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**Politics and Governance
in a Conglomerate Nation, 1977-2017**

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PART ONE

VII. Class, State, and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria¹

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This article resumes the exploration of Nigeria's political economy and the entrenchment of a prebendal mode of attitudes and behaviors. It takes up the shift to a mono-mineral export economy, the socio-economic proclivities of the dominant class, the considerable expansion in the state's economic role, and the distinct pattern of competition for access to public resources in all sectors of society. The sense of dissatisfaction with the achievements of Nigeria's Second Republic, and mounting concern about its viability, are shown to reflect the combined effects of these fundamental problems.

The expulsion of over a million unregistered aliens from Nigeria in January 1983 abruptly conveyed to world opinion that the country was in the throes of a severe crisis. This action was soon followed by the decision of the Nigerian government to cut the posted price of its crude oil in the hope that the steady decline in export earnings could be halted. These drastic measures, however, should be seen as consequences of a deeper crisis in the political and economic order which can be temporarily palliated, but not resolved, by such sudden initiatives.

In a statement which is certain to be cited frequently because of its blunt acknowledgement of the unremitting public tensions in Nigeria, Claude Ake exclaimed:

The crux of the problem is the over-politicization of social life... We are intoxicated with politics: the premium on political power is so high that we are prone to take the most extreme measures to win and to maintain political power.²

Ake's sharp critique calls to mind the condemnation by W. Arthur Lewis of the destructive winners-take-all politics that swept postcolonial Africa shortly after independence. Ake's strictures also echo the more recent commentary by General Murtala Muhammed, Nigeria's military ruler for seven months in 1975-76, that during the First Republic 'winning elections became a life and death struggle which justifies all means—fair or foul.'³ In this paper I shall put forward an analytical framework which enables me to examine and discuss in a systematic way the major components of Nigeria's political economy and society. The arguments presented are drawn from a book in progress in which a concerted attempt is being

¹ Originally published in *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, vol. 21, issue 3(1983), and Nelson Kasfir, ed., *State and Class in Africa* (Routledge, 1984).

² See *West Africa*, 25 May 1981, 1162-3 for excerpts from Ake's address to the annual meeting of the Nigeria Political Science Association.

³ W. Arthur Lewis, *Politics in West Africa*, (Toronto and New York, 1965), 65-84. For General Muhammad's remarks, see *Report of the Constitution Drafting Committee Containing the Draft Constitution*, (Lagos, 1976), xii.

made to explain the dynamics of the Nigerian socio-political system. At times, I shall only be able to sketch my more fully-developed arguments. The point of departure is that the self-destructive tendencies of this system must be thoroughly understood if ways can ever be devised to escape its debilitating cycle of political renewal and decay. The existence of many of these practices in other African countries will enable me to draw on the commentaries of a wide range of writers who have addressed various dimensions of this predicament.

The Nigerian State: Overdeveloped and Underdeveloped

Central to the deepening crisis in Nigeria is the ambivalent nature of state power, inherited from the colonial era and expanded considerably since independence in ways that have deepened this ambivalence. I use the term ‘ambivalence’ here to cover the range of contradictory features in both the structure of this state power and the uses to which it has been put. Even for scholars who may not adopt the special features of Hamza Alavi’s model of the overdeveloped post-colonial state, that model is of general utility in its portrayal of how countries in the capitalist periphery were bequeathed state apparatuses that could be deemed overdeveloped in relation to the general level of the economy.⁴

The key agencies in the expansion of the state’s economic role in Nigeria were the marketing boards of the post-1945 era which Douglas Rimmer has aptly described as instruments for ‘collectivizing savings.’⁵ There was a pattern of continuity in practice from the British to the independence governments in the use of these savings to finance a plethora of development agencies. At no time in this process was an appropriate theory setting limits to the increasing role of the state in the country’s economy formulated. The use of these resources eventually came to be determined on the basis of persistent political conflicts among individuals, groups, and factions over welfare schemes, fixed capital formation, the recurrent expenditures of governing parties, ‘development’ loans, and the acquisition of state property at derisory prices.⁶

It is necessary to go back to the colonial, and especially the terminal colonial, period to understand the ways in which contemporary African states have continued, rather than created *de novo*, certain statist economic practices.⁷ Nigeria, for example, has never known a liberal *laissez-*

⁴ Hamza Alavi, “The State in Post-Colonial Societies – Pakistan and Bangladesh,” *New Left Review*, 74 (1972).

⁵ Douglas Rimmer, “Development in Nigeria: An Overview” in Henry Bienen and V.P. Diejomoah (eds), *The Political Economy of Income Distribution in Nigeria* (New York and London, 1981), 31.

⁶ Sayre P. Schatz documents this chaotic pattern of the distribution of state financial resources in *Nigerian Capitalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1977), 151-250.

⁷ For relevant remarks concerning the state in Zambia, see Robert H. Bates, “Modernization, Ethnic Competition and the Rationality of Politics in Contemporary Africa” in Donald Rothchild and Victor A. Olorunsola (eds), *State versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas* (Boulder, Colorado, 1983), 158.

faire state in economic matters.⁸ Such ideological strictures were often left behind in the European metropolis by colonial officers, one of whose main duties was ensuring the economic rentability of the colonial enterprise. As one of Nigeria's foremost economists, Ojetungi Aboyade, put it: "Forced to depend on its own internally-generated resources to finance its administrative needs, the colonial government could not afford just to keep the ring as a passive referee for the capitalist operators."⁹ The colonial state therefore adopted an interventionist posture which quickly went beyond the provision of such basic physical and social infrastructures as railways, roads, schools, and hospitals.

