

A moral economy of corruption in Africa?

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ABSTRACT

As far as corruption in Africa is both conspicuous and generalised, it has to be studied from the viewpoint of the participants. This article starts with six general theses on corruption in Africa, which place it within a broader ‘corruption complex’, and emphasise its routine nature, the stigmatisation of corruption despite the absence of effective sanctions, its apparent irreversibility, the absence of correlation with regime types and its legitimacy to its perpetrators. Corruption is then shown to be socially embedded in ‘logics’ of negotiation, gift-giving, solidarity, predatory authority and redistributive accumulation. Any anti-corruption policy must face up to these realities.

INTRODUCTION

The rampant corruption affecting the totality of African countries has scarcely become a bona fide object in the sociological or anthropological study of Africa, in which corruption is barely mentioned except in the course of studies dealing with other themes, usually African political systems.¹ The types of corruption in West Africa, characterised by their conspicuousness and their generality, and which obviously bear some resemblance to the Asiatic and Latino-American types, deserve particular attention because of the specific nature of contemporary African states, and the depth of the crisis which affects them.² Besides, international organisations, investors and public opinion are often reminded of the scope of this problem, which is currently considered to be fundamental to ‘good governance’. Unfortunately, beyond declarations of principle, pathetic or exasperated acknowledgements and moralistic condemnations, the social mechanisms of corruption are scarcely explored, nor are its processes of legitimation *seen from the actors’ point of view*. This is why this article uses the term: *moral economy*, which may appear surprising when attached to a term as unanimously stigmatised as amoral or immoral. The intention here is to insist on as subtle as possible a restitution of the value systems and cultural codes,

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which permit a justification of corruption by those who practice it (and who do not necessarily consider it to be such – quite the contrary), and to anchor corruption in ordinary everyday practice.

However, the use of the expression ‘moral economy’, which makes an obvious reference to a certain intellectual tradition (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976), does not imply any intention to adopt a ‘culturalist’ point of view. Although reference is made to the *cultural embeddedness* of corruption, this is not done in the name of any monolithic or determinist theory of culture. Our intention is rather to pinpoint certain *social norms* widely represented in modern Africa, which ‘communicate’ with or influence the practices of corruption. It is, in a manner of speaking, a question of ‘slants’ which leave a certain room for manoeuvre to the actors who operate within or around certain ‘logics’, often combining them, sometimes dissociating or refuting them. These logics seem to have a ‘family resemblance’, a certain relation of affinity with ‘corruption’-type practices, but are not in themselves corruption. Their role is simply to provide a better understanding of the reasons why corruption finds, in contemporary Africa, such a favourable ground for its extension and generalisation, in short for its banalisation.³

Needless to say, this moral economy is ‘post-colonial’ (see Mbembe 1992) and fundamentally syncretic. It in no way reflects on ‘traditional’ or pre-colonial culture, even though ancient cultural elements, transformed and recombined, are undeniably amalgamated with numerous elements inherited from the colonial period, as well as others produced during the independence era. The process of state-apparatus building during the twentieth century, a process that is far from being achieved (see Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk 1998), is obviously fundamental not only for the production of corruption itself, but also for the production of a cultural embeddedness of corruption.

Before entering into these diverse logics in which corruption appears to be embedded, some extended preliminary remarks will be made in the guise of six general theses on corruption in Africa.

SIX THESES ON CORRUPTION IN AFRICA

Thesis 1: The moral economy of corruption in Africa does not merely concern corruption in the strict sense of the word, but rather the ‘corruption complex’ in a wider sense, which covers a number of illicit practices, technically distinct from corruption, all of which none the less have in common with corruption their association with state, parastatal or bureaucratic functions, and also

contradict the official ethics of 'public property' or 'public service', and likewise offer the possibility of illegal enrichment, and the use and abuse to this end of positions of authority.

It is necessary, of course, to make an analytical distinction between the various components of this vast complex of corruption, so as to avoid confusion between the bribe given to a civil servant in return for some favour, the abusive use of public funds to a personal end, or simple dipping into the public purse. This is why jurists make careful distinctions between these various forms, rightly so since they correspond to what one may call different 'techniques'. From the legal point of view, corruption (in the strict sense of the word) is for example neither embezzlement nor abuse of public property. Sociologists and political scientists, on the other hand, have attempted to reveal what these various 'techniques', generally resorted to by the same individuals in pursuit of identical objectives, have in common, thus enlarging the notion of 'corruption'. This is the case of Nye's now classical definition (1967: 419): 'behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence'.⁴ This definition has in turn been criticised as being too narrow and excessively concerned with the illegality of such practices, defined from a modern, Western point of view (these practices can be perfectly legal in other historical and social contexts, such as modern Saudi Arabia). Nevertheless, the illicit character of these diverse practices, from a juridical point of view, must apparently remain an unavoidable element of this definition, seeing that the law of African countries is in this respect directly copied from current French and English law. In reality the core of the sociological problem of corruption is to be situated in the distance between juridical condemnation of certain practices and their frequency, their banalisation or indeed their cultural legitimacy.

From this perspective, the notion of corruption may be broadened into what may be termed a 'corruption complex', in other words beyond corruption in the strict sense of the word, to include nepotism, abuse of power, embezzlement and various forms of misappropriation, influence-peddling, prevarication, insider trading and abuse of the public purse, in order to consider what these various practices have in common, what affinities link them together, and to what extent they enter into the same fabric of customary social norms and attitudes. Besides, they are often considered by the populations as belonging to the same behavioural category: the term 'bouffer' is thus of current use

in French-speaking Africa in reference to all illegal modes of enrichment through positions of authority (cf. the equivalent ‘to chop’ in pidgin English). Numerous other variations exist on the basis of this common metaphor. In songhay-zarma, a venal civil servant is said to have ‘his mouth wide open’ (*a miiyo ga hay*), while the expression ‘to grease the paw’ becomes ‘to grease the mouth’, as after a good meal (*miiyo fisendi*).⁵ Stuffing (‘bouffer’) corresponds emically to the whole range of practices falling within the corruption complex. A customs officer ‘stuffs’ and so does a minister. The way in which each manages to ‘sort himself out’ is of little importance in this context: bribes or direct misappropriation in one case, private use of special funds or influence-peddling in another.⁶

Thus all references to ‘corruption’ in this study, except where otherwise specified, cover the whole ‘corruption complex’, including similar practices technically different from those already mentioned above.

Thesis 2: Corruption (that is to say the ‘corruption complex’) has become, in almost all African countries, a common and routine element of the functioning of the administrative and para-administrative apparatus, from top to bottom. This being the case, corruption is neither marginal nor sectoralised or repressed, but is generalised and banalised.

