

INTRODUCTION

The messages are familiar to almost anyone with an e-mail account. During the early 2000s they became an international punch line. Often purporting to come from the relative of a Nigerian government official, they requested the recipient's help to transfer vast sums of money out of the country. In return for this assistance, the recipient would receive a significant percentage of the funds being transferred. Usually unsaid was that the money had been acquired corruptly and that the sender needed help in avoiding the attention of law enforcement. This high-tech update to the old Spanish Prisoner scam often appeared over the name of Maryam Abacha, widow of General Sani Abacha, who was Nigeria's military head of state from 1993 until his death in 1998. General Abacha had gained notoriety for the brutality of his regime and for personal corruption. As Nigeria moved to civilian government after his death, various estimates emerged of how much he and his family had taken out of the country—U.S. \$2 billion, \$3 billion, \$8 billion, \$9 billion. The Nigerian government sought international cooperation in 1999 to trace embezzled money, and in response Switzerland froze nearly \$700 million in Abacha family assets.¹ The ensuing drama garnered immense press coverage, as the government repeatedly detained Mrs. Abacha and members of her family, and as talks between government lawyers, family members, international banks, and foreign governments resulted in considerable sums repatriated. The negotiations were fraught—the newspaper *Tempo* reported Mrs. Abacha was “snobbish and uncooperative” with government negotiators²—but Mrs. Abacha became something of an international celebrity, famous as mistress of a misappropriated fortune.

And thus the e-mails. Mrs. Abacha might not have been such a compelling signatory if her husband's regime had not already been known for human

rights abuses. Most famously, the execution of the Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa brought the government to global attention. The story epitomized not just the regime's brutality but its corruption. Saro-Wiwa was known for his work in the Niger Delta, where the Ogoni people lived. They and other delta peoples had suffered the most from Nigeria's oil industry, losing great quantities of farmland to oil production and even more to the environmental degradation that went along with it. Worse, from their point of view, the revenues from oil were diverted elsewhere, to other regions of Nigeria and to the pockets of its rulers. Both inside Nigeria and internationally, General Abacha became synonymous with repression. As he became famous he was also equated with the political corruption for which Nigeria was already well known. The e-mails in Mrs. Abacha's name thus had various features to attract those with casual knowledge of recent Nigerian history: many had heard of vast sums stolen, many associated her name with that theft, and many had heard of her legal troubles. Other touches of verisimilitude may have passed many by: thus, the e-mails frequently had a return address that mentioned Gidado Road in Kano's elite Nassarawa neighborhood, where the Abachas famously own a house. But of course the e-mails did not come from Mrs. Abacha, and their recipients were not seriously intended to launder money. Anyone who replied was drawn into an extended correspondence, asked to send money to cover some of the expenses of regaining control of the fabled money, or even asked to come to Nigeria. There the target might be robbed, or subjected to elaborate dramas designed to extort large sums. In the first years of this century when this particular genre of e-mail was at its height of popularity, the senders were easily found. One could go into almost any Internet café in Nigeria and see the e-mails being written. When one sat down at a computer and woke the screen, if one didn't find porn it was often these e-mails.³ There has since been a crackdown, and now in Internet cafés each computer usually has a printed warning sign informing users they will be ejected from the café if they write such e-mails or view obscene material. More recently, the advance-fee fraud e-mails tend to come from other countries. The confidence games emerging from Nigeria's Internet cafés are somewhat different—financial scams are more likely to propose private business dealings than money laundering, and many schemes have to do with Internet dating or identity theft. But although the specifics have changed, the object is the same, to convince the recipient to pay large sums of money in the hopes of eventual reward.

The genre of the Abacha e-mails became established long before the general came to power. The technology that brought it into being was the fax machine rather than the Internet. Nonetheless, a relatively anonymous medium of com-

munication was not the only precondition for this confidence scheme. The scam depended on Nigeria's reputation for vast corruption. Mrs. Abacha was a compelling figure because of the Abachas' international notoriety, but in truth she only served as the embodiment for a well-entrenched stereotype. By the time fax machines were beginning to spool out stories of sequestered bank accounts and potential enrichment, the world had been hearing of florid Nigerian corruption for more than a decade. From the beginning of the oil boom in 1970, the Nigerian government notoriously spent vast sums of money, much of which was squandered and much of which was stolen. Both dynamics attracted lengthy international press coverage. The civilian rulers of the Second Republic (1979–83) received additional bad publicity when, in the aftermath of the oil glut and onset of the international debt crisis, the government was forced to admit that billions of dollars of government money had simply disappeared. Faxes and e-mails inviting their recipients to participate in looting Nigeria depended on the country's eruption into international discourse as a reservoir of corruption.

The e-mails in particular have also helped to confirm that reputation. Indeed, the e-mails have brought the Nigerian term “419” into international use. It invokes the section of the Nigerian criminal code outlawing confidence schemes. That section reads:

Any person who by any false pretense, and with intent to defraud, obtains from any other person anything capable of being stolen, or induces any other person to deliver to any person anything capable of being stolen, is guilty of a felony, and is liable to imprisonment for three years. If the thing is of the value of one thousand naira or upwards, he is liable to imprisonment for seven years. It is immaterial that the thing is obtained or its delivery is induced through the medium of a contract induced by the false pretense. The offender cannot be arrested without warrant unless found committing the offence.⁴

Provisions of this kind were a feature of penal codes dating back to the beginning of the colonial period. They attempted to regulate a major headache for the new government. Termed generically “personation,” the earliest versions involved people who dressed up in army uniforms or represented themselves as interpreters for British colonial officers and extorted money on the basis of their assumed positions. The colonial regime considered personation to be a particular threat to the legitimacy of the new British government and treated it severely.⁵ Attempting to install a political order that was culturally alien, the British had every reason to fear criminals who appeared to be state actors. From

the start the state reacted with particular ferocity to Nigerians who threatened the legitimacy of the new political order. Criminals engaged in personation and properly installed officials who misused their office were singled out for physical chastisement. The spectacle of public flogging was used to demonstrate the regime's disavowal of those who would use the symbols of state authority for private and dubious ends.

