

Corruption and the Leadership Question in Nigeria: Some Reflections on the Significance of the Sokoto Caliphate.

By

Sulaiman Shehu

Abstract

A major crisis of the Nigerian state today is the dangerous dimension of corruption in all sectors that drive its political economy. This problem is generally manifested in the flagrant abuse of office and misuse of opportunities by those entrusted with leading state affairs. For instance, it is today normal for leaders to initiate programs of development with tough stance against any form of corruption in it. However, those who take the lead in breaking the laws are either these leaders or their associates and then the followers, most of whom always hope to get to the “top” or “make it”. This way, such laws and policies rarely make meaning on the social and economic underdevelopment ravaging the nation. Thus, historicizing corruption as it affects Nigeria one find governments since independence carrying different brands of the fight against it, even though the same governments have continuously been blamed for the dismal failure to overcome many developmental problems of the nation. In most cases with Nigeria, past regimes and governments are seen as major contributors to the backward movement of the country because corruption has rather continued to grow as more opportunities for development are discovered. The oil and recently gas sectors are clear examples in this sense. This paper therefore attempts to highlight how leadership of the nation instead of leaving waste the treasuries should strive to end such looting so that the social and economic degradation in the national political economy will be kept at the lowest level. With examples from the founding leadership of the Sokoto Caliphate, the paper posits that incorruptibility is certainly the way for Nigeria’s leadership to lead the fight against corruption and derailing the country’s development process.

Introduction:

The contemporary significance of the historical experiences of the founding leaders of the Sokoto Caliphate to the discourse on the scourge of corruption in Nigeria is the main focus of the paper. This was the pre-colonial era when communities in the Nigerian area were going through political metamorphosis, fusing and forming larger socio-economic and political formations that began to pose serious threats to the so-called ascendancy of European nations whom were blinded with the sharing spheres of influence at the Berlin Conference of 1885. The European intent on this was to justify their unleashing of colonial terror on Africans in the name of civilisation. Here, we are wont to say that beyond the convention of counting only Naira and Kobo in assessing the nation’s loss to corruption (*that is being done in many reports and fora*), as the erstwhile Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) Farida

Waziri once observed, Nigeria has for decades gone through summits, conferences, seminars, workshops and even special prayer sessions specifically organised in respect of the self-inflicted monster; corruption but with seemingly very poor results(Waziri, 2010). This is perhaps one of the safest and simplest way to describe the state of corruption in Nigeria today so that we would continue to have justification on the search for solutions using the available materials and energy. In looking at the relevance of past experiences as it affected the social and political formation of the Sokoto Caliphate especially during the time of its founding fathers, Sheikh Usman *bn* Fodiyo (d. 1232/1817), Abdullah *bn* Fodiyo (d. 1245/1829) and Muhammadu Bello (d. 1253/1837) (Bobboyi, 2011) is one of the ways to understand the basis of the problem and the solution to it. It is important to point out that using the Sokoto caliphate example is certainly not the first as others have attempted. However, ours here would be some reflections on what most current researches about anti-corruption seem to disregard but which, are fundamental in understanding the nature and dimension of corruption in Nigeria and how to tackle it from the many dimensions it appear, from the legacies of the Sokoto Caliphate.

Background:

The key inspiration for writing this paper started from fundamental questions raised by some prominent Nigerians on corruption and ways to address the menace. The most appealing was the one presented by General Muhammadu Buhari on Friday 15th May, 1998. The subject of discourse in his presentation then was “Leadership and Accountability in a period of Moral Crisis” (Buhari, 1998). The second paper was presented by Late Malam Liman Ciroma on 22nd January, 1994 with the title: “The Imperative of National Unity and the Responsibility of Leadership” (Ciroma, 1994). These two were very much significant in shaping some of the thoughts that made up this paper. Also found be very relevant and inspiring for this paper were two famous presentations by our teacher and mentor Late Abdullahi Smith way back in the 1970s. First was that his thought provoking presentation at the seminar on the Sokoto Caliphate titled: “The Contemporary Significance of the Academic ideals of the Sokoto *Jihad*” (Smith, 1975). The second paper went with the heading: “The Development of Corruption”, presented at the first Ali Akilu Memorial Lectures at Kaduna (Smith, 1976). These presentations and few others were therefore inspiring in many senses as would be demonstrated in course of examining the significance of the founding political leadership of the Sokoto Caliphate especially in shaping our understanding of the directions of fight against corruption by the Nigerian state from its root, the current multifaceted anti-corruption activity notwithstanding. This is so because like Abdullahi Smith once referred to the Anti- corruption war and social re-engineering of the Murtala Muhammad regime few days before his (Murtala) assassination that... “I do not presume to teach them their business (governance), but I form the impression that their plans (especially on corruption) in this direction may possibly acquire some re-enforcement if developed with due consideration of the fundamental issues which public discussion of the subject of social corruption appears at present to avoid”(Smith, 1976:2). These statements you would agree are as fresh as the continued damages being caused by corruption to the socio-economic, political and cultural foundation of our nation and its people today. We therefore stand by this with the present government’s efforts to address the problem in which ours in the various sectors of national life would also continue to be that of re-enforcement based on the genuine course of the

