

INTRODUCTION

BY THE TIME I ARRIVED in Nigeria in 1989 as an employee of an international development organization, I was well aware of the country's reputation for corruption. I had heard the common stories of immigration and customs officers who shake down arriving passengers at the airport, police looking for money who harass motorists, taxi drivers who collude with criminals to rob customers, and government officials who do nothing without a bribe. Further, I had read that the government-controlled oil industry was riddled with graft, and that beginning in the 1980s, Nigeria was believed to be a transit hub in the international narcotics trade, with widespread allegations of official collusion. The U.S. Department of State issued bold warnings about fraud in its advice to travelers and businesspeople contemplating visits to Nigeria. The country's image as a bastion of bribery, venality, and deceit has remained constant over the years. Most recently, the global expansion of the Internet delivered evidence of Nigerian fraud to the e-mail in-boxes of millions of people around the world, in the form of scam letters seeking bank account numbers and advance fees in schemes that are premised on Nigeria's worldwide reputation for corruption.

In one of my first letters home in 1989, I recounted a story I heard as I met new friends over beers after a game of tennis:

Last night, AC, who is a businessman, told the most amazing story about how some Nigerians in Lagos duped a Texas oil executive out of one hundred thousand dollars. I don't know if you have heard of it, but apparently Nigerians commonly send letters and faxes to U.S. and European businesses looking for partners in fantastic deals where the foreigner is asked to provide money up front against the assurance that the initial investment will secure the payment of millions of dollars of ill-gotten wealth that can somehow only be released to a foreigner. The foreigner is offered a large cut of the millions in exchange for providing access to their bank account where the millions will be remitted. The fraudsters make their money by convincing the dupe that advance funds are necessary in order to get the money released. Once they lure the person in, they keep increasing the amounts necessary to get the bigger payoff, until eventually the victim realizes the whole thing was a scam. By then the dupe has lost lots of money.

Apparently these schemes can get remarkably elaborate, as AC's story last night attests. My new friends and I had finished playing tennis, and we were sitting down to share beers when AC began his story. He had just come back

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from Lagos and said that during his visit some of his colleagues had told him of the most recent case of “419”—419 is what Nigerians call fraud, apparently after a section in the Nigerian criminal code that describes these crimes. AC’s account was stunning.

He said that these 419 guys had snared this Texas oil executive with a series of letters, faxes, and phone calls, and had convinced him that thirty-five million dollars remained in an NNPC (Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation) account from a huge contract for an oil-industry-related construction project. The 419 guys pretended they were high-level managers at NNPC. They told the oil executive that the money was leftover from the project, and that they needed a foreign partner and a foreign bank account in order to pay out the remaining thirty-five million dollars. All the correspondence they sent the oil executive was on official NNPC stationery. The oil executive was apparently interested but skeptical. At a point, the 419 guys who spoke with him on the phone arranged for him to call an NNPC office in London to try to assure him that the whole thing was real. When the guy seemed primed but still had not completely swallowed the bait, they invited him to come to Lagos and meet with top NNPC officials. They told him that if he came to Nigeria, they would pay all his expenses once he arrived, and that if after the visit he still was not convinced, no problem. They sweetened the offer by stressing that even if the money transfer proposal did not work out, they might be able to arrange some legitimate contracts between NNPC and the oil executive’s Texas-based business.

The guy agreed to come to Lagos. The 419 guys told him not to bother to get a visa. As a guest of NNPC, they would handle everything. Sure enough, when the oil executive arrived at the airport in Lagos, he was met at the gate by a Nigerian in an expensive suit who held an NNPC placard with the executive’s name. The visitor was whisked through immigration and customs without even having his passport checked or his bags opened. Each immigration and customs official he passed simply greeted him: “Welcome to Nigeria!” The oil executive had heard plenty of stories about the hassles at Murtala Muhammad Airport and he was impressed by the clout of his NNPC hosts. Outside the airport, he was ushered into an air-conditioned Toyota Land Cruiser with the NNPC logo emblazoned on the doors. He was taken to the Sheraton Hotel, the fanciest and most expensive hotel in Lagos, where he was told that all of his bills were “taken care of.” In the morning, he was picked up by the same vehicle and taken to an NNPC office on Victoria Island, the most upscale area in Lagos. The guard, receptionist, and secretaries all greeted him: “Welcome to Nigeria!”

After a short wait, he was escorted into a large and expensively furnished office. Over the door the placard read, “Deputy Managing Director: Foreign Investment.” Behind an impressive desk sat Ibu Onye Biribe, who greeted the executive with the now-familiar words, “Welcome to Nigeria!” Mr. Biribe immediately handed the executive his business card, carefully pronouncing his name for the visitor’s untrained ears.

At this point my other friends who were listening to the story laughed uproariously because the supposed deputy manager's name, Ibu Onye Biribe, translates into "you are a fool" in the Igbo language. When the laughter died down, AC continued the story.

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Mr. Biribe's secretary buzzed to inform him that "the minister" was on the line. Mr. Biribe had a brief and cryptic conversation in which his side of the call consisted of mainly, "Yes sir, I will do that, sir." After dropping the phone, Mr. Biribe apologized to his Texas guest, saying that it was the federal minister for petroleum resources on the line and he had no choice but to take the call.

The NNPC's deputy manager for foreign investment then proceeded to explain again to the oil executive how this thirty-five million dollars had become available and why they needed a foreign partner, and particularly someone who was in the oil business in order to pay out the money. Paying the money to the Texas oil executive, he explained, would make it appear that the payment was related to the completion of the initial contract. The only problem, he continued, was that one hundred thousand dollars was necessary to secure the release of the funds because various officials would need to be paid off to facilitate the release of the money to the executive's account. "Unfortunately, so many of our bureaucrats are greedy and corrupt," the deputy manager lamented. He suggested that his guest transfer one hundred thousand dollars to an NNPC account in London rather than in Nigeria, so that he might feel more secure. As he suggested this, he buzzed his secretary and asked her to get the London office on the line. He put the call on speakerphone and the call was answered by a woman with a very British-sounding accent, who said, "This is the London office of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, how may I direct your call?" Mr. Biribe then asked for the appropriate official, and when he answered Mr. Biribe explained to him that one of their U.S. partners needed to transfer money to the NNPC's London account. He handed the phone to the oil executive. The man took the phone, and wrote down the NNPC bank account number and the instructions for how to transfer the money. The deputy manager then told his visitor that once he transferred the one hundred thousand dollars, the thirty-five million dollars would be released in forty-eight hours. The Texan's share would be 25 percent, or almost nine million dollars. Once the money was in the oil executive's account, he would then transfer his Nigerian partners' share to another account and all of this could be taken care of before the Texan departed Nigeria in three days. The deputy manager then handed his guest the phone and told him that it was an international line. He left the room while the oil executive dialed the United States. When the deputy manager came back, the Texan informed him that he had transferred the money. "Very well," Mr. Biribe said, "the driver can take you back to the hotel and I will come join you for dinner tonight. Then tomorrow and next, we can complete the transfer of money to your account in the United States and talk about other business."

