

Yoruba proverbs and the anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria

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Abstract

Corruption is entrenched in the public space in Nigeria. Various attempts by policymakers to stamp out this social cankerworm seem not to be yielding positive results, as more incidences of corruption continue to ravage the polity. This paper therefore contributes to the campaign for anti-corruption in Nigeria by drawing on proverbs to persuade Nigerians to resist corruption. Proverbs as an embodiment of the distilled thoughts and wisdoms of a people can be applied to different human conditions for change. Drawing on thirty purposively selected proverbs that touch on the Yoruba concept of "Ewà Inú" (inner beauty), this paper deploys a sociocultural-linguistic approach to reveal how the rhetorical force of the proverbs can help reveal the evils in corruption and persuade against it.

Keywords: Corruption; anti-corruption crusade; proverbs; *ewà-inú* (inner beauty); socio-cultural linguistics; Nigeria

Introduction

Corruption is a major issue and topic of debate the world over. *The Merriam-Websters Collegiate Dictionary* defines the concept as "impairment of integrity, virtue or moral principle." Also, the *Collins English Dictionary* defines corruption as "capable of being rotten, make evil tainted with vice or sin... immoral, depraved, dishonest, especially through bribes". Beside these definitions, scholars have also defined the concept in various ways. For Babatunde cited in Jaiyeola (2009), "corruption means willingness to do things in a wrong way ... and a means of enriching oneself through dubious means". Wkom (1992) views corruption as "the perversion of public affairs for private advantage". Similarly, Adreski (1988) defines corruption as "the practice of using power for making private gain in breach of laws and regulations nominally in force". From the above definitions of corruption, one could deduce that corruption essentially consists in human subversion of moral codes or principles of life in certain social capacities with a view to obtaining personal gain of any kind.

As pointed out earlier, corruption is a universal phenomenon. It manifests in almost all human societies. This accounts for the proliferation of international agencies monitoring corruption issues all over the world and also debates on how to eradicate corruption in human societies. For example, Transparency International is an international civil society leading the fight against corruption in the world. It publishes and reports corruption cases across the globe with a view to exposing corrupt persons and ensuring that they are sanctioned accordingly.

Nigeria no doubt counts as one of the countries greatly bedevilled by the vice of corruption. Corruption is a major issue in Nigeria. Owolabi (2007:3) states that corruption had been a reality in Nigeria since the colonial era, when Nigerians were appointed by the colonial lords in prosecution of the indirect rule of the colonialists. Owolabi remarks that the appointees grossly abused their offices by involving themselves in all manner of corrupt practices. He further states that upon the independence of Nigeria in 1960, the national leaders of the country also engaged in large-scale corrupt practices such as the use of money to buy votes and financial misappropriation. The trend continued since then, such that today, Nigerians of different backgrounds are said to be involved in all kinds of corrupt practices such as offering bribes, offering sexual gratification, awarding fake contracts, among many others. These corrupt acts manifest in almost all facets of the Nigerian nation, with dire negative consequences for the country.

Indeed, corruption in Nigeria can be said to be a hydra-headed phenomenon. This postulation becomes justifiable when one considers the fact that the high level of religiosity immanent in the country, as attested to by the presence of numerous churches and mosques, has not helped to curb or at least reduce the vice. Currently, statistics indicate that Nigeria records the highest percentage of church attendance with eighty-nine percent church attendance (www.worldstatistics.com). Evangelization and crusade activities are common practices in the country; all avenues through which the message can be conveyed that corruption is ungodly. To give evidence and justification for religious condemnation of the vice, we cite a portion of the Christian Bible which says: "you will not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right" (Ex. 23:8). Also, the Islamic religion abhors corruption as attested to in the following verse of the Quran:

... so give full measure and full weight and wrong not men in their things, and do not engage in corruption on the earth after it has been set in order, that it will be better for you, if you are believers (*Quran 7:85*)

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The traditional religions also forbid corruption. According to Magesa (2008:59), the African worldview engenders and enforces moral/ethical consciousness which informs the whole of African moral life. Magesa (2008:59) goes further to state that “African ethical consciousness must, and does, answer to religious demands”. Therefore, to an African, to be religious entails being morally upright. For example, in the Yoruba traditional religion, corrupt people are usually disallowed from leading rites in the religion, among other formal sanctions. However, the reality, in some cases, is that the religious institutions often serve as avenues for further perpetuation of corrupt practices and activities. There are cases of imams (muslim clerics), bishops and pastors (christian clerics) and traditional priests that embezzle the funds of their religious institutions. Thus, it can confidently be stated that the high level of religious involvement in Nigeria has not helped to abate corruption in the country.

