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Interrogating Our Past: Colonialism and Corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

One of the major impediments to economic, social and political development in African is corruption. Although there is an extensive literature explaining the entrenchment of this pandemic for the most part, the explanation ignores the role of colonialism in the genesis and sustenance of corruption in Africa. In this paper, we try to establish a link between colonialism and corruption, its genesis and institutionalisation. We argue that the incidence of corruption could be best understood in the context of colonialism – its systematic use of material inducements to compel African chiefs/administrators to collaborate with them in the pursuit of their colonial project of dominating and exploiting their own peoples. The practices of post-colonial Africa's political and bureaucratic elites are merely an extension of such colonial policies and practices which have served to entrench it.

Introduction

The term corruption, as defined by Osoba (1996: 372), refers to:

a form of antisocial behaviour by an individual or social group which confers unjust or fraudulent benefits on its perpetrators, is inconsistent with the established legal norms and prevailing moral ethos of the land and is likely to subvert or diminish the capacity of the legitimate authorities to provide fully for the material and spiritual well-being of all members of society in a just and equitable manner.

Corrupt behaviour would therefore incorporate acts such as the use of public

authority, office, or official position with the deliberate intent of extracting personal or private monetary rewards or other privileges at the expense of public good and in violation of established rules and ethical considerations (Hope 1987; Dey 1989; United Nations 1990), theft, embezzlement of public funds or appropriation of state property by other means, as well as nepotism or granting of favours to personal acquaintances. It comprises both petty and major acts that fall into these categories. It includes, on the one hand, individuals who demand bribes before rendering services to clients such as government file/record clerks who confiscate files and records belonging to other employees, retirees and clients seeking services until they are offered "something small"; also police officers who demand bribes from suspects in exchange for their freedom. Account clerks who embezzle funds belonging to their employers also fall within this category. On the other hand, it includes individuals such as senior corporate and government officials who conclude secret deals involving huge sums of money with local and international organizations, companies and individual businesses or who practice extensive embezzlement of public or corporate funds.

That corruption has become one of the most notoriously persistent and progressively worsening social problems afflicting virtually all sub-Saharan African countries today is indisputable. The practice has permeated virtually all institutions both public and private, governmental and non-governmental. Having reached endemic proportions, corruption has become not only a way of life but also a principal method for the accumulation of private property. For instance, in countries such as Kenya, how much money an individual has defrauded the state of appears to have become the yardstick for gauging "Who's Who" in society. Corruption, however, has become a major impediment to political, economic and social development (Ayittey 1992; Makumbe 1994; Osoba 1996; Hope 1997). It hinders administrative development and performance (Hope 1997), impairs economic efficiency (Gould and Amaro-Reyes 1983), stifles local initiative and enterprise (Ouma 1991; Hope 1997) and intensifies other social problems such as crime, ethnicity and ethnic conflicts, and family-related problems. The problem has resulted in increased poverty, misery, and degradation of the mass of society amidst the accumulation of immense wealth by the ruling and corporate elites. This is not to argue that corruption, however, is peculiar to sub-Saharan Africa. On the contrary, it is a global phenomenon which "manifests itself with significant similarities and differences in different societies, depending on the peculiar systems of power distribution and the legal and moral norms operating therein" (Osoba 1996: 372).

Although it is only recently that the pandemic of corruption became an object of concern for international governments and aid organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Transparency International, and civil society in countries

that have been paralysed economically by it, there exists immense literature covering the topic. Academics have documented different aspects of this social ill including its nature, extent, causes and consequences. However, previous efforts to diagnose the factors accounting for the genesis and persistence of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa have seemingly failed to incorporate its historical grounding. Studies have emphasised the internal causes of corruption by detailing the role played by African bureaucracies, private businesses and individuals without examining its historical context. The outcome has been the exclusion of historically rooted causes of the phenomenon and especially those associated with colonialism. This paper is an attempt to fill this void. It examines the role of colonialism and how it has affected the institution of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa. The term colonialism is used here to refer to an international system of economic exploitation in which more powerful nations dominate weaker ones (Johnson 1995). A distinction is made between two phases of colonialism; that is, *active* and *passive* colonialism. The former refers to the conquest of a people followed by the direct control (or domination) of the same by the conquerors using a combination of measures such as military coercion and dominance of major internal institutions such as the polity. The latter, on the other hand, represents what is commonly referred to as neo-colonialism or the extension of especially economic domination of a people beyond the attainment of self rule. The second phase of colonisation is associated with practices, policies and structures inherited from the first phase. These constitute a colonial legacy that, in our view, impacts on the extent of corruption in independent sub-Saharan African nations.