As early as the 1920s, government-owned cotton ginneries and rice-hulling factories were established. Public collieries, stone quarries, and even saw-milling and furniture factories proliferated during the interwar years.¹⁰ The real heyday for the establishment of public enterprises came during the 1945-60 period, with the government's commitment to rapid economic development coinciding, as mentioned above, with the accumulation of investible cash surpluses in the agricultural marketing boards.¹¹ The Nigerian state, at the regional as well as federal levels, therefore pursued the establishment of "directly productive enterprises that were intended to be run as profitable ventures,"¹² despite the formal commitment to promoting the development of a private enterprise economy. By the mid-1960s, Aboyade tells us, these public enterprises ranged "from farm organizations to manufacturing, from municipal transport to mining, from housing to multi-purpose power, and from trading to banking and insurance."¹³

The period of military rule, 1966–75, was characterized by considerable expansion of the economic role of the state. Tom Forrest has demonstrated the extent of the increase in number, kind, and operating budgets of Nigerian state corporations during the 1970s.¹⁴ He estimates that federal expenditures, which accounted for 12 percent of GDP in 1966, amounted to 36 percent in 1977. These figures closely correlate with Pius Okigbo's calculations of 9.2 percent in 1962 and

⁸ O. Aboyade, "Nigerian Public Enterprises as an Organizational Dilemma" in Paul Collins (ed), *Administration for Development in Nigeria* (Lagos, 1980), 89.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 85-6.

¹⁰ This period has been well-covered in several works. See, in particular, Gerald K. Helleiner, *Peasant Agriculture, Government and Economic Growth in Nigeria* (Illinois, 1966), and Peter Kilby, *Industrialization in an Open Economy* (Cambridge, 1969).

¹¹ Schatz, *op. cit.*, 5.

¹² Aboyade, *op. cit.*, 86.

¹³ Aboyade, *op. cit.*, 86.

¹⁴ Tom Forrest, "State Capital in Nigeria," Conference on the African Bourgeoisie: The Development of Capitalism in Nigeria, Kenya and the Ivory Coast, Dakar, December 1980. To appear in Paul Lubeck (ed). *The African Bourgeoisie: The Development of Capitalism in Nigeria, Kenya and the Ivory Coast*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987). *Ibid.*, 8; and P.N.C. Okigbo, "Ideological Perspectives of Public Sector Role in Nigerian Economy" in *Public Sector Role in Nigerian Development*, Proceedings of the Nigerian Economic Society Annual Conference, Lagos, February 1978, 9.

39 percent in 1974.¹⁵ With the proliferation of investment corporations at the federal and state levels to match the buoyant oil revenues after the civil war, public industrial investment in Nigeria came to exceed private investment, both domestic and foreign.¹⁶

Forrest estimates that by 1975 the Nigerian state owned 38 percent of the total equity in large-scale industry.¹⁷ Yet, instead of this massive expansion of the public sector yielding a socialized economy along Fabian lines, as desired by Aboyade, or a state capitalist system in which public authorities exercised greater autonomy, the conclusion of leading students of these developments is that the vulnerability and fragility of the Nigerian state increased *pari passu* with the expansion of its economic activities. By ‘vulnerability,’ the author means the degree to which individuals and private concerns were able to block, alter, or circumvent state policies to suit their own interests.¹⁸

The vast expansion of Nigeria’s oil economy during the 1970s and the gradual nationalization of this industry had major consequences for the country’s political and economic life that will be felt throughout the present decade. Between 1970 and 1977, federal revenues jumped almost tenfold, from ₦756 millions to ₦7,070.¹⁹ During this period, total government expenditures multiplied to keep pace with the swelling treasury, with current spending increasing from ₦774 millions to ₦3,574 and outlays for capital formation from ₦99 millions to a sum nearly fifty times greater at ₦4,913. By the time the military leader, General Olusegun Obasanjo, called a halt to this spiraling disbursement of national revenue in 1978, it was virtually too late: a new class of Nigerian entrepreneurs – disparagingly termed ‘drone capitalists’ by Akeredolu-Ale – had consolidated itself in both the public and the (nominally) private sectors.²⁰ Of particular

¹⁵ Tom Forrest, “State Capital in Nigeria,” Conference on the African Bourgeoisie: The Development of Capitalism in Nigeria, Kenya and the Ivory Coast, Dakar, December 1980. To appear in Paul Lubeck (ed). *The African Bourgeoisie: The Development of Capitalism in Nigeria, Kenya and the Ivory Coast*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987). Tom Forrest, “Recent Developments in Nigerian Industrialization” in Martin Fransman (ed), *Industry and Accumulation in Africa* (London, 1982), 335.

¹⁶ Tom Forrest, “State Capital in Nigeria,” Conference on the African Bourgeoisie: The Development of Capitalism in Nigeria, Kenya and the Ivory Coast, Dakar, December 1980. To appear in Paul Lubeck (ed). *The African Bourgeoisie: The Development of Capitalism in Nigeria, Kenya and the Ivory Coast*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987).

¹⁷ Forrest, “State Capital in Nigeria,” 30. O. Aboyade, “Indigenizing Foreign Enterprises: Some Lessons from the Nigerian Enterprise Promotion Decree,” in O. Teriba and M.O. Kayode (eds), *Industrial Development in Nigeria* (Ibadan, 1977) and Tom Biersteker, “Indigenization and the African Bourgeoisie: Dependent Development in an African Context” in Lubeck, ed., *The African Bourgeoisie*.

¹⁸ Forrest, “State Capital in Nigeria,” 30.

¹⁹ These statistics are drawn from Forrest, “State Capital in Nigeria,” p. 9. For an overview of the consequences of the oil boom in Nigeria, see Richard A. Joseph, “Affluence and Underdevelopment: The Nigerian Experience,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 16 (1978), 221-239.