For clear analysis it appears necessary to make a distinction between the various spaces in which corruption comes into play, the different types of social actor and the financial sums involved. Big-time corruption, the type practised at the summit of the state (presidents, ministers, directors of important offices, directors of public or parastatal enterprises), involving millions or even billions of CFA francs, has nothing in common, in terms of scale, social space and type of protagonist, with the ‘petty corruption’ of policemen, clerks, nurses or customs officers. The latter is extremely familiar to ordinary mortals, who come into contact with it, exploit it or become its victims, on an everyday basis. Everyone in Africa has routine experience in dealing with corruption (and the like), this being a part of the social landscape. It has even become a part of popular know-how, at the base of good usage of administrative services, and is indispensable for survival in the post-colonial milieu. However, this bottom rung corruption is doubtless of secondary economic importance compared to corruption at the top. The latter constitutes the ground for the type of analysis which associates corruption with neo-patrimonialism – the draining off of public resources by a ‘state elite’ or a ‘political aristocracy’ (see Harsch 1993). Although its results are quite visible (the vertiginous increase in

the wealth of high civil servants and officers of state), by contrast with 'petty corruption' it possesses hidden mechanisms, being practised between high officials according to procedures that are impervious to the non-initiated. For all that, it is none the less notorious, as indicated by recurrent rumours on this topic in the newspapers as well as in private conversations, in town and country. The difference in nature and scale between petty corruption and major corruption should not however prevent us from considering them at the same time as being two poles of a continuum, nor from trying to discover the possible existence of common factors that favour or legitimise both.

Thesis 3: The stigmatisation of corruption, as well as recriminations against it, are a central element of all discourses, public or private, at all levels of society, and have punctuated all the political phases since independence. Corruption is therefore as frequently denounced in words as it is practised in fact. But the verbal stigmatisation of corruption rarely leads to legal proceedings or sanctions. If there is officially a 'public domain', there is almost no 'practical ethic of the public service'.

The transition from the one-party state to military regimes at the end of the sixties and seventies was made in the name of the fight against corruption, widely mobilised as a means of legitimising military coups.⁷ The passage from military to democratic regimes at the end of the eighties was also made in the name of the fight against corruption, which was a central theme of the national conferences. Finally, at the present time, disappointment with democratic regimes, which has sometimes opened the way to the men and means of the past, thrives on generalised accusations of corruption brought against democratically elected politicians.

At the everyday level, there is scarcely a conversation without hostile or disgusted references to corruption, either the petty type of which one claims to have been a victim, or the upper crust type about which one has rumours to spread. This widespread stigmatisation of corruption, public as well as private, must be taken seriously, and not just brushed off as mere superficial rhetoric. The complex of corruption is almost unanimously experienced as an evil, or even as a calamity. Many current problems of African societies are attributed to it, by just about everyone, in a way that is not evidently insincere (see Bayart 1992: 70).

This stigmatisation is not limited to the educated or to intellectuals, whom one may suppose to have appropriated Western norms of public interest, but also exists in the popular, non-educated milieu, among those who are fed up with being swindled by politicians and bureaucrats, or disgusted at rumours of illegal enrichment by the elite.

It is true that such stigmatisation is often fatalistic, and just as true that it has nothing to say about effective personal practice: it is none the less real and widespread.

The contrast between this generalised discourse on the illegality of corruption, and the almost overwhelming impunity enjoyed by those given over to these practices, is particularly striking. There is rarely any evidence of trials of the guilty, or of consistent and effective legal or political campaigns against the corruption complex.⁸ The flagrant lack of prosecution is evident at all levels, and applies as much to 'big-time corruption' as to 'petty corruption'. First of all, let us look at the latter level, by taking into account a 'public space', which is not in itself a part of the state, but which integrates the category which has above been termed 'parastatal', in the broad sense of the word. Take, for instance, community funds at the village level. Generally instituted under direct or indirect pressure from development institutions, or in the hope of obtaining help from them, and concerning different areas (cooperatives, community cereal stores, peasant groups, village pharmacies, small land-holdings, etc.) these community funds give rise at one moment or another to accusations of misappropriation: for example, such and such an overseer, treasurer or president has 'gobbled up' the money from the cashbox. Obviously, without police investigation (which never occurs, as there is never any complaint), there is no proof that these accusations are justified. We are in a realm of rumours and suspicion (see Blundo 1996). However, field research often proves the embezzlement to be real. But the culprit is rarely prosecuted. In general, he is simply relieved of his functions. There is impunity. This is not because of lack of interest or absence of moral condemnation, quite the contrary. Although the affair is concealed from strangers (especially if they happen to be potential donors), it is a source of anger, rancour and distrust at the local level. However, in a 'face to face' society, the price of open conflicts is too high. It is unthinkable to denounce to the police a relative, a neighbour, the relative of a friend, that is, someone with whom one has a personal tie, even a weak one: social disapproval would be too heavy.

The impunity enjoyed by important individuals is clearly on another scale, and belongs to another order. Most, if not all, have compromised themselves and are best advised not to denounce their own personal practices when encountered elsewhere. In the eventuality of an embezzlement hunt in high places, the majority of African politicians would stand to face trial.⁹ But is the network of solidarity within this small techno-political and political world so far removed from village

solidarity? Both social universes are torn apart by antagonisms, jealousy and quarrels. Both, however, protect themselves from external interference and hinder justice. Neither has internalised any shared conception of public domain in its daily practices.

The scarcity of an 'ethic of the public service' within African civil services (not in words, but in practice) has often been pointed out. The youthfulness of these states and of their apparatus, as well as the traumatising experience of colonialism, are to some degree responsible. The lack of enthusiasm manifested by the political elites of all types, which have succeeded each other since independence, for the promotion of such an ethic, illustrated by their own example, bears a part – a great part – of the responsibility. Another factor, neither of greater nor lesser importance, which comes under this moral economy shared by African societies, is the general lack of a tradition of the 'public domain'.

Once again let us take a look at village space. In numerous regions of Africa, despite appearances, there is no village property, or any equivalent of the former 'communal holdings' of rural European societies. If such holdings do have 'proprietors' or 'masters', who act in the interests of a 'group', these 'groups' are usually private ones, so to speak, claiming their rights against other groups of the same village, by asserting their own supremacy: the lineage of the descendants of the first settlers, or the founders of the well, or the first conquerors, or the last conquerors, or the first chiefs of the colonial administration, or the last chiefs of the independence administration, and so forth. Village infrastructures are not usually 'communal' or public, even if their usage happens to be public (and though there are strong moral constraints governing their accessibility). They either depend on the representative of an eminent local group, a more or less customary authority, or belong to the state, that is to the outside world, and therefore to nobody. The difficulty that NGOs and Northern aid agencies have in the execution of their community programmes bears witness to this frequent absence of public property on the village level. Most African villages are conglomerates of specific sub-communities (families, peer groups, ritual societies, etc.), often existing in a climate of rivalry and antagonism, with no culture of 'general interest', partly because the village chiefs supposed to promote or represent this general interest were put in place by colonialism or were colonial agents.

The extrapolation of this state of 'non-communalism' from the village scale to that of the state is doubtless excessive, but there is something in it. The barriers which in Europe, since the nineteenth century, have generally quelled (without, of course, completely

abolishing) the private appropriation of the state, the excessive personal or factional use of authority, the transformation of a public function into a private affair, play but a minor role in Africa. These states, created from scratch by a foreign occupier, excluded 'indigenous' peoples from their management, and even more so from the co-ownership of the country. Independence witnessed the hasty construction of a new bureaucracy in the place of the colonisers, concerned above all with the exercise of their privileges and the consolidation of their status in as short a time as possible.

