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The Coloniality of Corruption in Trinidad

DYLAN KERRIGAN

Introduction

WHAT IS POLITICAL POWER UNDER RACIAL CAPITALISM?¹ Is there a historical line to be drawn from the colonial political power derived from Enlightenment ideas of race, class and gender hierarchies to modern elites and general publics in nations geographically far away from Europe?² This article describes and documents one type of socio-political power in Trinidad called *bobol*. It illustrates that some people understand bobol as white-collar crime, others as everyday corruption, still others as a range of different social actions, from the rebellious and destructive, to the efficient and culturally legitimate. It discusses these cultural ideas and logics within a context of postcolonialism as a failed experiment of self-determination and national sovereignty, where culturalism triumphed over structural change, and state and private institutions tended toward a general lack of transparency, accountability, efficiency and punishment.³ Finally, the essay also considers how colonial political institutions possess ontological distinctions, localised epistemologies and cultural logics that perhaps encourage particular postcolonial social and cultural behaviours. That is to say, as many ethnographies of everyday corruption from around the world suggest, unique transhistorical, economic and social structures and forces shape local techniques and cultures of resourcefulness.⁴ In this sense, talk and lyrics as texts⁵ on corruption are discursive transhistorical connections between colonialism and neo-colonialism, and suggest how bobol as a political power is represented and reflected from below.

Bobol in Trinidadian discourse

In Lise Winer's comprehensive *Dictionary of the English/Creole of Trinidad & Tobago*, the entry for bobol reads:

Bobol, bubol, boboll, bubbul *N* Graft: corruption; fraud; embezzlement. [ˈbʌbɔ:l] (south central Zoombo Kikongo *lu-bubulu* ‘corruption’; Kikongo *bubula* ‘become corrupt’; go rancid) (Northern Angola).⁶

Winer’s dictionary entry provides further evidence of the word bobol as language-in-use circulating and recruited widely in talk across time and cultures in Trinidad from as far back as 1907.

In Trinidad, bobol is spoken of in conversations, in radio chat shows, in everyday situations, by politicians, and on the news. For example, during Good Friday mass at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church on 13 October 2013, Archbishop Joseph Harris said, “Deliver us an end to bobol and corrupt practices”,⁷ and on 6 November 2013, the current prime minister Keith Rowley implored the nation to “avoid bobol”.⁸

Senator Anthony Vieira also raised the issue of bobol in the Trinidad and Tobago senate in 2014:

I would like to begin my contribution by talking about “bobol”. “Bobol” is a word that is indigenous to Trinidad and Tobago. “Bobol” is defined in the Trinidad and Tobago Dictionary *Cote Ce, Cote La* as: “Several persons involved in scheme and covering for each other. Financial scandal.” In the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* the word bobol is defined as “fraud and corrupt practices, usually on some scale by well-placed persons in authority in a company or in governmental administration”. To be “in bobol” or to “make bobol” is to be profitably involved in a network of fraud, usually of a company or government official in collusion with others . . . Trinidad and Tobago has been described as a land of “bobol”. Indeed, “bobol” and corruption are like a cancer causing social and economic injustice and discontent.⁹

Theoretical framework

The two-island nation-state Trinidad and Tobago was granted independence from Britain in 1962 and became the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in 1976. The population today is approximately 1.37 million people. The three main demographic groups are: Indo (37.6%), Afro (36.3%) and mixed (24.2%). This ethnic diversity reflects its colonial history of slavery, indentureship and migration under racial capitalism.

For J.P. Olivier de Sardan, one way to look at the emergence and continued

salience of corruption in ex-colonies is to examine the cultural outcomes and behavioural logics produced as a consequence of the cultural syncretism of colonialist, postcolonialist and pre-colonial realities. To do this he proposes various behavioural logics that are “profoundly engrained in current social life”¹⁰ in Africa. These logics include: negotiation, solidarity networks, predatory authority, gift-giving, and redistributive accumulation.¹¹ De Sardan proposes that each, often in combination with others, helps to explain how and why corruption in Africa can seem banal and everyday. His proposition is that such cultural logics shape the behaviour of local actors. In this sense, they provide cultural codes, “which allow a justification of corruption by those who practise it (and who do not necessarily consider, quite the contrary, it to be such) and an anchorage of corruption as banal everyday practice”.¹²

The suggestion in this article is that certain syncretic behavioural logics, such as those identified by de Sardan, develop transhistorically, and they “influence the practices of corruption”.¹³ Recognising why corruption in ex-colonies like Trinidad and Tobago may find a “favourable ground for its extension and generalisation, in short for its banalisation”,¹⁴ may help us to understand the intergenerational persistence of corruption and its causes, consequences, and culture. As Stuart Hall once observed, “Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse.”¹⁵

