NETWORKS OF FAVOUR: INFORMAL EXCHANGE AND THE NORMALISATION OF CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper discusses corruption in Nigeria as a social phenomenon, rather than as a set of individual moral or legal violations. It argues that corruption constitutes an informal institutional order shaped by patronage, clientelism, prebendalism, rent-seeking, and nepotism. The theoretical base of this study is anchored in structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism and network theory. The study utilises a qualitative, theory-driven, document-based approach to examine the historical trajectory of patronage from precolonial reciprocity systems, to colonial indirect rule and finally to the postcolonial, oil-dependent state. The study demonstrated that corruption has latent stabilising functions in weak institutions, which include helping to form elite consensus, to re-distribute resources and to keep political order. Simultaneously, it entrenches inequality, erodes bureaucratic professionalism, distorts moral values, and undermines democratic accountability. The review also reveals that the cultural norms of loyalty, reciprocity and communal obligation in Nigeria are culture-bound and sanction corruption, where the boundaries between civic duty and self-interest are not distinct. The invisible architecture of governance is a network of patronage among political elites, bureaucrats, contractors, and local intermediaries, and corruption thrives in this environment even after regime change, despite numerous legal reforms. The review concluded that the anti-corruption efforts in Nigeria have failed to achieve the desired results because of their limited scope and the use of a punitive and legalistic approach. It argues that sustainable reform requires a sociological reorientation, which would need to be directed at the social relations, cultural norms and network structures that produce corruption.

Keywords: Clientelism, nepotism, patronage, prebendalism, reciprocity, rent-seeking

Introduction

Despite all the efforts undertaken over the years to combat corruption through anti-corruption campaigns, institutional changes and the creation of agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), corrupt practices are still ubiquitous in public and private sectors. Commitment to transparency and accountability has been a goal of successive governments since the return to democratic rule in 1999, but there are widespread allegations of bribery, embezzlement, favouritism and the abuse of public office. This persistence has raised questions about the sociological aspects of corruption despite several laws established to curb it.

Increasingly, corruption in Nigeria is associated with the existence of 'informal networks' of patronage, reciprocity and social obligation that determine access to resources and opportunities. Many social and political contacts are not formalised by rules and procedures, but by personal relationships, ethnic belonging, kinship, and political allegiance (Martini &Chêne, 2014). Due to the culture of reciprocity, access to public utilities is determined by membership of primordial groups and networks rather than merit. As a result, the terms public duty and private accountability are blurred as favour trading becomes increasingly normalised and most times socially approved. This may give rise to concern that corruption has become part and parcel of the social fabric, not just a problem of isolated wrongdoing.

The history of the Nigerian state adds to this issue. The colonial and post-colonial eras saw the emergence of systems of patronage and clientelism through political institutions that rewarded loyalty and personal allegiance (Yagboyaju, 2017; Okojie, 2024). Oil revenues, which grew in the 1970s resulted in competition for state resources and boosted networks that enabled political actors to allocate state benefits to supporters, family members, and ethnic groups (Martini &Chêne, 2014). This meant that the role of the public office came to be linked with the possibilities of resource allocation and social redistribution. The question is not simply about corruption, but about how social expectations are institutionalised in ways that reinforce office holders' sense of urgency to prioritise network obligations over formal governance rules. This situation points to the existence of historically established social exchange patterns that continue to influence political behaviour, which helps perpetuate corruption.

While many studies have been devoted to corruption, most of them focused on moral and economic theories. Definitions of corruption are generally moral, identifying the problem as a result of individual greed, moral shortcomings or feeble character, and economic considerations, often as being the result of rational calculations, incentives, and institutional flaws. These perspectives are instructive, they don no shed light on the dynamics and cultural norms that sustain corrupt practices (Martini &Chêne, 2014). A social science approach concentrates on the networks of obligation, reciprocity and social legitimacy that strengthens informal exchanges. In the views of scholars in this school, corruption is not just an illegal activity that occurs for its own sake, it follows that it is sustained by collective norms, expectations, and power relations (Mustapha, 2010).

There is also verifiable evidence that corruption is embedded in the social fabric of the people within which it manifests. Studies by some scholars Mustapha (2010), Yagboyaju (2017), Edeh (2017), and Okojie (2024 revealed consistency in public officials expressly or tacitly using their position to benefit family members, political supporters, local, and ethnic communities. In some instances, contracts, appointments, and financial incentives are given to close relatives as a social duty and are not obviously seen as acts of corruption. These informal incentives create a normalcy of favour exchanges that solidify patron-client relationships where public duty and private loyalty are not clearly differentiated. Therefore, anti-corruption reforms often face opposition to social arrangements that many actors perceive as legitimate and beneficial. Although these dynamics are increasingly acknowledged, the role of informal networks in institutionalising corruption has received insufficient attention.

Against this background, this study interrogates informal exchange networks and the normalisation of corruption in Nigeria. In particular, the study examines corruption as a socially constructed phenomenon, embedded in social relations and the institutional practices of everyday life. It also examines how patronage networks enable the negotiation of power, resources and loyalty among political actors, bureaucrats and citizens, and the impact of these networks on governance, service delivery, institutional trust, and social inequalities. The study aims to advance the debate on the social roots of corruption, and why anti-corruption efforts often yield limited results, as well as the need to change social structures and cultural values that support corrupt practices for meaningful reform.

Defining Corruption as a Social System

In order to explain the extent to which the culture of corruption is integrated in the Nigerian society, there is a need to conceptualize it as a social system in contrast to the lack of morality among some people. The most basic type of corruption manifests in a personal basis; where one individual inflicts evil on another or against the law, which encompasses corruption by use of bribery, embezzlement, and misuse of office. This definition agrees with the classical conceptualisations of corruption in the sense that it refers to the abuse of state power for personal benefits (Fagbadebo, 2007). This opinion, however, can not suffice in the face of a spontaneous, institutionalised or systematised corruption.

