

# **Anthropological perspectives on corruption**

Tone Kristin Sissener

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**Chr. Michelsen Institute** *Development Studies and Human Rights*

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## **Indexing terms**

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“To argue that the personal relationships that come to be established between public sector employees and individuals who deal with them reflect a ‘corrupt’ society may be correct in a legalistic sense, but it misses the point that these relationships simply reflect different social and moral norms” (Vito Tanzi 1995).

## **Introduction**

The past few years have seen growing attention on the problem of corruption, including from the World Bank, IMF, NGO’s, donor countries, as well as academics. Throughout the 1990s government departments, international financial institutions and supranational political bodies have all published policy statements emphasising the negative effects of corruption. Although corruption in government is not a new phenomenon, for instance in the case of India statements in Arthasastra testifies to the durability of the phenomenon<sup>1</sup>, corruption is today viewed to be the primary obstacle to social and economic growth in developing countries. Notwithstanding arguments showing positive effects of corruption, the general picture suggests widespread condemnation (Theobald 1990). In order to devise anti-corruption programmes in developing countries it is necessary to know the nature, characteristics, patterns and organisational structure of the phenomenon.

Economists and political scientists have taken the lead in recent research on corruption world-wide (Price 1999). International debates on how to approach the phenomenon are ongoing, but a general and widely accepted definition is “the abuse of public office for private gain” (Amundsen 1999, Gray and Kaufmann 1998, Rose-Ackerman 1996, Zakiuddin 1998). This definition obviously depends upon the existence of a public domain that is recognisably separated from the private sphere. The question is how this definition, which is informed by Weber’s rational-legal bureaucracy model, applies to non-western contexts.

The objective of this essay is to show that this conventional definition of corruption is too narrow and excessively concerned with the illegality of practices. I will argue that people’s own assessments of courses of action do not arise from a set of culturally universal, invariable norms that helps to decide if certain actions are to be classified as

“corrupt” or not. Rather, what is seen as corruption varies from one context to another. Given such variations, explorations of how the actors themselves evaluate social practices are required.

In this essay attempts will be made to place the rational-legal paradigm within a social and historical context in order to disclose shortcomings of the above-mentioned definition of corruption. By reviewing some of anthropology’s methods and approaches it will become clear that the discipline has much to offer contributing to a broader understanding of the phenomenon. An examination of socio-cultural logics informing everyday practices will show how corruption can be seen as an ambiguous phenomenon because of variations in social experience and cultural values.

### **Weber’s rational-legal bureaucracy model**

The rational-legal bureaucracy model has long traditions in European countries. Handelman states that “the idea of bureaucratic organisation is hardly an invention of Western social-science” (Handelman 1981:6). He attempts to show “whether there may be logical connectivity between the seventeenth-century idea of taxonomic-organization and Weber’s depiction of modern bureaucratic-organization”<sup>2</sup> (op. cit.: 9). Handelman finds continuity between early organisational principles in the West and the evolution of bureaucratic-organisation. He argues that in the West “one is predisposed to feel and think in particular ways, perhaps in terms of different logics, when one is within particular locales or settings which are relevant to the frame” (op. cit.: 12). This does not imply that bureaucratic orders are simply the reflections of society.<sup>3</sup> Bureaucratic orders maintained in Western countries today must be seen as a result of historical events informing and changing the idea of a rational-legal bureaucratic-organisation. That public office was viewed as private property in much of Western Europe till at least the mid-nineteenth century exemplifies how notions of rational-legal principles have changed. Scott writes that, “the control of administration

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<sup>1</sup> The Arthashastra is a treatise on politics and the art of statesmanship, written by the Indian statecraft scholar, Kautilya, some fifteen hundred to two thousand years ago (Ruud 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Taxonomy literally means classification, i.e. the idea of an organising principle based on a classification system.

<sup>3</sup> This is made clear in the following statement, “In the West, one recognizes that the idea of bureaucratic-organization is somehow different from one’s perception of the everyday, and yet the same” (1981:14).

we know today would have been impossible without the development in the late nineteenth century of government accountability to broadly representative legislative bodies” (Scott 1969:316).