The pervading nature of corruption in Nigeria also made the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo to think of the best ways to legally and legitimately tackle the social cankerworm. Among other efforts geared towards combating corruption, the government established two bodies entrusted with the responsibility of prosecuting corrupt citizens of the country as well as non-citizens. The bodies are the Independent and Corrupt Practices and Related Offences Commission (ICPC) established on September 20, 2000 and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), which was established in 2003. The two bodies have been monitoring the trends of corruption in Nigeria, prosecuting corrupt people of different categories (high/low, rich/poor, etc.) and to some extent have retrieved sums of money from such corrupt individuals. Some of the cases of corruption investigated by such bodies include contract scams, illegal transfers of state funds to personal foreign accounts, among others. It is general knowledge that part of the Abacha loot was recovered.

However, in spite of all these efforts, corruption has not significantly abated in the public space in Nigeria, as there are more and more cases of corruption to the extent that some people may want to question the sincerity of the bodies charged with the responsibility of stemming the tide of corruption in the country. There have been cases of certain corrupt people who were prosecuted and later released without any meaningful punitive measure taken against them. For instance, the former Governor of Delta State, James Ibori, had escaped trials on several instances before he was finally arrested in the United Kingdom. Only recently, the former Governor of Bayelsa State, Diepreye Alamiesiegbu, who was jailed for corrupt practices and later released, was granted state pardon by the President of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan. This puts in doubt the commitment of the country to the anti-corruption drive. Also, the slowness of litigation process in the country has not helped matters as there are several cases of corruption that are not promptly attended to in some courts of law.

This reality therefore requires that some other approaches to tackling corruption may have to be sought, if only as a complement to the existing ones. One approach that may be effective in this regard is what I call culturally grounded moral rectitude. The African cultures, especially the Yoruba culture, offers certain paradigms for good human conduct and nature. The features constituting the paradigms delve into the essence of a real human being as construed by the Yoruba people of sub-Saharan Africa. This concerns the Yoruba notion of *ewà-inú* (Inner beauty).

The Yoruba constitute a huge proportion of Nigerians, with concentration in the Southwestern region of the country even though they migrate to different parts of the world within and outside of Nigeria. The Yoruba people are also to be found in countries such as Togo, Benin-Republic, Cote-D’voire and in some parts of Brazil, among other places. The Yoruba believe in proper human conduct which is captured in their notion of “*Omoluabi*” (the morally upright one). This notion of proper human conduct among the Yoruba is articulated in *ewà-inú*. In Yoruba cosmology, *ewà-inú* is a notion of beauty that transcends the physical; it emphasizes the character and conduct of an individual. This Yoruba philosophy is given force in Yoruba oral traditions, proverbs inclusive, in view of its importance. It is evident that the alarming rate of corruption in Nigeria can be attributed to the erosion of the Yoruba ideals of inner beauty among Nigerian citizenry.

Therefore, in this paper, I have selected some proverbs illuminating the Yoruba philosophy of inner beauty for analysis. I consider proverbs to be a resource that can expose the ills in corruption and provide counsel against it. Proverbs are inherently linguistic and cultural productions. As language resources or elements, they are weapons that can be drawn upon to effect certain changes in human behaviour, as language itself is potentially an agent of social change. As cultural productions, proverbs, especially Yoruba proverbs which are drawn upon in this study are rooted in the Yoruba ideological and thought patterns, and therefore have an infinite capacity to express and emphasize the Yoruba ideal of “inner beauty”, which is central to the Yoruba moral thought. Since a great deal of Yoruba ideology and thought is moralistic, the proverbs contain useful ideas on what is right or what should be and the repercussion of doing that which is wrong, among many others.

In what follows, the concept of *ewà-inú* is thus reviewed after which I discuss Yoruba proverbs.

