

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gbemisola Olujobi](#)

# **Between the Wrong Thing and ‘The Done Thing’** <sup>[1]</sup>

*USC Center on Public Diplomacy Research Associate Gbemisola Olujobi sheds light on one of the pejorative images that has come to define Africa in the eyes of many around the world.*

Corruption goes by many names in Africa -- "kola," "egunje," "maslaha," "kompo," "kitu-kidogo," "tikoko," "toshiyar-baki," "sweetener," etc. Everyone recognizes it as a gangrenous evil. Sometimes, however, the line between wrongdoing and the done thing tends to be...a little fuzzy.

The story is told of an African public officer who went to a Swiss bank and announced himself as a member of his country's anti-corruption commission. He said he was checking on externally held assets and asked for a list of his countrymen with deposits held in the bank. The bank manager told him that was not possible. The African big man produced a letter of authority from his country's president. Still, the bank manager did not budge. In anger, the big man pulled a gun and threatened to shoot the manager unless he gave him the list. "Shoot me if you must," the bank manager said. "I cannot release the names you require." "Excellent!" exclaimed the African, opening his briefcase to reveal bundles of dollars. "Open me an account."

Despite the humor of this fable, corruption is no longer a laughing matter in Africa. A report by the African Union estimates that corruption costs African economies in excess of \$148 billion a year. This figure is estimated to represent 25 percent of Africa's GDP and to increase the cost of goods by as much as 20 percent.

In Nigeria alone, it is estimated that 220 billion pounds (about \$500 billion) of development assistance has been stolen by successive corrupt leaders since independence. According to Malam Nuhu Ribadu, chairman of Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, this amount represents six times the money that went into rebuilding Europe through the Marshall Plan at the end of the Second World War.

Beyond the fiscal, corruption costs dreams, hopes, futures and lives, with the poor bearing a disproportionate brunt of the consequences. According to Transparency International, the poor suffer this disadvantage because they are more vulnerable to extortion and intimidation for basic services, as well as to the harsh consequences of corruption on their country's overall development. This is because corruption increases the cost of public services. It also lowers their quality; can restrict the public's access to water, health and education; diverts public resources away from social sectors and the poor; and limits development, growth and

poverty reduction.

Many wars have been waged against corruption. The African Union Convention Against Corruption, the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (which has been ratified by about 13 African states) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development's peer review mechanism are among efforts intended to kick corruption out of the continent.

But by far the most creative and realistic has been Mohammed Ibrahim's ingenious solution -- the Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership. One of Africa's most successful businessmen, the Sudanese-born Ibrahim is the founder of telecom giant Celtel.

The idea of the prize is to rate governance in 53 African countries each year. Winning leaders will then get prize money of \$5 million (2.7 million pounds) over 10 years after they leave office, plus \$200,000 (107,000 pounds) a year for life. The initiative has been endorsed by global figures such as Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Kofi Annan and Paul Wolfowitz.

The selection of winners of the Mo Ibrahim Prize will be guided by the Ibrahim index of African governance, which will rank all sub-Saharan countries according to quality of governance. The index will be developed under the direction of professor Robert Rotberg of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The selection criteria will include sustainable economic development, human development (health and education), transparency, empowerment of civil society, democracy, human rights, rule of law and security.

"Ranking governance in this manner," says Rotberg, "would provide both the carrot and the stick for positive change."

It took Ibrahim to remind everyone that African leaders have little to look forward to after holding office. There is nothing like a U.S. former president's library anywhere in Africa. It is as if they are expected to serve their countries and go into oblivion afterward. The fear of this oblivion is one of the things that drive official corruption in Africa.

"Suddenly all the mansions, cars, food, wine is withdrawn. Some find it difficult to rent a house in the capital. That incites corruption; it incites people to cling to power," Ibrahim said in an interview with the Financial Times. He could not have put it more aptly.

"The prize will offer essentially good people, who may be wavering, the chance to opt for the good life after office," Ibrahim offered.

Ibrahim is eminently qualified to know what ails African leaders. He built a very successful mobile phone business in countries that do not rank high on Transparency International's corruption perception index, such as Chad, Niger, Sierra Leone and Malawi. He certainly hobnobbed with the leaders of these countries during the course of establishing his business in their domains, and had the advantage of observing them at close quarters. Some of them may have even shared secret pains with him.

According to Ibrahim, "There is much gossip and speculation about what Tony Blair will do when he leaves office. Will he join the lecture circuit? Will he take on a series of directorships?"

Will he write his memoirs?

"In Africa, the choices for heads of state are more sobering. Most leave office with no chance of sustaining a lifestyle equivalent to the one they enjoy while in office. The income of former heads of government may seem a trifling issue compared to the major problems faced by many of the continent's citizens. In fact, it is of fundamental importance in securing its future.

