Published in final edited form as:

Anthropol Now. 2011 December ; 3(3): 1–9. doi:10.5816/anthropologynow.3.3.0001.

Benefiting from AIDS in Contemporary Nigeria

Daniel J. Smith

Department of Anthropology and Population Studies and Training Center, Brown University,
Providence, RI, USA, 02912

Introduction

The Nigerian weekly news magazine *Tell* ran a cover story in July 2004 reporting on the country's lucrative AIDS industry, entitled "Feeding Fat on AIDS." The article connected one of the Nigeria's biggest health problems with one of its most significant—and certainly its most notorious—political problems: corruption. The central link between AIDS and corruption identified in the story was the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Since the 1990s, I have frequently heard a joke told by Nigerians claiming that for recent graduates of secondary school and university, one of the only viable options for surviving in the country's troubled economic circumstances was to start an NGO. The joke served as a critique of NGOs and corruption, but also as a cynical acknowledgement that, for the most part, only those who participate in corruption do well in Nigerian society. The fact that NGO efforts to address AIDS were now tainted with accusations of widespread corruption only further solidified the popular perception that Nigeria faces an alarming social and moral crisis.

But much as Nigerians are angry about corruption and suspicious of the motives and operations of local NGOs and the international donors and federal and state government institutions that fund them, practices of corruption unfold in a complicated social context where people often participate in the very activities they condemn. Further, while denunciation of corruption in the abstract is almost universal among ordinary Nigerians, the dynamics that produce corruption, the behaviors that are labeled as corrupt, and the processes that determine who gets branded negatively for their corruption are embedded in complex social webs and intersecting moral economies. The realities that underlie corruption make simplistic judgments superficial and easy explanations inadequate. In this article, I use an example of one Nigerian AIDS NGO and its regional director to illustrate local practices of corruption and the kinds of circumstances that produce (relative) acceptance or ridicule. An analysis of this case reveals not only why so many Nigerian AIDS NGOs have become embroiled in accusations of corruption, but also how we can better understand local responses to corruption that, paradoxically, both push against corruption and allow it to flourish. I focus on an AIDS NGO, not because corruption is peculiar to organizations that aim—or purport—to address the epidemic, but because these NGOs are so common in the wake of the many hundreds of millions of dollars spent to

combat the disease, and because corruption in an endeavor ostensibly geared toward alleviating suffering and death makes the contradictions all the more poignant.

Understanding Corruption in Nigeria

Nigeria has a widespread reputation for corruption. In 2000, it appeared at the top of Transparency International's list of the most corrupt countries, and it continues to be regarded as a bastion of fraud, graft, and deceit. In the language of cause and effect, corruption is often portrayed as an independent variable inhibiting the desired and supposedly dependent outcomes of democracy and development, including improving health outcomes. The view that corruption is a problem in and of itself is prevalent and powerful. Despite this widespread perception, scholars have long recognised that corruption is as much a product of political and economic problems as it is their cause. While corruption is typically studied from the top down with a focus on the state, the emphasis on corruption as emanating from the state outward misses the complex ways in which corruption is woven into the fabric of everyday life in much of Nigerian society. Looking ethnographically at corruption in the AIDS NGO sector illustrates how it is part and parcel of both the maintenance of social inequality and the struggles to respond to it.

As I have suggested, a central question in the study of corruption in Nigeria, including in the local AIDS NGO sector, is how ordinary citizens can be, paradoxically, active participants in the social reproduction of corruption, even as they are also its primary victims and its principal critics. Understanding Nigerians' seemingly contradictory positions requires situating corruption in its political, social-relational, and moral contexts. For Nigerians, corruption can be, on the one hand, a survival strategy and a moral imperative, and, on the other hand, a political ruse to be condemned for its deception and venality. The contradictions of corruption mirror and explain Nigerians' growing expectations of and frustrated aspirations for democracy and development, a tension that manifests itself in popular perceptions of NGOs working to address the AIDS epidemic.

Numerous scholars have offered analyses that contribute to explaining why ordinary Nigerians participate in corruption that can be inimical to their own interests. For example, in his book *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria*, political scientist Richard Joseph emphasises the importance of various kinds of vertically organised 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" (1987: 54). In their book *Africa Works*, Chabal and Daloz capture concisely the significance of such solidarity networks by citing what they label as an African proverb: "whoever does not rob the state robs his kith and kin" (1999: 107, footnote 14). 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.

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 utilised Marcel Mauss's early work on gift exchange to explain how interactions that look like corruption to outside observers frequently serve important social and symbolic functions in local contexts. Other anthropologists have emphasised 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.