The concept of *Ewà-inú* (inner beauty)

Notions of beauty are varied and diverse. They are basically subjective because what one person considers beautiful may not be so to another person. This reality is captured in the Yoruba saying: “Èyí ó wùmí ò wù é”; meaning “that which you consider pleasing may not be pleasing to me”. An English equivalent of this truism can be found in the famous aphorism: “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder”. Against this background, the notion of beauty is nebulous; it is difficult to pin down to a particular thing. However, beauty, which inherently refers to a quality that is pleasurable or satisfying, can be split into two aspects: outer and inner (Lawal 1978). While outer beauty refers to physical qualities that thrill the eyes, the inner beauty is profound, almost spiritual, getting into the roots of the essence of the object of beauty. It is concerned with the character of that individual or thing being described. Whereas people get captivated easily by outer beauty, especially in this materialistic world order, the inner form of beauty can be said to have more value. In line with this postulation, Lawal (1978) remarks:

The person who is outwardly beautiful but inwardly ugly or lacks character is called *awóbowà* (skin covers character) or *ojú larí, òsò ò dé nú* (superficial beauty). The physical beauty of such a person may first be admired but as soon as the inner ugliness of such an individual surfaces, he becomes repulsive. His beauty becomes clouded by the flames of his character ... (p. 3)

Van Damme (nd, 5) also corroborates the notion that outer beauty is hollow. According to the scholar, the outer beauty has a transitory character; it does not last long. Indeed, this is true of physical beauty as human beings wither over time irrespective of their good looks or wealth. However, the inner beauty is eternal; it outlives the person who possesses it. Inner beauty refers to the intrinsic worth of an individual. According to Lawal (1978), it is the most important element in the Yoruba conception of human beauty. This virtue is referred to as *iwà* (character) among the Yoruba. According to Abiodun (1983:13), “there is no doubt that the concept of *iwà* (character) is crucial to the definition of beauty in Yoruba thought”. Character typifies an individual (at least to the Yoruba); it informs such an individual’s response and disposition to all issues and situations. The development, or otherwise, of any human aggregate is dependent on the quality of the character of the individuals forming the aggregate. Therefore, for any society to advance, members of such a society must possess *ewà inú*, especially those in key positions in the society, because their actions and inactions impact directly on the facets of the life of the society.

It should be stated at this juncture that inner beauty is not limited to the Yoruba culture. In actual fact, it is emphasised in many cultures of the world, among which are the Chinese culture, the Japanese culture and African cultures. Its apparent universality cannot but be attributed to the deepness of the issues it brings to the fore. Also, essentially, the religions of the world emphasize inner beauty. Armstrong (2011:1) confirms the universality of inner beauty when he remarks that it “is not exclusive to any religion, ethnicity, socio-economic or age-group”. Thus, inner beauty can be said not to be cultural only, but also religious. No doubt, the foregrounded position of inner beauty in the cultures and religions of the world is a function of its sacredness and the sincere realization of its importance by the peoples of the world. However, for the purpose of this paper, emphasis is placed on the Yoruba *ewà-inú*.

In the context of Nigeria’s anti-corruption drive, which is the focal point in this paper, one can then state that much more attention should be paid to the entrenchment of the Yoruba concept of *ewà-inú* in the psyche of Nigerians. Evidently, the heavy spate of corrupt practices in Nigeria cannot but be linked to the erosion of basic ideals in the society. It is a product of the new status now accorded “money” as the most important thing in the society which should be acquired at all costs. What I thus advocate in this paper is a socio-cultural linguistic approach to tackling corruption in Nigeria. The involvement of an individual in corrupt practices negates the essence of inner beauty as enshrined in the Yoruba culture, for the culture forbids one taking what does not belong to one.

Yoruba proverbs

Adedimeji (2009) regards proverbs as wise sayings that address the hearts of the discourse in any given context truthfully and objectively. To this extent, proverbs are held in high regard among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria and some other African peoples. Proverbs are treasures in speech-giving and making, illuminating the grey aspects of any discourse. As representations of distilled thoughts and wisdoms of a people or a race, proverbs give road markings that should be toed by participants in a discourse. Furthermore, proverbs are carriers of culture; they convey the nuances of culture and ensure the continued relevance of such nuances by their transmission from one generation to another. In the opinion of Akporobaro (2001:105), “Proverb is the form which has proved itself of continuing relevance to modern man. It has been and remains a most powerful transmission of culture”.

