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Public Service Reforms and the Nigerian Telecommunications (NITEL) PLC

Akinpelu O. Olutayo | University of Ibadan
Ayokunle O. Omobowale | University of Ibadan

Due to fiscal maladministration in the public sector and consequent inefficiency of public corporations, the Nigerian government has opted for laissez faire reforms in the public sector. One of the public corporations the government has put up for sale is Nigerian Telecommunications (NITEL) PLC. This paper examines the privatization process of NITEL and consequent impact on NITEL employees.

Keywords: *Privatization, NITEL, Nigeria, Predatory Corruption, Telecommunications*

Introduction

Nigeria built its immediate post-independence development on the Welfarist approach, and the government is saddled with the task of providing or subsidizing basic social infrastructure such as health, education, road, electricity and communication along with other public utilities. Ravaged by corruption and inept fiscal maladministration, Nigeria's once-buoyant economy, started faltering especially after the oil glut of the 1980s and eventually led to economic depression (Omobowale 2009; Montinola and Jackman 2002).

Economic depression hence clearly revealed the precarious state of Nigeria's public corporations that had been surviving only on government subvention while political office holders and executives fleeced these corporations. These corporations were centres of predatory corruption where officials dishonestly extracted huge funds to line private pockets which left the corporations inefficient (Sowunmi, Adesola, and Salako 2010; Szeftel 2000; Agbese 1988). The Nigerian experience is indeed similar to other occurrences across Africa. According to Olivier de Sardan (1999), what goes on in Africa is a generally accepted culture of corruption, which pervades every spectrum of African society, such that "To stand out or distinguish oneself in public (by rejecting the 'privileges of one's status,' for example) generates shame" (p. 46). Hence, corruption is "…socially embedded in 'logics' of negotiation, gift-giving, solidarity, predatory authority, and redistributive accumulation" (p. 25). In order to put an end to deliberate acts of corruption bedeviling the public service sector in most Third World nations, there is an international campaign for the enthronement on the New Public Management Order[1] (see Haque 2001; Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). Following the World Bank promptings, Nigeria adopted a public restructuring through privatization supposedly directed at tackling corruption and enhancing efficiency.

It is pertinent to note, however, that reforms in the public service sector are not novel in Nigeria. It was pioneered by Generals Mohammed/Obasanjo

[1] The New Public Management Order involves the adoption of neo-liberal/private sector approaches in public service management such that citizens are seen as customers who must be served efficiently in economic terms (see also SERVICOM 2007; Brune, Garrett, and Kogut 2004; Trebing and Voll 2006; Hefetz and Warner 2004; Nicholson-Crotty 2004; Armijo and Faucher 2002; Savas 2001; Morgan and England 1988; Haruna 2001; Christensen and Laegreid 1999; Terry 1993, 1998).

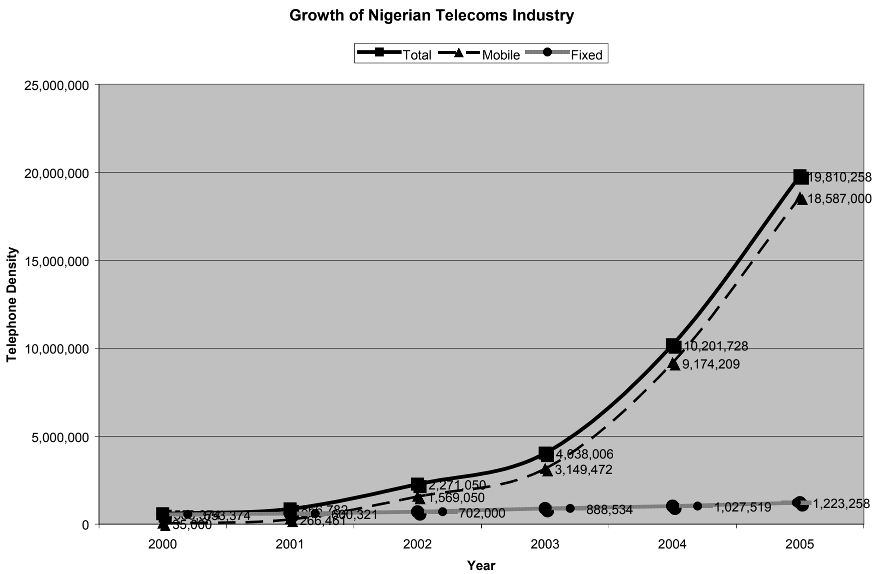

Fig. 1. Growth of Nigerian telecommunication industry.

