

Corruption of Language and Nigeria's Debased Value System

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*When language in common use in any country
becomes irregular and depraved, it is followed
by their ruin and degradation.
-John Milton*

Abstract

This paper invites attention to language (ab)use evident in the lexico-semantic constructions and reconstructions that are tactically deployed to configure and, more often than not, to conceal Nigeria's debased value system. It discusses some linguistic choices in relation to the major facets of the situation, namely labour and productivity, security, social life and politics. The article acknowledges the fact that the depravity of Nigeria's social order is alarming and unhealthy for national development and, to this effect, has been the subject of many discourses. But it contends that the linguistic options that Nigerians use to code all kinds of unacceptable behaviour are as threatening to the cause of national development as the practices themselves. Therefore, this study posits that any crusade that is geared towards sanitizing the Nigerian society should not be directed only at the manifestations of the country's perverse world-view but also at the linguistic expressions that serve as their 'life support' system.

Keywords: *'Naija', Meaning, Value System, World-view, Development*

Introduction

Contrary to Shakespeare's memorable words: 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose. / By any other name would smell as sweet.', it is a fact that when a name changes, the values attached to it often change as well. In the *Holy Bible*, for example, Abram's name was changed to Abraham, Jacob's to Israel and Saul's to Paul, at the point of a higher force changing the cause of their destiny for good. It is noteworthy, however, that changing a person's name does not always have positive attractions. There are people whose character traits have earned them appellations that have superseded their original names. For example, there are people who answer appellations such as Thatcher, Maradona, and so on¹. Popular as such names are in the larger society, those who are now using them as cognomen and their character traits are objects of contempt in the Nigerian context.

It is also a usual development for the names of countries to be changed when such countries are in search of cultural or ideological identity. In such a situation, such names tend to re-define the missions of such countries. In Africa, for example, Ghana was formerly known as Gold Coast, Burkina Faso as Upper Volta, and Congo as Zaire and now Congo Democratic Republic. Apart from the cultural and ideological perceptions that could underlie

such a change of names, a country's perverse world-view could make her original name or that of her nationality metamorphose into another. This applies to Nigeria's situation in which the original name 'Nigeria'/ 'Nigerian' has pejoratively metamorphosed into 'Naija'. The name 'Naija' and its attendant untoward behaviour patterns as exhibited by Nigerians have channelled an inglorious path for the country in the international community, as Aribiah (2000: 233) observes:

'Naija' is a slang; a very informal nomenclature. Yet it is quite popular in the United States of America. A Nigerian is usually referred to as a Naija . . . it is a derogatory term. The Nigerian is so-called especially when he/she exhibits unethical behaviour in government or business . . . rushing unnecessarily to board a train or a coach, evading tax payment deliberately and telling lies to cover up their illegal immigration status. Such unacceptable behaviour patterns observed over time amongst some Nigerians become associated with them. They are sarcastically called Naija. Naija is usually pronounced with a low-rise tone.

Instances of such unacceptable behaviour exhibited by Nigerians beyond the shores of their father/motherland and their being labelled 'Naija' are worrisome. However, within the context of the present paper, we focus attention on the appalling behaviour patterns exhibited by Nigerians at home, which usually attract the sarcastic exclamation 'Naija' or 'Omo Naija' (the true Nigerian) and the concomitant meaning-making reflexes that have been devised to capture the world-view in such a manner that bespeaks of a deliberate attempt to explore the expressive possibilities of language for dubious purposes. Such behaviour patterns span interpersonal relations, the discharge of one's duties at one's place of employment, (dis)service to the nation, passing through a system in pursuit of certain goals, among others. It is in this light that we treat the concept 'Naija' in this paper as it affects Nigeria's social depravity vis-à-vis degeneration of language use.

At this stage, we specify how the rest of the paper is organized. After this introductory section, we will consider by turns the following: theoretical perspective, aspects of Nigeria's debased value system, discussion and concluding comments.

Theoretical Perspective

The kind of analysis we carry out in this paper is purely sociolinguistic in approach, as it covers 'studies of language in its social context – language as spoken by ordinary people in their everyday lives' (Trudgill, 1974: 33). Within this framework, we apply 'linguistic relativity' which is one of the two associated principles of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, the other being 'linguistic determinism'. Linguistic determinism as a strand of the Sapir-Whorf

Hypothesis posits that language determines thought, as we can only perceive and think what our language allows us to perceive, think and say. This is considered a strong version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis which few linguists would accept, as the most obvious problem, according to Pinker (1994) quoted in Parr-Davies (2001: 2), is the idea of causality – one cannot ascertain whether (if at all) language has affected thought or if the thought has affected the language.