²⁰ E. O. Akeredolu-Ale, “Some Thoughts on the Indigenization Process and the Quality of Nigerian Capitalism,” *Nigeria’s Indigenization Policy. Proceedings of the Economic Society Symposium* (Ibadan, 1975), 72.

importance to our analysis is the recognition that when the state itself becomes the key distributor of financial resources—and this in the absence of any socialist or even capitalist ideology—all governmental projects become the object of intense pressures to convert them into means of individual and group accumulation.²¹

Several points can be drawn from this discussion. Access to the Nigerian state, from the colonial period to the present, has become increasingly central to the social struggle for control of scarce (and occasionally abundant) resources. One can speak paradoxically of the overdeveloped as well as underdeveloped nature of the Nigerian state by drawing attention to the ways in which the ‘softness,’ ‘corruption,’ and ‘indiscipline’ which characterize the daily conduct of public affairs is fostered by the emergence of the state as the central focus or vortex of the struggle for advancement at all levels and from all sections of Nigerian society.²² Procedural rules governing the conduct of state business become fig leaves behind which a range of informal mechanisms and strategies are employed to achieve access to public till or to procure valuable licenses to import, build, borrow, or exchange. We do not mean to assert the uniqueness of Nigeria or other African countries in the avoidance or evasion of formal governmental procedures. We are merely affirming the priority, or even decisiveness, of such approaches and their detrimental effect on the functioning of the swollen state apparatus.

At this point in analyses of Nigerian political society interpreters veer sharply in differing directions. Few are likely to dispute Ake’s linking of the highly conflictual nature of Nigerian politics to the great expansion of the public sector:

As things stand now, the Nigerian state appears to intervene everywhere and to own virtually everything including access to state and wealth. Inevitably a desperate struggle to win control of state power ensues since this control means for all practical purposes being all powerful and owning everything. Politics becomes warfare, a matter of life or death.²³

Yet the factors which are either stressed or played down to explain these statist and political outcomes vary greatly among commentators. In the ensuing sections I shall outline my understanding of the societal matrix in Nigeria and show how it sustains a debilitating set of political attitudes and practices. My main aim is to help advance the formulation of new and

²¹ The Reports of the Investigation Panels, established to probe the actions of public officials after the retirement exercise of 1975-76, provide interesting, though incomplete, accounts of this process of accumulation. These have been published by the Ministry of Information, Lagos, between 1976 and 1978.

²² This general argument is made in strong and sweeping terms for much of post-colonial Africa by Goran Hyden in “Problems and Prospects of State Coherence” in Rothchild and Olorunsola, *State Versus Ethnic Claims*, 67-84.

²³ Ake, *op. cit.*

appropriate theoretical frameworks at a critical juncture in the history of the most populous African nation.

Class Formation: Fragmentary and Diffuse

That a Nigerian bourgeoisie has emerged during the course of the past half-century, and that it has expanded greatly in size in recent decades, is not disputed.²⁴ Available evidence regarding property ownership, access to public resources via party channels, institutional entrenchment in chambers of commerce, governmental corporations and supervisory agencies, and the partial but insightful evidence from investigatory commissions demonstrate the variety of avenues which have facilitated private accumulation in Nigeria and the collaboration among members of an emerging capitalist class to further their mutual interests.²⁵ If we were to go on from such a statement, however, and analyze what is assumed to be class politics, we would be making a jump that is not fully warranted. Dennis Austin's distinction between the existence of a political class, and the absence of class politics in Ghana, is relevant to Nigeria.²⁶ There is a need to explain a similar distinction between the obvious features of class action in Nigeria, and the absence of a "clear development of class-based politics," as has been noted by many students in that country.²⁷

In discussing the emergence of a dominant class in Nigeria and its further consolidation during the military era, Forrest outlines the many ways in which the oil-boom and the expansion of the state sector provided conditions favorable for the private accumulation of wealth. He and other writers emphasize the ways in which the indigenization program of the 1970s enhanced "the accumulation and concentration of wealth amongst the bureaucratic, professional and intermediate classes".²⁸ Yet the very context of that accumulation, which includes multinational penetration and manipulation of an essentially *rentier* state, militates against the "growing coherence of bourgeois interest" that Forrest also claims to recognize.²⁹ There is a contradiction that must be recognized between a system whose investible capital is diverted into discretionary consumption and real estate speculation and one which can be said to reflect "the growing

²⁴ See the cited works of Forrest and Biersteker, as well as Ankie Hoogvelt, "Indigenization and Foreign Capital: Industrialization in Nigeria," *Review of African Political Economy*, 14 (1979), 36-55; and Segun Osoba, "The Deepening Crisis of the Nigerian Bourgeoisie," *Review of African Political Economy*, 13 (1979), 63-77.

²⁵ For a general study, see Gavin Williams (ed), *Nigeria: Economy and Society* (London, 1976).

²⁶ Dennis Austin, "Introduction" in Dennis Austin and Robin Luckham (eds), *Politicians and Soldiers in Ghana 1966-1972* (London, 1975), 11.

²⁷ See, for example, Henry Bienen, "The Politics of Income Distribution: Institutions, Class, and Ethnicity" in Bienen and Diejomoah, *op. cit.*, 162.

²⁸ Forrest, "Recent Developments in Nigerian Industrialization," 337; Biersteker, *op. cit.*; and E.O. Akeredolu-Ale, "Some Thoughts on the Indigenization Process and the Quality of Nigerian Capitalism," in *Nigeria's Indigenization Policy*, Proceedings of the Nigerian Economic Society, Ibadan, 1974, 68-76.

²⁹ Forrest, "State Capital in Nigeria," 31.

coherence of bourgeois interests.” Indeed, if the latter process were taking place, Nigeria would be far better able politically and economically to withstand the steady drop in state revenues since the final years of the Obasanjo regime.

