

Stealing from the Poor:

Nigeria's Most Enduring Political Tradition

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There is an enduring truth in the old saying: 'The evil that men do lives after them.' Wealth may fade, monuments may crumble and titles may be forgotten but the manner in which power and riches were acquired often outlives those who possessed them. Nigeria has cultivated a dangerous tradition: treating public office not as a sacred trust but as a license to plunder. From one administration to the next the pattern scarcely changes. Public funds disappear, projects are abandoned and billions meant for schools, hospitals, roads and security are diverted into private pockets. The familiar excuse is that today's looting will secure the future of one's children and generations yet unborn. Nothing could be further from the truth.

No reasonable parent secures the future of their children by mortgaging the future of an entire nation. Every naira stolen from the public purse is a classroom left unbuilt, a hospital left unequipped, a road left impassable and another young Nigerian denied the opportunity to fulfil his or her potential. Corruption does not merely empty government coffers. It steals hope. Public office exists to improve lives through quality education, healthcare, infrastructure, security and policies that lift people out of poverty. That is the true measure of leadership. It is also the legacy history remembers. Yet for too many office holders the language of service has been replaced by the language of looting. Instead of asking, 'How can I serve the people?' the question has become, 'How much can I take before leaving office?' Many who steal believe they are building dynasties. In reality they are laying the foundation for future ruin. Wealth built on corruption is a poisoned inheritance. It may buy luxury but it cannot purchase honour, peace or lasting prosperity. William Shakespeare observed that 'the evil that men do lives after them.' Long after stolen wealth has been spent society remembers the dishonour attached to it. History is kinder to those who served than to those who looted. The late Majek Fashek echoed the same truth in simpler language: one cannot sow corn and expect to reap cocoyam. Every seed produces after its kind. A life built on deceit cannot expect to reap lasting peace.

Wealth acquired without integrity rarely survives the generation that amassed it. Children who inherit fortunes they neither earned nor understood often lack the discipline and values to preserve them. By contrast, honestly earned wealth is more likely to endure because it rests on hard work, wisdom and integrity. Nigeria's greatest tragedy is not merely corruption but its normalization. Public office is increasingly viewed as an investment to be recovered rather than a trust to be

faithfully discharged. Elections have become fiercely contested because political victory is seen as unrestricted access to public resources. The result is a nation blessed with immense natural wealth yet impoverished by human greed. Equally troubling is the silence of those who should serve as the nation's moral conscience. Too many religious leaders, community influencers and opinion moulders have abandoned the courage to confront injustice. Instead they celebrate questionable wealth while their pulpits devote more attention to tithes and offerings than to truth, justice and accountability. A society that applauds ill-gotten riches should not be surprised when integrity becomes scarce. Scripture declares that 'the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life.' Whether understood spiritually or morally the message is the same: wrongdoing carries consequences. Corruption destroys institutions, deepens poverty, fuels insecurity and erodes public trust. Eventually the nation pays the price.

Perhaps that explains why so many once-thriving family empires collapse after their founders die. Money alone cannot sustain a legacy. Where integrity is absent even great wealth eventually evaporates. The lesson extends beyond wealth to power itself. Public acclaim is fleeting. Influence fades. Applause dies away. The voices that celebrate today's leaders will tomorrow celebrate someone else. No one occupies the corridors of power forever. Titles are temporary. Offices are held in trust. Political relevance has an expiry date. What ultimately endures is not the office one held but the legacy one leaves behind. Nigeria does not need more billionaires created by public theft. It needs leaders whose greatest ambition is to leave behind strong institutions, educated citizens, quality infrastructure and a society where honesty is rewarded rather than ridiculed.

The finest inheritance any parent can leave a child is not a hidden account, a foreign estate or a stolen fortune. It is an honourable name, a clear conscience and the example of a life lived with integrity. Those are treasures no thief can steal and no generation can squander. The greatest investment any of us can make is not in power but in people: the lives we touch, the opportunities we create and the character we leave behind. Those are the things that outlast office, wealth, influence and status. Until Nigeria replaces the culture of looting with the culture of service, it will continue stealing not only from today's citizens but from generations yet unborn.