CULTURE, CORRUPTION AND COMMERCE: AFRICAN CULTURE VIS-À-VIS CORRUPTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Discourses on sustainable development in Africa decry deeply-entrenched corruption as a leading obstacle. Sustainable development refers to a system of production, consumption and service delivery that positively contributes to the welfare of both the present as well as the future generations. Corruption, refers to a system that distorts and even decimates means of production, consumption and service delivery. Corruption, therefore, distorts and decimates sustainable development initiatives. Coming to the realization of the effects of corruption on sustainable development, a number of international, regional and local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have condemned, proposed and put into place various legal and institutional anti-corruption measures. Despite these anti-corruption efforts, corruption remains pervasive, continues to threaten to decimate sustainable development efforts in Africa. A reading of available literature shows that majority of the legal and institutional anti-corruption measures, as well as scholarly empirical studies, have hardly delved into how African culture can be utilized in the fight against corruption within the continent. This therefore, leaves a lacuna that this present paper seeks to fill. This paper, therefore argues that there are elements in African culture that can be effectively used to curb corruption for sustainable development in Africa.

Keywords: Corruption, Culture, Africa, Commerce, Sustainable Development

Introduction

While Africa has various endemic development challenges that have increased in magnitude and dimension in the recent years with devastating effects on sustainable development within the continent, there has been an apparent surge in the number and magnitude of corruption cases. And yet there has been a dearth of literature evaluating the link between corruption and value systems. The central argument of this paper is not just that corruption undermines

sustainable development in Africa, but that African culture has values that can be effectively employed to curb persistent corruption within the continent.

Corruption and Commerce

The environments where various businesses operate in Africa, and beyond, have a direct impact on their economic development and progress. In corruption rife environments, business growth is often jeopardized. For example, in areas where most businesses need legal permits for them to operate becomes centres of bribery. Government officials, who are in charge, would at times ask for money for any service they give. Because business firms generally depend on government officials to obtain operating permits for their businesses, they will therefore be forced into paying bribes to acquire the permits or face long delays in obtaining the permits. In certain instances, failure to pay a bribe may lead to a prospective business firm not acquiring an operating permit at all. This implies that as more money is being diverted into bribes, business growth is hampered. In this case, corruption has a corrosive effect on business growth. Similarly, corruption also has an effect on a country's economic performance by affecting many factors fueling economic growth such as investment opportunities, taxation, and effective distribution of public resources. With the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that corruption interferes with the sustainable development of a nation.

African Culture and Corruption

For Kirwen (2008), culture is the matrix through which people interpret reality, create artifacts, promote behaviour and organize space. Kirwen (2008) further opines that culture is divided into two main categories: material culture and non-material culture. Material culture consists of the community's artifacts while non-material culture consists of peoples' underlying cultural knowledge that enables them to interpret reality and promote behaviour.

It has to be emphasized that the material culture and the non-material culture both cannot be separated when one is referring to the culture of a people. They are fundamental in the explanation of a people's "cultural pattern", that is, the general code of conduct, the systematic and the integrated conduct of behaviour which is characteristic of any society.

Within the purview of this paper, corruption is an act or behaviour that distorts and even decimates means of production, consumption and service delivery. But,

this behaviour must be informed by an underlying knowledge or value system. In order to succinctly understand the connection between corruption and African culture, we here turn to Kwame Gyekye's ethno-cultural and multi-cultural communities.

An ethno-cultural community, on the one hand, is a community of people who are bound by some intrinsic ties within a spatial-temporal context. They find affiliation through an array of attributes comprising a common set of traditions, ancestry, language, history, society, culture, nation, religion, or social treatment within their residing area. It is here that ethnic affiliation mostly thrive. And public servants, may tend, to be more loyal to their ethnic affiliations than to the state as far as the distribution of public resources is concerned. A multicultural community, on the other hand, is formed when various ethno-cultural communities merge. It denotes various ethnic groups collaborating and entering into a dialogue with one another without necessarily having to sacrifice their particular identities. It may also imply a mixed ethnic community area where multiple cultural traditions exist or a single country within which they do. In Kenya, urban centres and settlement schemes are cases in point.