The key premise of the article is that in the context of the colonality of power,¹⁶ Caribbean studies have not sufficiently engaged with the phenomenology of corruption in ex-Caribbean colonies. This is not to say that corruption has not been studied in surveys or thought about in critical and creative ways.¹⁷ Rather, it is to suggest that by including humanistic, transhistorical, cultural, political and socioeconomic contexts, qualitative insights improve our overall understanding of how crime functions as social action and a racialised system of control, under capitalism.¹⁸ The article also provides conceptual connections, via discourse and language-in-use, about the intergenerational persistence of crime, that can be made between the corrupt power at the heart of colonialism and forms of corruption found today that have been erased by colonial amnesia, shallow culturalism and thin representations of human behaviour.¹⁹

David Friedrichs described how the Caribbean was established through state-organised crime, or state-corporate crime.²⁰ In this sense, the conquest

of the New World was a function of the greed and control of European elites and their state-led conquests and settler-colonialism. As such, elite corruption and political “white”-collar crimes were widely diffused regionally and are enduring features of Caribbean political history.²¹ In the Caribbean, governmental crime and state-led criminality, in its various manifestations, shape and influence the environment within which local political cultures develop and conventional crime occurs. Conceptually, one way to think about this from Western Enlightenment thought is to recognise Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s cautions about the growth of wealth and the consequences of increasing inequality, and that human material progress correlates with corruption.²²

Bobol is suggested as a discursive connection between political power in colonialism and in the neo-colonial present, to support this claim that the corruption of elites in the past shapes conditions for a culture of politics that, over time, feeds the wider society. As de Sardan in his anthropological work on Africa stated, describing the development and “cultural embeddedness” of a “corruption complex” and “moral economy of corruption”: “The process of state-apparatus building during the twentieth century, a process that is far from being achieved, is obviously fundamental not only for the production of corruption itself but also for the production of a cultural embeddedness of corruption.”²³

Methodology

Research data was collected between 2013 and 2017 from local fieldwork observations, various archival and secondary sources, and forty-six semi-structured interviews conducted in the evening with commuters travelling through Aranguez, a central transport hub outside the capital city Port of Spain and near the University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine campus. The larger research project focused on comparing the fear of street crime and the fear of white-collar crime. This article only focuses on bobol in Trinidad, as no evidence on bobol was collected for, or from, Tobago. The data from the interviews was open-coded. The various codes were then developed to produce sub-themes. Those sub-themes were then worked into umbrella or major themes, which are discussed later. A colleague at UWI St Augustine who participated in the original data collection undertook member

checks of the coding process and the logical progression of codes into sub-themes to major themes.

Calypsos, semi-structured interviews, political transcripts and newspaper clippings provide a rich empirical data set through which to discuss bobol-talk in Trinidadian society in a clear and evocative manner. Using a framework suggested by Stuart Hall,²⁴ the analysis of these various texts connected with bobol unpacks evidence of “language in use”, discloses the syncretic context between colonialism and postcolonialism that reinforces and constructs meaning, and addresses larger theoretical questions about postcolonialism and power that reach beyond the immediate empirical remit of this article, such as the relationship between language, discourse and meaning in the context of intergenerational behaviour, and how political power today in an independent postcolonial nation looks like political power in the colonial past.

Language-in-use: Public evidence of “bobol” then and now

Popular culture and media discourses

From public statements in newspapers, court records, calypso lyrics, political cartoons and local novels, Winer illustrates the existence of bobol from the early twentieth century to the present as a public languaculture understood across classes.²⁵ In the *Trinidad Guardian* on 11 September 1917, we see the term in popular use: “[The defendant] . . . tried to induce him to be a party to the theft of two motor-car tyres. The watchman . . . told [the] defendant that he would not join him in any fraud or, to use his own word, ‘bobol’.”²⁶ The phrase “To use his own word” is also evidence of an emic perspective of the term. Winer refers to 1960s popular culture discourse concerning state corruption: “You hear me talking about this new Dam they build. If you know how much grease-hand and boboll [*sic*] pass there”,²⁷ suggesting that for some the state was perceived to be involved in bobol.

The popular culture of calypso in Trinidad has been often described by researchers as a tool of cultural critique, a form of public shaming and a type of popular education that has provided commentary on politics in the Caribbean.²⁸ Louis Regis and others have highlighted the power of calypsos in policing governments and calling out both the colonial and postcolonial

governments of Trinidad and Tobago for corruption and bobol.²⁹ For example, the central hook and opening stanza of Atilla the Hun's 1937 calypso "The Treasury Scandal" was:

I wonder if is bobol? What dey doing with taxpayers' money at all?
I wonder if is bobol? What dey doing with taxpayers' money at all?

