



## KLEPTOCRACY AS THE IDEOLOGY OF NIGERIAN RULERS: A GLIMPSE AT THE FOURTH REPUBLIC.

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### ABSTRACT

*It is widely agreed that Nigeria is an immensely endowed country, and if its huge resources had been prudently managed and deployed, the country would not have been in the embarrassingly deplorable condition it presently finds itself. This study adopts a documentary survey of extant relevant data, which are then analysed within the purview of our research supposition. Consequently, its findings reinforces the view that in Nigeria, national resources that are meant for the provision of social amenities are squandered by public officials. It is argued that the stealing, looting and plundering of public resources are the key pillars of Nigerian rulers' ideology of kleptocracy, and that it is this criminal worldview that is mainly responsible for the underdevelopment of the country. It is recommended that in view of the glaring ineffectiveness of existing punitive measures, anyone who commits theft of state resources should be made to face capital punishment.*

**Keywords:** Kleptocracy, ideology, rulers, public officials, underdevelopment.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Why do African/Nigerian politicians steal money they don't use, see, need, reach, or access? The stealing by government officials in Nigeria is systematic, planned, organized, endemic, and extreme. Nigeria's thieving autocrats have turned every treasury in Nigeria into a crime scene. They spare no funds no matter how consolidated. They spare no assets or public accounts because they are morally depraved and ethically bankrupt. (emphasis added) - Austine Aneke (2014).*

The foregoing assertion pungently underscores the catastrophic misfortune which Nigeria's philistine and pestilential political class epitomizes. It draws attention to the fact that those who have had the onus of overseeing the affairs of Nigeria have often abused that privilege by committing incredible transgressions against the country and its people. Heist and larceny of unimaginable dimensions have been perpetrated by these political office holders. In this paper, we argue that the actions and inactions of Nigerian rulers indicate that they subscribe to an ideology of kleptocracy which tolerates, promotes and rationalizes the stealing and looting of public resources. Our analysis in this essay is limited to Nigeria's Fourth Republic which started in 1999; but it is important to stress that restricting the purview of the paper to this period does not imply that the situation prior to 1999 was any better; rather, it is because huge volumes of encyclopedias would be required for an adequate analysis of the problem in the country since independence in 1960 (Obo, Coker and Omenka, 2014:67).

As pointed out elsewhere (Obo and Adie, 2014:2), when a society is bifurcated into two: the rich and the hungry, it is difficult for one to be neutral; in this essay, we are not neutral: we are on the sides of the Nigerian people who, over the years, have been made to live in sub-human conditions inspite of the enormous resources which Nature has generously bestowed on their country. Indeed, as Kunle Amuwo (cited in Obo, Coker and Omenka, 2014:70) has observed, Nigerians have suffered almost irreparable damage from the deliberate, deliberative and pre-meditated collective looting of the public treasury by criminally-minded and under-performing politicians and senior bureaucrats, and thus waste, mismanagement, squandermania and profligacy have become the name of the game at the expense of the delivery of basic public goods and services.

It should be emphasized that official corruption and other forms of abuse of office by public officials are not exclusive to Nigeria; but we are alarmed by the fact that these vices are ubiquitous and have been institutionalized by the elites with debilitating consequences for the overall development of the country. It is clear, as stated elsewhere (Obo, Coker and Omenka, 2014: 70) that “the Nigerian state is controlled by a rogue elite, a group of persons whose primary goal is to enrich themselves and to privatize as much of public resources as possible”. Our interest in this essay has been ignited largely by the awareness that humongous public resources meant for social development have been plundered and stolen by those who run the Nigerian state. In fact, it appears that

*for members of Nigeria’s political class, looting the treasury is no longer just about stealing money to rival the material acquisitions of Arab oil sheikhs in choice locations all over the world; it is no longer just about aping the glamorous lifestyle of Hollywood royalty. It has now acquired a psychological dimension with a tinge of impunity... (Adesanmi, 2013 cited in Obo, Coker and Omenka, 2014:70)*

