

Book Reviews

Steven Pierce, *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Culture in Nigeria*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). pp. 282.

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Since the oil boom, Nigeria has developed a notorious reputation for corruption. In *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Culture in Nigeria*, Steven Pierce, Senior Lecturer in Modern African History at the University of Manchester, traces evolving conceptions of corruption in Nigerian society over the past 150 years. Over five chapters, Pierce argues that it is impossible to make sense of Nigerian statecraft without understanding the role of corruption in Nigerian politics.

Pierce divides his monograph into two parts. In Part One, he describes the history of corruption in the Hausa-speaking regions of colonial northern Nigeria. Before the British arrived, gift-giving was an important part of governance in the Sokoto Caliphate.¹ As the British began to impose their political norms on northern Nigerian society, corruption became shorthand for ineffective governance and governmental malpractice whenever British officials wanted to depose a local ruler whom they perceived to be a liability to the colonial administration.² The transition from a British colony to a federal republic, following World War II, inaugurated political competition at the national level. Accusations of corruption became an important political tool as regional political rivals jockeyed for limited resources for “development.”³ With the emergence of military rule and the petro-state, state officials began to siphon off oil revenue by awarding infrastructure contracts to private citizens who would divert a portion of these contracts into their coffers.⁴ It was during these years that Nigeria solidified its international reputation for corruption.

Part Two is made up of two thematic theoretical essays. The first essay investigates the moral economy of corruption, a concept popularized by English historian E.P. Thompson and American anthropologist James C. Scott in the 1970s.⁵ Pierce shows that Nigerians both demand and condemn corruption. While they disapprove of oppressive corruption, Nigerians nonetheless expect state officials to distribute money and gifts to loyal constituents—something no civil servant could possibly do on a meager state salary.⁶ Corruption is acceptable, so long as it benefits the people

and is constrained by religious values and good sense, or what the Hausa call *hankali*, according to Pierce.⁷ The second essay explores the ideological contours of the state. Pierce challenges the idea that Nigerian corruption is a product of state dysfunction, since Nigeria does not fit the mold of a “weak state,” nor is it even a “state” in the western sense.⁸ Because it resembles one though, the Nigerian state is rarely evaluated on its own terms.⁹ By placing their analyses of Nigerian corruption within the context of the international state system, political scientists have failed to make sense of how Nigerians understand governmental corruption—when it is an acceptable practice, and when it is not.

Pierce bases his research largely on written documentation. He conducted archival research throughout northern Nigeria (i.e., at Arewa House Museum, the Nigerian National Archives, Kaduna, and the Kano State History and Culture Bureau) and the United Kingdom (i.e., at Rhodes House and the Public Records Office). Newspapers and government publications also figure prominently in Pierce’s research. At a few points, Pierce even draws on his own experience.¹⁰ Oral data, however, remains mostly absent from the endnotes. Although the initial idea for this project came to him while he was collecting oral histories about local government among small-scale farmers in the town of Ungogo in Kano State, Pierce ignores oral history because of the “sensational” nature of his research topic.¹¹

The decision to exclude oral data, however, hinders Pierce’s discussion of corruption in the twenty-first century. Without the ability to follow the forensic money trail, gossip and rumors likely remain some of the most important sources of information about Nigerian corruption, as historians seek out source materials for their research on the postcolonial period. While record-keeping was of great importance to the colonial state, and Pierce certainly utilizes its detailed records in the early chapters of this book, its postcolonial successor is not a documentary state.¹² For this reason, it will remain nearly impossible to write effectively about many topics, especially those like corruption that are covert by nature, if historians of postcolonial Africa discount oral data—even if it appears sensational. This monograph could also have been slightly improved if Pierce had made more of an effort to engage with the indigenous Nigerian literature on corruption.¹³ A solid sampling of views from this literature might even have

been able to stand in for the oral data that is largely missing from the narrative.

Pierce's book is not without its geographical limitations. Since Pierce focuses on the different meanings of corruption among Hausa-speaking Nigerians from the north, this monograph is, as the author himself acknowledges, "a very partial picture" of corruption in Nigeria.¹⁴ Understandings of corruption are rooted in time and place, so the history of corruption in Nigeria would look different if Pierce had chosen to conduct his research among the Yoruba, Igbo, Ibibio, Isekiri, Izon, or even the Ejagham. Nevertheless, Pierce's monograph will greatly assist historians who want to write these histories of corruption.

Despite these shortcomings, Pierce's monograph successfully undermines the ahistorical prescriptions of economists and non-governmental organizations for ending corruption. By tracing the historical development of corruption in Nigeria, Pierce demolishes the idea that corruption is simply a form of economic behavior that could be eliminated with proper incentives, a thoughtful legislative agenda, and greater transparency.¹⁵ Corruption is not an epiphenomenon of the "failed" Nigerian state, but rather it is embedded into the political and economic logic of the state.¹⁶ For Pierce, the question that Nigerians should be asking is not how can corruption be eliminated, but rather how can patronage networks, a central part of Nigerian political culture, be used to advance the public good?¹⁷

In sum, *Moral Economies of Corruption* is a theoretically rich and timely contribution to the literature on corruption in Africa, northern Nigeria, and Nigerian politics. This book should be read by historians and policy experts alike.

Notes

¹ Steven Pierce, *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 27–32.

² *Ibid.*, 34, 49, 54.

³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976); E.P. Thompson,

“The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136. Pierce is neither the first Africanist historian, nor the first Nigeria specialist to deploy this term. In his book, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine, and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), for instance, Michael Watts uses the concept of a moral economy to describe relations between Hausa merchants and African agricultural laborers in the nineteenth century.

⁶ Pierce, *Moral Economies of Corruption*, 162–163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 204–208.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 212, 215.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154, 226. On the role of experience in the writing of African history, see Gregory Mann, “Experience as Evidence in Africanist Historiography,” *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 279–286.

¹¹ Pierce, *Moral Economies of Corruption*, x, 155.

¹² See, for instance, Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto, *Nigeria, Nationalism and Writing History* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 35.

¹³ See, for instance, Ibrahim Lame and Femi Odekunle, eds., *Fighting Corruption and Organized Crime in Nigeria: Challenges for a New Millennium* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2001); Femi Odekunle, ed., *Nigeria: Corruption in Development: The 1982 Proceedings of the Nigerian Anthropological and Sociological Association, Held in Zaria, 10–14 May* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1983).

¹⁴ Pierce, *Moral Economies of Corruption*, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23, 196, 207, 220–221.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 210. See also Moses E. Ochonu, “Bring Back Corruption,” *Sahara Reporters*, 13 August 2016.

¹⁷ Pierce, *Moral Economies of Corruption*, 229.