of the parties involved in the dispute would be required to take an oath to prove his ownership. If after one year of the oath taking, the oath taker survived and did not die, the land automatically belonged to him. But if he died his opponent would freely claim ownership of the land. Parties involved in the land dispute could also consult an oracle which after divination by the chief priest would reveal the owner of the land.

Apart from the administration of oaths and consultation of oracle by parties to land dispute, the Igbo people believed that the earth deity (Ala) to whom every land, every crop planted on it, and every dead ancestor were dedicated to, would always rise at any time in defense of the oppressed or any form of corrupt practice on the land. This meant that the wrongful claimant of the land might be struck with various forms of calamities. Sometimes, members of his family were the victims; sometimes the calamities would befall the entire village. The gravity of the wrath would necessitate a consultation of an oracle to determine the cause of such calamity. When the cause was ascertained the erring member of the village was directed to immediately hands-off his claim over the land. In addition, he was compelled to perform propitiatory rites to appease the earth goddess. The directive had always been religiously carried out, as the deity never hesitated to strike dead anyone who dared her. In some extreme cases relations of the deceased were also struck dead in very despicable manner if they were hesitant in performing propitiatory rites<sup>12</sup>. With such structural checks in the tradition and culture of the pre-colonial Igbo society, incidence of land seizure by unscrupulous land usurpers were checked.

#### **YAM THEFT AND METHOD OF CHECKING IT**

We have already noted that agriculture was the mainstay of the Igbo economy. Among the agricultural crops, yam was both the dominant and king crop among the Igbo. The popularity of yam as a staple food had to do with the value of the crop as a major source of energy needed by the people for facing such hazardous tasks as hunting, farming, warfare and long distance trek<sup>13</sup>. It has been suggested too that the Igbo adopted yam as a staple food mainly as a result of the mystic near religious symbolism of the culture<sup>14</sup>.

Yam crop in Igbo agriculture is of great antiquity dating to about 3,000 years ago<sup>15</sup>. Out of about 600 species of yam, two are identifiable with the Igbo. They included *dioscorea cayenensis* and *dioscorea rotundata*<sup>16</sup>. Yam as noted above was king crop; it was a status symbol. Farming calendar as well as the entire gamut of the Igbo agricultural system in the pre-colonial Igboland were yam based and yam centered. The socio-economic value of yam as a source of pre-eminence and popularity were a source of temptation for people to indulge in one form of dishonest or corrupt practice or the other. People indulged in yam theft from the farms and from the yam barns. But this unhealthy and, dishonest practice was checked by the peoples yam culture. By this culture, yam as well as its method of cultivation were insulated with taboos against certain unwholesome practices and social values discussed below.

#### **TABOOS ASSOCIATED WITH YAM**

The primacy of yam among the Igbo found expressions in the mystical qualities and values as expressed in the taboos associated with yam. Yam itself was under taboo. Its spirit force-*Ahajioku* or *Ifejioku* prescribed a labyrinth of taboos around the crop<sup>17</sup>. It was likely that the taboos merely evolved from the Igbo socio-cultural

attitudes and perceptions towards yam<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, it was from the mystical reputations ascribed to yam crop that other taboos around it were derived<sup>19</sup>. For instance it was accorded human personality, among the Igbo. It was referred to as Amadi or Amadu (meaning human)<sup>20</sup>. Throwing of yam from one location to the other was not permissible by the taboo. This was viewed as a mark of disrespect for the yam crop and its spirit force, *Ahiajioku*. Any offender performed propitiatory rites to appease the spirit force<sup>21</sup>.

Also, yam was not subject to theft. An offender faced the wrath of the spirit force. Whether the thief was caught or not by anyone, the spirit force fished him out, inflicting injuries on him and members of his family in a bid to enforce open confession and performance of prescribed propitiatory rites to appease the spirit force. Hesitation by the thief to perform the rites could lead to disasters on him in some cases leading to despicable death of the thief and members of his family. G.T. Basden has noted that yam stealing among the Igbo was punishable by death. According to him whether the stolen yam was freshly planted or the mature root, death penalty was still applied to the culprit<sup>22</sup>.

It is perhaps necessary to point out here that the pre-colonial Igbo society made provision for the poor and needy in its yam culture. According to this culture, a poor man could get into any farm, dig up yam which he cooked or roasted for his meal. But he must not take away any yam tuber from the farm to his house. The culture also demanded that the man or woman in question should embark on weeding or yam staking or any kind of work on the farm he was feeding from while waiting for the yam to get done. By so doing, he truly demonstrated he was not just a parasite, or a thief, but rather a true citizen only driven into the farm by hunger. If he was met by the owner of the farm while carrying out this duty, the farm owner would be appreciative and could go further to give more tubers of yam to the poor visitor to the farm<sup>23</sup>.