Thesis 4: Corruption is a cumulative and expansionist process, which is hardly reversible and mostly spreads from the top down. The factors favouring its diffusion cannot be reversed so as to produce its regression.

The more corruption develops, the more it becomes engrained in social habits (the more deeply it becomes inscribed in the 'moral economy') and the less possible it becomes to retreat. Though Africa provides numerous examples of countries showing a rapid development and spread of corruption, it provides none of the reverse. In a certain sense, the expansion of corruption produces a kind of 'corruption culture' with a tendency to permanence. Many known structural and contextual factors favour the spread of corruption. Three sets of factors, though by no means the only ones, are among the foremost and most prevalent.¹⁰

First, the crisis of the African state (the massive employment of unproductive civil servants, followed by the bankruptcy of the employer-state, the irresponsibility and cupidity of the ruling elite) have all contributed to the exposure in broad daylight of corruption in high places, and the incapacity of the state to control 'petty corruption'.

Second, the 'under-payment' of civil servants, whether in comparison to their northern counterparts (with whom, owing to 'globalisation', they increasingly share the same training and aspirations to a similar style of life), or in the light of the economic crisis (indebtedness, devaluation and structural adjustment), has obliged them to look elsewhere for the resources which are no longer provided by their salaries.

Third, development aid has played a somewhat similar role to that of the incomes of the drug and diamond economy, by inducing an inflow of assistantship and clientelism favourable to corruption. The 'project system' and the multiplication of NGOs, which have attempted to correct this bias by a greater control of the use of these

resources and by partly short-circuiting the state, have amounted to the creation of parastatal enclaves, which secrete in turn their own particular form of corruption. The enormous gap between the salaries paid by development projects and those paid by the state also incites government civil servants to seek complementary resources by illegal means.

But even in the (improbable) event of the suppression of these three sets of factors, it is not clear how a regression of corruption could thereby be produced; 'not enough state' produces no less corruption than 'too much state'; nor do the improvement of economic conditions or a reduction in development aid seem likely to produce a reduction in corruption.

As for anti-corruption measures, these contribute to the generalisation of corruption, in accordance with what one may call the 'driving licence formula'. In almost all African countries, a driving licence can be bought from the inspector, during the test. Attempts have been made, from time to time, to take firm measures in order to put an end to these practices: in Niger a policeman is in attendance during the test. The obvious result is that one has to bribe the policeman as well as the examiner.

But in this process of expansion which looks like a one-way trip, responsibility is not equally shared on all sides. 'Big-time' corruption, long since established at the summit of the state, and the consequent incapacity of politicians to carry out any kind of credible campaign in favour of the public welfare or the public service, has certainly been a decisive factor in the extension and generalisation of corruption. After all, the example is given in high places. However, beyond a certain limit, it would seem that the effect of acquired habits and the normalisation of commonplace practices renders the situation more or less irreversible.

Thesis 5: There is no obvious correlation between the extent of corruption, on the one hand, and the types of political regime, their degree of despotism and their economic effectiveness on the other.

It would certainly be nice to think that with the transition from a dictatorial to a democratic regime, a country would experience a recession in corruption; or that states which respect human rights would be less corrupt than those which do not; or that a country whose economic machinery is more or less functional would experience a lower rate of corruption than one in the midst of crisis. Unfortunately, none of these propositions have any demonstrable empirical foun-

dation, seeing that examples to the contrary exist in each case. No conclusive data (in a domain in which one disposes of little more than impressions) can be cited. Whether states have pro-Western one-party regimes, socialist or Marxist–Leninist one-party regimes, military regimes, more or less face value democratic regimes, or democratic regimes which play the game, one can distinguish none that has been more or less preserved, due to its ‘nature’, from either big-time or small-scale corruption.

Some African personal dictatorships have been less corrupt than democracies, and vice versa. As for economic efficiency, the hypothesis has been sustained that corruption is not an impediment to business, but, on the contrary, allows for economic transactions despite the odds, and functions like the grease necessary for turning the wheels of a notoriously inefficient bureaucracy (see Nye 1967; Bayart 1992). One might as well say that corruption is a result of the incompetence of the state apparatus (or even a palliative for this), as well as its cause and agent of reproduction. It is true that each type of regime develops its own particular form of corruption: electoral corruption is linked to democracy, in the same way that the black market is linked to bureaucratic forms of exchange control. But beyond these specific forms, the extension, banalisation and generalisation of corruption seem to accommodate themselves to just about any kind of regime.¹¹ One might consider that the modes of governance, or the policies involved, *within a given regime*, have some effect on the forms assumed by corrupt practices, but that is another matter.

Thesis 6: The practices that come under the complex of corruption, while being legally culpable and widely reproved, are none the less considered by their perpetrators as being legitimate, and often as not being corruption at all. In other words, the real borderline between what is corruption and what is not fluctuates, and depends on the context and on the position of the actors involved.

In one sense, ‘corruption is someone else’. Only the practices to which one falls victim or from which one is excluded are denounced as being corrupt. Those in which one plays a role oneself never give rise to condemnation. Let us take the example of the ‘corrupter/corruptee’ pairing. It is obvious that it takes a corruptor to produce a corruptee. The former is as guilty in the eyes of the law as the latter. We are all actors in corruption, for anyone who lives in Africa spends some time perpetrating corruption, to various degrees, according to the position one occupies: one bribes a policeman to avoid a fine, a customs officer to avoid overtaxing, a telephone service agent to finally come by

a line, a *directeur de cabinet* to obtain an authorisation, a minister to get hold of a market, etc. Whoever practices corruption auto-legitimises his own behaviour, by presenting himself, for example, as the victim of a system in which he is bound to this kind of practice to avoid wasting time and/or an insupportable amount of money, being penalised or condemned to inactivity. And at any rate, doesn't everyone do it? Nor is this completely false.

It is clear that the borderline between a legal and an illegal commission (a 'bribe') tends to be appreciated in a different light, according to whether one is oneself a beneficiary or not. There is a continuum rather than a gulf between bribing someone and thanking someone for services rendered. Between obtaining a favour from a friend in the civil service, which favour will be 'returned' later on, and slipping a bank note in return for the same favour to a civil servant whom one does not know, there is only a difference of form, be it monetary or not, in the exchange. A minister who uses public agents and public material to build his villa presents a scandal only to those who are poorly lodged or who do not stand to benefit from these 'facilities', but is merely gaining a fringe benefit similar to the use of an office car, in the eyes of the beneficiary, who considers that the services rendered to his country are far from being recompensed at their proper worth. In other words, the briber, embezzler or corrupter often has 'good reasons' for his actions and carries them out with a clear conscience.¹² Their attitude is not illegitimate as far as they are concerned, but is only perceived as such by those on the outside, or by participants who might stand to lose in the transaction, or by those who are placed at a disadvantage. At this point, one could easily fall into a mere relativism, thus legitimising any act of delinquency.