According to Coker and Coker (2008:49), “Yoruba proverbs are replete in philosophy and cultural ethics”. In actual fact, it can be said that only the intelligent can make good use of proverbs among the Yoruba. This postulation perhaps is indeed justified by the following proverb: “Lówe lówe là á lùlù àgídígbo, ológbón ní í jó o, òmòrán ní í mò” (The àgídígbo

drum is sounded in proverbs; only the wise dance to it, only the knowledgeable understand it). This explains why among the Yoruba, speakers who use proverbs are usually commended and encouraged with the Yoruba expression “O káre, wà á pà mií ” (Well done, may you live to use another proverb again).

As earlier remarked, since the Yoruba people are moralistic, a great deal of the proverbs rooted in their culture is laden with thoughts on good living and good life. Therefore, the proverbs effectively serve heuristic purposes. While Adegaju (2010) and Agbaje (1998) have generously explored proverbs as tools for a more peaceful resolution of conflicts in Africa, I specifically in this paper consider Yoruba proverbs a resource that can be drawn on in the campaign against corruption in Nigeria. Thus, through the subsequent analyses, I bring to the fore the aspects of inner beauty inherent in, and foregrounded in the broad Yoruba proverbial corpus.

Method

This study is exploratory. Data for the study were sourced from available books on Yoruba proverbs and the Internet. The data consisted of thirty proverbs illuminating the Yoruba notion of inner beauty and or proverbs that simply discourage corrupt practices among human beings. Specifically, the proverbs were obtained from the electronic version of Owomoyela's compilation of Yoruba proverbs, titled *The Good Person: Excerpts from the Yoruba Proverb Treasury*, the Internet and oral sources. Information was also obtained from the library, archives and oral sources on the philosophy of *ewà-inú* which forms the anchor of this paper. The proverbs selected were classified into different categories for ease of data analysis.

Theoretical orientation

Socio-cultural linguistics is the theoretical anchor for this study. Socio-cultural linguistics is an approach to linguistic analysis aimed at revitalizing the socially and culturally linguistic analysis. Bulcholtz and Hall (2005:5) describe socio-cultural linguistics as “the broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture and society”. In coming up with socio-cultural linguistics, Bulcholtz and Hall feared that sociolinguistics was getting rather narrowed in its focus, suggesting certain kinds of study, while de-emphasizing cultural and anthropological linguistics, among others. According to Nilep (2006:3), sociocultural linguistics to Bulcholtz and Hall would “include sociolinguistics, anthropology, discourse analysis, sociology of language, as well as certain streams of social psychology, folklore studies, media studies, literary theory and the philosophy of language”. Nilep's description of sociocultural linguistics reveals that the theory of language is highly interdisciplinary, drawing on culture, society, orature, literature, psychology and language.

Sociocultural linguistics is no doubt relevant to this study, as the work hinges on language, culture, society, psychology and folklore, which the linguistic model amply caters for. The problem of corruption being addressed in the paper is societal, cultural and also psychological. On the other hand, the concept of *ewà-inú* (inner beauty) reflected and emphasized in the proverbs selected for analysis in this paper is cultural, psychological and folkloric, just as the proverbs used themselves are.

Most significantly however, this paper re-emphasises the fact that there is a close relationship between language and culture. Just as language enriches itself through culture, so culture enriches itself through language. In the context of this paper, therefore, while linguistic resources (proverbs in this case) are used to project the cultural phenomenon of inner beauty, and in addition offer insights to the cultural problem of corruption in Nigeria, proverbs as a cultural repertoire further help to crystallize the fact that language is a potent weapon for social change.

Analysis and discussions

For the purpose of analysis, I classify the proverbs constituting the data for this work into three: (i) Proverbs that emphasize *contentment* which is an aspect of inner beauty, (ii) Proverbs that emphasize the need for a *consciousness of good name/reputation* (Orúko rere) and finally, (iii) proverbs that emphasize *good character*.

Contentment as inner beauty

A major explanation for the proliferation of corruption among Nigerians can be said to be the low level of contentment among them. Greed and an ostentatious lifestyle are the root cause of corruption in Nigeria. Several scholars in Nigeria have also echoed this view (See Mimiko 2008; Kehinde 2008). People of different classes in Nigeria want to live beyond their means so as to compare with those whose status is fairly above theirs. The high premium placed on money/ riches in the society also does not help matters, as well-meaning people with good ideas but that are yet to attain financial prosperity are hardly reckoned. Thus, contentment which is not only a major tenet of the two main religions, but also a central element of *ewà-inú* (inner beauty) among the Yoruba of Nigeria, is thrown into the abyss. This reality is no doubt unfortunate because contentment is indeed central to the Yoruba worldview.

