

Corruption and African Traditional Morality: Implications of Akan Moral Values in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to establish the link between corruption and the African Traditional moral values within the context of the Akan community of Ghana. This article focuses on the definition of corruption, morality, the antecedents of moral behaviour before the colonial period, the colonial era and the postcolonial era, the acceptance of donations among the Akan people, and the causes and implications of corruption in Ghana. The moral values of the Akan are meant to promote the well-being of the community. Therefore, anything that denies the development of society cannot be considered African moral values. The giving and receiving of gifts among the Akan people of Ghana are identified as a moral value. However, the motive of the person must distinguish a gift from a bribe. The main argument of this study was that traditional African morality and corruption: implications of Akan Moral Values in Ghana. The study established that moral values among the Akan community in Ghana do not influence the decision of the receiver. Therefore, the right implementation of African moral values can be achieved to help combat corruption, provided the teaching of African moral values are added to our curriculum from the Basic school to the tertiary level.

Keywords: Corruption, Moral Values, Gifts and Bribes

INTRODUCTION

Corruption, *poroye*, has ferocious and adverse effects on the societies of Africans. Africans continue to battle corruption with all kinds of strategies and institutional structures like the Ghana Integrity Initiative (GII) and the Office of the Special Prosecutor (OSP), yet the canker keeps on spreading and destroying the fibre of society. This paper attempts to provide an assessment of African traditional morality and whether it serves as the root cause or not for corruption in Ghana. An extreme focus is put on presenting the meaning of corruption, its causes and effects, as well as some of the moral values which have become an acceptable norm in the Akan society. Every nation is battling with the issue of corruption in one way or the other. This study sought to understand structural corruption from the perspective of ethics. The main question will be: Is it right to attribute the unending battle of corruption to the African Traditional Morality in Ghana? The sub-questions will be: What is the corruption and morality in Ghana in relation to Akan moral values? What are the implications of corruption in Ghana, and finally, explore the application of Akan's moral values and recommendations?

Definition of Corruption and Morality

Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.” Corruption destroys trust, democracy does not function effectively and slows down development. Poverty, inequality in the distribution of national resources and social division in the country serve as products of corruption. It is obvious that corruption is a dangerous phenomenon in society. Khan (1996:13) defines corruption as “an act which does not conform to the prescribed rules that regulate a person's behaviour who occupies a public office because of personal gains such as prestige, power and wealth.” The definition of Khan points to the issues confronting Africans or developing nations in accumulating wealth at the detriment of others.

Kunhiyop (2008:165) defines corruption “as making someone morally corrupt or becoming morally corrupt oneself”. Kunhiyop (2008:165) introduces another element known as “morally” and relevant to our discussion. Some of the words used to denote corruption are bribery, *ketasehye*; extortion *asisie*; fraud, *Se wode nyansa kwan efa obi sika anaa adwuma*, and the last one is Nepotism (Kunhiyop, 2008).

The terms ethics and morality are closely related, and the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines it as “the moral principles that control or influence a person’s behaviours or a system of rules of behaviour”. The definition shows clearly that ethics and morality are used interchangeably as rules and regulations in society. Furthermore, Wiredu (1992:192) posits that ethics is “observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interest of the individual to those of the society”. The way Wiredu defines morality actually projects the interest of the individual and the interest of society. The Akan society, which is rich in culture and tradition, actually sees affluence as a blessing from *Tweduapon Kwame*, Almighty God. Therefore, the morality of the individual showcases the interest of the individual first, and then to society. In this case, a person can do whatever to get what they want and use it to help society. Magesa (1997:2) also defines morality as “a normative ordering, in terms of perceived meanings, values, purpose and goals of human existence, of the lives of persons concerning how they can choose to relate themselves to reality.” There is a strong attachment of religiosity attached to the moral values of Africa. It agrees with Mbiti’s assertion that “Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices” (Mbiti, 1970). As Kofi Opoku states that religion can be seen in the life of the Akan people of Ghana and “it may be said without fear of exaggeration that life in the Akan world is religion and religion is life” (Opoku, 1974). The corruption perception index places Ghana in 72nd position out of 180 countries, with a score of 43 out of 100 in 2022.

