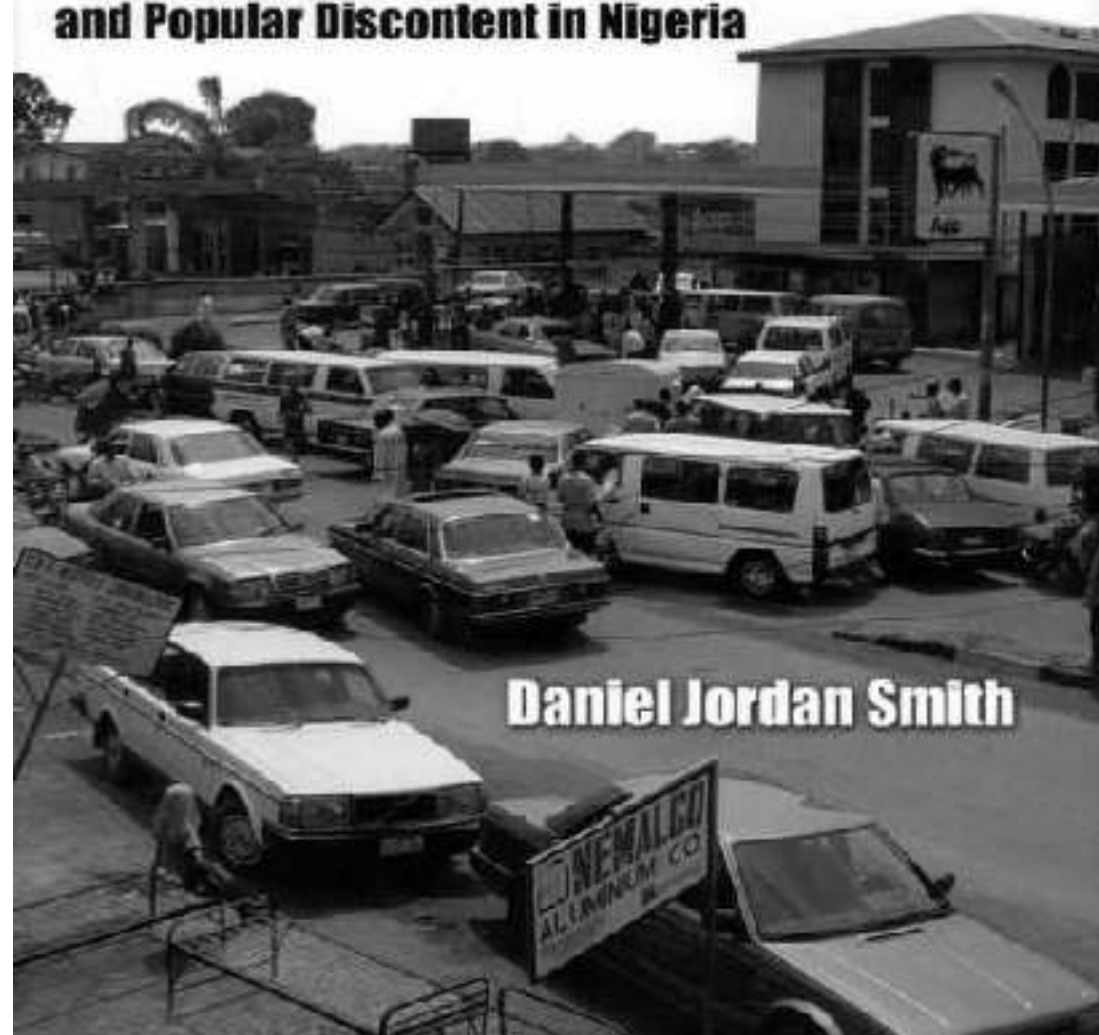


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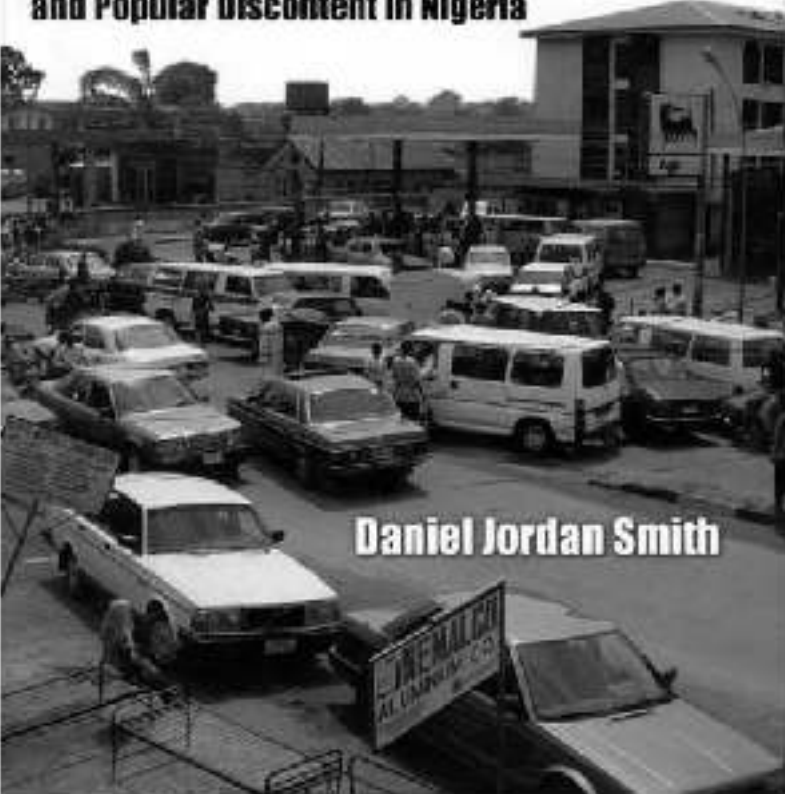
**Everyday Deception
and Popular Discontent in Nigeria**

Daniel Jordan Smith



A CULTURE OF Corruption

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DISCONTENT IN NIGERIA

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In memory of Claus Gustav Jordan and Charlotte Backus Jordan

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IT IS EASY TO FEEL ambivalent about Nigeria. In my experience, the people are outgoing, warm, and welcoming. They exude confidence and pride. For scholars and other friends of Africa who sometimes feel compelled to combat misguided stereotypes that the continent and its people are helpless and hopeless, nothing could serve as a stronger counter than witnessing ambitious, vibrant, and entrepreneurial Nigerians going about their daily lives. Against seemingly insurmountable obstacles, people exhibit fortitude and persevere with great resilience. As big as Nigeria is, it sometimes seems too small to contain its astonishing flurry of human activity. More than any place I have ever been, there is never a dull moment. Maybe the only thing more striking than Nigerians' extraordinary efforts to fulfill their aspirations is the critical collective awareness they possess regarding the problems in their own society—a national self-consciousness perhaps most evident in Nigerians' biting, unrestrained, and frequently self-mocking humor. Nigeria is an exciting place to live, work, and of course study. For these reasons and many others, it is impossible not to love Africa's giant.

But Nigeria can be a very difficult place as well. The same characteristics that make Nigeria appealing can also make it loathsome. As an anthropologist, it is usually considered impolitic to say you dislike the place you work, even if you love it, too. In published representations of our research, anthropologists generally err on the side of empathy for our subjects. Part of the beauty of our craft is that immersion in another society and culture offers insights and perspectives not available through other methods of social science. Getting to know something about real people and their everyday lives by working, living, and being with them over a relatively long period of time is at the core of our contribution to scholarship, and to any larger idealistic ambitions we may have for making the world a better place. For all that we celebrate cultural difference, we also affirm that in many crucial ways "they" are just like "us."