The paper argues that any comprehensive delineation of factors responsible for the emergence and entrenchment of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa must take a holistic view of the practice. It must examine the role played by colonialism and its legacy whose effects have continued to manifest themselves in virtually all sub-Saharan African countries long after the attainment of self-rule. While the former is here associated with the origins/birth of corrupt practices, the latter is considered to be partially responsible for the entrenchment of it.

Colonialism and Corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa

According to Robb (1992), the very initial historical basis for the emergence of corruption appears to have been the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. It was the financial growth which accompanied this historical event that was directly responsible for the birth of white-collar crime of which corruption is a part. Robb argues that the industrial revolution gave birth to a complex economy characterised by an increasing dependence on finance and investment and, consequently, enormous banking networks, stocks and credit and a complicated legal system. These factors, coupled with the increase in lawyers, financiers and other professionals, greatly aided the expansion and the potential for white-collar crime.

Concerning sub-Saharan Africa in particular, however, corruption appears to be a social phenomenon deeply rooted in the historical process of colonisation. Consistent with Osoba (1996: 372), the practice is viewed here as a by-product of traits of fraudulent antisocial behaviour derived from British, French and other colonial rulers. This behaviour was instilled into the colonial peoples during the colonial period, and was carried into the post-colonial era. This was inevitable considering the fact that colonialism was an extension of the new economic order and its concomitant problems which resulted from the industrial revolution. The quest for economic gain, or what Nabudere (1981: 7) refers to as "free trade imperialism", including the push for new markets and raw materials for European industries accompanying the industrial revolution, fuelled the scramble for and the subsequent partitioning of Africa into European spheres of influence during the Berlin International Conference of October 1884 and propelled the eventual colonisation of most of the continent (Freund, 1984; Nabudere 1981; 1982).

There are three major ways through which the historical event of colonialism could be linked to the emergence of corrupt practices in sub-Saharan Africa. First, as implicit from Robb's argument (*op. cit.*) corruption requires a well developed monetary economy characterised by a clear differentiation of interests to thrive. A closer look at pre-colonial African economies reveals that emerging colonial powers did not find sizable monetary economies in their newly acquired territories. The existing economies, therefore, lacked the financial and economic infrastructure necessary for engaging in corruption. Consequently, the new economies promoted by colonial governments had to nurture the conditions for the evolution of structures that were conducive to corrupt practices.

The introduction of a monetary tax – namely, the hut and later poll tax was a very significant way by which colonial governments fostered the growth of corruption. Having found no meaningful monetary economies in their newly acquired territories, most colonial governments, and particularly those of British origin, introduced compulsory tax payable only in cash for purposes of meeting the cost of administration and generating cheap African labour necessary for the establishment of productive economic activities. In Bechuanaland (now Botswana), for example, the establishment of a British protectorate in 1885 was followed in 1899 with the introduction of a hut tax (later changed to head or poll tax) to pay for the administration of the protectorate (Tlou and Campbell 1984). In settler colonies like Kenya¹ and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), on the other hand, taxation was used to force Africans to offer themselves as cheap labour which was badly needed to work in the emerging white settler economy (Van Zwanenberg 1975; Stichter 1982; Collier and Lal 1986); because wage labour was alien to the African and most of them were not willing to work in the white settlers farms and mines.