Developing nations have, according to Scott, “for the most part adopted the full panoply of laws and regulations that evolved from, and gave expression to, the long political struggle for reform in the West” (Scott 1969:319). This view is in line with Olivier de Sardan’s statement with reference to Africa that, “the functioning of the administrative apparatus [is] entirely copied from the European pattern [...]. In law, official functioning and budget it is totally Western” (Olivier de Sardan 1999:47). However, the mere adoption of a bureaucratic-administrative framework will not necessarily establish the concomitant bureaucratic values and practices.

As opposed to Western Europe, the logics of bureaucratic organisation may be far removed from predominant socio-cultural logics. In England, the development of political and bureaucratic rules and norms was a result of a long process, whereas for instance in Africa and South Asia the entire legal framework was for the most part a legacy of colonialism. As a result, the functioning of the administrative apparatus, entirely copied from the European pattern, takes the form of a “schizophrenic type” (Olivier de Sardan 1999:47). Moreover, the European legacy of colonialism may have set the stage for conflicting norms regarding bureaucratic-organisation in pre-colonial nations. Cohen reports from Nigeria that “Africans learned how to live and operate under a bureaucratic system in which illegitimacy was normal” (Cohen 1980:81). The new rules and political norms of the colonisers had little or no applicability to the realities of their own lives. Furthermore, the public services set in place by British colonial authority departed from how such services were managed in Britain for several reasons. The inefficiency, mistrust, and frustrations of over-centralisation and incompatible logics became part of the norms and culture of the Nigerian public service well before Africans took over. When they did, they also took over the inconsistent managerial style of the previous administrators (op. cit.).

## **Defining corruption: a conventional distinction in the social sciences**

In political science, the conception of public office is strongly influenced by Max Weber's ideal type of rational-legal bureaucracy. This rational-legal paradigm is crucial for the understanding of corruption as the non-respect of the distinction between public and private. However, this public administration perspective on corruption has not gone unchallenged.

Firstly, the notion of public office is essentially a western concept. Several scholars have made this point clear. Wood says, "it does not proceed from an a priori assumption that such [Weberian] rationality is or can be the norm in society" (Wood 1994:520). Price argues in the case of India that "a public servant is confronted with a wide range of pressing demands for action which are not described in official rules and regulations [...]. We can see the existence of competing codes as a reason for the widespread contestation of bureaucratic norms in many sections of Indian societies" (Price 1999:318). Ruud states that "to be the same man, and not to entertain primary loyalty at certain times to an informal institution, a lofty ideal, to remain the person in which your friends have trust, that seems more human, at least under certain circumstances to Bengali villagers" (Ruud 1998:4).

Secondly, legal procedures are not *per se* the most rational. Myrdal (1968) differentiated between the 'actual' rules of bureaucratic behaviour and the 'official' rules and suggested that the former may be more 'innovative' and appropriate to local conditions. Although corruption is often interpreted as having negative distributional consequences, others have argued that corruption has positive effects; it 'humanises' the workings of bureaucracy (Ward 1989).<sup>4</sup>

The task of finding a suitable definition of corruption, which can be used for purposes of comparative analyses, has proved fraught with difficulty. The legalistic understanding of the term relates corruption to the violation of a rule or a law. This approach raises several problems. Firstly, it presupposes rules and laws prohibiting corrupt behaviour and does not allow looking into the actions or inactions that laws on corruption (and regulations that distinguishes public from private) do not cover.

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<sup>4</sup>See also Theobald's (1990) discussion of positive effects of corruption.

Secondly, given that legal codes vary from country to country, judgements of the legality of various practices will also vary.

Thirdly, the legal approach depends on the notion that legal frameworks are somehow neutral, objective and non-political (Williams 1999), but corrupt activity is not an objective form of practice existing in a vacuum. It is a social act and its meaning must be understood with reference to the social relationships between people in historically specific settings. A transaction is now a legal one, now illegal, depending upon the social context of the transaction.

Trying to understand how corruption is conceptualised the question we need to raise is; what behaviour is being compared, how are practices evaluated, and by whom? Supporting the view that Weberian informed definitions of corruption is “too narrow and excessively concerned with the illegality of such practices, defined from a modern, Western point of view” (Olivier de Sardan 1999:27), my argument is that a broader notion of corruption is required. Olivier de Sardan uses the term of ‘corruption complex’ to include practices beyond corruption in the strict sense of the word, i.e. nepotism, abuse of power, embezzlement and various forms of misappropriation, influence peddling, prevarication, insider trading and abuse of the public purse (ibid). This seems the most satisfactory alternative as it opens up for a more advanced view of the complexity of social behaviour. Furthermore, it makes an exploration of people’s own evaluations of their practices possible.