This relativism can be looked at from two sociological perspectives:

First, a description of the universe of legitimation peculiar to a given sub-culture in a given space-time: this will include, for example, an identification of the way in which a 'delinquent' sub-culture – corrupted civil servants, or elsewhere gangs of young burglars, drug dealers, mafiosi, computer pirates – produce specific forms of self-justification (see Whyte 1955, or Becker 1963, on gangs in the USA).

Second, an analysis over time of the fluctuations in official as well as in practical norms.¹³ That is, how formerly legal practices now fall under the rigours of the law (such as the sale of public offices in eighteenth-century Europe); how formerly tolerated actions are currently 'repressed' (such as the prosecution of enterprise managers in modern France for abuse of public property); or how the clandestine

practices of yesterday are now carried out in the light of day (such as bribing a traffic policeman in Niger).

But I would like to propose yet another perspective, which will depart for a while from the ambiguous ‘stigmatisation/self-justification’ dichotomy. It consists in pinpointing a number of current social *practices* which, in themselves, have nothing to do with corruption, but none the less provide a favourable ground for its generalisation and banalisation. It will then be possible to reintegrate the practices of corruption, defined *a priori* in a negative light, in terms of illegality, into the larger fabric of everyday practices, expressing positive logics from the perspective of habitual local social norms.

THE CULTURAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF THE CORRUPTION COMPLEX

Six logics, profoundly engrained in current social life, and underlying a number of common behavioural traits, seem to influence the complex of corruption. Others surely exist. We will subsequently consider the existence of two ‘facilitators’, which cut across these logics and accelerate their effects.

The logics of negotiation

Corruption has, of course, long since been analysed as a transaction, and, as such, the cost of the transaction is obviously a subject of ‘bargaining’, that is a commodified form of negotiation regulating almost all forms of current exchange in Africa. But we would like to go beyond this particular aspect of the matter. Bargaining is not only pertinent to the pricing of commercial transactions. It enters into the larger configuration of everyday negotiations, commodified or not, which does not only concern a simple matter of negotiation within the limits of a set of stable rules, accepted on all sides, but is extended to a negotiation of the rules themselves.¹⁴

Marriage provides a significant example, especially in the urban, lower-middle-class or aristocratic milieus: not only is there constant negotiation on the expenditure that the prospective husband has to face (as well as the sum that must be given in return), but there is also permanent negotiation between both families and within each, on the very nature of the dues to be taken into account. There is no consensus on many of the rules of this ‘game’, which are selected, arranged, modified and reinvented along the way.¹⁵

The history of African countries obviously provides for an understanding of the current instability of these norms. This is evident in the juridical domain, where there is a superimposition of various types of law, inherited over several eras: pre-colonial (common law, Muslim law, for example), colonial ('customary law', 'indigenous law', French law), and post-independence (national law, constantly modified). None of these legal forms, however, is completely 'abolished' in practice, and all can be called into service according to need. The same holds true in the political domain, successive forms of political power having been piled one upon the other, and reorganised in relation to one another, without there being any question of substitution (coexistence of politico-religious authorities of pre-colonial origin with administrative chiefdoms, regional administrators of colonial origin, mayors and representatives of political parties and other mass structures of post-colonial origin, and so forth).

The practice of corruption benefits from this logic of negotiation and bargaining. Not only is corruption in the strict sense of the word an object of bargaining, thus affecting the form of normal, customary commercial transactions; it also takes the shape of a simultaneous negotiation on rules, their pertinence and modes of interpretation. Petty corruption, which we all recognise for having practised it, always has a necessary rhetorical dimension and often occurs in the form of verbal sparring (one cannot just give a 1,000 CFA note without saying a word: there has to be some kind of verbal exchange concerning the traffic law that has more or less been violated). In a sense, this negotiation is indispensable, if the 'illegal' transaction is to become banal, exempt from reprobation, if it is to become a part of everyday negotiations. In more general terms, vagueness concerning the laws governing the coexistence of various normative systems obviously favours the diffusion of corrupt practices, by widening the margin of negotiation.¹⁶

The term 'brokerage' (Bailey 1969; Boissevain 1974), in a sociological sense, designates social actors situated at the interface of two sociocultural universes, and endowed with the capacity to establish links among themselves, be they symbolic or economical, material or political. Contemporary Africa is a privileged site for this function, particularly so in the sphere of development. It suffices to mention local development brokers, who drain off development projects towards their village, their region or neighbourhood, and act as intermediaries between donors and northern NGOs, on one hand, and the populations that they coordinate or organise, in order to meet the expectations of

the former, on the other, thus allowing for the redistribution of the ‘development income’, without passing through the crisis-stricken state structures (Blundo 1995; Olivier de Sardan & Bierschenk 1993). The cultural logics of brokerage thus operate by means of an historical syncretism between pre-colonial practices (cf. the traditional role of mediators in family or political negotiations), the colonial heritage (cf. the necessary breaching of the gap between the colonised and the colonisers), and post-colonial transformations (cf. development aid).

The practices of corruption, however, make use of brokers in the strict sense of the word.¹⁷ One readily says in songhay-zarma *ir ma faaba ceeci* (‘let’s look for help’), which means let’s find ‘a useful relation’ for any given kind of mediation, which clearly implies a bribe, a commission or a ‘gift’. Brokers often organise transactions themselves, relieving the corrupter or the corruptee of the annoying aspects of these proceedings, while placing them in the circuit of everyday practices. When in need of anything, one gets in touch with a middle man, and leaves it up to him to ‘sort out the matter’ (*muraado feeri*), without having to bother oneself with whether the affair is legal or not. The generalised recourse to intermediaries makes it difficult to distinguish and interpret the practices of corruption by drowning them in common practices.

The logics of gift-giving

In Sahelian countries one would say ‘kola’ (*goro*). The giving of ‘little gifts’ is one of the thousands of actions of everyday life, mostly as thanks for service rendered. This ‘kola nut’ is not a fixed or negotiated price of remuneration, nor is it a brokerage commission; it is above all a moral duty. The beneficiary of whatever kind of aid has the duty to make some gesture of thanks. This duty to give a ‘kola’ goes even beyond the mere rendering of service. Aren’t the inevitable gifts given to *griots* who flatter one a contributing factor to the extension of the field of application of these logics of gift-giving? There exists an entire crop of names designating one type or another of these common, more or less solicited gifts. Is it not right to offer a gift to the bearer of good news (cf. *tukunci* in hausa and songhay-zarma: symbolic gifts to a bearer of glad tidings), or to the witness of an important transaction, the purchase of a car or a house, for example (*alaada nooru*, ‘customary money’)? Shouldn’t someone who goes to the market bring back ‘something’ to his relatives (*habüze*: ‘a market product’), who have the right to claim this in case of non-execution? Doesn’t this also apply to the traveller who returns home? Shouldn’t the passer-by or visitor give

something to women encountered in the act of hair braiding (*turguru nooru*: 'braiding money') or engaged in collective work (*yuubi*)?

