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THE DILEMMA OF NIGERIANS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The social ontology and the social structure of Nigeria reveal in a naked form the dilemma in which an average Nigerian living in Nigeria is presented with. An average Nigerian finds himself/herself positioned in between the red sea and the devil. The Nigerian social ontology exalts money as the ideal and idolized those who meet this ideal, condemning those who are unfortunate to meet it to the status of nonentities. Since no sane person would want to be seen as a nonentity, he/she would strive to become (somebody) by attaining the standard of measure of the ideal (wealth). Every Nigerian therefore craves after wealth to 'become.' He is however, limited by the social structure of Nigeria. The social structure of Nigeria is so closed up that the legitimate means of attaining wealth in the country are closed up to many. Only those who are related or close to a cabal or a well placed individual could get wealthy easily. Thus, an average Nigerian who does not have a well placed relative or friend ends up being caught up between two evil – to remain a nonentity for life or to go the corrupt way to amass wealth in order to gain recognition. Most Nigerians have chosen this last option, pointing to the reason why Nigeria has remained one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Nigeria has been named among the ten most corrupt nations by the anti-corruption organisation for about two decades now. The corruption that has plagued Nigeria today is therefore, a result of the idolization of money as well as the closure of the legitimate means of arriving at this idolized ideal. This paper would be arguing for dissolution of both the social ontology and social structure presently ruling Nigeria, so as corrupt free society could emerge.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of why Nigeria is so corrupt has been a long standing one. Some people blame bad leadership; some blame colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism; while some like the boko haram sect blame western education. While all these reasons given could arguably be attached some merit, there remain inadequate in explaining the endemic corruption in Nigeria. I think corruption is a result of the structure of the country as well as the social ontology it imbibes. By social ontology here, I mean what the society considers generally as the best existence of an individual. In the case of Nigeria this best existence is lots of cash. An individual is seen to exist and recognize as such if he has in his possession lots of cash. One who does not have such cash is hardly considered as existing. This happens in almost all facets of the societies in Nigeria including the church. A rich man receives preferential treatment everywhere in even in the churches in Nigeria and conversely a poor man no matter how hardworking and honest is hardly ever notice. It is not without reason why statement

like these are very common: "Nigerians will do anything for money!" "Nigerians love money too much!" "They can even kill their mama for money!" (*<http://www.nigeriancuriosity.com/2008/05/money-rituals.html>). By social structure on the other hand I mean the level of openness of a society to the advancement of its citizens. A society with an open social structure is one that gives room for fair and free competition for the available opportunities by all citizens. A closed one is one that legitimate means of accessing wealth are hardly present. Nigeria as shall be shown later is a closed society. In Nigeria to have a good job, contract or admission into a good course in the university, one must be connected directly or indirectly to certain highly place persons in the society. Before I delve into an extensive discussion of what has been said above, it need to be noted that the Nigerian I am talking about is not the traditional Nigerian but the contemporary Nigerian. That is the Nigerian of today. This is because both the social structure and social ontology of the traditional Nigerian and the contemporary Nigerian are drastically dissimilar.

The Nigerian Social Ontology: The Nigerian social ontology in the words of Obiechina is one "where Mammon rules with

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unrestrained power; its flags floats from every public building; his breath blows through every public institution and fires every private passion" (1-2). Ekpenyong supports Obiechina's assertion, when he avers, "the Nigerian society is characterized by ontology of 'having' mentality. A Nigerian is seen by this ontology as one who exhibits plenty of money, a well-furnished house, large cars and the company of pretty girls" (131). Ekwuru also commenting on this ontology writes on Nigeria as place where People have lost the basic orientation for a meaningful existence; where evil deeds and actions have been gradually installed as acceptable values; where criminals of all ranks are hailed and crowned for "making it", a situation where the social patterns and structures for organized meaningful co-existence have been dissolved (86). Obiechina, Ekpenyong and Ekwuru here describe a Nigeria whose social ontology is dominated by excessive materialism. This quest for wealth as Inoka puts it

Has become the matching order for most Nigerians. And like cancer, this quest has infected all aspects of our social lives. From the public service, the police, the judiciary, the school system to the mass media, the traders on the street and even the family which forms the nucleus of the larger society, the effect of this inordinate lust for vanity is seen to reverberate (132). The lust for wealth has come to a point now that it is no longer the work one does that count, rather the money one makes which is important. In the words of Ochulor, "to many Nigerians, the only thing that matters is money or wealth. How you get it is nobody business" (52). Okolo agrees with Ochulor and asserted that, "all that matters for the Nigerian is naira acquisition, the easier, perhaps the fouler the means, the better for him." (94). Buhari laments Nowhere else in the world can one find a society tolerating the theft of its precious resources in broad day light with nothing happening to the thieves ... few societies seem to reward embezzlement with 'honours' as does our own. Instead of putting rascals on trial, we put them in position of leadership (Buhari, in his AREWA house Lecture of May 15, 1998).