## **Towards a broader understanding of corruption**

### *Anthropological methods and approaches*

Blundo and Olivier de Sardan argues that corruption is largely a clandestine or concealed practice with strong normative undertones, similar to other phenomena like large scale and petty crime, parallel to black market activities and drug trafficking (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2000). Anthropology, as a social science sub-discipline, has an inventory of methodological tools appropriate for analysing the habitually concealed and under-communicated, usually illegal, and sometimes illegitimate practice of corruption. As an initial approach to a field where corruption is not very well-known or previously described, to formulate new hypotheses and verify the

applicability of existing theories derived from other studies, anthropological field methods are particularly fruitful.

Besides, traditional social science methods like questionnaires and quantitative studies run the risk of being identified with police interrogations and to produce embarrassed silence, self-victimisation, condemnation of others, and very biased results. Consequently, the indirect anthropological field methods are particularly apt in getting information from this social field that is so difficult to access for the “non initiated” (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2000).

In Blundo and Olivier de Sardan’s discussions of anthropological field methods, they emphasise *observation* as a useful method to assess the tension between formal and informal norm systems, and to determine what practices informants are considering to be the most important. Corruption does not necessarily take place where the researcher is looking for it; its everyday manifestations might be elsewhere. This everyday dimension is often overlooked by other social sciences and has as a result been lacking in the literature on corruption.

Even when corruption per se is hardly observable through “participatory observation”, informal conversations and people’s everyday discourses are rich in anecdotes, confessions and accusations, through which both substantiations and assessments on corrupt practices can be obtained. One can also study more directly observable activities, like transactions in buses, hospitals and roadblocks, although at high costs and with serious ethical dilemmas.

Valuable information on corrupt practices can also be collected through interviews, and preferable informal interviews that can uncover the popular and local semiotics and ethics concerning corruption. Focus group discussions have also been fruitful in some situations. Case studies, whether of particular institutions or specific interactions or episodes, are also fruitful. Finally, Blundo and Olivier de Sardan underline the significance of methodological triangulation: approaches and methods should be combined and used in parallel, like for instance interviews combined with observations and news paper reports or court hearings, to substantiate and verify the findings.

### *Some examples*

In this subsection I will present three anthropological works on corruption. This is to show how other social scientists, working within the field of anthropology, have argued for a broader understanding of corruption. These selected works illustrates quite clearly the importance of contextualisation. Furthermore, the authors manage to bring to the surface how an understanding of the complexity of social experience and cultural values is crucial when trying to understand the discourse of corruption.

Akhil Gupta made an early anthropological contribution to the international scholarly debate about corruption with an article published in 1995. By examining how lower-level officials execute their duties, Gupta found the conventional distinction between private and public inapplicable to an Indian context. Gupta says that Sharmaji, an Indian lower-level official, “pose an interesting challenge to Western notions of the boundary between ‘state’ and ‘society’ in some obvious ways”. The reason, he continues, is perhaps because “those categories are descriptively inadequate to the lived realities that they purport to represent” (Gupta 1995:384). The following case is an example of how an ordinary lower-level officer executes his duties.

“Sharmaji was a *patwari*, an official who keeps the land record of approximately five to six villages [...]. Sharmaji lived in a small, inconspicuous house deep in the old part of town [...]. The lower part of the house consisted of two rooms and a small enclosed courtyard. One of those rooms had a large door that opened onto the street. This room functioned as Sharmaji’s ‘office’. That is where he was usually to be found, surrounded by clients, sycophants, and colleagues [...]. Two of the side walls of the office were lined with benches; facing the entrance toward the inner part of the room was a raised platform, barely big enough for three people. It was here that Sharmaji sat and held court, and it was here that he kept the land registers for the villages that he administered. All those who had business to conduct came to his ‘office’. At any given time there were usually two or three different groups, interested in different transactions, assembled in the tiny room. Sharmaji conversed with all of them at the same time, often switching from one addressee to another in the middle of a single sentence. Everyone present joined in the discussion of matters pertaining to others. Sharmaji often punctuated his statements by turning to the others and rhetorically asking, “Have I said anything wrong?” or, “Is what I said true or not?” Most of the transactions conducted in this

‘office’ were relatively straightforward [...] [but] these things ‘cost money’” (Gupta 1995:379).

