

African Traditional Approach: Sustainable Option to Curbing Corruption in Nigeria

Adewale K. Kupoluyi

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Veronica Adeleke School of Social Sciences, College of Management Sciences, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. E-mail: adewalekupoluyi@yahoo.co.uk, Tel:+2348039402794.

Abstract

Corruption has been described as a major problem militating against the development of many Sub-Saharan African countries. Unfortunately, the more of such external interventions that are introduced, at the expense of local and indigenous initiatives, incidence of corruption seems to remain on the alarming rate. Is there something fundamentally wrong with the Western model of curbing corruption that makes it ineffective in Africa? The study is qualitative. Findings show that the use of traditional African approach is sustainable in the curbing corruption by fostering the entrenchment of the necessary legislation and public policies in Nigeria.

Keywords: African Tradition, Corruption, Culture, Development, Yorubaland.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Corruption has continued to be a serious factor stagnating the political, economic and social development of many African countries. Salisu (2000) argues that corruption brings about the misapplication of public resources to private ends at the expense of the generality of the people. To stem this tide, several policies, programmes and institutions have been put in place by the various African governments with the support, intervention and collaboration of civil society groups and international organisations to curb the malaise. Unfortunately, the more of such external interventions that are introduced, at the expense of local and indigenous initiatives, the incidence of corruption seems to remain on the alarming rate.

The traditional Yoruba anti-graft approach is highly organised and prevents the innocent from being unjustly sanctioned while offenders are severely punished without any fear or favour, hence, the need to

seek for viable alternatives or to come up with better options that would promote traditional values and good governance (Odejobi, 2013). African societies had solid systems of justice administration before the coming of the Europeans but it considered to be less sophisticated than that of the colonialists. Unlike what is obtainable, under the Western model, justice was done and seen to have been done with less emphasis placed on technicalities (Olutoyin, 2014). The machineries for administering justice were extensive and multi-layered in pre-colonial societies, and there were many agents and agencies for enforcing the rule of law.

Towards this end, there were specific places where cases were heard and settled (Olutoyin, 2014). These included the market places, religious centres, family compounds and chiefs' domains. The trial procedure was versatile, informal and less cumbersome, unlike the English judicial system (Sokefun, 2001). The agents enforcing the traditional law in these courts believed in, relied on, resorted to and employed the influence of the supernatural forces, ancestors and ordeals of various types in the detection of crimes and criminals (Agbaje-Williams, 2005).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Several policies, programmes and institutions have been put in place by African governments with the support, intervention and collaboration of civil society groups and international organisations to curb corruption. Unfortunately, the more of such external interventions that are introduced, at the expense of local and indigenous initiatives, the incidence of corruption seems to remain on the alarming rate. The study seeks to examine whether there is something fundamentally wrong with the Western model of curbing corruption that makes it ineffective in Africa in order to bring about sustainable development with particular reference to Nigeria.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. examine the effects of corruption in Nigeria.
- ii. examine why the Western model appears ineffective in curbing corruption in Nigeria.
- iii. suggest better ways to curb corruption with the adoption of the African traditional approach in Nigeria.

1.4 Methodology

The study is qualitative. Primary and secondary sources of data were used while key stakeholders such as traditional rulers, chiefs, religious leaders, rural dwellers and local historians in Yorubaland, were interviewed in the six (6) Yoruba-speaking south-west states of Nigeria, namely; Ekiti, Lagos, Ondo, Ogun, Osun and Oyo, where the rich traditional African cultures, religions, beliefs and taboos still exist in the fight against corruption.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION/Framework

2.1 Corruption

Pre-colonial Africa was founded on strong ethical values packaged in spiritual terms in a bid to ensure justice, equity and development in the human society. Pre-colonial Africa was known for laying much emphasis on strong moral values (Okolo & Akpokighe, 2014). Corruption is a cancer that has eaten deeply into the fabric of the Nigerian polity. The general global perception about graft in Nigeria is that it is generally acknowledged that corrupt practices are endemic and systemic in both public and private sectors of Nigeria (Okolo & Akpokighe, 2014). Corruption involves the illegal, dishonest, or wicked behaviour, which is destructive, as it entails the conscious and well-planned act by a person or group of

persons to appropriate by unlawful means, the wealth of another person or group of persons and may even cover the act of turning power and authority to ready cash (Okolo & Akpokighe, 2014).