"A situation in which leaders face three choices -- relative poverty, term extension, or corruption -- is not conducive to good governance."

The prize, says Ibrahim, offers a fourth option -- govern well and receive a prize worth more than the Nobel Prize.

Five million dollars is actually paltry compared to what a Mobutu or Abacha had access to. Both dictators are believed to have amassed nothing less than \$5 billion each. But according to thinker and writer Ethan Zuckerman, "the prize isn't designed to convince the Mobutus of the world that good governance beats dictatorial plunder -- it's designed to reward leaders like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, John Kufuor or Amadou Toure, who will likely leave office after fulfilling their terms and will need to figure out what you do after leading your nation. The hope attached to the Ibrahim prize is that retired African leaders might be able to be constructive civil society figures, perhaps in the way former American presidents like Carter and Clinton have been since leaving office."

Zuckerman finds a peg for Ibrahim's solution in a conversation he once had with Jose Maria Figueres, the former president of Costa Rica. "When he was leaving his position with the World Economic Forum, I asked him what it was like to be a former president looking for work. He smiled and gave an answer I'm sure he's given a few thousand times: 'You know, it's a new direction for people in my situation. Historically, being a Latin American president wasn't a job you survived.'"

Figueres' dilemma must be shared by many African heads of government. I once interviewed the former governor of one of Nigeria's 36 states a few months after he handed the office over to a successor. Inevitably, the interview veered into life after retirement, and he shared with me a close relative of what we all call "culture shock." I will call it "change-of-circumstance shock" here.

In Nigeria, top government officials usually ride in convoys heralded by sirens and outriders. Ordinary mortals are cleared out of the way of these presidential and governorship convoys and made to wait while the dignitary rides through.

For this former governor, one of the most difficult moments of retirement occurred when his car was cleared out of the way of his successor's convoy and he was made to pull to the side while his successor rode on in glory. From what I saw in his eyes, he would have worked harder at holding on to power if he had given more thought to the reality of becoming an ordinary citizen.

This may not make sense to people in the West who appear not to attach much importance to status or perks of office. As a guest of the Goethe Institute in Berlin in 2003, I was part of a group that visited a member of the German Bundestag. My jaw dropped when the parliamentarian jumped on a bicycle and rode off merrily after our meeting. I recall that I didn't

quite find it admirable that a member of Parliament would ride a bicycle. To my African mind, it was absolutely scandalous that such a "big man" would even touch a bicycle. I couldn't immediately make the link between the German MP's bicycle and corruption in my country and continent. I was totally blinded by my values, beliefs and attitudes -- simply put, my culture.

Many would like not to see any link between corruption and culture in Africa. The sad truth, however, is that the malignancy of corruption in Africa cannot be properly excised without paying attention to culture. My aversion to an MP riding a bicycle is probably what drives a typical Nigerian public servant who earns the equivalent of about \$500 a month to acquire the latest Mercedes or BMW automobile. He needs to keep up the appearances of a big man with a big office, so that ordinary people like me will not despise him for being "big man for mouth," a big man in name only. How then do people (like me) expect him to fund the appearances that will make him a "beta" (real) big man?

Victor Dike, in "Corruption in Nigeria: A New Paradigm for Effective Control," argues that cultures that stress economic success as an important goal but have low access to economic opportunities have a predisposition to high levels of corruption. Remember here that our big man, like other public and civil servants, sometimes works for months without getting paid. He has to meet his existential needs while also living up to the bigness of his office. "Under this condition," says Dike, "many citizens would reject the rule of the game and criminally innovate to make ends meet."

Now, what is our big man supposed to do about his army of cousins, uncles, aunties, fathers, mothers, grandparents, great-grandparents, in-laws, townsmen, friends, old classmates, former colleagues, club members, age-grade members, descendants' union members, old boys' association members, drinking buddies, former and current girlfriends, neighbors and sundry associates when he is suddenly catapulted from among them into a big office? Everyone who needs a meal, pocket money, school fees, a job, a contract, a university admission or any other favor simply finds his way to the big man's residence or office, with the full assurance that the need will be met. His resources must meet the needs of every member of this army, otherwise he is a "yeye" (useless) big man.

Dike cites the work of Edward Banfield, which notes that corruption is linked to strong family values involving intense feelings of obligation. That, according to Banfield, explains the high levels of corruption in southern Italy and Sicily, where the Mafia has the attitude of "anything goes" as long as it advances the interests of the family.