Sharmanji’s way of executing his duties show little resemblance to Western experiences in at least three ways. Firstly, his office was located in the same building as his home. Secondly, when performing his duties he constantly discussed the matters with others present. Thirdly, money was demanded in order for Sharmaji to execute his duties. However, when villagers complained about the corruption of state officials they were not mainly complaining about how they kept office, or having to pay bribes, but about lack of performative competence required in order to be successful in their dealings with state officials.<sup>5</sup> Gupta concludes that, “the discourse of corruption varies a great deal from one country to another, dependent as it is on particular historical trajectories and the specific grammars of public culture” (op. cit.: 392). In other words, social boundaries marking acceptable behaviour is not the same in all contexts, but rather culturally specific and socially produced.

Arild Engelsen Ruud argues in a paper from 1998 that – seen from the actor’s point of view – there is a difference between bribery and other forms of corruption. He says that in the case of Bengal the villagers have a special term for ‘bribe’ while other forms of corruption are not covered in everyday vocabulary. Ruud writes, “as such bribes appear to have a special significance, a special meaning, which is negative” (Ruud 1998:13). However, bribing may appear without being given a negative meaning, but outright bribery is described as only the last resort. First, problems are sought solved through the use of contacts.

“In order to secure a more steady income, Kalo applied for a position [...] at a near-by hospital. There were thirty vacant positions and several hundred applicants [...] Kalo had reasonably good qualifications, but so had many others [...]. As one who was not exceptionally qualified, he knew that only informal sources of influence would help: bribes, contacts, or pressure from the top. Over the month or so that went by from the

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<sup>5</sup> Ruud cites an Indian newspaper reporting that a group of peasants had sent a letter of complaint to the Prime Minister, “The letter did not complain about bribes having to be paid. Instead, it complained that the rates of the bribes for the various tasks varied from day to day, and even from person to person” (Ruud 1998:4). Supporting Gupta, Ruud says that, “The process of negotiation for getting a job done by a bureaucrat – including the negotiation for the size of the possible bribe – is a game, and it requires knowledge, wit and intelligence” (Ruud 1998:11).

formal interviews to the declaration of the results, Kalo [made] frequent travels into town from his village home [...] searching for information and contacts in connection with his employment application [...]. He had initially two promising contacts, a friend of his from old, who was employed in the municipality and who allegedly knew personally one of those in charge of the selection process; and then Kalo's cousin whose neighbour was a highly placed hospital clerk. With his friend he went to the one in charge of the selection process, and with his cousin he visited the neighbour-clerk. The neighbour-clerk part of the affair was pretty open and straight-forward. As a good neighbour he would do his bit to help [...]. He asked for money that he would need to pay off certain well-placed people. Kalo expected him to envision a reasonable cut for himself as well [...]. [A] rather steep sum [was required][...] but the argument was that lots of people were willing to pay up [...]. Kalo's cousin's in-laws turned out to be close personal friends of one of the commissioners in town [...]. [The commissioner] explained that his own position was not one of great influence in the matter (which was to say that he was not particularly interested), and promised to write a letter to the right person recommending Kalo – which to all meant that would not apply his clout in this matter but that equally he would not jeopardise his relationship with his friends, whose in-laws brought this person [...]. The last strategy [...] was that he implored his brother-in-law, Nikhil, to come to his assistance. He [Nikhil] declined to do it, declined to help his sister's family, and jeopardised his relationship with her [...] and they are not on speaking terms any more. Kalo's many other strategies also failed and he did not get the job”(Ruud 1998:14).

In the case of Kalo most of those who got involved tried to help him secure the job without expressing any resentments about how they were approached. Neither did Kalo complain about the sum of money that was asked for. Ruud writes that “it is not easy to draw the distinguishing lines between paying a bribe and remunerating some distant contact in the bureaucracy for a job done in your favour” (op.cit.: 17). Ruud concludes that what is corruption and what is not is a matter of shade. While giving a bribe and using one's contact can give the same results evaluations of the two acts are rarely the same.