A semantic slippage from personation to the misuse of political office maps onto what might otherwise seem to be an idiosyncratic usage within Nigerian English: *both* confidence schemes and political corruption are referred to with the word "corruption." Naturally, most if not all Nigerian English speakers are well aware of international usages and of the nature of political corruption; nonetheless, Nigerian usages are somewhat broader. If anything, in Nigerian popular culture deception of individuals for personal enrichment is more morally dubious than the simple act of stealing money from the state or of exerting influence on behalf of those with whom one has personal ties. Indeed, these latter might, under certain circumstances, strike many as understandable or even laudable. As Daniel Jordan Smith suggests: "When Nigerians talk about corruption, they refer not only to the abuse of state offices for some kind of private gain but also to a whole range of social behaviors in which various forms of morally questionable deception enable the achievement of wealth, power, or prestige as well as much more mundane ambitions. Nigerian notions of corruption encompass everything from government bribery and graft, rigged elections, and fraudulent business deals, to the diabolical abuse of occult powers, medical quackery, cheating in school, and even deceiving a lover."⁶ Such conceptual breadth is key to understanding the phenomenon overall—even and especially in the sense of abusing public office. The relatively wide scope of Nigerian usages masks some of what is specific to the place. It also encodes the long history of "corruption" both as a set of activities of Nigerian officials and as an international discourse for describing official malpractice, wherever it might be found. Taking the term "corruption" as transparent and straightforward implies that it has a universal set of meanings, but its vernacular application in Nigeria maps onto a distinctive local moral field. This book will argue Nigeria is not somehow exceptional or pathological in that. The semantic variability of "corruption" in Nigeria suggests something more interesting, which is that the use of the term lies at the center of how moral questions about the distribution of public goods are negotiated. In Nigeria, as anywhere else, talking about corruption is a way of talking about moral ills. What is distinctive in Nigeria is the specific history of how such public ills intersect with public evaluations of the state. More than that, the broader references in some Nige-

rian uses of “corruption” also points to long-term developments in how the term has functioned internationally.

The subject of this book is not 419 e-mails, nor is it a muckraking description of corruption in Nigeria. Rather, it is a history of corruption as a cultural category. It describes how corruption has taken on the forms it has, and it argues that the profusion of Nigerian corruption is partly explained by its cultural complexity. One reason Nigerian corruption is now omnipresent and florid is because “corruption” is a label bringing together a host of practices and moral imperatives. The challenge is that the label is used locally, but it applies to practices that transcend region, local moral communities, and traditions of moral discourse. Following how corruption has functioned in Nigeria historically requires focusing on something *other* than Nigeria’s international reputation for corruption, or the reality of corrupt practices that pervade nearly every aspect of public life. Nonetheless the cultural imbrication of “corruption” ultimately provides insight into these two phenomena. This book’s primary project is to trace historically the forms of political culture that have led to present-day Nigeria, plagued by corruption and notorious for it. Its point of departure is the contention that it is not entirely clear what “corruption” means. The history of Nigerian corruption reveals that “corruption” takes on a variety of meanings and refers to various phenomena. Corruption’s meanings are multifaceted and polyvalent. At the most fundamental level, this book examines the polyvalence of “corruption.” It traces how corruption discourse has changed across the past century. It considers the complexity of “corruption” as a conceptual category, and it attempts to map that complexity onto the history of corruption in Nigeria both as a set of concrete practices and as a clutch of ideas. Nigerians and international commentators decry the country’s corruption, and rightly so. This book does not question the suffering corruption causes, nor the governmental dysfunction the label “corruption” indicates. These are real. The problems are urgent. But they have also changed across time, paralleling transformations in the political system and the economy. More than that, the vocabulary and traditions of discourse available for describing and evaluating these phenomena have also changed over time. The question asked here is of the political and cultural work done by people’s calling such a complex of activities “corruption.” That history is significant in its own right. Coming to terms with it is a necessary condition for dealing with the problem of corruption as it is generally understood.

The starting point of this project came while I collected oral histories about local government across the twentieth century. I noticed certain people did not tend to describe instances of bribe seeking, extortion, and embezzlement

on the part of government officials as “corruption.” Rather, many people consistently described such behavior as “oppression,” acts that were *wrong* but that were nonetheless a common quality of people in government. Oppression is something to be expected from government officials, which is why it makes sense to avoid them as much as possible. This descriptive habit was most common among people who spoke only Hausa (rather than having substantial fluency in English as well), who did not have much Western education, and who were not strongly oriented toward Western culture. It is worth taking their formulation seriously, and not to dismiss it simply as a case of ignorance of the law or of appropriate governmental practice. Viewing certain official practices as being “oppression” rather than “corruption” is perfectly robust on its own terms. It enables moral evaluations of particular individuals. It is also part of a more complex whole, since the practices some would call “oppression” are also discussed by people who inhabit other conceptual universes. Both paradigms of malpractice-as-oppression and an international technocratic paradigm of malpractice-as-corruption should be taken as important ways of thinking about the morality of Nigerian political practice. Similarly, the formulation of “corruption” in Nigerian English in terms rather broader than those in American English should be taken equally seriously. Insisting on the polyvalence and the conceptual complexity of the label “corruption” is a way of starting to examine how particular social practices (stealing money from the government, for example) become conjoined with specific modes of describing them. The forms corruption has taken—and the manner in which it has become both all-pervasive and notorious—are encoded within the very complexity of corruption as a semantic complex. Observers variously evaluate “corrupt” practices and therefore make different moral claims on the officials in question. A multiplicity of interpretations helps to perpetuate the entire system. I will propose that part of the reason Nigerian corruption has taken on its current forms stems from its polyvalence, the manner in which social practice is inflected by translation between languages and frames of reference, by which it refracts through different and almost incommensurable social institutions.