regime(s)[2] in the late 1970s. Then, the government claimed it was done tackling corruption, inefficiency, and other social ills in the civil service by making the public service sector compact and accountable to the people. By the end of the exercise, about 10,000 public officials had lost their jobs (Adamolekun and Ayo 1989; Otobo 1986). The return of Chief[3] Obasanjo as a civilian head of state in 1999 signaled another round of reforms in the public sector. Particularly, in the telecommunications sector, the government moved to break NITEL's monopoly by licensing private fixed and mobile networks and putting NITEL up for sale. Indeed, as shown in the figure below, this has resulted in the growth of the telecommunications sector.

Figure 1 above shows progressive increase in telephone density in Nigeria since 2001 when private GSM came into operation. Thus, access increased from 553,374 in 2000 to 1,223,258 by 2005 for fixed telephone subscribers and 35,000 to 18,587,000 for mobile phone users, resulting in a total telephone density of 19,810,258 by 2005 (National Bureau of Statistics

[2] General Obasanjo became the head of state after Colonel Dimka led an abortive coup that claimed the life of General Murtala Mohammed on February 12, 1976.

[3] Nigeria's political class members who came out of the military socio-political structure apparently prefer civilian titles, perhaps in order to sustain acceptance in a social structure of highly anti-military rule that pervaded Nigeria in the late 1990s.

2006). In spite of this monumental increase, it is important to note that the influence of NITEL as a major player in the telecommunications sector rather gradually began its abysmal decline. As customers opted for other networks considered more efficient, its lines began to dwindle. In government circles, this more than ever before justified the need to privatize NITEL. It was indeed a new phase in the "life" of a seemingly once buoyant[4] public parastatal. This study examines NITEL's privatization process, consequent restructuring, and the impact this had on the organisation's staff. Data for this study were collected through interviews and secondary sources.

The Story of NITEL

NITEL was the result of a merger between Nigeria External Telecommunications (NET) and the telecommunications arm of the Post and Telecommunications (P&T) department of the Ministry of Communications in 1985 by the proclamation of the General Buhari government that merged (Aroge 2000). As a state monopoly, it gradually grew and stretched its presence to at least all of the state capital and other major towns. The company experienced financial turn-around in 1992 when it was commercialized by the federal government. Thenceforth, it stopped receiving subvention from the government and, therefore, had to survive on its own by expanding its customer base and by generating higher income.

Nevertheless, as much as its profit profile and customer base increased, it was largely similar to the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA), a sister government monopoly in charge of electric power generation, which was also bedeviled by endemic corruption and inability to supply adequate power (Olukoju 2004). Indeed, NITEL was such that could be described as huge but hollow telecommunication company which survived as long as it did not have competition. Its customers were rather treated as servants who could not complain against the decisions of the master. NITEL officials apparently saw the organization's deplorable service as social service to the few relatively rich Nigerians who can afford this luxury while the poor majority should not even think of it. This was a period in which application for a telephone line

[4] NITEL was only seemingly buoyant once. Its weakness was clouded in the excesses of its officials whom customers had to plead with to have lines secured, installed, or repaired. Since there was no competitor, customers could hardly complain, as such may attract refusal to connect or repair lines by the officials for whom customers who desired to have and maintain telephone lines, not just as a necessity but as a status symbol, were somewhat in awe.

would take months—if not years—to be approved by the officials in charge while those with connections in the corridors of power could have their applications approved quickly, and even if the lines were approved and put in place, the connections were bedeviled with constant failure while many lines summarily go dead when raining. A NITEL customer desirous of having his/her line back on track had to wait at a NITEL office, sometimes providing transportation for a NITEL official, carrying ladders, and following a NITEL technician to other repair sites until it reached his/her turn. By the time the customer had his/her line fixed, s/he might have spent up to eight to ten hours at the mercy of a NITEL technician whom s/he would have to tip at the end in order to secure the technician's "favour" when next such is needed. In spite of all these, however, NITEL remained a profit-making organization due, of course, to the monopoly it enjoyed.

The story changed in 2001 with the granting of operational licenses to independent GSM companies, namely MTN and ECONET, and much later GLOBACOM. In real terms, this was a welcome development for many Nigerians and an opportunity to escape from the strangle-hold of monopoly that had taken the citizenry for granted. Hence, the gain of the new telecommunication companies became the loss of NITEL, as it found it difficult to compete with the other firms.