Drawing on ethnographic material about a set of Nepalese cultural practices known as ‘*natabad – crypabad*’<sup>6</sup>, Alex Kondos (1987) attempts to chart the meaning ‘favouritism’ has for Nepalese in their everyday encounters with central administration. This is again compared to how the idea of favouritism is constructed by the Westernised intellectuals to mean corruption. He finds a conflict between the two opposing ideologies and argues that, what the academics tend to label as instances of corruption, those involved will view as obligations towards family and friends. This view is supported by ‘rickshaw wallas’ in Kathmandu in the following case story.

“Many a ‘rickshaw walla’ in Kathmandu explains why he does not operate with a motorised version of the vehicle known as ‘tempo’ by simply saying ‘*pahauch chaina*’ (I have no source-force<sup>7</sup>). [D]uring the 1970s [...] a Cabinet Minister launched a scheme which provided for long-term interest-free bank loans to ‘rickshaw wallas’ for the purchase of ‘tempos’, arguing that, among other things, this would help up-grade the occupation which had become popular among Kathmandu’s educated youth because of lack of alternative employment opportunities. He claimed that the government’s action would demonstrate in a very concrete way its own and the people’s faith in education by illustrating that ‘education holds the key to better occupational opportunities’. The scheme was short-lived because, as the press, and the radio bulletins put it, ‘corruption’ [...] marked the occasion. Some Nepalis insist that this was not the reason but rather the scheme became so popular that the students from all over Nepal rushed to the city ‘to cash in’ on the scheme and hiring their acquisitions to existing ‘rickshaw wallas’. It appears that those who managed ‘to cash in’ on the scheme were either relatives of the Minister or close friends of these relatives or staunch political supporters of the Minister” (Kondos 1987:17).

The ‘rickshaw wallas’ that did not manage to get the favourable bank loans expressed no complains about how these loans were gained. The only regret they expressed concerned their own lack of ‘source-force’. Kondos concludes that because favouritism constitutes a legitimate way of going about things in a highly traditional Hindu culture these practices are not regarded as corruption by the participants.

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<sup>6</sup> Kondos writes that, “helping kin is known as ‘*natabad*’ helping others as ‘*crypabad*’”. *Natabad-crypabad* is translated to favouritism (Kondos 1987:18).

<sup>7</sup> Kondos says that, “‘source’ refers to the contact and ‘force’ refers to your contact’s power” (Kondos 1987:17).

A narrow definition on corruption makes it difficult to explain how behaviour, that transcends Weberian borders of what is deemed acceptable for holders of public office, are seen as legitimate and even laudable to those involved. In order to explore the legitimacy of various practices a broader understanding of the phenomenon is essential. This will have to include a contextualised assessment of what practices are the most important *seen from the actors' point of view*.

### **Socio-cultural logics informing everyday practices**

In many developing nations, holders of public office derive their administrative and professional legitimacy from training in modern European administration, but their social legitimacy may imply to act in conformity with different socio-cultural logics. Below, ethnographic examples of the different socio-cultural logics of gift-giving and solidarity networks will be presented to indicate just a fragment of acquired habits and commonplace practices informing everyday activities in selected places. The ethnographic cases illustrates how variations in social experiences and cultural values obstructs an idea of corruption as an uncontested phenomenon. An exploration of how the actors themselves evaluate their actions can provide an understanding of the legitimacy of various activities.

#### ***The logics of gift-giving***

Discussions and analysis of gifts and exchange provided by Malinowski (1922), Mauss (1990 [1925]), and Sahlins (1972) have provided a theoretical frame of reference for contemporary ethnographers (see for example Bourdieu 1977, Ledeneva 1998, Parry 1986, Weiner, 1976, 1978, 1980, Yan 1996).

In China there is a set of practices called *guanxi*, which literally means “social relationships or social connection” (Yang 1989, 1994). In Mayfair M. Yang’s rich and varied ethnographic material a variety of practices, generally falling under the rubric of *guanxi*, is described and analysed. In the practice of *guanxi* giving gifts activates obligations of mutual assistance on a wide scale between two parties who have established a basis of familiarity. However, the motives behind gift-giving and repaying varies depending on the relationship between the parties. Firstly, living up to

obligations by giving, receiving, and repaying gifts are at the same time what ‘feels’ right and a way of avoiding ‘loosing face’<sup>8</sup> in the eyes of others. Secondly, “one may feel obliged to help others with a certain sense of self-interest and material benefit in mind” (Yang 1994:140). *Gunaxi* is a way of helping each other out in every day life by giving and reciprocating gifts, which the following case is an example of.