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That evening, the deputy manager never showed up at the Sheraton. The Texas oil executive was worried, but figured the money went to a London account and if there were any problem the whole thing could be reversed. The next morning, no one came to pick him up. When he inquired at the desk whether anyone had looked for him, he was told no one had. The receptionist then asked whether he would be staying another night. When he said that he would, she informed him that he would need to present his credit card. When he protested that his bill was being covered by NNPC, the receptionist told him that whoever had paid his bill had only paid for two nights. Now the man really panicked. He quickly hired a car to the address on Victoria Island where he had met with Mr. Biribe the previous day. When he arrived, all the evidence of an NNPC office had disappeared. AC said, “He turned even whiter than a white man”—again drawing uproarious laughter from my friends. There was no signboard, no placard over the deputy manager’s door, no receptionist, nobody. When he asked a person who appeared to be cleaning the stairwell what happened to the NNPC office, the cleaner replied, “There’s no NNPC office here. This office was vacated at the end of last month and the landlord is still looking for new tenants.”

The panicked oil executive then asked where he could find the nearest police station. When he found a police station, the first thing they asked for was his passport. When the police looked at his passport and saw that he had no visa, they informed him that he was in Nigeria illegally. His protest and his story seemed to get him nowhere. In the end, the man had to arrange for his Texas office to wire him three thousand dollars to pay the police and immigration officials to allow him to exit the country. When he got home, he discovered that the London account to which he had transferred the one hundred thousand dollars was empty and closed. It had never belonged to NNPC.

As AC closed his story, my friends at the tennis club exclaimed variously, “Nigeria na war-o!” “We are in trouble,” and “These guys are too much,” expressing a combination of resignation, unease, and lament about corruption as well as a sort of admiration for the audacity and ingenuity of the 419 men. When I asked AC whether the 419 perpetrators had received assistance from real officials in NNPC in order to pull off their plot or had concocted everything themselves, he answered simply: “In this country anything is possible.”

AC’s story and the reception it received illustrate a profound critical collective self-consciousness that Nigerians share about corruption in their society. Ordinary citizens are ambivalent about corruption. They recognize that it undermines the country’s democratic political institutions, economic development, and global reputation, yet they also realize that wealth, power, and prestige in Nigeria are commonly achieved through practices that can easily be labeled as corrupt. People frequently condemn

corruption and its consequences as immoral and socially ruinous, yet they also participate in seemingly contradictory behaviors that enable, encourage, and even glorify corruption.

This book examines the relationship between corruption and culture in Africa's most populous country. It offers an answer to the question of how ordinary Nigerians can be, paradoxically, active participants in the social reproduction of corruption even as they are also its primary victims and principal critics. Taking its cue from Nigerians, who see corruption at work in every corner of social life, the book presents an ethnographic study of corruption, demonstrating that there is much to be learned about social action, collective imagination, and cultural production when they are seen through the lens of an anthropological account of corruption. The book takes readers into the everyday world of Nigerian citizens as they encounter a society plagued by corruption. From police checkpoints where motorists offer banknotes in exchange for safe passage, to Internet cafés where thousands of young Nigerians craft their notorious e-mail scam letters, to local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) created to siphon international donor dollars into individual hands, the book provides a detailed portrait of the social organization of corruption. It examines not only the mechanisms and contexts that explain corruption but also how the intense discontent that Nigerians feel about corruption propels contemporary events and stimulates Nigerians' collective cultural imagination.

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. Although the use of the term corruption risks privileging a seemingly Western concept, my aim is to examine the Nigerian experience of corruption. I argue that it is empirically justified and theoretically important to study this spectrum of ideas and behaviors under the rubric of corruption, not only because Nigerians connect them in their collective conceptualizations, but also because together they reveal the complex intertwining of popular morality, contemporary social processes, and postcolonial statecraft.

Corruption, in its many valences in Nigeria, is a potent stimulus for cultural production, both as a means for corruption's pursuit and a method to combat its consequences. Stories about corruption dominate political and symbolic discourse in Nigeria. Everyday practices of corruption and the narratives of complaint they generate are primary vehicles

through which Nigerians imagine and create the relationship between state and society. The contradictions of corruption both mirror and explain Nigerians' growing expectations and frustrated aspirations for democracy and development. Further, I contend that understanding corruption and its discontents is central to explaining and connecting a wide range of important contemporary social phenomena, such as resurgent ethnic nationalism, the rising popularity of born-again Christianity, violent vigilantism, and a range of common yet seemingly bizarre fears and accusations regarding witchcraft, cannibalism, and other occult practices. It is in these cultural responses to corruption that the relationship between political-economic transformation, social imagination, and the intimate sphere of interpersonal relationships is revealed. Unraveling the connections between corruption and culture is integral to understanding not only contemporary Nigeria but also the broader dynamics of culture, politics, and social change in a world marked by enormous inequality.

Writing about the relationship between corruption and culture runs the risk of blaming Nigerian culture and, by extension, Nigerian people for the corruption that plagues their society. Oscar Lewis's (1959) seminal work on the everyday lives of poor people in Mexico gave rise to the notion of a "culture of poverty," in which the habits, values, and behaviors of the poor were elevated to the level of an explanation for their predicament. The culture of poverty perspective obscured the historical and social structural dimensions of poverty—factors largely beyond the control of individual people. It also reinforced a misguided view of culture as timeless, static, and somehow unbound from the economic and political forces of society and history. I reject this view of culture, and try to show how even as ordinary Nigerians are participants in perpetuating corruption in their society, they do so in circumstances that are partly beyond their control. The explanation for corruption in Nigeria requires understanding the intersection of local culture and larger systems of inequality, and in ways that refute a simplistic scenario that blames the victims. Further, as the evidence presented in this book will make clear, to the extent that it is reasonable to talk at all about a "Nigerian culture" (a country as vast and diverse as Nigeria is, of course, characterized by considerable cultural heterogeneity), it is as much a "culture *against* corruption" as it is a "culture *of* corruption." Yet it would be misleading to dismiss entirely Nigerians' sense of culpability for the extent of corruption in their society. In many instances, ordinary Nigerians see themselves as complicit in corruption, and indeed it is this awareness of collective responsibility for corruption that fuels hopes for change, even as it paradoxically perpetuates cynicism and a sense of intractability.

THE NIGERIAN FACTOR: CORRUPTION AS A NATIONAL DISCOURSE

Throughout the 1990s, Amibo struggled to become the last of eleven villages in Ubakala to be connected to Nigeria's national electricity grid. Many families in Amibo had wired their houses for electricity over a decade ago, and the community had contributed money to erect poles in order to induce the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) to extend service. Numerous village delegations had been sent to NEPA and to a series of military administrators and civilian governors. On each visit, these delegations deposited money with state officials as an incentive to mobilize assistance for their dream of electrification. Yet electricity was never provided. Community frustration frequently boiled into accusations of corruption targeted at the government, but also directed inward. Politicians and bureaucrats who had collected the community's money were condemned for their venality. But many villagers who had contributed funds as part of collectively imposed levies suspected that perhaps their own kin had pocketed some of the community money, leaving too little for the payoffs to government and NEPA officials. When I asked one of my most trusted friends where he thought the problem really lay, he said, "Who can tell? In any case, it is 'the Nigerian factor.'" Suspicions of corruption span the social spectrum, potentially implicating not only elite politicians but also relatives in village communities.