In a seminal article in the 1970s, Peter Ekeh examined corruption in Africa in terms of "two publics," one moral and rooted in ties to kin-group and community of origin, and the other amoral, a legacy of institutions imposed under colonialism. While Ekeh's notion of two publics is analytically useful, in practice in contemporary Nigeria the two publics overlap and interpenetrate (and I would go further and suggest that the domains of public and private intertwine as well). The realms of kinship and the state (and kinship and civil society) are mutually implicated in a political economy that is organised around patron-clientism, in which people rely on kin, on people of the same community of origin, and on other hierarchically organised social ties of affection and obligation for opportunities and assistance. To understand the motives that underlie "corrupt behaviour," it is essential to remember the extent to which self-interest in Nigerian society (and in other African contexts) is intertwined with group interests and group identity. Rather than attributing these complex interconnections to some sort of primordial culture, and therefore assuming that processes of modernisation will weaken such ties, evidence from Nigeria suggests that the salience of kinship's reciprocal obligations may be growing at the same time as Nigerians negotiate processes of development, rural-urban migration, and democratisation within a context of pronounced political and economic instability. In such an environment, ordinary people perceive participation in corrupt activities as necessary to achieve their moral, political, and economic objectives, even as they simultaneously recognise corruption's detrimental effects.

Nigeria's social context is central to explaining when and why Nigerians participate in corruption, but also to understanding circumstances where corruption seems relatively acceptable, and circumstances that produce the popular discontent that fuels many salient contemporary social phenomena. Over the past few decades, new forms of corruption have emerged that Nigerians widely view as illegitimate. This illegitimacy is most pronounced where Nigerians feel deceived by the postcolonial state's failure 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 bureaucratic and kinship-based clientelism to maximise their wealth and power, the legitimacy of both idioms is undermined.

A patron-client system has long served as a buffer against the state's capriciousness by providing access to resources through familiar (and familial) mechanisms of reciprocity. This system is widely understood by ordinary Nigerians to have given way to a much more individualistic pursuit of wealth and power. The use of deceptive mechanisms for corruption has diffused throughout society, creating a popular sense of crisis, wherein Nigerians see the

repercussions of corruption in everyday life as at once caused by and contributing to the demise of morality. However, the perception that corruption is rooted in social amorality obscures the political and economic underpinnings of inequality, whilst paradoxically creating hope. At the same time as Nigerians see themselves as complicit in corruption, they also view themselves as the ultimate agents of change. This is why, in Nigeria, local NGOs are viewed as beacons of hope and change and yet also bastions of corruption perpetuating the inequality of the status quo. This popular view is, in many senses, right on both accounts.

Corruption as Greed versus Corruption as Patronage

In the mid-1990s, Pius Okadigbo (a pseudonym) got a job working for a U.S.-based non-governmental organization that ran a number of public health projects in Nigeria's southeastern Abia State. He graduated from university with qualifications that appeared to serve him and the NGO well. A friend of mine, who was the Nigerian manager for the American NGO's projects in southeastern Nigeria, spoke highly of Pius's work after he was hired. Based at the NGO's Umuahia office, Pius worked as a program officer, meaning that he ran training programs, supervised field staff, collected and analyzed project data, and helped draft reports for the NGO headquarters and for donors. In his years working for the NGO, Pius learned a wide range of skills relevant for running such an organization.

After several years with the American organization, Pius eventually left to run the office of a large Nigerian NGO. The local organization, United against AIDS (UAA—a pseudonym), for which Pius directed the Umuahia office, was one of the most prominent domestic NGOs created to address the country's HIV epidemic. UAA had its headquarters in Ibadan in southwestern Nigeria, where it was supported by major grants from Western governments and multilateral donors. Nearly all of the big NGOs fighting AIDS, which command many millions of dollars of international aid, are based in Nigeria's Southwest (and now, increasingly, in Abuja, the capital). Many of these mega-NGOs have regional offices around the country, like UAA's office in Umuahia.

I saw Pius several times in the years while he ran the Umuahia office of UAA. He was always gregarious and polite. One day I ran into him during lunch at a restaurant in town and he insisted that I accompany him back to his office. When we entered the reception area his two staff members quickly stood up and greeted him in English, "Welcome, Sir!" One of the young ladies then opened the door for us to enter Pius's office (which had "Director's Office" boldly displayed on a black and gold signboard). The office had all the accoutrements that I had long since become used to seeing in the offices of "big men" (and big women) in government and NGOs: a chilly air conditioner, a computer and a printer, a phone (though cell phones have recently almost entirely displaced landlines), and a private refrigerator stocked with cold drinks. But in Pius's office the furniture was more expensive than is typical, the refrigerator was bigger than usual, the computer seemed to be the latest laptop, the printer was a laser rather than inkjet, and Pius made a point of showing me that he had internet service (at that time widely available in internet cafes, but uncommon in private offices). Pius Okadigbo clearly enjoyed his success.