Gift-giving is practised equally in the direction of 'superiors', equals or 'inferiors'. The holders of traditional power, for example, are receivers as well as donors. In Niger (where chiefs retain official entitlement to local power and are paid by the Ministry of Home Affairs), a gift is brought to the customary chief when one goes to greet him, even in the absence of any precise request; this is the 'done thing', and has the additional value of entering into his good graces or assuring his goodwill in the future. For an enthroning (as for a marriage or baptism) everyone brings his 'contribution' (*kambu-zaa*, which means, more or less, 'to give a hand').

Nowadays gift-giving is usually a question of money. The general monetarisation of everyday life has transformed the giving of kola into the giving of money. One must constantly have one's hand on one's purse. Many practices of petty corruption enter into this 'gift' category: one owes a 'little something' by way of thanks to a compliant or helpful civil servant. If, out of kindness, he has refrained from applying in one's disfavour the rigours of the law, doesn't he typically become one of those to whom one is obliged to give something, out of good manners? He himself will not forget to claim his 'kola' or rightful 'part', as occurs when the potential donor seems distracted or recalcitrant.

Of course the 'gift' is sometimes given in advance, as a preventive measure in view of conciliating the good graces of the civil servant in question, in order to give 'weight to the file' confided to him, and as a means of preventing the documents from 'disappearing into thin air'. But this practice is not without its counterparts outside of corruption. Whoever goes to see a marabout in order to set him to 'work' (therapeutic or magical) will first give what can be called 'money for the ink' (this ink is used by the marabout for the tracing of verses of the Koran which will serve in the making of the amulet). If the amulet turns out to be effective, one will then give more ample 'thanks' to the marabout. The transition from this practice to corruption is in fact made in popular speech. Thus, in songhay-zarma, *kalam dene* (the quill of the pen) which describes this preliminary gift to the marabout, is now applied to the 'advances' given to a bureaucrat in charge of one's case.¹⁸

One must also realise that to refrain from giving the 'kola' when deserved is not only a sign of avarice or of bad manners, but also carries the risk of attracting misfortune. Quite apart from the fear that can be

inspired by a griot of marabout who has been mistreated or cheated of his recompense, anyone who has been thus frustrated can bring you back luck, even despite himself. One might consider, for example, the current practice which consists in giving ‘something’ to the cashier when withdrawing a large sum at the post office or at the social security office: this gift is called *moo daabu* in songhay-zarma (which means, approximately, ‘to prevent the evil eye’, which, in the absence of a gift, the envy of the cashier might send you, or *moo baa* (‘the eye’s share’). Obviously it is also a matter of paving the way for future collaboration. Here, once again, the borderline between corruption and everyday practices is quite thin. The multiplication of ‘gifts’ in everyday practice leaves room for the drowning of illicit gifts within the mass.¹⁹

The logics of the solidarity network

There are a multitude of solidarity networks in Africa. These are of course far from being negligible in Europe, where, however, their extension is clearly inferior: factors such as the withdrawal of the nuclear family, confinement of friends and close acquaintances to limited circles, the absence of relations between neighbours, among others, result in a weaker sociability in the North than in the South. The importance of these networks of sociability in Africa, in particular in urban areas, goes far beyond the family framework, which is however, as we all know, widely extended and replete with pressures and solicitations which can hardly be ignored. Links created within peer groups (primary school, secondary school and college friends) last until retirement. Comradeship, good neighbourliness and work relationships also multiply this ‘strength of weak ties’ (Granovetter 1975). Solidarities that arise from adherence to a common association, church or confraternity, to the same party, to the same faction within a party, also play their role, as does the fact of originating from the same region or district.

However, not only are these various forms of interrelations particularly extended, providing each person with a capital of social relations far exceeding that of other continents, they also include an almost general obligation of mutual assistance. One cannot refuse a service, a favour, a bit of string-pulling or compliance to a relative, neighbour, party comrade or friend. Nor ought one to refuse the same to someone who is ‘sent’ by any of the above. The circle of individuals to whom one feels obliged to render services is thus astonishingly wide. One must add the converse, that there is also a great number of persons

to call upon. The system thus becomes one of a 'generalised exchange' of services, big or small, often in the shape of an officially illicit favour.

Let us employ the conventional term 'network' to qualify these multiple forms of belonging.²⁰ Each individual is integrated into various networks, each of which entails solidarities and therefore corresponding pressures. The problem is that the solidarity exacted by the network is so rigorous that anyone who fails to respect his obligations to a member of one of the networks to which he belongs suffers reproach, and becomes the object of considerable and sustained pressure from all members of the network. Should he persist, he becomes the cause of scandal, and his reputation soon becomes detestable.

Moreover, in the context of a dysfunctioning administrative and bureaucratic apparatus, and a dramatic scarcity of resources, the multiplication of interventions in favour of one person or the other progressively becomes the normal mode of management of such affairs and cases. Woe betide the man who knows no one, either directly or indirectly.²¹ He is left with no solution but bribery, if his means permit. Instead of acting like everyone else, through an exchange of favours, combined or not with 'little gifts', he will be obliged to make a monetary 'purchase' of the required service, directly or through the mediation of a broker. Engrained, commodified corruption is, in this perspective, a mere symptom of the lack of an activatable network, a temporary deficit in 'social capital'. The resource to bribery is merely a sub-set of the recourse to 'favours'.²² But the omnipresence of 'personal favours' (though often liable to legal action, if the law were to be applied, and while remaining an undebatable constituent of the corruption complex) is simultaneously a functional necessity (conditioning the effectiveness of all administrative undertakings), and a normative necessity (the foundation of all forms of sociability).

The logics of predatory authority

While the preceding logics share obvious elements of complementarity, and concern just about everyone, the two that follow are somewhat different, and are linked to functions of authority. The first concerns the right that many persons holding positions of power accord themselves to proceed to various types of extortion, to the detriment of their 'subjects', that is to those who must toady to them. These royal prerogatives, which their victims describe as rackets, appear in the eyes of the beneficiaries, not simply as a matter of personal choice, but

rather as a rightful aspect of their office. The latter therefore ‘naturally’ entails a predatory dimension. A policeman has the right to deduct his dues from transporters, in the same way that a *directeur de cabinet* has the right to dip into special funds, or the customary judge the right to exact fees from offenders.

Bankruptcy of the state and non-payment of salaries explain in part why public servants holding the slightest bit of authority fatten themselves on the other man’s back. But one can go further in history in search of more general causes. Might one not consider the banalisation of despotic extortion as a prolongation of certain pre-colonial habits (raids, tributes of war which were at time a part of the social landscape)? But the current context is so different (the modern African state has little or no resemblance, whatever may be said to the contrary, to the chiefdoms, kingdoms and emirates of yesterday) that one needs to turn instead towards colonial customs, from the military conquest and the all-powerful ‘commandant’, to administrative chiefs appointed by colonialism and to indigenous auxiliaries, who have always enjoyed a wide margin for arbitrary actions.²³ As for post-colonial regimes, these have propelled into existence and into sudden omnipotence a local elite wearing the boots of the European dominators, flattered by both camps of the Cold War, without any counterbalance to their despotic or predatory temptations (see Darbon 1990). From the top to the bottom of the state apparatus, the assimilation of positions of power with the right to levy tribute has undergone rapid extension (despite the existence of a few remarkable exceptions, whose exceptional character is thus noted by one and all). The change to democracy seems, in this regard, merely to have introduced the possibility of openly attacking practices (by means of a denunciation of ‘prebend’ and ‘racket’), without modifying them; those who criticise them today, when in opposition or without power, will adopt them tomorrow when in power or possessing influence.