As Bala Usman contended, Nigeria would suffer if its fate were entrusted to the country’s bourgeoisie after 1979 because the latter’s rapacious economic activities impelled it to fragment and abuse state power.³⁰ The commentaries which inundate the press, Nigerian and international, clearly reflect the correctness of such predictions:

The self-styled businessmen and women, forwarding and backwarding agents, general contractors and Mr. Fix-all, have seized upon the state of corruption ‘in high places’ to perpetrate even more heinous crimes against the nation.³¹

The general point is that a class whose formation, and sustenance, has become closely tied to the privatizing of public resources is a class which is doubly at risk. First, the relative ease of appropriation via state agencies militates against the establishment of a strong independent economic base outside the public sector. Forrest and Biersteker do not fully agree on this point. Biersteker sees much of the privatized wealth being squandered or diverted into non-productive activities, while Forrest points to the expansion of distributive trades, of local assemblage of consumer goods, and of a perceptible shift to manufacture in some areas (i.e., Kano).³² Second, the masking of a certain amount of private consumption as government consumption means that the reduction of state budgetary allocations since 1979 has constricted what had been the prime channels of class accumulation. The shrinkage of the economy accentuates the problem of class formation in Nigeria which, according to several scholars, has produced a bourgeoisie that is profoundly deficient.³³ ‘Drone Capitalists’ may be able to fatten themselves on oil-generated wealth, to paraphrase Akeredolu-Ale;³⁴ Their consumerist and comprador proclivities, however, prevent them from shifting to really productive activities as long as sufficient oil income can be siphoned off.

A serious dilemma of Nigeria’s Second Republic derives from the fact that individuals who accede to positions of state power are often adept at milking the very source which they are expected to strengthen and fructify. Under civilian government, according to Eukora Joe Okoli, there is such a general acquiescence to bribery that “one could even say...it has gained official

³⁰ Yusufu Bala Usman, *For the Liberation of Nigeria* (London and Port-of-Spain, 1979), 59-77.

³¹ Eukora Joe Okoli, “Corruption in High Places” *West Africa*, 24 January 1983, 191.

³² Biersteker, *op. cit.*, 37 and Forrest, “Recent Developments in Nigerian Industrialization,” 339. Further in Kano, see Paul Lubeck, “Labour in Kano since the Petroleum Boom,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 13 (1979).

³³ Osoba, *op. cit.*

³⁴ E. O. Akeredolu-Ale, *Underdevelopment* (Ibadan, 1975), 75.

recognition.”³⁵ President Shehu Shagari, after approving ₦200 million in supplementary allocations to the states to pay the overdue salaries of their employees, remarked that a number of these governments “were still in default because the money they received had changed hands.”³⁶ Thus, while a Nigerian bourgeoisie exists, it is equally true that this class has an economic orientation and a set of priorities that render it incapable of ruling without squeezing dry the arteries of the state itself.

Ethnicity and Clientelism

An understanding of the vertical dimensions of political and social mobilization in Nigeria can help explain why the dominant class in Nigeria is unable to rule effectively, even in its own interest. To appreciate this dilemma, emphasis must shift from the assumed causal primacy of class action and consider the determining character of conflicts which are conducted on a sectional basis. One of the stumbling blocks in the analysis of contemporary African politics has been the zero-sum debate between class and ethnic models of social conflict. Scholars have for too long felt it necessary to adopt primarily one or the other. For a while Richard Sklar’s explanation of the contribution of class formation to ethnic mobilization was a helpful way of combining the two.³⁷ On the basis of the experiences of many African countries, such an analysis must now be broadened to include other dynamics.

Ethnicity, to use the language of Abner Cohen, has become “one type of political grouping within the framework of the modern state.”³⁸ Such a grouping is called into being as a result of the keen struggle “...over new strategic positions within the structure of the new state.”³⁹ There now exists a number of cogent discussions of the capacity of ethnic groups to serve as functional or interest groups in their own right.⁴⁰ Anyone who has to deal directly with the ways in which Nigerians and other Africans at all levels of the social hierarchy mobilize or evoke sectional identities – whether of ethnicity, locality, or religion – in pursuit of the most

³⁵ Okoli, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Lagos Radio Broadcast, 5 April 1983.

³⁷ See in particular, Richard Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation* (Princeton, 1963), and “Political Science and National Integration: A Radical Approach,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 5 (1967), 6.

³⁸ Abner Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man: An essay on the anthropology of power and symbolism in complex society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974), 87.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96-7.

⁴⁰ See for example, David Parkin, *The Cultural Definition of Political Response: Lineal Destiny Among the Luo* (London and New York, 1978); Bates, *op.cit.*; and Elliott P. Skinner, “Competition within Ethnic Systems in Africa” in Leo A. Despres (ed), *Ethnicity and Resource Competition in Plural Societies* (The Hague and Paris, 1975). For a general, cross-national study, see M. Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1976).

basic goods and services would find it difficult to maintain that such identities are solely a reflection and instrument of bourgeois class formation.⁴¹

For authors to uphold claims for the class nature of Nigerian politics and state policy, it is often necessary for them to play down the importance of these vertical networks. Such a tendency can be seen in Forrest's contention:

A class alliance has formed between foreign capital and bureaucratic and managerial elements of the bourgeoisie. These class forces may be weakened and obscured by sectional and distributional conflicts, but it is they, in the absence of any independent industrial bourgeoisie, which largely determine the character, effectiveness and limits of state policy.⁴²