For the government, this may have further justified the resolve to move from mere commercialization to privatization. The first attempt at privatization in 2002 failed as the preferred buyer, Investment International Limited (ILL) of Britain, failed to pay the sum of $1.317 billion it had offered for NITEL within the stipulated period (*Nigerian Newsday* 2007). Thereafter, the Bureau for Public Enterprises (BPE) opted for a management consultant to run NITEL to modernize and increase its lines in preparation for privatization. The criterion prescribed was that:

> …[I]nterested managers MUST be international telecommunications operators and MUST demonstrate, one, evidence of having installed and managed at least a million telephones; two, a successful track record of expanding a telecommunications network in a developing country; three, sufficient management resources to grow NITEL and enhance shareholder value. (*Nigerian Village Square* 2006, p. 1)

Of course, the guiding perquisite for NITEL management was to ensure it would only get into to the hands of experienced managers who could positively turn it around. However, it ended up in the hands of Pentascope, a company set up just about a year earlier with eight staff members, whose address was traced to a dilapidated church building in Amsterdam, Netherlands, at $4 million per annum, to be paid by the federal government (*Daily Independent* 2007; *Nigerian Village Square* 2006).

Within one year, the failure of Pentascope became just too glaring! When Pentascope took over NITEL, it had 455,000 lines and about N17.7 billion in its coffers. By the time Pentascope was sacked, NITEL lines had dwindled to 288,000 and it had also lost about N100 billion with a backlog of unpaid wages (*Daily Independent* 2007; *Nigerian Newsday* 2006).

NITEL remained in this moribund state until another solution was found for it through its sale to Transcorp, a supposed Nigerian multinational corporation, which *Daily Independent* described as "…an indigenous company without pedigree." Transcorp is indeed an organization in which President Obasanjo[5] and some other economic and political elite have substantial interests. The sale to Transcorp was rushed without giving other firms equal chance of bidding on NITEL. This transaction again reflected predatory tendencies meant to satisfy the whims and caprices of a few members of the privileged political and economic class. With Transcorp came staff rationalization, which claimed over 7,000 jobs out of the former workforce of about 10,000.

The Bureau of Public Enterprises, which was saddled with the task of privatizing NITEL, opted for a buy-out scheme that left the disengaged staff and pensioners with little to gain, unlike the gratuity/pension scheme enshrined in the NITEL *Staff Conditions of Service* (see table 1 below).

The table above specifies the retirement benefits NITEL staff would enjoy. A close scrutiny shows that it was designed to reward loyalty and long service to the company. Thus, NITEL staff would be morally constrained and motivated to put in their best and avoid anything that may jeopardize the benefits they are to enjoy. This was indeed a better welfare package than the buy-out which the government opted for. Although the disengaged workers asked for a 10-year salary as severance pay, BPE opted for a graduated scheme on the basis of years put in service as presented below:

1-10 years: two-year buy-out
11-15 years: two-and-a-half-year buy-out
16-20 years: 3-year buy-out
21-25 years: three-and-a-half — year buy-out

[5] President Obasanjo handed Transcorp over to President Yaradua on May 27, 2007.

Table 1. Computation and Payment of Pensions and Gratuity in Pre-Privatized NITEL

Years of Qualifying Service	Gratuity as Percentage of Final Pay	Pension as Percentage of Final Pay
10	100	*
11	110	*
12	120	*
13	130	*
14	140	*
15	100	30
16	110	32
17	120	34
18	130	36
19	140	38
20	150	40
21	160	42
22	170	44
23	180	46
24	190	48
25	200	50
26	210	52
27	220	54
28	230	56
29	240	58
30	250	60
31	260	62
32	270	64
33	280	66
34	290	68
35	300	70

Source: *Staff Conditions of Service* (Nigerian Telecommunications PLC 1992, p. 46).
* No data are available for years of qualifying service 10 to 14.

26-35 years: four-year buy-out

As for those who had retired prior to the privatization programme, they were simply bought out via the three-year pension. Indeed, improving the situation of NITEL through reforms may be a welcome development which definitely requires proper implementation (this shall be addressed later on in the paper). For now, it is important to consider the plight of the disengaged workers and pensioners in view of the manner they were bought out.