The 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) displays that most countries are failing to stop corruption. The CPI ranks 180 countries and territories around the world by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, scoring on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). The global average has remained unchanged for over a decade at just 43 out of 100.

The corruption perception index reflects the corruption practices in Ghana. The position and the score point to the presence of corruption in Ghana, which is propelled by the above causes of corruption.

METHODOLOGY

By adopting a literary approach, this paper interrogates the moral framework of Akan values expressed in folktales, proverbs, and cultural symbols to explore their connection with contemporary narratives of corruption in Ghana. Rather than relying on statistical analysis or empirical data, this approach emphasises text and cultural story analysis. Akan moral values and their implications for corruption can be qualitatively analysed; however, a literary approach informs the analysis. The paper does not employ quantitative or qualitative methods; instead, it utilises Akan stories, proverbs, and cultural symbols that reflect the moral values of Akan traditional morality.

Causes of Corruption in Ghana

Corruption in Ghana has numerous causes in Ghana. Myint posits that greed on the part of politicians and other officeholders serves as a causative factor in promoting corruption in Ghana (Myint, 2000). Politicians and other officials tend to remain in office for a long time, thereby influencing the electorate with money (Myint, 2000). This money does not come from their salary but rather from the illegal money they receive from other people. Another cause is high expectations from the society and communities in which the politicians and officeholders were elected into office. Myint (2000:40) indicates that officeholders in the country are “required by tradition to present gifts” to functions such as weddings, parties, festivals and other celebrations. Another cause is the bureaucratic process in Ghana. The procedure for getting attention in public institutions is very laborious. Myint (2000:40) says ‘The underhanded payment that has to be made to a clerk to expedite the issue of a driving license has its own set of problems.’ Furthermore, insufficient salary also propels a worker to indulge in illegal activities to cater for their basic wants. Therefore, raising workers’ pay can minimize the level of corruption practices in our society. The desire to be rich has led a lot of people to indulge in illegal activities, which also serve as a contributing factor to corruption. The church cannot be exempted from this

canker. The prosperity gospel, which saturates our airwaves and churches, especially charismatic churches and neo-prophetic ones, can also serve as a contributing factor in promoting corruption in Ghana. The causes of corruption cannot be overemphasized. The question is whether the traditional ethics of Ghanaian society are part of the moral decadence. Let us examine some of the traditional practices in Ghana.

Acceptable Behaviour of Presenting Gifts in African

Kissi and Eck describe the Akan as the largest ethnic group in Ghana, making up 47.3% of the population of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service 2013). They comprise the Bono, Asante, Adanse, Twifo, Asen, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwahu, Sehwi, Awowin, Nzima and Ahanta. (Kissi & Eck, 2017). Onyinah arranges the Akan ethnic group into regions such as Ashanti, Western, Western North, Central, Bono, Ahafo and part of Eastern and Volta (Onyinah, 2012). Salam and Falola state that “the Asante Empire expanded their influence and became the most powerful force in modern Ghana under the leadership of Osei Tutu” (Salm & Toyin, 2002).

Giving out gifts and accepting gifts can be classified as moral values among the Akan people of Ghana. There is a saying that *Obi mba ohene anim nsampa*, to wit, “You are not to appear before the King's palace empty-handed. This moral principle is accepted in societies to ensure that the person appearing before the King receives the audience and attention. A proverb goes like this: *Papaye ma nipa di aduane a wantɔ*, kindness allows a person to eat the food he did not buy. This indicates that virtue brings rewards. It can have a negative connotation in which people demand something when offered.