But I have gotten ahead of myself. So far, my invocation of “international technocratic paradigms of corruption” has been somewhat loose, even while I have insisted on the specificity of Nigerian usages. This is partly because technocratic usages are themselves elusive. Consider one influential formulation: Transparency International (TI), the well-known nongovernmental organization, defines “corruption” as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.”⁷ The definition is useful in that it signals its own intellectual history even as it displaces almost all definitional bite onto other key terms. TI’s definition is

admirably open-ended, and it applies to all of the phenomena the organization wants to deal with. But unless one already has a good sense of what it means by every adjective and noun in the phrase, the definition is elusive. The key terms are “entrusted,” “power,” and “private” (“abuse” and “gain” are also challenging, for that matter). Below I will discuss these issues in more detail, but here it is worth noting that such technocratic definitions rest on particular understandings of what the state is and how its functionaries should discharge their duties. For technocratic commentators, corruption implies a deviation from the principles governing officials’ behavior, and it also depends on a distinction between public and private: “corruption” labels not just divergence from official codes of conduct but divergence out of private interest. Technocratic paradigms are very different from those indexed by deception or oppression.

So this is my point of departure: some Nigerian paradigms of corruption are different from international norms, but together these three paradigms cover what one might term “corruption” in Nigeria. Where does that get us? How does one study corruption, especially if the conceptual universes available to describe it are divergent and sometimes incompatible? Is it possible to write a history of corruption if the word itself continually changes in meaning? The difficulties are yet more challenging. For while phenomena termed “corruption” constitute a discrete, albeit open-ended set of material practices (dressing up in army uniforms, gouging extra taxes from peasants, wiring government money to private Swiss bank accounts, sending deceptive e-mails), only some are “corrupt” in TI’s sense. The various ways of thinking about corruption demonstrate that it is also a complicated array of discourses available for describing those practices. Instead of evaluating material practices as right or wrong, regular or irregular, one must consider descriptions of corruption to be a set of discourses that evaluate the moral qualities of concrete events. “Corruption” in this sense is a moral terrain on which debate is conducted. TI’s definition is one strand in this much more complex discursive field, as are notions of corruption as oppression or deception. Related to but distinct from this formulation of corruption as a moral discourse is the fact that corruption is a set of legal doctrines under which particular events or practices can be adjudicated. Corruption is a legal category. And here, TI’s definition maps onto formal laws fairly well, even if there are complexities in how those laws work in practice. These three registers of corruption—material practice, moral discourse, legal category—are sometimes parallel. They sometimes intersect. They sometimes are wholly independent.

If one wants to understand Nigerian corruption, therefore, one must understand that the label “corruption” is not a rigid designator. The term’s meaning is

not transparent. It refers to a variety of phenomena. Its meaning is contextually dependent, but more importantly its social utility stems in part from its protean qualities. Corruption's three registers—material, discursive, legal—are not three alternatives, each in its own domain the only possible meaning of “corruption.” Rather, their complicated interdependence has structured the changing forms corruption has taken in modern Nigeria. This is a challenge to discuss, because it requires using the word “corruption” in a variety of ways, sometimes in scare quotes and sometimes not. For this reason, it is useful to borrow Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan's term “corruption-complex,” although my use of it here is very different from his.⁸ In this book I use it to designate the totality of phenomena encompassed by the term “corruption”: practices that might be labeled “corrupt,” the three registers in which “corrupt” practices subsist, and the various culturally embedded frames of reference through which this complex of practice and naming can be understood. A key contention of this book, then, is that the flamboyance of the Nigerian corruption-complex emerges directly from the ways in which its heterogeneous components have developed across the course of modern Nigerian history. As a matter of heuristic convenience, I shall use “corruption” with quotation marks in order to emphasize its status as a label. At times I shall also use the word uninflected, simply as a matter of narrative convenience.

A corollary to my formulating the problem in this way is the corruption-complex's cultural embeddedness and historical contingency. But those specificities pose their own challenges. To the extent that the corruption-complex is embedded in vernacular culture (which itself has changed across time, and continues to do so), the task of writing a history of how the complex emerged and was transformed is hideously complicated by Nigeria's cultural complexity. Contemporary Nigeria is a federation of thirty-six states; within those states live peoples speaking an estimated 250 languages. Each language might be considered to correspond to its own cultural vernacular, potentially with its own distinct manner of conceptualizing corruption. Some language groups may have more: a society such as that of Hausaphone northern Nigeria is extremely diverse, and has long been stratified by class, occupation, and geography. Moreover, the meanings of ethno-linguistic categories are fluid, and their boundaries porous. Their social implications have changed across time, and indeed even considering them to be *distinct* groups in many ways is a legacy of the colonial period. Reifying ethnicity is thus a mistake, and yet it has been a matter of life and death for many across Nigerian history. Ethnic groups are imagined communities in Benedict Anderson's terms, subject to change over time and subject to manipulation by individuals. It is sometimes possible to

identify with different groups at different moments.⁹ Despite their complexity, contingency, and fluidity, ethnonyms and linguistic groupings can serve as rough proxies for the contexts within which cultural understandings of phenomena like corruption take place. As such, every group potentially contains the history of a particular strand of Nigerian understandings of corruption. Perhaps some of these are more significant than others: the three largest ethnic groups (the Hausa, the Yoruba, and the Igbo) make up approximately 60 percent of Nigeria's population, and they have played a disproportionate role in Nigeria's history of ethnic politics. Even so, the history of Nigerian cultures is not reducible to those of the big three. Tracking the history of the cultural embeddedness of the Nigerian corruption-complex, therefore, is impossible in a straightforward narrative. A definitive history of the corruption-complex would need to attend to a myriad of vernacular histories, with all the nuance such would entail; that project is too complex for one volume to attempt at all. Yet the vernacular component of "corruption" is central to how corruption has developed across Nigerian history. In the interest of making a first approximation, therefore, this book will follow one of those strands, from the Muslim Hausa emirates of northern Nigeria as they have become incorporated into Nigeria as a whole. This is a very partial picture of the Nigerian corruption-complex but nonetheless is an important one. Muslim Hausa culture has been politically central to Nigeria from the start of internal self-rule onward. By following this strand of the corruption-complex, this book develops an approximation of what the history would look like for Nigeria as a whole, even though such an account would be almost infinitely more complex. It is thus an essay on how to go about the study of Nigerian corruption more than a history of the entire phenomenon.