Seen through the prism of calypsonian as griot and commentator on local culture, the phrase "taxpayers' money" and the name of the calypso – "The Treasury Scandal" – are a bottom-up view of the existence of state corruption in 1930s colonial Trinidad.³⁰ According to cultural commentator and social activist Afra Raymond, the calypso's outrage

[lay] in the fact that the story came out in bits and pieces and of course, none of the 'Big-Boys' was ever jailed, or even charged for that theft. That was a massive amount of money in the 1930s. Atilla was lamenting the lack of accountability and transparency in how public money was being managed. The "Treasury Scandal" was a true episode from the bad-old colonial days of the 1930s, but of course we have progressed a great deal since then, having achieved Independence, Republican status and universal education. The problem is that despite the obvious movement forward, we are witness to yet another "Treasury Scandal". I am referring to the CLICO [Colonial Life Insurance Company] bailout, announced in January 2009 and still ongoing at an anticipated cost of \$24bn.³¹

Short Pants's calypso "The Law Is an Ass" is evidence from 1979 of the perception of corruption in the local justice system, which criminologists suggest is still the case in twenty-first-century Trinidad:³²

Don't care how big
Don't care how small
The law should be there for all
But the judges making bribe to throw your case outside
Then the law is an ass
If when your case is called no papers at all
Then the law is an ass
If policemen indeed selling and smoking weed
Then the law is an ass
And if the brilliant AG let all these things pass
We know the law is an ass

Short Pants's calypso describes the inequality of the justice system. In a form of postcolonial erasure, two of the main radio stations operating in the country, fearing repercussions from the Eric Williams-led government at the time, banned it from their airwaves. The chorus singers contracted to the calypso tent employing him also refused to sing back-up for this calypso, suggesting further erasure of his social observations and, perhaps, fear of the repercussions of his "true" talk.³³

Another calypso which centred on the perceived injustice of the local justice system and in particular the failure to prosecute white-collar criminals is Luta's 1992 "Law and Justice". Luta's calypso expressed frustration with the justice system and the disparities regarding social class and punishment of crimes:

There is no truth in Justice,
 no Justice in the Law
 The system works for the rich
 But it holds no hope for the poor!
 The fact is that Law and Justice are two separate entities
 So is constant chaos and fighting between these two legal enemies
 Big shot coat tail men have no problem
 Because they big shot friend could recommend them.
 Between you and I
 They living a lie
 The Jacket and Tie is just mamaguy!³⁴

While bobol is not an explicit word used in the lyrics of these two calypsos, there is nonetheless recognition that justice is experienced differently at many societal levels, and the calypsos reflect public discontentment and aspirations for social justice and change.

Sparrow's popular calypso from 1982, "We Like It So", also pivots on the notion of bobol as an accepted element of local politics:

The northern and southern idol
 The two kingpins of bobol

The calypso suggests that the two ethnic parties (the northern and southern idol) are both good (kingpins) at bobol.

The newspapers of that decade also used the term bobol in matter-of-fact

ways, as this story from the *Trinidad and Tobago Mirror* makes clear: “Controversy surrounds the landing of 3,000 pounds of rejected potatoes . . . But officials . . . [said] that there was no bobol and corruption involved. They even denied that the potatoes were being off-loaded.”³⁵ As the officials in charge of off-loading goods are customs officials, persons employed by the state, that they might claim there was no unloading, and hence “nothing to see here”, suggests that state officials can make certain practices, like bobol, invisible.

In the 1980s, newspaper cartoons like *Sweetbread* in the *Trinidad Express* made jokes about bobol and compared it to labour and work:

“Yeh, ah hear he have ah big house wit swimming pool an’ e have 4 big cars . . .”

“So wot business he in?”

“Bobol!”³⁶

By the twenty-first century – using the content of the three main daily newspapers and public statements of public figures – bobol might be described as a ubiquitous part of language-in-use around public and political life in Trinidad, in print and on social media. For example, a Google search for the word bobol in local newspaper articles in 2013 quickly pulls up a number of entries such as Sonya Sanchez, a Carnival designer, who when interviewed by the *Trinidad Guardian* on 19 June 2010 told readers, “I married that to the underhanded nonsense going on in Trinidad and Tobago. Bribery, trickery, dishonesty, slyness, deceit. All de bobol, comesse and grease han’ skulduggery.”³⁷ Minister of Parliament and current minister of finance Colm Imbert is quoted saying that there is “Bobol in Priority Bus Route Rail Project”.³⁸ Other newspaper headlines include: “Does There Have to Be Bobol in Everything?”;³⁹ “No Proof of Bobol”;⁴⁰ and “All the Ingredients for Bobol”.⁴¹

These headlines and comments from a selection of national newspapers, alongside calypsos and popular culture examples, suggest that elites and the general public today understand and accept in language use a “corruption continuum”,⁴² and accept the interchangeability of the word bobol as a cultural reality – possibly because it frames longstanding syncretic behavioural logics of political power broadly defined under the conditions and social structures of colonialism and postcolonialism. As such, bobol might be said to be a cultural “rich point” that taps deeply into the transhistorical context of Trinidad.⁴³

Street talk – Common themes and codes

Alongside the evidence of bobol and the corruption of the state presented in popular culture and local newspapers, a selection of data from forty-six semi-structured interviews with commuters in Aranguez is provided in this section to flesh out what some people suggested that they understand by the word bobol.⁴⁴ From the commuter interviews conducted, bobol was described and defined in many different ways, including “a bligh”, “eat ah a food”, and “political corruption”.