Proverbs abound in Yoruba culture condemning lack of contentment or covetousness. For instance, it is said that “òkánjúwà baba àrùn” (covetousness is the father of illnesses). This proverb tells us that in the Yoruba worldview,

covetousness is the worst of all human frailties or shortcomings. The Yoruba cannot tolerate covetousness. It is important to be fully aware of the meaning of the Yoruba word “àrùn” used in the proverb in order to appreciate the semiotic import of the proverb. “Àrùn” is disease, which nobody prays to experience as it is essentially negative. But in the proverb, covetousness is presented as sickness, showing that anybody who exhibits covetousness is sick. Another proverb that harps on the Yoruba intolerance of lack of contentment is “Òkánjúwà baba olè; àwòrònsòsò wo ohun olóhun má séjú” (The covetous person is the most senior thief; bug-eyed greedy person stares at another person’s possession without blinking). In this particular proverb a covetous person is likened to a hardened thief. This analogy simply shows the Yoruba contempt for greedy acts. The use of the Yoruba word “baba” is significant in the proverb, more so as it occurs in the proverb preceding this. The word conveys information about the depth and high level of the Yoruba rejection of greed. Also, it is said among the Yoruba that “Òkánjúwà pèlú olè, déédé ni won jé” (greed/covetousness and stealing are the same). This particular proverb perhaps is a more stringent Yoruba proverbial condemnation of covetousness. In this proverb, covetous people are not given a chance at all, as they are tagged thieves. Thus, the social indignation that is accorded thieves is the lot of covetous people. This explains the popularity of the Yoruba proverbial saying: “Ìtélórùn baba iwà” (contentment is the father of all behaviours). This short proverb shows the premium the Yoruba place on contentment, as it informs one that contentment is the most revered of all human qualities. A further testimony to the emphasis placed on contentment in the Yoruba cosmos is found in the Yoruba proverb, “Àíkánjú tu olú orán, igba rè ò kún isáàsùn” (it is fruitless harvesting mushrooms prematurely, two hundred will not fill the pot). In this proverb is shown the unfulfilment that comes with discontentment and overzealousness. The wisdom in the proverb for corrupt people of all kinds is that they are only chasing shadows by their corrupt acts as their material acquisitions eventually add up to nothing.

To demonstrate the Yoruba’s difficulty in rationalising the involvement of individuals in greedy acts, the Yoruba say: “Omodé jí ti ojú orun wá, o ni àkàrà méjíméjì, ká ní won ti mu u bèè kó tó jí, kò ní bá ìkan” (A child wakes up from sleep and says in code; “Bean fritters two-by-two”. Had the others been taking them thus before he woke, would any have been left?). This particular proverb portrays corrupt people not only as lacking in *ewà-inú* but also not being able to think profoundly. The proverb informs us that corrupt individuals are usually oblivious of the fact that if others had not toiled to create the platforms wherein they now operate and through which they demonstrate their greed, they would not have been successful. Therefore, all corrupt people whether high or low can be described as “Omo àkítàn tí ó sora rè di aríléyanká” (The child who had hitherto been in a garbage dump, who suddenly finds a house and abuses the opportunity). This is a Yoruba proverb that condemns all manner of excessive opportunism which is essentially the case with Nigerian leaders and others involved in corrupt practices. Although it may be argued that some of these corrupt people were not poor before coming into power, the fact is that every individual who embezzles money can adequately be viewed as being poor and thus needing to steal to be comfortable or financially secure.

Further condemnation of corruption in Yoruba proverbs is found in the proverb “Ònà òfun, ònà òrun; méjèèjì bakan nàà ni wón rí” (One’s throat may lead one to death). This particular proverb indeed sensitizes people to the risk involved in getting involved in corrupt acts. It informs one that corruption, greed or avarice can indeed lead to the destruction of an individual. This explains why Yoruba people train their children right from infancy to show contentment by initially refusing gifts from outsiders. All manner of facial expressions are deployed to instill the value in children due to its importance. To further show the distaste of the Yoruba for corruption or immodesty, the Yoruba would say: “Òpòlopò oògùn a gunmo gálègàlè (It is a great deal of medicine that possesses a child and robs it of all self-control). What this proverb suggests is that a person who lacks moderation is like someone overpowered by bad medicine. This proverb no doubt shows the extent to which the Yoruba forbid immoderate or immodest actions such as those of the corrupt individuals in the Nigerian nation.