In understanding the nature of corruption, Konie (2003) has identified two types of corrupt practices, namely; vertical, official or bureaucratic corruption that involves managers and decision-makers and is common in less developed countries while the second type is horizontal corruption, which entails not only officials, but informed and laymen groups in the countries. Corruption is antithetical to the development of any nation. It reduces economic growth, enhances inequalities and reduces the government's capacity to respond to people's needs. It further distorts economic and social developments by engendering wrong choices and encouraging competition in bribery. Corruption leads to the creation of gap between the rich and the poor and deepens poverty by enriching a few at the expense of other innocent and fellow citizens. Under the vertical corrupt system, there is a concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny minority of the population such that resultantly income distribution becomes highly skewed (Okolo & Akpokighe, 2014).

In developing countries like Nigeria, vertical, official or bureaucratic corruption could take the form of bribery, smuggling, fraud, illegal payments, money laundering, drug trafficking, falsification of documents, false assets' declaration and tax evasion. Many reasons have been adduced as the probable causes for the prevalence of corruption in Nigeria. These range from non-conformity with religious tenets, imparted values and ideals that are alien to African culture and ethnicity (Okolo & Akpokighe, 2014). Other manifestations of corruption include examination malpractices, adulterated food or hazardous drugs, misappropriation and embezzlement of fund and using of proxy names to buy expensive property (Okolo & Akpokighe, 2014). The reality on ground in Nigeria now calls for a fiscal

philosophy that would vigorously tackle corruption, waste, inefficiency, poor governance and inequitable distribution of wealth (Kupoluyi, 2016).

Unfortunately, Nigeria is considered as one of the very few countries in the world where a man's source of wealth is of no concern to his/her neighbours, public or the government because wealthy people, who are known to be corrupt, are regularly courted and honoured by communities, religious bodies, social clubs and other private organisations (Nwaobi, 2004). The most annoying thing is that honest and dedicated public servants, who have not accumulated dirty wealth, do not appear to command much respect from the society. These attitudes serve to encourage a new breed of public servants who engage in corrupt practices (Okolo & Akpokighe, 2014). It is on this basis that Maduegbuna (2005) has noted that the benefits of corruption seem to be greater than the consequences of being caught and disciplined while the cost of corruption can be classified into political, economic, social and environmental. On the political front, corruption constitutes a major obstacle to democracy and the rule of law in a democratic system. Economically, corruption leads to the depletion of our national wealth and on the social level, the people have lost trusts in the political system in its institutions and leadership they have developed nonchalant attitude and general apathy towards public policy planning and implementation (Kupoluyi, 2012) and a weak civil society (Okolo & Akpokighe, 2014).

The fundamental challenge has been vertical, official or bureaucratic corruption, which is the diversion of public resource for private gains and how it has been undermining development administration. Corruption has remained a development issue in Africa and that is why the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) tend to promote high level of accountability and transparency in the public service (Jaiyesimi, 2016). Historically, there was remarkable difference in patterns of colonial

administration and practices in Africa, as colonialism was markedly different from the colonial experiences of the Americas, Europe, and Asia; and this produced administrative instruments that tend to create more problems (Ake, 1996).

Despite the emphasis on the study of development administration in post-independence Africa, there has been insufficient attention being paid to corruption and the incidence of development administration, or better still, there seems to be a gap on the institutional overhaul and transformation of Africa's public administration in line with the indigenous and developmental states (Amadi & Ekekwe, 2014). This suggests why Andrei and Vishny (1993) have concluded that corruption has the potential to undermine sustainable development in many ways, despite the huge oil wealth and abundant resources endowed to the continent (Amadi & Ekekwe, 2014). According to Igbuzor (2008), there are six questions that should test the seriousness of any anti-corruption crusade. They are: Is it systematic? Is it comprehensive? Is it consistent? Does it have focus? Is it well published? Does it carry people along? Regrettably, insufficient attention has been paid to corruption because the battle against it not really been on the political agenda in Nigeria since the 1950s, when relevant commissions were set up to investigate corruption in the Eastern Region (Foster-Sutton Commission of Inquiry) and Western Region (Coker Commission of Inquiry).