Giving gifts is culturally relevant in the Akan Community of Ghana. However, Graycar and Jancsics suggest that cultural relativism brings out varying interpretations of morality, thereby influencing external factors to complicate the universal applications of moral values (Graycar and Jancsics, 2017). Undoubtedly, universal moral laws are accepted by all human beings, but societal moral values allow a person to stay effectively in society. The Akan traditions are meant to promote the general well-being of the individuals in the society,

The difference between gifts and bribes enhances the discussion of this paper. According to Graycar and Jancsics (2017:1014), people see no harm in giving gifts. They also postulate that,

Gifts are usually exchanged as part of a regular social relationship. On the other hand, people almost universally condemn bribes, viewing them as undesirable, harmful and destructive. Bribes are given to influence the outcome of political, bureaucratic, business or professional decisions or relationships. Gifts are legal, while bribes are illegal.

From the assertion made by Graycar and Jancsics, one could identify the distinction between gifts and societal. In the Akan moral values, anything that influences a decision or situation is technically considered illegal.

The Influences of Traditional Donations and Corruption

The first point to raise in the morality and acceptable behaviour among the Akans is when a member of the community appeared before the gods (deities) of the land for *abisa* divination (Onyinah, 2012). Onyinah (2012:85) posits that “*abisa* (divination) is the central activity of the work of *akomfoɔ*, the principal figure in the *abosomsom* (the worship of the gods)”. Evans-Anfom (1986:2) posits that human beings in Africa “believed that there was divine control of the universe and that it was possible to contact this divinity to find an explanation on what was happening or what was about (or likely) to happen.” A traditional shrine is a place where individuals or communities offer sacrifices to invoke the blessings of God and influence the gods through gifts before executing a task. Kunhiyob (2008:166) claims “one had to approach the gods with gifts in hand to appease them for some wrongdoing or to thank them for such things as a good harvest, the birth of a child or the coming of the first rains.” The Akans of Ghana strongly believe that the gods can never be wrong or involved in any immoral activity. Based on this conviction, giving out gifts to the gods through the traditional priests cannot be considered a bribe.

Furthermore, the appearance of a member before the kings and elders with gifts is considered an acceptable moral behaviour in the Akan communities of Ghana.

In the Akan communities in Ghana, it is an indisputable fact that the chiefs and elders have higher power and influence in the activities and moral values of the societies. There are Checks and balances in the community that restrict the chiefs and elders from being careless in discharging their duties. The chiefs and elders were regarded as arbitrators of law and order in the society (Nukunya, 2016). They have the right to bless and curse, which is seen during libation pouring and their pronouncement. Nukunya (2016:285) states that “the chiefs were in the same position, getting rich rewards for what they were installed to do and were, in addition to the stool property, the taxes and the court fines meant for upkeep.” Since there are no well-structured salaries for the chiefs and elders in the Akan communities in Ghana, gifts could be classified as salaries.

Nukunya underscores that these practices are common among the Asantes of Ghana (Nukunya, 2016). Nukunya (2016:285) quoted Busia to buttress his argument by pointing out that.

The most noticeable thing that struck me when I began my inquiries in Kumasi in 1942 was the considerable intrigue that went on regarding constitutional disputes that came before the Ashanti Confederation Council. Bribes were given and received in such cases. It was so common that everyone knew about it, and everybody talked about it.

However, Kunhiyop does not see the gifts as bribes because the sacred chiefs and respected elders are expected to discharge their duties and responsibilities without any fear or fervour (Kunhiyop, 2008). From the various assertions, I can deduce that the acceptable practices in the palace are not considered bribes when justice is done. Still, when justice is denied, then the members of the community will begin to raise questions that border on their integrity. The people's worldview can never be considered to include such practices as bribery and corruption.

