



THE ETHICS OF TRUST AND THE CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA: A PHILOSOPHICAL AND SOCIO-MORAL INTERROGATION OF LEADERSHIP FAILURE, CORRUPTION, AND THE SEARCH FOR ETHICAL RECONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The persistent crisis of governance in contemporary Africa raises fundamental ethical questions about the nature, function, and erosion of trust in public life. Why has governance in many African states become synonymous with corruption, inefficiency, and moral failure? Can sustainable development occur in a society where trust between leaders and citizens has collapsed? This study interrogates these questions through a philosophical and socio-moral lens, arguing that the crisis of governance in Africa is primarily a crisis of trust. Drawing from African communal philosophy, Western ethical theories, and religious moral traditions, the study adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology to examine the ethical foundations of leadership and institutional legitimacy. It is argued that the breakdown of trust manifests in systemic corruption, weakened institutions, and civic disengagement. Furthermore, the study contends that governance without trust becomes coercive rather than legitimate. The paper concludes that rebuilding trust requires ethical reorientation, institutional accountability, and a return to value-based leadership grounded in both African and universal moral principles.

Keywords: Trust, Governance, Ethics, Africa, Leadership.



1.0

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on governance in Africa has, for decades, been dominated by narratives of corruption, instability, and underdevelopment. Yet, beneath these visible symptoms lies a deeper moral problem: the erosion of trust. Trust, as a philosophical and ethical concept, is not merely a social convenience but the very foundation of human coexistence. As John Rawls argues, a just society is one built on fairness and mutual confidence among its members (Rawls, 1971, p. 3). But what happens when this confidence collapses? Can governance survive in the absence of trust?

In many African states, governance has become a site of moral contradiction. Leaders are entrusted with power to serve the people, yet this trust is frequently betrayed through corruption, nepotism, and abuse of office. This raises pressing questions: Is the African governance crisis fundamentally an ethical failure? Is corruption merely a political problem, or does it reflect a deeper moral decay? Why has trust, once central to African communal life, diminished so drastically?

Traditional African societies were deeply rooted in communal ethics, where trust functioned as the glue that held society together. John Mbiti famously asserts, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1990, p. 108). This worldview underscores the interconnectedness of individuals and the moral responsibility they owe one another. However, the transition from traditional systems to modern state structures disrupted these moral frameworks, creating a vacuum often filled by self-interest and opportunism.

Moreover, the colonial legacy and post-colonial governance structures introduced systems that were often alien to indigenous values. Kwasi Wiredu critiques this disjunction, arguing that many African political systems fail because they are not rooted in African moral consciousness (Wiredu, 1996, p. 45). Consequently, governance becomes detached from the ethical expectations of the people.

This study, therefore, seeks to interrogate the ethical foundations of trust and its relationship to governance in Africa. It asks: Can Africa achieve sustainable development without restoring trust? What role do ethics, culture, and religion play in rebuilding governance? By engaging these questions, the study situates trust at the center of the African governance discourse.

2.0

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 The Concept of Trust

Trust is a multifaceted concept that has been examined across various disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, political science, and psychology. Philosophically, trust is understood as a moral attitude involving vulnerability, reliance, and expectation of goodwill from others.



According to Baier (1986), trust involves "accepted vulnerability to another's possible but not expected ill will" (p. 235). This definition highlights the inherent risk in trusting relationships, particularly in governance contexts where citizens place their welfare in the hands of leaders.

In the African context, trust is deeply embedded in communal relationships. Mbiti's (1990) conception of "I am because we are" reflects a worldview where trust is not merely individual but collective, woven into the fabric of social existence. Trust in traditional African societies was maintained through kinship ties, shared values, and mutual obligations. However, the transition to modern state structures has weakened these traditional trust mechanisms, creating a crisis of confidence in public institutions.

Trust can also be categorized into interpersonal trust, institutional trust, and systemic trust. Interpersonal trust refers to trust between individuals; institutional trust concerns confidence in organizations and systems; while systemic trust relates to trust in abstract systems such as legal frameworks and governance structures (Giddens, 1990). In contemporary Africa, all three levels of trust have been significantly eroded, undermining social cohesion and effective governance.

2.1.2 Governance as a Moral Enterprise

Governance refers to the processes, structures, and institutions through which authority is exercised and decisions are made in a society. However, governance is not merely a technical or administrative matter; it is fundamentally a moral enterprise. As Kofi Annan (2000) observed, "good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development" (p. 7). This perspective underscores the ethical dimensions of governance, including accountability, transparency, participation, and the rule of law.

From a philosophical standpoint, governance derives its legitimacy from the consent and trust of the governed. This is rooted in social contract theory, which posits that individuals surrender certain freedoms to the state in exchange for security and the protection of their rights (Hobbes, 1985; Locke, 1988). When governance fails to fulfill this moral obligation, it loses its legitimacy and becomes coercive rather than consensual.