“Han Sulan, a woman in her early fifties with a peasant and working-class background, lives with her husband, daughter, and mother-in-law in a modest three-room cement cottage [...] belonging to her husband’s factory [...]. Because of the proximity of the neighbours and the long time they have all lived there, these families have come to know each other well and feel comfortable calling on one another for help on a small scale [...]. Sharing is the best policy, says Han, because invariably neighbours find out what you have acquired, and a loss of face for yourself [...]. Her mother-in-law once made a cotton-padded winter jacket for a neighbour who could not sew very well. Six months later when the mother-in-law was going to visit her other son in the countryside, the neighbour bought her some cakes to give to her son’s family [...]. Han says that through these rounds of giving and helping, one maintains good relations with the neighbours and finds peace and security at home” (op. cit.: 81).

Yang refers to a variety of examples where gifts are given on a day-to-day basis and where the act of refusing to accept or reciprocate a gift invariably leads to a ‘loss of face’. However, the obligation to accept and reciprocate a gift may cause dilemmas, as in the case of a worker who wanted to get a few unauthorised days off from work. First he presented a gift to the factory manager in private, but the latter declined. He then decided to offer the gift in yet another way. In the presence of other workers he presented the gift in a manner that the manager could not refuse to accept. After accepting the gift the manager had to honour the worker’s request because so many people had seen him accept the gift. Otherwise, people would talk about him as the manager that had accepted a gift without feeling any obligation to give something in return (op. cit.).

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<sup>8</sup> See Yang (1989:42) where she writes, “the Chinese relational construction of personhood represented by the importance of face provides the mechanism for the art of *guanxi* to constrain the actions of a gift recipient”.

In China, gift-giving is not only seen as obligatory in certain contexts, but also as a legitimate solution when, for instance, trying to obtain and change job assignments, buy certain foods and consumer items, and obtain better education. Kin, friends, neighbours, and colleagues become a resource for obtaining goods and services. In an article Yang writes, “in the Chinese cultural discourse there is [...] often a fine line between the art of *guanxi* and bribery” (Yang 1989:48). This argument is followed up in a monograph where she argues that “the art of *guanxi* cannot be reduced to a modern western notion of corruption because the personalistic qualities of obligation, indebtedness, and reciprocity are just as important as transactions in material benefit” (Yang 1994:108). Yang argues that in cultural judgements of practices the importance of the length and quality of personal relationships is stressed. She finds that the Chinese distinguish between those who are ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ when commenting on exchanges:

“A woman graduate student studying in the United States expressed the culturally felt distinction between bribery/corruption and the art of *guanxi* perhaps most clearly. For her, bribery and corruption are pejorative, negative terms, whereas *guanxixue*<sup>9</sup> connotes “human sentiments” [...], friendship, long-term personal relationships, and an image of people helping one another. ‘So, there is a good side of *guanxixue* which bribery does not have. For example, if you and an official do not have a prior personal relationship already, such as shared native homes, kin relationship, and so on, and he is seen to help you, then other people will surmise that there is bribery going on between you” (op. cit.: 63).

Yang stresses the point that although Chinese cultural discourses contains diverse, ambivalent, and contradictory understandings of *guanxi*, most people consider the art of *guanxi* a necessary part of everyday life. However, to legitimately obtain goods and services through informal channels presupposes an established basis of familiarity between those involved.

### *The logics of solidarity network*

Ever since Barnes introduced the concept of network to anthropology in 1954 anthropologists have employed this term to qualify multiple forms of belonging in

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<sup>9</sup> *Gunaxixue* is a contemporary variation on *gunaxi* (Bell 2000).

different settings (see for example Barth 1978, Bott 1955, 1957, 1964, Epstein 1961, Mayer 1962, Mitchell 1966, 1975, and later Hannerz 1992).

The concept of network was found particularly useful in a Bangladeshi context where much effort is put into maintaining and creating bonds to a wide range of people (Sissener 1999). Bangladeshi men spend a lot of time meeting after dark sharing cigarettes, drinking tea and chewing betel together, always trying to expand their personal ties of friendship. The conversations they have may seem like meaningless chatter, but by engaging in these conversations they gain information about each other. On this arena, which usually is the local market place or the nearest country town, business deals are discussed, loans are given, introductions are made, favours are granted, information exchanged, etc.