“The principle of reciprocity” by Nukunya also serves as an antecedent of corruption in Ghana (Nukunya, 2016). For instance, when a person visits family members in the hometown, he/she has the opportunity to offer gifts to them as a family member. When the person returns to the city, the family members will gift him/her items such as maize, yam, plantain, chicken and other foodstuffs depending on the produce from the soil and environment (Nukunya, 2016). This practice has been in existence from the precolonial era, the colonial era and the post-colonial era.

The third aspect is the giving of gifts to the traditional priests for consultation. Based on these assertions, Onyinah admits that the traditional priests prepare charms for the people to enrich themselves in an unapproved way (Onyinah, 2012). Kunhiyop asserts that giving out gifts to the Diviners and priests who serve as mediators to “carry the will of the gods” to “misconstrue what the gods were unthinkable” (Kunhiyop, 2008). In a certain town, a traditional priest charges the customer before rendering services. This kind of act is unacceptable behaviour, yet rampant in the Akan community of Ghana.

The Implications of Corruption in our Society

Corruption erodes trust, weakens democracy, hampers economic development, and further exacerbates inequality, poverty, social division and the environmental crisis. Exposing corruption and holding the corrupt to account can only happen if we understand the way corruption works and the systems that enable it. Corruption destroys trust, democracy does not function effectively and slows down development. Poverty, inequality in the distribution of national resources and social division in the country serve as products of corruption. It is obvious that corruption is a hazardous phenomenon in society.

Kunhiyop (2008:167-168) brings out the effects as “erosion of moral values, increased social evils, lack of transparency, disregard for the rule of law, oppression of the weak, lack of public trust, and destruction of the moral fibre of society.” The impact of corruption affects every aspect of society and the economy. The above assertion by Samuel Waje Kunhiyop shows that corruption must not be entertained in our society because it defiles the African moral values which protect the well-being of society.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is either difficult to associate corruption with the moral values in the Akan community or to disassociate corruption from African Moral values. A former Convention People's Party (CPP) General Secretary, James Kwabena Bomfeh, affectionately called "Kabilla", has expressed deep concern about the disconnect between religious beliefs and lifestyle among Ghanaians. During an interview on Peace FM, which is known as the "Kokrokro" morning show, he asserts that a portion of the population lacks a genuine understanding of their religious faith (Amoako, 2023). He further reiterates that the inability of the religious people to translate their religious faith into action has caused the rise of bad behaviours such as hatred, corruption and laziness in Ghana. He says, "If love prevails in our country, corruption will have no way. Cheating will have no way. Laziness will have no way (Amoako, 2023). The moral values of the Akans are meant to promote the well-being of the community. Therefore, anything that denies the development of society cannot be considered African moral values. The giving and receiving of gifts among the Akan people of Ghana is considered a moral value. However, the motive of the person must distinguish a gift from a bribe. The giving and receiving of gifts among the Akans in Ghana, as consultation fees for the gods, for appearing before the elders and chiefs of the community, can be modernised based on the motive of the receiver and the giver.

Therefore, the right implementation of African moral values can be achieved to help combat corruption, provided the teaching of African moral values is added to our curriculum from the Basic school to the university in Ghana. The fight against corruption demands a comprehensive approach that enforces societal change. The inclusion of African moral values in the Ghanaian education system through the implementation of the government's legal policy framework shall ensure the inherent power to shape and model the individual in the society and nation to exhibit high moral virtues, thereby combating corruption in Ghana.

In addition, the religious bodies in the nation have an enabling environment to ensure the instilling of moral values in the people in the nation. Teaching and encouraging people to exhibit these moral values, such as honesty, integrity, hard work, truthfulness and faithfulness, will cure the cancer of corruption in the fibre of society.

Moral values are meant for the promotion of the well-being of society. Undoubtedly, individuals are attached to their community in the Akan society in Ghana with a strong sense of responsibility in ensuring the general welfare of the people in the society. This brings the development that Ghanaians are anticipating. Therefore, the whole population must see Ghana as one community in which development must be based on the values and norms emanating from African traditional religion.

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