Gumperz (1996) cited in *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, however, holds the view that current linguists, rather than study whether language affects thought, are studying how it affects thought. It is against this backdrop that we appeal to the more moderate or limited Whorfianism called linguistic relativity which posits that language influences the way we perceive and remember, and generally, it predisposes us to look at the world in a certain way. Chandler (1994) contends that while few linguists would accept the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in its ‘strong’, extreme or deterministic form, many now accept a ‘weak’, more moderate or limited Whorfianism, that is, linguistic relativity which differs from linguistic determinism in a number of ways:

- the emphasis is on the potential for thinking to be ‘influenced’ rather than unavoidably ‘determined’ by language;
- it is a two-way process so that ‘the kind of language we use’ is almost influenced by ‘the way we see the world’;
- any influence is ascribed not to ‘language’ as such or to one language compared with another, but to the use *within a language* of one variety rather than another (typically a *sociolect* - the language used primarily by members of a particular social group);
- emphasis is given to the social context of language use rather than to purely linguistic considerations, such as the social pressure in particular contexts to use language in one way rather than another. (Chandler, 1994: 3).

It is based on this understanding that we appeal to linguistic relativity in discussing language (ab)use with regard to Nigeria’s perverse world-view. At this point, it is useful that we cast light on the context against which we will anchor our subsequent discussion.

Aspects of Nigeria’s Debased Value System

It is no news that Nigerians sometimes shudder to disclose their identity in the midst of other nationals in anticipation of the contempt and ridicule that would greet such a revelation. ‘Is it a crime to be a Nigerian?’ (Oha, 2001: 4) asked when Sabena Airlines refused him booking for being a Nigerian. Eso (1999: 90) attempts to picture the bizarre situation and its underlying ravaging malady:

The mess this country is in, especially in the realm of corruption, now seems to have practically isolated the country from the progressive world. It has

stared[sic] off investors from a country which badly needs an upward economic progression, given the country a negative image, especially in the news media of the developed world . . . Everywhere one goes, the signs are there, physically or subtly displayed. When they are physically displayed, it is clearly shown that the Nigerian is not welcome. When they are subtle, they are accompanied with sighs and contemptuous smiles signifying that he (or she) is least regarded. (parenthesis mine)

Expressing a similar view, Mbanefo (1999: 11) laments:

How was it possible for our value system to become almost completely destroyed within a space of less than twenty years? Our social fabric has been worn terribly thin, our morality has fallen into disrepute, and our respected institutions have lost their authority, while our educational system has lost its quality. The sad corollary to all these is that, internationally, we have lost respect as a serious people who can be trusted in business.

These viewpoints encapsulate the extent to which Nigeria's value system has degenerated. We will now attempt to shed light on some spheres of Nigeria's national life that have become breeding sites for corruption.

Nigeria's educational system has suffered terribly from the pangs of her debased value system. A major vice that is thriving by the day is examination malpractice. It is noteworthy that offering and taking of bribes by candidates and examination officials respectively in both internal and external examinations have aided examination malpractice. Some candidates allegedly contribute some amount of money for invigilators at examination centres so that they could have their way. Thus, the conduct of examinations is replete with cases of examination leakage, especially in external examinations conducted by bodies such as West African Examination Council (WAEC), National Examination Council (NECO) and Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). In 2005, the *Vanguard* newspaper carried on its front page the screaming headline: 'Exams Leakage Scandal Rocks WAEC' with a rider: 'Students Procure Each Question Paper with ₦5, 000'. To further heighten the national disgrace, a sample of one of the leaked subjects tagged 'Bromide of alleged CRK paper' appeared on the front page. Reacting to this development, the *Tell* Magazine of June 20, 2005 tagged its cover story: 'Exam Scams: Why Nigerian Certificates Are Worthless', capturing the sorry state of Nigeria's educational system by titling the piece: 'The Reign of Empty Heads'.