A man I shall call Lucas, on his regular trip to the country town, one evening heard that he might not keep his current position. A few months back he had been promoted and was holding a position as a higher-level officer at the local office of an international NGO. A friend of his said that the head office in Dhaka had decided to transfer him to a position as a lower-level officer in Dhaka upon request from the local director. The next morning Lucas was called to a meeting with the local director who explained that, as he was not pleased with Lucas' work, he had requested to have him transferred to Dhaka. Lucas decided to get more information on why his boss suddenly was not pleased with his work. After working nearly twenty years in the same office he had finally been appointed to the second highest position in the local office. He could see no reason why his boss wanted him transferred.

Lucas had a friend who was on leave from his position as assisting director at the head office in Dhaka to do a Ph.D. at a university in England. This friend was back in Bangladesh to decide on fieldwork sites for his research. Lucas met with him one evening and offered to assist him the next morning visiting various villages in the area. This gave him the opportunity to talk with his friend about his job. After explaining the situation Lucas asked his friend to talk to the local director to find out why the director had decided to have him transferred. Next time they met the friend told Lucas what the director had said. Lucas then asked him to talk to the directors in Dhaka convincing them that there was no reason for his transfer, but the friend said that since he was on leave he would have no influence on the matter. As a friend he wanted to help Lucas, but by

getting too involved he was afraid of jeopardising his own opportunity of returning to his position as the assistant director after finishing his Ph.D. Therefore, he advised Lucas to go to Dhaka himself and talk to people there. He gave him a name of one of the officers to talk to in particular.

Before going to Dhaka, Lucas made a visit to another friend, the former director of the local office, asking for advice. This friend belonged to the same tribal community as Lucas and he was hoping for some help. The former director, as it turned out, had left the organisation due to a personal conflict between himself and the directors at the head office in Dhaka and could offer no assistance. Arriving in Dhaka Lucas stayed with a relative working for the same organisation, but as a lower-level officer he was unable to influence the decision of the officers in charge. After a few days in Dhaka spending hours every day meeting with different people Lucas realised that there was nothing he could do there about the transfer. Back home Lucas again tried to get his boss to change his mind and withdraw his request for transference. Lucas ended up leaving the organisation realising he could not turn things around because he did not have, or manage to establish, contact with the right people. None of those he tried came through for him and in the end he had no one else to turn to.

When Lucas realised he might not keep his job at the local office he met with friends working for different organisations in the area. This way he came to know about a vacant position relevant of his qualifications. One of his friends knew one of those in charge of hiring and recommended Lucas for the position. A few years back when this friend had applied for the position he was currently holding Lucas had recommended him to the board, which he was a member of, and the board decided to hire him.

Between family, friends, neighbours etc. in Bangladesh there exists an almost general obligation of mutual assistance. One cannot refuse a service, a favour, and a bit of string pulling or compliance without severe consequences (as observed in the case of Kalo approaching his brother-in-law). When Lucas heard about the transfer he said that moving to Dhaka was not possible because he did not know very many people there. Ethnographic evidence documents the importance of special purpose networks consisting of friends doing business together and lending money, without interest, from each other (cf. Sissener 1999). People spend years establishing and maintaining a sufficient network and they depend on kin, friends, and neighbours for their everyday survival. In this context, making use of solidarity network is a vital and

legitimate part of everyday practices. If objections to the use of solidarity network are voiced at all it is usually done in connection with one's own misfortune, i.e. in cases where people see themselves as victims of particularistic considerations giving preference to someone else.

In Russia there is a set of practices similar to those described above called *blat*, which is "the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures" (Ledeneva 1998:1). Within *blat*, Alena V. Ledeneva distinguishes among forms in which favours were grounded in the actors' mutual utility, in which personal ties of friendship or kinship created a moral obligation to help out, and in which a boss meted out favours for the sake of his own self-image. Ledeneva's primary research consisted on fifty in-depth interviews. The following statement is made from one of her interview objects explaining about *blat*.