## LABOUR

Labour referred to here is agricultural labour during the period of our study. The basic unit of labour was the family<sup>24</sup>. The family involved the man, his wife or wives, children, extended family members, and his slaves or domestic servants. There was also a mandatory service which a son in-law owed the father in-law. This was a necessary condition that had to be happily fulfilled in the process of marriage. Writing on this form of labour Ifemesia noted that:

*...the man(the suitor) also rendered bride services (Olu ogo) to his girl's father. This enabled the girl's family to observe in their turn, how far the man was likely to succeed as a husband...*<sup>25</sup>

In all these forms of labour, there was no incidence of corruption. Social rather than material interest was involved. Everyone saw the entire project as his and so it was indeed. The size of the farm determined how fat each member of the family fed. For the grown up members of the family ripe for marriage, the size of the yam barn would determine the stacks of yam they would inherit from their father. So, everyone shared the ambition and task of working hard to develop their farm and yam barn to enviable size.

## NON-AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

Apart from agriculture, the Igbo engaged in the production of non-agricultural goods based on her indigenous skills and technology. The local skills developed at the period included palm-wine tapping, sculpture, smithery, pottery and weaving among others. They were each organized on small scale basis with *laissez faire* system as its dominant policy. This meant that each skill was open for any interested member of the village community. However some of the skills such as palm-wine tapping, sculpture and smithery were exclusive reserve for male folk, while pottery and weaving were predominantly undertaken by the females<sup>26</sup>. The main aim of the enterprise was the satisfaction of the interests and tastes of the consumers. Defaulters in this task were never persecuted by anyone, nor were they subjected to any legal trial. But the trial and persecution the defaulter faced was instant decline in the demand for his goods. Once he was 'black-listed' as producer of bad products, people including his relations and friends would shy away from him, making no demand for his products. There was certainly no room for maximization of profit at the expense of people's interest and taste. The society was simply unsophisticated, and corruption was at its minimal level. According to the bible, "where you find jealousy and ambition, you find disharmony and wicked things of every kind being done"<sup>27</sup>.

Another factor that protected the skills and the practitioners from corruption was the taboo associated with each skill. Each of these skills had its origin rooted in one mystical or spiritual force or the other<sup>28</sup>. The spirit force handed out taboos on the operation of the skill, prescribing the dos and don'ts which all participants in any particular skill or profession must observe. Deviation from or violation of such taboos always attracted unpleasant consequences to the defaulter. So, for participants in the above skills they had to satisfy the interest of the society they served as well as the demand of the spirit force, the originator of the skill or trade they carried out. The codes of conduct of these skill operators ensured corruption free enterprise for all participants.

## LOCAL TRADE BEFORE 1600

Trade at this time in question was local trade. Items traded were food items, kitchen utensils, farming implements and local clothings. Means of exchange was by barter<sup>29</sup>. The village remained the basic economic unit with its local market. Inhabitants of any village were largely descendants of a common ancestor who shared common ancestral or kinship ties. Communal life was lived by the people who shared the ideology of being their brother's keeper in terms of providing for the poor and the needy among them. Stealing in any form was roundly detested and condemned and culprits were instantly killed, for the Igbo believe in the saying that, a rogue or thief was not part of population increase phenomenon of the people (*onye ohi abughi uba madu*). We have already noted that means of exchange was by barter' this took care of anyone presenting and exchanging bad item for sell in the market. Before exchange was made, both parties scrutinized their items, ascertained, and confirmed equivalent values of products involved before exchange was made. Even after the exchange, if it was later discovered by one of the parties involved that his or her own product had any kind of problem not noticed in the course of bargaining, he was free to trace the other person involved in the bargain to effect a change or replacement of the item concerned. The person involved was bound to comply to avert associated scandal in the village. In this way incidence of corrupt practices were checked at the local market level. Long distance trade did not develop this time of our study for some obvious reasons; absence of security, absence of means of exchange acceptable to contiguous and distance communities as well as absence of agents to prosecute and organize the trade were reasons why long distance trade did not develop before 1600. We now discuss the long distance trade as a product of European Trans- Atlantic trade.