In the tertiary institutions, some disgruntled male lecturers unduly favour students of the opposite sex and receive gratifications from the male students or both sexes so that the

students could pass well even when they have not worked for such. Commenting on this, Bugaje (1995: 4) has this to say:

You no longer need to be qualified to gain admission nor do you need to pass the exams to get the degree, for so many ways of going round all these have been perfected and are gaining ascendancy in the amoral atmosphere of the campuses.

At present, the certificates offered by Nigeria's educational institutions no longer command any respect in the labour market both within and outside the country. In effect, the national development scheme and the dream of successfully implementing it are fast fading away.

The practice of journalism in Nigeria is also one of the most affected by corrupt practices. For long, journalists have been notorious for taking bribes from corporate bodies and government officials but this assumed a national and disgraceful dimension on 8th February 2002 in the wake of Professor Jerry Gana's (formerly Nigeria's Minister of Information) holding a session with foreign pressmen, particularly of Cable News Network (CNN) and South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) extraction for their negative reporting on the aftermath of the Idi-Araba riots and Ikeja Army Dump explosion which suggested that Nigerians were in support of the military return to power (*This Day* Saturday February 9, 2002). After the session, it was reported that (some of) the reporters received gratification of ₦50, 000 notes equivalent to \$430. Professor Jerry Gana, however, denied bribing foreign journalists during the interactive session, arguing that in the letter of invitation sent to the journalists, 'arrangement has been made to cover their travel and incidental expenses, hence the decision to give each of them the sum of ₦50, 000' (Jerry Gana quoted in Aluko, 2002: 4).

Notwithstanding the truth or falsity of this report, the practice of journalism and its ethics in Nigeria have been denigrated by bribery. Stephen Faris reported in *Time Magazine* (International Edition) April 14, 2002 (quoted in Aluko, 2002: 3) that:

Cash-filled envelopes are routinely handed over by government officials, oil companies, banks and just about anyone giving a press conference. "Virtually all journalists are given", says Yinka Aderibigbe, who covers Lagos State Governor for the *Guardian* . . . A typical press conference yields up to \$15, more than half of most reporters' weekly salary. Editors have money delivered to their offices. A single source – a state government, for instance – might give a senior editor \$200 every few months to ensure favorable coverage.

In the political arena, corruption has taken its toll on the sustenance of Nigeria's political system. In the current political dispensation, bribery has reached such an alarming

rate that ('Ghana-must-go') bags containing millions of naira have been reportedly dragged to the floor of the parliament as bribes when decisions on the impeachment of parliament officials or any other crucial state decisions were to be taken. Apart from this, other political actions such as the organization and execution of solidarity/political rallies, exercise of civic rights in local, state and national polls, have been characterized by the allocation and distribution of money to participants. The April 2007 general elections in Nigeria, apart from being marred by violence, also suffered grave setbacks owing to reported large-scale electoral malpractices that thrived on bribing the electorate and the officials of the electoral body. It is interesting to note that the report of the European Union Election Monitoring Group on the April 2007 general elections in Nigeria has been officially presented to the Nigerian government (*The Guardian*, Wednesday, September 5, 2007). Pointing out some of the lapses in the elections, the EU observes:

Incidents of hijacking of ballot boxes were witnessed by EU observers, who reported widespread irregularities, including under-age voting, and significant evidence of fraud, particularly during the result collation process, which completely lacked transparency due to the fact that polling station results were not publicly displayed at any level of the election administration throughout the country.

(*The Guardian*, Wednesday, September 5, 2007, p. 70)

The security system of the country is also adversely affected by the country's moral decadence. Men and women of the Nigeria Police no longer enjoy the confidence of the people in view of the bribery that thrives in the system. Policemen mount illegal check points not to enforce any law but to extort naira notes from road users, thereby giving defaulting road users and criminals the licence to operate at will. In fact, the lapses in the Nigeria Police at a time precipitated the emergence of vigilante groups as a means of law enforcement in Nigeria. Besides, men of the Customs Service, Immigration Service and Road Safety Corps collect bribes at their various duty posts. The implication of this is that 'anything goes' in the Nigerian system so long as one could offer a bribe.