Systemic corruption is characterised by cases of corruption that are not exceptional or isolated but are codified and embedded within the operational systems of political and bureaucratic organisations. In such systems, corruption operates through an interplay among political elites, bureaucrats, commercial interests, and other community representatives, all of whom gain access to material or symbolic rewards through their participation (Martini & Chene, 2014). In Nigeria, governance is dominated by neo-patrimonial systems, which, Igiebor (2019) argues, entail the prevalence of loyalty- and reciprocity-driven governance over institutional rules. Consequently, the state is reduced to a space of patronage dispensation, and corruption is perceived as a natural, even a legal, order of acquiring resources.

The U4 Helpdesk report on Nigeria by Transparency International further reinforces the patronage thesis. The report identifies two principal functions of corruption within the Nigerian state. The first is the extraction of rents from public resources, while the second is the preservation of political power through corruption and electoral manipulation (Martini &Chêne, 2014). In this respect, one may state that corruption in Nigeria does not qualify as a deviance, but a social phenomenon, a continuum of practices institutionalised in political culture, norms of reciprocity, and weak formal institutions.

Patronage, Clientelism, Prebendalism, Rent-Seeking, and Nepotism in the Nigerian Case

This section attempts to provide serviceable definitions of systemic corruption and its interrelated frame works such as patronage, clientelism, rent-seeking and nepotism.

Patronage is the practice of giving support, preferential treatment, offering favour, or making appointments to build a loyal following. A relationship in which a patron gives benefits to clients who in return give him support. Patronage networks in Nigeria are strong, with access to resources frequently being based on proximity to power rather than on merit or competence (Okojie, 2024). Ojukwu and Shopeju (2018) also contend that Nigerian politics is infused with personal relationships and informal networks, where people try to get included in these networks for economic opportunities and social protection. Patronage is therefore an important means by which power and resources are allocated in society.

Patronage is closely related to clientelism, the institutionalisation of these relationships through exchanges between patron and client. Patronage is about the allocation of favours by those in power; clientelism is about their mutual commitments. Clientelistic systems involve paying back a client (e.g., giving money, jobs, contracts or community development projects) for political loyalty, votes or other forms of loyalties. This process has created a culture of dependency in Nigeria, leading citizens to increasingly rely on political patrons as a means of accessing public goods and services, as noted by Anugwom (2011). This in turn undermines democratic accountability and increases the influence of informal power structures.

Prebendalism is the most elaborated form of institutionalisation of patronage and clientelistic exchanges. Prebendalism is a term coined by Richard Joseph in his study of Nigerian politics to refer to the state of affairs in which public offices are seen as personal rights endowed to individuals for the use of appropriating state resources for private benefit and for the benefit of their supporters (Joseph, 1987 cited in Edeh, 2017). In this context, political office holders see their offices as means to represent more restricted ethnic, religious or regional groups instead of the general public. The view is correct to some extent, given the nature of political practice in Nigeria, where patronage networks tend to be strengthened by the distribution of state resources at the expense of public institutions (Yagboyaju, 2017). So, prebendalism becomes a rule of governance which influences how the state works.

There are also opportunities for rent-seeking behaviour because of the widespread presence of prebendal politics. If the public office is considered a means to private gain, political actors start to be more interested in gaining benefits from their impact on state policy, contracts, and regulations. Rent-seeking is the practice of individuals and groups seeking wealth and privileges without providing any economic value, frequently done through the use of public resources (Rose-Ackerman & Coolidge, 1995). In a highly oil-dependent economy, rent-seeking has become more entrenched in Nigeria, where political and economic players vie for the most profitable contracts, licences, and concessions, often via informal networks and political ties. The practice has become a major form of accumulation in public enterprises and the procurement systems, creating inefficiencies and squandering resources to the detriment of productive economic development (Anugwom, 2011).

The other side of these interwoven networks of patronage, clientelism, prebendalism and rent-seeking is the continued existence of nepotism. Nepotism is defined as the practice of giving preferential treatment to relatives, family members and close friends in the appointment, promotion and distribution of public resources. In contexts where personal loyalty is stronger than institutional norms, such practices become normalised and are frequently rationalised as obligations to family or social group. Nepotism is a common practice in Nigeria, in both the political and administrative sectors, with a tendency for people to be appointed and promoted based on their ethnicity, family connection, or relationships with the appointing power, rather than on merit and performance (Oji et al., 2024). Nepotism thus continues to exacerbate the inequalities already in place, diminishing citizens' trust in public institutions and contributing to the culture of corruption that is entrenched in informal networks of favour and obligation.

When considered together, patronage, clientelism, prebendalism, rent-seeking and nepotism are interconnected aspects of a larger social and political network which support corruption in Nigeria. These practices do not exist in isolation, but reinforce each other through access to public resources and networks of loyalty, reciprocity and group affiliation. In this sense, corruption is ingrained in the practices of governance and social interactions, and gains strength from a combination of social norms and institutional weaknesses. It is this interdependence that helps to account for the durability of corruption despite multiple legal and administrative changes.

The sociological approaches to corruption provide some explanations for the inadequacy of legalistic anti-corruption efforts which tend to address individual incidents rather than structural and cultural issues that fuel the system. Reforms should therefore, target political incentives, economic dependencies, and social norms that perpetuate corruption as a way of life.

Theoretical Framework

Structural Functionalism, Conflict Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and Network Theory provide useful insights into how corruption is created, sustained, deconstructed recreated, and perpetuated in Nigerian society. These schools of thought foreshadow different aspects of the phenomenon: its systemic structure, its connection to power and inequality, its ability to generate meaning at the micro level, and its functioning within relational networks.