There is no doubt that aside from the policies and actions or inactions of a government with their concomitant consequences, the true ideological character of the government can be brought to bare if penetrating questions are asked. In other words, the issue of whether a government is driven by an ideology which is people-oriented, development – focused, and transformational or a prebendalistic and ruinous ideology which encourages and celebrates official thievery and pillage can be resolved if some fundamental questions are posed. These questions include:

*[W]hat has the government done in relation to what it can do with the resources at its disposal? What can the government do if the wealth of the nation had not been appropriated illegally and through state robbery? What can the government do if its policies had been more egalitarian and popular and less elitist? What can the government do if its political economy had been less exploitative, less patriarchal and sexist, more humanistic, more progressive?*

*What can the government do if it had not set itself up as infallible, all-wise and second to God? (Madunagu, 2006:130).*

Nigerian elites have shown that they are callous, dangerous, unpatriotic and extremely avaricious. They have demonstrated that they are not leaders but criminal predators who have robbed the country of its future as well as bruised and violated the collective humanity of the people. As kleptocrats, they have “consumer psychology”, and for them, “to lead is to have or to use the opportunity of leadership to acquire” (Nwankwo, 1989:22). Under the watch of these buccanner – like elites, Nigeria has become, in the words of Niyi Osundare (2015), a country where the surest route to personal wealth and influence is the possession of political power; where that power is characterized by absolutism and impunity; a country in which what you need to hold on to power indefinitely is the possession of more power; a country where power comes without responsibility, control without restraint; a country where the rulers are thieves who live beyond the law; a country where the ruled are too ignorant, too poor, too disunited to kick and too ready to connive in their own abasement; a country, in short, where power is not just the ultimate aphrodisiac, it is also the wine of absolute forgetfulness.

This essay focuses on Nigeria at a time the country is said to be practising “democracy”; but it must be noted that Nigerian rulers are not interested in democratic governance which upholds the values of accountability and rule of law. They love any system that grants them untrammelled access to public resources which can be stolen or squandered with impunity. In the words of Attahiru Jega (2001:106), for the Nigerian political class, democracy is hardly desirable if it means popular empowerment of the masses. Democracy, according to him, is desirable to them only if it can facilitate access to power, create avenues for looting the public treasury and keep the people in check and at their mercy.

The central thesis of this paper is that Nigerian rulers and public officials strongly believe in and practise kleptocracy as their ideology, and this accounts for the provocative wealth of the rulers and their friends and relations on the one hand, and the monumental poverty and crippling misery which engulf the country and the majority of its people, on the other. This essay is made up of four sections. Following the introduction is section two where some conceptual and

cases of how Nigerian rulers have practised their ideology of robbery and plunder are cited in section three. Section four contains the concluding remarks.

## **2.0 Kleptocracy and Ideology: Some Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives**

We do agree with the view that “if concepts are to serve the functions of communication, sensitivity to and organization of experience, generalization, and theory construction, they have to be clear, precise, and agreed – upon” (Frankfort – Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996:28). Thus, it is necessary for us to properly clarify the key terms employed in this essay – especially in order to evade “conceptual inconsistencies”, to use Andreas Tsolakis’ (2010:390) phrase. The concepts of kleptocracy and ideology are examined in this section..Kleptocracy

According to Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, kleptocracy – which is derived from the Greek words “kleptes” (i.e., “thief”) and “kratos” (i.e. “power, rule”), hence “rule by thieves” – is a form of political and government corruption where the government exists to increase the personal wealth and political power of its officials and the ruling class at the expense of the wider population, often with pretense of honest service and this type of government is generally considered corrupt, and the mechanism of action is often embezzlement of state funds.

The Wikipedia also states that the effects of a kleptocratic government on a nation are typically adverse in regards to the faring of the state’s economy, political affairs and civil rights. According to it, kleptocracy in government often vitiates prospects of foreign investment and drastically weakens the domestic market and cross-border trade; and as kleptocracy normally embezzles money from the citizens, a kleptocratically structured political system tends to degrade nearly everyone’s quality of life. Moreover, the Encyclopedia points out, the money that kleptocrats steal is often taken from funds that were earmarked for public amenities – which has further adverse effects on the quality of life of the citizens living under a kleptocracy.