So far, emphasis has been laid on bribery as a facet of corrupt practices in Nigeria. Equally worrisome is the Nigerian scam called four-one-nine (419) or the 'Nigerian Connection' as it is mostly called in Europe. The advance fee fraud has given the country such a negative image that there is a Nigerian 419 Coalition website <<http://home.rica.net/alphae/419coal/>> on the Internet to alert the whole world of the 'Nigerian way of doing business'. There are such warnings/captions on the website as 'The Five Rules of Doing Business with Nigeria' and 'What to Do if You Receive a Nigerian

Scam/419 Letter'. In this sense, one would share Bugaje's (1994) view that the country is daily receding but the only thing moving forward in the country is corruption which is growing and thriving and becoming the biggest industry. In view of this, there is an extent to which one can dispute Tijssen's (2001-2006) assertion that 'in the Western World, Nigeria is rapidly becoming known as the business fraud capital of the world'. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of 2000 ranked Nigeria the most corrupt country in the world; the second most corrupt in 2001, 2002, and 2003; the third most corrupt in 2004; the sixth most corrupt in 2005; and the eighteenth most corrupt in 2006 (http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/suveys_indices/cpi)

The picture painted so far touches on the facets of 'Naija' and this is encapsulated in Asemota's and Yesufu's (2002: 19) view:

. . . there is something fundamentally wrong with our value system. Nigeria is a classic example of **“representation without taxation”, “reaping without planting” and “sharing without contributing”**. Nigerians need to work hard, **not** scheme hard for what they want and get. Hard work must be made to pay in Nigeria of the 21st century.

It is noteworthy that corrupt practices in Nigeria have been condemned in strong terms by successive governments over the years. In particular, the Obasanjo administration came up with two agencies saddled with its anti-corruption crusade by first inaugurating the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and later the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). While the EFCC has been severely criticized for being selective in its arrest and prosecution of public officers, the successes recorded by the agency so far in curbing financial crimes (<http://www.efccnigeria.org/>) must have engendered Nigeria's upward review on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of the Transparency International as indicated earlier. Recently, Nigeria's efforts at fighting corruption received a tremendous boost with President Umar Musa Yar'Adua's public declaration of assets. This development has been widely commended:

June 28 2007, would remain a remarkable day in the history of this present administration and Nigeria. This is because, on that day, President Umar Musa Yar'Adua publicly declared his assets and liabilities. This is remarkable in the sense that never in the history of Nigeria, either during any military regime or civilian administration of past governments has any Head of State or President opted to publicly declare his assets.³

In this respect, Raufu (2007) emphasizes the culture of transparency that President Yar'Adua is trying to enthrone by the exemplary action of declaring his assets publicly. He then notes

that President Yar'Adua's war against corruption will work because of his willingness to lead by example rather than preaching what he cannot practise.

At this juncture, it is pertinent for us to point out that corruption is a worldwide phenomenon and not peculiar to Nigeria alone. In a report monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), (available at <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3819027.stm>) it is established that corruption is pervasive in Africa. It points out, for instance, that in some Cameroonian public hospitals, patients say that they have to put some money in the doctor's consultation book before they are attended to. And in some schools, a student cannot pass examinations without bribing the teachers. One of the respondents to the poser 'How deep is corruption in Africa?' holds the view that corruption in most African countries takes place within the civil service, as civil servants who are poorly paid have to subsidise their income through corruption. It is interesting that there are also diverse linguistic expressions used to capture corruption. In Zimbabwe, it is called 'sweetener'; corruption in the Gambia is fuelled by a deep-rooted norm called 'MASLAHA'; and 'kitu kidogo' is the Kiswahili word for bribes.

Even among the developed nations of the world, corruption is still prevalent. According to a survey by the Chartered Institute of Building in 2007, (available at <http://www.ciob.org.uk/news/view/1222>) 51% of UK construction professionals felt that corruption is commonplace within the UK construction industry and manifests in employment of illegal workers, fraud, offering a bribe, and producing a fraudulent invoice, among others. Besides, O'Kelley (2004) provides insight into corruption in the American society, making reference to 'Enron', 'WorldCom' and 'Halliburton' which are names indelibly associated with ethic violations that have shaken the American economy and captured headlines in the past few years. David Callahan, quoted by O'Kelley (2004), sees 'Enron' as just the tip of the iceberg and argues that the country is now riddled by an ethos of cheating that touches the lives of every American.

Having given an overview of the pervasiveness of corruption in Nigeria and tried to locate it within a global trend, we proceed to the thrust of this study by examining the linguistic habits which are used to configure the facets of Nigeria's perverse world.

