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## Fantasy Theme Analysis: Rhetorical Visions of Political Corruption in Nigerian Newspapers

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### Abstract:

*This research lays emphasis on predominant corruption stories in popular Nigerian newspapers, by means of fantasy-theme analysis in reviewing issues that concern corruption within the Nigerian political sphere. Particularly, this analysis compares stories about Nigerian politicians who have been reported at various points in time by Nigerian newspapers as corrupt individuals, who in one way or the other were found guilty of syphoning funds and falsifying relevant information. Through a thorough examination of fantasy themes roles on these accounts and recognizing which parts of reality are significant, we conceive what the messages are able to achieve with regards to the creation of rhetorical visions within contexts of symbolic convergence theory. In this study, fantasy themes analysed disclose meanings regarding morality, personal decisions, and class privilege. This study also highlights how stories on corruption cases by political leaders could help in the establishment of proper, honourable societies that punish or reprimand certain corrupt behaviours via normative impact on audiences. Fundamentally, rhetorical visions derived in this paper suggest that decision to be corrupt or not, as a politician lies with the politician himself.*

**Keywords:** *symbolic convergence theory, fantasy-theme analysis, political journalism, politicians*

### 1. Introduction

Corruption is widespread, extending to all parts of the world at large. So vast a concept is corruption that it has the ability to change appearances, depending on the culture it finds itself. Within Africa or not, corruption is a prevalent issue, which has, sadly, permeated every sector of the society. As the days go by, newer terms are created to create graphic representations of just how deep corruption has eaten into the fabric of our beings. Terms such as "cancer, virus, cankerworm, parasite, epidemic" and a host of others are a few terms often used to metaphorically describe this societal ill (Apata, 2018, p.1).

Within the African context, and perhaps, as it concerns Nigeria, corruption takes a different tone altogether. A tone that screams "corruption at its peak dwells here." Why is this so? The African continent as a whole is constantly bedevilled with problems such as poverty, economic stagnation, social upheaval and political uncertainty (Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson, 2001; Acemoglu, 2005; Acemoglu & Robinson 2009, 2012; Johnson 2005; Mbaku 2007), all of which have been hypothesized to be core causes of corruption. Thus, the most popular narrative that is circulated today is hinged on corrupt public office holders lavishly spending public funds, living the luxury life, while their countrymen are left deprived and starved of basic, essential needs and amenities. As a matter of fact, José Ugaz, Chair, Transparency International as cited in Apata (2018, p.1) retorts that:

Corruption creates and increases poverty and exclusion. While corrupt individuals with political power enjoy lavish life, millions of Africans are deprived of their basic needs like food, health, education, housing, access to clean water and sanitation.

These observed it is not strange therefore to conclude that the causes of corruption lie in the above stated factors. Yet, these arguments do not end here, as they, in fact, revolve in a never-ending cycle of cause and effect. For instance, the argument that concerns itself with poverty tells a tale of corruption causing poverty, while a flip side tells a different tale of poverty birthing corruption. Hence, it becomes difficult to tell what truly is the cause, and what the effect is, in this situation.

The Nigerian 1999 constitution, section 22, saddles the media with the responsibility of holding the government, and by extension, public office holders, accountable for their actions and decisions. Having been entrusted with the role of the watchdog of the society- as well as protecting human right and interest, accountable governance indeed lies in the hands of the media. Siebert, Palterson and Schramm (1963) as cited in Isola (2008) assert that the mass media across different nations of the world are saddled with a number of responsibilities, among which are: monitoring governance, protecting the interests and rights of the weak in the society and advocating for issues and causes which enhance the growth and development of the society within which they operate.

It is believed among many that the Nigerian media have not been able to live up to their responsibilities as society's watchdog, particularly by having failed to ensure government accountability in Nigeria's emerging democracy, especially with regards to corruption cases. As a matter of fact, good governance, which is regarded as an "indispensable tool" for

national development is a big challenge and a huge source of worry to many nations of the world, of which Nigeria is included (World Bank, 1989, UNESCO, 2005; Nanda, 2006; Hout, 2007; Gisserlquit, 2012)

While this paper does not negate the effects of corruption on the African and Nigerian populace, but in fact highlights how much damage corruption has cost this dear country, it equally brings to bare how twisted and disregarded the real nature of corruption is, which in itself is a different problem altogether, and one that makes it more difficult to procure solutions to the issue of corruption in Nigeria.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Corruption