In our formulation, "sectional and distributional conflicts" are seen as doing much more than just weakening and obscuring the action of class forces. Goran Hyden regards the African bourgeoisie as captives of communal groups whose social and affective networks coalesce to offer political support in exchange for social welfare benefits.⁴³ He is correct in emphasizing the significant input from the popular masses in sustaining the sectional pattern of socio-political conflicts in Africa. I also agree with him on the need to develop appropriate language for discussing the ways in which ethnicity forms "an integral part of Africa's contemporary political economy."⁴⁴

Embedded in western scholarship is the expectation that affective identities eventually give way to more 'functional' ones. In the case of tropical Africa, we can now assert that, in the struggle for survival and advancement, such identities also take on a functional, instrumental and interest-based cast. Moreover, the advantages offered by ethnic groups in 'combining interest with an affective tie' can hardly be matched by other organizational forms.⁴⁵ David Parkin calls attention to the adaptation of kinship to serve "as an excellent medium" for communication and insulating political messages "from observation by other ethnic groups";⁴⁶ and Crawford Young provides a general overview that captures this understanding:

⁴¹ For a general essay which emphasized the "situational" dimension of ethnicity, see Nelson Kasfir, "Explaining Ethnic Political Participation," *World Politics*, 31 (1979), 345-364.

⁴² Forrest, "Recent Developments in Nigerian Industrialization," 341. Any of a number of other progressive writers could have been cited here. We cite Forrest because of our considerable respect for his painstaking research and careful writing.

⁴³ Hyden. *op. cit.*, 70-71. [This dimension of pressures "from below" has more importance than I had previously accorded it.]

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁵ Daniel Bell, cited by M. Crawford Young in "Patterns of Social Conflict: State, Class and Ethnicity," *Daedalus*, 111 (1982), 92.

⁴⁶ David Parkin, "Congregational and Interpersonal Ideologies and Political Ethnicity" in Abner Cohen (ed), *Urban Ethnicity* (London, 1974), 120.

The rapid growth of cities creates social arenas where competition for survival is intense, and where the consciousness of other groups locked in combat for the same resources deepens. The importance of scarcity of resources and competition for status in the crystallization of contemporary identities can hardly be overstated.⁴⁷

Yet a recognition that the affective nature of ethnic ties can co-exist with, and indeed enhance, their functional and instrumental capacities should be buttressed by the recognition that an even more fundamental and pervasive mechanism is at work in sustaining them: namely, that of clientelism. The grid of Nigerian political society is an intricate and expanding network of patron-client ties, which serve to link communities in a pyramidal manner. At the summit of such networks can be found individual office-holders in the federal state capitals. Haroun Adamu vividly captures the clientelistic norms of political and economic life.

A young businessman, whose contact with various groups in the state is tops, would like to know from me whether those in authority over there in Lagos are aware that they in Bauchi have no representation in the Federal Government.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It is that simple,” he said, “we have no one in the Supreme Military Council; we have no one in the National Council of State and we have no one in the Federal Executive Council.”

“Would the state have fared any better if you had anyone in those bodies?” I countered.

“Sure. When I come to Lagos on business, I do not have anyone to go to with my problems to help me solve them. That’s the difference.”⁴⁸

Clientelistic networks also link individuals at different levels within public and private institutions. Central to these relationships is the exchange of various kinds of patronage for assistance, support, and loyalty. The ‘mercenary’ nature of such ties need not contradict the shared ethnic identity between patron and client where they exist.⁴⁹ Indeed, as Robert Bates aptly put it, “the language of relationships” and “the sense of obligation” are themselves broadened to reflect the widening circles of kinship necessitated by the pursuit of jobs, permits, and finance.⁵⁰

Analysis of Nigerian politics must take into account the spatial as well as vertical dimensions of what can be termed ethno-clientelism. The basic dyadic (two-person) relationship that reflects patron-client ties can operate among persons who share, as well as those who do not

⁴⁷ Young, *op. cit.*, 89.

⁴⁸ Haroun Adamu, writing in the *Sunday Times* (Lagos), June 1977.

⁴⁹ Richard Sandbrook, “Patrons, clients and Factions: New Dimensions of Conflict Analysis in Africa,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 5 (1972), 111.

⁵⁰ Bates, *op. cit.* 160.

share, a common ethnic or other communal identity.⁵¹ Moreover, clientelistic relations have served in Africa to reinforce and even promote ethnic clustering as individuals provide the conduit for the transmission of resources from their own patrons downwards while ensuring in exchange the support of a reliable constituency. Therefore, ethnic communities complement the former regions and now federal states of Nigeria as informal constituencies of the nation.

While Henry Bienen points to the determining force of “territory and community rather than class and occupation,” my model suggests a non-contradictory interplay between class formation and ethnic conflict via the mediating mechanism of clientelism.⁵² Such an understanding enables us to grasp how the disproportionate access to goods and services between individuals of high and low socio-economic status are legitimized in Nigerian society. Nigerian writers are adept at portraying the commingling of individual procurement with communal advancement, as in the remarks of Honourable Nanga in Chinua Achebe’s novel, *A Man of the People*:

I think you are wasting your talent here. I want you to come to the capital and take up a strategic post in the civil service. We shouldn’t leave everything up to the highland tribes. My secretary is from there; our people must press for their fair share of the national cake.⁵³

Too much academic writing on Africa today is weakened because of the reluctance of scholars to grapple with the pervasive normative expectations shared by bourgeois, *petit bourgeois*, and plebeian alike, that the struggle for a share of public goods will be conducted and assessed along ethnic and other sectional lines.⁵⁴ Such expectations, and the actions they foster, do not preclude egoistic appropriations by individuals or mutual exchanges among members of the dominant class.

