Moral Economies of Corruption

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Like many well-beloved children, this book was an accident. It came about as I moved between two big research projects, one on the history of land law, the other on the politics of criminal law. Indeed, the research that has gone into it was originally planned (and funded) for those ends. As I worked on the two projects, my mind kept drifting back to my many conversations with a remarkable man, Malam Isa Muhammad. In many ways, Malam Isa was an ordinary talaka, commoner; he was a farmer, and he was very poor. He was distinguished, however, by a razor-sharp intellect and a biting wit, and he had enjoyed a career as an activist in the Northern Elements Progressive Union and People’s Redemption Party, left-wing parties during Nigeria’s First and Second Republics, respectively. Spectacularly knowledgeable about the political history of his town, and about the travails of its poorer residents, Malam Isa was also gifted at sensing when I did not understand concepts to his satisfaction. His patience and generosity made all the difference to me in some trying times. And his insistence on telling me about his comrades’ problems in his own terms is what ultimately led to this book.

While I was finishing my first book, Jim Brennan invited me to the African history seminar at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, which I took as an opportunity to revisit a point Malam Isa had pressed, and which I had not resolved to his satisfaction or mine. Among Hausa-speaking people in northern Nigeria, there seemed to be several different ways of talking about corruption, only one of which accorded with my own understanding of what the word entailed, and I presented a paper laying out the concepts and the problems they highlighted. The audience pushed me hard, helping me to think through the problem sufficiently to
turn my paper into a proper article. Along the way, I was helped enormously by the editors and anonymous readers for *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, where it appeared. While I was a refugee from Hurricane Katrina, Shannon Dawdy invited me to the University of Chicago, where I presented a near-final version of the article. Ralph Austen made me rethink the basic logic of what I had written, while Jean and John Comaroff picked up on what had been almost a throwaway line and pointed out that it raised a book’s worth of questions. The rest followed from there.

I owe profound thanks to countless people in Nigeria for their help, advice, patience, support, and criticism. I have benefited from my affiliation with and support from many institutions: Bayero University, and especially its Departments of History, Nigerian Languages, and Islamic Legal Studies, and from its Centre for Democratic Research and Training (Mambayya House); the Kano State History and Culture Bureau; Arewa House; and the Nigerian National Archives (Kaduna). Hajiya Aisha Shehu, head of research and documentation at HCB, and the Honorable Professor Haruna Wakili, then director of Mambayya House, provided me with institutional home bases and greatly facilitated my work. Usman Aliyu, as ever, provided wonderful research assistance, and a great many people shared their wisdom. Because of the somewhat sensational subject matter of this book, I have for the most part structured my narrative in a way that avoids oral history, and the interview material that is presented is for the most part noncontroversial. I am deeply, personally grateful to everyone who was willing to talk to me. I hope this text adequately signals my intellectual debts without placing anyone in a difficult situation.

This book was written while I was a member of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS). I am grateful to Professors Didier Fassin and Joan Scott for their intellectual leadership and for the opportunity to participate in their seminars on moral issues and on secularism. My arguments were shaped and enriched by conversations with Didier and Joan and with my fellow members, especially Laurie Green, Kimberly Hart, Cecile Laborde, Tomoko Masuzawa, Jeffrey Stout, Judith Surkis, and Winni Sullivan. I made final revisions on the manuscript while a senior fellow at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg/Centre for Global Cooperation Research (GCR), University of Duisburg-Essen and on a sabbatical from the Department of History at the University of Manchester. My thanks to Drs. Alexandra Przyrembel and Volker Heins, who headed my research unit while I was at GCR, and to my colleagues while I was there, especially Sarah van Beurden, Morgan Brigg, Jaroslava Gajdosova, and Abou Jeng. I am equally grateful to my friends and interlocutors here at Manchester, Laurence Brown, Paulo Drinot, Pierre Fuller,
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and he will together create a better future than the one we have made for them.
This book is for Elango.
Map 1. Three Regions, 1939–1963