

## CONCLUSION

In April 2013, Transparency International issued a press release disavowing connection with a group called Transparency in Nigeria (TIN). The latter organization had recently issued a “Budget Discipline Perception Index” that ranked the budgets and accomplishments of Nigeria’s state governments. Transparency in Nigeria strongly implied its report issued ultimately from the international body. Transparency International protested it “has no links with ‘Transparency in Nigeria,’ nor does it currently have an affiliate in Nigeria.”<sup>1</sup> The relationship was slightly closer than TI asserted: Transparency in Nigeria had been a TI affiliate until 2011, when it was disaffiliated from the international organization.<sup>2</sup> Transparency in Nigeria garnered additional attention in July 2013, when press coverage of Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer inaccurately suggested Nigeria had just been ranked as the eighth-most-corrupt country in the world.<sup>3</sup> Nigeria ranked eighth in the barometer’s question about whether a country’s citizens considered corruption to be a major problem, but its performance in other metrics varied considerably. Nonetheless, the Nigerian government responded defensively, pointing out TI had published no such ranking.<sup>4</sup> The special assistant to the president (New Media) proceeded to recount Transparency in Nigeria’s disavowal by the international secretariat, going on to note that many media outlets were controlled by opposition politicians. His press release did not assert that TIN was behind the news stories or that the organization was controlled by the opposition, but the implication was clear.

While there is no evidence to suggest TIN had choreographed the unflattering interpretation of the Global Corruption Barometer, the incident demonstrated once again the country’s sensitivity to international coverage

of Nigerian corruption and the deeply political nature of all discussions of the subject. Transparency in Nigeria itself is a prime exhibit of this domestic politics of reputation. The Budget Discipline Perception Index (BDPI) had been distributed by a journalist named Abba Anwar, and its contours demonstrated Nigerian domestic political concerns. The BDPI was complimentary to Governor Rabi'u Kwankwaso of Kano state, which came out at the top of the index,<sup>5</sup> something a movement of his supporters called the Kwankwasiyya was quick to trumpet.<sup>6</sup> Transparency International's disavowal of the index received a fast response on the Kwankwasiyya Facebook page, noting that the study was objectively accurate, whatever its author's institutional affiliations, and that the ties between TI and TIN were more enduring than the international body would admit: "Who sponsored . . . Abba Anwar to some training programmes in United Kingdom and United States of America (USA), among other nations of the world, sometimes in the past? So to even say Transparency in Nigeria has no link with Transparency International is nothing but a misnomer."<sup>7</sup> Although TIN might be tightly tied to Governor Kwankwaso, its members claimed international cachet because of training received through TI sponsorship. The extraversion of the Nigerian elite, the importance of a reputation for fighting corruption, and the central importance of ties of patronage and affiliation were all nakedly illustrated in the incident.

One could take this exchange as an "only in Nigeria" moment, when even Transparency International became an object of 419 posturing by a state government. There is doubtless something particularly extreme in Nigeria's "culture of corruption," as Daniel Jordan Smith has termed it. Material acts termed "corruption" are not restricted to state and public institutions. Private enterprise and nongovernmental organizations alike have been plagued by bribe taking and other forms of malpractice, which would easily be termed "corruption" were they in the public sector. Part I of this book developed an account of how this state of affairs came about. This history requires some emendation of the implicit histories much of the literature on corruption has assumed in order to develop an account of corruption as a global phenomenon. Conceptualizations of corruption as a species of patrimonialism and allied notions of corruption as rent seeking rely on an implicit figure of a "normal" state to which the Nigerian (or other corrupt) state might be contrasted. The implicit history such an account develops of Western states—assumed gradually to have purged themselves of corruption—misses the role corruption discourse played in processes of political change in those states. Nigerian history demonstrates that corruption is not simply a persistence of older pro-

cesses of politics, nor is it an ongoing pattern of economic behavior that could be discouraged given adequate incentives.

The history of corruption discourse in Nigeria demonstrates the country's deep particularity. Historicist accounts of corruption have tended to take one of two approaches. The first, emerging from intellectual history and political theory, historicizes the paradigms through which "corruption" has been understood, an intellectual trajectory moving from Aristotle through Machiavelli and culminating in the "modernist" moment of the present. In this view, "corruption" is a popular form of political philosophy in which notions of good and appropriate political behavior can be described and debated. Much of the social science literature remains caught in a second historicist notion emanating from modernization theory. Following early commentators like Joseph Nye or Wraith and Simpkins, they suppose that "corruption" is a problem all modernizing countries have been forced to deal with.<sup>8</sup> In that case, Nigerian history could be interpreted as an extreme instance of a common pattern in which political systems centering on patron-clientage were drawn into a modern constitutional order. Such an account would be compatible with an acknowledgment that the Nigerian state has been gravely handicapped by its peripheral location in the world economic order, its corruption exacerbated and entrenched by its gatekeeping role. Indeed, one can also acknowledge the role played by Nigeria's sectional and ethnic conflicts and by its status as an oil-rentier state.

