

# BOOK REVIEW

**Steven Pierce. *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Culture in Nigeria*.** Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016. vii + 275 pp. Maps. Notes. Index. \$27.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6091-9.

Corruption is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges facing the Nigerian state. It has been fingered to be at the root of a wide range of maladies, such as insecurity, poverty, poor infrastructure, and general underdevelopment. Nigerian corruption has attracted the attention of numerous scholars over the years, and this has given rise to a plethora of insightful analyses, from several different angles. However, Steven Pierce, in *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Culture in Nigeria*, offers a new perspective and fresh insight into the discourse. He takes as a point of departure the position that Nigerian corruption is rooted in the culture of the people, and this explains why it has been extremely difficult to eradicate. According to Pierce, corruption is a cultural characteristic, and the prevalence of corruption in Nigeria derives from its cultural complexity (5). This cultural complexity explains the differentials in interpretation and definition of corruption in the country.

In essence, wide gamuts of practices have come to be subsumed under the rubric of corruption, which therefore assumes different dimensions, aptly identified by Pierce as the corruption-complex. This corruption-complex, which predates colonial penetration, became part of the building blocks of the Nigerian state. Although the book has its setting in northern Nigeria, the author extrapolates it into the whole Nigerian state because “Muslim Hausa culture has been politically central to Nigeria from the start of internal self-rule onward” (9). The whole of the book, which is divided into two parts, was therefore written to explain this position.

Part One, which consists of three chapters, provides the empirical discussion that supports the conclusion reached in Part Two. In this first part, the author explains the various elements of corrupt practices that predate colonial penetration. Pierce explains with historical details how traditional political leaders in northern Nigeria used their offices and status for personal ends. Gratification of various forms was regarded as a perquisite of office and therefore it was demanded, even when it was not given. The pattern of

appropriating public platforms for private ends became ingrained in the British indirect rule, although the British administrative system had an undergirding code of ethics that is absent in Nigerian culture. Corruption-complex, as depicted in the book, was furthered by oil rents, which arrived shortly after independence. The military emerged on the political turf as a major enabler of the corruption culture. A picture is therefore painted that both the colonial and post-colonial suzerainties were products of their previous eras. Just as the colonial period was erected on pre-colonial practice, the post-colonial was nothing but a continuation of the colonial era, in respect to corrupt practices. Nothing really changed.

Part Two is comprised of essays. The first essay, which is Chapter Four, is an engagement with the concept of moral economies, presenting a practical discourse of the concept. This chapter traces how the concept was first used by E. P. Thompson for eighteenth-century British politics and how James C. Scott enlarged it beyond the period, before it was further fine-tuned by other scholars to capture the contemporary situation. Drawing from the theoretical exposé, Pierce paints a complex relationship between Nigerian people and corruption. In one breath, Nigerian people abhor corruption, and in another they support it. Taking a “stance of acceptance and critique” (166) of corrupt practices practically underscores the attitude of Nigerians toward the abuse of office. In this context, corruption is acceptable as long as it benefits the people and kicked against if the proceeds are not shared with the people.

Chapter Five, which is the second theoretical essay, explores the Nigerian state in its ideological standing. Here, Pierce identifies concrete efforts taken by the Nigerian state to address the corruption siege and how such attempts have been stymied by the dynamics of state formation and operation and by the characters of the actors driving the crusade. In making this explanation, Pierce rejects the weak state analysis of the Nigeria government. To him, there is visible evidence that the capacity of the Nigerian state to deliver was handicapped by the antics of the political elites and by a general compromise of the populace in matters concerning corruption practices.

The book takes as its sources personal interviews and personal experience of the author, as well as extensive archival materials sourced from Kano, Nigeria, and the United Kingdom. These eclectic sources confer some level of credibility to the work. However, the book suffers from one major limitation. Not many people will agree with the extrapolation of Muslim Hausa culture and traditional practices as representative of Nigerian ways in general. There are over two hundred ethnic groups in Nigeria, and all with different cultures and mores, though this is acknowledged by the author. Indeed, Peter Ekeh’s Two Publics concept suggests that the traditional sphere in Nigeria is undergirded by high moral rectitude, as compared to the public space. In essence, the book will likely be seen, just as the author envisages, “as a very partial picture of the Nigerian corruption” (9). In spite of

this shortcoming, however, Steven Pierce has written a valuable book that focuses our attention on the fundamental problem of corruption in Nigeria.

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**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

Asiimwe, Godfrey B. 2013. "Of Extensive and Elusive Corruption in Uganda: Neo-Patronage, Power, and Narrow Interests." *African Studies Review* 56 (2): 129–44. doi:10.1017/asr.2013.45.

Demarest, Leila, and Arnim Langer. 2019. "Reporting on Electoral Violence in Nigerian News Media: 'Saying It as It Is'?" *African Studies Review* 62 (4): 83–109. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.150.

Smith, Gerald H. 1997. "The Dichotomy of Politics and Corruption in a Neopatrimonial State: Evidence from Sierra Leone, 1968–1993." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 25 (1): 58–62. doi:10.1017/S1548450500005345.