2.2 African Traditional Approach to Curbing Corruption

There are many ways to explaining the place of the African traditional approach to curbing corruption. For the purposes of this paper, it is pertinent to state that the Afrocentric view becomes relevant because it stresses the need the continent to adopt African solutions to African problems. The Afrocentric School argues that pre-colonial African leaders were responsible and responsive to their subjects and avoided corruption as much as possible unlike what is obtainable in the present day society. It maintains that

traditional African leaders in the pre-colonial period could hardly be said to be corrupt, because of the communal spirit that guided their operation (Igboin, 2016). Although, there were reported cases of kings and chiefs being suspended or sent to exile for ‘corrupt’ behaviour/practices, and of individuals punished for corrupt behaviour. The Afrocentric School holds the argument that pre-colonial Africa was not corrupt; and hence, a near perfect community. This school also believes strongly that contemporary Africa does not have to just borrow from the past, but may have to adopt wholly the pre-colonial African past as a response to the negative effects of colonialism. According to this school, Africans were guided by religious and moral rules of which the members of the community lived by such that the rules of the community ensured that everybody was his/her brother/ sister’s keeper (Igboin, 2015).

Ehiabhi (2015) argues that using a post-colonial definition of corruption to evaluate the activities of the pre-colonial era would mean that such action as the giving of fabulous gifts would mean corruption. He further posits that indigenous African religion played a critical role in ensuring that there was social sanity. Since the ancestors were believed to be very active in the administration of community life, the fear of repercussion for doing evil was strong enough to prevent occurrences of corrupt practices. Gyekye (2003) also talks about ‘embarrassing’ a gift offer, which in post-colonial reckoning could be regarded as bribery. He points out that if a gift was too much, the recipient could return it. There are a plethora of African proverbs that espouse that corruption of different kinds took place in pre-colonial Africa but pre-colonial societies had cases of corruption and also dealt with them in tandem with the existing regulations or laws while emblems were mounted conspicuously to constantly serve as deterrence to would-be corrupt people (Habib, 2010).

Gennaioli and Rainer (2005) also agree that the structure of African societies has largely helped in no mean way in curbing corruption considerably in the sense that the centralised pre-colonial political institutions of African ethnic groups reduced corruption and fostered the rule of law in colonial and post-colonial Africa. Taboos and superstitions were introduced as weapons in the implementation of the African traditional approach. They are powerful and are not contained in any written law but are preserved in the tradition of the people that believe in them (Odejobi, 2013). People learn them, practice them and teach others in the society (Odejobi, 2013). Similarly, Agboola and Mabawonku (1996) assert that taboos and superstitions were regarded as an integral part of traditional education and in Yoruba African societies; traditional education is supported and encouraged because of its contribution to the growth, renewal and development of the society (Oduyale, 1985; Idowu, 1962).

Taboos were seen as a moral ambience or moral codes intended to create harmony and the order of the existence of the universe (Magesa, 1997). In the traditional African society, especially in Yoruba society, taboos played significant and positive roles. They provided a set of rules serving as a moral guidance or a law in the community to ensure that peace and security were present in the community. According to Osei (2006) every moral system requires the existence of guiding principles, sources of motivation, and some grounds for objectivity (Odejobi, 2013). Yoruba traditional taboos have enhanced development in the society. It is also functional. It is not just a means of creating fear into the children but they have played important roles in the traditional African Yoruba society and also exercise great influence on the modern society as well.

In West Africa, the Asante confederation was a kingdom that thrived on strict rules and regulations. Established by seven clans close to the city of Kumasi, the Kingdom was held together by the symbolic Golden Stool of Asante-Hene. With strong cooperation from all groups the leadership of the Asante

kingdom was known to have carried out administrative practices that included promoting advancement by merit and the development of state enterprise through the building of roads and promoted agriculture, commerce, industry and education through self-help and self-reliance (ChikaforAfrica, 2012). Among the Yoruba of south-west Nigeria, the institution of *Oyo-mesi* the king making body, acted as a check against the abuse of power by the Alaafrican (the Oba) or the King of Oyo.

