

Chapter Four

HOW CORRUPTION ATE NIGERIA'S SOUL

*It's here, there, and everywhere; it's you, me,
and everyone. We accept and perfect it at the same
time that we decry and inveigh it*

Corruption has become so integrated into Nigeria's national fabric and has eaten away every scintilla of decency in our social and cultural fiber that it is almost unthinkable that the scourge can ever be surmounted.

Nigerians of all stripes, not just politicians and public office holders are possessed and consumed by corruption to the extent that we have come to accept it as an integral part of who we are.

We have become so used to it as a way of life that we no longer find it obnoxious or shocking. Even the vilest form of it now has the sweet aroma of something expected and welcome.

Just to give you an idea, consider the following missives.

I was in Lagos not long ago and I lost my way in the giddiness of Obalende. I stopped to ask this little boy on the street for directions and much to my befuddlement, after pointing me in the right way, he pushed his palm in my face and said, "Oga you have to settle me."

He said it with such seriousness and alacrity that I was completely stupefied. "Settle you for what?" I queried my mouth agape in wonderment.

"Abi," he returned, maintaining his searing gaze at my eyeballs, "the direction wey I give you, you no need am? Abeg settle me joo."

Now I was thoroughly flabbergasted. I wished then that I could give him back what he just gave me so that I would be free of his menace. I also felt cowed and deflated.

"Why you no tell me say e go cost me something?" I demanded as I lamely fished in my wallet for a 100 Naira note.

"Befor nko? Abi you no know say na Nigeria we dey?" He retorted.

He took the 100 Naira and hissed as he skulked away and I could tell that he was not even impressed by the 100 Naira.

Then there was another time when I was unfortunate to have my car stuck in a crater-sized pot hole on a road in Lagos. I was immediately accosted by half-a-dozen youth who seemed to have been crouching out of sight nearby. Grinning ear to ear as if they had just netted a robust deal, they demanded I pay them some hefty amount to get my car out which I did. And when out of pretended naiveté I asked why the road was in such a bad shape, they scoffed at me and one said, "Haba oga, you be JJC? This na our own business center. If they fix am, we go spoil am. We no go gree them take our business from us." I got the point.

Then one time, I went to this palatial mansion in Lagos to see a so-called big man residing there. When I got to the huge gates, I was accosted by a uniformed guard who demanded to know my reason for coming.

"I want to see chief," I told him.

"Chief no dey," he returned tersely.

"But I called on the phone and he knows I'm coming," I said.

"Well, chief no tell me," he replied.

"Well go ask him," I pressed.

"Wetin you wan' see chief for?" he queried.

And my frustration grew. Luckily, "Chief" had another visitor who knew me and who had his way with the guard so I got in to see chief on the visitor's good grace.

On my way out, the guard sidled up to me. "Oga you go see me sha," he quipped, his tone clearly friendly now.

"I'm seeing you already with my eyeballs," I replied testily.

"Ah oga no vex. Jus' find me something," he insisted.

"Find you something for what?" I demanded.

"If no be me, you for no see oga. Na me open gate for you." He returned slyly.

He was an idiot, I could see. I left without another word. I'm betting I would have a tougher time if I ever went back.

Then check out this one about this poor chap who went to some ministry in Abuja to submit an application for employment.

The unassuming applicant did get beyond the gates and into an inner office where he warmly greeted a clerk and handed over his application. Then after a brief stop at another office to make inquiries he left to go home. Outside the gates he bought some groundnuts from a street vendor and discovered to his utter consternation that the paper with which his groundnuts were wrapped was the application he had just submitted.

Apparently he had neglected to “put something on top” of his application for the clerk when he submitted it and the application had followed him out the gates of the ministry rather than being forwarded for consideration.

These are just some examples of the decay in the mindset of most Nigerians. They are excoriating examples of why corruption has become Nigeria’s first nature. It is not just in high places, it’s in low places. It’s everywhere, it involves all Nigerians.

In one fashion or the other, we breathe, live, eat, drink, and indulge corruption, every one of us. Well, maybe ninety-nine percent of Nigerians.

That’s how bad it is.

Most people wrongly believe that the problem of corruption begins and ends in high places and with politicians and public office holders.

We all prefer to point fingers at others but not ourselves. We blame politicians, the police, public officials, and the military. We blame everyone else but ourselves. Even the corrupt politician points fingers at other corrupt politicians. We blame everyone else for corruption but ourselves even when we reek and stink and revel in it.