In 2003, Nigeria conducted its first successful national elections managed by a civilian government. Since the country achieved independence from Great Britain in 1960, no democratically elected government had previously managed a national election that did not result in a military coup. The transition from one civilian government to another—even though incumbents handed over power to themselves—was widely represented as another step toward the consolidation of democracy. Yet in many localities, most people believed that the election results were rigged. In one local government area in Imo State, a close friend's younger brother was heavily involved in organizing young men, to both vote and intimidate other voters, and even stuff and carry away ballot boxes. When we talked about the elections just a couple months after they occurred, he assured me that the outcome in Imo State was predetermined. The result, he said, was not a reflection of the will of the people but rather the inevitable product of the Nigerian factor. He cautioned me, "If you don't understand the Nigerian factor, you won't understand anything about politics in this country."

In 2004, as crude oil prices hit record highs, my friends at a local tennis club in Umuahia began calculating how much extra revenue was being

generated for the federal government. Because the 2004 national budget was based on a reference price of twenty-five dollars per barrel, the surge in oil prices beyond fifty dollars per barrel meant that government revenues would far exceed projections. Recalling that over twelve billion dollars in excess oil revenue generated in the wake of the 1990s' Gulf War had never been accounted for (Apter 2005, 247), my tennis pals speculated about the vast amounts of new money that would never even enter government ledgers. When club member and local businessperson Goddy Nwogu said, "Our national thieves may have changed from khaki to *agbada* (from military to civilian dress), but that has not changed the Nigerian factor," his statement provoked gestures and sounds of assent, ranging from laughter and resignation to anger and dismay.

Nigerians routinely complain about corruption. It is not an exaggeration to say that it is the national pastime. Stories range from the large scale to the mundane, but the archetypal narrative focuses on how the country has squandered its rich natural and human resources. I could not possibly count the number of times I have heard this classic story of complaint, beginning with an emphatic statement like, "This country has resources!" Knowing that their country is the world's seventh-biggest oil exporter and the largest producer in Africa, and that it is Africa's most populous nation, with over 130 million people, most Nigerians believe that the country is rich, and that their own poverty is purely a consequence of corruption. Indeed, many people's perceptions of the magnitude of oil wealth far exceed the reality. Even at my tennis club, where members are obviously educated and elite, some people spoke as if individual Nigerians would all be wealthy if only the government gave each citizen an equal share of the annual oil revenue—a fantasy belied by the numbers. But Nigerians are surely correct to believe that their country would be, could be, and should be better off were it not for corruption.

In his trenchant book *The Trouble with Nigeria*, the renowned author Chinua Achebe (1983, 2) notes Nigerians' penchant for complaining: "Whenever two Nigerians meet, their conversation will sooner or later slide into a litany of our national deficiencies." Achebe laments this national inclination as a sign of resignation and says his book aims to challenge such complacency. Corruption is indeed so prevalent in Nigeria that ordinary citizens experience and express some degree of resignation. The very expression "the Nigerian factor" suggests that Nigerians have concluded that corruption is so endemic that it defines the nation. Yet resignation is only one of the meanings of Nigerian narratives of complaint. Even as Nigerians feel compelled, enticed, trapped, and resigned to participate in Nigeria's ubiquitous corruption, they also feel angry, frustrated, dismayed, and betrayed.

Popular anger about corruption is common not only in Nigeria but across Africa, and in many countries around the globe. In an excellent analysis of the dynamics of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa generally, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1999, 29) notes the extent of discontent about corruption: “At the everyday level, there is scarcely a conversation without hostile or disgusted references to corruption.” In many ways, corruption has become the dominant discourse of complaint in the postcolonial world, symbolizing people’s disappointments with democracy and development, and their frustrations with continuing social inequality.

In this book, as mentioned earlier, I aim to understand the mechanisms of everyday corruption in Nigeria. Further, I document, interpret, and analyze Nigerians’ multiple responses to corruption. These responses are signaled in overt narratives of complaint, but extend to diverse arenas of social imagination and cultural production. Complaints about corruption reveal a rich popular consciousness, and trigger complex cultural responses that are both complicit in and challenging to the status quo. Recognizing the seriousness of Nigerians’ discontents, including ambivalence regarding their own roles, and examining the range of social and cultural phenomena that are produced in response to corruption, are essential to explaining the multiple meanings implied when Nigerians attribute their predicament to the Nigerian factor.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND CORRUPTION

Anthropologists have undertaken very few studies that explicitly examine corruption.¹ The anthropological inattention to corruption is probably due to several factors. First, for a long time anthropology focused most of its attention on smaller-scale societies and institutions. Both theoretically and methodologically, the discipline was oriented toward studying relatively bounded communities, often characterized by face-to-face social relations, where breaches of law and morality are not normally glossed as “corruption.” Anthropological investigations and expertise centered on social and political institutions such as marriage, kinship, and customary law, and economic systems such as foraging, pastoralism, horticulture, and regional trading networks. Modern nation-states, global capitalism, and transnational cultural flows have become objects of anthropological interest only much more recently (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Taussig 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001).

Second, because most anthropologists aim to understand human motives and behavior at least in part from the perspectives of the people they study, those processes that political scientists typically describe as corruption often appear in the anthropological literature under rubrics such as

gift exchange, moral economies, reciprocity, and patronage. Anthropology's emphasis on local rationalities and cultural logics, and the largely sympathetic sensibility of anthropologists regarding their subjects, produces a disinclination to attach a seemingly derogatory Western label like corruption to the behavior of non-Western peoples. Indeed, as this book will illustrate, there is much to be gained by examining corruption from local perspectives, and recognizing that what might look to an outsider like pure venality is often undertaken for very different reasons that can be discovered by studying local social institutions and cultural logics.

Finally, the relative barrenness of the ethnographic literature on corruption is due partly to the fact that it takes some time for anthropological interests to catch up to the changing realities in the places we study. Corruption, I suggest, has become an increasingly important issue for ordinary people in the postcolonial places where anthropologists typically work. This is certainly the case in Nigeria. Popular awareness and discontent about corruption extends at least back to the colonial period (Smith 1964; Afigbo 1972; Tignor 1993; Pratten 2000; Guyer 2004). But collective fascination and frustration with what Nigerians themselves call corruption has escalated throughout the country's postcolonial history, reaching an unprecedented peak since the transition from military to civilian rule in 1999, a trend reflected in Nigerian scholars' growing attention to corruption (Lame and Adekunle 2001; Akani 2002; Ugwu 2002; Aku 2003). Just as increasing anthropological interest in phenomena such as globalization and transnationalism was catalyzed by observable changes in the communities and lives of people anthropologists study, so too I suspect that anthropological interests in corruption will likely grow considerably, as researchers realize they can no longer ignore the salience of corruption as an organizing force in the lives of people in many contemporary societies. There is already some evidence to suggest that the anthropological awareness of corruption is growing (Gupta 1995; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Sissener 2001; Ezeh 2002; Haller and Shore 2005), and this book aims to engage and advance that trend.

Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the initial contributions of anthropology to understanding corruption have built on the discipline's theoretical strengths regarding the social and symbolic dimensions of economics, politics, and power. For example, several anthropologists have utilized Marcel Mauss's seminal work on gift exchange to explain how interactions that look like corruption to outside observers frequently serve crucial social and symbolic functions in local contexts (Yang 1989, 1994; Yan 1996; Werner 2000). Other anthropologists have emphasized the importance of solidarity networks and the logics of patron-clientism through which power and prestige depend on the conspicuous redistribution of accumulated wealth in a logic that encourages corruption (Olivier de Sardan

1999; Smith 2001b). Such perspectives are represented in some of the more compelling political science analyses of corruption, including scholarship focusing on Nigeria and, more generally, Africa (Joseph 1987; Bayart 1993).

For example, in his book on politics in Nigeria, Richard Joseph (1987, 54) emphasizes the importance of various kinds of vertically organized solidarity networks in Nigerians' relationship to the state, and argues that corruption hinges partly on the inseparability of individual and collective interests: "The fundamental social process in Nigeria is one in which these two propositions—(a) I want to get ahead and prosper and (b) my group (ethnic, regional, linguistic) must get ahead and prosper—cannot logically be separated, whether in the context of behavior, action, or consciousness." Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (1999, 107n14) capture concisely the significance of such solidarity networks by citing the African proverb "Whoever does not rob the state robs his kith and kin." One of the most important contributions of Africanist political science and the emergent anthropology of corruption has been explaining how so-called corruption frequently occurs as the result of social strategies, cultural logics, and moral economies that assign values different from those assumed in the ideologies of the neoliberal bureaucratic state.

Such perspectives offer insight into the social reproduction of corruption, including ordinary citizens' participation. Nevertheless, as I have come to recognize the intense frustration that average Nigerians feel about corruption, and as I have observed the extent and growth of popular discourses and social movements expressing these discontents, I have come to believe that it is not sufficient to explain corruption in terms of local cultural logics and enduring African social institutions. A dimension of continuity is no doubt part of the story, but just as important, or probably more important, is explaining why corruption has become the dominant discourse of complaint in contemporary Nigeria, and what sorts of changes this reflects.

CORRUPTION, PATRON-CLIENTISM, AND THE POSTCOLONIAL STATE

As we approached a police checkpoint on the road from Port Harcourt to Owerri, the minibus slowed down. Several vehicles had stopped ahead of us. Fellow passengers groaned over the delay that heightened the discomfort of the afternoon sun in our crowded vehicle. A man behind me, who had fallen asleep earlier in the journey, muttered "thieves" under his breath, apparently referring to the heavily armed police officers who blocked our way. When the vehicle just ahead of us seemed to stop for more than the usual few seconds, a woman in the front row said audibly,

“Ah, give them something so we can pass now.” As our bus finally reached the head of the queue, our driver gave a police officer a scrunched up banknote in an almost furtive handoff, and we were again on our way. I had seen the transaction so many times over the years that I hardly noticed. But as soon as we passed the checkpoint, my student, who had just arrived for the summer to work on a project with my Nigerian colleagues, asked me in a whisper, “If everyone knows exactly what is happening, why do the driver and the police officer halfheartedly try to conceal it?” In retrospect, this simple question and the events that preceded it raised critical issues about the relationship between ordinary citizens, corruption, and the state.

The half-concealed levy paid to a police officer at a roadside checkpoint in order for a bus to pass represents an example of a transformation in Nigeria’s political economy of patron-clientism that characterizes Nigerian citizens’ relationship to their postcolonial state. In traditional systems of patronage, or at least as Nigerians romanticize them, exchanges between elites and common people were based on reciprocity and a sense of mutual obligation. Inequality was tempered by a moral economy in which the links between the haves and have-nots created mechanisms for accountability. In contemporary Nigeria, people of all social strata continue to navigate political and economic insecurity and inequality by relying on social networks of patronage rooted in such a system of reciprocity, whereby ties based on kinship, community of origin, and other associations provide access to the resources of the state (Berry 1985, 1989; Smith 2001b; Guyer 2004). Yet many Nigerians believe that elites have hijacked the patronage system and perverted it to serve their own interests. Further, the Nigerian state, with its alternative idiom of accountability based on a social contract between the government and the people, is equally experienced by Nigeria’s citizens as corrupt. Indeed, it is the integration of a system of patronage with the facades of bureaucracy and officialdom produced by the postcolonial state that facilitates the corruption that is so ubiquitous in Nigeria. Jean-François Bayart (1993, 87) has suggested that “the postcolonial state thus represents an historical mutation of African societies, taken over the long term: never before, it seems, has the dominant class managed to acquire such marked economic supremacy over its subjects.”

The conventional wisdom in Western society, exemplified in many donor-sponsored programs to promote democracy and “good governance” in Africa, opposes the realms of modern neoliberal democracy and traditional systems of kinship and patron-clientism. But in Nigeria, elites and ordinary citizens live simultaneously in both worlds. Although observers and analysts frequently make sense of this complexity by contrasting the two systems (Ekeh 1975), or by describing Africans as “strad-

dling” multiple social worlds (Bayart 1993, 69–70), for most people these contrasting systems are experienced as one reality. The Nigerian state is at once a neoliberal institution claiming the full range of powers and responsibilities typical of modern nation-states and a prize to be captured and shared according to the principles of patronage (Joseph 1987; Nelson 1996; Bayart 1993).

Inherent in a political economy of patronage is the role that ordinary citizens play in the social reproduction of corruption, even as the vast majority of people are acutely aware that the system disproportionately benefits a few at the expense of the many. The most elite politicians, government officials, and economic moguls—federal ministers, state governors, NNPC managers, major construction and petroleum industry contractors, and so on—commonly reap many millions of dollars through corruption. But people at many levels of society participate in corruption in order to survive. In a patron-client system, almost everyone has a stake in corruption, no matter how small. It is almost a cliché to recognize that in African societies, everyone is a patron to a lesser person and a client to a more powerful person (d’Azevedo 1962). As Olivier de Sardan notes (1999, 41), “Woe betide the man who knows no one, either directly or indirectly.”

It is important to emphasize that in a country where the World Bank estimates that nearly 60 percent of the population lives below the poverty line of roughly one U.S. dollar per day, most people are not benefiting substantially from either the formal mechanisms of government or the more informal networks of patronage that constitute a significant proportion of the everyday political economy. But even ordinary people have daily experiences with corruption in their efforts to forge better lives for themselves and their families, confronting and participating in everyday forms of corruption in offices, schools, and hospitals, and in a wide range of efforts to obtain basic services from the state. As much of the evidence presented in this book will attest, at the same time that Nigerians in ever larger numbers aspire to modern lifestyles, they become increasingly caught up in the paradoxes of corruption and its discontents. While the millions of very poor people in Nigeria are largely left out of the struggle for resources that occurs at the nexus of the state and the networks of patronage that vie to control it, in my experience even the extremely poor are remarkably aware of the fact that it is through the social connections of patron-clientism, and increasingly corruption, that people control wealth and power in Nigeria.