Structural Functionalism: The Hidden Uses of Corruption

Structural functionalism, based on the work of Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, views society as a coherent system in which all elements, morally approved or not, play a role, either consciously or unconsciously, in social order (Vannucci, 2015). Traditionally denounced latent functions can be achieved by corruption, which is stabilising in a structurally weak society.

In Nigeria, corruption is a more informal way of resource flow when formal bureaucratic systems are poor or weak. In addition to formal institutional channels, political elites often use patronage networks to provide benefits, like jobs, contracts or material resources, to build loyalty, strengthen their power and create social cohesion (Martini &Chêne, 2014). Being officially corrupt, this system allows different ethnic, religious, or political groups to gain access to state resources, thus preventing open conflict. Fagbadebo (2007) observed that such interactions play a reinforcing role within elite networks, strengthening intra-elite relationships and sustaining the perceived legitimacy of political actors, even in the face of pervasive institutional decay.

Corruption is also considered a coping survival mechanism, especially to top up low income and rev up earnings. To this end, corruption is a survivalist strategy (Nkpe, 2025). Where there are constraints on the ability of state institutions to provide services equitably and efficiently, informal mechanisms such as payments to state officials (speed money) to facilitate access to public utilities and services become the pragmatic alternative to formal institutional processes (Ijewereme, 2015). This suggests that corruption is a means of social adaptation, a way for people and groups to cope with institutional shortcomings and fill gaps in poor governance. Still, the functionalist perspective does not overlook the dysfunctions of corruption, which in the short run provide stability in relations, but in the long run break down the institutions of trust and meritocracy. Elite-tie networks that undermine bureaucratic efficiency also strengthen institutional inequality (Vannucci, 2015). Thus, the issue of corruption in Nigeria can be viewed as a two-sided process, stabilising and disintegrating, a tool that maintains order in the chaos.

Conflict Theory: Power, Class Interests and Exploitation

The conflict theory is based on the ideas of Karl Marx (the infamous founder of communism) and developed by theorists like C. Wright Mills, Antonio Gramsci, Ralf Dahrendorf and Randall Collins. The theory views society as a field of struggle between groups that seek to dominate the power and available resources. In this paradigm, corruption in Nigeria is perceived as a manifestation of class domination and the exploitation of elites. Political elites utilise state resources to accumulate wealth to maintain power over their subordinates (Igiebor, 2019).

The patron-client system in Nigeria is defined by elites, who control the state apparatus and selectively dispense rewards to their clients in exchange for their loyalty and political support. Such an arrangement creates a pyramid of dependency, in which individuals' financial survival and political significance are determined by their position in the network (Ojukwu &Shopeju, 2018). Consequently, the distribution of rents, contracts, and appointments are based on the vested interests that favour the ruling elite rather than on objectivity and merit.

In this sense, corruption is a tool of domination, exacerbating inequality in favour of a privileged elite who already have privileged access to state institutions. Low-income citizens who are excluded from elite patronage networks often depend on informal favours and, in many cases, become complicit in sustaining corrupt practices, as these arrangements constitute their primary means of survival within a dysfunctional system (Anugwom, 2011). This dependence reproduces corruption at the grassroots, as it becomes part of the everyday social relations of the people and not just elite corruption.

Furthermore, the Nigerian state, with its neo-patrimonial governance structure, is a space of resource extraction in which political elites extract public resources to maintain their power and control (Igiebor, 2019). When implemented, anti-corruption measures are often abused by the ruling elites and used as instruments of political persecution or consolidation of power. Hence, it is not just a moral problem in Nigeria; it is a problem of capitalist accumulation and elite rule, much intricately tied up with political power, class relations and the structural organisation of the state.

Symbolic Interactionism: Construction of Corruption

The interactionist viewpoint poses questions about the micro-social processes that shape meaning, trust and moral justification in daily life, whereas the functionalist and conflict paradigms examine corruption at the macro level. The Interactionist perspective is grounded in the work of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, who suggested that people act according to the meanings they assign to phenomena, which are developed from everyday social interactions and continually clarified through interpretation (Study.com, 2023).

What this clearly highlights is that corruption is not necessarily perceived as an unethical activity, but rather a part of culturally ingrained notions of reciprocity, solidarity, and social duty. For example, a public official's job allocation for someone from their ethnic or kin group is seen as a contribution to the constituency and not corruption, but as an act of communal duty or “taking care of one's own” (Nkpe&Akanle, 2024). These socially constructed meanings normalise corruption within the daily social relations by legitimizing corrupt practices as expressions of loyalty, mutual support and shared responsibility.

For instance, Nkpe&Akanle (2024) studied the social construction of corruption in Nigeria and found that to a certain extent, citizens differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable corruption in Nigeria depending on the beneficiary. Small and culturally approved forms of exchange, including gift-giving or assisting favours, are rarely considered ethically wrong, and as such, the boundary between generosity and bribery becomes unclear.

Symbolic interactionism explains why anti-corruption campaigns cannot infiltrate such social discourses: for example, campaigns are conceptualised in terms of legal or ethical assumptions that are incompatible with locally institutionalised definitions of trust and duty. Since participants constantly re-create their relationship dynamics in social interaction, discourses of loyalty, sharing, and community service justify behaviour that would otherwise be considered corrupt. As a result, the problem of corruption in Nigeria persists, partially due to the role of socially constructed ethical good in certain relationships.