To be sure, corruption was not invented in Nigeria. However, we have taken it, embraced it, cuddled it and made it our own. We exist in it rather than it existing in us.

It hosts us rather us hosting it. It is our process of doing things rather than an item in the way we do things. It is usually excused with the popular refrain, “*this na Naija*”.

Corruption is so ubiquitous in Nigeria that without it, you cannot get anything done.

You cannot buy something without paying an excess amount for it even if you are a savvy buyer.

And if you are not careful, you will buy a dress shirt from the market only to discover when you get home that it has no sleeves.

Or you will buy a can of sardines only to find out that the expiration date on the can has been scratched off or altered.

You cannot get employment even if you tout the best qualifications.

And if you do not grease someone's palm your credentials will not be considered.

Or someone else will use your credentials to get hired.

You cannot get government business or contract even if you have the most realistic bid or proposal.

And even if you have the best equipment around someone else will get the contract and pay you peanuts to do the work.

Or if you want you can take the money and not do the work.

You cannot even go to see your friend if he lives in a mansion and has a security person at his gate.

And if you are not vigilant, someone will demand something from you for saying "good morning" to you.

Or require you to pay him first before he can tell you "good afternoon".

You cannot buy something from the market, take it home, find it defective or change your mind and return it to the vendor for a refund.

Oh no, not on your life.

Where do you think you are?

Whatever you pay for, you have to keep it whether you like it or not.

You cannot hand over money for any reason for that matter and then turn around and ask for it back.

That would be an abomination and you will be scorned and reprimanded.

Corruption permeates every pore, every crack, every cranny, every nook, every callow, every camber, every confine, every crevice, and every cell of Nigeria's existence.

In short, Nigeria is now officially a *Corruptocracy* (government of corruption, by corruption, and for corruption or Government of corrupt people, by corrupt people, for corrupt people).

Corruption is implicit in every contract, every deal, every transaction, every conversation, every discussion, every scheme, every appointment, every negotiation, every position, every office, every edifice, and every structure.

In theory and in practice, corruption no longer exists in Nigeria rather Nigeria exists in corruption. Corruption is the iceberg; Nigeria is now only the tip.

Corruption has eaten and imbibed the remnants of the Nigerian soul to the extent that most Nigerians, big and small, old and young, rich and poor are now bereft of any conscience.

Corruption is now not only the exclusive preserve of the policeman and the political office holder; it is the little boy who wants something in return for helping an old folk cross the street.

It is the market vendor who would sell you a shirt with only a front side but packaged to look like it is a complete shirt.

It is the seller of goods who would swear that the goods he is selling to you is the real stuff when he knows that it is a fake.

It is still the school boy who would lie to his uneducated parents that he needs to buy a packet of photosynthesis for science class.

It is the self-appointed pastor or self-nominated man of God who would encourage you to keep the loot you have carted from government coffers and to see it as God's blessing as long as you give him ten percent of the loot.

It is the school teacher who brings stuff to sell to other teachers in school rather than sit in class and teach.

It is the Nigerian no matter where you will find him or her.

Whatever is left of the country is in the throes and thralls of sure demise because of corruption but no one seems to notice or even care.

Nigerians now suffer from compulsive and spontaneous corruption to the extent that we can no longer restrain ourselves.

Even those who profess a religious faith are smack in the midst and middle of corruption.

It is no longer sin or thievery.

It is no longer something to be ashamed of.

It is now something to boast of.

And be proud of.

And celebrate.

It is now so much the norm that one can guarantee that even those who steal from government coffers do not fully appreciate the fact that they could be doing something terrible.

They pillage our treasures as a matter of entitlement and of right. That's how come they see nothing untoward in their actions.

Said one politician, "If I don't steal, somebody else will."

So he is merely beating the next bandit to the loot.

The national treasure is no longer for a common purpose; it is now for the first to get there.

First come, first served.

For him or her, there cannot be anything wrong with taking for himself or herself the treasure that belongs to all.

And if he has the opportunity to steal and he does not utilize it, he would be a laughing stock of others.

If you are not corrupt, you are a bloody fool.

And no one should have given you an important office in the first place.

That's how much Nigeria has embraced corruption.

Indeed, all Nigerians are victims of an enemy that they invited in their home and gave the impetus to destroy their country.