## PERIOD OF TRANS-ATLANTIC TRADE

European Atlantic trade which shared in the seventeenth century had some revolutionary effects on the economy of the Igbo and their neighbours. The first segment of this trade was slave trade which lasted from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century when it was abolished, while the second segment, legitimate trade lasted from the nineteenth century up to the colonial period in the twentieth century. Prior to the period of the European Atlantic slave trade, slave trade was already in practice in the Igbo country and beyond; but it was on very low scale. Kings and wealthy farmers bought them for domestic and agricultural services. People sold into slavery at this time were people with abnormal body formations (those who first developed upper incisor teeth before the lower ones), lazy children and those with bad characters, among others. It is noteworthy here that slaves at the period of study were not subjected to harsh conditions as was the case in Europe and America. They only served their owners while alive and accompanied them to the life in the great beyond by being buried alive with their owner at his death<sup>30</sup>. This practice was not perceived as corruption; it was rather part of the people's culture. Subsequently this study will focus on the prosecution of oversea Atlantic trade; demonstrating how the Aro middlemen, their oracle and their agents introduced all forms of corruption in the pre-colonial Igbo society unabated.

## TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

From the seventeenth century onwards, significant changes crept into the economy of the pre-colonial Igbo society. Agriculture, though remained primitive, some exotic crops were introduced during the time. Trade on the other hand recorded appreciable changes, with a corresponding increase in the wave of crime or corrupt practices. The period under review witnessed a marked development of long distance trading across Igboland and beyond. This involved traders from different communities converging at designated popular market centers to trade on some commodities. In some cases market rings were formed resulting to traders moving from one popular market to the other within the Igbo eight-day week<sup>31</sup>, namely, *Eke-ukwu*, *Orie-ukwu*, *Afor-ukwu*, *Nkwo-ukwu*, *Eke-nta*, *Orie-nta*, *Afor-nta* and *Nkwo-nta*. Apart from the popular long distance trading, there were also trade fair centres in Igboland, where slaves were mainly displayed for sale. Among these trade fair centres were Uburu, Bende, Uzuakoli and Ibagwu Nsukka. Articles sold in the long distance trading included food stuffs from within the locality of a particular market, slaves, fire-arms, dried fish, beads, calm woods, hoes, pottery items, matchet, arrow and European made goods such as rum, gin, tobacco, hat and European made clothes among others.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike the local market, adulterated goods were sold to traders who lacked knowledge of the person they were buying goods from. Counterfeit or inferior goods were sold as superior ones; so was counterfeit monies used as genuine money for commercial transactions. In addition, trust monies were diverted to personal account by middleman and rendered false or no account to the European merchants<sup>33</sup>. An example of adulterated goods sold was palm oil which dubious traders mixed with grounded and liquefied red calm-wood to increase the quantity of the palm oil which was a highly demanded community.

The major prosecutors of the trade from the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century were the Aro traders who acted as middlemen between the European merchants at the coast and producers in the hinterland. They had their agents at virtually every community in Igboland and environs for their influence

spread up to the Ibibio, Efik, Ijaw, Tiv, Idoma and Igala nations.<sup>34</sup> They were at the root of the crimes committed, hiding under the cover of the *Ibini-Ukpabi* oracle which was feared and respected throughout the spheres of their influence. The people perceived the oracle as a god per excellence who had answers to their needs and problems, and to whom they owed reverence. On this Afigbo noted thus:

*The people in this area did not worship the Ibini-Ukpabi like they worshipped their local deities, but they saw it as a supernatural agency that helped them out of their many perplexities, resolved their difficult land and other disputes, helped their barren women to become fertile and enabled them to communicate with their prominent beloved dead. the Aro on their side saw it merely as another adjunct to their commercial activities, a convenient instrument for exploiting the superstition, stupidity and ignorance of their neighbours. They probably had no illusion about its being a mere hoax. There was a local Aro saying that "An Aro does not tell a fellow Aro that Ibini-Ukpabi asked of him?"<sup>35-</sup>*

So, for the Aro indigenes who understood the tricks in the oracular hoax of the Aro, they were never victims of the treachery, like other Igbo people and their non Aro neighbours.

#### **METHOD OF CHECKING CORRUPTION IN THE PERIOD OF STUDY**

Traditional method of checking and controlling corrupt practices in parts of Igboland remained intact even in the period between the seventeenth and nineteenth century. All corrupt and dishonest dealings pertaining to land, yam theft, sexual scandals, murder of any kind were handled within the framework of the people's culture. There was no exception to the rule, nor was there the issue of sacred-cow within the scope of the village community.

The situation however changed on issues involving the Aro middlemen and their agents scattered everywhere within and outside Igboland. In such cases caution was applied. The Aro were able to establish their hegemony in Igboland for the period from the seventeenth to nineteenth century. Thus, they controlled the economic, religious and social life of the entire Igboland in the period of our study. The Aro at the same time were at the root of the crimes and corrupt practices. The Aro and their agents indulged in various types of corrupt practices such as adulteration of goods to increase the quantity of goods they bought with drastic reduction in the value, and standard of the goods; diversion of trust money to private pocket; extortion of money from the childless, the poor, and the sick with the promise that the Aro oracle, *Ibini-Ukpabi* would reverse their situation for the better. In all encounter with the people, the Aro tried to apply tricks in order to cheat their customers.