Pre-Privatization Conditions of Service and Post-Privatization Experience

NITEL employees generally described pre-privatization conditions of service at NITEL in glowing terms. Interviewees recounted with nostalgia NITEL's conditions of service as one of the best in Nigeria prior to privatization. For example, an employee (a senior manager) who was retained after privatization stated:

> NITEL conditions of service were alright. It was like the third highest-paying public organization in Nigeria. Staff were trained and retrained. We could hardly notice negative challenges. People were promoted when due. Promotion came after every two years, provided there were vacancies. (Oral Interview/Retained/April 24, 2007)

Likewise, another respondent further corroborated the claim above with a stint of distinction from what happened from the pre-merger days:

> The condition of service at NET was very attractive and rewarding. Employees were awarded car loans as at when due while capacity training was extended to members of staff periodically, even in institutions abroad. We were not happy when we were asked to merge with P&T. This was because our condition of service at NET was quite better. Those at P&T were bedeviled with the ills in the civil service because they were part of the Communications Ministry. They were not as trained as we were, their emoluments were meager while promotion did not come for them as at when due, unlike the case in NET. With the merger, P&T entrants were given a step ahead of those in NET because the government believed they had been denied promotion for so long. And so the "step ahead" was to compensate them and bring them on par relative to their colleagues at NET. After the merger, we could no longer enjoy the things we used to enjoy under NET. The salary became meager; you had to queue for a loan, while training abroad became a thing of the past. However, I stayed because of the security of tenure service. Provided one complied with the rules, one would retire after 35 years of service and enjoy one's gratuity and pension thereafter. (Oral Interview/Post-Privatization Disengaged/April 18, 2007)

Still another interviewee who started his career from P&T states:

> I was happy joining P&T in 1974, because it was a bit different from the ministry in terms of pay and good conditions of service and job prospects. I joined as a draughtsman, and then in-between I received a promotion and came to the University of Ibadan under study-leave-without-pay. I studied sociology between 1977 and 1980 and became a postal controller thereafter at P&T. I later transferred to the personnel department… The job prospect was good. Every year we were positively transforming from one stage to another…everybody was happy because there was gradual improvement until we reached the peak when everybody in NITEL was being paid very good salary. (Oral Interview/Pre-Privatization Retiree 1/April 23, 2007)

What could be deduced from the data above is that the respondents were convinced of the successful/benefiting service period for as long as they remained at NITEL and thereafter. Even the respondent who had misgivings at the merger of NET with P&T to form NITEL stayed on due to security of tenure and other benefits at NITEL. Aside from good remuneration, NITEL also trained its staff both locally and internationally. These were aimed at building and ensuring experienced and skilled staff that would be capable of sustaining the growth and dominance of the company in the telecommunications sector. As long as NITEL's monopoly lasted, it seemed NITEL was achieving its aim. Nevertheless, NITEL was only achieving its aim of running a profitable state monopoly; it was not delivering efficient service to its customers. This was confirmed by an interviewee as thus:

> When NITEL carried the day, NITEL workers acted like gods. People were begging NITEL staff to get their lines fixed… And so by the time GSM came, people abandoned NITEL out of annoyance…in spite of the high cost of GSM. The situation was that bad. (Oral Interview/Pre-Privatization Retiree 1/April 23, 2007)

This is one of the ills of monopoly as pointed out by Morgan and England (1988). If NITEL was not optimally efficient as it should be, it was not because its employees were not well paid or untrained, nor was it because of the dearth of equipments. It was due to negligence and unwarranted acts of customer disloyalty. NITEL customers were at the mercy of its staff. Indeed, in such a situation, the client was not a valued customer, but rather just another hapless individual who may be exploited for his/her quest for a functional line. Of course, under a monopoly, customers had to endure NITEL's inefficiency without NITEL realizing its faults. Once GSM came into operation, NITEL's inefficiency became overwhelmingly pronounced and NITEL could not compete with other telecommunications companies in spite of its advanced human, technological, and capital resources. In fact, new GSM companies attracted NITEL staff that had technical expertise, and these companies also depended initially on some vital NITEL equipment for their operation. As a public corporation, NITEL did not enjoy the full commitment and loyalty of its employees. An interviewee gave insight into why NITEL employees were not fully committed:

> If you talk of organization that has training facilities, you cannot get anyone better than NITEL in Nigeria. NITEL has two gigantic training institutions in Lagos and Kano. The one in Lagos is for training engineers while the one in Kano is for management training. Also there was house sourcing system where you can pursue a degree or higher qualifications to any level. Under that, I was permitted to obtain a master's degree, which was funded by NITEL, and a Ph.D., which was self-sponsored. Likewise, many people were sent for training. But the skills they acquired were not put into use. This is because one would have been told that "…your study leave has been approved, but in spite of whatever certificate you bring, you have to wait in queue until it is your turn to receive a promotion." The fact that they sponsored my master's programme did not change the queuing system. I could not get a promotion over and above someone who was less trained. The emphasis was rather on the quota system, federal character, etc.…the training received did not translate to efficiency within the organization because the best hands available were not allowed to do the job. (Oral Interview/Pre-Privatization Retiree 1/April 23, 2007)

Training is considered essential for organizational success and survival, but at NITEL, socio-political consideration was allowed to overshadow the essence of training. Nigeria has a quota system, which is enshrined in the country's federal character policy. The quota system was put in place in Nigeria's constitution to ensure that the different ethnic groups are represented in public office and to also ensure that all ethnic groups have access to state resources. Strict adherence to the ethos of the quota system at NITEL resulted in disregarding the values of merit, ability, and efficiency in the organization's reward system in favour of ethnic spread/balance. This must have somewhat resulted in disenchantment among staff members who have received training but were denied promotion, leading, therefore, to institutional inefficiency and widespread corruption despite the huge training structure put in place.

Likewise, interviewees cited several cases of institutional misappropriation of funds and corruption perpetrated by the government. An interviewee puts what happened during the military era as thus:

> …[T]he moment the military knew there was money, everybody started looking into NITEL. NITEL funds were channeled to finance the military and its officers through undocumented financial benefits paid to officers. Likewise, NITEL funds were used to pay the salary of public officials in other establishments such as the police. (Oral Interview/Pre-Privatization Retiree 1/April 23, 2007)

Another interviewee states:

> It was the government and the management that have over the years destroyed NITEL. When NITEL was buoyant, the military government of those days diverted NITEL funds to pay allowances to military officers from NITEL purse. These officers just took and spent money recklessly. There was no accountability. Besides, the level of corruption among the management staff was enormous. In fact, there was a case of an average-income-earning university lecturer who was appointed Managing Director at NITEL. He built a personal multi-million naira estate within a short time while in office. These people embezzled NITEL funds to enrich themselves and gave archaic equipments in return. (Oral Interview/Pre-Privatization Retiree 2/April 30, 2007)

By and large, what the interviewees have highlighted is the siphoning of NITEL's funds to the management of other government agencies, misappropriation of funds, and corruption especially during Nigeria's long years under military rule. One should rightly wonder why the military and other government agencies are financed from NITEL's funds. Inasmuch as it might have gone against civil service rules, refusal to comply with the directive of the military government, however illegal and/or irrational, by any government official would lead to his/her removal from office and possibly detention and prosecution over trumped up charges. Therefore, in order to tow the line drawn by the military government and remain in office, NITEL management had to transfer funds as demanded, to the detriment of the company, even as top management staff unduly profited through embezzlement as well. NITEL's supposed success under a monopoly quickly collapsed after market reforms. In spite of its state-of-the-art equipments and highly trained staff, NITEL could not compete with private telephone companies once the stage was set for competition.

Those who had to pay the price of NITEL's failure, however, were not government officials or the management that mismanaged its funds. Neither did the government take the blame for sticking to an ethnic balancing principle which resulted in stifled efficiency. Rather, the negative sanction came on the employees and retirees who were laid off and bought out by BPE in preparation for a takeover by Transcorp, the new buyer. This translates to immense hardship for the disengaged workers. An interviewee presents his case below:

> I feel shortchanged. The "security of tenure," which attracted and retained me at NITEL, has been bastardized. Now I have little for all I contributed into NITEL. If I had worked for the full 35 years, I would have been able to make adequate preparations for post-retirement life. But now, I am being forced to learn to become an entrepreneur. If only my pension would keep on coming, I would be collecting more than N100, 000 (US$833) per month. With the loss of our pension, how do they want us to survive? (Oral Interview/Post-Privatization Disengaged/April 18, 2007)

Yet another interviewee states:

> …[T]he way the pension was paid was too bad. Workers who have worked for up to 33 years and more were paid maximum of 4 years of pension payment… These are people who could hardly work at another place. Those who had retired before privatization were paid only 3 years of pension payment. How are they to survive? Are they expected to steal?… How do we define that? So, they are simply saying, go and die. This was not supposed to be the case of NITEL. I think some government officials actually wanted NITEL to die so that it could be sold at a give-away price. The property NITEL has is enough to take care of its pensioners if well managed. Our recommendation was that core telecommunication areas be privatized while the properties are left with NITEL pension fund so that retirees and disengaged workers may be taken care of. If that was done, there would be no problem as the real estate property in the form of landed properties, estates, buildings, etc. runs to billions of Naira. (Oral Interview/Pre-Privatization Retiree 1/April 23, 2007)