In Trinidad and Tobago, contemporary forms of white-collar corruption range widely from the massive fraud and public mismanagement of CLICO; the Section 34 (Administration of Justice) act fiasco; the Piarco Airport Enquiry; the trial and conviction of former prime minister Basdeo Panday found guilty of the charge of infringing the Integrity in Public Life Act of 1987; and more recently, the arrest of Marlene McDonald, housing minister in the current PNM government, and her husband who have been charged with corruption, money laundering and misbehaviour in public office after a five-year police investigation.⁴⁵ Everyday low levels of influence such as the corruption of traffic police officers and passport bribery and fraud also exist toward the other end. As one interviewee put it,

Sometimes police stop you and tell you, “Yuh break a light”, and they would tell you give them “so and so money” and I tellin dem, “Oh gosh, I don’t have dat” . . . If I don’t pass the money to them, I would have to pay \$900 in court. They say I have to give dem something. They do this on weekends to get their liming [socialising] money. If you don’t pass it, they say go to court cos police not wrong.

In response to the question “Is bobol easy to get away with?”, we captured a variety of responses. Some were about bobol at state entities, such as, “Then there is licensing office. You have to pay the driver to make sure you pass [the test]; you have to pay the instructor. Pay for your licence and get it and done.” In connection to bobol in the private sector, a woman told us, “Yuh know wat is bother me and I say is a crime, is dem grocery selling expired goods and putting ‘buy one, get one free sign’ on the thing and fooling people and making them think they getting a bargain.” A businessman told us of the necessity of corruption to his work: “My business life would be affected by not indulging in white-collar crime.”

When we asked respondents for examples of bobol as a sociocultural and normative behaviour, we received a variety of affirmative replies. These include a man who told us that “Bobol is normal”. Another male respondent told us, “Bobol takes place every month in Trinidad but we ent know nothing about it.” A woman responded, “Everything in this country you have to pass money. People like it, they pay their money and they get things. This country full of smart people, it is part of the culture. A culture of passing money.” Another respondent told us, “Bobol take place every day. That is part of the culture of Trinidad. Yuh cyar get rid of dat. Dem politicians always hidin tings and only for d’election, the mark does bus. That’s when the shit hits the fan and everybody know.”

As we had asked respondents if street crime was something that caused them to be fearful, we also asked respondents if bobol was something they were scared of. An older man told us, “I fear street crime because that could hurt and kill you. Bobol don’t kill people.” A woman told us, “Not anybody is ever afraid of bobol. I just don’t like it. I fear violent crime more because it can hurt you physically, it could kill you and rape you.” Another woman told us, “When I go to sleep, it is not the bank I afraid go break into meh house and rob me. I am more afraid of getting killed, beaten, robbed and raped.” Another respondent suggested to us that bobol was more than everyday corruption and akin to white-collar crime; as such, bobol is not mentioned in the media often: “The media prefer street over violent cause it have more violence and violence sells more papers. People love blood, man.” He continued the conversation by telling us,

Big people crime is ignored. Dem politicians and businessmen hold hands and commit crime. The only type of crime that may be hidden from the public is white-collar crimes. This is not because of the media but because of the politicians. The politicians are people trying to protect themselves. The politicians hide any sort of illegal and corrupt activities.

When another respondent described corruption in Trinidad as “social mobility” and “our time now” it was reminiscent of de Sardan’s logic of redistributive accumulation through illegal enrichment and nepotism, because it infers that wealth and power should be shared among close friends and family.⁴⁶

Discussion

Taken as a corpus of responses that were thematically open-coded, the major themes that emerged from the structured interviews were that bobol was seen as not violent; respondents in general did not fear it; bobol was seen as common and easy to get away with; it appeared in some ways to be cultural, expected and normative. Their responses suggested bobol was political and did not affect them directly. In these various themes, bobol became less about everyday behaviour, and more tied to everyday political and elite behaviour. This stands in contrast to defining bobol as a rebellious political power such as everyday corruption.