The Alaafrican was constrained to rule with caution and respect for his subjects. When he is proven to have engaged in acts that undermined the interests of his subjects, such as gross miscarriage of justice for personal gains, the *Oyo-mesi* would present him with ‘an empty calabash or parrot’s eggs as a sign that he must commit suicide’ since he could not be deposed, according to tradition (ChikaforAfrica, 2012). Pre-colonial Rwanda had a highly organised and centralised system of administration. Although described as autocratic, there were systems of checks and balances among those who ruled at the clan level. A kind of the land ownership, *Ubukonde* permeated pre-colonial Rwanda society that involves mutually-beneficial exchange of labour between the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa that is set on agreed principles (ChikaforAfrica, 2012).

Under customary law in the south-west, corruption is equally abhorred. ‘Customary law’ here refers to the body of legal rules that evolved from the customs of the indigenous communities of Nigeria and which are used to regulate human conduct, govern social relations and economic transactions (Beredugo, 2008). The Nigerian Evidence Act, 2011 defines customary law as a rule, which in a particular district has for long usage obtained the force of law while in the decided case of *Oyewumi v. Ogunesan* (1990) 3 NWLR (Part 137), p.187, per Obaseki JSC at p.207, the Supreme Court of Nigeria has defined customary law as the living law of the indigenous people of regulating their lives and transactions. It is organic in that it is not static; it controls the lives and transactions of the community and serves as the

mirror of the culture of the people (Olutoyin, 2014). Today, the Africa traditional approach can re-introduced into modern public administration to bridge the missing gap between how it has been used in the past to curb corruption and the present day, whereby the Western approach seems not adequate to stem the tide. Public policy innovation is not always the invention of something completely new, it is the combination of two existing practices or approaches that creates an interesting new way of looking at or doing things (GCPSE, 2015).

Africa's indigenous values and systems, even though, was discredited by the colonialists, many African nations do not seem to be better with the advent of colonial rule that brought with it, Western administrative practices inclusive of anti-graft strategies. The invasion of Africa has been describes as a bourgeois attempt by the Europeans to acquire political power, using the instrumentality of colonialism (Ekeh, 1965). It is time indigenous solutions to tackling corruption was explored. Rwanda has successfully done the latter through the *Gacaca*, *Abunzi*, *Umuganda*, *Umudugudu* and other indigenous systems (ChikaforAfrica, 2012). This can also work in other countries, including Nigeria, and the south-west, in particular without affecting people's individual religion (Islam, Christianity and traditional religion, among others). The prevalence of corruption in Africa today is a process of socialisation, which became evidently clear after colonisation (ChikaforAfrica, 2012).

2.3 Why Western Approach Has Failed in Curbing Corruption

Corruption seems to have continued unabated in many developing countries because of the erroneous and widespread feeling that facts cannot be discovered, or that if they can, they cannot be proved, or that if they can be proved, the proof cannot be published. All these notions seem dubious because there are nearly always sources of information (Leys, 1965). Other reasons can be adduced for why the anti-graft Western models have not been effective in fighting corruption in the African public service.

These reasons include inadequate financial resources to fight corruption, decadence in moral values, lack of political-will to enforce existing laws/policies and absence of anti-corruption reforms (Riley 1998; Robinson 1998; Kpundeh 1998, 2004; Johnston 2005; Amundsen, 2006 and UNDP, 2004). For instance, persons found to have engaged in corrupt practices are not severely punished to serve as deterrent to others. Realising this grave implication of this, *The Punch* editorial of May 31, 2017 stated that an attempt is being made to bring to justice, about 311 Nigerians that have allegedly been found to have corruptly enriched themselves.

According to the Attorney-General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, Abubakar Malami, government was planning to leverage on the Mutual Legal Assistance agreements it signed with six countries to get the wanted suspects back to Nigeria. The countries with the MLA agreement include the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the United States of America, Italy, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates (*The Punch*, 2017). Many of the culprits were said to have engaged in official corruption of petroleum products and subsidy scam of 2011 in which N1.7 million was stolen. Other culprits are found in connection with the Pension Reform Task Team, whereby N2.8 billion was illegally found in the bank accounts of its top officers. The Special Fraud Unit of the Nigeria Police Force had launched a manhunt for another three subsidy fraudsters, whose companies allegedly got permits to import petrol between 2010 and 2011. But they collected N6 billion without importing the product. Each of the three collected N2 billion with forged documents and allegedly fled the country (*The Punch*, 2017).