development of our national resources and not the development of corruption anymore. Based on this task, we now make some fundamental conceptual clarifications on history and corruption.

Conceptual Issues

For Corruption however, it is not the intention to enter into any deep complexity in the definition of the concept. From the Greek word “Corruptus” the term Corruption refer to an aberration or a misnomer better understood to consist of the wrongdoings of an individual or group through means that are incompatible with ethical standards such as bribery, embezzlement, fraud and theft from public funds. A more summarised explanation has been offered thus: Corruption means to break away or depart from morality, ethics and civic virtues. Further explanation of each of these words gives us better understanding and insight of the term.

Morality refers to morals, principles, values, goodness, decency, probity, honesty, integrity and so on.

- 1.) Ethics in this sense means moral code, belief, traditional practices, habits, conventions, customs, laws and rules, regulations, commandments, decrees etc.
- 2.) Civic virtues on the other hand refer to aspects of public opinion of merit and quality (Media Advocacy and Development Initiative: 2015).

Going by these simple definitions, corruption is the break away from what the society agree was good and right in the pursuance of the overall goal of governance as something for the benefit of all without any form of discrimination as to whether one is among the leaders or the led. It has been quite acknowledged that over the years, Nigerian governments have produced comprehensive documents and other institutional frameworks that identified and made provisions on how to tackle corruption from the legal point of view. However, the greatest weakness of this effort seems to go beyond constitutional or any law provisions and anti-corruption agencies. As severally observed, the fundamental requirement for any successful war against corruption in Nigeria was for the anchors of the polity to first and foremost be fully identified with honesty and integrity, effective leadership and governance, transparency and accountability. A look at the history of the rise of states throughout the world would confirm this not just for the requirements of a leader who expresses readiness to fight corruption, but for those who muster the courage to really lead their people to the needed social and political reforms. Let us not forget that corruption is only one of the many symptoms of the social weakness and degeneration that occurs in a state and its governing system when the leaders are only good at rhetoric.

The Example of the Sokoto Caliphate

Many a study have been done on the problem of corruption in the Nigerian polity so much that at the conventional academic level, there is virtually little or nothing not said and repeated over and over at seminars and conferences within and outside the country. All the textual aspects of the war against corruption have been flogged over and over, the chronology of governmental efforts, provision of anti-corruption agencies, bodies and those laws in the constitutions, the past and the present, they have been discussed and are still being dusted, amended and repackaged. In the history of the Sokoto Caliphate examples abound for the emulation of the Nigerian State.

A quote from the *Sheikh Usman bn Fodiyo's* writing titled *Bayan Wujub al-Hijra* suffices...“A leader gains victory over his enemies according to his justice (incorruptibility) over his people and is defeated in his struggles according to his injustice” (Bobbyi, 2011). The example of the