The current semantic difference in songhay-zarma between *kom-yan* (to despoil) and *zey-yan* (to rob) might be elucidating. A chief, prince or ‘big man’, a man of power, or of force, is *kom-yan*, he despoils, takes, serves himself, openly, impudently (isn’t authoritative levying to be linked with power?). A poor man, without resources or power, for his part, can only have recourse to *zey-yan*, that is to theft, cheating and shameful sneaking around.

The logics of redistributive accumulation

A civil servant who accedes to a prestigious position, a post of responsibility, and of course to an appointment considered to be 'juicy', must, in the sight of his relatives, profit from this and spread the benefit around. It is obviously a question of making a fortune, that is of displaying the outward signs of wealth (villas, luxurious cars, private schools for the children, jewels for the wives, etc.), and at the same time making this of benefit to his extended family, his acquaintances, his village, his dependants by means of numerous and visible signs of largesse. To refuse to grab such an opportunity to make a fortune is to make oneself an object of reproach in some cases or of mockery in others. Illegal enrichment and nepotism are definitely supported by positive social values, namely the necessity to seize all opportunities allowing for a manifestation of cardinal virtues, such as generosity, largesse and gratitude to all those who in the past, when you were unimportant, weak, in need, provided help, encouragement and support. Now, for a civil servant, positions of power provide the only means of coming into any kind of wealth. To refuse them is to make a simultaneous show of ingratitude, egoism, pride, naïveté and even stupidity. Social pressure is very strong in the direction of the accumulation of wealth in view of redistribution.²⁴

This cultural logic, like others mentioned, does not come down directly from the past. It is clear, particularly so in the present case, that the factors originating in pre-colonial culture of ostentation are of some importance (see Nicholas 1986); the pre-colonial chief was obliged to show largesse to all, and thus to allow for public praise of his generosity. Here the capacity to redistribute was of course founded on patrimonialism, which regulated traditional power in the context of a confusion between the wealth of the state and that of the sovereign. But these customs had to be recycled under colonial and post-colonial periods, in order to come down to us in the present day, while retaining their power in a world which has undergone such enormous transformation.

One other factor is 'rivalry'. Contrary to various communal illusions, contemporary African societies are remarkably 'agonistic', from a real or symbolic point of view (cf. sorcery). Redistributive accumulation finds a particularly powerful additional propellant in the 'jealousy' of a neighbour, colleague or relative, and in the imperious necessity to best him as far as possible. It suffices to remark on the importance of ostentatious distribution (cf. the role of griots in the Sahel), whose

competitive aspects are evident. The anxiety to build one's 'reputation' easily takes the form of an effort to out-do others.

CULTURE AND CORRUPTION

The role played by all these logics in the banalisation of corrupt practices seems undeniable. They are usually combined, thus dissolving juridically reprehensible practices into the fabric of similar and socially commonplace practices, which happen to be accepted and even esteemed.²⁵ Of course corruption is not produced as such by these logics – except perhaps, to some extent, by the last two. Neither permanent negotiation nor the prevalence of brokerage, nor the practice of frequent gift-giving, nor solidarity with the social networks to which one belongs, *automatically* give rise to illicit practices, and there are examples of particularly vigilant, and relatively atypical public servants, who, at least for the most part, refuse to indulge. However, these logics, while exerting continuous pressure on social actors, help to accord a cultural acceptability to corruption. Should one therefore impute corruption in Africa to some kind of 'African culture'? Nothing would be more absurd. The notion of culture is extremely polysemic, and many of its interpretations are, to my mind, unacceptable. Nowhere is there any Value System, soaring above the populations and inducing their deportment, be it on an 'ethnic', national or 'African' level. 'Culturalism', to the extent that it occasions an excessive homogenisation of the way in which practices are perceived, to the extent that it transforms the abstract construction of the researcher into a Subject, to the extent that it deduces from social actions a kind of cultural 'tablet of the law', is indefensible. On the other hand, the converse, denial of the existence of common normative pressures exerted on actors, or a refusal to take into account shared social codes which act as a foundation for modes of social recognition or modes of intelligibility of interrelations, would imply falling into the opposite excess. The logics here enumerated thus attempt an avoidance of both of these opposed and symmetrical stumbling blocks: an explanation by 'culture', or the denial of any 'cultural factor' whatsoever. 'Cultural factor' is as vague an expression as one may encounter. The notion of logics therefore seems to be more analytically operational, in that it refers to normative configurations which influence actors' strategies. All these logics are syncretic, none is 'traditional', none comes directly from any so-called pre-colonial culture.

This brings us to the following proposition: *in the modern process of its generalisation, induced to a great extent by the bankruptcy of the political elite, corruption benefits from a favourable terrain for its routinisation and banalisation, owing to an encounter with widespread behavioural logics within post-colonial societies.*

A few other favourable factors need to be mentioned. I will call them ‘facilitators’ for want of a better word, to the extent that they integrate each of the above mentioned logics, by ‘facilitating’ the erosion and dissolution of the separation line between legal and illegal everyday practices, through an accentuation of social pressures inciting a disregard of this barrier. One may distinguish at least two such facilitators, each having a very distinct nature.

First facilitator: over-monetarisation

The permanent search for cash in contemporary African societies has already been underlined above.²⁶ If the economic crisis is quite clearly among the primary causes, due to the scarcity of resources available, it is not the only one. The inflation of outputs in relation to family ceremonies (marriages, baptisms in Muslim cultures, funerals in others), and to other social festivities (Christmas, Tabaski, etc.) is definitely a ‘social problem’, generating an infernal mechanism which everyone deplores but which no one can stop. An example among several others is that of the haussa *buki*: a custom and term which has also passed into songhay-zarma, a recent system according to which the presents received by a woman for a baptism (or at times for a wedding), and which she has carefully recorded, must be returned *doubled* to the respective donors, on similar later occasions.

All these outputs have since taken a monetary form, transformed either directly into cash or into consumer goods bought for the occasion. Personal relationships also take on a permanent monetary form. Whereas in Europe everyday forms of consumption require a constant dipping into one’s pocket, everyday forms of sociability shy away from monetary support. In Africa, on the contrary, they require quite a lot of cash: giving of ‘taxi fare’ to a visitor, giving coins to the children of friends, giving money for the purchase of a length of African print to a cousin going to a school party, giving a bank note to your step-mother when running into her in the street, giving 500 CFA to a colleague at work to buy cigarettes, helping out a neighbour or a vague acquaintance in need; this monetarisation of everyday forms of sociability is the object of much exertion of pressure. Thus, well beyond

the mere logics of gift-giving analysed above, the over-monetarisation of everyday life obliges all and sundry to engage in a permanent quest for ‘means’, and blurs the distinction between legally admissible and legally condemnable ones. The illicit purchase of an administrative favour or the embezzlement of public money are all the more visible in Europe – and all the more condemnable – according to the degree to which they assume a monetary form (the ‘bribe’ or ‘suitcase full of bank notes’) in domains from which money is normally excluded. Entire sectors of social life function through a minimisation or condemnation of the circulation of money. In Africa, on the contrary, there is no domain (matrimonial relations included) in which money does not play a permanent role.²⁷

Second facilitator: shame

One might expect the feeling of ‘shame’ to be an impediment to corrupt practices. The opposite is nearer the truth. Let us reconsider the problem in a more general light. ‘Shame’ is, in the majority of African cultures, a powerful means of social control. Any behaviour which breaches good breeding, which provokes a scandal, which engenders humiliation, which displays bad manners, which ridicules local moral values, is a generator of shame and must, as far as possible, indeed at all costs, be avoided (see Olivier de Sardan 1982). Shame is a social morality, a morality based on other people’s opinions, rather than one based on an individual examination of conscience.