In the African context, governance has often been characterized by patrimonialism, clientelism, and the personalization of power. Chabal and Daloz (1999) argue that African politics is shaped by "the instrumentalization of disorder," where leaders exploit ethnic and social divisions to maintain power. This undermines the ethical foundations of governance and erodes public trust in state institutions.

2.1.3 Corruption and Moral Decay

Corruption is commonly defined as the abuse of public office for private gain (Transparency International, 2023). However, corruption is more than an administrative or economic problem; it



is a symptom of deeper moral decay. Corruption reflects a breakdown in ethical standards, a loss of commitment to the common good, and a prioritization of self-interest over collective welfare.

In Africa, corruption has become endemic, affecting all levels of governance and society. The African Union (2018) reports that corruption costs the continent an estimated \$148 billion annually, undermining economic development and exacerbating poverty. However, the moral implications of corruption extend beyond economic costs. Corruption erodes trust in institutions, weakens social cohesion, and perpetuates inequality and injustice.

Nussbaum (2011) argues that ethical societies require citizens and leaders who are committed to justice and human dignity. When corruption becomes normalized, it signals a collective moral failure that cannot be addressed through legal or administrative measures alone. Instead, addressing corruption requires ethical transformation and a recommitment to values such as honesty, integrity, and accountability.

2.2 Theoretical Review

2.2.1 Social Contract Theory

Social contract theory provides a foundational framework for understanding the relationship between governance and trust. Originating with philosophers such as Hobbes (1985), Locke (1988), and Rousseau (2002), social contract theory posits that political legitimacy derives from the consent of the governed. Individuals voluntarily surrender certain freedoms to the state in exchange for protection, security, and the promotion of the common good.

According to this theory, the state has a moral obligation to act in the interests of its citizens. When the state fails to fulfill this obligation, the social contract is broken, and the state loses its legitimacy. In contemporary Africa, the widespread corruption and abuse of power observed in many states suggest a fundamental breach of the social contract. Citizens no longer trust that their leaders will act in their best interests, leading to civic disengagement, apathy, and resistance.

Rawls (1971) further develops this theory through his concept of justice as fairness. Rawls argues that a just society is one that would be chosen by rational individuals under a "veil of ignorance," where they do not know their own social position or advantages. This framework provides a normative standard for evaluating governance and emphasizes the importance of fairness, equality, and mutual respect.

2.2.2 African Communitarian Ethics (Ubuntu)

African communitarian ethics, often encapsulated in the concept of ubuntu, provides an alternative framework for understanding governance and trust. Ubuntu is a Southern African philosophy that emphasizes interconnectedness, compassion, and mutual responsibility. As Desmond Tutu (1999)



explains, "A person is a person through other persons" (p. 31). This worldview challenges the individualism and self-interest that characterize much of contemporary governance.

Gyekye (1997) argues that African communitarianism offers a distinctive ethical perspective that prioritizes community over the individual. In this framework, individual rights and interests are balanced against the demands of the community. This ethic requires leaders to act in the interests of the community and to be accountable to the people they serve.

The relevance of ubuntu to contemporary governance lies in its emphasis on relationality, trust, and moral responsibility. By integrating ubuntu principles into governance frameworks, African states can rebuild trust and create more inclusive and accountable systems of governance. However, this requires a fundamental shift in political culture and a rejection of the individualistic and self-serving values that have come to dominate African politics.

2.2.3 Institutional Theory of Trust

The institutional theory of trust, as articulated by scholars such as Giddens (1990) and Fukuyama (1995), emphasizes the role of institutions in fostering trust in complex societies. According to this theory, trust is not merely interpersonal but is mediated through institutions such as the legal system, the media, and government agencies. These institutions provide the frameworks within which trust can develop and be sustained.

Fukuyama (1995) argues that trust is essential for economic development and social cohesion. Societies with high levels of trust are better able to cooperate, innovate, and compete in the global economy. Conversely, societies with low levels of trust suffer from high transaction costs, weak institutions, and limited social capital.

In the African context, the weakness of institutions has been a major obstacle to the development of trust. The judiciary, electoral bodies, and law enforcement agencies are often perceived as corrupt and incompetent, undermining public confidence in the state. Strengthening these institutions is essential for rebuilding trust and promoting effective governance.

2.3 Empirical Review

2.3.1 Corruption and Governance in Africa

Numerous studies have documented the prevalence and impact of corruption in Africa. Transparency International's (2023) Corruption Perceptions Index consistently ranks many African countries among the most corrupt in the world, with countries such as Somalia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo scoring particularly poorly. This widespread corruption has significant economic and social consequences, undermining development and exacerbating poverty.



Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) argue that the legacy of colonialism has shaped the institutional environment in Africa, creating extractive institutions that prioritize the interests of elites over the welfare of the population. These institutions perpetuate corruption and inequality, making it difficult for African states to achieve sustainable development.

Similarly, Hope (2014) examines the relationship between corruption and governance in Africa, arguing that corruption is both a cause and a consequence of weak governance. Corruption undermines the effectiveness of state institutions, erodes public trust, and perpetuates cycles of poverty and underdevelopment. Addressing corruption requires comprehensive reforms that strengthen institutions, promote transparency, and foster a culture of accountability.

2.3.2 Trust and Political Participation

Research on trust and political participation in Africa has revealed significant challenges. Bratton and Mattes (2001) find that trust in political institutions in Africa is generally low, with citizens expressing skepticism toward political leaders and state agencies. This low trust has implications for democratic consolidation, as citizens are less likely to participate in political processes or hold leaders accountable.

Norris (2011) argues that declining trust in institutions is a global phenomenon, but it is particularly acute in Africa due to the weak capacity of state institutions and the prevalence of corruption. This decline in trust threatens the legitimacy of democratic governance and creates space for authoritarian alternatives.

However, there are also signs of hope. Recent studies suggest that citizens in Africa remain committed to democratic values and are willing to participate in political processes when they believe their voices will be heard (Afrobarometer, 2022). This suggests that rebuilding trust is possible through reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.

2.3.3 African Philosophy and Governance

A growing body of literature examines the relevance of African philosophy to contemporary governance challenges. Wiredu (1996) argues that African political systems must be rooted in African moral consciousness if they are to be effective. This requires a rejection of imported models of governance and a return to indigenous values and practices.

Similarly, Nkulu-N'Sengha (2009) explores the contribution of African philosophy to the discourse on good governance, arguing that African cultural values such as consensus, solidarity, and mutual responsibility offer valuable resources for building ethical governance systems.

Mudimbe (1988) critically examines the construction of African identity and its implications for governance, arguing that African societies must reclaim their own narratives and values if they are



to achieve genuine development. This perspective challenges the dominant Western models of governance and offers alternative pathways rooted in African traditions.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, analytical, and interdisciplinary methodology. Given the philosophical nature of the subject, the study relies heavily on textual analysis and critical interpretation of existing literature across ethics, political philosophy, African philosophy, and religious studies.

Primary materials include classical and contemporary philosophical texts such as Rawls' (1971) *A Theory of Justice*, alongside African philosophical works by Mbiti (1990), Wiredu (1996), and Gyekye (1997). These are complemented by scholarly articles, policy reports, and religious texts that provide moral perspectives on leadership and trust.

The study employs three main analytical approaches:

First, normative ethical analysis is used to evaluate the moral responsibilities of leaders and institutions. What ought leaders to do? What constitutes ethical governance?

Second, a comparative philosophical method is adopted to examine the relationship between African communal ethics and Western individualistic frameworks. For instance, while Rawls (1971) emphasizes justice as fairness (p. 10), African philosophy emphasizes relational harmony and communal well-being (Gyekye, 1997, p. 35).

Third, thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns such as corruption, institutional failure, and civic distrust across the literature.

This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of governance not merely as a political structure but as a moral enterprise grounded in trust.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Trust Deficit Between Leaders and Citizens

One of the most striking observations is the widening gap between political leaders and the citizenry. Citizens often view leaders as self-serving elites disconnected from the realities of the people. This perception is not unfounded. Transparency International (2023) consistently reports high levels of corruption across many African states, reinforcing public skepticism toward leadership.

This raises an important question: Can a government be legitimate if it is not trusted by its people? According to social contract theory, the legitimacy of the state depends on the consent and trust of the governed (Hobbes, 1985, p. 89). When this trust is broken, governance becomes coercive rather than consensual.



The empirical evidence supports this theoretical perspective. Afrobarometer (2022) data indicates that only 42% of Africans trust their national governments, with significant variations across countries. This trust deficit has profound implications for governance effectiveness and democratic consolidation.

Tabl 1: Trust in National Government Across Selected African Countries (2022)

Country	Trust in Government (%)
Botswana	68
Ghana	58
Kenya	45
Nigeria	38
South Africa	52
Tanzania	64
Uganda	35
Zimbabwe	30

Source: Afrobarometer (2022)

4.2 Institutional Breakdown and Moral Failure

Beyond individual leaders, institutions themselves suffer from credibility crises. The judiciary, electoral bodies, and law enforcement agencies are often perceived as compromised. This institutional distrust weakens democracy and fosters lawlessness. Kwame Gyekye (1997) argues that institutions must reflect moral values if they are to function effectively (p. 102). However, when institutions are driven by corruption rather than ethics, they lose their moral authority.