While it might seem odd to emphasize my ambivalence about Nigeria up front, ironically it is a sentiment I share with many, if not most, Nigerians. Part of their collective self-consciousness is an unsurpassed capacity for self-criticism. So when I say that in addition to being gregarious and hospitable, Nigerians can be aggressive and intimidating—or that even as they are proud and self-assured, they are also frequently arrogant and unyielding, I suspect that many Nigerians will recognize these traits in their compatriots, and maybe even in

themselves. I have frequently described Nigeria to colleagues who work in other West African countries by saying that they would find many similarities, but that in Nigeria the volume is turned up-sometimes too high. The country's huge population and a process of rapid urbanization contribute to a sense that life is hectic, hurried, and stressful-a perception often voiced by Nigerians in the ubiquitous pidgin English phrase "Nigeria na war-o," which translates literally as "Nigeria is a war." For ordinary Nigerians, and certainly sometimes for me, getting ready for each day in Nigeria is a bit like preparing for the tension of battle. Life is hard, but what is more, Nigerians almost seem to take pleasure in making it harder for themselves and others.

Anyone who has experienced a Nigerian "go slow," the local slang for a traffic jam, has seen some of these dynamics at work. Drivers aggressively attempt to circumnavigate the traffic, maneuvering between lanes, cutting off competing vehicles, driving on the shoulders, and frequently even racing between oncoming vehicles in the opposite lane-all the while loudly cursing and condemning other drivers who resort to the same tactics. On public transportation, passengers exhort their drivers to take drastic measures to get them where they are going as fast as possible, even as they lament the whole spectacle. All involved appear to know that had driving only worsens the traffic, but once others are doing it everyone feels compelled to participate or risk being overtaken, left behind, and even squashed.

The parallels to corruption, the topic of this book, are striking. While corruption is obviously much more complex than a traffic jam, in each phenomenon ordinary Nigerians are participants in a process wherein they are simultaneously the main victims and the loudest critics. Traffic jams, like corruption, contribute to making Nigeria such a stressful place. In moments of frustration, it is easy to attribute these problems to some kind of shared national flaw. Nigerians themselves often lead the bandwagon in this regard. Debating and analyzing the country's woes is a popular obsession, from the ranks of the intellectual elite to the poorest of the poor. No other national issue so riles Nigerians as corruption. They are acutely aware of its consequences and ambivalent about their own role in its perpetuation. Discontents about corruption dominate the national discourse. This book is about understanding corruption and its discontents, and showing how corruption and the discourses of complaint it generates are at the core of contemporary events, shaping collective imagination and driving social action.

For a long time, my affection for Nigeria, attachment to people there, and intellectual orientation as an anthropologist prevented me from approaching corruption as an object of scholarship. From a personal

point of view, I felt that focusing on corruption stereotyped and oversimplified the lives of people I knew and cared about. From an intellectual point of view, I thought that writing about corruption ran the risk of perpetuating common Western misrepresentations of Africa.

My inclination over the years has been to play down corruption in my accounts of Nigeria to friends, students, and professional colleagues in the United States. When U.S. friends and colleagues would ask me about the infamous harassment at the airport in Lagos, I usually replied that the reality was not nearly as bad as perceived and that the situation had improved a lot over the years-both true. In response to more general questions about corruption, I always tried to emphasize that Nigerians are good people, like people everywhere. When I thought someone might actually listen, I often added that we would do well not to exaggerate the differences in corruption between Nigeria and our society, a warning that resonated in Providence, Rhode Island, the city where I currently reside, where a longtime and very popular mayor ran a notoriously corrupt city government for many years. Recent U.S. corporate corruption scandals like Enron and news media accounts of shady government contracts awarded to companies such as Halliburton, which has extensive dealings in Nigeria as well as Iraq, have also reinforced a degree of caution in seeing corruption as a problem primarily in so-called Third World countries. Nevertheless, the popular and global association of Nigeria with corruption produced a particularly bad image, and my inclination was to combat it.