Sokoto Caliphate established the *Sheikh* with the intent to reflect on its leadership style and programs which served antidote to corruption during their time. As it was then, the leaders of the *jihad* movement challenged the *Sarakunan Kasashen Hausa* and their neighbours to end the gruesome dimension of corruption in the land until that led to the overthrow of these rulers, uprooting the social and political base which protected their unjust activities. Indeed, ...“the force of the *jihad*...had its roots in the explosive potency of the problem of corruption in the societies of *Kasashen Hausa* and their neighbours...which was one of the major reasons why within a decade over an area larger than Nigeria, the ruling classes and governments which had been established for centuries collapsed before the *jihad* movement like a pack of cards”(Usman (2008:7). Here, some simple but very fundamental questions on the intellectual basis, structural content, and the methodological nature of activities of the *jihad* movement that eventually overthrew corruption and other vices in the societies of *Kasashen Hausa* and neighbouring polities need to be asked. What was the world view on some of the key issues that help in building a society which is just and exemplary with both the leaders and the led enjoying equal opportunities and rights to self-dignity, honour and protection against any form of shenanigan? These and many more key questions not raised here are certainly important not for those of us in this forum alone but it should be the basis which the leadership of our nation could begin to see the foundation upon which corruption has continued to thrive in our national political economy, so that at least we would be able to see the path which if we follow corruption would be uprooted from our society. The few examples here may not provide full answers to some of the key questions raised, even though the purpose of raising them is primarily to give us avenue for serious thoughts on where we came from, where we are and what we need to get to where we hope to be safe with our honour and dignity without being injured by the very people leading us or the social and economic system operating in our political community. Otherwise, our individual aspirations would continue to be emphatic on how much and whatever we can do to like “*them*” also “*get there*” so that we would by all means “*make it*” the very way of those we succeeded “*made it*” or even outshine them in riches.

First, that the *Sheikh* and his assistants such as Abdullahi *bn* Fodiyo, Muhammadu Bello, and their lieutenants were throughout their lives engaged in serious learning was true as this produced in each of them a scholar of high intellectual repute and master in his own right on aspects of social and political engineering, economic doyenship (though they were not at all bothered by the worldly temptation to amass wealth). The combination of these three leaders were said have authored over three hundred and fifty works on diverse fields of the Islamic world of learning spread around the world (Bobboyi:2011). This way as pointed out by Bobboyi (2011) who, in reference to the three leading *jihadists* as the Sokoto Triumvirate said... “they were not only imbued with the vision of the society they wanted to establish but also had the patience and perseverance to struggle for the realisation of many aspects of this vision of ensuring justice in the societies of *Kasashen Hausa* and the Central Sudan region.

Secondly, these *jihad* leaders with their vast knowledge had always believed in the path of scholarship where they both studied and taught on the principles of Islam on all the branches of human endeavour. This was essentially build on the basis of their conviction that Islamic teachings had a long history of existence in *Kasashen Hausa*, Borno and other areas, though its fundamental message have been corrupted by scholars leading to the kind of moral and social crises perpetrated by an inept leadership which the *jihadists* struggled to change. They were therefore scholars, teachers, politicians, and economists, experts on health and hygiene matters,

brave military commanders, and practical fighters for human rights especially in protecting the weaker members of the society. The most noteworthy aspect and key part of the struggle was that the *jihad* leader exhibited the best moral and social habits through all their private and public activities for the followers to emulate. This made them a rallying point for the *Jama'a* with mainly enjoying good and forbidding evil as the key link between the leadership and the followers. Consequently, the third question which is related to the issue of teaching and nurturing their followership arises. One of the greatest weapon used by the *Sheikh* and his lieutenants in their call to reform quite distinct from most of the *Ulama* of their time was the total rejection of all tendencies to corruption especially in dealing with the *Sarakunan Kasashen Hausa* and other members of the aristocracy in the *Sarauta* system. They were exemplary in the fight against corruption in the way its various dimension penetrated both spiritual and worldly affairs. Corrupt practices in the pre-*jihad Kasashen Hausa* principally revolved around ungodly acts, relegating Islamic teachings and practices in the conduct of state affairs, and giving priority to worldly vanities instead of the virtues of obeying the commandments of Islam. In addition to all these was the unjust economic burden of taxes imposed on the people and their sources of living known as the *Haraji* (General tax on all subjects) and *Jangali* (a form of tax on cattle owned by herdsmen). These have been clearly explained in the book *Kitab al Farq* written by the *Sheikh Usman bn Fodiyo* where he itemised the types of corruption promoted under the political system of *Kasashen Hausa*. This was the root of questioning the legitimacy of the rulers and those that support them in condoning these forms of corruption and then insisted they have the legitimacy to rule (Hiskett, 1957). This seem typical of the elected governments of our present democratic system in which case in spite of their losing the mandate of the people they usually have course to insist on staying in power. On these and other problems, the leaders of the Sokoto Caliphate were very emphatic on the educating the society, particularly women because of the strategic role they play in building solid social and political structures that help the transformation of the society.