Desire for good name and reputation as inner beauty

Another cause for the extent of corruption in the Nigerian society is the drop in Nigerians’ consciousness of the necessity for a good name or reputation. This consciousness of the need to have a good public image is part of what constitutes *ewà-inú* in an individual. In the Yoruba culture, reputation and good name are given utmost significance. According to Fashiku (2006), “names are instruments of arousing, defining, manifesting and establishing the expectations, aspirations and consciousness of the bearer”. Names reveal a great deal about their bearers. In actual fact, among the Yoruba, names are not just given; they make statements about certain prevailing social and cultural circumstances around the birth or history of the family of the infant being named. Just as naming infants at birth involves a great deal of seriousness and introspection, the process of acquiring good names or reputations involves certain serious conditionalities. It implies that the individual being accorded such noble cultural height must have distinguished him/

herself in certain capacities and circumstances. Such a person must have acted in consistence with the tenets of the Yoruba philosophy of *ewà-inú* in some capacities.

Numerous proverbs emphasize the importance of good name or good reputation among the Yoruba. However, of all of them, the most apt can be said to be “Orúko rere sàṅ ju wúrà àti fàdákà lo” (good name/reputation is better than gold and silver). This particular proverb reveals the extent to which good name/reputation is sacrosanct in the Yoruba worldview. The appearance of this proverb in the Bible (Proverbs 22:1), further shows that good name is held as important not only in the Yoruba culture and perhaps some other cultures but also in the major religions of the world. Through the proverb, the greatest material desires of men are portrayed to be ephemeral and worthless, whereas good reputation and name is portrayed as containing intrinsic value. No doubt, this common philosophy of the Yoruba is true as material things fade away with time, but good reputation outlasts the bearer. People of good reputation are never forgotten in history. Little wonder the Yoruba say: “Oba tó je tí ilú rójú, orúko rẹ̀ ò ní parun ...” (The king whose reign witnessed tremendous peace, his name will never be destroyed). This Yoruba saying indicates that notable men who sought good reputation and achieved it will never be forgotten in history; a good reputation is eternal.

To demonstrate the importance of a good reputation and name, the Yoruba also say “Orúko eni ní í jẹ̀rì eni lókèèrè” (one’s reputation is one’s witness everywhere). What this proverb simply offers is that with a good name or good reputation, one does not have to visit everywhere to be known as good. It is unfortunate that corrupt people in Nigeria have neglected this reality. For example, as big as Nigeria is, there are people who attain national significance by performing well in their own immediate environment. Typical examples are found in the likes of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Wole Soyinka, such that even people who are yet to have physical contact with them within and outside Nigeria jump at the mention of their names. Still to concretise the sacrosanct importance of good reputation, the Yoruba say: “Orúko lègbón oyè” (good name or reputation surpasses titles). This proverb informs one that to be honoured with a title, one must have distinguished oneself as an exemplary person, as titles are given to noble people.