Some respondents may consider it unethical to pay kickbacks in order to secure a contract, whilst others view it simply as an acceptable way of doing business. It might be the misuse of funds, bribery, fraud, embezzlement, favouritism, nepotism or some other illicit act that entails “the use of public power for private profits in a way that constitutes a breach of law or a deviation from the norms of society”.⁴⁷ However, as de Sardan notes, predatory authority (the idea that persons involved in corruption often see it as a right and benefit of their office or job) can be described as a pattern from colonial days and an extension of the ways colonial authorities used their positions in the context of extortion, arbitrary acts, despotism and racketeering.⁴⁸

“Tenderpreneurs” today – those opportunistic advisers who cash in on government contracts – are one equivalent. Another that respondents spoke about was the 2015 story of the luxury massage chair for the chairwoman of the Trinidad & Tobago Electricity Commission. The matter was not criminal, but for some respondents, it was an abuse of power and an upsetting account of how government officials overstep their authority and how public servants let them do so (the chair was almost seven times the most expensive chair of any other ministry and was found at the chairwoman’s home and not office).

In this sense, understanding Trinidad’s historical power struggles is important in appreciating how white-collar crime is understood, handled and treated locally. In more general terms, many anthropological monographs and ethnographies explain why the conventional definitions of corruption used in Western disciplines are too narrow, “and [are] excessively concerned with the illegality of practice”. Tone Sissener explains that this is because “what is seen as corruption varies from one context to another”, and “[g]iven

such variations, explorations of how the actors themselves evaluate social practices are required".⁴⁹ From a culturally relative vista, the Western legalistic definition of corruption as breaking the law raises many issues for fieldwork around the world. These include the variation of laws across nations, the cultural relativity of judgments of illegality, a lack of objectivity around corruption, and a lack of historical context in understanding practices deemed in Western "formal legal-rationality" as corruption.⁵⁰ For Sissener, anthropology requires broader definitions of corruption and should

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. 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.⁵¹

What might bobol tell us about a postcolonial corruption complex?

In phenomenological and languaculture⁵² terms of everyday life, can we say bobol in Trinidad has come to be a familiar understanding to many of the "political"? For example, is white-collar crime one end of a range of behavioural logics and local conditions found in Trinidad? Of course, in the context of cultural relativity, different societies will produce different levels and forms of corruption and value them accordingly. This reality does not mean Trinidad condones corruption or bobol, which is stigmatised and frequently denounced across classes, ethnicities and genders; and which, at its most extreme, at the vehicle licensing office or with building codes, actually kills people and destroys lives. Nor is it meant to dilute the discussion of corruption in this article from one that recognises the structures and social context of racial capitalism to one focused on behavioural culturalism.⁵³ Rather, the suggestion is that, much like de Sardan found elsewhere, bobol as corruption in Trinidad covers a vast range of activities and behavioural logics from elite corruption to everyday corruption. Local postcolonial structures merged and blended with the conditions bequeathed by colonialism in specific ways in Trinidad, ways that share an affinal relationship to other 'postcolonial' situations, and

postcolonial nations like Trinidad and Tobago provide a favourable terrain for corruption in everyday, banal and familiar situations.⁵⁴

Understood through the three types of texts provided (newspapers, calypsos, and interviews) and also connected cross-culturally to other ethnographic investigations, and as a sociological ‘phenomenon’ in Trinidad, bobol appears in emic terms to be longstanding, well-known, common, hidden, cultural, about power, expected, efficient, legitimate, humanising; includes elements of favouritism, nepotism and clientelism; and cuts across class, race and ethnic groupings. Bobol as such is local knowledge with a long, transhistorical back-story and sociological context and involves the various logics mentioned by de Sardan, including white-collar crimes. It is not simple culturalism. On another level we might also suggest bobol as James Scott’s “metis” or a type of “practical knowledge”⁵⁵ that accompanies “the revolution of rising expectations” typical of emerging nations, expectations which can never be fulfilled.⁵⁶

Bobol as socio-culturally embedded discourse

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff suggest that the criminological encounter of colonialism and then imperialism needs to be understood not just in cultural terms but also in economic and political ones.⁵⁷ For example, the European bureaucracy, with its institutions, courts, papers, contracts, agents and the many other features that we might say accompany Western democracy, was forced onto colonial subjects as the path to universal progress. This, of course, hid the self-justifying nature of the colonial project under progressive terms and, no doubt, concealed poorly the central function of the colonial state: to protect the wealth and status of colonials – a distinctly corrupt political and economic project.