Every Nigerian, even the Nigerian who wears corruption as a vest is a victim.

We are all victims because we have permitted to stand systems and structures that make it easy for corruption to thrive.

We have erected a national storehouse of treasures and we have continuously entrusted the keys to just one person to control and manage it as he sees fit. If he be not corrupt at the time of the entrusting, mightn't we have neglected the fact that he is human and temptation is no respecter of humans?

I am always amazed when people express consternation at a report that some political office holder has absconded with millions of dollars or billions of naira.

"Can you imagine that?" They would say in bewilderment and anger.

"Yes I can." I would retort with a knowing smile.

What do they expect?

When the system places so much authority at the hands of one person to the extent that the president of Nigeria has the only say-so on every contract and every oil deal in Nigeria, why should anyone be surprised that with a stroke of the pen he could steal every dime the country has and have the guts to laugh in our faces.

When there is no effective system of checks and balances and the minister or governor or local government chairperson, or counselor, or commissioner behaves as if his office is a personal investment what you have is a conscienceless society that breeds and encourages criminal behavior.

When there is no effective system of accountability in which a winner-take all mentality is prevalent, what you have is a despoiled community in which people are not expected to be forthright.

When it is easy for the police to take extra-judicial action by locking a person in jail just because another person has given them money to do so, what you have is a perverse society where abuse of power and authority reigns supreme.

When you have a system in which a crime victim pays the police for the upkeep of the victimizer or suspect in jail and for investigation of the crime as well as transportation of the suspect to court, what you have is a bastardization of the notion of justice.

When you have a judicial system in which a case in court has to be put on hold because the judge or magistrate is away for a few months on a personal matter, what you have is a derelict judicial process in which people are forced to resort to self-remedies.

When you have a system in which the ordinary man has no basic knowledge of his fundamental rights

guaranteed by the constitution and those in the know exploit his ignorance, you have a nation which does not offer any form of protection for the ordinary citizen.

When you have a system in which people act with impunity and without fear of repercussions, what you have is a country that is sure to fail.

I agree with former President Obasanjo when he suggested that the systems and structures in place in Nigeria are so wantonly derelict and decayed that even if Jesus Christ himself came down to conduct elections in Nigeria, they cannot be free and fair.

Indeed how can elections in Nigeria be free and fair when we still rely on election officials to be sincere and true to their service to their fellow Nigerians? How can elections be fair when by their very nature, Nigerians are corrupt? Why should anyone expect a corrupt system to produce honest results?

I agree with all those Nigerians who have thrown their arms in defeat and frustration and are quick to quip that Nigeria is unsalvageable from the hands of odious corruption.

I agree more with all those Nigerians who say that we must do something about corruption in Nigeria.

I agree with many Nigerians who say that public office holders and politicians must be taken to task and held accountable.

However in setting our sights on righting the wrongs of our country, I do not agree that we should busy ourselves chasing after people and their stolen wealth.

Rather I am for ensuring that it never happens again.

No matter how much we rail about the things that have already gone awry, it is still foolhardy and unproductive to cry over spilt milk.

We must let bygones be bygones. The past can only serve as a teachable history of the paths we should avoid and cannot afford to thread. We must be forward looking.

That's a more practical and realistic approach.

If the money was stolen, it was not properly safeguarded.

If people are corrupt, it is because the system encourages and allows it.

If I see a thief running from my house with a bag of loot, I will not waste my time chasing after him especially when I may never catch up with him. I would go to my house to investigate how it is that the thief was able to get in. I would then reinforce the security in my house so that when the thief or his ilk returned he or they would not be able to gain entrance again.

That is the realistic and practical way to combat the scourge of Corruption in Nigeria.

No matter how rotten and broken the system in Nigeria has become, it is fixable.

Nigeria's best bet is to embark on sweeping and comprehensive reforms that would re-kit and retool and restructure and redefine the systems and structures in place so that no one Nigerian will ever be in a position to control our destiny and to avail himself of our national treasure.

Whatever changes we need to make would have to be revolutionary. There would be resistance because change is a bitter pill. We would need a lot of will power and resolve and determination and courage to force it down the throats of those who will resist.

Our steps must be sure and bold and decisive because change is something that our country direly needs.

After all said and done, when we have turned a new page, all of us, every Nigerian, will be swept to a new place where we would find our collective soul regurgitated from the bowels of the monstrous beast called corruption.