Theorizing Corruption

It is all very well to insist that corruption can be understood only in cultural context and that contexts vary, but the formulation ducks a key problem. The entire discussion so far has implicitly relied on what I have been terming a technocratic definition of corruption. It has taken for granted that "corruption" (however defined) applies to a coherent, discrete referent directly describing what is going on when an official engages in "corruption." But does it? At times I have displaced this problem by calling activities that would fit under such a rubric "malpractice." But that is not entirely satisfactory. What features are common to practices that are described in technocratic terms as "Nigerian corruption" or "government malpractice"? What makes them distinctive or

worthy of inquiry? What does “Nigerian corruption” have to do with political malpractice in other polities across human history, and to what extent can we equate different intellectual and moral systems for evaluating such malpractice? Is it appropriate, or even possible, to discuss Nigerian corruption as a discrete thing? A bureaucratic logic valorized distinctive codes of conduct for officials working within it; that logic came to Nigeria in tandem with a tradition of describing particular forms of misconduct as “corruption.” But this was not static, a constant characteristic of British or western European culture. The import of bureaucratic norms to Nigeria took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time when the concept of corruption was in flux within Europe itself.

Western Europe by that time possessed a long history of using “corruption” and its cognates in other European languages metaphorically. In its basic sense, “corruption” denotes an apolitical, literal spoilage and rottenness. Any biological entity degenerates over time; bodies corrupt after they die. Such usages can be extended to describe governmental and public processes as metaphorically spoiled and rotten. A tradition dating from Aristotle and stretching to Machiavelli and beyond saw corruption as the diminution of virtue in the polity, a falling away of the citizenry from the principles of good behavior that had informed them in earlier times.¹⁰ This use of the word “corrupt” was a political critique, or at least suggested principles for structuring a well-run state. Nonetheless, “corruption” in this sense did not have all the nuances it now has, nor was the metaphor necessarily employed to denote all occasions of government malpractice that might now be termed “corruption.” Processes of degeneration were not universally correlated with sin, accepting bribes, improper reliance on patronage, and so forth,¹¹ nor was all condemnation of such practices necessarily understood through biological metaphors. Nonetheless, a powerful tradition had emerged of using such metaphors in this political sense.

Across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, political usages acquired new nuances through novel political struggles.¹² In keeping with earlier uses, “corruption” could designate a state of political affairs suffering from some species degeneracy, implying that society had been healthier in earlier periods before things went wrong. Physiocratic writing, for example, posited wealth as emerging from agricultural surpluses and economic problems as caused by the parasitism of merchants and artisans, whose activities degraded earlier states of prosperity. Similarly, Adam Smith and other political economists tried to understand how trade could be maintained to increase national wealth, avoiding distortions that had previously come to plague it. Such traditions of eco-

nomie thought maintained continuity with earlier thinking about a degeneration of virtue: contemporary economic woes stemmed from an earlier system's spoilage. A novelty, however, had emerged in that such thinkers were not seeking a return to an earlier state of virtue but rather hoped for a different and improved future. Even as this occurred, however, practical politics and patterns of political and economic change pushed "corruption" in new and unexpected directions.

In the United Kingdom, the struggle against "rotten boroughs"—parliamentary constituencies that had declined radically in population and therefore had small electorates and were under the control of a local patron—helped to align ideas about political reform with a specific critique of patronage, which was then designated as "corruption." Reforms in hiring practices for the civil service, clergy, and military commissions, and in university admissions and appointments, similarly deployed "corruption" to criticize existing states of affairs.¹³ In the United States, movements to pay public officials with salaries rather than fees and bounties and to combat patronage-based political machines adopted "corruption" as a powerful way of describing what was wrong with the system as it stood.¹⁴ Both of these were instances in which projects of political innovation were dressed up as a return to regimes of morality that had previously prevailed. Because their novelty was also inarguable, such innovations helped to change the meaning of "political corruption" itself, somewhat diffusing the temporal trajectories the trope of rotting had implied. Nonetheless, it was especially the progressive movement in the United States at the turn of the last century that resulted in a new and detailed attention to what "corruption" might mean and how it might be ameliorated, and to the ways in which systems of patronage were incorporated into systems of government.¹⁵

A distinctive critique of corruption in empire infused "corruption" with yet more complexity. Imperial expansion across the eighteenth century led to a series of scandals. For example, officials of the British East India Company plundered India and then used their riches to buy honor and influence at home. Atrocities were committed against Indians. Almost worse, critics argued, British officials were conducting themselves in a manner that accorded more with "uncivilized" Indian mores than with the beneficence of rulers from a civilized Christian power. Not only that, men who had enriched themselves in such unacceptable ways were frequently from relatively humble backgrounds, but they were able to use their questionable wealth to climb the class ladder at home. Imperial administration debauched European officials and ultimately threatened to corrupt the mother country.¹⁶ At the same time, the heat of the tropics and the allure of the various sexual delights available far from home threatened

to debauch the European men and women who went there, creating a carnal corruption.¹⁷ In imperial contexts, the language of corruption did not posit an earlier state of wholeness then spoiled by a process of corruption. Instead, the “advanced” mother country was endangered by the influence of its “primitive” possessions. An imperial dialectic of scandal and attempted reform combined with an ambivalence about the dangers of ruling colonies to push “corruption” in new and unexpected directions.¹⁸ Corruption was no longer simply political degeneracy; it was beginning to imply a persistent primitivism, a lack of modernity, a state of not having achieved (or of having lost) key bureaucratic and procedural innovations in government. By the early twentieth century, Western states were still far from having eliminated all practices that could be called “corrupt,” quite the contrary. However, an idiom for describing a particular genre of undesirable political forms was well established. “Corruption” was available as a term of critique. It pointed in many temporal directions at once, even as its means and application continued to shift.¹⁹

This process had relatively little purchase in Nigeria at the time of colonization, though many instances of annexation were justified by the claim that indigenous rulers had degenerated and become corrupt.²⁰ For the most part, however, the critique was applied to governmental processes that depended on an organization model brought to Nigeria only through colonial rule. Euro-American reformers had to this extent triumphed: by roughly 1900 “corruption” denoted a failure to live by the mores of a particular kind of bureaucracy. This usage valorized a bureaucratic code of conduct; it also naturalized distinctions between public and private and delegitimated political motivations on the basis of “private” interests. In the late nineteenth century, this distinction was still under negotiation and was more complicated in practice than in theory.²¹ Nonetheless, at the start of the twentieth century when Northern Nigeria was colonized, the technocratic paradigm of corruption was still relatively close to its vernacular sense. The way it functioned as a political critique did not depend on a terribly elaborate theorization of the state or its history.

