

Corruption as Discourse of Dis-Enfranchisement

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I. Introduction

This paper looks at corruption as a diversionary, amorphous and neo-colonial idea used by the West to denigrate African leaders and their achievements after uhuru. "Diversionary" because the term is used as a decoy to mislead African peoples and their leaders. Instead of striving for material democracy and well-being, the Africans are set on an anti-corruption crusade, pursuing mirages of transparency, accountability, good democratic governance as defined for all by the same West. "Good and free" Africans are expected to be seen and heard chasing or challenging their leaders into joining the anti-corruption crusade. The term corruption became fashionable with the decolonization of Africa in the 1960s and thus became synonymous with post-independence African leaders and governments. The term is amorphous in that it has no definite meaning and has different meanings to different people.

II. The Discourse

The discourse about corruption is dominated by the views of Western governments, their non-governmental organizations (ngos) and various activist groups like Transparency International Zimbabwe (TI-Z). These see corruption as endemic to and a feature of African leaders who allow patronage, cronyism, tribalism and nepotism – instead of merit – to be the determining factors in the choice of officials to run governance systems. These factors that constitute the corruption edifice are seen as the malaise explaining the failure of Africans and their governments to "run modern economies". This failure in turn feeds into another failure to break through the cycle of poverty. As such, therefore, African leaders are viewed from a negative perspective, seen always inclined to do harm to their respective communities.

The failures caused by the inherent corruption of African leaders are said to be the root cause of coup de tats in Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda and other independent African states. "Are said to be..." because recent evidence published by magazines like *New African* shows the coups had nothing to do with African nationals themselves seeing their leaders as corrupt. Rather, the coups had all to do with the interests of the Western powers like America, United Kingdom, Belgium or France. The coups, according to evidence, were staged by Western intelligence organizations on behalf of their respective governments.

In Zimbabwe, according to one, Chengu (2003:3) an anti-corruption conference in 2002 linked the country's economic hardships – the hoarding and food shortages, fuel crisis, foreign currency shortage and black market – to public sector corruption. The main features of the corruption were "bribes, kickbacks and scratching one's (sic) in return for favours". The West and its agents see the land reform program as having benefited Mugabe and his cronies and war veterans only. His government ministers and his relatives are said to be the new business elite that got that rich through corrupt means. The perception here is that any rich or successful black business person achieved that status through corruption.

The preferred anti-corruption activities of activists and other Western agents include Western-sponsored conferences and workshops to conscientise communities about state corruption, demonstrations against perceived corrupt government officials, disobedience to the "corrupt" state and its agents. National newspapers have published stories of some of these activists like vowing they cannot accept arrest or prosecution by a police force or a judiciary led by a "corrupt" commissioner-general and attorney-general respectively.

III. A Critique of the Western view of Corruption

By identifying, defining and characterizing cronyism, nepotism and tribalism as undesirable manifestations of African leaders' corruption, the West and its agents denigrate African wisdom as in the chiShona proverb "Chawawana idya nehama, mutorwa ane hanganwa". In Africa sharing with relatives is natural. Hence one would be considered strange and viewed with utmost suspicion if they chose to sup and feast with foreigners only without their own relatives. This is to say that considering one's relatives first say, in hiring workers for one's business is the norm. Preference of foreigners over one's own can be seen as a product of warped or

corrupted thinking. The result of following such corrupted thinking is to weaken the leader and the institutions they lead. A leader forced to work with or lead people he does not share much with can only be weaker than one leading a team of buddies. A system or institution run by warring tribes cannot be expected to be effective. The English equivalent is "charity begins at home" but it is not seen as promoting nepotism. In the final analysis, a black entrepreneur or executive that employs or promotes own relatives ahead of non-relatives even if the relatives qualify for the posts is likely to be investigated and even charged with nepotism, tribalism etc. But white people have always considered their tribesmen first – maybe in line with charity begins at home mantra. That has never been labeled as corruption or seen as reason for poor performance of their economies or businesses. In fact the recruits – who are usually paid far higher than their black trainers – are members of one's Old Boys' or Fraternity Club or college buddies.