Part I of this book demonstrated that such a view was insufficient. The story of Nigerian corruption is not simply one in which the country followed a trajectory traced by countless others—either all "modernizing" states or perhaps postcolonial ones. The contemporary Nigerian state emerged from institutions pioneered by the British colonial regime. In these institutions "corruption" was a label that might be used to explain getting rid of officials in political trouble. Persistent patronage and incomplete modernization are inadequate glosses for a more intricate set of political struggles. That legacy helped to constitute Nigeria's specific history of "corruption" as a political performative. More than a shifting set of malpractices, the Nigerian corruption-complex became central to state practice; deploying the charge of "corruption" served political ends. Corrupt practices were inseparable from the *charge* of corruption, which itself has been inseparable from patterns of political contestation. That history is deeply rooted in the legacies of Nigerian federalism and political competition. Then in the postcolonial period and particularly after 1970, Nigeria's notoriety for corruption created new opportunities for corrupt

behavior. If nothing else, the 419 e-mails would not have been possible without that reputation. Corruption is inexorably tied to the history of the Nigerian polity, and in particular its complex regional and ethnic politics, and the logistical demands of administering and distributing oil revenue.

What aspects of this history can be generalized? The specifics cannot. Some might find it useful to construct typologies of countries and to trace the ways in which analogous histories create similar trajectories of national corruption-complexes. The historical account developed in part I of this book made a more modest contribution to comparative discussions of corruption. By demystifying the history of corruption in Nigeria, it demonstrated that corruption cannot be taken as a simple or straightforward set of political malpractices. It is a political performative whose importance can only be assessed in local historical context. So corruption cannot be viewed as one problem but as a family of problems and as a genre of political discourse demanding evaluation. Nigerian history shows corruption politics can illuminate political life more generally. Corruption cannot be fully appreciated without a relatively systematic attention to the history not just of corrupt practices but of the ways in which “corruption” has functioned as a means of engaging in politics and political critique. Part of that account must be a history of the ways in which external forces and paradigms of corruption have impinged on local ones. To this extent, it would be a mistake to attempt to describe a particularly “African” or “Third World” corruption. While obviously there are family resemblances between forms of corruption, and while there are historical parallels across Africa and beyond, the development of corruption-complexes is inextricably tied to the histories of individual polities. Generalization requires caution. In the past several decades, international discourse about corruption and political pressures on countries accused of permitting it have increased tremendously. *Corruption* may not be a label that has *analytic* purchase beyond local usage, but it nonetheless must frequently be addressed as a general problem: that is how actors around the world use the term, not infrequently while also relying on localized systems of meaning. By itself, the historical analysis of corruption can only cautiously be generalized.

Part II took up that challenge, using the previous discussion of Nigerian history to develop two broader points that might find application elsewhere. Chapter 4 developed a critical analysis of the moral economy of corruption-discourse. Have Nigeria’s rulers transgressed a collective consensus about a permissible degree of diverting public resources to private ends, and if so when? This is an important question given the sense of crisis that has long pervaded Nigerian popular discourse: corruption is worse than ever before, the people’s situation

more desperate. As chapter 4 argued, the moral economy is something of a mirage, an explanation that is satisfying only at a distance. Corruption discourse appears to be the expression of outrage over the violation of norms, but in the end it perpetuates and entrenches precisely the modes of politics that outrage it. Only the most exceptional critiques, such as Odia Ofeimun's, promise something different from further entrenchment of the corruption-complex. Similarly, chapter 5 argued that the history of corruption in Nigeria requires a reevaluation of paradigms of the state. Paralleling recent work in the tradition of Philip Abrams, it argued that the state was ideological figure more than objective reality, and that the Nigerian state was striking in the starkness of its contradictions. That argument's important caveat is that this contradictory quality should not be presumed to be unique to Nigeria, or Africa, or post-colonial states. Instead, it suggests the need for agnosticism about the nature of states everywhere.