According to Gyekye (1997), social values which are manifested in ethno-cultural communities, are absent in a multicultural community. It is within such setting that corruption and its links to culture is conceptualized. For example, an individual who has been accused of corruption will not see himself/herself as the accused, but will see his/her community as the accused. That is, the individual displays allegiance to the ethno-cultural community than to the multi-cultural community.

Then, why is corruption persistent in Africa? The allegiance to ethno-cultural community is passed on from one generation to the next. This is because culture is learnt and transmissible (Kirwen, 2008) through a process of socialization. This means that subsequent generations of young Africans get socialized into a system that is predominantly ethno-cultural and sustains social network values that are operative in ethno-cultural settings. Such social networks are functional pragmatic networks that become effective mechanisms to pool scarce resources and provide access to goods, services, resources and even career opportunities.

Social networks then become constructed on the basis of specific criteria of group affiliation such as gender, ethnicity, professional acquaintances, and religion. Some networks may consist of 'friends of friends' and encompass increasingly

distant acquaintances such as the 'referral system' of seeking new employees among certain human resource officers. This means that the ethno-cultural social network value chain has become so large that it is indistinguishable from a multi-cultural setting. Within this system, individuals act on the basis of the obligation to share with the next of kin, for networks that are generally familial. They also act with the urge to reciprocate – in networks that are larger than familial, that is, among acquaintances.

Research data suggests that the boundaries are extremely blurred, if not nonexistent, in the conceptualization and the practice of the separation of private and public realms. This allows the influence of the social networks to override the obligations associated with public duty; it confers a skewed logic to the exercise of public office (Ouma, Oyugi & Samita, 2021).

However, this paper envisions a dialectic movement from an ethno-cultural setting to a multi-cultural setting for the realization of sustainable development in Africa. But, in order to change people's behaviour, you have to first of all change what people think, that is, the underlying cultural knowledge (Kirwen, 2008). Once we have realized that the old moral order encompasses values and beliefs that serve to sustain corruption, then the said old moral order or scheme of reference should be broken to pave way for a new order that sustains the common good of the multi-cultural nation-states. The *elephant in the house is*, "How do we do this?" What are some of the African values that can inform this new moral order?

Mental models about national identity

The main goal of this paper is to discuss relative effectiveness of behavioural interventions on corruption in Africa. For the sake of clarity, there are three types of interventions that can be used to address corruption: top-down interventions, social accountability interventions and behavioural interventions.

Top-down interventions refer to those that aim to reduce the opportunity space for engaging in corrupt actions by promoting better controls at the workplace. This type of intervention aims to support the ability of management to hold the public sector workers accountable. Social accountability interventions are those involving direct citizen engagement. The World Bank defines social accountability as "the broad range of actions and mechanisms beyond voting that citizens can use to hold the state to account, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other societal actors that promote or

facilitate these efforts' (World Bank, 2006, p.5). This type of intervention typically seeks to strengthen formal accountability channels by means of mobilizing citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) to provide oversight roles in public service.

However, a closer analysis shows that both the top-down intervention approach and social accountability approach capitalize on monitoring and oversight. However, these approaches could be limited in efficacy taking into consideration that there could be power asymmetry between the public officials and the citizens. Moreover, the environment in which this kind of monitoring takes place could be inherently corrupt to an extent that there could be no viable party to undertake oversight roles.

In contrast, behavioural interventions, which this present paper advocates for, are grounded in the acknowledgement that behaviour is often shaped by non-rational and quasi-rational factors such as in-built mental models, social and cultural expectations. Individuals may be enculturated as a direct result of past experiences and the long-term exposure to a given and context-specific social environment and culture. Therefore, behavioural interventions, rather than directly targeting individuals, aim at making changes in the wider environment in which people make decisions and respond to cues. Examples of behavioural interventions include approaches such as education campaigns aimed at changing mental models, and social norms that dictate how individuals act.

Why does this paper prefer behavioural interventions over other types of interventions? Our approach is supported by the "power of mental frames". Mental frames easily result into automatic thinking. This is the scenario whereby our behaviours are affected by the perceptions of the generalized patterns of action adopted by others around us. For example, when people assume that everybody else around them is paying bribes to traffic police officers and accepting that as a normal state of affairs, then bribery will indeed become normalized. Normalized bribery then becomes the mental frame shaping the reactions of individuals who, when faced with a traffic police officer, will immediately assume the person in front of them is expecting a bribe.