The antimonies of efficient bureaucracy and corruption were not the end of the story. “Corruption” continued to shift its meaning across the twentieth century, particularly as social scientists began to consider the problem in the years after World War II. Attention to corruption came as countries across Asia and Africa attained independence from colonial rule. Scholars accordingly attempted to plot a course toward modernity and political stability for these “new nations.” The general rubric for this school of thought was modernization theory, which posited a universal sequence of political and economic development through which “precapitalist” systems of production like peasant

agriculture gave way to industrial capitalism. The urgency of modernization theory stemmed from the ambitions of the emergent “Third World” and the fear of communist revolutions; the ambition was to achieve capitalism and democracy faster and with less social upheaval than the process had occasioned in the West. Frustrating the desires of citizens of new states might make socialism more attractive to them.²² Corruption was a potential pitfall in the path to modernity. In this intellectual context, “corruption”—that is, officials not performing their duties properly but abiding by private interests—was a *technical* problem. Informed by a need to provide technical advice to the rulers of newly independent countries, scholars in this new approach avoided simple exhortations to progress but instead attempted to provide guidance about how progressive change might be accomplished. Moral proscription and political critique were insufficient as technical advice. An early attempt in this vein was a book entitled *Corruption in Developing Countries*, which acknowledged that corruption caused enormous problems but also argued that condemning it tout court was oversimple and unproductive. The authors proposed to address the “scarlet thread” of corrupt practices that plagued newly independent nations. They posited that the solution was to examine how corruption had been overcome in the West. This created a certain analytical problem, the authors admitted, because comparison and a “moralizing approach” might miss local systems of understanding, which were key to local practice. Indigenous culture needed to be taken into account, since only careful attention to corruption’s social utilities would enable planners to address it effectively.²³ In this view corruption was neither an object of political critique nor a deformation of earlier, purer states of affairs. Rather, it was characteristic of a particular moment of social evolution, which all societies would face at one point or another. It had a social utility, and its many drawbacks might be ameliorated through a proper understanding of other societies’ experiences.

An emphasis on local systems of knowledge and an acknowledgment that corruption could achieve important ends touched off a new literature considering corruption less as a moral problem than as a shortcoming in political systems, and as the consequence of relatively straightforward and recent historical causes.²⁴ A critical corollary was that corruption was the product of a certain stage of development. It was a sign of primitivism but for precisely that reason could be overcome through political development. One point of departure was a proposal by a former British political officer in Africa that corruption was the consequence of a clash between precolonial modes of political culture and new forms of the state that required a different mode of political comportment.²⁵ Others emphasized Ronald Wraith and Edgar Simpkins’s rejection

of moral condemnation, urging examination of such practices' historical or structural causes, rooted in local contexts.²⁶ Joseph Nye brought together these strands in an influential essay positing that there had been two primary approaches to the study of corruption, which he termed moralist and revisionist. He proposed retaining the insights of each approach by subjecting corrupt practices to cost-benefit analysis, as a way of determining the conditions under which corruption should be considered to be a barrier to political and economic development. Nye's article was important in its identification of two approaches to thinking about corruption, in its explicit reliance on modernization theory as a framework, and in its import into concepts of corruption a version of Weberian sociology then current among modernization theorists. Nye's definition of corruption bore a strong resemblance to earlier attempts, but its nuances were innovative: "behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding . . . pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence."²⁷ Nye's elaborate vocabulary imported a theoretical apparatus that today remains encoded as unarticulated assumptions when "corruption" is used in a technocratic sense.²⁸ Even though modernization theory lost explicit purchase after many decades' unrelenting criticism, the use of technocratic paradigms of corruption invokes this rather more rarified conceptual system. The corruption literature borrowed from modernization theory a historical argument suggesting corruption was ultimately the product of a confrontation between traditional and modern political culture. More recent uses of technocratic definitions also involve this conjectural and (as I shall argue in this book) rather problematic history. Nye is important in this regard because his definition most clearly signals the underlying assumptions of the paradigm.

Using technocratic terminology not only suggests the critic is a disinterested technocrat; it also presupposes an entire developmentalist history of the problems under discussion. The scholarly redefinition of corruption made a reformist critical vocabulary into an entire past, present, and future: "tradition" gives way to a problematic present, which may be redeemed in a modernized future. Describing political corruption thus systematizes and theorizes an analytic object for the purpose of justifying technical interventions in the evolution of capitalist modernity. The irony is that this intellectual apparatus was grafted onto a discursive tradition that emerged from idiosyncratic political struggles in countries whose histories have little to do with difficulties in countries like Nigeria today. Instead of remaining an objective description of a universal process of human development (much less an abstract set of neutral paradigms), "corruption" evolved as a way of critiquing political practices in

eighteenth- and nineteenth-century polities, mostly in Europe. Modernization theorists and other sociological commentators in the 1960s and 1970s may have relied on a somewhat teleological view of how states develop or should develop, but the long-term legacy of their paradigms does not lie in that conjectural future history. Rather, their redefinition of “corruption” helped to create a novel “political unconscious,”²⁹ which moved from individual instances in which corruption was identified to an implicit and inarticulate conviction that corruption had a consistent set of causes and at least potentially a consistent set of solutions. For this reason it has had profound political and cultural consequences.