A different interviewee states:

> Gratuity and pension are so meager that one can do little with it. In fact, by the time the government decided to buy out retirees, only 3 years of pension payment was made. We were shortchanged. The proposal before government was for 10 years. The government approved 5 years while BPE paid only 3 years. The case is in court now. Retirement benefits should last for life as contained in the condition of service we entered into and not be cut short by the government. (Oral Interview/Pre-Privatization Retiree 2/ April 30, 2007)

The data presented above reveal feelings of gloom among former NITEL staff who feel cheated by an organization they had served under the promise of continued sustenance after meritorious retirement. Their plight was even further compounded by the liquidation and sale of the properties of the hitherto viable NITEL pension fund, which could have assured continued pension payment even after privatization. As much as making NITEL efficient and viable to compete favourably with others may be desirable, even if it means privatizing, the question that deserves an answer is the rationale behind "abandoning" the workers who had sustained it via their human resources. Is it because they were deemed corrupt as well? Of course, this may be an indication of the complexity of corruption, which Olivier de Sardan has earlier identified as the bane of Africa.

Just as management contract with Pentascope ended in massive failure due to the half-hearted implementation of reforms that could have revamped NITEL, the seemingly questionable sale of NITEL to Transcorp,[6] which was described as an organization without pedigree, gives every hint of a process still not devoid of corruption. And so, whereas the privatization was supposed to ensure efficiency and timely delivery of service, the unethical process of NITEL's sale therefore rather ensured a process in which disengaged staff and retirees who were seen as burdensome to the new managers were simply dispensed with through the buy-out. One wonders what this buy-out really means. Is this sale a buying out of employment or survival/life? So far, the NITEL staff and retirees were already disengaged and, hence, not a buying out employment or compensation for

[6] At present the government of President Yaradua has re-acquired NITEL from Transcorp due again to mismanagement, corruption and failure to revamp the company. The Management Team of Transcorp is also on trial for the embezzlement of N15 billion from NITEL coffers.

disengagement. Rather, it is buying out the responsibility to continue to take care of NITEL workers whose activities had also contributed to the deplorable state of NITEL.

Conclusion

NITEL is another glaring example of inefficiency, government failure, and massive corruption practiced in the Nigerian state. Attempts at revamping NITEL have been foiled by predatory privatization where public office holders have once again influenced the process of selling it to favoured companies in which they have vested interest. And thus, little emphasis is put on the welfare of the workers or retirees who have been bought out and, in fact, abandoned.

While NITEL was buoyant, it was an epicenter of corruption perpetrated by both its employees and government officials. And at wit's end, it has been taken over by representatives of the political and economic elites who have, of course, abandoned NITEL's retirees and laid off about 70 per cent of its workforce. At present, the Nigerian government under President Yaradua has re-acquired NITEL from Transcorp, again due to mismanagement, corruption, and failure to revamp the company, and the management team of Transcorp is also on trial for embezzling N15 billion from NITEL coffers, while NITEL remains comatose. This paper, therefore, argues that the case of NITEL is representative of predatory corruption in the Nigerian system.

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AKINPELU OLANREWAJU OLUTAYO, Ph.D., is Senior Lecturer and Acting Head of the Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He is a development sociologist. He was sub-dean (undergraduate) of the Faculty of Social Sciences from 1994 to 1997, visiting scholar at the University of Ghana (2005-2006), and visiting lecturer at the University of Botswana (2007-2008). He has published extensively in his area of specialization *Address*: Department of Sociology, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria [*E-mail*: lantopamtu@yahoo.com]

AYOKUNLE OLUMUYIWA OMOBOWALE, Ph.D., has interest in sociology of development, rural sociology, political sociology and medical sociology. He won the University of Ibadan Postgraduate School Award for scholarly publication in 2007. He was a lecturer at the University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria, from April 2007 to May 2008. At present, he is a lecturer in sociology at Nigeria's premier university, the University of Ibadan, Ibadan. He has published articles in renowned journals and books *Address*: Department of Sociology, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria [*E-mail*: muyiwaking@yahoo.com].