That points back to the question of whether Nigeria is so unusual that its experience cannot be generalized. Is corruption in Nigeria simply an extreme form of more general tendencies and historical experiences? My analysis points to radical particularism. Corruption in Nigeria cannot be disentangled from the institutional history of its politics, from the trajectory of its economy and its patterns of political and regional competition, or from the ways political actors engage with the corruption-complex. If corruption is a political performative, it cannot be extracted from the specific contexts in which corruption discourse is deployed. At the same time, corruption remains a global discourse, and particularly since the start of the oil boom the international reception of Nigerian corruption has been an integral part of even its domestic dynamics. So perhaps one could conclude that Nigerian corruption is a local phenomenon, but one that grew up in relation to a global counterpart.

While the argument in this book emphasizes the local and particular, its implications are of wider scope. Nigerian corruption can only be understood by juxtaposing local, national, and global scales of analysis and following them across time; that mode of analysis would apply elsewhere. Taking corruption not to be an objective fact or a determinate body of practices but rather a shifting array of practices labeled "corrupt" and an ever-changing terrain of moral discourse suggests that academic approaches to corruption must themselves acknowledge their own political ends. Instead of imagining that one offers disinterested policy advice—conceptualized as an objective array of strategies that could be adopted in order to achieve proper politico-economic development—one might view policy proposals in a broader, always-politicized frame. "Corruption" is not an analytic category; rather it is itself deployed to particular ends. While the

political grounding of corruption discourse varies from one historical and cultural context to another, the lesson applies generally.

Corruption should therefore be viewed as a source for interpreting the cultural history of politics. This is not a surprising conclusion from an academic historian. Many scholars and policy makers have more practical concerns. What is one to do if one wishes to start a factory in Nigeria (or anywhere else) and is being extorted for bribes from different competing government agents? What is one to do if one wants to attract such international investment without deterring investors by subjecting them to such demands? How might a country like Nigeria achieve patterns of economic change that improve the lives of a greater percentage of its citizens? Calling the problem “corruption” and attempting to wipe it out—whether through exhortation or enforcement—will be unlikely to make much practical change given the broader context. It would also not work to attempt to emulate other experiences. There are countries—Malaysia, for example—that have emerged from extreme poverty. That country’s ruling coalition has suffered from political scandals; accusations of cronyism are rampant and compelling. However, it has not fallen into the same pattern of political looting as Nigeria, and while there is a rich, politically connected elite, the lives of ordinary people have also changed profoundly.<sup>9</sup> The import of a historicist approach is that the distinction between Malaysia and Nigeria cannot be boiled down to a set of “lessons” that the latter could learn from the former. The riddle for all concerned is to find ways to bring the basic logic driving practices labeled “corruption” into accordance with the institutional demands that might be placed on them. The trick is not to assume Nigerian political society must change. Rather, it is to bring into being a better, more cooperative, and probably more egalitarian future.

International discourses on corruption have a long history. I am not the first writer to point that out. We know that corruption has changed over time. As one recent commentator put it, “Corruption is not what it used to be. While corruption used to imply a wide variety of morally dishonorable acts . . . [now it] refers to a set of actions of a distinctly material character which was not always shared by older conceptions.”<sup>10</sup> However, it is not helpful to imagine that history is one of changing analytics for approaching a more-or-less constant object. Scholars have long known that ancient, medieval, and early modern notions of corruption are not equivalent to those of the present: paradigms of decay and degeneration gave way to other methods of understanding government malpractice. Nonetheless, a strong current of theorization of corruption depends on notions of transformation and deviance. Mark Philips, for example, has influentially argued that all definitions of political corruption de-

pend on “some ‘naturally sound condition’ (variously described) from which corrupt acts deviate,” suggesting that the key to understanding corruption is the notion of the ethical value of politics that one adopts.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, scholars have detailed how conceptions of government misconduct have changed over time. The choice to call such genealogies of political critique “histories of corruption” is already to engage in an unfortunate nominalism. “Corruption” is not one thing. Discussions of corruption will thus vary depending on one’s aims. Viewing corruption as crime or malpractice leads one to presuppose a set of moral principles, losing track of their contingency. My point is not that corruption is a social construct and thus imaginary, or that because corruption is historically and culturally contingent it is thus not open to condemnation on the basis of universal principles. The corruption-complex is a set of practices and ways for describing them that simultaneously critique and enable those practices to happen in the first place. There is nothing wrong with condemning corruption. Doing so is sensible, and often morally imperative. But condemning discrete instances of corruption necessarily involves the commentator in the phenomena she is attempting to describe. If one takes historical figures—Nuhu Ribadu, for example, or Farida Waziri—and describes their fights against corruption, one is forced to take a position on the legalities of the crimes they investigated and prosecuted. One *also* interprets Ribadu and Waziri as successful or not successful, genuine campaigners against corruption or servants of power. The problem is that doing so naturalizes a set of ideological presuppositions that are themselves part of the problem. Whether one thinks of corruption as being the persistence of patrimonialism or considers it to be a species of rent seeking insufficiently constrained by norms of good governance, the solution to the problem is distressingly elusive. The frustration perceptible in most public discussion of corruption one hears in Nigeria stems from the fact that they boil down to little more than condemnation and exhortation. Corruption is bad, and it can be avoided through sufficient willpower, greater awareness, and dedication to its eradication.