The Federal Government had claimed that \$150 billion was siphoned in the 10 years to 2015 and that much of this is stashed away in banks in Europe, the US, Island of Jersey and Liechtenstein, among other places. At the 70th General Assembly of the United Nations, Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari had called global community to urgently redouble efforts towards strengthening the mechanisms for

dismantling safe havens for proceeds of corruption and ensuring the return of stolen funds and assets to their countries of origin, although, Switzerland is said to be co-operative by returning \$700 million of looted funds to Nigeria (*The Punch*, 2017). Despite these efforts, not much result has been achieved in curbing corruption in Nigeria.

3.0 AFRICAN TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO CURBING CORRUPTION: A REVIEW

The study has covered the major traditional institutions in all the six (6) South western states in Nigeria, where adherents of the following gods, traditional taboos, superstitions and cultures were interviewed, using the sets of questions listed in the Appendix to this paper: Ogun, Sango, Agemo, Aiyelala, Egungun, Obatala, Oro, Obaluaye and Osun Oshogbo. Majority of the respondents worshipped Ogun, Sango and Ifa. Some respondents go to the church because it was their family religion and a common practice nowadays; very few practiced Christianity and the Islamic religion because they grew up to see their family members going to the church or mosque. The respondents believed that Ogun, Ifa, Egungun Ina, Sango, Aiyelala were the most worshipped gods. The most dreaded deities/gods were Sango, Ogun, Osanyin Aiyelala and Osun Oshogbo.

Among the Yorubas, a tribe in South-West Nigeria, the word; ‘Ofin’, ‘ase’ or ‘ilana’ means law UP (2008) and there is a popular saying that ‘Ilu ti ko si ofin, ese ko si ni ibe’ translated ‘in a community that has no law, there is no sin’ (Olutoyin, 2014). The process used to determine whether an accused person is guilty or not is similar to all and is through direct consultation with the deities/gods before exoneration or passing of judgment, after exhaustive investigation. The steps involved are:

1. An allegation is raised.
2. Worshippers of the deities/gods are consulted.

3. Investigations are carried out to ensure that an innocent person is not punished while sanctions are pronounced by the priest on the guilty persons.
4. An opportunity for appeal is opened to aggrieved party.
5. Severe punishment or acquittal is given.

Respondents revealed further that the presence of traditional rulers in the community, adherents or witnesses are necessary, to give the necessary credibility and openness. Respondents believe that biased judgment by the traditionalists could be avoided by consulting the oracle; performing necessary ritual by the priest and ensuring that due process was followed by the priest because the gods are never known to be biased as suggested by Amadi and Ekekwe (2014). The punishment an offender gets from the deities/gods are inexhaustible but may include public disgrace, public ridicule, sickness, banishment from the community, beheading, accident, stoning to death, swollen tummy, being struck by thunderstorm and even sudden death by constantly serving as deterrence to would-be corrupt people (Habib, 2010).

Unlike the Western model that makes it possible for the rich to evade justice through the instrumentality of litigation, it is not possible for an offender to evade judgment, if he/she is truly involved in the crime, even if he/she runs away from the community because the gods will still punish the culprit because of the powerful and supernatural powers moral system that is still based on the existence of guiding principles and some grounds for objectivity (Odejobi, 2013). Many of the respondents also believe that the Western approach to curbing corruption is still useful because it is flexible and allows the offender to repent unlike the traditional approach that is a bit rigid. Details of the *modus operandi* of the workings of the deities/gods, in line with ascertaining accountability and transparency in governance, calls for further research, to ascertain whether due process was followed or not, to what extent, and how truly

sustainable is the Yoruba traditional approach? Respondents further said that the advantage the traditional approach has over the Western model is that it does not compromise, gives instant judgment, it is quick and strict.