Now let's go back to our big man. Apart from taking care of his inner caucus, he also has countless obligations to his community. It is even worse if he holds an elective office. In that case, the people put him there by voting for him. To refuse to attend to the community's needs in the office into which his people put him amounts to biting the fingers that fed him. For the politician who plans to come back to ask for votes in the next election, that is nothing but political suicide. He would have chopped (eaten) and then defecated into the soup pot, so he would not be welcome for another feast. No career politician would take this option.

So, our big man has to initiate and fund development projects in his village, give scholarships to indigent students, send his old classmate to England for a liver transplant, renovate the village palace, build a new town hall, contribute toward feeding widows and orphans, be the chairman at every wedding, be the chief mourner at every funeral, be the chief launcher at

every fundraiser and find a job for every graduate his village produces.

As N.G. Egbue rightly points out in "Africa: Cultural Dimensions of Corruption and Possibilities for Changes," "The average person's financial and other forms of resources must be seen to assist the uplifting of others in his immediate community or even beyond. This often determines the status given to any individual and in particular, the level of political support due to a person."

This situation, says Egbue, "combines with a tendency towards ethnic allegiances and parochialism, to encourage the average African to condone unethical acquisition of wealth by friends and relatives."

If the big man fails in his duties as a worthy son of the soil, he is considered selfish and referred to as "adanikanje" (one who consumes a feast all by himself). Such a big man is likened to the selfish tortoise who ate so much that his innards burst through his stomach. He becomes the object of public opprobrium, and every member of his family suffers the community's ill wishes.

Make no mistake about it, the needs of the big man's inner caucus as well as those of his wider community are genuine needs. These are actually people who need help with the next meal, means of livelihood, school fees, medical attention, potable water and rural electrification. When you combine poverty, deprivation and the absence of social security with the lack of a safety net for individuals who have access to public funds, you have a pretty mess on your hands.

Don't be surprised when the "generous" big man, who has obviously dipped his hands into the treasury, is rewarded with chieftaincy titles by his community. Yes, he is a worthy son of the soil because of the boreholes he has drilled in his village, the scholarships he has awarded, the contracts he has facilitated, the sick and hungry he has succored and the jobs he has secured for his unemployed kith and kin. He has met many crucial and immediate needs. The larger consequences of his corruption can be sorted out later. A hungry man is not only an angry man, he is also a very unreasonable man!

And even though everyone cries about the ills of corruption, in reality corruption happens only when you don't benefit from it. When it is done by a member of your clan and you follow chop (benefit from it), it is not corruption. It is the done thing.

Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan captures this ambivalence vividly in "A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa?" He says, "Corruption is someone else. Only the practices to which one falls victim or from which one is excluded are denounced as being corrupt. Those in which one plays a role oneself never give rise to condemnation."

Besides, you would think there would be at least one voice of reason in our big man's community. Someone somewhere must be honest enough to recognize the big man's largesse as part of an ill-gotten pile and be ready to expose him. Now, this is like the proverbial belling of the cat. Who will do it? It is like using one's head to crack a coconut. Native wisdom informs that the person who uses his head to crack a coconut will not partake of it. That fellow should be dead, in a coma or nursing too serious a headache to chew anything.

Says de Sardan, "in a 'face to face' society, the price of open conflict is too high. It is unthinkable to denounce a relative, a neighbor, the relative of a friend (or neighbor), that is, someone with whom one has a personal tie, or even a weak one: social disapproval would be too heavy."

Why do all the swashbuckling corruption eradication crusades seem to have little or no effect in Africa? According to de Sardan, "Unfortunately, beyond declarations of principle, pathetic or exasperated acknowledgements and moralistic condemnations, the social mechanisms of corruption are scarcely explored, nor are its processes of legitimation seen from the actors' point of view."

De Sardan argues for "as subtle as possible, a restitution of the value systems and cultural codes which permit a justification of corruption by those who practice it." He points to "certain social norms widely represented in modern Africa, which 'communicate' with or influence the practices of corruption."

Dike also leans on the work of Robert K. Merton to identify the link between culture and corruption. "His means-ends schema implies that corruption is sometimes a motivated behavior responding to social pressures to violate the norms, so as to meet the set goals and objectives of a social system."

Many social scientists also argue that petty corruption in developing countries arises from the clash or conflict between traditional values and the imported norms that accompany modernization and sociopolitical development. They describe it as a natural stage of development for societies in transit between the ancient and the modern. Using Western norms to categorize corruption in Africa may therefore present some benign problems.