Discussion

Our discussion of the appropriation of meaning relative to Nigeria's perverse world-view is predicated on Limberman's (1997: 1) view:

Of what does verbal communication consist? It consists of words. But words do not possess their meanings in themselves; rather, the occasioned discourse taken as a whole carries the sense and distributes the meaning to its component words. “Meaning” has to be something about words, but one cannot find it in the words alone. The words institute shifting system of signification, but they themselves are subject to this very system, which provides for them new traces of possible sense they can take up.

Given this background, we will start by assessing Nigeria’s security system with close reference to the activities of the Nigeria Police. A visitor to Nigeria for the first time who sights the array of slogans that are used to brand the Nigeria Police would be tempted to judge their service by such slogans. At a time, there was a special squad called ‘Anti-crime Patrol’. Then came the era of ‘Operation Sweep³’, ‘Operation Crush’, ‘Operation Flush’, ‘Operation Wipe’, and so on. All these slogans give an air of sophistication and combat-readiness to the agency. The reality, however, is that they are mere cosmetic emblems in view of the inefficiency of the police in combating crime wave in the country. It is rather ridiculous to find patrol vans prominently displaying such slogans parked at strategic points on our roads where policemen extort money from road users.

With the change of leadership of the Nigeria Police from Musliu Smith as the Inspector-General to Tafa Balogun, the slogan adopted to combat the ever-increasing crime wave became ‘Fire for Fire’. The exit of Tafa Balogun and the stepping in of Sunday Ehindero as Police Inspector-General also changed the slogan to ‘To serve and protect with integrity’. Among other alleged diverse acts of aiding and abetting criminals and even perpetrating crimes themselves, one wonders the integrity the police are protecting when the missing handset of a road user, stopped for routine checks by a police team in Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State, allegedly rang in the cap of one of the policemen on patrol (*Tell Magazine* No. 5 January 31, 2005 p. 10). It then suggests that these catchy slogans have not in any way changed the inefficiency that has hitherto been the bane of the agency. Obviously, there is a deliberate attempt to (ab)use language in order to give a false identity, which tends to cover up the rot in the system and deceive the people.

Apparently, it is difficult to reconcile the semantic import of these lexical entries with the world of reality in the country’s security system. And to assuage the people’s deep resentment against the police, the agency further came with the futile image-laundering project captured in the slogan, ‘The Police is Your (the people’s) Friend’ – the parenthesis is mine. The word ‘friend’ used here, as in other popular discourses, is semantically vacuous for someone who professes to be a friend may turn out to be an enemy, though. Meaning, we

must note, does not reside in a word but in the external world of realities where interactants have cause to process them. Of course, a 'true' friend would have the attribute of actually serving and protecting with integrity and this must have informed the popular saying: 'A friend in need is a friend indeed'. How readily available are the police when the people are in dire need of their service? So, the agency should know the meaning attached to the kind of friendship that the people see them posturing.

In the labour sector, when the workforce of ministries, parastatals and any other establishment is bloated so that those at the helm of affairs could share the excess money accruing from the subvention, the non-existent workers, whose names on the payroll fetch the booty, are referred to as 'ghost workers'. In a bid to detect the 'ghost workers', an exercise referred to as 'pay parade' is usually carried out but there is a Nigerian way of doing it again that 'ghost workers' are not detected in the end and when detected they are found to be actually ghost (deceased) workers whose names have continued to appear in the payment voucher. That then suggests that the supposed 'ghosts' have living souls behind their 'existence' for ghosts live in the spirit world and would therefore have nothing to do with the country's currency which would not be a legal tender in the world of the spirits. Therefore, the expression 'ghost workers' is semantically slippery, as people have devised this dubious strategy of injecting fictitious names into the pay-roll to siphon the country's resources.

Another expression that has been grossly abused in the labour sector with regard to the allocation of positions and resources is 'federal character' or 'quota system'. In an attempt to reflect the so-called 'quota system', merit is underplayed. As a corollary to this, there is the expression 'son of the soil' that gives any bearer the privilege to attain certain goals within the system without recourse to his/her qualifications. Sometimes, the expression is used to absolve an individual of a wrongdoing at his/her duty post when an 'outsider' would pay dearly for such. It is particularly worrisome that the expressions 'quota system' and 'federal character' are used on false premises by 'the powers-that-be' to gratify praise singers, sycophants, family members, people of the same religious or ethnic affiliation.