As I soon learned through conversations with personnel at other NGOs in Umuahia, Pius's colleagues resented the way Pius flaunted his new wealth and position. They called Pius a "poser," a term used for people who pretend to be what they are not, but usually reserved in Nigeria especially for people whose conspicuous consumption and boastful personalities would have people believe they are more important than they really are. Pius had indeed made a lot of money from his job running UAA's Umuahia office, most of it rumored to be misappropriated (his salary was good, but not nearly enough to explain the car he purchased, the house he was building in his village, or the chieftancy titles he bought for himself). The dishonor of being perceived as a poser was not so much about the fact that Pius allegedly stole money from his AIDS NGO (though some people, of course, lamented that too); it was much more about how he abused his new wealth and status to intimidate others. He was seen as an inauthentic big man, not because of the source of his money, but because of the way he used it. Instead of sharing some of his money to cultivate social ties and build a network of followers, in a manner of good patronage that has a long and embedded history in Nigeria's clientelistic political economy, Pius was seen as aggrandizing himself at the expense of others.

Unusually for Nigeria, Pius's theft of project money was publicly exposed and he was eventually fired. UAA initiated criminal prosecution, though I later I heard that the case was stalled in court. Most people suggested that Pius would never actually be convicted. But he was thoroughly disgraced and seemed to have little hope of rehabilitating his reputation and career, at least in the NGO sector. Several friends of mine working at other NGOs speculated that Pius had been done in by his own staff—that the office accountant or others who knew of his corrupt dealings had quietly made sure that the UAA office in Ibadan discovered his malfeasance. They betrayed him, these stories suggested, not because he was stealing money, but because he was so arrogant and selfish in his dealings with others, most especially his own staff. Pius's status as a poser was an index for his greedy and individualistic behavior. Not coincidentally, these are the same traits that are seen as contributing to the larger social and moral crisis to which Nigerians attribute HIV and AIDS. In Nigeria, as in many places, HIV infection is commonly explained as resulting from selfish and immoral behavior, a view that is linked less to real data about the risks of AIDS than to the way that people connect economic, political, and social problems to individual and collective moral failures. Much has been written about how these moralistic views of AIDS perpetuate stigma and interfere with effective prevention. Less has been said about how these ideas represent and reveal people's larger anxieties about social change. Like the AIDS epidemic itself, NGOs such as UAA sit at the center of these troubling trajectories of transformation. AIDS NGOs are institutions created, in part, to help manage the consequences of social change, but they are also implicated in aspects of change about which Nigerians are extremely ambivalent.

Conclusion

The fact that AIDS NGOs in Nigeria are often mechanisms for corruption and the reproduction of inequality is not all that surprising, and this is phenomenon certainly not confined only to Nigeria. But perhaps more interesting is how these NGOs provoke the popular political imagination. Stories that circulate about "feeding fat on AIDS" speak to

ordinary Nigerians' awareness that the dynamics of domestic disparity are tied to the larger global system of inequality. People are certainly aware of these connections when it comes to the oil industry, the country's largest source of revenue, but they are also well aware of the importance of access to donor dollars as the lynchpin for success in the arena of health and other development-related enterprises. It is commonly believed that most of the money in NGO work comes from abroad, and that those who get rich in this "business" are those with the best connections to foreign funds. Interestingly, many ordinary Nigerians believe that their compatriots who profit from AIDS and other development NGOs dupe their foreign backers. They think that outsiders would be likely to use aid money more honestly than their fellow citizens. While I am less charitable than most Nigerians in my assessment of the motives of U.S. and European foreign aid in Africa, Nigerians' generally positive perception of the motives of foreign aid presents donors with an opportunity to do better and improve reputations that, arguably, should be much more tarnished than they are.

The stories about NGOs feeding fat on AIDS point to Nigerians' ambivalence about a moral—and a material—economy in which practices of patronage undermine and outweigh competing rules based on bureaucratic accountability. On the one hand, the stories and widely expressed discontents about NGO corruption suggest that Nigerians are fed up with politics and economics of patronage. On the other hand, the distinction between Pius and senior personnel at many Nigerian NGOs whose similarly "corrupt" practices were tolerated—and even accepted—indicates that there are still many moral pressures and social rewards for using stewardship of an NGO to build one's career as a patron. Pius was condemned not so much because he benefitted financially from his position at UAA, but because of the way he mishandled himself in his relationship with his staff, his peers, and his various publics. He was seen a greedy and self-aggrandizing, whereas many of his peers were seen, by and large, as good patrons and moral persons. Nevertheless, numerous NGOs and their personnel were also the subject of rumors and defamatory gossip, suggesting that even the position of a good patron is becoming suspect in Nigeria's changing political economy.

Nigerian AIDS NGOs—and NGOs more generally—are more than just objects of discontent in popular discourse. They sit at the nexus of significant processes of social and political change. They are caught up in the social reproduction of inequality—examples of how local elites navigate the flow of global aid dollars and the politics of patronage to perpetuate inequality. Nevertheless, the very fact that many NGOs are popularly acknowledged as illegitimate, while even those that are more legitimate are the subjects of critical rumors, suggests that inequality sits uncomfortably with collective morality. This is the case whether the moral economy is grounded in patron-clientism, a more bureaucratic neoliberal order, or some mix of the two. AIDS NGOs are both bellwethers of and active participants in these changing dynamics, where corruption, inequality, and morality are central to people's experiences of AIDS and of contemporary social life more generally.

Suggestions for further reading

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