Shame relates first of all to the disapprobation of others, and above all of one’s family circle. As already mentioned, denouncing a relative or an acquaintance guilty of embezzlement generates shame. To refuse a favour to a ‘recommended’ person generates same. To refuse a gift in return for help generates shame. To stand out or to distinguish oneself in public (by rejecting the ‘privileges’ of one’s status, for example) generates shame.

On the contrary, slipping a banknote to a civil servant, taking one’s cut to the detriment of ‘clients’, ‘borrowing’ from the cashbox,²⁸ abusing ‘office’ material, obtaining illegal favours, none of this generates shame, even though the abuse of power or extortion will sometimes be considered as ‘shameful’ and as incompatible with the norms of aristocratic conduct.

The engrainment of corruption into social habits has the remarkable characteristic of displacing the barriers of shame. An intransigent attitude in the face of all forms of corruption would marginalise its

author by reason of the shame that would inevitably befall his relatives, and which could be interpreted as his pride, his scorn for others, his lack of compassion, his rejection of family or friends, his hostility towards social norms.

In other words, the stigmatisation of corruption mentioned above (Thesis 3) is unconnected to the feeling of shame, which one might have expected to impede individual recourse to practices which are deplored on another level. Stigmatisation is general, concerns public morality, is usually abstract, and when nourished by reference to personal experiences, this is often in a context where the complainant see himself as a 'victim' and/or considers that the rules of proper behaviour have not been respected; shame, which is fundamentally situational, plays upon another register, that of the pressure of the family circle and its networks, that of 'what will people say', and this register favours rather than impedes the practices of the corruption complex.



These 'facilitators' help to dissolve the borderline between sociocultural logics and corrupt daily practices. Of course, the norms of the public service or the legal definitions of corruption in Africa are the same as in Europe, being directly derived from the European model. But in Europe this model is in part the product of rather different sociocultural logics, inaugurated in the nineteenth century, on the basis of a distinction between public and private affairs, on puritanism, on egalitarian and individualistic demands. In Europe, in other words, the norms of the public service and the legal definitions of corruption correspond or harmonise, even if only approximately, with the predominant sociocultural logics.²⁹ In Africa, on the contrary, there is a glaring discrepancy.³⁰ As a result, the functioning of the administrative apparatus, entirely copied from the European pattern, is of a schizophrenic type. In law, official functioning and budget it is totally Western. In practice, it is otherwise, traversed by logics in drastic contradiction with the original model. Thus what is considered to be corruption from the perspective of official norms is not, or very little, viewed in the same light from the perspectives of practical norms and of practices. The type of generalisation of corruption peculiar to Africa makes 'petty corruption' particularly conspicuous. This is certainly not the most significant nor the gravest aspect of the matter, from an economic point of view. But its embeddedness in wider sociocultural logics produces in Africa, as opposed to Europe, a

continuum or a resemblance between petty corruption and major corruption.

Civil servants also find themselves in a schizophrenic situation. Their administrative and professional legitimacy is derived from their training in modern European administration (which is now a world-wide standard) and therefore in its values concerning the 'public service'. But their social legitimacy implies, on the contrary, that they act in conformity with more or less contradictory 'sociocultural' logics. The very widespread adherence to abstract official norms of European origin, advocating the impartiality of the state and the necessity of an ethic of the general interest, thus coexists peacefully with an equally prevalent pattern of behaviour in conformity with social norms in favour of the preeminence of private and partisan interests. Everyone is sincerely in favour of respecting the public domain, and wants the bureaucracy to be at the service of the citizens, but everyone participates by means of everyday actions in the reproduction of the system he denounces.

Hence the general feeling of helplessness in the face of an infernal mechanism. And hence this hypothesis, which is also a risk: the development of movements of a 'puritanical' tendency, intended to bring about a reform of public morals (which can assume, in Islam as in Christianity, a fundamentalist hue) may be among the ultimate means, in the absence of an improbable self-reformation of the political elites, to attempt to change the present course of affairs. Any 'anti-corruption' policy must face up to these realities.

NOTES

1. J. F. Bayart (1989, 1993) with his analysis of 'the politics of the belly', characteristic of the modern African state, and J. F. Médard (1991, 1992) in his studies concerning neopatrimonialism, are, obviously, those that come closest. To the best of our knowledge, G. Blundo (1998), alone in francophone africanist literature, has attempted systematic research, from an empirical point of view, on the theme of local corruption in Africa (based on Senegalese working material). An article here and there touches directly on the subject, but usually on a quite general level: Bayart (1988, 1992, 1996), Bayart *et al.* (1997), Morice (1991, 1995), Amselle (1993), Elwert (1994), Sindzingre (1994) or Médard (1995). On the anglophone scene, the studies are more substantial by far. See among others Smith (1964), Greenstone (1966), Le Vine (1975), Gould (1980), Szeftel (1982), Joseph (1983, 1987), Klitgaard (1988), Charlton (1990), Pepinsky (1992), Tignor (1993), Harsch (1993) and Reno (1995). As for corruption in other contexts or in general, there is a very abundant literature, particularly in the areas of political science and economics.

2. Of course no society possessing a state and bureaucracy, ancient or modern, is exempt from corruption. But from one society to another, or from one type of society to another, corruption varies in scope and extension, assumes different forms, more or less perceptible or tolerated, sectorialised or generalised. This opens the way for a discussion of the characteristic forms of corruption in developing countries, as distinct from European and North American forms. Cf. the early works of Leys (1965) and Scott (1969).

3. Although reference is made to general tendencies, which seem quite widespread on the African continent, this does not imply an ignorance of specific national and sectarian distinctions. Each country (and in some instances each administration) obviously has its own 'style' in corruption, in the same way that it has its own political culture (the examples here refer to West African countries in general and to Niger in particular). The forms assumed by its generalisation and banalisation are also variable and can present more or less obvious exceptions (cf. e.g. Good's remarks on Botswana, 1994).

4. Méry (1992: 10–11) proposes a similar definition: 'a form of secret social exchange through which those in power (political or administrative) take personal advantage, of one type or another, of the influence they exercise in virtue of their mandate or their function'.

5. Our examples in popular semiology about corruption are taken from songhay-zarma, spoken in Niger, Mali and Benin, which has been familiar to the author since 1965. But the logics we describe are present in very different West African countries.