Network Theory: Corruption as Embedded Relationships

Network theory builds on the sociological concept of corruption by examining how individuals and groups relate to one another through webs of relationships. It is based on the fact that social behaviour depends on the organisation and density of the related ties, not on personal characteristics only (Vannucci, 2015). Corruption is carried out through an extensive patronage network that connects politicians, bureaucrats, contractors, traditional leaders, and business elites to the never-ending cycle of mutual interests. Such networks are used as avenues for distributing the resources of the state and trading favours. Martini & Chene (2014) described them as informal institutions that operate alongside formal governance regimes, and, in most cases, they are more effective than the formal ones.

In such networks, actors have a positional role in that, patrons are the central nodes, clients are the peripheral connectors, and brokers are the intermediaries that help in the exchange of resources and information. The nearer an actor is to the centre of the network, the more power and benefits he/she has (Anugwom, 2011). Network theory, thus, sheds some light on the fact that corruption in Nigeria is not an incidental phenomenon, but an organised process as it has its hierarchies and resource distribution patterns.

Empirical research from similar African settings revealed that the pattern of patronage is a small world, with corruption networks built tightly knit groups of individuals mediated by only a few, crucial intermediaries, which make the networks more resilient and adaptable (Campana & Varese, 2018). The Nigerian case is the same; the corruption system continues to function under the new and old administrations because it remains intact, and individuals are only replaced at the upper echelons. These relational structures are enduring and help to ensure corrupt practices remain after the passage of political era or institutional change.

Strategies to deal with this systemic corruption should not only target individual offenders, but also the relational structure of patronage. Breaking the trust, loyalty and reciprocity networks that support corrupt exchanges is critical to challenging corruption at both a political and social level. If anti-corruption efforts are not designed to disrupt these networks, they are likely to yield only limited or short-term results.

Theoretical Synthesis

All the theoretical approaches taken together give a complete picture of corruption as a socially entrenched phenomenon in Nigeria. Structural functionalism emphasises the adaptive functions that corruption serves in environments of weak institutions, where informal exchanges can substitute for missing formal institutions. Conflict theory adds to this view by showing how corruption is a way in which the political and economic elite perpetuate social inequalities, maintain power, and control resources. These macro theories provide explanations for the structural underpinning of corruption, but symbolic interactionism focuses on the micro-social processes by which corrupt practices are socially constructed, legitimised and normalised in the context of everyday interactions. Network theory enhances this research by visualising how corruption is perpetuated by long-lasting networks of relationships between political parties, the bureaucracy, business, and citizens. Taken together, these views show that corruption is not just a matter of individual deviance and moral failure but a product of institutional shortcomings, power dynamics, social constructs, and primordial networks that facilitate the transfer of resources and allegiance. A sociological understanding of corruption, which takes into consideration both the construction and the reconstruction of corruption in everyday social practices, is therefore required.

In Nigeria, the convergence of these dimensions produces an integrated and deeply entrenched system of corruption, embedded within social expectations, political survival strategies, and institutional fragility. Addressing this system requires more than legal or administrative reform, as it demands sociological insight and informed understanding of how social structures, shared meanings, and networks intersect to reproduce corruption as a routine and enduring feature of social life.

Methodology

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted where relevant studies were identified through searches in prominent academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, IEEE Xplore, and ScienceDirect, using the keywords "corruption," "network of favour," informal exchange," "project success," and "Nigeria.

The review included peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2012 and 2024, written in English, and focused on the research topic. Non-peer-reviewed journals and articles published in 2011 and earlier were excluded. The study selection process adopted the in-depth screening procedure outlined in PRISMA (2020), resulting in the selection of 25 articles that met the inclusion criteria. The quality of the selected articles was assessed based on their relevance to the research objectives, peer-review status, transparency, and clarity. Data synthesis was conducted using descriptive and content analyses to identify recurring themes and patterns from the findings of the selected studies.

Qualitative thematic and interpretive analyses were used. Themes of loyalty, reciprocity, elite capture, informal institutions, moral dualism, and networked power were observed throughout the texts and examined in the context of Nigeria's history and socio-political landscape. These themes were then explored using four complementary theories, namely structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and network theory, to facilitate a nuanced discussion of corruption.

Theoretical triangulation was used to provide analytical thoroughness by comparing findings across different bodies of literature and theories. This is because when there is consistency in the historical, empirical, and policy sources, the interpretations are more valid. The study was not meant to create statistical generalisability, but it was aimed at achieving analytical generalisation by establishing connections between the Nigerian experience and the more general sociological explanation of systemic corruption and neo-patrimonial governance.

This work is purely a document-based study, and no direct ethical risks were involved. Ethical responsibility was nonetheless maintained by accurate citation, careful contextualisation of politically sensitive issues, and the avoidance of defamatory claims. One of the major strengths of the methodology is the breadth, depth and theoretical integration of the sources analysed, while one of the major weaknesses is that it is based on secondary data, limiting access to lived experiences. The overall methodological approach is appropriate for explaining the existence of corruption as a stubborn or wicked social problem in Nigeria and the failure of mostly legalistic anti-corruption strategies.

Historical Roots of Patronage and Corruption in Nigeria

To conduct a detailed analysis of corruption in Nigeria, one requires a historical approach that explains its evolution across the various periods of political existence. The phenomenon of patronage and clientelism does not have its roots in the modern period; instead, it has a strong historical background that can be traced to the indigenous system of governance, which was later transformed through the colonial government, and institutionalised in the process of building the post-colonial state. This segment traces the development of these stages, culminating in the culture of corruption that characterises the lives of the Nigerian population today.

Before the colonial invasion, the government in Nigeria was structured into a system of authority that was founded on kinship, lineage, and community. The leadership of the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Niger Delta cultures was based on the communal reciprocity and moral responsibility (Afigbo, 1989). Chiefs, elders, or kings were supposed to redistribute trade, tribute, and gift wealth among members of their communities. This was not regarded as a corrupt reallocation, but a moral responsibility based on the communal sharing concept (Ekeh, 1975).