Although my most common response to inquiries about Nigerian corruption has been to try to correct overly negative images of the country, it would be disingenuous if I did not admit that I sometimes take a certain pride in the fact that I have lived, worked, and studied for so long in a place that has a reputation for being so difficult. Anthropologists are perversely fond of celebrating the hardships of our trade, whether they are the deprivations of rural life, the exposure to tropical diseases, or the adjustments to strange foods and "exotic" cultural practices. When other anthropologists or Africans in other countries in which I have spent a lot of time, such as Sierra Leone and Ghana, say things like, "You must be strong to live all those years in Nigeria," I have perhaps enjoyed this response too much. I must admit that at times, Nigeria's corruption has served as my symbol of its exoticness.

My effort to avoid portraying Nigeria's corruption as exotic, but also to sidestep confronting my own perverse enjoyment of that image, prevented me from addressing corruption head-on. The intense preoccupation that Nigerians themselves exhibit regarding corruption in their society, however, always left me with a nagging feeling that simply countering negative images obscured important questions.

Nigeria is rife with corruption, and no one is more aware of it than ordinary Nigerians. In various ways that I will describe and explain in this book, Nigerians are fixated on and passionate about corruption. Navigating corruption preoccupies people in all kinds of everyday endeavors, and talk about corruption dominates popular discourse. Much as I would like to be able to wipe the stigma of corruption from Nigeria's global reputation, Nigerians themselves regularly remind me that corruption is one of their most pressing problems. Increasingly, instead of trying to minimize the significance of Nigeria's notorious corruption, I realize that explaining it is central to understanding the very fabric of Nigerian society.

I began working in Nigeria more than fifteen years ago, first as a public health adviser for an international development organization and then for the last decade as an anthropologist. I met my wife in 1989, not long after I arrived in the country, and my relationship to Nigeria became even more personal when we married in 1992. Being an in-law became a central part of my identity in Nigeria, not only among my wife's kin and community members, but in much larger social networks. Over the years, being an in-law has proved to be a great advantage, not only as an anthropologist, but in navigating daily life in Nigeria. Nigerians almost universally become even more welcoming, helpful, and outgoing when they learn I am married to a Nigerian, even in settings that are seemingly impersonal, such as in government offices, at police checkpoints, or during airport customs searches. Indeed, being an in-law has illuminated how the interpenetration of personal networks and the bureaucratic offices of the state are integral to the mechanisms of corruption.

I would like to think that being an in-law has mostly added to my capacity to get the anthropologist's much sought-after "insider's perspective." But I do not mean to exaggerate these advantages or suggest that this book would have been impossible without them. Further, I do not want to minimize some of the obstacles created by being an in-law, perhaps especially in Ubakala, my wife's natal community, where I have lived much the time during my research. In some cases, people have proven less willing to trust me precisely because I am an in-law, and am therefore perceived to have vested interests that they need to consider in deciding what to say to me. Yet this is not a book about me or the impact of being both an in-law and anthropologist in Nigeria. In the chapters that follow, when my in-law status seems relevant to explaining something that occurred in my interactions with people or I think it influenced what they said, I mention it, in the same way that I try to explain other salient contextual issues. But I deal with it here mostly to acknowledge it up front so that the book can focus on corruption and its discontents as they are

experienced by Nigerians.