Social Science and Corruption in Practice

While the category of corruption was acquiring new weight, incisive field studies such as those of M. G. Smith and Simon Ottenberg developed a detailed picture of how political elites emerged as intermediaries between domestic economies and the international market as a consequence of political structures that came about during the colonial period. Smith’s study of colonial Zaria, for example, focused on long-term patterns of oppressive conduct on the part of Zaria’s aristocracy. Smith identified a long-term increase in what he termed “the use of public office or authority for private advantage and gain”³⁰ ever since a reformist jihad at the beginning of the nineteenth century. During the twentieth century, colonial rule brought greater centralization of government and a larger role for it in managing economic life, both of which greatly increased corruption’s incidence. More immediately influenced by neo-Weberian approaches, Ottenberg viewed corruption in local government as being the consequence of a set of structures organized around modern bureaucratic principles. These were staffed by people whose political culture dictated more personalistic and reciprocal modes of decision making. The clientelist nature of their political support and the centrality of the state in providing opportunities for enrichment combined to make diversion of state resources to private ends easy and inevitable.

In the years following this pioneering work, the literature on corruption flourished, to such an extent that it is difficult to represent its entirety.³¹ Nonetheless, the period from the 1970s onward was not simply a halcyon time for secondary literature on corruption; it was also when Nigeria became almost synonymous with the term. To the extent that scholarly literatures have informed technocratic vernaculars, some overview of the former is useful. Roughly, one can perceive three major approaches to writings in the traditions

arising from the conjunctures of the 1960s. The tradition that has had greatest influence on technocratic approaches to corruption since the heyday of modernization theory emerged from economics. Many of these scholars follow Susan Rose-Ackerman in treating corruption as “an illegal or unauthorized transfer of money or an in-kind substitute” for which the “‘bribee’ must necessarily be in a position of power, created either by market imperfections or an institutional position which grants him discretionary authority.”³² Corruption is conceptualized as a particular form of rent seeking—attempting to gain economic benefit by acquiring access to already-existing wealth rather than creating new—potentially constrained by an appropriately designed system of incentives. The trick is to prevent anticorruption mechanisms from imposing greater economic costs than does corruption itself.³³ For development planners this is extremely useful in that it provides a package of potential fixes to specific forms of corruption. Rose-Ackerman herself suggests a battery of policies that might, in different combinations, lower the incidence of corruption in many societies.³⁴

Despite this obvious utility, microeconomic approaches provide little insight into why particular states of affairs obtain in the real world, tending to take institutional arrangements as instantiations of policy choices arrived at by decision makers after weighing them against alternatives. This may create a robust predictive model, but it does not accord very well with the processes through which these arrangements came about. On one hand, such approaches are well suited to reform, or at least to the design of policies addressing the need for reform.³⁵ Accordingly, such approaches greatly influence policy—within governments, the donor and business communities, and civil society groups like Transparency International. On the other hand, like their modernization theory predecessors, they tend to naturalize the current state of affairs as a moment in a developmental sequence or to imagine a solution that could simply be willed into being.

A tradition emerged in political science somewhat at odds with this emphasis. Such scholars emphasized the patterning of political relationships.³⁶ As the initial celebration of African independence gave way to more sober and critical assessments of African states’ thorny problems during the 1970s and 1980s, scholars like Colin Leys and Sayre Schatz argued for the importance of political elites in maintaining African states’ dependent position in the world economy as a consequence of the elites’ drive to maintain access to lucrative opportunities diverting state resources toward themselves and their families.³⁷ The sociologist Peter Ekeh made a very influential suggestion that postcolonial Africa was characterized by the coexistence of two distinct public

spheres, one of primordial cultural ties whose moral claims were similar to the intimate ones of the private sphere, and a second of civic involvement equivalent to the Western public sphere but which was perceived as fundamentally amoral. Africans, Ekeh argued, experienced the claims of the primordial public sphere as exerting great moral force but perceived the civic public sphere as simply a realm to be exploited.³⁸ Together the emphasis on the peculiar incentives dependent economies created for political elites and culturalist accounts of how such elites perceived their sociopolitical responsibilities enabled the emergence of an important literature on politics in countries like Nigeria.

Such approaches ascribed corruption and political instability to the persistence of patrimonial ties within modern state structures, often under the rubric of patrimonialism or neo-patrimonialism.³⁹ One of the most influential studies of Nigerian politics emerged from this tradition. Richard Joseph's *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria* looks systematically at how the politics of patronage (and specifically the ethnicized distribution of state offices) both constituted and fatally undermined the course of politics in Nigeria's Second Republic (1979–83).⁴⁰ One of Joseph's key insights was that constitutional structures did not just exacerbate ethnic cleavages. Rather, the two had a mutually constitutive relationship. Patron-client ties were the sine qua non of Nigerian politics. Constitutional structures and patterns of politics determined how patronage could be exercised. Patronage largely followed ethnic boundaries, and since the state distributed most economic opportunities, political competition was inevitably a struggle over resources more than policy. Communal sentiments became a primary idiom for this competition.⁴¹ More recently, William Reno made analogous arguments about the ways in which the politics of clientelism (or, in a later book, warlordism) have inflected the practice of politics and as a consequence have created corruption almost as a by-product.⁴²