Despite their corrupt practices, they remained 'untouchable' because of the power they controlled. They were indeed the sacred cows of the time; they were highly organized with their settlements, agents and oracular influence spread across the length and breadth of Igboland. They also had their army including some mercenaries recruited from neighboring warlike communities such as Ohafia, Abam and Edda. With this army the Aro exercised their power and influence to force other communities obey their orders and commands<sup>36</sup>. The same army was used to attack any community they wanted to raid for slaves. So it happened that there was no cure to the Aro menace or influence in Igbo land throughout the period of their ascendancy from the seventeenth to the beginning of the twentieth century when this hegemony collapse with the Aro conquest (1901-1902).

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study provides a road map in the search for origin, causes of corrupt practices and traditional methods of checking the social vices in the pre-colonial Igboland. Means of production, distribution and exchange, (means of livelihood) have been identified as sources of corrupt practices. The level of social development of the society to a large extent influenced the means of livelihood in promoting or checking corrupt practices. This was amply demonstrated in the varying degrees of corrupt practices in the period before the seventeenth century and the period between the seventeenth century and end of the nineteenth century Igboland. During the earlier period, the society was unsophisticated in terms of social development and trade. The village was the basic social, political and economic units. Like other human societies, the Igbo society at this time was not corruption free, but the level of corruption was relatively minimal. At the same time the society's communal life took care of all persons in virtually every sphere of life at that time. The culture made provisions to deal with defaulters as a way of checking the social vices.

But the advent of the oversea Atlantic trade revolutionized the society for worse. From the

seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century corrupt practices became entrenched in the socio-economic life of the pre-colonial Igbo society. The Aro middlemen involved in the Trans-Atlantic trade, their agents scattered all over Igboland and the overwhelming influence of their oracle, Ibini-Ukpabi were responsible for the socio-economic menace in the society. The social vices were carried out with impunity by these people. No effort or power to check them, for they were indeed in control of the entire society. They attacked and conquered any community that challenged them, using their army drawn from warlike societies of Abam, Ohafia and Edda. The inability of the Igbo at the time to evolve ways of curbing, checking or even controlling the cankerworm for a period of three centuries laid a dangerous foundation for corrupt life among the Igbo in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras.

One may argue that the Aro were conquered by the British between 1901-1902; but the Aro network of settlements across Igboland and beyond were not dismantled or affected by the Aro conquest. Even the so called Aro conquest mainly affected the oracle, *Ibini-Ukpabi*. So, the corrupt foundation laid by the Aro for over three centuries in Igboland coupled with the corrupt elites of the Aro extraction ushered in the colonial regime with all corrupt infestations. So, the Igbo society even in the post-colonial era is not yet out of the woods.

This study reveals the potency and effectiveness of the pre-colonial Igbo culture in checking corruption and other social vices. The Aro hegemony that came on board in the seventeenth century did not represent a true Igbo culture. It was purely exploitative in form and character, hence it was an embodiment of corruption, bereft of all moral values.

The colonial rule that succeeded it was no better. Its primary motive was founded on economic exploitation of the colony. Christianity, which was the religion of the colonizers was not preached in its true form. Rather it was preached to serve the best interest of the colonial officials, at the expense of the colonized. Thus the outstanding legacies the colonial officials bequeathed to the Nigerian elites were exploitative tendencies and corrupt practices. Thus, virtually all governments in Nigeria today, their agents, politicians, academics, judiciary and the military among others are haunted by these cancerous spirits of exploitation and corruption.

It is the view of the author that there is the need for a retreat back to the pre-colonial traditional cultures of the various peoples of Nigeria and utilize aspects of their cultures in fighting corruption and similar social vices in Nigeria or in the respective communities. Most of these vices take place today in urban areas. Rural communities to a large extent are immuned from ravages of these social vices because they are still conscious of the prevalent social norms and values of their respective communities. So, an entrenchment of some pre-colonial traditional institutions in the Nigerian constitution will be of great necessity in overcoming the challenges of corruption in the Nigerian society.

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10. A.E. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, Ibadan, University Press, 1980 Pp. 159-160.
11. *Ibid.*
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29. A.E. Afigbo, Pp. 153-155
30. C.C. Ifemesia Pp 18-25
31. The Igbo have an eight-day week. The eight day week is a full Igbo traditional week. The Igbo native calendar is normally based on the eight day week; and lunar months.
32. Afigbo, p. 168.
33. Trust money was the money given to middlemen by European traders to use in making purchases in the hinterland on behalf of the European merchants.
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