In the words of Brian Smith (2008:234), too often, and especially in Africa, the alternative to a developmental state has been a predatory state led by “rapacious officialdom”. He also points out that at the extreme, when a state is tagged a kleptocracy, it means that the state has become less an agency for providing law, order, security, justice, and welfare, and more a device for endowing the political elite with power, wealth, and privilege.

On his part, Edward Dommen (1997:491) has reasoned that the essence of kleptocracy is that whoever has the power to appropriate resources does so and keeps most, if not all, and this

means that the number of other beneficiaries, if any, is particularly small. He also states that kleptocracy can take different forms depending on the degree to which it is centralized; but the proceeds may be scattered widely if the central regime no longer has the strength to keep other groups under control. Furthermore, Dommen observes that kleptocracy can be even more decentralized, shading into criminality. This latter point correctly depicts the situation in Nigeria which this essay seeks to examine. Kleptocracy is not only huge in its magnitude but it is also pyramidal in its pervasiveness as it affects all the three tiers of government – federal, state and local – in the country.

A renowned Nigerian Marxist scholar, Edwin Madunagu (2006:466-468) has drawn attention to the irreparable damage which what he calls “state robbery” – a concept which approximates “kleptocracy” as used in this essay – has done to the Nigerian society. According to him, state robbery is robbery committed through the use or manipulation of the power acquired through the control of the state or one or more of its institutions. Sociologically, in his view, robbery is the appropriation by A, of what belongs to B without the latter’s permission or consent; and this can happen only because A has the means to do so; and this “means” can be raw power or mere circumstances or – as is frequently the case – a combination of the two. In Madunagu’s view, the “means” employed in state robbery reduces to raw power because the “circumstances” that may sometimes be cited are, in the case of state robbery, products of power.

Madunagu also surmises that state robbery has various forms; but the dominant forms practised in a given historical setting (time and place) depend on the dominant culture, historical experience and the type of political economy in place. As he puts it, in our own (i.e. Nigeria’s) setting, the dominant forms include:

*appropriation of ‘security’ votes; inflation of costs of contracts with a view to appropriating the surpluses from the contractors; appropriation, through budgetary and non-budgetary, but nonetheless lawful allocations; demand and appropriation of bribes, incentives and commissions from beneficiaries (national and foreign), of state concessions, privileges, appointments and preferments as well as other policies in the economic sphere; ambush and subsequent appropriation of revenues and other payments due to the state; direct removal of cash from state coffers; forgery and*

*falsification of records; open and legal confiscation of public or private property, followed by private appropriation; and what I may call the ‘robbery of robbery’, that is, stealing what is being recovered from robbers.*

The preceding passage unmistakably captures the core components of kleptocracy as the ideology professed and practised by Nigeria’s thieving elites, and they are also the major pillars of the “political banditry” (Wilmot, 2007, cited in Uhumwhangho, 2008:26) which Nigeria has suffered over the decades.

### Ideology

As a concept, ideology has been controversial almost from its birth, and more than one call has been issued to desist from its profligate use (Sartori, 1969 cited in Knight, 2006:619). Ideology is an enigmatic phenomenon, and much controversy exists among scholars about its meaning and effect; it is the most elusive concept in the whole of social sciences, an essentially contested concept, one about the very definition (and therefore application) of which there is acute controversy (Cassels, 1996:1; Sargent, 1999:3; McLellan, 1986:1). In fact,

*nobody has yet come up with a single adequate definition of ideology...This is not because workers in the field are remarkable for their low intelligence, but because the term ‘ideology’ has a whole range of useful meanings, not all of which are compatible with each other (Larrain, 1979 cited in Cassels, 1996:1).*

The foregoing assertions have been reinforced by Andrew Heywood (2003:5) who points out that few political terms have been the subject of such deep and impassioned controversy, and that the first problem confronting any discussion of the nature of ideology is the fact that there is no settled or agreed definition of the term, only a collection of rival definitions. However, in spite of these conceptual and definitional difficulties, a few remarks on the meaning and nature of ideology would be in order.