It also creates fear in the people as there is no delay in judgment because the spirit of the deity cannot be brain-washed. It also helps in sanitising the society of corrupt practices. The respondents further agree that the limitation of the traditional approach in curbing corruption is that it does not give room for repentance and opportunity to correct errors by the culprit. They also say when the gods are angry; the innocent in the community may still be affected. All those interviewed concurred that African traditional approach should be embraced and legislated upon in Nigeria to stem the tide of corrupt practices in the country by serving as the moral ambience or moral codes intended to create harmony and the order of the existence of the universe (Magesa, 1997).

Other suggestions, flowing from the usefulness of the traditional approach in Nigeria, have canvassed for the creation of jobs for many unemployed youths, increase in the minimum wage paid to workers, prompt and timely payment of monthly salaries, reduction of gap between the rich and the poor, swearing in political office holders using the deities. Others are reduction in rural-urban drift, strict observance of the existing laws and statutes, death penalty for corrupt persons, reduction in salaries and allowances of political office holders, embracing the culture of selfless service, promotion of transparency and accountability by government at all levels, curbing of financial inducement during elections and money politics, provision of basic amenities as well as taking care of the citizens by the government by promoting high level of accountability and transparency in the public service (Jaiyesimi, 2016).

Findings further showed that government and traditional institutions are not collaborating enough in the fight against corruption. The necessary legislation are not put in place by the various governments, most especially, at the state and local government levels to formalise the adoption of traditional African approach to deliberately curb corruption while the various governments do not seem to promote the practice of indigenous African traditions. Furthermore, educational curricula are not developed to take adequately imbibe moral teachings while not much effort is put into preventing corruption from taking place (Igboin, 2015).

4.0 CONCLUSION

The traditional anti-graft approach is highly organised and prevents the innocent from being unjustly sanctioned while offenders are identified, tried and severely punished without any fear or favour. The study has shown that the careful adoption of the traditional African approach is sustainable in the curbing corruption by fostering the entrenchment of the necessary legislation and public policies in African states, that will invariably bring about good governance in terms of sustainable economic growth, educational empowerment, enhanced living standards, employment, financial stability and by becoming a major player on the global scene.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends as follows:

- i. Government and traditional institutions should collaborate in the fight against corruption.
- ii. Enabling legislation should be put in place by the various governments, most especially, at the state and local government levels to formalise the adoption of traditional African approach to curbing corruption.

- iii. Government should ensure that the practice of indigenous African traditions is enhanced through its inculcation into educational curricula in schools and colleges in Nigeria.
- iv. Government and non-governmental organisations should fund research into how the traditional African approach can be made to further curb corruption without necessarily jettisoning the conventional approach.
- v. Deliberate efforts should be channeled into preventing corruption rather than relying on punitive measures that may not be effective.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

African Traditional Approach: Sustainable Option to Curbing Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption has been described as a major problem militating against the political, economic and social development of many Sub-Saharan African countries. To stem this tide, several policies, programmes and institutions have been put in place by the various African governments with the support, intervention and collaboration of civil society groups and international organisations to curb the malaise. Unfortunately, the more of such external interventions that are introduced, at the expense of local and indigenous initiatives, the incidence of corruption seems to remain on the alarming rate. Is there something fundamentally wrong with the Western model of curbing corruption that makes it ineffective in Africa? What better alternatives can be explored? The main objective of the study is to clamour for a revisit and the rejuvenation of the African traditional approach to curbing corruption.

Please, answer the questions below, as promptly as possible. All information gathered will be used purely for research purposes and be treated with utmost confidentiality.

Thank you.

1. What is the major traditional institution (s) in your domain or state?
2. Which god is mostly worshipped?
3. Which god is mostly dreaded?
4. Which god do you worship and why?
5. Do you go to the church or mosque? If yes, please state the reason(s).
6. Do you believe using god's punishment to curb corruption is the best way out in our society?
7. Who gives or pronounces judgment on the offender?
8. How do you avoid biased judgment by the traditionalists while taking

decisions on corrupt practices?

9. Can you list the nature or punishment an offender gets from the gods?
10. Is it possible for an offender to evade judgment?
11. Why do you think the Western approach to curbing corruption is still useful or not?
12. What do you think is the advantage of the traditional approach over the Western model?
13. What are the limitations of the traditional approach in curbing corruption?
14. Do you suggest that African traditional approach to ending corruption should be legislated upon in Nigeria?
15. Kindly give other suggestions that could assist in curbing corruption in Nigeria.