Clientelism, and more broadly ethno-clientelism, provide the linkages between village and provincial or state capitals in Africa. Despite the apparent discontinuities in economic benefits and life-styles between those at the center and the periphery of the statist distributional system, the former can be shown to be linked to the latter through a pyramiding ‘of ethno-

⁵¹ The literature on political clientelism is not quite extensive. For a collection of relevant papers, see S.N. Eisenstadt and René Lemarchand, *Political Clientelism, Patronage and Development* (Beverly Hills and London, 1981).

⁵² Bienen, *op. cit.*, 144.

⁵³ (New York, 1969), 11.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Morris Szeftel’s analysis which coincides with ours in several ways, “Political Graft and the Spoils System in Zambia – the State as a Resource in Itself,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 24 (1982).

clientelistic networks.⁵⁵ A political broker or entrepreneur in Nigeria stands – or struggles to stand – at the apex of one of these pyramids. Consequently, much of Nigerian party formation has consisted of a fierce competition to recruit the men and women whose affiliation can mean the inclusion of a community of followers varying from a handful of villages to the block vote of an ethno-linguistic group.⁵⁶

This basic pattern seems to be a notable feature of party politics during the Second Republic. Larry Diamond tells of the jockeying for positions and power since 1979 via the formation of sectional caucuses within parties.⁵⁷ He describes the NPN, as I did during its formative stage, as “a loose coalition of many diverse ethnic groups”⁵⁸ and points to the new options enjoyed by minority groups to barter their political affiliations.⁵⁹ These practices reflect the strategic brokering role that can be fulfilled by federal, state, and local politicians on behalf of vertically mobilized groups. Individual personalities in Nigeria play a commanding political role. The struggle by a variety of political groups in 1978-79 to win the affiliation of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was done in the full knowledge that he would bring with him the greater majority of Igbo voters. The same can be said of a variety of other political patrons, such as Joseph Tarka of the Tiv. Ethno-clientelism, reflecting the fundamental behavior pattern in Nigerian social life of individuals seeking out their kinfolk for patronage or support must be part of any satisfactory analysis of wider political and economic activities.

The Theory of Prebendal Politics

There is a certain logic to Nigerian political behavior and to the fashioning of formal and informal political alliances, although this behavior inevitably contributes to a serious crisis in the legitimacy and effectiveness of governmental authorities. I have adopted, and then elaborated, the notion of prebendal politics to refer to this prevalent pattern of socio-political behavior, and its attendant norms, whose features are now familiar to many students of contemporary Nigeria. The term prebend or prebendal is little used in contemporary social science analysis. Its first general application was made by Max Weber, as the following account indicates:

...prebend was originally an ecclesiastical term signifying the stipend drawn from land granted to a canon from a cathedral estate. Weber used this to mean ‘allowances in kind’

⁵⁵ See Sandbrook, *op.cit.*, and the articles on this subject by René Lemarchand, including “Political Clientelism and Ethnicity in Tropical Africa: Competing Solidarities in Nation-Building” in *The American Political Science Review*, 66 (1972).

⁵⁶ See Richard Joseph “Political Parties and Ideology in Nigeria,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 13 (1979), and “The Ethnic Trap: Notes on the Nigerian Campaign and Elections (1978-79),” *Issue*, 11 (1981), 17-23.

⁵⁷ Diamond, “Cleavage, Conflict, and Anxiety,” 638.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 658-9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 664.

or ‘right to use of land in return for services’ where these allowances or rights are not granted on hereditary principles.⁶⁰

In general historical usage, therefore, the term prebend refers to offices of feudal states which could be obtained through services rendered to a lord or monarch or through outright purchase by supplicants and then administered to generate income for their possessors. Max Weber discussed both prebends and a prebendal organization of office.⁶¹

In my adaptation of this concept to Nigerian politics, as well as many other peripheral capitalist nations, the term prebendal refers to patterns of political behavior which reflect as their justifying principle that the offices of the existing state may be competed for and then utilized for the personal benefit of office-holders as well as that of their reference or support group. To a significant extent, the ‘state’ in such a context is perceived as a congeries of offices susceptible to individual *cum* communal appropriation. The statutory purposes of such offices become a matter of secondary concern however much that purpose might have been codified in law or other regulations or even periodically cited during competition to fill them.

Many former as well as contemporary students in Nigeria have made the fundamental observation which are embraced by my terminology, although no attempt has previously been made to carry such observations to the level of a general theory of the country’s politics and society.⁶² Robert Cohen contributed a relevant assessment of Nigeria’s First Republic:

...behind the liberal façade of formal political institutions and debate lay a series of vicious struggles over the allocation and distribution of political offices, the award of contracts, positions in the corporations and state boards, and the distribution of social and economic benefits.⁶³

Such an interpretation is carried forward by Williams and Turner when they describe Nigerian politics as being essentially “the process of gaining control of public resources of private ends.” The term ‘private’ here is immediately and appropriately broadened to private/communal: “The competition for access to resources in Nigeria has taken place predominantly between ethnically-defined constituencies. These constituencies were not simply given, but are defined in the

⁶⁰ Brian Turner, “Feudalism and Prebendalism” in *For Weber: Essays on the Sociology of Fate* (Boston, London, and Henley, 1981), 208.

⁶¹ For the most relevant passages, see Max Weber, “Bureaucracy” in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, ed., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London, 1948), 207; and Talcott Parsons (ed), *Max Weber, The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (London, 1964), 342-9.

⁶² The closest approximation is the discussion of Nigeria as a “conglomerate society” and as having a pervasive “system of rewards” by Ken Post and Michael Vickers in their *Structure and Conflict in Nigeria 1960-1966* (London, 1973).