Perhaps, to further lampoon the tendencies of corruption among citizens, the Yoruba would say: “Eni Olórún bá fún lórúko, kò ní máa wá oríkì mi kiri” (the person whom God has granted a good reputation will not indulge in excessive acts that will portray him/her in a bad light). This particular proverb offers a witty criticism of immoderate acts as capable of bringing ruin to people who had hitherto worked hard to get to certain heights but are about to bring themselves into disrepute. This typifies the scenario among corrupt individuals in Nigeria as they usually are people privileged to be in certain positions of social significance that should ordinarily give them satisfaction. However, rather than enjoy the privileges that come with their offices and leave indelible marks on the sands of time, they resort to amassing wealth illegally for their future use upon exit from office. The example of such people is further captured in the Yoruba proverb: “Eni tó joba, tó tún sàwúre, se ó fé di Olórún ni” (the person who is a king already and is still frantically doing fortune medicine, does he want to become God?) This proverb also contextually portrays corrupt people as being guilty of shallow thinking due to the befuddlement of their thoughts by inordinate desires. It portrays them as selfish people who are most ungrateful to God for the opportunity given them, more so as to the Yoruba, it is only God that is self-subsisting; men can never attain that height and should accept the fact. Further criticism of corruption is found in the Yoruba proverb: “Kàkà kí n bé egbàà òbùn, ma kúkú bí òkan soso ògá. Sé òkan soso àràbá kì í se egbé egbàà òsúnún” (two hundred filthy persons are no match for one person of good repute). This proverb emphatically informs one that no matter the size and prosperity of corrupt people, a virtuous or incorrupt person is better or more desired than them. Thus, it is important for corrupt Nigerians to note that their wealth may not necessarily earn them admiration from the people, as opposed to people of good repute whose example is captured by the proverb “esè pò léyìn ikookò” (There is a multitude of feet in the wake of the wolf). The proverb crystallises the fact that good reputation attracts popularity and a great following which is not the lot of corrupt people.

The Yoruba believe in the sacredness of good reputation to the extent that people are encouraged to guard their reputations jealously. This is responsible for the frequency of the expression “máa bà mí lórúko jé” (don’t soil my name) in Yoruba frank conversations, as a good reputation once tainted is usually difficult to “mend”. This is captured in the Yoruba proverb “eni bá jalè léèkan, bó bá fàrán ogun òké bora, aso olè ló wò (whoever stole once, if he or she drapes himself or herself in expensive velvet cloth, is draped in stolen goods). The proverb is succinctly a metaphor for the persistence of a bad image once acquired. It is however unfortunate that corrupt people are usually not conscious of this fact. In their bid to enjoy the frenzy of the moment as afforded by their social capacities, corrupt people heap social stigma on themselves, the resultant effect of which is not only felt by themselves but even everybody associated with them, since it is said that “Èsù ò níwà, a kólé rẹ̀ sí oríta” (whoever lacks social graces deserves to be ostracized). It should be said that, in reality, many of the corrupt people are not literally ostracized, they are however practically ostracized as they are ideally denied future social or communal privileges.

Good character (*ìwà rere*) as *Ewà-inú*

In the above analyses, I have identified aspects of inner beauty that are suited to the eradication of corruption in Nigeria using proverbs. Here, I generally want to explore proverbs on good character with a view to advancing the thesis that good character (*ìwà rere*), being central to *ewà-inú* (inner beauty), offers the solution to the problem of corruption in the Nigerian nation. At this stage, however, it should be crystal clear that corruption is not *ìwà rere* and as such individuals involved in it do not have good character. To show the extent of Yoruba respect for good character, it is said that “*Ìwà lewà*” (good character is the real beauty). This proverb delves into the core of African aesthetics, informing one that the real beauty is the inner beauty and not the outer one. This is the kind of beauty respected by the ideal society. It is the kind of beauty possessed by political office holders who leave office without embezzling funds. Thus, to emphasize the dignity accorded good character, the Yoruba would say: “*bíbíre kò se fowó rà*” (good character/reputation cannot be bought with money). This proverb presents good character (*ìwà rere*) as the essence of human existence or living which is intrinsic in people and not acquired. Also, it is said that “*Eyin funfun lèsó èrín, ìwà rere lèsó èniyàn*” (the beauty of a smile lies in the whiteness of the teeth, the beauty or aesthetic value of an individual lies in the good character of such individual). This proverb implies that good character is central to the being of every individual. To show the emptiness of successful people without good character, it is also said that “*Eni tó ní orí rere tí kò ní ìwà rere, ìwà rẹ̀ ní o ba orí rẹ̀ jé*” (the person who is destined to be successful but has bad character will soon be destroyed by his own doing). This particular proverb shows the depth of the African belief in good character, elucidating that even if people with bad character prosper temporarily on this earth, they will not do so in the hereafter. This particular proverb is instructive as it teaches that the prosperity of corrupt people is evanescent, withering away with time.