The word “ideology” was first used in the 1790s by a French theorist – Antoine Destutt de Tracy, a founding member of the Institute Nationale, who introduced the term as a newly

conceived science in opposition to the subject of metaphysics, and by which he meant the “science of ideas” - a fresh discipline intended to be the basis of an entirely new social and political order (Johari, 1987:460; Hoffman and Graham, 2009:167; Heywood, 2003:6). Among the meanings that have been attached to ideology are the following:

- (i) a political belief system;
- (ii) an action – orientated set of political ideas;
- (iii) the ideas of the ruling class;
- (iv) the worldview of a particular social class or social group;
- (v) political ideas that embody or articulate class or social interests;
- (vi) ideas that propagate false consciousness amongst the exploited or oppressed;
- (vii) ideas that situate the individual within a social context and generate a sense of collective belonging;
- (viii) an officially sanctioned set of ideas used to legitimize a political system or regime;
- (ix) an all-embracing political doctrine that claims a monopoly of truth; and
- (x) an abstract and highly systematic set of political ideals (Heywood, 2003:6)

According to Lyman Sargent (1999:3), an ideology is a value system or belief system accepted as fact or truth by some group, and it is composed of sets of attitudes toward the various institutions and processes of society. In his view, an ideology provides the believer with a picture of the world both as it is and as it should be, and in doing so, organizes the tremendous complexity of the world into something fairly simple and understandable. As observed by Reo Christenson and others (cited in Eminue, 2001:295), an ideology can be regarded as the belief system that explains and justifies a preferred political order for society, either existing or proposed, and offers a strategy for its attainment, and it also includes a set of basic assumptions, both normative and empirical, about the nature and purpose of man and society.

The point has also been made that from a social – scientific viewpoint, an ideology is a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides a basis for organized political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power relationships. All ideologies therefore, according to this view, offer an account of the existing order, usually in the form of a “worldview”; provide a model of a desired future, a view of the Good Society; and outline how political change can and should be brought about (Heywood, 2007:45). It has been



observed that ideologies also serve to establish and deepen identity; promote unity; provide guidelines on appropriate political behaviour; confirm the legitimacy of the political leadership; facilitate conflict management; and directly affect the distribution of political power by demeaning and diminishing the standing of domestic opponents (Eminue, 2001:295).

In his analysis, Eskor Toyo (2001:23) points out that “by ideology we mean the code of beliefs, values and preferences which drive or are benchmarks for rulers in society or for classes or masses of people”. Within the context of Nigeria, Toyo (2001:23) contends that

*People who say that Nigeria does not need an ideology, or can exist without ideologies, are simply ignorant, or they are conscious opportunists or oppressors hiding their own beliefs, purposes and values because they know that their driving ideas and motives are selfish or anti-social.*

This essay adopts Professor Toyo’s description of ideology because it fits perfectly into the analysis of the corrupt attitudinal or behavioural patterns of Nigerian rulers. There is no doubt that “every social system is driven and sustained by an ideology or set of ideologies defining what its rulers consider right or wrong, just or unjust with reference to society” (Toyo, 2001:24). It is clear that Nigerian rulers and elites believe that public resources are meant to be stolen, looted, plundered and squandered. And they have done all these spectacularly!

### **3.0 Kleptocracy in Practice: Echoes from Nigeria**

When in 2004, an American scholar, Robert Rotberg (cited in Onumah and Onyeacholem, 2015) described the Nigerian leadership as “predatory kleptocrats” and “puffed-up posturers”, he was simply stating the obvious. There is no doubt that the stealing, looting and plundering of public resources by Nigerian rulers have had dire and catastrophic consequences for the overall development of the country and the wellbeing of its people. In one of its editorials, The Punch (July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016), a leading Nigerian newspaper, argued that but for corruption, the fiscal buffers such as the \$22 billion that was once in the Excess Crude Account and the huge sums earned from high oil prices between 2007 and mid-2014 would have benefited a greater number of Nigerians irrespective of any affiliation. Today, according to the

paper, unemployment is 24.1 per cent; less than 40 per cent the population have access to portable water; poverty is over 60 per cent; and infrastructure is pitiable.