The reverse is also projected to have a similar outcome. That is, in a society whereby individuals are exposed to information about integrity, transparency and accountability, people are likely to develop mental frames that are oriented to such values. The underlying point in the success of behavioural interventions in corruption studies is that information about concepts of national identity,

common good, integrity, transparency and accountability is a necessary prerequisite in anti-corruption initiatives.

One of the relevant mental models that can be associated with national identity and the images it conjures in the collective imagination, in Kenya, for example, is "being a Kenyan". "Being a Kenyan", connotes social justice, accountability, responsibility and integrity as values that ought to guide the relationship between the citizens and the government and also the relationship among the citizens. But, in the Kenyan case, are the values associated by "being a Kenyan", that is social justice, accountability, responsibility and integrity, linked to indigenous worldviews?

A case in point is the Pokomo term "*ngao*" which finds its common usage across most of the cultures in Kenya. *Ngao* means "shield". It is a symbol of strength and connotes ability to defend the common course of a community. The usage of the term "*ngao*" can also be found in the Kenyan national anthem which states that "*Haki iwe ngao*", i.e., "Truth/Justice be the shield." This term communicates a strong message of the Kenyan national identity. Therefore, official policies ought to explicitly articulate and reinforce the development of the "*ngao*" culture – or shared mental model – that dictates roles, behaviours and expectations that align with the promotion of common good that is reminiscent of "being a Kenyan". This should be seen in the wider sense of *ubuntu*, being human. All communities meet at the cultural altar of recognizing that to be *human* requires concrete efforts along the communitarian spirit of *ubuntu* to defend the course of the community. This frontier could be employed in nurturing shared mental frames through the African storytelling mechanisms in the cycle of the rites of passage which stand as monumental pillars at critical moments of transition in human life as explained in the following paragraphs.

First, in many parts of Africa, after dinner, villagers would congregate around a central fire and settle down to hear and listen to stories (Achebe, 1958). The calm nights and sitting around the fire set the tone for storytelling. The narration of the stories are accompanied with singing, drumming, percussion instruments, clapping, and dancing. The proverbial songs are utilized to highlight the expression of the characters (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1982).

In this theatrical mix, the function of storytelling is to transmit knowledge and information across generations, conveying information to the younger generations about the culture, worldviews, morals and expectations, norms and values (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1982). To demonstrate its pedagogical ambience, the

storyteller in Africa creates and generates a series of mental metaphors and images associated with words. This means storytelling can be packaged in forms such as songs, music, dances, plays, dramas and poetry (Utley, 2008).

African stories reflect relations among humans, man and woman, and humans and the animal world. This is shrined in the African concept of "Ubuntu" (Mandela, 1994). Ubuntu means "to be human". Ubuntu entails harmony and common good. These are virtues that are critical to the wellbeing and longevity of the African person. In this regard, the stories offer explanations of natural phenomena, they teach morality, and provide African people with a sense of identity.

Moreover, African stories have a powerful way of creating mental models in individuals as far as morality is concerned. This is because of the use of repetitive language. Storytellers repeat words, phrases, gestures and verses. The utilisation of repetition techniques makes it easy to understand and recall the stories from memory. The moral lesson behind the story, in this regard, becomes a lived experience in the community, thanks to the art of repetitive language technique. Moreover, at the end of each story moral lessons would be drawn.

Apart from repetitive language, African storytelling uses proverbs and parables to challenge the audience into resolving important moral dilemmas. This goal of using proverbs and parables is to achieve harmony and wisdom in the community and expose bad anti-social and canning tortoise-like behaviours (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1964). Proverbs and parables stimulate the mind of the audience to seek answers to the prevailing moral dilemmas.