As simple a concept as corruption seems, there seems to be no easy and clear answer as to what it really is. As a matter of fact, and as far as literature is concerned, it is, and has always been an uphill task to come up with definitions that capture what corruption is. Academically, Peters and Welch (1978) insist that the inability to capture what corruption has hindered research. Buttressing this, Busell (2015) explains that there exist a variety of means via which corruption can be described. He explains further that no single definition can be found to cut across all research purposes. In line with this, therefore, he suggests that it is necessary to determine the context in which corruption is being studied as this will aid the study better. Bearing this in mind, this paper adopts Heidenheimer and Johnson's (2002) definition of corruption which holds that corruption refers to misappropriation of public funds for personal or individual gains. Farells (2005) views corruption as an ageless situation, capable of existing at any governmental level, nation or city, and time. This position is what Gardiner (1970, p.93) supports when he says:

Corruption is a persistent and practically ubiquitous aspect of political society; it is unlikely that any reforms will ever eliminate it completely. Wherever men compete for valuable but limited commodities, whether they are licenses to operate taxicabs, franchises to sell goods to the government, or freedom to operate a numbers game, there will be a temptation to secure these commodities through corrupt inducements if other efforts fail.

In like manner, Freidrich (1966, p.74) as cited by Heidenheimer (1970) says:

The pattern of corruption can be said to exist whenever a power-holder who is charged with doing certain things, i.e., who is a responsible functionary or officeholder, is by monetary or other rewards not legally provided for, induced to take actions which favour whoever provides the rewards and thereby does damage to the public and its interests.

In sum, corruption is a cross-fundamental, cross-fleeting and diverse wonder, which can exist wherever, whenever, and under any type of government.

### 2.2. Symbolic Convergence Theory and Fantasy Theme Analysis

Symbolic convergence theory (SCT), propounded by Ernest G. Bormann details the ability of communication to construct and maintain collective awareness by sharing fantasies or narratives. Bormann investigated how exercising collaborative fantasy engenders joint unity and eventually group mindedness. He affirmed that such societal narratives act as avenue for group participants to comprehend and make sense of communal actualities. So, sharing fantasies motivates building of convergent viewpoints, joint comprehension of typical encounters and common group identities. The word 'fantasy' in SCT implies shared explanation of matters that fulfils cohort's psychological or rhetorical necessities (Bormann, 1985). Contrary to popular perceptions of narratives as unrealistic day-dreams, fantasies incorporate previous or visualized futuristic incidences that unravel complexities from joint realities (Foss 1989). They likewise allow forums for persons to reflect on the future, as vital to visions of corruption in Nigeria.

Applying this theory to political corruption situations, the fantasies serve three shared functions: provide shared support for citizens who have been affected by the actions and inactions of corrupt public office holders, raise awareness, and establish a recognisable discourse for advocacy. It glides through the process of alerting readers about political actions, to induce their guiltiness concerning political apathy, blame politicians for the ills brought upon society under as a result of his corrupt practices, awakening series of feelings that corruption reports in politics can stimulate. The standard fantasy in these narratives are corrupt practices and the place of personal decisions, allowing people imagine success or failure in political events that they are yet to even experience, and propelling persons to act, possibly seeking an end to corruption among politicians and public office holders. Not only are fantasy themes meant to provide comprehensible ways to understand happenings, Foss notes that they are continually channelled and organized in certain directions for convincing elucidations of encounters (Foss 1989, p. 291). When accumulated, fantasy themes develop rhetorical foresight to include larger meaning (Foss, 1989). To probe into communal realism and ethnical interpretations imbibed by celebrity health story discourse, this paper presents these research questions:

- RQ1: What prominent fantasy themes of corruption stories exists in top-circulating Nigerian newspapers?
- RQ2: How do fantasy themes transmit morality, personal decisions, and class privilege?
- RQ3: What are the rhetorical visions of corruption and what predominant meanings do they imply via symbolic convergence theory?

## 3. Methodology

In order to arrive at a subtle expression of manners in which corruption in Nigerian politics are detailed and how this affects politicians' placement in socialized composition, the researcher employed fantasy-theme analysis to chart representative convergence. This lays emphasis on things such as environment, characters, actions, and their inter-relationship with the sole aim of creating jointly shared, rational foresight of actuality. (Bormann, 1985; Foss, 1989;

Garner et al., 1998; Aleman, 2005). Setting themes refer to locations where the actions are staged by the characters performing the different roles, character themes are concerned mainly with the features, intents and qualities of the character, action themes portray the behaviour of the drama's characters. All of these when put together evolve into what is known as fantasy themes which encourage moral orderliness (Aleman, 2005). This, provided a platform to map out notifications regarding corruption in politics and dispositions arising from several corruption memoirs.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher coded every article for classifications of fantasy theme, characters, action and setting.