The fact that I have spent most of my years in Nigeria in the Southeast, and almost all of them among Igbo-speaking people certainly affects the version of "Nigeria" that comes across here. I have little doubt that many readers who are intimately familiar with Nigeria will read this book and recognize that it is particularly influenced by the Igbo perspective. Such an observation is almost certainly true. A few years ago, I traveled with an Igbo colleague from a university in southeastern Nigeria to Kano, the largest city in Hausa-dominated northern Nigeria. Our car broke down in the northern state of Kaduna and we were stranded for two days in a small village while a local mechanic rebuilt the engine. On the second day, we were joined by a Hausa man from Kaduna whose car also broke down. Inevitably our conversations turned to Nigerian politics. At a point, my Igbo colleague and the Hausa man were discussing the issue of ethnicity. They were debating the relative contributions and difficulties posed by their respective ethnic groups to the future of Nigeria. After extolling the Igbo's ingenuity and work ethic, the Hausa man said, "The problem with the Igbo man is that he has an `exaggerated personality.'" My Igbo friend laughed uproariously, accepting his Hausa interlocutor's characterization, even if it was a criticism. I remember thinking that most people from neighboring African countries would probably apply the Hausa man's critique of the Igbo to Nigerians as a whole, but it was a useful reminder of the diversity and nuances of culture within Africa's most populous country.

Almost all of the ethnographic examples of corruption as well as the contemporary events and popular discourses that corruption generates come from southeastern Nigeria. That is where I have lived for more than six years, and it is the place I have visited in all but two years since 1989. While my experiences and evidence have an Igbo slant, the kinds of everyday corruption I describe are not unique to the Igbo or the Southeast. Further, a good deal of the book focuses on local and popular understandings of corruption in the world of politics and the machinery of the Nigerian state, particularly in the arenas of development and democracy. Although Igbo interpretations are certainly colored by their history and cultural context, I believe Nigerians of all ethnic groups along with scholars and students more conversant with other parts of Nigeria will find much that is familiar. Indeed, part of my argument is that corruption and the discourses of complaint it produces are central to the way all Nigerians experience and understand the relationship between state and society.

In showing how discontents about corruption drive contemporary events and explain important social trends, I rely on local examples about which I have concrete ethnographic evidence. My analysis of

resurgent ethnic nationalism focuses on Igbo nationalism, but I believe that similar arguments hold in other regions of the country. My explanation of the burgeoning popularity of horn-again Christianity in southeastern Nigeria surely has parallels in the Muslim North. The vigilantes I describe in southeastern cities, and the rumors and accusations about the occult that circulate in Igbo communities, are found in their own vernacular forms elsewhere in Nigeria. The most persuasive evidence that I present is local and specific, but I contend that this strengthens rather than weakens the larger theoretical assertions I wish to pursue. At the very least, I hope it gives other scholars rich material to compare to their own findings and conclusions.

The research for this project has occurred over all the years I have lived and worked in Nigeria. I gathered some of my material before I even knew I was studying corruption. Only later did I realize what a large corpus of "data" on the subject I had accumulated over time. Even during my dissertation research, from 1995 to 1997, corruption was not my topic of study. I was interested in the effects of social change on population processes such as marriage, family organization, and fertility. But as is inevitably the case in Nigeria, corruption figured prominently in everyday experience and the common conversations of daily life. It was only in 2000 (the first time I returned to Nigeria following its transition to civilian rule in 1999) that I decided corruption was something I wanted to write about, perhaps spurred by the extra intensity of national discourses about corruption in the wake of Nigerians' rising expectations about democracy. Since 2000, I have spent every summer in Nigeria, and in 2004 I was there from June to December. Gathering ethnographic data about corruption meant being more attentive to media stories about the subject, interviewing people about their experiences with everyday forms of corruption and their interpretations of national corruption-related scandals, and trying to be even more diligent about observing and documenting the instances of corruption and the plethora of common narratives and complaints about corruption that are the stuff of daily life in Nigeria. It also meant paying attention to a wide range of contemporary events with the intention of pursuing their connections to corruption and its discontents. The book uses the experiences of particular people to understand and explain phenomena that have broad social and theoretical implications. By focusing on corruption ethnographically, I hope to show the kinds of insights that can be produced by taking this approach to studying a major contemporary problem.