In this context, the symbolism of *ngao and ubuntu*, as an anti-corruption intervention, could be embedded in the school curriculum through set-books and other storytelling mechanisms. If successfully embedded in the school curriculum, the teaching of moral education in schools becomes an African theatrical experience. An experience that uses the classroom as its theatre. The teacher becomes the African storyteller, while the students become the audience. The teacher first digests and understands the topic under study, carefully crafts indigenous methods of content delivery such as drama, songs, riddles, proverbs, tricksters, and parables and engages the students in search for the moral of the story. Stories related to Ubuntu morality, would challenge narrow ethno-cultural mental models when synchronized into the day-to-day school learning activities at different levels of education. The school today represents a multicultural hub,

bringing learners and facilitators whose mental frames have interacted with worldviews that transcend the limited ethnocentric frames.

Second, Ubuntu morality could as well be enforced by means of the cycle of the rites of passage. Other than delving into the specifics of each rite of passage, in this section we delve into the process of the rites of passage particularly for the adolescent initiates. The process of initiation begins with *identification*. This is the stage whereby parents/families identify adolescents whom they deem to be ready for initiation. Majority of the times, this takes place at the teen-age period. After the identification process, the would-be initiates enter into *seclusion*. The *seclusion* period is a period of instruction. The would-be initiates retreat into secluded areas where they are under the care of trusted community elders. It is at this stage of seclusion that they are instructed on the moral values of the community.

The moral values inculcated into the candidates revolve around o*bedience/loyalty* where they are taught to obey parents and the elderly. Through this, the would-be initiates are made to believe they would receive blessings if they remain obedient and loyal to community members. They are also taught *respect*. Young people are trained to have respect for others as well as self-respect. They are taught *honesty*. Young men and women are taught to be honest in all their undertakings. Similarly, the young men and women are taught to be *courageous* and *hardworking*. The youth are taught to be *courageous*, *responsible* and *hardworking* in order to be able to face challenges in life. Moreover, they are taught *patriotism*. Young men and women are taught to develop love for the community in which they gain a sense of belonging. Linked to *patriotism* is the *spirit of sharing*. The young men and women learn the importance of *generosity* and *sharing* what they have with others. These moral values, taught during the *seclusion* period, constitutes the hallmark of Ubuntu morality.

Upon successful conclusion of the *seclusion* period, the candidates enter into the stage of *incision*. This is the point at which a physical mark is made on the initiates as per each community's customs. Some communities do circumcision, some cliterodectomy, some removal of lower six teeth, some make incisions on the forehead. These are transition marks that allow the initiates to transit from childhood into adulthood. The initiates are then given specified time for healing under the care of experienced and knowledgeable members of the community.

Upon the completion of the specified healing period, the initiates enter into the stage of *re-integration*. *Re-integration* marks the stage whereby the newly initiated

adults are allowed, through ritual ceremonies, to join the larger community as responsible adults who are ready to advance the common good of the community.

However, in the contemporary African communities, there has been a shift in the design and execution of the indigenous rites of passage. Cliterodectomy has particularly become contentious with majority of the African governments and rights groups terming it Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Although a concise discussion of cliterodectomy goes beyond the scope of this paper, we however argue that an alternative viable option to cliterodectomy is long overdue. Moreover, with respect to other forms of initiation particularly male circumcision, majority of families today tend to prefer hospital setup or, in other instances, group initiation in churches and other places of worship. It remains to be ascertained whether such contemporary models of initiation utilize similar instructional methodologies as the indigenous models. A situation in which the contemporary initiation models, particularly within urban setups, do not match the indigenous models would – in theory and practice- account for a mismatch in moral value formation in Africa. It is therefore important that the new models of initiation be structured in a manner that they incorporate the indigenous moral instruction for the preservation of the common good.

Conclusion

Since research evidence indicates that ethno-cultural mental models play a substantial role in fuelling and perpetuating practices linked to corruption (Ouma, Oyugi & Samita, 2021), harnessing multicultural mental models in shaping anti-corruption interventions is long overdue in Africa. Thus, awareness raising campaigns that spread the message of *Ubuntu* could be a feasible solution to the endeavor of nurturing a multi-cultural mental model in Kenya, and elsewhere in Africa. Moreover, we have argued that through the African storytelling model, the education curriculum ought to be structured in such as that it incorporates the indigenous storytelling mechanisms in moral education. Lastly, we have also argued that the indigenous initiation rites of passage are focal points of moral formation and ought to be infused into the contemporary moral and ethical education methodologies.

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