Moreover, a common expression that is used to cover up the Nigerian way of sacrificing merit and excellence at the altar of mediocrity is 'let my people go' – an expression which is a parody of the Biblical account of how God instructed Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, to set the Israelites free from captivity. It is disheartening to note that the promotion of mediocrity is the bane of Nigeria's development; for mediocrity, according to Osundare (2007: 30), is a 'virulent weed that chokes whatever legitimate plant . . . within its reach, then spreads and takes over the entire terrain'.

In the manufacturing sector, Nigerians crave for foreign goods to the neglect of locally made goods. Such foreign goods that Nigerians refer to as ‘fairly used’, ‘Belgium’ or ‘Tokunbo’ (arrivals from overseas) have completely supplanted home-made goods that are pejoratively referred to as ‘Aba made’ which means products from an industrial city (Aba) in southeastern Nigeria. Ironically, what Nigerians refer to as ‘fairly used’ may have constituted a nuisance to their original users abroad that they would find every means to dump them somewhere else. In fact, the terms ‘fairly used’, ‘Belgium’ and ‘Tokunbo’ have become household expressions in the Nigerian parlance that Nigerians do not seem to see that something is wrong with their value judgement.

Generating power for public consumption in the productivity sector is a national disgrace. Nigerians have grown so weary of the failure of the corporation that generates power that its former name, National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) was sarcastically changed to ‘Never Expect Power Always’ (NEPA). Also, the once proposed name of the corporation (NEP Plc) when it was to be privatized was accordingly changed by consumers of electric power to ‘Never Expect Power; Please Light Candle’. All these show the re-contextualisation of meaning to reflect the true picture of power supply in Nigeria. In this regard, Bugaje (1997: 2) writes:

There is a death but there are also deaths. National Electric Power Authority’s (NEPA) epileptic service not only deprives one electric power whimsically but often blows up one’s gadgets anytime NEPA decides to bring it back . . . One hears otherwise unbelievable tales of how surgeons often finish operation with a torch-light hurriedly borrowed from the night-watch, when NEPA fails.

Nigerians’ reaction to the reality of power supply in the country has gone so perverse that it is taken as a normal occurrence for the Nigerian people to be kept in perpetual darkness for days, weeks or months. Therefore, when electricity is restored, especially at night, shouts of ‘UP NEPA!’ would rend the whole of the atmosphere. What an irony! It is, in fact, ridiculous that the expression ‘UP NEPA’ has become one of the readily available expressions for young children, who are just trying to speak the language of the immediate speech community, to pick as part of their lexicon because of the recurrence of the expression in the people’s day-to-day affairs.

As regards the abuse of language in the political arena, one expression that has suffered most is ‘nascent democracy’ relative to the current political dispensation. I pointed out earlier that there have been reported cases of (‘Ghana-must-go’) bags loaded with money and dragged to the floor of the parliament to influence important parliamentary decisions. Worse still, parliamentary debates have sometimes degenerated into scuffles characterized by

the throwing of dangerous weapons such as chairs, exchange of blows among parliamentarians, display of arms and fetish objects, and the scramble for and seizure of the mace of the parliament. And all of these shameful acts are explained away as the characteristic teething problems of a fledgling democracy instead of outright condemnation and prosecution of defaulters.

Besides, the expressions ‘dividends of democracy’, ‘second term’ and very recently ‘third term’ have been so abused that the political class have capitalized on their use to give false credibility to their respective governments. For instance, ‘dividends of democracy’ is a political jargon designed to give the impression that the people are enjoying certain rights and/or privileges that were denied them during the long years of military era. In the real sense, however, it is the political office holders that are exclusively enjoying the ‘dividends of democracy’, as they abuse office and amass wealth, forgetting the people that voted them into power. The on-going trial of former political office holders, particularly state governors who have siphoned billions of naira from the coffers of their respective states reported by Raufu (2007) in his feature writing available at http://www.efccnigeria.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1513&Itemid=2) leaves no one in doubt as to the poor standard of living of the people and the deplorable state of infrastructure in their domains. Little wonder that the expression ‘second/third term’ has become a household jargon in the political parlance of Nigeria’s civilian-to-civilian transition, as almost every incumbent political office holder seeks re-election popularly called ‘second/third term bid’ to ensure ‘continuity’ in the execution of people-oriented(?) programmes.