It is difficult to disagree with the position of Debo Adesina (2016) that Nigeria is a country in trouble and its people are in real pains as they get little or no value for their commonwealth. He also points out that level of poverty has never been higher; the army of the unemployed is swelling by the day; and the cost of living has hit the skies while the average income has dwindled. The tragic irony, in Adesina's words, is that very few countries have anything near the warehouse of human and material resources available to Nigeria; but no nation has exhausted the store of harvested capital as mindlessly as Nigeria has done, and no nation has put its blessings to so much waste or plundered its resources so mercilessly, leaving it scrapping the floor for anything resembling crumbs.

The crippling poverty which pervades Nigeria is engendered and sustained largely by the larceny of the rulers who always steal public funds meant for the provision of social amenities and services for the people. Just as Acemoglu and Robinson (2013:3) observed about Egypt, Nigeria is poor precisely because it has been ruled by a narrow elite that have organized society for their own benefit at the expense of the vast mass of people. Political power, it is reasoned, has been narrowly concentrated, and has been used to create great wealth for those who possess it, and the losers have been the Nigerian people. This explains why Nigeria, a leading crude oil exporter, lacks electricity, good roads, hospitals, schools, railway system, employment opportunities, etc. Indeed, because of its rulers' "humongous thievery" (Oshun, 2015), Nigeria is having "two parts: a zone of existence occupied by the political elite, and a zone of non-existence, for the rest" (Ilunga Kabongo cited in Meredith, 2011:303).

It is important to emphasize that the problems of stealing and looting of public resources are ubiquitous in the Nigerian polity; all tiers of government as well as all state agencies and institutions are affected. Little wonder that Steven Pierce (cited in Ochonu, 2016) argues that to understand the history of statecraft in Nigeria, one must understand how corruption, in its various governmental iterations, has functioned as an arbiter in both adversarial and productive political engagements. Rather than being an anomalous virus of politics, what is called corruption, Pierce contends, is integral to how the Nigerian state is constituted and reconstituted by political elites.

It is thus unsurprising that Nigeria is a "recipient" of all the "medals" in the kitty of Transparency International, the global anti-graft organization. The country has been ranked as

one of the most corrupt countries in the world at one time; the second most corrupt country at another time; and the most corrupt at yet another time. Sadly,

*... the rich and fat kleptocrats who hold their knives to the carcass of the Nigerian elephants are too avaricious, too satiated, too visionless to notice the dangers in the Nigerian forest, forever festering, as they do, in the illusion that the booty is far too big, too sumptuous to vanish under their gaze. Worthy descendants of ancient Nero, they feast while the country burns... (Osundare, 2015).*

The kleptocratic proclivities of public officials in Nigeria have not only severely encumbered the country's quest for twenty-first century civilization, but have also eroded the Nigerian people's humanity, dignity and self-worth. There is a close correlation between the massive stealing of public resources by Nigeria's rogue elite and the socio-economic retardation of the country and the excruciating poverty plaguing the people. The more resources the rulers steal, the less is available for the promotion of the public good. Some of the exposed cases involve sums that are befuddling and mind-boggling. A few examples would suffice at this point. In 2012, many newspapers in Nigeria (for example, *Sunday Punch* of November 25, 2012) presented reports detailing how \$31 billion (cover N5 trillion) had been pilfered by public officials between 2010 and 2012.

Since 1999, billions of dollars have been stolen in the course of running a very fraudulent oil subsidy scheme. In 2012, for example, it was reported that N240 billion was voted for fuel subsidy in 2011; but the government later claimed to have spent over N1.3 trillion on the scheme. It was believed that the difference between these figures – over a trillion naira – was stolen by public officials. Adams Oshiomhole (cited in Ikhide, 2014), as a state Governor and member of Nigeria's extremely unpatriotic political class confirmed this when he publicly declared that “in the name of subsidy, large sums of money are being stolen”.

According to a report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), between 1960 and 2006, over N20 trillion or \$154 billion had been stolen by public officials in Nigeria. An estimated \$55 billion or N7.2 trillion of this amount, according to the report, was stolen between 2000 and 2006 (Ojukwu, 2007 cited in Obo and Williams, 2007:9). In 2013, the

pioneer head of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nigeria's anti-graft agency, told the Southwark Crown Court in the United Kingdom that a former governor of Delta State (South – South Nigeria) must have stolen at least \$500 million representing fifty percent of the revenue that accrued to that state during his reign ([www.saharareporters.com](http://www.saharareporters.com)). That former governor was sentenced in the United Kingdom to thirteen years in prison for fraud and money laundering.