It was not the introduction of taxation *per se*, but the manner in which the tax itself was collected, that encouraged corrupt behaviour. To collect taxes, the

colonial governments mostly relied on local African leaders and especially chiefs. Where chiefs did not exist or were unco-operative, new ones were appointed by the colonial powers (Richards 1959; Crowder 1968). Above all, to motivate chiefs to generate as much tax revenue as possible, and do so with zeal, the colonial administrations allowed them to retain a part of it. In Bechuanaland, for example, the *dikgosi* (chiefs or kings) were mandated to collect the taxation and retain 10% of the total tax collected in their area (Colclough and McCarthy 1980; Tlou and Campbell 1984). This practice amounted to the taking of kickbacks by African chiefs. It gave an entirely new meaning to the traditional practice of giving gifts which had existed in different parts of Africa long before colonialism. To illustrate, in pre-colonial Botswana households exchanged gifts and tribute frequently and occasionally individuals were expected to make special gifts to close relatives (Schapera and Comaroff 1991). Such acts did not constitute corruption as defined in this paper. That is, they were neither carried out at the expense of the public good; nor did they constitute a violation of any established rules and ethical considerations. On the contrary, the practice of rewarding tax collectors became a principal method for the accumulation of private property, a way of life that was hard to give up which encouraged chiefs to abuse their office. As Leonard (1991: 29) put it, colonial chiefs "were implicitly encouraged to use their positions to amass wealth and demonstrate thereby that it paid to cooperate with Europeans".

The financial gains accruing from the amount pocketed from taxes transformed them (chiefs) into willing agents of colonialism (Crowder *op cit*) and blinded them to the plight of their people as a consequence of taxation. In Bechuanaland, the 10% received by the *dikgosi* made them ignore the adverse effects of taxation, such as coercing African men into migrant labour in South African mines and farms; the decline in agricultural production as the burden of family work such as ploughing fell mainly on women; the emergence of broken homes because husbands were absent from home for long periods of time; and the impoverishment of especially those who could not find work, and had to sell the few cattle they owned to meet their tax obligations (Colclough and McCarthy 1980; Tlou and Campbell 1984).

Finally, corruption is associated with colonialism through the methods employed by the colonial authorities to subdue and control the colonised peoples. Of particular significance is the technique of divide and rule (Brass 1985; Cockerham 1995) adopted especially by Britain in her colonies. This entailed the practice of favouring one tribe over others with the dual objective of securing the loyalty of a particular group or tribe to the colonial administration and encouraging rivalry between different tribes as a strategy of preventing the development of a sense of unity among them which could threaten colonial rule. Such divisions culminated in the creation of paramount (superordinate) and subordinate groups with the former enjoying considerable privileges from the colonial rulers. In North Nyasa District of British Nyasaland (now Malawi) the British colonisers developed an

alliance with the Ngonde peoples by elevating them to paramountcy and according them privileges they had never enjoyed during the pre-colonial period (Kalinga 1985). The Ngonde became the avenue through which the British could extend their dominance among the peoples of this region. Elsewhere in colonial Africa, in Uganda for example, the British conferred a similar paramountcy on the Baganda (Roberts 1962); the Tutsi in Belgian Rwanda and Burundi (Weinstein and Schrire 1976; Mazrui and Tidy 1984), the Ibo in British Nigeria (Hunt and Walker 1974) and the Shona in present-day Zimbabwe (Day 1980), to mention but a few cases.

To understand the association between corruption and the practice of divide and rule one must reflect on some of the methods utilized to sustain it. Those groups enjoying a privileged status in the colonial administration were rewarded with easy access to Western (missionary) education (Kalinga 1985) and government sponsored economic opportunities. This created immense regional disparities in the extent of educational attainment and economic opportunities. As will be shown below, such discriminatory practices sowed the seeds of corrupt behaviour which has now become entrenched in many sub-Saharan African nations.

Africa's Colonial Legacy and Corruption

To guarantee a smooth transition to neo-colonialism (the second phase of colonialism), the colonialists established economic, social and political structures that would continue to safeguard their interests long after they relinquished direct control of the colonies. Essentially, this involved the transfer of economic, social and political institutions that had been established by the colonialists during the period of (direct) colonial rule; but the transition was organised purposely to usher in the next phase of colonialism, which is neo-colonialism. As indicated earlier, this constitutes a legacy of colonialism that is central to the provision of a comprehensive explanation of the rampant corruption found in independent sub-Saharan African nations. We present below a discussion of how the actions of the colonial governments during the period just before independence in shaping the post-colonial constitutional framework, and post colonial institutions have contributed to the institutionalisation of corruption in Africa. Particular emphasis is placed on three legacies of colonialism: namely, the administrative technique of divide and rule; the administrative culture inherited from colonialism; and the constitutional structures inherited at independence.