The prescriptions offered by economists and by organizations like Transparency International are similarly unconvincing. On one hand, these prescriptions include the inauguration of investigative, prosecutorial, or quasi-judicial forces, and initiatives like crowd-sourcing corruption reports. On the other, they involve initiatives for greater transparency in government in the hopes that corrupt practices will not be able to take place under public scrutiny. Such prescriptions are carefully thought through, and if fully implemented might work. For a historian, the problem with them is that real-world institutions do not emerge because of some disembodied process of public choice. Policy

makers do not simply pick from a menu of alternatives according to their preference orderings or those of others. Laws and institutions emerge through contingent and often haphazard processes. Public-choice theorists do not pretend their models are manuals of political strategy, but they also often avoid the problem of creating initiatives within a political culture that produced the problems in the first place. And the empirical history of Nigerian corruption demonstrates nothing if not that the charge of corruption is a central facet of Nigerian politics. Even if political actors were genuinely committed to eradicating corruption—many are, at least in the abstract—it is difficult to escape the multifaceted utilities of Nigerian corruption discourse. While it would be difficult for any observer to laud both Nuhu Ribadu and Farida Waziri for their anticorruption bona fides, considering either as historical figures requires more than hagiography or even balancing genuine judiciousness and political calculation. The problem is that corruption discourse itself is part of the system it is also attempting to critique and control. That is where moral economy and of the ideological contradictions of the Nigerian state become pressing and relevant.

Nigerians can almost universally agree that corruption is bad and that the country's rampant corruption is largely responsible for its current woes. There is less agreement on who precisely is corrupt. One is most likely to absolve figures enmeshed in one's own chains of patronage and obligation. People are likely to absolve figures in inverse proportion to their contemporary political relevance. Thus, First Republic politicians are discussed more charitably than Second Republic politicians. Government figures from the military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s are discussed more leniently than Fourth Republic politicians. In my own experience, the most stunning development is the partial rehabilitation of Sani Abacha's reputation. My first visit to Nigeria began immediately after the annulled election of 12 June 1993, but I truly came to know the country after Sani Abacha took power later that year, during an eighteen-month stay in 1996–97, when the Abacha regime had really shown its repressive character.

During that time, the only people I met who had kind words to say about the government were its own officials and people with close government ties. Driving past police barracks, people discussed the atrocities that had been committed by the police and security forces, and they spoke quietly about people who had disappeared or been taken away. Such stories were intertwined with those of rampant government theft and more quotidian violence from state agents. Since then, there has been an effort to rehabilitate General Abacha's reputation, and meanwhile many people remember his regime with greater



fondness than they exhibited at the time. I have discussed narratives of petrol shortages and black marketing, and people's relationships to the various actors involved helped to determine their investment in the stories of who was to blame. During the Abacha regime, Olusegun Obasanjo was remembered as having been fairly honest as a head of state, and indeed he was admired as an opponent of what was then understood to be a much more brutal military regime. His winning the presidency changed people's attitudes, and he is now often vilified as one of the most corrupt heads of state Nigeria has ever had. His continued involvement in Nigerian politics doubtless tends to compound that ongoing lack of admiration.

Akhil Gupta has suggested that *narratives* of corruption are part and parcel of corrupt practices, that indeed such narratives constitute much of ordinary people's affective relationship to state institutions.<sup>12</sup> This is an important point, but it does not fully acknowledge the degree of political work that discourses of corruption accomplish. Corruption reveals an entire moral economy of citizen-state relations, a normative scheme for evaluating official practices and how much might "legitimately" be diverted to unofficial ends. But the concept of moral economy encourages circular logic. Outrage requires a supplementary evaluation, because there is no consensus about an "appropriate" degree of corruption beyond which it becomes immoral. More to the point, there is an epistemic murkiness to actual corrupt practices. It would be difficult to argue that any particular figure has transgressed a boundary for "legitimate" amounts of corruption because it is nearly impossible to be certain how much has been stolen. Acknowledgment of a figure's corruption is a signal of disapprobation and a sign of positioning oneself in opposition to him or her. Under circumstances that make it very difficult to be certain of the truth or falsity of any given set of charges, one's conclusions are often ultimately a matter of faith. Thus, for example, one of the primary bits of evidence cited against President Obasanjo is the wealth and success of his farm, a mechanized, vastly profitable concern. How, ask his detractors, is this to be explained given its relative lack of success during the Abacha period? How could the president have managed to capitalize his farm so successfully during his time in office, when the farm really took off as a profit-making enterprise? The farm's success would only have been possible due to massive investment, and this would have been possible only by misappropriating public money.