Previously, persons outside the ex-colonial sphere did not often describe imperialism as being criminal – an omission Foucault might stress is a function of power standing in for truth.⁵⁸ Yet, looking at colonialism from the bottom up in an anti-colonial reading, we can suggest colonialism as a form and type of bobol that was then replaced by more bobol in postcolonialism, before it was neatly smoothed over by more bobol that continues today under neo-colonialism.⁵⁹

This bottom-up reading feeds into wider ideas about development in the Caribbean. In the Caribbean it was slavery and colonialism (1600s–1940s)

that 'seasoned' the population for racial capitalism.⁶⁰ It was colonialism that accumulated by dispossessing and pauperising a majority of the populations. It was slavery and a "racial social contract" (racial liberalism) that historically created and structured the social hierarchies and injustices of the society.⁶¹ It was slavery, colonialism and imperial exploitation that prepared and developed its institutions (political, educational and social), its social classes, its bureaucracy, its courts, and its culture, for the growth of a society that would, in comparison to parts of Europe and the US, always be exploited and whose history could be forgotten.⁶²

Sold as nationalist sovereignty and self-determination to both elites and the masses, postcolonialism in this light was an economic and cultural movement involving the socioeconomic assimilation and class consolidation of indigenous colonial elites and local masses in the successful expansion of racial capitalism.⁶³ It was the era before and after Independence in which foreign elites were replaced by local ones, such as the "Afro- and Indo-Saxons" in Trinidad, and the former colonial powers managed to export their internal problem and conflict between rich and poor "from the national to the international stage".⁶⁴ It was a period of "creole nationalism" where the politics, beliefs and political economy of former colonial masters and the continued salience in the postcolonial era of the racial hierarchies and ideology/culture/structures of white supremacy produced in the original colonial encounter needed to be redressed.⁶⁵ But the postcolonial era failed to redress the violent legacies, both symbolic and real, of colonialism, and also inscribed within the foundations and institutions of national self-determination a cultural logic of racism and culturalism tied to transnational forms of wealth creation and socioeconomic class and gender inequalities.⁶⁶ As such, there is substantial continuity between the eras, with a relationship of domination and subordination maintained through control of the international marketplace, culture industries, the bureaucracy, and local political leaders educated in and by the metropole.⁶⁷

Through institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Bank, and agreements like the recent Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union (EU), neo-colonialism maintains and extends global economic and social inequality in present ex-colonies and into their future.⁶⁸ As Kwame Nkrumah put it fifty years ago, "The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which

is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.”⁶⁹

Another way to describe these historical shifts is that emergent countries desired national development and the increases in wealth meant to go with it. They tried to replace the colonial state with indigenous rule, however they often failed for a variety of reasons, including a lack of consensus and destabilisation by foreign governments like the US and Britain.⁷⁰ As such, newly emergent nations were mostly left with the racialised and corrupt apparatus of the colonial state as the foundation of the postcolonial state and unable to change it.

The Enlightenment as bobol

Yes, clearly political and everyday corruption is real – and obviously not just in Trinidad – but another theoretical take-away from this exploration of bobol is that political culture as socio-economic structure can and does seep into everyday culture and social action, both as a frame of reference and as a cultural response of behaviour and expression. Is this Rousseau’s “General Will”? That corruption by the powerful is expected, and often repeated by those less powerful? From a bottom-up, Caribbean perspective, an anti-colonial perspective, we could say yes, although for Rousseau, the general will was meant to be virtuous, getting and ensuring the best for the common human good.⁷¹ Yet, in places unlike Scotland, or Europe, places ontologically distinct, perhaps bobol became part of languaculture and the general will because of the circumstances of the emergence of Caribbean nation-states.

If the notion of corruption and the various forms of occupational criminality are disabused of the immoral connotations, both corruption and politicisation can be seen as functional for the crystallisation of a postcolonial system of rule. Short of revolutionary changes (e.g., Cuba), corruption and politicisation of public institutions are functionally imperative for the transformation of inherited colonial institutions in Third World societies.⁷²

One interpretation of Rousseau, according to Sharon Vaughan, is that he believed to a large degree that individuals become what their governments make them. In this sense, corrupt governments would normalise the expectation


of corruption, and language and discourse would accompany this.⁷³ While critiques of Rousseau's ideas form a substantial culture industry and many thinkers submit that his ideas were simply conjecture, his intellectualism in both *Discourse on Inequality* and *The Social Contract* are still useful explanatory devices with which to understand and explicate bobol in Trinidad.⁷⁴ For Rousseau, society, the state and government are inventions produced by man's own activities; inventions that ultimately corrupt and deny him a prior form of goodness. As John Plamenatz notes of Rousseau, it is impossible to go back to a time and society less sophisticated than the one he or even we ourselves live in, as we have come too far. As such we must focus on the corruption found inherently in modernity and begin to explore the relationship between political culture and the social which makes it so potent.⁷⁵

So bobol, we might venture, begins in Trinidad as an enterprise and practice of colonial elites perceived by and represented in language by non-elites. As such, bobol as a behavioural logic is embedded in the colonial state and becomes, in the move to postcolonialism, a part of the emergent dysfunctional postcolonial state and one of a number of various behavioural logics within a corruption complex that are spoken about. As such, bobol represents a more general practice and language-in-use that many in the society can access when needed; a way of getting business done, and understanding how business gets done, in a demographically small place, with all the dangers that corruption can pose for all members of a society.