It is no longer news in Nigeria that billions of dollars voted for the purchase of arms and equipment for the Nigerian military to enhance its war against Islamic fundamentalists in North-Eastern Nigeria were stolen by a few public officials led by a former National Security Adviser. In early 2016, a former Director of Finance and Account of the Nigerian Air Force told an Abuja High Court that he was used by his boss (a former Air Force Chief) to siphon 558.2 million naira from the Air Force account every month for fifteen months (Ugwu, 2016). This translated to hundreds of millions of dollars.

In 2015, the All Progressives Congress (the ruling party in Nigeria) accused officials of the immediate past regime in the country of looting at least 11.11 trillion naira (billions of dollars) of public funds. It has to be clearly stated that many leaders of the ruling party are also active members of the league of looters and plunderers of Nigeria. In January, 2015, the co-chairman of Nigeria Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing National Risk Assessment Secretariat declared at a public event that as at 2009, over N74.4 trillion (\$400 billion) of Nigeria's wealth was stolen by high level Nigerian public officials, and that much of this money was stashed in foreign bank accounts (Ikuomola and Adanikin, 2015).

It should be stressed that the few cases cited above are just the tip of the iceberg. Nigerian rulers and public officials have committed unpardonable crimes against the country and its people. It is clear that if a thorough and comprehensive probe is conducted on the actions and activities of all public office holders in Nigeria – senior bureaucrats, local government councillors, heads (i.e. chairmen) of local government areas, state governors and deputy governors and their cabinets, state houses of assembly (i.e. the state legislatures), state and federal judicial officials, President and Vice-President and their cabinets, the national parliament (Senate and House of Representatives), ambassadors, heads and members of state and federal government boards, agencies, committees and commissions, etc – since 1999, it would be

realized that billions of dollars (in cash and properties) have been stolen by these officials from the state offices they occupied (Obo, Coker and Omenka, 2014:71).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Nigerian rulers and public officials have – over the years – been overseeing a programmed and well organized system of public roguery. Indeed, Nigeria has been – and is still being – misgoverned by “the brotherhood of thieves” (Oluwasanmi, 2015).

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have attempted to redirect attention to a well-known and fundamental problem in Nigeria: the fact that the country is not backward and underdeveloped due to lack (or even paucity) of resources but rather because the enormous resources accruing to the country which should have been used for the development of the country are often stolen and plundered by public officials. Nigerian rulers have proved to be the real enemies of the country as they are responsible for its poor state and the improvement of the masses.

It is the rulers’ ideology of kleptocracy which underpins the “prebendal and ruinous rulership” (Obo and Adejumo, 2014:141) which Nigerians have grappled with over the years. This mode of governance depicts

*patterns of political behaviour and governance processes characterized by massive corruption in which state offices and political power are acquired and developed mainly for private accumulation of wealth. In this system, the essence of governance is to guarantee the comfort and luxury of the rulers and not to promote the welfare of the majority of the masses. Moreover, in this type of system, there is a dialectical connection between the rulers and the ruled: the more wealth the former extract from the system, the more impoverished and pauperized the latter become (Obo and Adejumo, 2014:147).*

As a country, Nigeria cannot be said to be a victim of what Niran Adedokun (2015) calls the “tyranny of limited options” because with a population of over one hundred and sixty million people, there are millions of Nigerians who are incredibly competent, visionary, flawlessly

patriotic, and who are not ideologues of the kleptocratic weltanschauung. These are the people who should govern the country but those who have so far ruined Nigeria through their thievery should be given the Chinese treatment (i.e., capital punishment). In the words of Pius Adesanmi (2016),

*Wahala is the fate of a door. A door never knows peace. A door never finds peace. Open. Close. Open. Close. Such is the fate of a door. May the fate of a door forever be the lot of those ruling Nigeria.*

To the above, we say: Amen!

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