"My mother worked as head of a Soviet farm butchery. She could sell really good meat and at much cheaper prices, or other foodstuffs in short supply. For example, when there was a shortage of butter she could obtain some. Naturally, she had good connections, and worked hand in glove [...] with shop assistants from the clothes store. My father worked in construction all his life, and construction materials were always in demand. When he retired and became a gas-supplier, he could offer a bigger gas cylinder in exchange for a small one. And city gasmen gave him more of the bigger cylinders because his wife would sell good meat to them. He also obtained fuel for his car by *blat*. He knew the tanker drivers and received an unlimited supply from them, normally for a bottle of vodka or 'moonshine'. He also paid, of course, but they did not offer this to everyone, only those whom they trusted. For him it was cheaper and free of queuing. Another example: a meat storekeeper in the village was a good acquaintance from long ago. Every year when she went on holiday she left him in charge. She trusted he was not going to cheat, whereas he was happy to help and to have this opportunity to buy meat for all his family. My father also helped my brother with dacha construction. You know how expensive it became. And he hardly spent any money. Contacts, old contacts. They allocated him cut wood for free or for a few kopecks. And he gave them fresh eggs or dung" (op. cit.: 134).

According to Ledeneva obtaining goods and services through blat is seen as a legitimate activity. Based on her informants' statements she draws a distinction between blat and bribery; "In contrast to bribery, *blat* is a matter of belonging to a circle. *Blat* favours are normally provided to *svoim* (people of the circle, one of us). In such long-term relations, all kinds of favours are possible" (op. cit.: 40). In blat, as in guanxi, the personal relationship existing between those involved is stressed. One of her informants expressed this concern in the following manner:

"In blat, one's self-image is positive also because no money is involved. People often provide favours in anticipation of some return favours in order to create a certain image: 'no need to pay, it is a sign of friendship, no calculations between friends, I could be in the same situation myself, one day you'll prove useful'" (op. cit.: 41).

Giving bribes becomes only a last resort because "everything can be decided by *blat*". Ledeneva writes that while bribery is illegal according to a statute in the Criminal Code blat is not mentioned at all. However, the distinguishing line between a bribe and the use of blat is thin and often overlapping.

"Thus, some links in the chain are *blat* ones, some must be paid off. The cases where *blat* approaches or mediates bribery create juridical problems as well as everyday confusion. This is but one reason why struggle against bribery and corruption cannot be fully effective – only one link (bribe-giver-bribe-taker) in the chain is involved in the case while the greater part of it – to do with *blat* and personal networks – is not targeted" (op. cit.).

These are just a few examples of acquired habits and commonplace practices informing everyday activities. In many cases, practices of gift-giving between familiars and the use of solidarity network to obtain goods and services is evaluated differently from outright bribery between strangers. Even if a payment in cash is involved this becomes secondary to the importance placed on the nature of the relationship existing between those involved. Consequently, the line between blat or guanxi and bureaucratic corruption becomes blurred.

## **Concluding remarks**

Corruption is an ambiguous phenomenon often causing diverse, ambivalent, and contradictory understandings among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike. Given such ambiguousness, discourses of corruption can only be understood when seen as part of wider social and cultural contexts.

In this essay I have argued for a broader understanding of corruption. Finding the conventional definition on corruption too narrow and excessively concerned with the illegality of practices a more open approach has been argued for. Anthropology has an inventory of methodological tools and analytical approaches appropriate for capturing people's own assessments of courses of action. Using these methods and approaches enables us to disclose what is corruption and what is not corruption *seen from the actors' own point of view*.

Corruption is very much an issue in public debates and everyday conversations both in Africa, Russia, and South Asia. The intention has not been to excuse illegal actions by providing an explanation by 'culture', but to show that the borderline for acceptable behaviour is not universal. Knowledge of peoples own views and their discourses of corruption provided by anthropologists will bring to light possible discrepancies between official and practical norms and practices. Unless practices are seen as unacceptable to the practitioners, reformations may prove hard to implement. Any 'anti-corruption' policy must face up to this.

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# Summary

The primary concern of this paper is to present anthropological perspectives on corruption. The emphasis is on how anthropological methods and approaches can contribute to a broader understanding of corruption. International debates on how to approach the phenomenon are ongoing, but corruption is generally defined as the abuse of public office for private gain. It is argued that this conventional definition is too narrow and excessively concerned with the illegality of practices. Explorations of how the actors themselves evaluate social practices are seen as essential. Variations in social experiences and cultural values may explain why corruption remains ambiguous.