The norms and values of decent social life have been replaced with avarice and greed which is occasioned by the ontology that sees money as the ultimate. This ontology explains; The daily frenetic rush of the jobless in the society, the arranging of deceitful and false business deals (otherwise called 419), the mounting of legitimate illegitimate roadblocks and the now popular display of healing powers and miracles abilities by fake and false prophets (Ekpenyong132). Emeka Ekwuru enshrines this social ontology in a more philosophical fashion. For him Nigeria's social ontology Equiparates, "being" with "having". In this way, a man is not simply what he "seems to be," but what he "seems to possess." Being, then is measured by the degrees of having, the more one has, the more he becomes, for becoming is manifested in possessing. Therefore, material acquisition and wealth are the two essential characteristic features that create the social-cultural worth of the human person in the society (96). The foregoing observations of Inoka and Ekwuru confirm our earlier thesis that the Nigerian social ontology, that is, the ontology build on mammon, partly explains the many discordant social practices evident in Nigeria. This is because, since in Nigeria one's social being (existence) is measured by what one possesses, then one's perception of life will actually reflect this objective ontological position. Every Nigerian comes now to believe

that happiness comes only through accumulation of wealth upon wealth. Thus, because of this existing social ontology, Nigerians generally ascribe to the philosophy of money acquisition, even if it means killing others. Since 'being' (existence) as Ekwuru observes, is measured by what one possesses, Nigerians therefore, craze for wealth to 'become' (exist). The Machiavellian principle in which the end justifies the means is what now operates in Nigeria. Thus, all that matters for the average Nigerian is naira acquisition, the easier, perhaps, the fouler the means, the better for him" (Okolo 94).

The Nigerian Social Structure

A lot of people would want to argue that, the fact that money has been made the ideal in Nigeria does not preclude or foreclose the existence, or the acceptance by the people of legitimate means to achieving the said ideals. They would argue further, that the elevation of money and wealth as ideals adored by the people might even act as props and encouragement for the members of the society to attain them. Ochulor is one proponent of this argument, he argues; "in the face of the corrupt nature of the Nigerian society, there is still the possibility of acquiring morally upright wealth in Nigeria" (185). I contend here that the above argument would be perfectly valid in an open society, where the permissible means of gaining wealth were thrown open to all, or if opportunities were generally open to competition. But Nigeria is not such a society. The means to attaining the ideal (money), which are: open and free competition, merit, recognition of hard work and talents are not known in Nigeria. On the contrary these are replaced by the Nigerian means which are: favouritism, nepotism, godfatherism, ethnocentrism, tribalism and other preferential means of selection. The Nigerian social structure is so "closed up" in terms of individual advancement that to get a contract, admission or job, one has to 'belong' to this or that 'power bloc' or be related or have some affinity with one highly placed person or the other. Nigeria therefore, operates in what Weber would call "social closure". By social closure here as documented by Parkin, Weber refers to

The process by which social collectives seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circles of eligible's ... provided it can be used for the monopolization of specific, usually economic opportunities ... its purpose is always the closure of social and economic opportunities to outsiders (Parkin 175). This social fact describe by Weber is what we chose to call "closed or cultic." The Nigerian social structure is so closed and cultic that everyone knows that to get a good job, contract and even admission into a good course in a good university, one must be in one way or the other connected to a certain cabal or individual with the power to turn things around. You could have a first class or some other basic qualifications for certain opportunities, but find yourself double-crossed by somebody less qualified than you, all because you do not 'belong.' Discussing on this Nigerian social structure, a man once gave a joke; that to start a successful church in Nigeria, all one needs to do is to invite some powerful managers session and have them televised. Thousands of worshippers he said will flock to the church not in pursuit of salvation but to get the opportunity as brethren to be connected to these powerful people with the hope of gaining favours. In a situation like this