Tribute systems and gift-giving served as social cohesive and legitimising systems. As an example, the Yoruba tradition of kingship focused on Asa (custom), whereby they would present gifts to chiefs and subjects as a sign of respect and loyalty (Falola, 1999). Equally, the Hausa-Fulani emirates: the Sarkin (emir) retained power by granting privileges, cattle, and land to those who were faithful to the Sarkin (Usman, 1979). These interactions strengthened the political hierarchy and the social balance within the community.

However, such types of gift exchange preconditioned the subsequent patron-client relations, although they had moral and cultural reasons. Rewarding loyalty with material gains became so ingrained in societal demands. As traditional economies of reciprocity were transformed into new models of personalised power and patronage by the introduction of cash economies and bureaucracies under colonial and subsequent post-colonial systems, these traditional norms of reciprocity were reconfigured (Ekeh, 1975; Osoba, 1996). Yagboyaju (2017) argued that the formal state institutions were gradually being made to serve the interests of the elite, as communal ethics of redistribution were grafted onto them.

British colonialism essentially changed the social and political structure of Nigeria, converting the native systems of power into a hierarchy of bureaucracies. In the indirect rule system that was implemented by Lord Lugard, the British depended on traditional rulers who administered the local people on their behalf as a chain of communication between the colonial state and the local people (Crowder, 1968). This system had the effect of formalising patronage, since chiefs were given political power and taxation or levies as rewards for loyalty to the colonial government.

Bureaucratic corruption in colonialism was introduced via the sale of political power. The traditional rulers, who were appointed representatives of the British Crown, exploited their position to collect rents and share resources with their allies, family members, and supporters (Osoba, 1996). This shift turned moral reciprocity into material patronage, as allegiance become connected to interests rather than social obligations.

The colonial economy further increased the elite's inequality and reliance on the state. Cash crops, taxation and monopolisation of trade formed an elite group that acted as the mediator between the European companies and the local groups (Falola, 1999). These elites relied on contracts and licences awarded to them by the colonialists, and were thus the first to create the patronage economy in Nigeria. This shift is captured in the influential Two Publics Theory by Ekeh (1975) who states that the colonial rule split Nigerian society between a primordial public (whose communal morality was relevant) and a civic public (who was affiliated to state institutions but lacked moral restraint). In the latter, it was not considered immoral to exploit the state to benefit oneself or even one's ethnicity, since it was seen as belonging to no one.

Therefore, in addition to establishing an administrative system that favoured patronage, colonialism undermined the ethical principle of serving people by isolating the state's social morality. The same duality continues to characterise Nigeria's corruption situation today. In 1960, through independence, Nigeria acquired a political system that was strongly influenced by the colonial system of governance and reliance on the elite. The colonial patronage model was soon borrowed and modified by political leaders to protect their positions. Political clientelism and ethnic favouritism were some of the characteristics of the First Republic (1960-1966), where parties like Northern People's Congress (NPC), National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), and Action Group (AG) allocated state jobs, scholarships, and development projects to their supporters or ethnic groups (Joseph, 1987).

It turned into the logic of governance as being in the public office was considered an opportunity to pay off one ethnic group, or their supporters, or political allies, a phenomenon that Joseph (1987) notoriously called prebendal politics. This system viewed the state not as a neutral entity but as a source of rents to be distributed to factions. Okojie (2024) notes that Nigeria after independence replicated colonial patronage hierarchies in the political party framework and the bureaucracy of the state.

The 1966 military rule continued to centralise power and increase chances of corruption. Oil revenues dominated the command economy of the 1970s, turning the Nigerian state into a rentier state in which wealth flowed not through production but through political access (Igiebor, 2019). This is because the distribution of oil licences, contracts and import permits became the new arena of elite competition. Officials of the government and their cronies were able to accumulate enormous wealth, which was usually reinvested in political patronage circles (Anugwom, 2011).

There was also an increase in ethnic and regional patronage during this time. Geo-political factors were also used to make federal appointments, distribute resources, and execute infrastructural projects, which strengthened the spirit of our turn to eat (Emilokan as recently refimed and re-echoed by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu in the runoff to the 2023 Presidential election). These relations established what Ake (1996) referred to as a politics of distribution, in which the state was viewed as a prize rather than as a public trust. The result was that rentier corruption was institutionalised as a self-perpetuating strategy where the possession of oil revenues and holding government offices became the main source of wealth creation. In the 1980s and later, it was found that patronage was an aspect of governance rather than a peripheral feature (Osoba, 1996). The modern cases of corruption in Nigeria, including the electoral vote-buying and the inflation of contracts and nepotistic hiring, follow this historical pattern.

Anatomy of Patronage Networks in Contemporary Nigeria

The patronage networks in Nigeria form a systematic form of corruption that connects the political elites, bureaucracy, business intermediaries and the local stakeholders in informal yet powerful webs of influence. In Nigeria, these networks are the working infrastructure of governance that shapes political competition, resource allocation, and the concept of citizenship. Instead of taking up marginal roles, patronage is an alternative system of governance that coexists with formal systems and, in some cases, even replaces them altogether. In order to understand the sociological aspects of corruption in Nigeria, there is a need to assess how these networks are formed, how they work and how cultural and spatial conditions perpetuate them.

In Nigeria, the patronage system is hierarchical and multi-layered, and power and access to state resources are unequally distributed. Political elites like governors, ministers, legislators, party fundraisers, etc., who act as patrons and exercise control over the distribution of public goods like contracts, appointments, development projects and so on, occupy the top of this hierarchy. These elites are gatekeepers with discretionary power over who is allowed to access opportunities within the State, and who is not. Below them are the bureaucratic actors who implement these informal instructions, often bending or overriding the formal administrative rules and procedures to protect the interests of their patrons and maintain the patronage system (Ijewereme, 2015).