The siNdebele *Izandla ziyagezana*, *imikhombo iyananana* or *Ikhoth' eyikhothayo* denote reciprocity. According to the corruption discourse as described above, where Africans are positively returning favours among themselves, this reciprocity falls under corruption.

Western-sponsored activists have been very active advocating and agitating for an anti-corruption commission, policies and measures. In Zimbabwe, the anti-corruption crusade has even found its way into the new constitution adopted in 2013. Corruption as an issue and measures to combat it constitute Sections 254 -7. The Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) and the National Prosecuting Authority are described as the two "institutions to combat corruption and crime" and the subject of Chapter 13 of the constitution. But even so, with the Commission in place, they still continue to complain of "rampant corruption" particularly in the public sector. It is as if the Anti-Corruption Commission itself is corrupt – that is unable to perform!

Responding to the question when exactly the ACC was going to be established and start working, a government official cautioned the questioner and delegates to the Business Conference at the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair (2013) that the ACC they were clamouring for was most likely going to find not much corruption in public offices but plenty in the private sector –the very sector shouting loudest about corruption.

IV. African View about Corruption

African scholars like former South African president Thabo Mbeki, Tafataona Mahoso (2014) and Zimbabwe's 2003 Tripartite Negotiating Forum (in association with the National Economic Consultative Forum, NECF) have countered this Western view of corruption in Africa by characterizing the vice as a process involving a corrupter or corruptive agent on the one side and a corruptible agent on the other side. Mahoso (2014) sees the Zimbabweans' obsession with fighting corruption in the wake of salary scandals at ZBC and PSMAS as serving the interests of "corrupted organizations led by corrupted leaders". The idea of these organizations is to divert Zimbabweans from fighting against Western-imposed sanctions.

The same view came out as part of the "Kadoma Declaration" of the Tripartite Negotiating Forum (NECF February 2003). The TNF comprising Government, business and labour had met to find common ground and agree on prices and wages to enable the economy to grow. Perceptions of corruption were identified as a major component of "country risk" feeding the poor image Zimbabwe had. It was in trying to demystify the risk factor that the forum came up with the Declaration and analysis of corruption.

In essence the corrupting process is usually initiated by the corrupter finding proper procedures inhibitive and time-consuming. He/she then approaches systems operatives and offers inducements so as to be allowed to bypass procedures and get away with murder as it were. According to this view the corrupters or corruptive are the active agents that use and benefit from corruption. But the Western view lays blame on the corrupted or corruptible Africans. It is like the age-old case of blaming women for prostitution and saying nothing about the men that constitute the demand side of the equation.

Another difference between the Western and African conceptions of corruption is that the West sees people, African leaders, as corrupt. But African scholars see systems or institutions like capitalism as corrupt. Under its mandate the NECF's Anti-Corruption Task Force has, inter alia, the following:

- promote a service culture that mitigates against corrupt practices ...
- recommend changes in previous laws and practices marginalizing communities
- protect vulnerable members threatened by unfair "standards and practices, etc.

According to this view, it is conditions, under which people live, their practices and institutions that make people behave the way they do. It is not African peoples or leaders that are corrupt. The benefit of such a view is that systems or institutions are man-made and can be changed or corrected by people. But people are not man-made and if one is naturally corrupt, not much can be done to correct or change that. In addition, Africans in Zimbabwe, for instance, have only recently coined a chiShona word *uori* for corruption. This would demonstrate that the concept is a new phenomenon to the African. Interestingly, the discourse of corruption in Zimbabwe comes at a time when the West and their agents are making sustained calls for an end to Mugabe's rule. This suggests that even though words are oft coined to express one's ideational experience (Halliday -) in this particular instance it is not the African experience or reality that is expressed but that of the West.

Duodu (2009) writing about promoting corruption in Africa provides evidence showing that Western companies in their struggles to win competition against rivals routinely pay bribes for contracts in Africa. He cites the case of Mabey and Johnson, a British engineering company which pleaded guilty to corruption charges laid against it by the British Serious Fraud Office. The corruption crimes were committed in Ghana. Interestingly, the company was asked to pay 6.6 million pounds fine to the British state and a mere 658 000 pounds as "reparations" to Ghana.