Table 2: Perception of Institutional Integrity in Selected African Countries (2023)

Institutionn	Level of Trust (1-5)*
Judiciary	2.4
Electoral Bodies	2.1
Law Enforcement	2.3
Civil Service	2.5
Legislature	2.0

Note: 1 = Very Low Trust, 5 = Very High Trust

Source: Author's Compilation from Afrobarometer (2022) and Transparency International (2023)



4.3 Corruption as a Symptom of Ethical Collapse

Corruption is not merely an administrative failure; it is a moral failure. It reflects a breakdown in ethical standards and a loss of commitment to the common good. As Nussbaum (2011) notes, ethical societies require citizens and leaders who are committed to justice and human dignity (p. 211).

Table 3: Corruption Perception Index (CPI) Scores for Selected African Countries (2023)

Country	CPI Score (0-100)	Global Rank
Seychelles	71	24
Botswana	60	39
Cabo Verde	58	41
South Africa	41	72
Ghana	43	68
Kenya	32	123
Nigeria	25	145
DR Congo	20	166
Somalia	11	180

Source: Transparency International (2023)

4.4 African Communal Ethics and the Restoration of Trust

Despite these challenges, African philosophy offers a pathway for restoring trust. The concept of ubuntu emphasizes shared humanity, compassion, and mutual responsibility. As Desmond Tutu (1999) explains, "A person is a person through other persons" (p. 31).

This ethical framework challenges the individualism and greed that characterize much of contemporary governance. It calls for a return to values that prioritize community over self-interest.



Table 4: Core Principles of Ubuntu and Their Governance Implications

Ubuntu Principle	Governance Implication
Shared Humanity	Inclusive decision-making
Compassion	Welfare-focused policies
Mutual Responsibility	Accountability mechanisms
Consensus Building	Participatory governance
Respect for Elders	Respect for institutional wisdom

Source: Author's Compilation

4.5 Religious Ethics and Moral Accountability

Religion remains a powerful moral force in Africa. Both Christianity and Islam emphasize honesty, justice, and accountability. Yet, the paradox remains: Why do deeply religious societies still struggle with corruption and poor governance?

This contradiction suggests that religious belief alone is insufficient without genuine moral commitment. As Oduyoye (2001) observes, religion must move beyond ritual to transformative ethics (p. 67).

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the crisis of governance in Africa is not merely political or economic but fundamentally ethical. At its core lies the erosion of trust—a moral failure that undermines leadership, institutions, and society as a whole.

Without trust, governance loses legitimacy. Without legitimacy, development becomes unsustainable. The question, therefore, is not whether Africa can develop, but whether it can rebuild the ethical foundations necessary for development.

The findings reveal that the breakdown of trust manifests in systemic corruption, weakened institutions, and civic disengagement. However, African philosophy offers a pathway for restoring trust through the revival of communal ethics and the integration of indigenous values into governance frameworks.



5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1 Ethical Reorientation of Leadership

Leaders must embrace governance as a moral duty rather than an opportunity for personal gain. This requires a fundamental shift in political culture, from self-serving leadership to servant leadership. Leadership training programs should incorporate ethical education and emphasize the moral responsibilities of public office.

11 Strengthening Institutions

Institutions must be reformed to ensure transparency, accountability, and independence. This includes strengthening the judiciary, electoral bodies, and law enforcement agencies. Anti-corruption institutions should be provided with adequate resources and political independence to effectively combat corruption.

111 Revival of African Values

Indigenous ethical systems such as ubuntu should be integrated into modern governance frameworks. This requires a revaluation of African cultural heritage and the incorporation of traditional governance practices, such as consensus-building and community participation, into contemporary political systems.

1V Civic Education

Citizens must be empowered to demand accountability and participate actively in governance. Civic education programs should be implemented to raise awareness of citizens' rights and responsibilities, and to promote a culture of political engagement and social responsibility.

V Religious Responsibility

Religious institutions must promote ethical transformation rather than mere ritual observance. Religious leaders should actively speak out against corruption and injustice, and encourage their followers to embrace ethical values in their personal and public lives.

VI Transparency and Anti-Corruption Measures

Governments should implement comprehensive transparency measures, including open budgeting, public procurement reforms, and whistleblower protection. Anti-corruption laws must be enforced consistently and impartially, regardless of the status of the individuals involved.



VII Youth Empowerment and Ethical Leadership Development

Investment in youth education and leadership development is essential for building a future generation of ethical leaders. Youth programs should emphasize moral values, civic responsibility, and commitment to the common good.

VIII Regional Cooperation and Peer Review

African countries should strengthen regional cooperation through mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) to promote mutual accountability and share best practices in governance and anti-corruption.

colleagues and students whose critical discussions helped shape the direction of this research.



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