To be without a patron is to be without access to resources, but to be a patron is to be under great pressure to accumulate and share wealth, including through corruption. Many of my friends in positions of relative power in Nigeria remark on and frequently complain about the pressures

from kin, community members, friends, and associates to use the power of their offices or the benefits of their wealth to fulfill requests for help. Whether one is a school principal, a successful businessperson, the director of a development NGO, a customs officer, or a motor vehicle licensing agent, the pressure to use one's position to benefit people in networks of personal association is intense. These expectations are particularly powerful in situations where patrons are in a position to leverage benefits and services from the state. The centrality of the state in the system of corruption should not be surprising given its importance as an employer and provider of services but also given the sheer economic dominance of the state in a country where the principal source of wealth is petroleum, and oil revenues are directly controlled by the government (Watts 1992; Apter 2005).

The significance of the state in Nigeria is intensified by the particular history and current configuration of Nigeria's petroleum-dominated political economy (Watts 1992; Karl 1997; Apter 2005). Oil was discovered in Nigeria in 1958, but it was not until the 1970s, when the country joined the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and the Middle East crisis sent the price of oil skyrocketing, that Nigeria was transformed into a "petro-state" (Watts 1994; Apter 2005; for a similar analysis of Venezuela's petro-state, see Coronil 1997). As the nation became increasingly dependent on oil as a source of revenue, rent-seeking behavior gradually replaced productive agriculture as the primary means to achieving wealth and prestige. The Nigerian state became the locus of competition for resources, a reality captured eloquently in the colloquial expression Nigerians use to describe the state: "the national cake." During the oil boom, the government rapidly consolidated state control over the oil industry and centralized the distribution of revenues to the lower tiers of government and society. The collapse of oil prices in the 1980s exposed the contradictions in Nigeria's largely nonproductive petroleum economy, making control of the state and its increasingly scarce oil revenues the object of even more intense competition, while also feeding corruption and stoking discontent over the consequent poverty and inequality.

For Nigerians, the state and corruption are synonymous. Because they must navigate, indeed participate in, corruption if they are to achieve even their most mundane aspirations and reasonable goals, most Nigerians realize that what Bayart (1993, 89) describes regarding African post-colonial states more generally is particularly true in Africa's giant: "It would be an error to see all these dealings simply as the corruption of the State. They are, conversely, the State's fabric." In Nigeria's petroleum-dominated political economy of patron-clientism, where corruption rules, it makes sense that "strategies adopted by the great majority of the population for survival are identical to the ones adopted by the leaders to

accumulate wealth and power” (Bayart 1993, 237). Yet even as ordinary Nigerians participate in corruption and recognize that the trappings and facades of the state are manipulated in a politics of illusion, rising expectations are created regarding the very institutions and ideals that are perceived in Nigeria to be provided only as fakes. In other words, despite the fact that the pretenses of democracy and development are employed to facilitate corruption, Nigerians increasingly judge the performance of their state and the circumstances in their society based on aspirations associated with these ideals.

The dynamics that characterize the relationship between patron-clientism and corruption are certainly not unique to Nigeria or Africa. Akhil Gupta (1995, 397) found exactly the same kind of social expectations in postcolonial India: “For example, a highly placed official who fails to help a close relative or a fellow villager obtain a government position is often roundly criticized by people for not fulfilling his obligations to his kinsmen and village brothers. On the other hand, the same people often roundly condemn any official of another caste or village who has done precisely that as being ‘corrupt’ and as guilty of ‘nepotism.’” The fact that clients judge the behavior of patrons in their own networks by one standard and assess the behavior of patrons outside their networks by another is commonsensical, and probably reflects universal aspects of human social life. Certainly this feature of human social relations accounts for some of the ambivalence Nigerians feel about corruption—it is OK when it benefits me; it is bad when it does not. Yet it is in the diversity of the meanings that people ascribe to corruption—drawing on idioms of accountability that include liberal ideals of development and democracy, kinship-based expectations of reciprocity, notions of the occult and supernatural justice, and promises of divine intervention offered in Pentecostal Christian churches—that the full intricacy of the relationship between corruption, patron-clientism, and the postcolonial state reveals itself.

It would be misleading to claim that this book is about the Nigerian state. But as an ethnographic account of corruption, it is very much about Nigerians’ experiences and understandings of the state. In part, the book addresses the discursive construction of the state by examining narratives about corruption. Yet I am more concerned with how concrete experiences of corruption—the ways in which everyday interaction with their government affects Nigerians’ material lives—constitute ordinary citizens’ relationship to the state. As Joseph notes (1987, 1), “In Nigeria . . . the state has increasingly become a magnet for all facets of political and economic life, consuming the attention of traders, contractors, builders, farmers, traditional rulers, teachers, as much as that of politicians or politically motivated individuals in the usual senses of these terms.” Nigerians are fully aware that their state and society are plagued by corruption—to

the point where rumors and stories of corruption frequently exceed what could possibly be verified empirically. The other side of popular cynicism, however, is a growing awareness of what could be possible were the facades of democracy and development—so vital to corruption—transformed into more legitimate endeavors. Implicit, and increasingly explicit, in the narratives of complaint about corruption is not only an awareness of a bureaucratic and democratic standard of accountability but a growing expectation that it be adopted and respected (Gore and Pratten 2003).

FORMS OF CORRUPTION

Defining corruption is difficult and has occupied a good deal of space in the social science literature, particularly in political science (Nye 1967; Heidenheimer 1970). Most political science definitions include or imply the existence of the state, and typically emphasize the misuse of public office for private gain. For example, Joseph Nye's (1967, 419) classic definition is widely cited: "Corruption is behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain private-regarding influence." In formulating his definition, Nye recognized that corruption also has much broader moral meanings, including "a change from good to bad" (419). For a political scientist looking at corruption from the perspective of the state, Nye's definition and its many subsequent variants, which sidestep issues of morality, provide a parsimony that facilitates an appealing clarity.

As an anthropologist looking at corruption ethnographically, from the bottom up, as it were, such parsimonious definitions obscure as much as they reveal. In Nigeria, the question of whether the misuse of public office for private gain constitutes corruption varies significantly depending on the context. The social morality of behavior figures much more prominently in popular assessments of corruption than does any technical definition. Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that rising expectations about the state, as well as democracy and development, are part of a process in which the relationship between social morality and governance is changing. This means that rather than separating corruption and morality, my task is to try to sort out how they fit together in Nigeria.