This literature has corresponded to much wider discussions on the African state which locate many of its dysfunctions in the inadequacies of institutions put in place during the colonial period. Local administration became the responsibility of officials granted resources inadequate for their political needs, or for their need for public consumption as understood in local political culture. Instead of acting as guardians of the public interest, African elites have accordingly pursued the interests of their home regions, of their families and patronage networks, and (quite frequently) of cities over rural areas.⁴³ One influential strand of thought was that the African state was weak, lacking the mechanisms of enforcement and control usually thought to characterize the modern state and maintaining its existence largely because of an

international system that presupposed all territories are governed by a state, thus propping up institutions that had little popular legitimacy or efficacy.⁴⁴ More than approaches from economics, this approach answers critical questions about why African states face the dilemmas they do. But if the conclusions scholars taking this approach draw do not always offer obvious packages of reformist solutions, they nonetheless suggest how corruption might be overcome. Scholars who emphatically reject the supposition that African political problems emerge from a failure to develop nonetheless often rely on an implicit model of (European) states from which African ones deviate. Even where African states might be celebrated as hybrid, as having distinctive forms of politics, European forms remain as an ideological point of comparison, a norm, or an unmarked category—a great irony, since “corruption” emerged as a political critique rather than as a supposed developmental stage. Treating it as designating something coherent and real, which states might be plagued by or not, naturalized an ideological portrait of the noncorrupt state as a *European* state, when the conceptual category had emerged as an implicit complaint thus did not exist in the real world. Political case studies often lose track of the local systems of meaning through which “corrupt” practices emerge and from which they take on a large portion of their social significance.

Such questions, however, are at the center of an ethnographic literature on corruption that has emerged relatively recently. Much of this work moves away from neo-Weberian assumptions about the nature of state institutions or the significance of a clash between patrimonial and bureaucratic political logics. Rather, ethnographers have taken an actor-centered approach, considering how individual people understand the situation of corruption within which they find themselves. In their research on Ghana, for example, Brenda Chalfin and Jennifer Hasty describe how “corrupt” practices are understood in cultural context. Chalfin’s fine-grained examination of the Ghanaian customs service demonstrates how customs agents and other state officials constitute “the state” in a particular location while being dependent on local political and economic relationships enabling them to exercise their authority and to extract “corrupt” revenue for themselves. Hasty’s fieldwork working as a journalist in southern Ghana enabled a uniquely insightful account of how both “corrupt” practices and political condemnation of corruption depend on fundamentally similar expressions of desire for access to resources not available to particular actors.⁴⁵ Daniel Jordan Smith on southeastern Nigeria,⁴⁶ Janet MacGaffey on Congo/Zaire,⁴⁷ and Olivier de Sardan and Giorgio Blundo’s comparative project on Benin, Niger, and Senegal have all provided particularly noteworthy ethnographic studies of corruption.⁴⁸ Also important is the influence of the anthro-

political literature on gift giving and prestation. Following Marcel Mauss's seminal account of the gift as a total social fact, the organizing principle of exchange and thereby of social life in pre-market societies, anthropologists have debated the relationship between "pure" gifts and ones that demand reciprocation, and how this relates to other patterns of obligation and hierarchy in human societies.⁴⁹ Smith in particular provides a wonderfully detailed portrait of the emergent nature of "corrupt" transactions in particular locales, as a basic logic of prestation is enacted under the demands of bureaucratic authority, an intersection of reciprocity and what Christopher Fuller and Veronique Beni have termed the "everyday state."⁵⁰ Of particular note is recent work by Akhil Gupta, who has developed an important ethnography of corrupt state practice in India. He demonstrates the centrality of corrupt and irregular practice in the relationship between ordinary people and the frontline officials of the Indian state, and most importantly shows that *narratives* of corruption are a primary way in which the state itself is discursively constructed through talk of corruption.⁵¹

Such approaches provide a crucial addition to a literature that has tended to see "corruption" as one phenomenon that variously manifests itself around the globe, or that represents a particular developmental conjuncture. This strength can also be something of a weakness, since it leaves somewhat shadowy the question of how one might pay attention to the local meanings of a global phenomenon, or of the relationship between such socially situated practices and the state structures they emanate from and influence. As Rose-Ackerman notes, "Ethnographic research tends to concentrate on cultural and social expectations to explain the prevalence of personalistic ties and quid pro quo transactions" to the exclusion of looking at the dynamics of "grand" corruption, its systematic qualities, or the central role played by the state."⁵² The danger of taking an actor-centered approach to corruption is that doing so tends to de-emphasize its consequences or what is specific to it. In one sense, this criticism is simply a familiar condemnation of anthropological relativism—which in fairness is not a position any serious scholar espouses. But that begs the question of how to deal with it analytically. Is "corruption" simply a series of family resemblances, or is there something more profound linking corruptions together? One useful approach has been taken by historians, who have tended to look at particular contexts and at how the phenomena deemed "corrupt" operated and changed over time.⁵³

Along those lines, one of the most influential bodies of literature about the African state considers features that might be termed "corruption" and emphasizes how the specific histories of African states have produced a somewhat

unusual state form. Authors like Jean-François Bayart, Mahmood Mamdani, Achille Mbembe, and Jeffrey Herbst have all insisted on examining the *longue durée* trajectories of African states, locating contemporary dysfunction in long-term patterns of politics, political accommodation, population structure, culture, and geography.⁵⁴ Such authors' appeals to history often work better as broad-brush characterizations than as detailed descriptions of any particular case. Even accounts that insist on the unlovely legacies of jamming together African political traditions and European political institutions and that decline to valorize European practices as advanced or intrinsically better can end up implicitly importing European models by positing them as actually existing in Europe or elsewhere. Whether or not one supposes a European model of the state is that with which "normal" states should accord, such approaches tend to reify European states as according with aspirational accounts rather than hard facts. The ideological figure of the bureaucratic state, which emerged in projects of political reform crosscutting intellectual traditions describing and enabling reformers' ambitions, becomes taken as an objective description of "normal" states rather than a charter myth some states invoke or a model to which they aspire. "Corruption," in short, is difficult to deal with because it is epistemically shifty: it creates urgent social problems, but its meaning is fluid and subject to change over time. It is a moral discourse as much as it is an objective reality.