### 3.1. Sample

The democratic dispensation which Nigeria finds itself today has a huge number of daily and weekly newspapers in circulation, making it difficult to examine all the newspapers. Thus, the newspapers used in this study are The News, The Premium times and The Comet. The politicians: Kemi Adeosun and Salisu Buhari were chosen for both fame and fixation of their corruption cases. We chose these corruption stories to capture issues that represent a causality split in political challenges. Articles about the politicians in the two newspapers were analysed.

### 3.2. Findings

For every politician, we track major fantasy themes via elements of action, characters and setting. We decide renowned fantasy themes and check how they can operate in telling corruption truths by SCT. We consider indications of community-based entitlements attributed to politicians and capable of affecting decision making. We likewise search for ethical evidences and breeding of political jurisdiction. Possible motivations for rhetorical perceptions in interacting about politicians were also expounded upon in the discussion segment.

### 3.3. Politicians as Corruption Antagonists

#### 3.3.1. Kemi Adeosun

Kemi Adeosun is the former chairman of the board of African Export-Import Bank (AfreximBank) and former Finance Minister of Nigeria, who allegedly got her NYSC exemption certificate unlawfully in gaining entrance to public capacity. Coverage of Adeosun spanned three articles in Premium times and one in the News newspaper. The theme of the coverage centres on an episode in which Adeosun resigned from her position as Finance Minister and this was accepted by President Muhammadu Buhari; this moment shapes her fantasy theme.

#### 3.3.2. Setting

The setting for Adeosun's resignation is the National Assembly, and her apartment in Aso Rock. The National Assembly is an accessible public space, while her apartment is rather out of reach to person beneath a certain level of societal status.

#### 3.3.3. Characters

Adeosun is the protagonist, and she is described as honourable and full of integrity. On 7 July, 2018, Premium Times (Nigerian online newspaper) claimed that Adeosun illegitimately received her NYSC exemption certificate to enter public service. Two days after, Adeyemi Adenike (NYSC Director of Press and Public relations) issued an announcement which affirmed that although Adeosun legally tendered requisition for NYSC exemption certificate, inquiries were still ongoing to ascertain its approval. On 14 September, 2018, Adeosun resigned as Minister of Finance in a letter to the President due to ongoing defamations of said forgery, where she attested that her NYSC exemption certificate was not genuine and may hinder credibility of the administration, if she did not vacate office. In this fantasy, forged NYSC certificate is the antagonist, because the forgery was done without her knowledge, but nonetheless, cost her a position as a public office holder.

A political character is Mr Yekini Nabena, acting National Publicity Secretary of All Progressives Congress (APC) who praised Adeosun for her bold act, wishing her well in subsequent endeavours, in addition to supporting the president in thanking her for enormous benefactions in stabilizing Nigeria's economy over the past three and half years. He goes on to add that in Buhari's regime of transparency and uprightness in conducting public affairs, no public official with iota of contentious dealings or honesty should remain in power. This is an important addition to the story because it shows Adeosun's readiness to do what is right, even in the face of unfavourable conditions, emphasizing that she is a receptive and accountable politician caring for truthful and necessary procedures, which raise awareness of the political corruption fantasy.

#### 3.3.4. Actions

Adeosun's decision to step down from public office was an acknowledgement of her integrity as well as the yardstick for most of the coverage about her. The Premium Times reports that APC viewed Kemi Adeosun's resignation from position of Minister of Finance and corresponding approval by President Muhammadu Buhari as an honourable, strong, characteristic and noble step. Another article by Premium Times reads "I have, today, become privy to the findings of the investigation into the allegation made in an online medium that the Certificate of Exemption from National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) that I had presented was not genuine. This has come as a shock to me and I believe that in line with this administration's focus on integrity, I must do the honourable thing and resign." In acknowledgement of her decision,

Mr Yekini Nabena, the APC acting National Publicity Secretary, in the Comet newspaper declared that “*Now that the report of the investigation is out, the right thing has been done, the honourable Minister has taken the path of honour and resigned.*” In the midst of all that she had been through, Adeosun left power, with her pride intact, having done the right thing. Her modesty is also compelling, as her exploits included noticeable improvement in tax collection and the cutting down of waste in public service, especially the curbing ghost-workers and budget racketeers. Although the country plunged into recession under her watch in August 2016, the economy later bounced back with fair improvement in GDP growth by mid-2017. Her tenure also saw Nigeria successfully raise Eurobond to shore up the economy, following reduction in oil prices which crippled government activities and threatened payroll.