To further reveal the centrality of *ìwà rere* which is being ignored by corrupt Nigerians to the African perception of good living and life, I wish to offer for analysis the Yoruba proverb: “*Ilé dára ó ku èké; èyàn dára ó ku ìwà*” (the house is beautiful but lacks pillars; the person is good looking but lacks good character). In this proverb, just to show the importance of good character, an analogy is drawn between *ìwà rere* and the pillars of house. Of course it is not debatable that without the pillars, the house will not exist. In the same vein, without a good character, a person lacks his or her essence. This is instructive especially in the Nigerian political climate where politicians adore money to the extent that they consider it the “pillar” of good life or living. The Yoruba also say: “*Obìnrin sòwà nù, ó ní òun ò lórí oko*” (a wife who is bereft of good character laments not having a responsible husband). This proverb emphasizes the importance of good character to the survival of human beings. Although in the proverb, recourse is directly made to women with bad character that complain of lacking stable homes, it is a metaphor for all manner of people who do not utilize all their potential due to their bad character. Thus, if a politician is thrown out of office on grounds of misappropriation of funds, such an individual should consider him or herself a failure irrespective of the competencies of such an individual.

Indeed, the possession and demonstration of good character has merits. The Yoruba say: “*Òrisà níwà, bí a se hù ú ló se n gbe ni*” (Good character is a deity; it favours one just as it is exhibited). The proverb is significant, informing us that there are distinct benefits that obtain from the demonstration of good character. Contrary to the popular belief among Nigerians that it is better for one to feather his/her own nest while in political offices as recognition is not given to selfless people; the proverb impresses the lesson that there is a clear reward for selflessness. It is also said that “*Eni rere kí kú sípò ikà*” (Each person is recompensed according to their character). This proverb further emphasizes that good character attracts certain benefits and vice-versa. The Yoruba also say that “*Ojú ikà láti n fi omo olóore joba*” (it is in the presence of the wicked that the child of the good person is crowned). This proverb tells one that the benefits of demonstration of good character by an individual can be eternal, outliving such an individual. Numerous examples abound of people who have found themselves in certain noble positions by virtue of the good deeds of their parents or relations in the past. In fact, in many African societies, this is a common practice. All this should help to re-orient all manner of corrupt public office holders that their example should not always be that of the “whiteman” captured in the proverb “*Òyìnbó n lo, o su saga*” (Whiteman leaves office with faeces on his seat). Perhaps, this particular proverb can be said to be hilarious but underlying its hilarity is deep wisdom. It is a strong condemnation of excessive opportunism as manifested in corruption.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the inherent principles of *ewà-inú*, as reflected in selected Yoruba proverbs. The thesis of the paper is that a psycho-cultural re-orientation of Nigerians towards the ideals of the Yoruba philosophy of inner beauty (*ewà-inú*) would bring about positive effects in remoulding Nigerian society towards a moral path. The argument is that all corrupt people in Nigeria and indeed beyond Nigeria essentially lack *ewà-inú*. Therefore, a lot of effort is needed to ensure that Nigerians embrace *ewà-inú* with a view to eradicating corruption in the country. To this end, proverbs were proposed as an effective resource for articulating the tenets of the Yoruba *ewà-inú* whose entrenchment in the public

space in Nigeria will discourage corruption. If the society can go back to the basics, by integrating courses that will teach young Nigerian citizens at the primary and secondary school levels aspects of the Yoruba notion of inner beauty, emphasizing that which forbids taking what is not rightfully one's own, such individuals will grow up with the right attitude. Also, specific proverbs and related pithy sayings on inner beauty can be exposed to children right from home at the primary and secondary school levels to instil anti-corruption ideals in them from those levels. The wisdom in the proverbs if taught to children in the society should help in training them along the moral path such that they would not like to engage in corrupt practices. Also, if adults in the nation are constantly reminded of the wisdom in the proverbs, there is a tendency for them to retreat from their corrupt ways. The media thus has a significant role to play in this regard, as the proverbs can be used in enlightenment programmes against corruption in the society. It is suggested that a massive campaign be launched in the country through all manner of media, sensitizing the public to the cultural imperative of inner beauty as enshrined in the Yoruba cultural tenets, and reflected in the broad Yoruba proverbial base.

In conclusion, however, I wish to state that since inner beauty is not limited to the Yoruba culture, its corollary in the verbal arts of the other cultural groups in Nigeria can be appropriated so as to engender a national re-awakening against corruption. The exploration of inner beauty through Yoruba proverbs achieved in this study would then be a springboard for stamping out corruption in the Nigerian body polity.

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