the question remains, what happens to those who do not belong? In an environment where money is seen as the highest good but the means of acquiring this wealth is 'closed up.' What happens to a common man who is not 'connected' to anybody? In a situation like this, Durkheim the social scientist would advise suicide as the escape route to the dilemma. The Nigerian however, has this peculiar characteristic of being resilient and the capacity of 'hoping against hope.' Thus, unlike Durkheim the Nigerian would not give up but would try to resolve this societal misnomer. Nigerians therefore, see corruption and fraudulent acts as a bridge between what the society presents as 'ends and the closure and removal of legitimate 'means' to achieving these 'ends'. In other words, since money is the ideal and the ladder to climb to this money is not open for use, Nigerians have created their own ladder (corruption) in order to acquire it. This is in consonance to Nelson Mandela's assertion that, "when a man is denied the right to live the life he believes in, he has no choice but to become an outlaw" (13). Corruption is therefore, now a common thing in Nigeria, because individuals are denied the opportunity to achieve the supreme ideals (money) through legitimate means. Alhaji Shehu Musa summarises the endemic corruption in Nigeria with this assertion, "it is not just that officials are corrupt, but that corruption is official. Anyone who does not do so is seen as a fool (This Day, Oct; 5, 1997).

Evaluation and Conclusion

An average Nigerian from what has been discussed above is open to three choices in life: to commit suicide, to give up the search of wealth in despair and take up the derogatory status of nonentity and to get the money through whatever means, even if it means killing his whole family. The first choice as has been commented on already can hardly be taken by Nigerians, because of their resilient nature. The two real choices therefore, become to surrender to poverty or to get rich by all means. Some Nigerians have subscribed to the first while majority have taken to the second. The mass subscription to the 'get rich by all means' option has been the reason why there is so much corruption in the country. Nwala supports this assertion, he observes: "today, the nation is hostage to corruption. Materialism has taken charge of the soul of the nation. Corruption and materialism have become our religion and have permeated our sacred institutions including the religious, educational and traditional institutions" (169).

From the foregoing, it could be said that Nigeria is corrupt because of the ontology it espouse and the social structures it has erected. To end corruption and thereby move Nigeria forward, these two evils need to be eradicated. The minds of Nigerians need to be discoloured from conception of money as an ideal. Values like honour, good name, integrity, uprightness, hard work, creativity et cetera should replace money as the highest good. This could be achieved through education from the various religious houses, schools and media. The government should do its best to reward these values with recognition, so as there may gradually become the highest and most adored values by Nigerians. Countries that do not place money making as the supreme value are the ones who are making advancement in science and technology as well as in other fields. An individual who sees money as everything would not involve himself in a task like scientific investigation that would take years to complete. Most of the

inventions we have now took the inventors several years of research. A mind whose sole aim is to make riches would not excel in such ventures. This is why Nigeria has remained a consumer country. Her citizens shy away from tasking and time consuming ventures. They rather run after easier and quicker means of accumulation of money and shun task that would give them honour or good names. The moment wealth is therefore, successfully dethroned as the supreme good in the hearts of Nigerians, that is the moment when the greatness of Nigeria would be evident to the whole world. For now we are nothing but "Africa's richest nightmare," a country of noisy people ... a country where nothing works ... big for nothing" (Ncha 28).

Similarly, the societal structures that operate base on favouritism, nepotism, ethnocentricism would need to be dissolved. Every Nigerian would need to be given a level playing field, where hard work, creativity, genius and talent would determine who get what and who does not. When this free and fair competitive field is instituted, that is the moment when individuals would be boosted out of their revelry to join in the struggle to succeed. Individuals, who otherwise would fold their hands and wait for their god fathers, would wake up to the reality. This is when, productivity would increase. Nigerians have always had this mentality that hard work or talent is not the key in Nigeria but who one has. This is the reason why a lot of Nigerians have not given out their best in whatever endeavour they find themselves. Students hardly give time for their studies, after all it is not one with the best result that get selected by employers but one who has 'long legs.' In the same vein, those with talents hardly show up their talent, because talent is meaningless in Nigeria – Nigeria is not a country that recognises talents, it is not a country that encourages creativity or clap for hard work. It does not care about geniuses – the potential inventors. Nigeria does not care for who you are or what you can do but who you have in the high ranks. When once good laws that would correct this societal imbalance are instituted and well enforced that is the moment, Nigerians would really show up the potentials latent in them, which unfortunately many have died with.

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