At the last lever are the contractors, local leaders and community intermediaries who make sure that patronage resources filter down to communities in exchange for political allegiance and electoral backing (Oghuvbu, 2023). These middlemen often have a hybrid position both as beneficiaries and as brokers between elite power centres and as local populations.

The key point of connection between this structure is the phenomenon of godfatherism in politics where influential sponsors (godfathers) put a candidate into a public office to get rewarded in the future. Osumah (2010) describes godfatherism as a predatory relationship between political patrons and kith and kin, at the expense of the state's autonomy and in place of meritocracy, based on loyalty. Nigerian politics is permeated with it, as it can be seen at the national and state levels. Godsons grant contracts, appointments, and concessions to their sponsors when in power, thereby creating a dependency loop and enriching elites (Okojie, 2024). This system makes politics a commodity and sells it off for financial and political gain in lieu of service to the people.

The procedures of patronage work are very informal, but they influence the formal roles of ruling. The most apparent and prominent is the distribution of state resources by informal networks. Distribution of government contracts, jobs, and access to credit or subsidies, rather than on merit, is frequently based on the ability to associate with political patrons (Martini & Chene, 2014).

Secondly, this system is based on the trade of loyalty in exchange for access and protection. Political allegiance in most states in Nigeria is rewarded by appointment or even money, and political dissent is met with exclusion or even harassment (Oghuvbu, 2023). This is a two-way process: patrons will need clients to mobilise the grassroots and win elections, and clients will need patrons to survive economically and politically. Wantchekon (2003) discovered that these types of clientelistic transactions influence voting behaviour in African democracies where voters offer electoral favours in exchange for material rewards instead of commitment to ideologies.

Thirdly, patronage networks are run by informal institutions that compete with or ignore formal bureaucracies. In Nigeria, the rules governing the creation of states, allocation of resources and contracting tend to be informal, and this leads to a lack of transparency (Okojie, 2024). In such networks, trust and loyalty are the currency, and the basis for who receives the benefits of the state and who does not. Consequently, the Nigerian state has a dual character of government, as Osoba (1996) called it; a formal bureaucratic order that operates alongside a well-established informal order of patronage.

Cultural Dimensions

A full understanding of patronage in Nigeria is unthinkable without an understanding of the cultural environment in which it exists. The moral economy of Nigeria is highly value on sharing, reciprocity and collective responsibility. The attitude of traditional settings is that successful people are supposed to share their success with their families, ethnic groups, and religious groups (Nkpe, 2026). This expectation extends to the modern political context where voters see politicians as benefactors from whose benefits they reap (Yagboyaju, 2017).

This cultural norm normalises the use of patronage, which was once commonly known as corrupt, and in some instances, even sanctioned. Those who are not successful in bringing development projects to their community and do not show material support to their followers are often seen as selfish, ungrateful, and unconcerned with community obligations. It is similar to Ekeh's two publics thesis, which distinguishes between the primordial public (family, kinship and ethnic affiliations) and the civic public (state) (Ekeh, 1975). Responsibility and honesty are expected a great deal of the moral public, and are not necessarily expected of the civic public. This means that it is acceptable for a community to ‘take' the resources of the state, and even be seen as doing right to do so, thus normalising corruption in Nigeria's socio-political system.

Consequently, it is partly because corruption is aligned with the local moral rules of generosity and reciprocity. These cultural patterns, as emphasised by Yagboyaju (2017), continue the patron-client process by rendering informal agreements that do not align with the norms of formal bureaucracy commonplace. In a nutshell, what may seem like political corruption to the external world may be interpreted as social solidarity to the internal world. The result is a vicious circle that makes cultural legitimacy mean that there is moral justification for clientelism, which is sustained by networks that feed corruption.

Not every patronage system in Nigeria is the same; they can differ in region, in sector of the economy and in levels of government, adapting to the context and resource endowments in which they operate. One such case is the availability of oil rents to the oil-producing people of the Niger Delta region, where there has been a deepening patronage system among political elites, oil companies and local contractors (Ikelegbe, 2013). In the case of community leaders, they are likely to act as middlemen in securing benefits and compensation packages from state and corporate actors and may siphon funds to personal interests and political agenda. This has led to a new type of rentier politics, in which the state's interaction with local actors hinges on the distribution of oil revenues and not on development planning.

Conversely, in northern Nigeria, patronage has been mediated by religious and traditional institutions. The access to state benefits is controlled by hierarchical yet socially accepted systems of favour by emirs, clerics and political patrons (Usman, 1979). The solidarity among ethnicities and partisan allegiance is more likely to be established in the south-west, and thus patronage relationships are more centralised around political godfathers and business elites (Oghuvbu, 2023).

The same situation applies to the rest of the public service, education, and local governance: promotions, transfers, and contract awards are based on personal connections rather than on performance (Ijewereme, 2015). The spatial and sectoral elasticity of these networks is what makes them resilient; they can adjust to shifting political conditions without altering their underlying logic of relations.

In such a way, the Nigerian patronage networks could be considered as territorially based systems, whereby the elites and the grassroot actors are linked to each other by localised cultures of obligation and exchange. The differences also complicate efforts to achieve uniformity in fighting corruption, since any anti-corruption strategy that does not take into account spatial and cultural differences will not work, as patronage varies across settings.

