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Daniel Jordan Smith, A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 263 pp.

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Book reviews

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A careful reading of the title of this book reveals the author's embarrassment at the subject he has chosen to examine. Daniel Jordan Smith is not an Afro-pessimist and he confesses to having hesitated before embarking on the research that led to the writing of this book. But, as an anthropologist who had lived and worked for over ten years in Nigeria in the south east and whose wife came from that part of the country he found himself well placed to examine corruption and its everyday effects on the lives of Nigerians.

The leitmotif is "corruption and its discontents" and throughout the book Smith emphasises both how aware all Nigerians are, at all levels of their lives, of corruption and how they both hate it and laugh at it and at themselves because they are inevitably involved. Smith does not go back to the period before independence except to underscore how some forms of corruption are considered legitimate because they express the patron/client relationship that has always existed throughout Africa. Serge Latouche, in *L'autre Afrique. Entre don et marché*, said that only a man without "friends" was truly poor in Africa. In Nigeria this is still true. Smith gives us a wry example of how he was involved in pulling strings to get his niece into a Nigerian university; this is not considered nepotism but a form of family loyalty and one way of combating real corruption.

"Nigeria na war-o" is how Nigerians express the presence of corruption at all levels of their lives: "Nigeria is a war." If you need a document, such as a driving licence, then you will have to pay several civil servants to do what they should do for free; but there is a difference: if the money is demanded, it is a bribe; if it is not demanded then the recipient gives the honest civil servant a "dash," or present in money. At the numerous police checkpoints the driver has his money ready, though it is handed over in a semi hidden way. Since education is seen as very important to get on in the world parents are prepared to go to great lengths to get their child into the right school and the right university, either by bribes or by pulling strings. Unsurprisingly elections are partly, or wholly, rigged and the candidate with either most money or most support from the ruling party is the only one to have a chance in getting elected.

Although Smith does not deal primarily with corruption at government level he cannot fail to mention instances of huge fraud. For example when the price of oil doubled recently after the federal government had determined its budget for the coming year no one expected any changes and everyone knew the extra millions would "disappear." Another example of government manipulation is that of NGOs created as a front behind which the elite siphons off millions into private bank accounts.

In this climate of general distrust the term used to describe corruption is 419. We have all received emails offering us part of huge sums if only we would give our bank account numbers where the writer can deposit part of the cash. This form of corruption started at the end of the 1980s when oil prices plummeted and the naira was worth almost nothing: it was the brilliant system invented by hundreds of young Nigerians of getting

their hands on the money they needed to survive and it took many forms, often using the government oil agency as note paper or address. 419 was the number of the law that made this practice a crime. Today Nigerians apply the term to just about everything, including the opposite sex in love affairs, quacks selling “medical” concoctions or doctors setting up private clinics within a public hospital, cheating at school or in business and, most terrible of all, what Smith calls the “diabolical use of occult powers,” which he describes towards the end of the book.

What is fascinating and demonstrates Nigerians’ enterprise is the use of modern technology, as in the 419 emails, or modern development schemes, as in the creation of spurious NGOs as a front for diverting aid money into private bank accounts. As Jean François Bayart pointed out in *The criminalization of the African state*, this is a practice that is common to many African countries, and as Smith himself says we can find many examples of ingenious corruption in the West; but what distinguishes the Nigerian versions is the boldness and inventiveness. As a Hausa man said to an Igbo friend of Smith’s: Igbos have an “exaggerated personality,” something that could be applied to Nigerians in general.

In talking about how Nigerians turn to Pentecostal religion (or to fundamentalism in the north) as a way out of this “state of war,” Smith feels that too great an emphasis on personal and intimate behaviour (as in dress and sex) has produced negative results in the last ten years or so. “This domestication of religious morality, in which the individual conduct in the spheres of family, sexuality, and everyday religious observance are emphasized to the exclusion of attention to political and civic behaviour, enables elites to participate in corruption while still viewing themselves as ethical people. It deflects the attention of ordinary citizens away from the political and toward the personal when they imagine the causes of Nigeria’s ills.” He gives only one instance in which disgust with corruption turned violent and political: the riots in Owerri. These were sparked by the arrest of a man accused of the ritual murder of an eleven-year old boy, whose head had been cut off. The man then died the next day in custody. At this point young men went on the rampage through the town and burned down a hotel and the houses of several very rich people. In fact, Smith points out, popular anger was about the 419 men who had been awarded high positions (because they were rich) by the local chief instead of following the age-old custom of choosing a prominent citizen who had worked for the good of the community. It is a good example of how those perceived as truly corrupt are men who think only of making themselves rich and who forget the larger picture of family and community. In this case the federal government woke up and tried to set things right, worried because of the genuine cause of community anger and its devastating effects.

A Culture of Corruption is a well-written book, though perhaps rather repetitive at times and gives us a lively and accurate picture of a phenomenon that is particularly associated with Nigeria today. It is an extremely sympathetic portrait, seen from the inside, of popular reaction to a factor that is distorting the lives of Nigerians and postponing the development of their own form of real democracy.

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