6. Bayart (1989) is of course the first to have insisted on this aspect. However, we are not in entire agreement with his systematic (almost explanatory) association between 'belly' metaphors linked to corruption and those linked to witchcraft or sorcery (Bayart 1992). Power and corruption are of course related, as are power and witchcraft. But these two relations are by no means to be confused or superposed, under the excuse of metaphorical closeness. One has to be suspicious of 'over-interpretation' (Olivier de Sardan 1997).

7. One might go back to the period before independence. Tignor (1993) shows that, immediately after the Second World War, the theme of corruption was a central element of political debate in Nigeria, as much on the British side (against nationalist leaders) as well as on the Nigerian side (one against each other).

8. Sarassoro (1990) refers to anti-corruption campaigns in Africa as a mere flash in the pan destined to failure.

9. However, one must bear in mind that the threat of prosecution is often brandished, and constitutes in certain cases a means of pressure and of systematic blackmail at the disposal of a dictator or man of power, who thus controls his allies and enemies (the rare cases of prosecution in the higher spheres thus correspond to the legal 'execution' of an undesirable individual). This mechanism (pinpointed by Bayart 1989, 1992) also has a wider application and can be encountered on other levels: the threat of denunciation, or in some cases, the act itself, is always to be interpreted in the context of political or factional combat (cf. Blundo 1998), local or central (and in the relation between the local elite and the centre). In this perspective, a 'corrupted' individual is, above all, a loser.

10. Other more local or sectoralised cases include the presence here or there of easy money, due to the petroleum income controlled by high officials; connections with the drug economy or smuggling (Bayart 1996); compliance or connivance with multinational enterprises; and underhand manipulation by former colonial powers, mostly French.

11. Unfortunately, there is no justification for Sarassoro's optimism, when he repeats the declaration of the chairman of the OAU in 1990: '*l'instauration de la démocratie est le seul moyen de sortir l'Afrique de la corruption*' (1990: 206).

12. This has been emphasised by Le Vine whose corrupted interviewees do not express the slightest amount of guilt. Le Vine (1989: 368).

13. The official norms in question are those defining corruption in terms of illegality; the practical norms are those that regulate practices that are illegal but which are culturally legitimate or tolerated. Generalised cultural legitimacy corresponds to what Heidenheimer (1989: 161) calls 'white corruption'.

14. Cf. S. Berry (1994) who has pointed out this particularity of contemporary Africa. Lund (1998), for his part, develops an example on the subject of property conflicts. It has already been noted (e.g. Padioleau 1975: 45) that the coexistence of several systems of norms is a factor favourable to corruption.

15. There is of course a general agreement on certain usages which remain or have become unavoidable, for example the bride price and 'suitcase' in Niger (the latter being a tradition of recent invention); but beyond these scant guidelines, the notable variations in local custom and the numerous changes that have intervened over the years, have opened up the list of possible references, thus leaving elbow room that 'uncles' and 'aunts' do not ignore, each in their own interest.

16. Scott (1969) has produced an analysis which goes partly in the same direction. In his opinion, certain practices of corruption in the South are the functional *ex-post* equivalent of *ex-ante*

parliamentary lobbies in the North. The latter carry out collective negotiations on the terms of a law to be passed, in the interest of a group whose mandate they execute, which law will be relatively well applied, while the practices of corruption in the South, where the political class is more estranged from the civil society, and where group and professional interests are rarely organised collectively, where laws are not very familiar or well adapted, allow for individual negotiation on the level of the process of application of laws and regulations.

17. Morice (1995) has pointed out the link between the system of corruption and the emergence of a mediator class, in Guinea and Brazil.

18. Brownberger (1983: 221–3) uses the term ‘polite corruption’ in reference to traditional gift-giving, to which he accords only a minor role in the practices of corruption. But this is because he perceives only the traditional aspects of gift-giving (if gift-giving is obviously of traditional origin, it now assumes completely new and modern forms), and because he makes it out to be a particular form of corruption, divorced from other such practices. Here, on the contrary, we consider gift-giving as constituting a wider cultural logic.

19. Leys (1965: 225) had already noted the degree of inconspicuousness in the passage from the traditional gift in kind to the monetary bribe (‘the precise nature of the rule of infringement is partially concealed by the continuity with the older custom’). He makes reference to a case in which a chicken given in the open becomes a bank note given in half-secrecy.

20. Though the term is vague, it seems preferable to excessively rigid anthropological designations such as ‘corporate groups’ or ‘primary solidarities’.

21. Le Vine (1975) has underlined, in the case of Ghana, the hyper-personalisation of political and administrative relations. No affair is ever handled before an anonymous institution, but before ‘relations’ of which one disposes in these institutions. Here again it is a question of a well-known phenomenon in the North (the French system of ‘*énarques*’, for example, reposes for the most part on this personalisation), but this is, in general, restrained to networks of peer groups of equivalent training and competence, and does not therefore entail the same generality, transversality or extension as in Africa. The essential point is to demonstrate that there is a continuum rather than a rupture between an ‘exchange of services’ and ‘bribes’. Padioleau (1975), referring to the United States elite, is therefore right to insist on the importance of ‘corruption through exchange of favours’.

22. Thus the limit of the opposition between ‘parochial corruption’ and ‘market corruption’ (Scott 1969: 330).

23. Wangrin obviously comes to mind, a scarcely fictive hero of the well-known book by Amadou Hampaté Bâ. For a sociopolitical analysis of colonial despotism in western Niger, based on the accounts of peasant victims, see Olivier de Sardan (1984).

24. Chinua Achebe’s novels *A Man of the People* and *No Longer at Ease* are remarkable illustrations of this.

25. Several authors have already pointed out this characteristic; note, for example, Heidenheimer (1989: 159): ‘all the activities considered “routine corruption” by official Western standards are standard practices deeply rooted in more general social relationships and obligations’.

26. Raynaud (1977) has long since demonstrated the importance of cash circulation in one African society (a Hausa village society) even when resources are scarce and cash is rare.

27. G. Elwert (1984) has analysed in a stimulating text what he refers to as the generalisation of ‘venality’. But, to my mind, he confused two processes, the ‘monetarisation’ of social life and its ‘commodification’. Over-monetarisation does not imply that relationships in which there is a circulation of money obligatorily become commodified relationships. The money given to a prostitute comes under venal love, but this is not true of the money given to one’s wife.

28. The importance of ‘borrowing’ and especially of the unreturned and unclaimed loan (it is sometimes more ‘shameful’ to ask a debtor to reimburse than for the latter to refrain from doing so) merits development, and one might consider this as yet another ‘logic’, favouring the banalisation of practices of corruption.

29. Of course, there are places and sectors, in Europe, where corruption is ordinary. But these practices are confined to a number of particular domains (public works, and construction, for example, or the financing of political parties, not to mention the recycling of dirty money and the drug economy). Corruption is ‘sectoralised’, whereas it is ‘generalised’ in Africa.

30. Médard (1995) rightly points out that it is not only a matter of contradiction between norms and practices, but one of a contradiction between the norms themselves.

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