Although the falsification of age and forgery of certificates have been synonymous with Nigeria’s moral decadence such that Nigeria was once banned for some years from participating in under-age tournaments organized by The International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), the current political dispensation has witnessed unprecedented cases of falsification of age and certificate forgery. It was even alleged that the late Chief Evans Enwerem and Senator Chuba Okadigbo (formerly Senate Presidents) and Senator Bola Tinubu (formerly Lagos State Governor) had cases to answer in this regard. But the political figure that paid most dearly for such vices was Alhaji Salisu Ibrahim (formerly Speaker of the House of Representatives) who allegedly falsified his age and presented the certificate of the University of Toronto, Canada, that he never attended (*Tell Magazine* No. 31 August 2, 1999). Since then, the word ‘Toronto’ has been humorously introduced into the lexicon of

Nigeria's debased value system to cover up all manners of certificate forgery (a common 'Naija' phenomenon).

All in all, the corrupt practices that pervade the various facets we have focused on in our discussion so far are configured in diverse expressions. When contracts are awarded, a certain amount of money goes back into the purse of those that award the contracts. This is termed '10%' patterned after the Christian injunction of tithes paying that takes 10% of one's income. This is not a new development in Nigeria's moral decadence. Eso (1999: 93 – 94) notes that:

The first Republic was noted for allegations of obtaining ten per cent of funds allocated to projects as bribes, and public officers including ministers, were the targets of these allegations. The bad reputation spread beyond the shores of the country, and Nigeria was known as a country of ten-percenters.

In the current dispensation, 'kickback' is mostly used to label the percentage that would go back to the source in the award of contracts. Also, based on the offering of bribes in cash usually by using a brown envelope that is not in any way transparent, 'brown envelope' has become a constant in the parlance of Nigeria's debased value system to stand for a bribe offered in cash. Apart from offering bribes in monetary terms, gift items are also presented as inducements. Both gift items and money are encapsulated in the word 'settlement'. Given the widespread involvement in the act of 'settlement', the impression is generally created that there is hardly any mischievous or illegal deal one wants to perpetuate in Nigeria that would not be executed if one could 'settle'. Giving an account of the pervasiveness of 'settlement' syndrome in Nigeria, a victim of the social vice, quoted in Aribiah (2000: 236) complains:

I settle police
I settle soldier
I settle customs
I settle immigration
I settle taxman
I settle local government
I settle the truck driver and him boys
I settle task force people
I settle my neighbour
I settle de carpenters.
. . . The lexical entry 'settle' here means 'to bribe'

The beneficiaries of this act of 'settling' as shown in the excerpt above leave no one in doubt as to the pervasiveness of this culpable act and the urgency of tackling the social malaise.

Furthermore, the high level of corruption within the leadership circle is also worth mentioning. Those at the corridor of power loot the nation's treasury at will and since other

Nigerians have the impression either rightly or wrongly that ‘. . . for us in Nigeria, the political kingdom has for too long been the gateway to the economic kingdom’ (Obasanjo, 2002), everyone jostles for power to have their own share of the ‘national cake’. It is rather worrisome that the country’s resources that ought to be well managed have been so labelled and denigrated to the level of cakes meant to be shared freely at birthday or wedding ceremonies. It is, therefore, not surprising that they make it a ‘do-or-die’ affair, resorting to political assassinations to eliminate their opponents and have access to the ‘national cake’.

It is pertinent that we also comment on an aspect of Nigeria’s social life that is most unethical. Nigerians are never patient; everybody seems to be in a hurry. And this has not particularly helped the traffic system for it has made traffic jam a permanent feature of the major towns and cities. In a bid to wriggle out of such hold-up, Nigerians find it particularly fashionable to trade insults with their fellow road users and in some cases to heap curses on one another. What is disturbing, however, is that the way the people hurry on the roads is never the way they hurry to meetings and important (state) functions. A ceremony billed to start, say 10a.m. may start at 12 noon or 1p.m. and yet the lackadaisical attitude to punctuality is explained away as ‘African time’. This concept of ‘African time’ calls into question African perception of the natural phenomenon time. In this regard, Osuntokun (2001: 103) notes:

Africans liked to set target. This could be in terms of where the society would want to be at a particular time or in terms of productivity . . . This is why it is difficult to understand the origin of the idea that Africans had (have) no sense of time. If this were true, it must be a racist concept⁵ . . . In many of Africa’s wise sayings it is common to suggest that time does not wait for anybody . . . (ellipses and parenthesis mine)