De Sardan highlights some practices that are still alive and well in many Sahelian countries today (as in many other African countries) that may be hard to explain to anyone in the West. Among these done things are monetary gifts such as "tukunci," which is given to a bearer of glad tidings; "alaada nooru," given to the witness of an important transaction; "habiize," given to relatives when one returns from a journey; "turguru nooru," given to women encountered in the act of hair-braiding; "yuubi," given to women engaged in collective work; giving gifts to the customary chief when one goes to greet him to put one in his good books; "kambu-zaa," a contribution to marriage, baptism or enthroning; "kola" or "a little something," given to a compliant or helpful civil servant; "kalam dene" (ink money), given to a marabout for the ink that he needs to trace the verses of the Quran or to a bureaucrat in charge of one's case; "moo dabu," given to a cashier when one withdraws a huge sum of money from the bank or post office to prevent the evil eye. Now, how do you explain these things to a World Bank official from Washington, D.C., or to the program director of a New York-based NGO?

"This multiplication of gifts in everyday life" presents a dilemma. According to de Sardan, "it leaves room for the drowning of illicit gifts within the mass." On the other hand, however, not doing the done thing is "not only a sign of avarice or bad manners, but also carries the risk of attracting misfortune."

Like practically everyone who lives in Africa, I am often caught in the incongruity of straddling two worlds -- the ancient and the modern.

A policeman once accosted me at one of Nigeria's famous road blocks as I cruised home from

work after a long day. He wanted to see my vehicle particulars and fire extinguisher. I had removed the fire extinguisher from the car for some reason during the weekend and had forgotten to put it back. Despite my explanation, the policeman was not going to take it lightly. If I didn't settle (give a bribe), he would take me to the police station.

Somewhere along the line, he realized I was a journalist and was not sure what could come out of asking a journalist for a bribe, so he changed his tactic. He told me how difficult life was for him. His pay was meager and was often not given on schedule. The inspector-general of police had just been removed for corrupt enrichment, so I knew very well what he was talking about. But I insisted on not parting with my money. When he saw that his tales of hardship had no effect on me, he tried to sway me with prayers.

Now, everyone in Nigeria loves to be prayed for and I am no exception. This is why churches are the most lucrative enterprise in the country. The easiest way of getting someone to grant you a favor or see things your way is by showering prayers on them.

"May you never suffer in your life, madam," he prayed. I had suffered many times, so I was not impressed. ("Madam" is a term of respect for a woman of status in Nigeria.)

"May you go to London, America, Germany, Spain. ..." I had been to all these places, so that prayer was lost on me.

"You will not die but you will live, madam." That was "heavy." I did not want to die, but I did not want to lose my money either.

"May you never bury your child, madam."

That last prayer got me badly. It touched the most primordial of my fears. At that point, I ceased to be a journalist. I became simply the fearful mother of an only child. I spend a significant portion of my time and resources ensuring that no evil befalls my child, so that is a prayer I need badly. "Amen," I murmured under my breath as I reached into my purse with trembling hands and fished out a generous offering for a thoughtful prayer -- a 200 Nigerian naira note (less than \$2 U.S.).

"More blessing, madam," the policeman wailed excitedly, caressing the bribe, "dash" or whatever as he waved me on. Did I just bribe a policeman? I wondered all the way home.

It was not a bribe, I consoled myself. It was a "dash," a gift. The poor guy had probably not been paid for months. Besides, I could not ignore that last prayer. I remembered the monkey in one of my grandmother's stories who refused to say amen to prayers and suffered dire consequences later. "Won ni k'obo sami lojosi, o'nse faari," my head sang of the arrogant monkey who would not say amen to prayers.

I got home about 10 minutes to midnight. My mother was waiting up for me. I told her about the policeman, his prayers and the money I gave him. She had a more disturbing angle to the encounter. "Thank God you gave the money," she said, rubbing her palms in supplication. "Look at the time! You must not refuse to give 'saraa' (alms) at this time of the night. That may have been an 'anjoonu' (evil spirit) in the guise of a policeman."

Because African cosmology leans heavily on the supernatural, adversities such as ill health,

financial downturn, road accidents and sudden deaths are considered to be the work of malevolent spirits in many societies on the continent. Such spirits are believed to be capable of taking on human forms when they are up to mischief. They are also believed to be more active at night.

I have not been able to refuse a policeman a bribe after dark since then. This could be an 'anjoonu,' I always reason, recalling my mother's admonishing finger.

Now, how do I explain this to my American friends? "Bullshit," they would probably say.

#### Related Articles

Michael Todd: "Travel Advisory: Dealing With Corruption," published in Travel Africa Magazine (edition five, autumn 1998)

Transparency International: "Frequently Asked Questions on Corruption and Africa"

Ethan Zuckerman: "Is \$5m the cost of good governance in Africa?"  
[ethanzuckerman.com/blog/?p=1076](http://ethanzuckerman.com/blog/?p=1076)

"Prize Offered to Africa's Leaders," BBC News [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/6086088.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6086088.stm)

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