The Administrative Practice of Divide and Rule

As outlined above, the administrative technique of divide and rule was employed by some colonial governments to subdue and control the indigenous populations. That policy led to the emergence of favourite ("superior") groups at the expense of others in the colony. In some countries this policy was intensified during the struggle for self-determination. To weaken the independence movements that

swept across Africa in the 1950s some colonial governments groomed collaborators, mainly chiefs, who were used to divide the ranks of the African freedom fighters and betray them to the colonial authorities in exchange for monetary rewards or other favours. The history of the Mau Mau (war of independence) in Kenya, for example, is replete with examples of African home guards who sold freedom fighters to the colonial administration for petty favours.

The policy of divide and rule appears to have permeated the entire fabric of the post-colonial state which encouraged the practice of corruption in several instances. First, the practice can be associated with the rampant ethnicity (tribalism) and/or nepotism that appears to be widespread in African countries. Aware of the political and economic value of the policy of divide and rule, post-colonial African political leaders have developed a tendency to treat members of their tribal group with favour thus setting the stage for the rapid growth of ethno-centric favouritism and nepotism. Second, in some countries, ethnicity/tribalism and nepotism have encouraged the spread of corrupt practices such as embezzlement and economic mismanagement through the appointment of under-qualified, and in some instances unqualified, but politically well-connected tribesmen to fill important positions. Kenya under Arap Moi provides a classic example. A notable attribute of the Moi administration has been the systematic elimination of the members of other tribes from the most strategic political and economic positions in Kenya's political administration and economy, and replacing them with individuals from Moi's own predominantly pastoral Kalenjin tribe. This appears to have ushered in what could be considered as a "pastoral model" in the management of the economy which is characterised by purposeful corruption. The president's men over time have acquired a reputation for mismanaging a particular organisation to the point of bankruptcy before being transferred to another. We call this the "pastoral model" of economic management because of the parallel between it and pastoralism where an area is usually grazed till the soil is bare before moving to another area in the hope that the grass in the overgrazed area would regenerate itself naturally.

The Administrative Culture Inherited from Colonialism

The administrative culture inherited from colonialism presents a second avenue through which Africa's colonial past has facilitated and entrenched corrupt practices particularly among the higher echelons of political and administrative bureaucracies. Of particular significance is the adherence by Africa's new political elites to what we call the "African chief model" of administration which dates back to the colonial period. Colonialism not only took advantage of the institution of chiefs but also created a particular legacy that was to accompany this institution. The British, were quite notorious in this regard. Even in areas where they found no chiefs with whom to strike alliances, or where they found chiefs who were uncooperative, new ones were appointed (Richards *op cit.*, Cromwell *op. cit.*) to provide

a ready political and administrative framework that they needed to implement the Pax Britannica. According to Nkrumah (1980) pre-colonial chiefs had limited and controlled powers but colonialism reinforced the chiefs' power by giving them new powers and occasional payment that translated them (chiefs) into agents of colonialism. Colonial chiefs were expected to be authoritarian figures who could make quick, final decisions and keep order by commanding respect and even fear (Leonard 1991). As Leonard (1991: 28) documents, chiefs "were not notable for their respect for the niceties of law or due process, they were known instead for their decisiveness, courage, presence, and ability to hold a crowd". Although their role was not popular, they became well established due to the support they received from the colonial government, which conferred considerable legitimacy on them.