As an anthropologist, my inclination is not to impose a definition of corruption on the Nigerian situation and then arrange my ethnographic material accordingly. Rather, I examine the multiple ways that Nigerians employ the concept of corruption, and then use local categories and implied definitions to build an analysis that makes sense in light of what Nigerians do and say. Given that Nigerians see corruption at work not

only in public offices but also in a wide range of commercial exchanges and interpersonal relations as well as in the realm of the supernatural, tying the definition of corruption too strictly to affairs of the state is overly limiting. Still, even as I provide an ethnographic account and an anthropological analysis of corruption that includes a range of local meanings, it will become clear that the emergence of the postcolonial state is central to Nigerian experiences of corruption, and that the expectations and disappointments generated by the state permeate Nigerians' collective imagination about corruption. Many of the narratives of discontent that appear most obviously moralistic and least directly about official corruption *per se* are, in fact, heavily influenced by experiences with and expectations regarding the state.

Based on an intensive comparative study of corruption in three West African countries (Benin, Niger, and Senegal), Giorgio Blundo and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2001a) have developed a useful typology of forms of corruption that maps reasonably well onto the Nigerian scene. The seven basic forms they identify are: (1) commission for illicit services, (2) unwarranted payment for public services, (3) gratuities, (4) string pulling, (5) levies and tolls, (6) sidelining, and (7) misappropriation. Briefly, commission for illicit services refers to the payment by users to officials who then grant access to unwarranted advantages. For example, a contractor might provide money to a government official to ensure that he receives a job in a process supposedly based on competitive bids, or an importer might pay a customs official to underestimate the value of their goods to reduce a tariff. Unwarranted payment for public services involves an official forcing a user to pay for a service that is ostensibly provided for free, or inflating the cost of a routine service. In Nigeria, people commonly pay extra money for basic services such as the issuance of licenses, passports, and birth certificates. A gratuity is also a kind of payment for services, but usually after the fact, and commonly couched in the idiom of a "thank you." Nigerians typically call such a gratuity a "dash," and do not think of it in the same terms as a bribe. But as Blundo and Olivier de Sardan point out, a dash only makes sense in an environment where officials diligently doing their jobs without the demand for a bribe is an exception and deserves a reward. In fact, many Nigerians recognize that dashes are frequently simply more sociable and socially acceptable ways of paying bribes.

String pulling refers to using social and political influence to promote favoritism, offering preferential access to employment, education, and a whole range of other opportunities, particularly those allocated by the state. From experience, Nigerians commonly believe that resources and opportunities of all kinds are awarded based, above all, on who you know. Levies and tolls are relatively stark forms of tribute that persons in posi-

tions of power can extract from ordinary citizens. For example, police who collect illegal tolls from motor vehicle drivers at roadside checkpoints, vigilante groups that demand a security levy from local businesses, or bureaucrats who require pensioners to pay money in order to receive their pensions fall into this category. In most cases, this type of levying is viewed by Nigerians as outright extortion. Sidelineing refers to the use of public or company resources for private purposes—for instance, using official vehicles for personal travel, running a private clinic in a public health facility, or using university resources to conduct a private consulting job. Misappropriation extends this practice further, whereby public materials are not simply used for private purposes but expropriated entirely, usually in a manner more concealed than sidelineing because it is both more illegitimate and more obviously illegal.

This typology captures and describes a wide range of forms of corruption that are prevalent in Nigeria, but as Blundo and Olivier de Sardan acknowledge, the boundaries between these forms can be fluid, and the perceived legitimacy of particular practices can depend very much on context, and particularly on the position of the people participating in or assessing the behavior. Some forms of corruption are almost always less legitimate than others. For example, the tolls collected by police at checkpoints are widely resented, whereas string pulling by a patron to assist a friend or relative is often seen as highly legitimate and even morally honorable. A number of dimensions are salient in situating particular forms of corruption and understanding their degree of acceptability in Nigeria. Whether a particular behavior is perceived as corrupt and how corrupt a behavior is judged depend on where the behavior falls along a number of intersecting continuums. These continuums include legality and illegality, legitimacy and illegitimacy, and scale (that is, petty and massive) as well as whether one is a beneficiary or a victim. Social distance from acts of corruption is generally predictive of perceived illegitimacy, tapping people's sense of corruption's corrosiveness in society, whereas perceptions in cases of closer proximity depend heavily on whether one is a beneficiary or a victim. While smaller-scale corruption is more widely tolerated, it is also true that it is the biggest forms of corruption that are least likely to be punished because the most egregious forms are undertaken by the most powerful people.

In the many examples of corruption that are described in the chapters to follow, I show how important social context is for explaining when and why Nigerians participate in corruption, but also for understanding what kinds of corruption are acceptable and what kinds produce the popular discontent that fuels so many salient social phenomena in contemporary Nigeria. I argue that over the past couple of decades, new forms of corruption have emerged that Nigerians widely view as illegitimate. This illegiti-

macy is most pronounced with regard to the deceptions Nigerians associate with the failure of their postcolonial state to deliver the expected benefits of development and democracy, at the same time that more traditional mechanisms of patron-clientism are perceived to be breaking down. In other words, as elites manipulate the intertwining of modern bureaucratic and more traditional kinship-based clientelistic idioms of accountability in order to maximize their wealth and power through corruption, the legitimacy of both idioms is undermined.

A patron-client system—in which people rely on kin, people of the same community of origin, and other hierarchically organized social ties of affection and obligation for assistance—has long served as a buffer against the capriciousness of the state by providing access to resources through familiar mechanisms of reciprocity. This system is widely perceived by ordinary Nigerians to have given way to a much more individualistic pursuit of wealth and power. I show how the deceptive mechanisms of corruption associated with the state are perceived to have diffused throughout society, creating a popular sense of crisis about social morality, wherein Nigerians see the repercussions of corruption in everyday life as both caused by and contributing to the demise of morality. This perception that corruption is rooted in social amorality both obscures the political and economic underpinnings of inequality and creates some hope. At the same time that Nigerians see themselves as complicit in corruption, they also view themselves as the ultimate agents of change.

419: CORRUPTION, DECEPTION, AND SOCIAL MORALITY

If the Nigerian factor is corruption, the primary mode of illegitimate corruption in Nigeria is 419. Named after the number in the Nigerian penal code that deals with a specific form of fraud, as mentioned earlier, 419 (pronounced four-one-nine) first emerged in the 1980s, during Nigeria's economic decline, when the country fell from the heady heights of the worldwide oil boom into a period of political and economic struggle marked by military dictatorships, inflation, a rapidly devaluing currency, and widespread poverty and unemployment (Watts 1984, 1992, 1994; Apter 2005). The original meaning of 419 was linked to a specific practice of fraud, such as that described in AC's story, in which the perpetrators sent letters and faxes that relied on the symbols of Nigeria's petroleum-dominated political economy—official letterhead and signatures, NNPC insignia, lines of credit, government contracts, and so on—to bait mostly foreign targets into providing advance fees against the promise of a larger payoff. The scams relied not only on the trappings of the Nigerian state but also its reputation for corruption, enticing dupes with the expectation

that some of the millions of dollars siphoned off by corrupt officials could be obtained simply by providing a foreign bank account and advance fees to enable the funds to be released. Apter (2005, 226–36) has cogently described how 419 emerged as Nigerians became disillusioned with the state at the same time that the state itself, no longer awash in oil money, relied on the politics of illusion to maintain its eroding legitimacy.