Writing about corruption involves important ethical issues, including protecting people's confidentiality and anonymity. Although many

people have told me that I have their permission to use their names in the stories I tell, in most cases I have chosen to protect people's identities by disguising their names, and in some instances slightly altering the context of their cases. Obviously I cannot do this where the people involved are public figures, but in almost all instances, what I write about public figures is available in the media or is in regard to what ordinary Nigerians say about them. When I utilize quotations from newspapers and other publicly circulated documents, including e-mail scam letters, I reproduce them verbatim, without grammatical or spelling corrections.

Many people have asked me whether I think I will be banned from Nigeria once this book is published. I have always said that I do not think so, because I have forever found Nigeria to be a place of remarkable freedom of expression. The stories I tell about corruption in Nigeria are no more inflammatory or revealing than what circulates in everyday discourse, including in the media. Further, I do not try to document high-level corruption in this book. I am much more interested in how typical Nigerians experience corruption and what they have to say about it. Finally, and most important, I intend the book to be empathetic as well as critical. I certainly hope it is read that way, for that is surely the Nigerian spirit.

Acknowledgments

As I TRAVELED DOWN the long road of completing this book, I developed a new appreciation for the depth of debts that authors must acknowledge. I now read others' acknowledgments with a much greater appreciation, and hope my readers will realize that the gratitude and thanks I express here are much more than a formality.

This study would not have been possible without financial support from a number of sources. Though my dissertation ostensibly had nothing to do with corruption, in retrospect, many of the first ideas for this book were kindled during my dissertation research—and much of the evidence for the book was gathered during that initial long period of fieldwork from 1995 to 1997. I thank the Institute for International Education-Fulbright Program, the Population Council, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the National Science Foundation for funding my dissertation research.

I have continued to conduct fieldwork in Nigeria in every year since 1999. Although I have been funded to study a variety of topics, being in Nigeria inevitably enabled me to advance my research on corruption. I gratefully acknowledge the National Institutes of Health (3 P30 HL126251-10S1 and 1 R01 HL1724-01A1), the National Science Foundation (BCS-0075764), and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (5838) for their generous support of my research in Nigeria, without which this book would not have been possible. I also thank the Watson Institute for International Studies and the Department of Anthropology at Brown University for funding portions of my summer research. I owe particular gratitude to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which not only funded my two-year postdoctoral fellowship at the Population Studies and Training Center at Brown University from 1999 to 2001 but also supported half of my salary for my first four years as an assistant professor of anthropology. Without this support, this book—and much else for which I am grateful—would not have been possible.

Two chapters in the book are adaptations of previously published articles. Chapter 5 is a revised and expanded version of "Ritual Killing, '419,' and Fast Wealth: Inequality and the Popular Imagination in Southeastern Nigeria," which appeared in *American Ethnologist* (28 no. 4:803-26) in 2001, and was copyrighted by the American Anthropological Association. Chapter 6 is a revised and expanded version of "The Bakassi Boys: Vigilantism, Violence, and Political Imagination in Nigeria," which appeared in *Cultural Anthropology* (19 no. 3:228-55) 2004, and was copyrighted by the American Anthropological Association and the University of California Press. I thank the American Anthropological Association and the University of California Press for permission to use versions of these articles in this

I owe an incalculable debt to my supportive colleagues at Brown University. In the Department of Anthropology, my work has been encouraged, constructively criticized, and improved by a group of generous and engaged colleagues. They have all made me feel like they want me to succeed, and have always been willing to advise and assist. Douglas Anderson, William Beeman, Lina Fruzzetti, Richard Gould, Matthew Gutmann, Marida Hollos, Stephen Houston, David Kertzner, Shepard Krech III, Philip Leis, Catherine Lutz, Patricia Rubertone, William Simmons, Patricia Symonds, Nicholas Townsend, and Kay Warren have all acted at one time or another as adviser, cheerleader, critic, and teacher. In particular, I thank Philip Leis and David Kertzner for serving as mentors, reading and critiquing my work, and providing invaluable career counsel. I am especially grateful to David Kertzner, not only because I owe him a great professional debt, but because he continually shows the goodwill to do the little things to support and encourage his junior colleague.

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