She lays all of these to rest as reports from the Premium times reveal that shortly after her resignation, she quietly edited the biography on her verified Twitter page to remove her affiliation to the Nigerian government. She did not immediately replace it with any new position, also she tweaked her profile image to what seemed an official portrait of her with a grin. Adeosun's action to promote proper conduct and discourage corruption among politicians and public office holders are all a part of the corruption as a politician fantasy theme.

### 3.3.5. Fantasy Theme

As a former politician, and particularly, former Finance Minister of Nigeria, Adeosun has a fantasy theme that reveals what politicians should, and can do, in the face of corruption situations. The moment when she resigned completes a tale of the corruption fantasy theme. While one may conclude that a woman of her calibre and reputation will have no difficulty landing another good, mouth-watering job, that she decided to walk away from corruption, and do what was required of her, honourably and without question make her case no different from any other political office holders'. Thus, the message being sent out there is that of an individual, who will stand for rightness and justice, and will shun corruption, irrespective of what the corrupt practice might offer.

### 3.3.6. Politicians as Corruption Protagonists

#### 3.3.6.1. Buhari Salisu

Alhaji Salisu Buhari, a former speaker of House of Representatives, was the first to occupy the office after the 1999 general elections. He was best known for his inconsistency famousness which followed records of his decision and biography, yet, he refused to vacate his position in government. However, a Nigerian journalist named Sani Kabir, alongside his associates in United States of America (USA) were unhappy with this situation, and they sufficiently uncovered enough confirmation to facilitate cases that “Buhari's age declaration and educational qualifications declared in his pre-election data form were wide off the mark” Omoera (2010, p.36). Three of the articles about Buhari's case appeared in the comet newspaper, while one appeared in the Premium Times.

#### 3.3.6.2. Setting

The settings are in the House of Representatives, where the former speaker was a member. Another setting is in the law court, where the former speaker filed a lawsuit against another Nigerian newspaper known as *The News* which published a news story on the 12th of July, 1999 with the headline “The Crook”, alleging that Alhaji Salisu Buhari was never a student of the Toronto University, Canada. It also alleged that the speaker amplified his actual age. In reaction to this report by the newspaper, the speaker filed a lawsuit against the paper. The final setting is also in the House of Representatives where the Comet newspaper was quoted calling for the speaker to resign as: “...we reaffirm our position in an earlier comment the Honourable speaker should climb down from his high office until investigations are concluded” (as cited in Olutokun and Seteolu, 2001).

#### 3.3.6.3. Characters

Salisu Buhari is the antagonist, and he is referred to as “The Crook” by ‘The News’ newspaper. Buhari, who refused to vacate office despite the allegations levelled against him, was again reported in the Comet via its Editorial dated 20th of July, 1999. The editorial which was titled “Buhari: The Path of Honour” read:

...the House of Representative has a constitutional responsibility in the matter. The members should now rise up to the challenge by conducting a thorough investigation to ascertain the veracity of the allegations...He should vacate his office until the matter is over. This is the honourable thing to do (*The Comet* newspaper, 20th of July, 1999 as cited in Omoera 2010.)

In this fantasy, the investigative journalism undertaken by media practitioners to reveal the true state of Salisu Buhari's age and pedagogical attainments stated in his pre-election form is the protagonist, because it exposes readers to the truth and shields them from the lies the politician had hitherto fed them with. Hence, despite that fact that the speaker filed a lawsuit opposing their paper, they did not backpedal. Finally, he shamefully left his job.

Omoera (2010) further adds that even though the former speaker and his co-horts fought to remain in power, justice was eventually meted out to him and he was forced to vacate the seat of power. Consequently, Olutokun and Seteolu (2001) conclude that: consequential upon the watchdog role performed by the media, Buhari finally decided to resign from office and face prosecution on July 22, 1999. He was found guilty of forging certificate and given the option of going to jail for two years or paying fine.

Another character here are media goons who ensured that they met their responsibility of making sure government is accountable to citizens. Though Nigerians might have been unsatisfied with sanction imposed on the former

speaker for his obvious unscrupulous activities, media undeniably did its job of exposing the corrupt politician, and followed through till the case was adequately dealt with (Olutokun and Seteolu, 2001).

#### 3.3.6.4. Action

Reports of a politician with irregularities which trailed records of his decision and biography, yet, he refused to vacate his position in government reveal the politician flouting a moral code. Sources recall that the politician was called up by different newspapers to do the needful, yet, he refused. Information about falsifying his certificate and age emerged on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1999 through investigations by "The NEWS Magazine, whose discoveries surmised that Buhari was birthed in 1970 rather than 1963; moreover, he did not graduate from nor attend Toronto University as falsely claimed by the speaker. Section 65(1) of 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria prohibits anybody less than 30 years from contesting for membership of House of Representatives.