Final thoughts

It is worth pointing out that it is quite simplistic to so easily suggest, much like Rousseau once did, that white-collar criminality in the past is the reason for present-day forms of corruption. Nonetheless, in line with de Sardan, the thesis is still tenable that in postcolonial societies morally and ethically bankrupt elites both during and after colonialism did, on some level, pattern behavioural logics and a culture of politics that, over time, fed into the wider social structures and society. Of course, this is not a strict causal connection. But much like de Sardan in his study of corruption in Africa, we can say the relationship in Trinidad between white-collar crime in the past and everyday corruption today is a syncretic one. And this syncretism of colonialism, post-colonialism and pre-colonial realities is productively understood when we

talk about corruption as a transhistorical phenomenon embedded culturally in colonialism. Corruption, at both the state level and the everyday level, was part of colonialism's imperial design; and then the 'mamaguy' of post-(neo)-colonial national sovereignty and self-determination.⁷⁶

Using three types of texts – semi-structured interviews, newspaper articles and calypso lyrics – alongside participant observation and contextual cultural analysis, this article explored, theoretically, bobol as a technique of social and political power. Thinking about colonialism, postcolonialism and neo-colonialism as part of a larger transhistorical corruption complex tied to racial capitalism, with both structural and cultural elements, provided a space to think about the role played by bobol-talk and discourse in the intergenerational persistence of corruption in Trinidad under capitalism. Culture, in reaction to socio-economic realities, will, to a degree, develop behavioural logics, language and discourse to make social action more efficient. This suggests that more than simply concentrating on individuals committing corrupt acts – although that is the central way corruption happens, and is of course an important focus – corruption should also be analysed culturally as a symptom and longstanding syncretic outcome produced by racial capitalism. 

NOTES

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4. See, for example, Alex Kondos, "The Question of 'Corruption' in Nepal", *Mankind* 17, no. 1 (April 1987): 15–29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1987.tb00738.x>; Brenda Danet, *Pulling Strings: Biculturalism in Israeli Bureaucracy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989); Robert B. Cunningham and Yasin K. Sarayrah, *Wasta: The Hidden Force in Middle Eastern Society* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993); Richard T. Antoun,

- “Civil Society, Tribal Process, and Change in Jordan: An Anthropological View”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 4 (November 2000): 441–63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800021164>; Arild Engelsen Ruud, “Corruption as Everyday Practice. The Public–Private Divide in Local Indian Society”, *Forum for Development Studies* 27, no. 2 (November 2000): 271–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2000.9666142>; and Alena Ledeneva, “Blat and Guanxi: Informal Practices in Russia and China”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 1 (January 2008): 118–44, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417508000078>.
5. Following the Americanist practice that considers texts to be products of linguistic knowledge (grammar), framed through social discourse, and instantiated at the site and in the moment, texts are not exclusively written documents; texts may be spoken, signed, danced, carved, painted or otherwise expressed.
 6. Lise Winer, ed., *Dictionary of the English/Creole of Trinidad & Tobago* (Montreal and Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 102.
 7. Laurel V. Williams, “Archbishop Harris Calls for Truth”, *Newsday*, 31 March 2013, <https://archives.newsday.co.tt/2013/03/31/archbishop-harris-calls-for-truth/>.
 8. “Rowley: Avoid Bobol”, *Newsday*, 6 November 2013, <https://archives.newsday.co.tt/2013/11/06/rowley-avoid-bobol/>.
 9. Public Procurement Bill Debate, Trinidad and Tobago Parliament Hansard (Port of Spain: House of Representatives, 27 May 2014), 131.
 10. J.P. Olivier de Sardan, “A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa?”, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 1 (1999): 36.
 11. *Ibid.*, 36.
 12. *Ibid.*, 25–26.
 13. *Ibid.*, 26.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”, in *Culture, Media, Language*, Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Love, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 167–68.
 16. Gurminder K. Bhambra, “Introduction: Knowledge Production in Global Context: Power and Coloniality”, *Current Sociology* 62, no. 4 (2014): 451–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0011392114524504>; Ramón Grosfoguel, “A Decolonial Approach to Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Border Thinking and Global Coloniality”, *Kult* 6 (2009): 10–38.
 17. George Saridakis, Anne-Marie Mohammed, and Sandra Sookram, “Does Crime Affect Firm Innovation? Evidence from Trinidad and Tobago”, *Economics Bulletin* 35, no. 2 (2015): 1205–15; David O. Friedrichs, “Governmental Crime, Hitler and White Collar Crime: A Problematic Relationship”, *Caribbean Journal of Criminology and Social Psychology* 1, no. 2 (July 1996): 44–63; David O. Friedrichs, “Responding to the Challenge of White Collar Crime as a Social Problem: Implications for