Thus, as we can see unlike the way corruption issues are discussed in most conventional fora a reflection on the practical experiences of the founding fathers of the Sokoto Caliphate is proficient in locating and probing the root of the disease and identifying the antidote to it. This is because in spite of measures increasingly taken by the nation's authorities in the history of the development of corruption as a national disease, the problems have always been on the increase. This is further aggravated by the fact that opportunities and sources of wealth were increasingly being discovered the more in the nation. No wonder then such corruption titles also continue to grow in numbers from bribery, extortion, embezzlement, betrayal of trust, gratification, brown envelopes, tips, emoluments, greasing palms, softening the ground, inducements, sub-payments, side payments, irregular payments, payment under the table, undocumented extra payments, padding etc. some of these have become part of the economic culture of public and private services regarded as normal while the national wealth kept increasing through the new sources and opportunities not envisaged in recent years. Thus, apart from being sources of national revenue they also provided the big opportunities as conduit pipes of perpetual corruption. A few of this would include Oil and Gas sector that opened doors for bunkering and others illegalities, the Value added tax (VAT) money, Foreign Exchange deals, National and State budget defence at the state and national assembly's level, the National Assembly Ministerial project monitoring, Zero contract, huge duty waiver on imports, the pension fund and indeed security votes such as in the huge money genuinely voted for fighting

insurgency and those of other disasters or crises but diverted to private gains, etc. The list is enormous but as re-iterated this discussion is not just to parade the titles which corruption wear in our national political and social culture as a dependent capitalist nation colonised and natured to serve global capitalism. Beyond that, it exposes the level of excessive materialism built on individualism and the doctrine of the end justify the means that has permeated the endeavours of our national life. This is responsible for the blinded struggle among our youth for recruitment into the Nigerian army, Immigration, Customs and other “juicy” jobs in the public and private sectors. The persistence and aggravation of these corruption trends in spite of the laws, institutional policies and provisions are in themselves symptoms of the failure of these measures which also indicate the fact that the base of the problem has yet been identified let alone addressed. Thus, as the search for the solution continues, there is the need to begin appreciating the fact that policies no matter how effective they may seem needed the human aspect of implementation to be championed by only those who possess the moral justification to leadership in a way they would be exemplary for the followers to emulate. Leaders must earn for themselves the moral justification to be in the forefront of any anti-corruption drive, policy direction and standing in for a just system to reign in our society. This, we can find many inspiring records in the life and conducts of the founding fathers of the Sokoto Caliphate; *Sheikh Usman bn Fodiyo*, *Abdullah bn Fodiyo* and *Muhammadu Bello* who led in the establishment of Sokoto Caliphate as a political community that thrived in the central Sudan from 1804 up to British conquest of the Caliphate and the killing of Sultan Attahiru at Burmi now in the area of present Gombe State of Nigeria in the first decade of 1900.

Conclusion:

In this paper, we have come to understand that a fundamental requirement for any successful fight against corruption in Nigeria is for the anchors of the polity to be fully identified with honesty and integrity, effective leadership and governance, transparency and accountability. The present situation of the country is a situation where government leads the development process and regulates socio-economic and political activities. Consequently, these have turned out to be the greatest hiding areas for corruption in its different faces. The Contemporary significance of the leadership of *Amirul Muminin Usman bn Fodiyo* and his successors like *Abdullahi bn Fodiyo* and *Muhammadu Belloto* the Nigerian leadership and society here lies in the embrace of the habit of learning and practicing the very moral and social codes which teach incorruptibility and the virtues of attaining just leadership in our society. The triumvirate were clear in their show of leadership by example, incorruptibility and firm stand against all the forms of injustices perpetrated under the pre-*jihad* social and political formations of *Kasashen Hausa*. This was what earned them the trust, respect from their public where most importantly issues like corruption were tackled in the various faces they met them under the overthrown social, economic and political structures of *Kasashen Hausa* and their neighbours.

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