The original 419 scams have continued to flourish; if anything, they have increased and expanded as the Internet has democratized access to the technology of 419 during the same period that Nigeria itself has been embarking on its transition to democratic governance after many years of military rule. But even more significant than the continued practice of 419 scams through e-mail is the fact that 419 has become an all-encompassing signifier in Nigerian discourse for any behavior that relies on dissimulation, illusion, or some other manipulation of the truth in order to facilitate gain or advantage. Indeed, nothing illustrates better the Nigerian definition of corruption than the spectrum of activities and behaviors that are described as 419. A few brief examples will suffice to indicate the expansive meaning of 419, an issue that will be developed more thoroughly throughout the book.

During my most recent period of fieldwork in 2004, the Nigerian Labour Congress, an umbrella organization representing many trade unions, called a national strike to protest government efforts to deregulate the price of gasoline, kerosene, and diesel—a policy that would result in significant increases in the cost of Nigeria’s highly subsidized domestic fuel. The strike in June was widely observed, and after several days, during which the nation’s economy was largely paralyzed, the government was forced to compromise, still raising fuel prices but keeping them well below the deregulated levels that had been proposed. In the period during and after the strike the issue of corruption in Nigeria’s oil economy, always a favorite topic, reached peak levels in everyday conversation.

Nigerians commonly believe that cheap domestic fuel is a kind of national birthright, perceived as one of the few benefits that an otherwise corrupt and ineffectual government ought to be able to deliver to the masses in Africa’s oil-producing giant. National strikes over fuel prices have been common in Nigeria’s recent history (Apter 2005). In one of the great ironies and tragic symbols of Nigerian underdevelopment, for the past several years Nigeria has imported nearly all of its refined fuel from overseas, as the country’s four broken-down oil refineries remain nonfunctional, despite numerous huge government contracts awarded to repair them. The popular belief, voiced in the idiom of 419, is that the country’s political elite, led by the president, has deliberately kept Nigeria’s refineries from being repaired so that they can profit from controlling the importation and distribution of fuel. One account of the do-



Figure 1. To ordinary Nigerians, the country's frequent fuel shortages—in spite of the fact that Nigeria is the largest oil producer in Africa—are an egregious example of the consequences of corruption (photo by author).

mestic fuel situation, provided by a friend during a conversation as we waited in line for fuel at a crowded gas station after the June 2004 strike was called off, illustrates a widely held view:

[President] Obasanjo is just playing us 419. Government could easily repair the refineries but they leave them failing on purpose. I mean, in this country, with the billions generated from oil revenues, are you telling me that for several years they cannot even repair one refinery? No way. Obasanjo and the ex-military boys, they want it this way. They control the importation of fuel from abroad. They own the ships, the local marketing companies, the petrol stations—I understand some of them have even built refineries abroad. Can you imagine? While our refineries rot, they have built their own abroad to profit from our suffering. It is not enough that they steal the oil revenues. They also sell our oil back to us at a profit. No. It's 419, it's 419.

Whether or not my friend's account is entirely factual, it represents a common awareness that elites are getting rich at the expense of the masses and that 419—illusions created through deception—is the central strategy.

But as much as most people see elites as the biggest perpetrators of 419, people also share a common belief that practices of 419 have filtered throughout Nigerian society—a perception also illustrated in some of the discourse produced around the fuel strike. For example, proprietors of local filling stations were accused of 419 for hoarding fuel as the strike approached and pretending their stocks had run out in anticipation of higher prices after the strike. Even the impoverished urban street urchins who sell black market fuel in plastic jugs at the roadside when gasoline is scarce are accused of 419, because motorists suspect that they mix cheaper kerosene with more expensive gasoline to increase their small profits.

Politics is, of course, a primary arena for 419. Over the years, the Nigerian public has realized that various programs of transition implemented by military governments as part of the promise to return the country to civilian rule were elaborate ruses. No example is more telling than the 1993 presidential election, when then military dictator Ibrahim Babangida annulled the vote after a long and torturous process in which the military directed every step of the transition from above, including the creation of political parties, the writing of their manifestos, and the determination of eligible candidates. Babangida's cancellation of the election just days after the vote, which led to five more years of brutal dictatorship under General Sani Abacha, was viewed by many Nigerians as the ultimate 419, committed by the Nigerian leader most associated with the term (Apter 1999; 2005, 236–48; Diamond, Kirk-Greene, and Oyediran 1997). Political 419 has not been the exclusive province of the military. The most recent election in 2003, conducted by a democratically elected government, was widely viewed as 419 by Nigerians who saw the huge victories for President Obasanjo's ruling People's Democratic Party as a process of elite-driven selection masquerading as a democratic election.

The concept and practices of 419 have extended to multiple spheres of contemporary life in Nigeria. Any new visitor to the country is bound to notice the odd phenomenon that literally thousands of houses and buildings in cities and towns bear the message "THIS HOUSE IS NOT FOR SALE," painted prominently near the front door. Ask any Nigerian the purpose of the message and they will quickly tell you that it is to prevent 419. Apparently, one popular method of 419 is to assume the identity of a real estate agent or simply a property owner trying to sell one's house. In Nigeria's cities and towns, where the real estate market is tight, buyers can be induced to make down payments to secure a later purchase, and in some cases entire transactions have been completed before the buyer discovered that the deal was a scam. By labeling houses as "not for sale," property owners are trying to prevent themselves and their buildings from becoming embroiled in 419 cases—and in Nigeria there is always the added fear



Figure 2. Countless houses and buildings across Nigeria bear the warning "THIS HOUSE IS NOT FOR SALE" to combat a common scam (photo by author).

that even if your house has been sold in a scam, you might still lose it if the buyer has more money or better political connections.

The 419 scams appear in contexts one might not expect them; that is part of the way 419 can be successful. In my first years in Nigeria, young men in Lagos sometimes stood on the side of the road signaling to drivers that something was wrong underneath their cars. If a driver stopped, the young man would offer to check under the car, quickly creating a real problem that only a mechanic—his coconspirator—could fix. On a recent bus ride I took between cities in Nigeria, one of the passengers stood up at the beginning of the trip and asked that we all pray for Jesus's journey mercies, a practice not uncommon in the heavily Christian South. Indeed, buses are a popular venue for evangelism, and I braced myself for proselytizing. But the man quickly shifted from talk of God to talk of illness and medicine, explaining that he was a renowned healer and had brought his medicines on board to help his companions on the journey. He proceeded to describe how his plastic bottles full of red liquid treated malaria and typhoid, and how the ones with yellow liquid treated an assortment of "woman problems" such as irregular menses and infertility; he even had

different powders for toothaches and foot odor. Each time he introduced a new medicine a man in the back of the bus shouted that he wanted it and asked the price. He paid enthusiastically and was given his medicines. Eventually, a few other passengers bought some too. After several stops the medicine peddler bid us adieu and disembarked, presumably to continue his sales on a bus going the other way. His main customer, who had purchased so many medicines, also departed at the same stop. Once they exited, the woman sitting beside me turned toward me and said, as I had been thinking, “It’s 419. The fellow at the back eagerly buying all the medicine is his partner.” She paused and added, with a sigh, “Nigeria.”