On a final note, the use of the cliché ‘Nigerian factor’ calls for a careful consideration. The expression has become a stereotype with which Nigerians encapsulate and trivialize the drifting of the country’s value system as it affects every facet of national life. It is such a potent expression in that it has coloured the people’s thoughts and made them believe and resign to ‘fate’ that they are a people destined to crawl, where and when other nations are soaring high. Interestingly, the expression ‘Nigerian factor’ could be re-focused in a positive sense to typify that surging spirit attendant to every revolution. In this sense, it would be a propelling force behind making great strides towards breaking the jinx of underdevelopment; it would be an apt slogan in a bid to chart a new course for the national development scheme. This is indeed a subject for national discourse and the National Orientation Agency has a vital role to play.

We have so far discussed the (ab)use of language to reflect the various manifestations of Nigeria's depleted social fabric. We will now give the concluding comments.

Concluding Comments

What we have tried to do in this paper is to re-appraise, on the one hand, Nigeria's debased value system and, on the other hand, to bring into focus the nuances of meaning that characterize the situation. Obviously, such subtle expressions that are used to code unacceptable behaviour patterns tend to detract from the enormity of such unethical behaviour and, in effect, trivialize and mask issues of serious national concern. Therefore, it is our contention in this paper that the linguistic habits deployed by Nigerians relative to their unethical value system have the unimaginable propensity to influence the way they think of and understand reality and behave with respect to that reality. In addition, an outsider, (a non-Nigerian) may not know the import of the subtle linguistic options that are used to configure the depletion of Nigeria's social fabric, as they are innovatively but mischievously coined for the Nigerian milieu. It could be implied from our discussion so far that negative social behaviour influences language use negatively and that perverse language, in turn, influences social behaviour, thereby cutting the picture of a vicious circle.

On the whole, this study is geared towards raising awareness rather than pointing accusing fingers at the government, relevant agencies and the people. Therefore, in order to ensure that this negative aspect of Nigeria's national life is redressed, the government has a major role to play. Corruption seems to be the symptom and not the disease of the Nigerian society; for it is a reflection of the deep economic and social problems of society. In this respect, the government has to take certain measures and make policies that would directly impact on the living standards of the people in order to rid the country of unethical behaviour. It is then it can embark on the spirited effort of sensitizing the people on the need to shun corrupt practices. As the government and its relevant agencies brace up for this challenge, Nigerians should be mindful of their linguistic behaviour that provides a kind of grid through which they perceive, analyze and respond to their depleted social fabric, as a result of which they see culpable acts as mere 'common practice'. Consequently, we submit in this article that not until Nigerians recognize the enormous potentials of language and its instrumentality to sustaining the country's depleted social fabric, they will find it absolutely difficult to win any battle waged to sanitize their society.

Notes

1. Thatcher and Maradona are the names of distinguished personages in human history. Within the Nigerian context, however, Thatcher has become a negative label for a strict or high-handed woman, while Maradona has become a stereotype for any individual that is skilful at deceiving people for his/her own selfish end.
2. 'Operation Sweep' was the initiative of the military administration of Lagos State under the leadership of Brigadier-General Buba Marwa and it was highly efficient in curbing the crime wave in the state at its inception. Later on, however, the model anti-crime unit (from which other states copied) became notorious for corruption and indiscriminate killings of innocent citizens. Much later, the Lagos State Police Command started operating another unit called 'Rapid Response Squad'. Interestingly, Eko FM 89.75 (The Broadcasting Corporation of Lagos State) as at then was airing a programme (Watchdog) that reviewed security issues in Lagos State and entertained responses from the populace on the efficiency of the squad. While some of such responses were complimentary, some were so uncomplimentary and cast serious doubts on the 'rapid response' tag of the squad.
3. This excerpt is quoted from a feature article titled 'Nigeria Fighting Corruption – The Yar'Adua Example' available at http://www.efccnigeria.org/index/php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1527&Itemid=2
4. Although Osuntokun (2001: 103) gives the impression that the expression 'African Time' must be a racist concept, it is noteworthy that Nigerians seem to have become so used to it that they see it as a normal way of life. Therefore, the fact that Nigerians themselves propagate this abnormal lifestyle tends to disprove the stance that racism is at work in this situation.

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