The attainment of independence by African countries did not end this "colonial chief" model of administration. The leadership style adopted by African political and administrative elites after independence reveals a strong resemblance to this model. Contemporary African politicians and administrators appear to have embraced the power structure associated with the colonial chief, despite its unpopularity during the colonial era, and adhered to "an only slightly softened version" of the colonial chief's role (Leonard 1991: 29). Like the colonial chief, these leaders have been associated with authoritarianism and, most important, an almost total lack of respect for the law and due process. In addition, they have used their positions of power to amass illegal wealth just like the colonial chief. In particular, they have shown open contempt for the law, an attitude which is partly responsible for the rampant corruption that characterises most administrative bureaucracies in sub-Saharan Africa today.

The Independence Constitutions

The role of the "colonial chief" model of administration in the perpetuation of corruption in most of sub-Saharan Africa has been reinforced by their independence constitutions. Once the colonisers realised that it was impossible to maximize economic benefits from their colonies without direct political and administrative control, they opted to negotiate a transition to self-rule with the nationalist leaders. This included overseeing the shaping of new constitutions that would guide the operations of the new governments while ensuring indirect control of their governments and economies. With the conducive environment created by the new constitutions the new political elites manipulated the new state institutions to facilitate their engagement in corrupt practices. In particular they amended their constitutions to enhance the concentration of power in one office, institution or individual; the creation of environments that were not conducive to participatory democracy; and the development of an expanded economic role for the state.

Centralised Power and Corrupt Practices

Emerging African nations inherited constitutions that enhanced the emergence of very powerful states exercising boundless economic and political power and reigning supreme over civil society (Hope 1997). Such constitutions invariably vested enormous (absolute) power in a single office, institution or individual, usually the president. Because of their long and uninterrupted stint in power,² presidents were not only inclined to take the legitimacy of their regime for granted and ignore voices of dissent and criticism from civil society. They also engaged in wanton corruption under protection of their constitutions. To strengthen their grip on civil society they surrounded themselves with power brokers who enjoyed the same immunity from persecution as enjoyed by the president himself. Invariably, the members of the presidential ensemble were accountable only to the president himself. They became the president's trusted aides, wheeler dealers, political schemers and hatchetmen for high-level corrupt deals that cost the nation, private organisations, individuals and would-be investors huge sums of money (Hope 1997).

Closely related to the existence of overly powerful presidents was the politicisation of bureaucracies which is often accompanied by the entrenchment of patronage. This made them (bureaucracies) become not only more autocratic and devoid of accountability, transparency and the rule of law (Hope 1997; Adedeji 1991), but also irresponsible (Adedeji 1995). As economic and political power became centralised in the hands of the state, state power became more personalised through the presidency and his/her few select cronies while civil society increasingly became alienated from the decision making process. This was an obvious invitation to (bureaucratic) corruption. Loyalty to the state became synonymous with loyalty to a single individual, a family, tribe or a few well-connected individuals (Hope 1997). This created and oiled the channels for peddling influence and authority and the abuse of public office for private and personal gain. As Hope (1997: 95) explains, loyalties based on personalism "often require the contravention of rules and regulations to maintain", and advance (bureaucratic) corruption. The social networks emanating from such loyalties, for instance, determine who gets hired or fired, who gets promoted, who is awarded government contracts, who is allocated which piece of land, and who is licensed to operate what business, to mention but a few. This breeds a corrupt culture (Prah 1993) within the administrative machinery.

The rule of law and transparency in public affairs are indispensable for institutionalizing rules and procedure to provide for the regular enactment, implementation and review of laws and policies (Adamolekun and Bryant 1994). In most African states, the formal bureaucratic organizations such as the civil service, the legislature and the judiciary have been hijacked by the government