The M&J case is typical of many Western companies operating in Africa as Perkins (2005) illustrates. The fact of the matter is that Western governments, their companies and civil society agents define corruption, bring it into Africa and benefit from it. After benefiting they become the whistleblowers and reap further benefits from that too. They are the corrupters that turn the corrupted/corruptible African into the villain thus disenfranchising him/her. The governments and business communities of Africa are the ones whose reputation is soiled. One would argue therefore that corruption is an integral part of Western culture that has perfected the art of managing the vice by turning it from a business threat into an opportunity.

By contrast, Africans seem to have no idea of this lucrative business taking place under their very noses. The discourse of corruption is hidden from the African maybe because it is alien to ubuntu/unhu. The African does not understand the hidden agenda behind the discourse of corruption. He most probably is not aware of the corrupt nature of the activities and institutions of his Western guests unless and until the guests themselves define their practices as corrupt. And even then the African cannot prosecute these Western corrupters, maybe because he does not understand the workings of the Western system.

The Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) reveals that inferences made as a result of discourse become part of the meaning arrived at. The frequent use of the word corruption in the description of African leaders and institutions has made that word synonymous with failure. Hence African success cannot be celebrated such as Zimbabwe's high literacy, the highest in Africa because it is an achievement of a "corrupt" government.

Another serious form of corruption involves the same Western systems corrupting and destroying other systems. African thought processes and thoughts are a case in point. Primitive (read: pure, unadulterated, uncorrupted) African thought is generally considered non-existent or of no consequence. It is not taken seriously until and unless revised and validated by Westerners and western scholarship. This revisionism kills Africanness and Africa's unique potential contribution to humanity. What eventually comes out of Africa and is seen as African is as a result not African at all but a bastardized and corrupted concoction. It is the result of Africans performing using un-African tools and methods to craft African thoughts and systems. This dominance of foreign tools and methods was castigated by the likes of Chinua Achebe and Charles Mungoshi (cited by Gono 2013) who are of the view that for a solution to be relevant and work in Africa the analysis and processes leading to it must be African by Africans.

This view of corruption may not be palatable to mainstream (read Western or Westernised) thought; but it is significant. It tells us that Africans and their institutions are "corrupt" in the sense that genuine ubuntu or Africanness is actively suppressed and destroyed by corruptive foreigners.

V. Conclusion

"Corrupt" as a doing word is about spoiling, defiling and preventing systems from operating as expected. People who corrupt systems or institutions do so for their benefit. In our case these corrupters are the West who brought the concept to Africa for a purpose. Western companies, NGOs and sponsored activists corrupt African leaders and institutions to ensure the West benefit at the expense of African masses.

These Westerners use the discourse of corruption to alienate and weaken an identified and targeted African leader from her/his followers. The same Westerners encourage African people to rebel and overthrow their

‘corrupt’ leader and are always assured of Western support and protection if they do. The net result of this is constant instability as military juntas succeed one another without any of them removing the corruption it said was the reason for removing the previous regime. This fact supports the argument that claims of corruption in Africa are just a pretext for those with hidden agenda to get their own hands on African resources.

By alienating followers from their leader the former are also deprived of their identity and recreated as dependents of the West. The followers cease to identify with their leader, they denounce and despise their association with "corrupt" leaders. In the end, any achievements made with that leader become a source of shame. In Zimbabwe, when land redistribution took place those who sympathized with the colonial land ownership structure disassociated themselves from the whole liberation struggle. They refused to celebrate the revolution as an achievement. Instead they felt ‘defeated’ by Mugabe and his ‘cronies’.

Of course Africans were corrupted by the whites and their black friends to get into this state of self-denial! By refusing to be part of victors and choosing to associate with losers, Africans actively dis-empower themselves. They disenfranchise themselves, perhaps thanks to successful brainwashing from the West. But in the end, African empowerment and enfranchisement will come, but only when Africans stop the institutionalized corrupting of things African. Pure or primitive African-ness can offer a lot to humanity (Wutawunashe, 2014) but only if it can be allowed to exist and operate uncorrupted. For this to happen African-ness may have to isolate itself from and reject globalizing forces.

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