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 19. Burden-Stelly and Hintzen, “Culturalism, Development”.
 20. Friedrichs, “Responding to the Challenge”; see also Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963); and Biko Agozino, *Counter-Colonial Criminology: A Critique of Imperialist Reason* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2003).
 21. A.W. Singham and N.L. Singham, “Cultural Domination and Political Subordination: Notes towards a Theory of the Caribbean Political System”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15, no. 3 (June 1973): 258–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500007118>; George K. Danns, “Politics, Corruption and the Police”, in *Caribbean Political Thought: Theories of the Postcolonial State*, ed. Aaron Kamugisha (Kingston and Miami: Ian Randle, 2013); and Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (1968; New York: Grove Press, 1998), 29–44.
 22. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (1754; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 29; Sharon K. Vaughan, *Poverty, Justice, and Western Political Thought* (Lanham, MD, and Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008), 75; and John Plamenatz, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau*, ed. Mark Philp and Z.A. Pelczynski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 218–19.
 23. De Sardan, “Moral Economy”, 36, 21.
 24. Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”, 128–38.
 25. Winer, *Dictionary of the English/Creole of Trinidad & Tobago*, 102.
 26. *Trinidad Guardian*, 11 September 1917, 10, quoted in Winer, *Dictionary*.
 27. Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival* (PhD diss., Yale School of Drama, 1966), quoted in Winer, *Dictionary*.
 28. Cozier, “Exploring the Role of Public Shaming”; Keith Q. Warner, *The Trinidad Calypso: A Study of the Calypso as Oral Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1983); Gordon Rohlehr, “‘Man Talking to Man’: Calypso and Social Confrontation in Trinidad 1970 to 1984”, *Caribbean Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (June 1985): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.1985.11829396>; and Peter van Koningsbruggen, *Trinidad Carnival: A Quest for National Identity* (London: MacMillan, 1997).
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30. Rohlehr, "Calypso and Social Confrontation".
31. Afra Raymond, "The Treasury Scandal", 23 August 2013, <http://afraraymond.wordpress.com/2013/08/23/the-32.treasury-scandal/>.
32. Devon Johnson, Edward R. Maguire, and Joseph B. Kuhns, "Public Perceptions of the Legitimacy of the Law and Legal Authorities: Evidence from the Caribbean", *Law & Society Review* 48, no. 4 (December 2014): 947–78, <https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12102>.
33. Cozier, "Exploring the Role of Public Shaming".
34. To "mamaguy" is to "try to deceive (someone), especially with flattery or untruths" – see <https://www.lexico.com/definition/mamaguy>.
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39. "Does There Have to Be Bobol in Everything?", letter to the editor, *Trinidad Guardian*, 17 October 2012.
40. "No Proof of Bobol", *Trinidad Express*, 22 October 2012. The story headline was about former prime minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar's public statement that there is no evidence of corruption in her government.
41. Afra Raymond, chartered surveyor and president of the Joint Consultative Council for the Construction Industry writing in the *Trinidad Express* on 29 October 2013 about local procurement legislation or the lack of it.
42. De Sardan, "Moral Economy".
43. Michael Agar, *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 227.
44. The original phonetics and spelling of the speakers has been maintained.
45. Kerrigan and Sookoo, "White Collar Crime".
46. De Sardan, "Moral Economy", 43.
47. Shan Eugene, "Police Corruption: A Debauchment to Human Dignity", in *Corruption and Human Rights*, ed. V.N. Viswanathan (New Delhi: Allied, 2012), 92.
48. De Sardan, "Moral Economy", 41–42.
49. Tone Kristin Sissener, "Anthropological Perspectives on Corruption", Working Paper No. 5 (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2001), 1–2.
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51. Sissener, "Anthropological Perspectives", 5.
52. Agar, *Language Shock*.
53. Burden-Stelly and Hintzen, "Culturalism, Development".

54. De Sardan, "Moral Economy", 28.
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57. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming", in *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 1–52.
58. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).
59. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London and Tanzania: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972); Danna, "Politics, Corruption and the Police", 125; and Burden-Stelly and Hintzen, "Culturalism, Development".
60. Robinson, *Black Marxism*; and Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*.
61. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Mills, "Racial Liberalism".
62. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
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69. Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism*, ix.
70. Danns, “Politics, Corruption and the Police”, 120; Ralph R. Premdas, “Guyana: Socialism and Destabilization in the Western Hemisphere”, *Caribbean Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (September 1979): 25–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.1979.11671954>; and Euclid A. Rose, *Dependency and Socialism in the Modern Caribbean: Superpower Intervention in Guyana, Jamaica, and Grenada, 1970–1985* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 345–86.
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73. Vaughan, *Poverty, Justice, and Western Political Thought*, 75.
74. Michael Sonenscher, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Foundations of Modern Political Thought”, *Modern Intellectual History* 14, no. 2 (August 2017): 311–37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244315000104>; and Plamenatz, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau*, 195, 209.
75. Plamenatz, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau*.
76. Burden-Stelly, “Cold War Culturalism”; and Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*.