As the investigations into officials accused of corruption have been regularly discovering for over a century, it is difficult to reach definitive conclusions about such accusations. Only the most naïve would conclude they had ever been disproven. Given the tenor of absolute conviction that undergirds

most corruption allegations, it is clear that the corruption-complex does not operate as a mechanism for *limiting* or constraining the absolute scope of “corrupt” activities. That is not to say that a supporter’s optimistic assessment of a politician’s probity stems from a desire to euphemize or minimize his or her crimes, nor to assert that the politician’s malpractices fell below the threshold of unacceptability. Rather, as Odia Ofeimun so brilliantly demonstrated, the moral economy of corruption suggests ultimately the nature of Nigerian political society. The issue is not what level of political malfeasance might be tolerated but rather the far deeper and more troubling question of how the political economy distributes resources, and particularly how the claims of different regions of Nigeria might be balanced against one another. That, similarly, stands behind the normative vision undergirding “Army Arrangement.” At stake is a future in which rampant thievery is ubiquitous. The vision of a future in which young people “see and hear” is ultimately a vision of economic enfranchisement, and one in which public scrutiny is able to serve as an effective check on official malfeasance. The critique is of the “gatekeeper” system in which a political elite controls the international economy’s access to Nigerian resources and is then able to use its position to extract enormous rents. “Seeing” and “hearing” are not simple synonyms for greater governmental transparency or an appropriate set of incentives for that political elite. They constitute a vision of substantive democracy and enfranchisement. By itself this vision is not a realistic political program, but it does suggest the corruption-complex is more than a pathology, more than a cultural stance that enables political malpractice even while condemning it.

This is where my suggestions about the state as an ideological device came in. Part I took “the state” in a substantive sense, to denote the institutions of the Nigerian government, glossing over their ineluctable heterogeneity. Chapter 5 underlined the conceptual incoherence of such a position and demonstrated that corruption emerges from and depends on the state’s ideological aspects. “Corruption” is the sign of an action that is contained within the state’s ideological process—it is the “improper” action of a person whose actions should be considered impersonal, the agency of “the state” rather than of a person’s will. But by being improper, it is simultaneously enabled by and excluded from the scope of “the state.” Narratives of corruption contain within themselves signs of this device’s simultaneous success and failure, and they also point to the political work corruption talk accomplishes and some ways of addressing the problem that may in the long term prove more productive than exhortations to good behavior or the creation of reformist institutions. Corruption signals the failure of the state-effect because it requires viewing officials’ prac-

tices as *not* being legitimate or appropriate state actions but rather as being private crimes. But it is also a success, because it presupposes there are norms and codes that are part of being a state actor, not just an individual maker of contingent decisions.

What does this tell us about corruption as a comparative phenomenon? The argument of this book is that corruption discourse has a long history as a global occurrence, and that history is well known. There is also a long history of articulations between that global discourse and its political use in particular locales. Understanding corruption requires understanding this history of intellectual and political interaction around the world, all taking place as if corruption were applied to a discrete and coherent object. The history of corruption around the world is a history of global politics, and it is a history bringing together myriad local histories. This relatively grand claim about historical processes can coexist with a number of more modest practical implications. For reformers, ameliorating corruption will require dealing with issues fundamental to the logic of local political culture, and these will vary tremendously from context to context. In Nigeria, the issues involve the intersection of patronage and political life and the distributive issues of revenue across a culturally diverse country. Instead of attempting to prevent officials from diverting public revenue to self-interested ends, Nigerians must face a constitutional challenge: how can public ends be served by accommodating patronage as a fundamental political principle? Exhortation is ineffective, as are investigations and judicial interventions. Instead, the constitutional order must be brought into alignment with political culture. Webs of patronage must be able to constrain official behavior and demand more from it, and the needs of regions must be brought into harmony. That is easier said than done.