Corruption and Social Order

Corruption in Nigeria is not only a sign of social decay, but it is also a form of social control, a structure that maintains the interaction of relations, holds a political structure together, and maintains the integrity of the elite despite the weakness of the institutions. Ironically, corruption also erodes formal legality and equality and creates regularities of exchange and interdependency through which societies operate. This two-fold way of seeing corruption as both a cause of chaos and the pillar of stability is why corruption has been so difficult to eradicate in Nigeria's political and social system. In such a weak institutional setting as Nigeria, corruption frequently manifests itself in the guise of informal government, substituting for incompetent and/or distrusted formal institutions (Ijewereme, 2015). Together with patronage, clientelism is another system of institutions that serves to keep things stable, allocate resources, and manage loyalty of political elites. Informal interactions help regulate access to power and reduce potential elite conflicts.

According to Martini & Chaine (2014), political patronage in Nigeria is an adaptive mechanism for maintaining elite consensus; rather than engaging in a debilitating competition, the elite divide state resources through negotiated patronage deals. This is an agreement based not on ideology or institutional trust but on material reciprocity. As a result, the state is transformed into a distributive arena, in other words, a process of buying peace among warring parties (Anugwom, 2011).

In addition, corruption provides an alternative to the weak formal bureaucracy. Citizens who lack access or are unable to access social services seek informal intermediaries to obtain public goods or justice, such as local leaders, relatives, or political patrons (Okojie, 2024). Such a replacement of formal arrangements by informal institutions is not without purpose; it is the historical propensity of Nigerians to structure power and obligation in the form of personal relationships, rather than impersonal regulations (Ekeh, 1975). In this sense, corruption functions as a social lubricant, enabling governance processes to continue operating in contexts where formal institutions are weak, compromised, or dysfunctional.

But the same mechanism that provides short-term stability also produces long-term vulnerability. Corruption undermines bureaucratic accountability by prioritizing personal connections and fostering a culture of governance that treats respect for the rule of law as optional. In this case, the state appears strong in its ability to exercise authority but weak in its legitimacy, since legitimacy is not institutionalized and rule-based but derived from interpersonal relationships.

Another paradox of Nigerian society is that corruption is both denounced and accepted. Religion and morality are two aspects in the eyes of the crowd, but the very society that condemns corruption is itself involved in it or even justifies it (Nkpe, 2026). This contradiction arises because formal moral condemnation and informal moral justification coexist within the same social system. As Yagboyaju (2017) argued, despite religion in Nigeria theoretically opposing corruption, it tends to condone it through selective morality. The political elites are publicly trying to show their religious devotion, but at the same time, they indulge in patronage and rent-seeking, which they explain as benevolence or charity. Corrupt officials give donations to churches, mosques, and communities, and it is generally viewed that they are showing social responsibility and not stealing. The effect of this phenomenon is what sociologists refer to as moral dualism- a separation of moral ideals and practical realities.

Moreover, whenever citizens feel that corruption is common and unavoidable, they tend to be more involved. With a high level of acceptance, Igiebor (2019) notes that corruption ceases to be the deviance of an individual but becomes a social norm- a rule, and not an exception. It can even be considered naïve or socially isolating not to be a participant of corruption in such an economy.

This moral paradox is upheld by cultural expectations. According to the theory of two publics presented by Ekeh (1975), Nigerians would distinguish between loyalty to the primordial public (ethnic or kinship group) and to the civic public (the state). Corruption in the state is perceived to be acceptable or even essential to benefit the community and corruption towards a fellow member of the same ethnic group is considered to be unethical. This two-fold morality allows people to live in the world of conflicting moral demands and uphold the system of patronage on a larger scale. Corruption, therefore, is not only tolerated despite moral condemnation but also continues to exist because of it: it is the moral cover of the religious and cultural institutions that perpetuate the status quo of hierarchies and power relations. The system does not attain legitimacy by refuting corruption, it redefines it as benevolence or duty.

Corruption is also a reproduction of social inequality process in Nigeria. Since access to patronage is relative to being close to the power, people not within elite or client groups are systematically locked out of the opportunities, resources and representation (Osumah, 2010). Rather than being determined by competence, political connections are becoming a strong determinant of access to employment, contracts, or educational scholarships, thereby strengthening class divisions and perpetuating cycles of poverty. Elites at the class level obtain access to public resources through rent-seeking, whereas the poor rely on small-scale patronage or token gains to get by. This unfair accessibility makes corruption advantageous to the powerful at the disadvantage of the majority (Anugwom, 2011).

Corruption and patronage, in the gender level, tend to strengthen patriarchal institutions. Research shows that women in Nigeria have fewer chances of enjoying political patronage due to the fact that networks that advantage access to power are male dominated (UNODC, 2022). The gender norms that limit women to political roles further alienate them to the elite groups thus not allowing them to be a part of decision-making processes where patronage works effectively.

At the ethnic level, corruption hardens the inequality in the region by balancing the state resources with identity politics. Ethnic favouritism means that areas supporting the ruling elites receive disproportionate advantages, while other areas are disregarded (Okojie, 2024). This trend perpetuates a zero-sum perception of governance where each ethnic group wants to get its share of the pie, and the practice perpetuates divisions and instability (Joseph, 1987). Overall, the Nigerian patronage system transforms corruption into the generator of inequality, thereby recreating class privilege and the hierarchy of regions in the name of resource distribution. Although corruption initially seems to democratise access by redistributing benefits informally, in reality, it consolidates power in the hands of elites and continues to marginalise women, youth and the poor.

Case Studies of Patronage and Systemic Corruption

Corruption in Nigeria is best explained with examples of patronage and clientelism in political, bureaucratic and regional contexts. The cases illustrate that there is no randomness or incidentalism in corruption, but it is a system for the allocation of power and resources. They also highlight specific aspects of the Nigerian experience and its wider implications for patronage-based politics in Africa.

In electoral politics, patronage shifts elections from politics of policy and ideology to politics of material exchange. Political elites can rally support by providing vote-buying, job offers, and other incentives, and elected officials can offer contracts and public jobs and other rewards to sponsors and loyalists. This is the politics of settlement, which is the politics of the elite, the politics that undermines meritocracy, and the politics that makes it look like politics is a business.