Again, Buhari insisted that he finished his NYSC at Standard Construction in Kano which was similarly false as his name was not seen as part of enlisted documentation comprising those who completed the programme. Despite these many accusations regarding his untrue attestations, Buhari quickly answered by attributing such news as assaults against him while announcing his guiltlessness and threatened to take legal actions against such character defamers. His stance was extremely emphatic that he was a targeted prey of evil pursuits. Notwithstanding, considering the magnitude of this deceptive sham and with Buhari left dry by some organizations which he professed belonging to, his vehement responses were of no use especially given ascending proofs against him. The magazine wrote Toronto University soliciting affirmation that Buhari was an alumnus. Carlo Villanueva, an official of the Institution replied, "*Regarding your request for confirmation of degree for Mr Ibrahim Salisu Buhari. We have searched our records and could not find anybody with the name you are inquiring with*"

He was also seen to be guilty regarding public opinion and venues where punishments were prescribed and policies enacted experienced utmost-peaked nervous anxiety. On Thursday, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1999, ashamed and trapped, Salisu Buhari confessed to Nigerians that he falsified his age, certificates and other expositions of the NEWS.

*"I apologize to you. I apologize to the nation. I apologize to my family and friends for all the distress I have caused them. I was misled in error by zeal to serve the nation, I hope the nation will forgive me and give me the opportunity to serve again."*

He stepped down from House of Representatives' membership and dishonourably vanished into hiding.

#### 3.3.6.4. Fantasy Theme

As a previous House of representatives' speaker, Salisu Buhari has a fantasy theme that reveals what politicians should, and can do, in the face of corruption situations. He however fails to do what is expected of him, holding on strongly to corrupt practices. His luck however runs out when the media stays put on his case, insisting that he is underserving of the political position he occupied. Thus, the message being sent out there is that of an individual, who fails to stand for rightness and justice, completely unable to shun corruption.

## 4. Conclusion

Within the framework of rhetorical visions of corruption in Nigerian newspapers, using politicians' fantasy themes, honest discourses surface. Here, it is revealed that a politicians' realisms are strengthened and the form of their class privilege is reduced through the relationship particular to revealing corruption cases and stories surrounding them. These being apparent, politicians are able to win both the sympathy and popularity of their readers. These fantasy themes offer two rhetorical visions: one of a politician who does what is right, in a politically corrupt setting, and the other who chooses to continually play smart, even after his corrupt practices had been exposed to all and sundry. Within each of them, we are able to have a better understanding of both corruption coverage and newspaper content, by taking into account the symbolic realities of morality, personal decisions, and class privilege as they make their way through in political corruption fantasy themes.

As a symbolic reality, morality and personal decisions perform a huge role in separating the fantasy theme. They reveal clearly the impact both moral failings and moral superiority have in the politicians' corruption actions. In the case of Kemi Adeosun, moral superiority comes to play as she decides to take the honourable route. This choice of an acceptable behaviour in the situation she found herself encourage the audience to judge her behaviour positively. Advice that results from the protagonists' behaviour includes: have a good sense of right and wrong; do what is right, and not what pleases you; be a role model; approach the situation with the best of manners. The implication is that by enacting these behaviours, people deserve to be governed in truth and fairness.

On the flipside, Salisu Buhari falls short in doing as he ought to, considering the fact that he was a political leader, and by all standards, a role model to many. In his case, moral failings came to play as he decided to act dishonourably. His personal decisions were negative and they led to his downfall. These were also evident in the judgement he received from his audience. In contrast to Adeosun, Buhari's inability to meet up to expectations further emphasises his moral failings and the deserved status of the manner with which he was kicked out of power.

Class privilege is also crucial in understanding the importance of these politicians' stories. To begin with, landing good, paying jobs are non- issues. Also, lobbying their way out of these issues were pretty possible, especially in a country like Nigeria, where corruption dominates every sector. Yet, the realism that was achieved by sharing these politicians' cases dos well to eliminate barriers that might have been set up in the minds of the audience, that some people might be above the law. As a matter of fact, it proves that wealthy or poor, black or white, the law remains supreme. And that nobody, not even political office holders, are above the law!

Conclusively, the predominant rhetorical vision here is that corruption in political quarters can be contained, and controlled. These fantasies create a channel via which one attaches moral values to political actions, and by reducing the lass-based aspects of socioeconomic factors, the social reality of political corruption is oversimplified in these discourses.

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