⁶³ Robin Cohen, *Labour and Politics in Nigeria* (London, 1974), 28.

process of political competition itself.”⁶⁴ Douglas Rimmer comes the closest among contemporary students of Nigeria to my understanding of what I now consider to be a qualitatively unique form of statist and clientelist political behavior:

Either directly or through the medium of the parties, men in authority benefitted their supporters and home communities by provisions of amenities, misappropriations of funds, and nepotism in appointments. They received fealty and delivered largess.⁶⁵

...public economic power and patronage were valued mainly as instruments of distribution... Appointments to public office (particularly ministerial and in the public corporations) were therefore decisive, and the dominant purpose of electoral activity was to control such preferment.⁶⁶

What the theory of prebendal politics brings to the study of Nigeria, and that of other countries to which it will be seen to apply, is a framework for understanding the mutually reinforcing nature of several dimensions of political, social, and economic behavior which are often discussed singly or in subsets but rarely as parts of a new system of power in the context of peripheral capitalism. Moreover, such a system can be seen to be eventually self-destructive. The numerous parallels between the outcome of Nigerian electoral politics since 1979 and those experienced in the 1950s and 1960s evoke the well-founded fear that it will suffer the same ultimate fate.⁶⁷

The centrality of the Nigerian state in the distribution of desired goods and services renders it a kind of ‘market,’ to use Terisa Turner’s expression.⁶⁸ Competition for such benefits, we would contend, reflects a combination of individualistic, class, and communal motivations. Some writers distinguish egoistic from solidaristic graft, others prefer to use the language of class accumulation.⁶⁹ For me, all three axes of social action are evident, although the maldistribution of state-derived resources tends to be legitimized in terms of the conflicts between ethnic or geographic sections of the population.

The politics of competition over the allocation of resources, or what in Nigeria is called ‘the national cake,’ has as its most dire consequence the transformation of the offices of the state

⁶⁴ Gavin Williams and Terisa Turner, “Nigeria” in John Dunn (ed), *West African States: Failure and Promises* (Cambridge, 1978), 133, 134.

⁶⁵ Rimmer, *op. cit.*, 45.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁷ The basis of these fears is outlined in Diamond, “Cleavage, Conflict, and Anxiety in the Second Nigerian Republic.”

⁶⁸ Terisa Turner, “Multinational Corporations and the Instability of the Nigerian State,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 5 (1976), 63-79.

⁶⁹ For the former, see Rimmer, *op. cit.* and, for the latter, Forrest, “Recent Developments in Nigerian Industrialization,” 340 and Szeftel, *op. cit.*

into prebends. The higher (in political terms) the office, the larger its budget, the wider its array of jobs, the greater its control of permits and contracts – these are the factors which determine the fierceness of the competition for such an office. The intensity of political conflict in Nigeria, which most commentators regard as the greatest threat to its constitutional democracy, can now be more fully understood in terms of prebendal attitudes to governmental office.

Since Nigeria has changed in recent decades from civilian to military rule and then back to a competitive civilian political system, it may be asked what implications such changes have for the prebendal nature of political life? Moreover, what about the shift from an agricultural export economy to one predominantly of petroleum export? Finally, what can we learn of the current struggle to evolve a ‘working democracy’ which might avoid the bitter strains of what Ake referred to as the ‘over-politicization of social life’? Let us consider each of these questions in terms of prebendalism.

The wide array of policy departures which Nigeria’s military regimes were able to undertake – the creation of new states, an indigenization program in industry and commerce, the nationalization of oil production, a land-use decree – reflect the degree to which a military-bureaucratic elite during the 1970s was able to act in an authoritative and often unilateral manner to execute policy and institute reforms. The tendency to assess government appointments and the allocation of public funds along communal lines, however, persisted throughout the period of military rule, and these pressures could be partly contained because of the government’s monopolization of collective force and authority.⁷⁰ The transition to a constitutional civilian system and the entrenchment in the 1979 Constitution of the requirement that the country’s ‘federal character’ be reflected in all governmental appointments and disbursements converted what had for long been an informal norm of political competition into a directive principle of state policy.⁷¹

The shift from agricultural export to that of petroleum contributed to both the multiplication and centralization of public revenues. The widespread tendency throughout Africa of using “official positions to distribute public resources through unofficial channels” or even to convert “state offices into businesses” reached its apogee in Nigeria as was reflected in the great cement scandal that – along with a host of other cases of misuse of government for private gain –

⁷⁰ For a discussion of these pressures, see Habibu A. Sani, “An Ex-Insider’s Overview of the Civil Service (1966-1977),” *The Nigerian Journal of Public Affairs*, 6 (1976), 87-90, and Brigadier David M. Jemibewon, *A Combatant in Government* (Ibadan, 1978), 91-2.

⁷¹ Sam Egite Oyovbaire in “Structural Change and Political Process in Nigeria,” *African Affairs*, 82 (1983), 19, discusses how a constitutional provision to assure distributional equity has become debased in practice: “federal character is federal discrimination.” While seeking to provide the best protection against the ethnic domination, the drafters of the 1979 Constitution also gave constitutional legitimacy to the subsequent pursuit of governmental benefits by “indigenes” over the claims of those adjudged “non-indigenes” at all levels of the political system.

contributed to the downfall of the Gowon regime in 1975.⁷² What a study of the growth figures of government expenditure during the military years seems to suggest is that egoistic graft or private and class accumulation through public channels took priority over ‘solidaristic graft’ or distribution to ethnic collectivities.⁷³