How to Do Things with Corruption

Corruption is real. We know that, but that is not because corrupt acts occur and we know they are "corrupt." Corruption is now a global concern because corrupt acts occur *and are labeled "corrupt."* These acts of labeling are polyvalent, varying from time to time, place to place, and even situation to situation, even as they invoke a particular intellectual tradition that is not identical to all traditions for critiquing government malpractice. Changes in the entailments of "corruption" help to produce both the persistence of particular forms of political malfeasance and the perpetuation of a hierarchy of states and political forms. Across the past century invocations of "corruption" in global arenas have moved beyond reformist discourses about degenerate political forms. Increasingly they have invoked an implicit schema of political and social development. At the same time, other, oftentimes more local discourses about the rightness and wrongness of state actions have also acted to inform discussions of "corruption." In this process, such discourses performed political work, but that work has changed over time. This book is thus a history of the practical

polyvalence of corruption discourse, and it is a history of the political work “corruption” has done in Nigeria.

Formulating the problematic in this way emphasizes corruption’s quality as what might be termed “a political performative.” That term is taken from J. L. Austin’s notion of performative speech acts.⁵⁵ Austin noted there are things people say that have effects in the world simply by being uttered—the celebrant of a wedding saying, “I declare you husband and wife,” for example. It is not always straightforward to distinguish what separates performative speech acts from other speech acts, but the notion of speech that does things simply through being uttered is fruitful, particularly when discussing politics. Even more useful is a distinction Austin makes between what he terms illocutionary speech acts and perlocutionary speech acts; the former are speech acts accomplished purely through being uttered, the latter acts accomplished because the words are spoken.⁵⁶ If I am a judge passing a sentence, it is an illocutionary act for me to say, “I sentence you to be hanged.” My uttering the words accomplishes the act of sentencing. My words also have perlocutionary force in that they will result in the defendant’s death by hanging; the sentencing is illocutionary, the hanging perlocutionary. In this instance, the discursive aspects of the corruption-complex function as a political performative, and the challenge for political analysis is to sort out what happens in the gap between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary, somewhere between “I say the town clerk stole money” and his removal from office in disgrace. People talk about corruption in order to achieve specific political ends, which are accomplished in and through the act of labeling. At least when discussing the trajectories of the Nigerian corruption-complex, the material practices of corruption become imaginable and therefore possible because of well-established discourses about corruption. If corruption is central to Nigerian politics *and* talk about corruption is as well, it follows that corruption itself depends on the discourses critiquing it. For this reason, corruption cannot be “solved” until we appreciate its status as a political artifice and political performative.

The cultural history of “corruption” is thus the history of a complex semiotic trajectory. Even in the context of the domestic politics of Western countries, “corruption” has been deployed to shifting political ends. An academic shift to neo-Weberian paradigms in the 1960s helped to bring in an implication of primitivism, which international technocratic parlance continues to employ if sometimes covertly through the idiom of development. As the performative work of “corruption” shifted internationally, Nigerians appropriated the term for their own ends; some accorded with international norms, and some did not. At the same time, vernacular modes of describing government malfeasance

intersected and coordinated with technocratic language. The result was a multi-stranded public discourse articulating moral claims within the larger ideological project of the state.

Such a formulation raises as many questions as it answers. To shift attention from corruption conceptualized as objective practices to the amalgam of material practices, discourses, and legal regulation I have termed the corruption-complex is to emphasize moral systems, the political vernaculars that collectively constitute people's understanding of corruption in the world. As I shall argue at length in part I of this book, the moral systems through which government officials have been evaluated can sometimes dictate practices that are also possible to understand as "corrupt." This ambiguity and complexity is an integral aspect of the Nigerian corruption-complex and how it has changed over time. But following such patterns of change is challenging, both methodologically and theoretically. One useful approach to such issues is the literature on moral economy, which will be discussed at length in chapter 4. While there is considerable diversity in different authors' formulations of moral economy, the commonality is that they focus on how groups of people evaluate particular forms of conduct: the mechanisms for setting the price of bread, for example, or the conduct of scientific research. Instead of asking whether an action or procedure is moral, the study of moral economy looks at how such questions are negotiated socially. The question is not whether I personally think the price of bread is fair but whether the broader public within which I am included does, how those collective evaluations are negotiated, and how they then influence community action.⁵⁷

Moral discourses about official conduct exist everywhere. In Nigeria they long predate the colonial period, which means they also long predate the formation of a single, countrywide public sphere. A plethora of Nigerian discourses on corruption is thus partly the consequence of the many languages and cultures from which Nigerians come and within which they continue to live. The story of how hundreds of different normative systems came together to create the multiple political performatives constituting today's responses to corruption is too complex—and too evanescent—to be written as one history. The following chapters attempt something simpler. Part I follows the consolidation of the corruption-complex in Hausaphone northern Nigeria across the colonial period. It then takes the story into the postcolonial period, even as Hausa political culture became intertwined with other modes of politics. The result is less a definitive history of the Nigerian corruption-complex than an extended essay about what enabled it. Part II consists of two thematic essays, each exploring a topic of critical importance to the study of the corruption-

complex in Nigeria: chapter 4 looks at moral economy and chapter 5 at the ideological contours of the state. The arguments in these chapters are not intended to be definitive but instead to suggest some ways my approach to the study of corruption may be used elsewhere in Nigeria and beyond. Another way of looking at it is that part I provides the empirical material that supports conclusions presented in part II. This structure suggests several strategies for reading the book. Part I may be of more interest to those looking for the specifics of Nigerian society. The chapters in part II and the conclusion may be of greater comparative and theoretical interest. Although the argument is cumulative, the chapters can largely be read separately.

This book attempts to go beyond the view that corruption is a discrete problem that could be solved by sufficient effort—by providing officials with appropriate incentives or by somehow creating a “modern” political culture. Viewing corruption as the persistence of patron-clientage or patrimonialism in the bureaucratic state creates an uninspiring policy prescription: corruption can be combated by sufficient sincerity. While there might be a certain utility in such an approach, that utility does not lie in actually ending corrupt practices. The adoption of a historical, nonteleological view suggests something more interesting: it demystifies ideas about the state and potentially deromanticizes Western state formation. Corruption discourse is a way of articulating moral claims and of imagining alternative futures. For all the real and urgent pathologies the word “corruption” designates, a careful attention to the corruption-complex’s historical, cultural, and conceptual career may ultimately point less toward bureaucratic regularity than toward democratic accountability.