In the bureaucracy, corruption exists in the form of routine and structural corruption. The use of public institutions for channelling rents to the political allies and loyal subordinates are exemplified by the practice of ghost workers, inflated contracts, and the selective distribution of allowances. These arrangements, rather than fostering efficiency, professionalism and accountability, reinforce the dependence of the bureaucracy on the patron, and lead to the perversion and manipulation of administrative procedures.

The Niger Delta is a case in point of systemic corruption and how the wealth of oil allows for the creation of patron-client networks between federal officials, local elites, contractors and militants. Development resources are often captured by intermediaries and state pacification programmes create new forms of dependency based on political loyalty. Nigeria, in comparison to some other nations like Kenya and Ghana, has a more entrenched and oil-fuelled form of patronage. All these cases jointly show that corruption in Nigeria is not a phenomenon of individual acts, but it is a consistent way of governance entrenched in the political and social fabric of Nigeria.

Sociological Consequences of Patronage-Based Corruption

Corruption and patronage in Nigeria have impacts beyond political inefficiency. They underdeveloped and depend, they weaken institutional capacity, and they taint the public morality; corruption is not only a moral shortfall, it is a social system. In this context, the role of public institutions is slowly being undermined and the norms of governance, morality and economy are becoming more and more determined by informal networks of loyalty and personal benefit.

The most obvious result of this system is the loss of the bureaucratic professional and accountability. In a patronage-prone system, merit in appointments and promotions is de-emphasised, leading to the appointment of civil servants to serve patrons and not the public interest. In the absence of accountability, procurement, budgeting, and auditing activities are open to political manipulation, inflation, ghost workers, and revenue leakage. This institutional decay fosters a general distrust of government, undermines public confidence, and leads citizens to think of government as a place for personal enrichment.

There is little or no doubt that corruption distorts social values and hampers development. The normalisation of corrupt practices like bribery, nepotism, and vote-buying as a means of survival, and the growing respect given to wealth and income, regardless of their source diminishes commitment to honesty, merit, and public service among young people. Patronage diverts money from health, education, infrastructure and productive investments, as well as substitutes long-term development with short-term political gains. The consequence is a vicious circle of inequality, dependency and underdevelopment, where loyalty always prevails over productivity and the public good.

Pathways for Change: Disrupting the System

The persistence of corruption in Nigeria demonstrates that anti-corruption efforts focused primarily on punishment and legal action have so far had limited impact. This is partly because corruption is often seen as a problem of personal moral weakness, rather than as a root of social and cultural norms that are supported by informal networks, shared expectations and patronage. Any meaningful reform should therefore go beyond legal sanctions and tackle the norms, relationships and practices which underlie the social acceptability of corruption. A critical approach that emphasises the importance of developing civic values, ensuring local democracy, and encouraging civic accountability through civic engagement, social movements and social accountability is needed to stem the dwindling tides.

An underlying pillar of this reform is the reconstruction of moral communities and the strengthening of civic actors, outside the framework of elite patronage. Civil society organisations, community groups, professional bodies and religious institutions have the power to reshape public values and hold leaders to account, particularly if they are based on local ownership and not reliance on state patronage or foreign funding. The potential of grassroots efforts such as BudgIT Nigeria and Follow the Money Africa to enhance fiscal transparency and uncover public resource misuse through community data, social networks, and digital platforms is evident. Meanwhile, civic education, family socialisation and faith-based leadership should help to reconceptualise notions of integrity, public service, success and connect personal morality with public office conduct using indigenous moral traditions.

It is also essential to eliminate the incentives that encourage patronage, a structural reform. Reducing the centralisation of fiscal and administrative powers can help to diffuse the power centre and help citizens more easily monitor public spending. Primordial tendencies can be reduced in state institutions through merit-based recruitment, public service exams (in which the public, not the government, determines who is appointed), digitalisation of processes, and independent appointment systems. There is an urgent need to strengthen open budgets, public audits and participatory governance, which should be localised. Digital activism, investigative journalism and youth mobilisation are also powerful bottom-up accountability tools. In the case of #EndSARS for example, digital media and evidence-based reporting have been used to expose abuse, create public pressure and contribute to a wider anti-corruption culture that is not just driven by the elites.

Conclusion

The solution to corruption in Nigeria is not simply legal, moral, or economic because it cannot be addressed in these areas alone. The experience of this paper has shown that corruption is an entrenched social institution which is constructed, sustained and influenced by historical processes, cultural norms and the fragility of formal institutions. It has grown out of a tradition of reciprocity and developed over colonial and postcolonial networks of patronage, and has become part and parcel of the organisation of power, the allocation of resources and the shaping of opportunity in modern-day Nigerian society.

At the sociological level, corruption has become a routine system in which there are close relationships among political elites, bureaucracy, contractors and local intermediaries. These informal links often replace formal institutions; however, they are able to shift the allocation of state resources with loyalty, protection and mutual obligation. This system can provide a temporary political calm and consensus among elites, but it also undermines the professionalism of the bureaucracy, the sanctity of moral values, and the continuity of social inequality, thus producing a social order that dictates that corruption is publicly denounced yet it is, nonetheless, regularly reproduced in everyday practice.

Therefore, any response that is more than a punishment and administrative rule will need to address the social relations and cultural logics that generate corruption. It is only when civic ethics are restored, meritocracy, transparency and decentralisation are enhanced, and a public culture is developed where integrity is socially rewarded, and corruption is firmly stigmatised that Nigeria can find its way forward. In the end, corruption is not just a political or institutional issue; it is both a sociological and moral one that demands collective change in conceptions of the state, the use of power, and the roles of the citizenry.

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