One of the apparent consequences of combined military and bureaucratic rule in the 1970s is that higher state officials, through “triangular relationships” with foreign and domestic businessmen, were able to appropriate public funds in ways which shielded such disbursements from the pressures for distribution to subordinate strata within ethnic constituencies.⁷⁴ With the return to competitive party politics after 1978, these constraints to the full flowering of prebendal politics were removed. The winning of elections calls for heavy investment by aspirant candidates and their parties, and the recouping of such investments cannot be done without the simultaneous distribution of public resources to sectional constituencies. At the time of a sharp drop in export earnings, however, the Nigerian treasury cannot satisfy these combined sets of demands. Thus the Nigerian system has entered a prolonged period of crisis since the dominant class elements will not temper their greed to make possible a sufficient downward flow of resources. Demoralization and anxiety consequently permeate the society.⁷⁵

The dual legitimization of prebendal politics in Nigeria has been that an individual’s sectional support groups should obtain tangible benefits from the former’s exploitation of his or her public office, and also that a certain pride will be taken by these sectional clients in the magnificence of the patron’s life-style. These expectations constitute normative principles of democratic representation – of both sharing in the spoils and vicariously rejoicing in the material success of one’s kinsfolk among the elites – which will not be found in political science textbooks. That is prebendal politics when it ‘works.’ It cannot, however, work even to such a degree in post-military Nigeria because the civilians were bequeathed a shrinking economy perched on the declining fortunes of petroleum export. The unhappy consequences of this inheritance is that the state will be squeezed beyond the point of financial exhaustion, i.e. into growing international indebtedness; and those who achieve public positions will find themselves violently assailed for their abuse of office while being simultaneously prevailed upon to procure some benefits for their artificially expanded networks of sectional supporters.

⁷² See respectively, Hyden, *op. cit.*, 79; Szeftel, *op. cit.* 11-12; and, for the cement crisis, Thomas J. Biersteker *Distortion of Development: Contending Perspectives on the Multinational Corporation* (Cambridge, 1978).

⁷³ See Douglas Rimmer’s analysis of the relevant statistics, *op. cit.*, 62-3.

⁷⁴ Terisa Turner, “The Working of the Nigerian Oil Corporation” in Collins, *Administration for Development in Nigeria*, 124-5.

⁷⁵ See Diamond’s discussion of the widespread disaffection engendered by the excessive corruption and extravagance, and the consequent failure to meet the basic needs of the masses of the people. “Cleavage, Conflict, and Anxiety,” 657-8.

The culmination of such a deepening crisis can be seen in fires which are widely believed to have been deliberately started in government buildings to destroy evidence of corruption: the Foreign Ministry in 1981, the headquarters of the Federal Capital Authority in Abuja in 1982, and the 32-story External Telecommunications building in Lagos in 1983.⁷⁶ The twisted logic of this social system we have been describing appears to be reaching a fatal and even cruel consummation: offices of the state are dutifully filled via elections or appointments in ways which satisfy constitutional guidelines regarding the federal character in Nigeria. These offices are not, however, merely occupied but rather appropriated for a certain length of time and quickly exploited in a variety of formal and informal ways. However, if it happens that such misconduct is on the verge of being uncovered and publicized, the appropriate course of action is now to torch the entire building housing the offices themselves.

A long-standing attitude towards public property has reached an unfortunate apotheosis: “a government office is public, it therefore belongs to no-one”; “it has, through election or appointment, become mine, and thus ours”; “we can therefore use it, abuse it, and now even eliminate it, as suits our interests.” Most Nigerians, it should be pointed out, deplore and condemn this ruinous cycle of thought and action. They have, however, found no way of escaping its destructive logic, despite the detailed provisions to ensure the accountability of public officials that were written into the 1979 Constitution.

Conclusion

Beyond the many institutional reforms that were incorporated into Nigeria’s Second Republic, ways must be found to protect the state-power itself from being prebendalized and then squeezed of its resources to satisfy the unceasing struggle among massed communities and their (self-serving) patrons for access to the public till. Goran Hyden’s suggestion is that the state bureaucracy must relinquish control of the market and allow the latter to expand according to its own dynamics.⁷⁷ He believes that such a change would facilitate the emergence of a genuine capitalist bourgeoisie because of the lessened need for entrepreneurs to rest in a parasitic way on the state.⁷⁸ Such a solution appears less feasible in Nigeria as long as oil continues to flow and the option remains of siphoning off substantial sums for personal accumulation and consumption.

⁷⁶ For a comical yet accurate portrayal of the behavior of corrupt government officials and their destructive behavior when confronted with the threat of discovery, see Femi Osofisan’s play, *Who’s Afraid of Solarin?* (Ibadan, 1978).

⁷⁷ Hyden, *op. cit.*, 76-7.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 77-8. Diamond also concludes on a similar note, although what can be called his prior ‘class critique’ differs from Hyden’s ‘class defence.’ Diamond sees the hope of Nigeria’s democracy as resting on ‘the development of a genuinely pluralistic economic structure, one which affords opportunities for upward mobility and accumulation of wealth based on honest initiative and enterprise.’ “Conflict, Cleavage, and Anxiety,” 668.

There also remains the pressing need to break some of the links in the chain that connects the pursuit by individuals of excessive material rewards with the pursuit of more basic goods and amenities by members of their “solidarity group.” Hyden’s suggestion that horizontal linkages among persons will not take precedence over vertical ones unless a vigorous market economy comes to supplant what we, following Turner, would call the state-as-a-market, might sound like a step backward. But if increasing statism in the context of peripheral capitalism, complicated by mono-mineral export, only fosters the prebendalizing of state-power, what alternatives can one suggest? Some would answer “revolutionary socialism,” others a new “corrective” military regime. A final group might counsel greater patience in the hope that the current crisis would itself generate a new set of political norms, practices, and party structures and thus preclude the need to divest the state of its acquired “commanding heights” in the economy. Whichever of these options is finally adopted, there should be little doubt that the cost to Nigerians will be high and that the choices to be made by those who exercise public power will require the tapping of new reserves of goodwill, foresight, and probity.