which continue to use, or interfere with, the powers and functions of government for purely private gain (Hope 1997). While the civil service functions like an extension of the ruling party, parliaments have become a rubber stamp for presidential decrees and actions, and cannot act even in cases where a bundle of evidence exists to establish indisputable acts of corruption and graft among the political and bureaucratic elites. The president is able to interfere with the judiciary and, consequently, its ability to adjudicate on and give deserving sentences to those involved in corrupt practices through the appointment and promotion of members of the bench. Furthermore, the tenure of senior members of the bench depends on their support for the president and his regime rather than on their professional competence. The capture of the bureaucratic organisations and instruments of law and order by the state has undermined the independence of the judiciary and made it impossible to challenge corrupt practices and irrational decisions even in the courts. Heads of state and/or their powerful cronies pressure courts to delay and eventually throw out even the most serious cases of corruption leaving the perpetrators free to continue fleecing the nation. In Kenya, a case involving scandal, commonly referred to as "the Goldenberg scandal", in which senior government officials and an Asian businessman have been charged with defrauding the government of billions of shillings through the marketing of nonexistent gold, has dragged in the high court for years because of government interference and patronage. One can also cite the Zimbabwean case in which attempts to detect and punish public officials involved in an elaborate scheme to illegally acquire and resell motor vehicles became a farce when the first government minister to be convicted in the affair was accorded presidential pardon and the Attorney General subsequently dropped all charges against other government ministers and members of parliament on grounds of imminent presidential pardon after conviction (Makumbe 1994). Finally, there is the case of the former Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) in which the late president Mobutu Sese Seko was able to become one of the wealthiest men in the world through large kickbacks on government contracts and outright embezzlement (Young and Turner 1985) which he practised with impunity.

Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy is a necessary requirement in combating corruption: it facilitates monitoring and holding to account those in charge of the affairs of state (Osoba, 1996). However, the constitutions which ushered most sub-Saharan nations into independence did not lay a solid foundation for nurturing it. Consequently, the new constitutions, and subsequent amendments to them, either strengthened one party dictatorships or undermined the institutions and processes necessary for consolidating a democratic regime.

Expanding the Economic Role of the State

The expansion of the role of the state in the economy in most African countries contributed immensely to the growth of corruption (Hope 1997). This is particularly true for the period immediately after independence up to the early 1990s when most countries embraced the idea of the state as entrepreneur which involved both state participation in economic decision making and the proliferation of public or state enterprises, and set the stage for bureaucratic corruption to thrive. First, the centralisation of economic decision making culminated in an expanded bureaucracy vested with enormous discretionary powers. This made it possible for corruption to thrive with public enterprises becoming a gold mine for the political and bureaucratic elites (Hope 1997). Increasingly, it became normal for a bribe to be offered before a transaction could be completed. As argued above, such corrupt state elites were, in most cases, protected by the head of state (Ouma *op. cit.*; Ayittey *op. cit.*, Makumbe *op. cit.*). Some of the corrupt practices took the form of embezzlement and private accumulation from questionable sources. By these and other corrupt means many African political and bureaucratic leaders amassed assets that were disproportionate to their official earnings (Hope *op. cit.*; Ayittey *op. cit.*).

Conclusion

This paper sought to integrate the historical event of colonialism into the analysis of the genesis and subsequent entrenchment of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa. To do so, it examined the role of colonialism in the birth of corrupt practices; and assessed how Africa's colonial past has impacted on the extent of corruption that characterises most nations during the post-colonial period. We have argued that bringing colonialism into the study of corruption enables us to inject a historical dimension into its causes. The emphasis placed on the role of the historical event of colonialism in the birth and entrenchment of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa should however not be construed as attributing corruption entirely to colonialism. Indeed, if self-determination gave African leaders the opportunity to choose what was good for their people, then one would be justified in arguing that the opportunity has existed for them to choose non-corrupt practices. That they did not opt for that path is a clear indication of the total lack of commitment and political will by the continent's political and bureaucratic elites to depart from corruption.

Notes

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1. In Kenya, the colonial government first imposed direct taxation upon the indigenous people to pressure them into wage labour in 1901 in the form of a "Hut Tax". This made every man liable for taxes on the huts which he was

supposed to own (Van Zwanenberg, 1975). In 1910, a Poll Tax on men over age 16 was added and by 1912 punishment for nonpayment could involve a sentence of up to three months in prison.

2. Extreme cases include Ethiopia under 42 years of Haile Selassie's dictatorship and in Zaire Mobutu's 32 year presidency. Other cases whereby political parties and individual presidents have been in power for over 10 years abound. To illustrate, Botswana, one of the few cherished democracies in Africa, has been ruled by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) since independence in 1966 while Kenya has been under Moi and Kenya African National Union — KANU — (mis) rule for almost 20 years.

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