The popular association of corruption with deception seems almost infinitely expansive. Indeed, even partners in failing romantic relationships occasionally accuse each other of 419, when reality turns out to be different from appearances. The fact that 419 is perceived to be so pervasive is incredibly troubling to most Nigerians. In this ethnographic study of corruption, I take seriously Nigerians’ narratives of discontent and the anxiety about social morality that they signify. An immense array of contemporary trends and events can be productively interpreted as a response to popular ambivalence and frustrations regarding corruption. Understanding corruption and its discontents illuminates the intertwining processes of statecraft, moral imagination, and cultural production in postcolonial Nigeria.

CORRUPTION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Nigerians’ sense that their state and society have become increasingly amoral—with elites pursuing wealth and power without regard for the consequences, and ordinary people seeking money by all means available simply to survive—contributes to a popular perception that law and order have given way to rampant corruption at every level. The concept of 419 and the breadth with which it is applied across social domains represents this collective conclusion that the country has spiraled out of control.

Yet implicit in Nigerians’ anger and frustration about corruption is the recognition that things could and should be different. In their acute collective self-consciousness about the shortcomings of their society, Nigerians express their awareness of alternatives. The perception of 419 as amoral is rooted in strong expectations about social morality, in part based on a traditional moral economy wherein reciprocity, kinship, and personal allegiance dictated forms of sociability and social obligation in which the welfare of others was privileged over individual interests. Or perhaps more accurately, individual interests were tied to protecting the welfare of others. In many ways, this moral economy remains powerful in contemporary

Nigeria, and even contributes to forms of “corruption” that Nigerians see as more or less legitimate. In some situations, Nigerians’ discontents are projected backward to better times, in a sort of nostalgia for an idealized past. But in their frustrations over the current state of affairs, many people also look forward to anticipated transformations. Expectations about social morality are increasingly influenced by the ideals of democracy and development promulgated by the postcolonial state. Concepts of probity and official accountability are fertilized even in a setting where they are frequently deployed duplicitously.

Because this book is about corruption, most of the cases presented in the narrative emphasize this dimension of everyday life and try to explain it. But it is absolutely essential to recognize Nigerians’ ambivalence about corruption. Their acute dissatisfaction with the most amoral forms of corruption, commonly glossed as 419, is produced in relation to experiences with institutions and forms of human relationship that are *not* corrupt. Whether it is trusted friendships and family ties, upright and generous religious congregations and fellowship groups, or networks of informal business relationships that cooperate effectively based on high degrees of trust and internal self-regulation, all Nigerians have experiences with social forms that are honest and scrupulous. Even in the realm of formal institutions associated with the state, examples of people and organizations with a reputation for integrity are well-known. Understanding the social currents that push against corruption is as important as explaining those that facilitate it.

While the first four chapters of this book aim to present and explain Nigerians’ experiences, understandings, and ambivalent participation in corruption, the last three chapters examine popular responses to it. I show how urban vigilantism, spectacular witchcraft allegations, resurgent ethnic nationalism, and the dramatic rise of born-again Christianity are in part fueled by discontents about corruption. These crucial trends in contemporary Nigerian culture must be understood, in large measure, as *challenging corruption*. In each case, part of the motivation and justification is to combat corruption. But even social movements and arenas of cultural production that can be usefully analyzed in the context of popular discontents about corruption do not necessarily or automatically contribute to its amelioration. The people, institutions, and ideas to which Nigerians resort in their frustrations over corruption can themselves become instruments of 419.

CORRUPTION IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Corruption has become one of the symbols of popular discontent in the modern world, not only in Nigeria, but across the globe. Stories of corrup-

tion dominate the media in both developed and developing countries. In addition, corruption has become the focus of policymakers, watchdog groups, and scholars, most of whom share a more or less explicit assumption that corruption is inimical to good governance and economic productivity. Watchdog groups like Transparency International regularly rank countries in terms of their perceived corruption, and numerous programs to combat corruption have been initiated by multilateral donors such as the United Nations and the World Bank, Western and non-Western governments, and a plethora of NGOs. It seems as if corruption has become the primary culprit in explaining the dysfunctions of government and the inequities of global economics.

The focus on corruption is particularly intense in developing countries. While there is widespread awareness in developed countries that corruption remains a pervasive problem, it is also true that poor nations are portrayed as especially plagued. This spotlight on developing countries, particularly Africa, is worrisome for two reasons. First, as I alluded to already, many accounts of corruption rekindle and reinforce misguided stereotypes that link corruption, and the associated ills of poverty and inequality, with an image of timeless cultural traditions. Such stereotypes perpetuate notions of African backwardness that obscure the extent to which the relationship between corruption and culture in places like Nigeria can only be understood in the context of larger historical patterns of political and economic inequality. Second, as an explanation for the failures of democracy and development, the idea of corruption runs the risk of deflecting responsibility for the injustices of the contemporary world from the haves to the have-nots, whether that means from rich to poor countries or from the elites in poor countries to their largely poor populations. Although ordinary Nigerians frequently implicate themselves in the perpetuation of corruption, it would be a mistake to lose sight of the larger context of inequality.

Whether so much global attention to corruption is really warranted remains an open question. Even if one takes for granted what democracy and development are, and even if one assumes that they offer the best hope for better societies (one need not—perhaps should not—take these issues for granted), it is not clear whether corruption is the primary obstacle to these ideals, or if it is an obstacle, whether it acts as an obstacle in the same way in different places. Many people who have wide experience in a number of other countries have remarked on similarities or resonances with things I describe in Nigeria. The academic literature on corruption is replete with parallels, but also suggests important differences. For example, scholars of Italy note the extensive corruption in that country, and yet Italy is a Group of Eight industrial power with levels of development only dreamed of in contemporary Nigeria. Colleagues working

in India have identified discourses of complaint about corruption there that respond to the postcolonial state's self-justification as the engine for development in ways that are similar to Nigeria (Gupta 1995), and yet India has a reputation (at least compared to Nigeria) as a stable democracy. Parallels to other oil-producing states such as Venezuela are intriguing (Coronil 1997), and the similarities of corruption in Nigeria to other African states are striking (Bayart 1993; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2001c).

My experience and expertise are limited to Nigeria. I hope to be able to demonstrate how corruption and the popular discontents it produces are at the center of Nigeria's struggles to develop and democratize, and to show how an ethnographic account can contribute to answering broad questions about the organization, meaning, and consequences of corruption in the case of Africa's most populous country. For ordinary Nigerians, corruption has become the ultimate symbol of modernity and its malcontents (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). In their popular responses to corruption, Nigerians seem to suggest that corruption is both inimical to democracy and development, and paradoxically, part of a historical process in which these expectations may eventually be achieved. Examining corruption and its discontents offers a revealing window onto processes of social transformation that extend well beyond Nigeria.