

ELITE PRIMORDIALITY AND REGRESSIVE NATION BUILDING IN NIGERIA: A STUDY IN PREBENDALISM

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Abstract

Nigeria's peculiar political and socio-economic history has illustrated the process of nation building albeit as an arduous and challenging task. The reality of the Nigerian polity is that it is a curious amalgam of a multiplicity of diverse ethnic groups and religious persuasions. It is the Elite from these groups that have continuously championed the primordial and prebendalist orientations of the populace in matters of resource allocations at the national level. Indeed there exists a curious link between primordiality and prebendalist alignments as the basis for Nigeria's regressive nation building profile. This paper hinged on the use of Social Practice Theory also utilizes textual analysis from secondary data sources. The prominence of primordial and prebendalist convictions has consequently led to the consistent polarization of the component sectors of the polity. This in turn has made the attainment of a united, progressive, cohesive and cooperative nation state almost impossible. The perpetuation of these ideologies is responsible for the constant rivalry, conflict and failure of the Nigerian state to achieve the desired level of nation building. This situation has rather created a polity with a regressive nation building culture with very grim implications for future existence. It is therefore recommended that political elite engages a new reorientation towards progressive nation building values and complimentary ones that ensure and promote unity and a common identity in order to reverse the ominous trend.

Keywords

Political Elite, Primordiality, Prebendalism, Regressive Nation-Building

1. Introduction

Nation building; the process, strategy and art of molding and developing together a nation state is as intriguing as it is challenging when the component parts of the intended states are perhaps socio-politically diverse. The attempts to forge a common platform for national cohesiveness and identity has rather been arduous and without the desired levels of success and attainment. The particular reasons given by scholars such as Nnoli (2008), Jibo (1996), Lentz (1995) is the strong identification by the ruling elite with the fundamental norms and beliefs of ethnic cleavages. These cleavages provide the platform for broad based ideological adherence and bias. The cosmological values of the groups which the ruling elite belong to lay the firm foundation of the constant reinforcement of the in-group out-group dichotomy that

has constantly reinforced the mutual fear, dislike and suspicion the cogent ethnic groups in Nigeria have had towards each other.

Fundamental reinforcement of core ethnic value systems and culture creates a culture of primordiality; a situation where cultural identification finds broad acceptability among the ruling elite and the populace. Therefore primordiality rather than merit became the main doctrine of Nigeria's achievement orientation. Ethno-nationalist orientations in Nigeria have tended to pull apart than pull Nigeria together. The Nigeria-Biafra Civil War of 1967-70, and the various ethno-religious conflicts such as the Tiv-Fulani, Ife-Modakeke, Maitatsine and the Boko Haram terrorist insurgency merely underscore this fact.

Thus universalistic governance principles become cosmetic in their impact as the ruling elite defines and continues to reinvent its image from this obvious culture of primordialism. Interestingly ethnic particularism is not peculiar to the Nigerian state but also manifests in other states as well. The difference is the development of the capacity to distinguish between negative and positive primordialism and in turn create alternate value platforms for positive reinforcement. Primordiality in its nature creates the environment where prebendalism consequently develops and thrives thus complicating the national unity and identity objective altogether.

The premise for nation building among the various ethnic cleavages is that without a common identity, territorial sovereignty is always at risk, a fact that threatens the core of state's corporate existence. As Lentz (1995) submits, negative primordiality usually manifests at first within ethnic group structure and later spreads to others such as religious and social class groups thus reinforcing fundamental identification. It is this two pronged dimensions of the "we and they" dichotomy that provides an understanding of Nigeria's complicated nation building process, a situation this paper attempts to elucidate.

2. Defining Primordiality, Prebendalism and Nation-building.

The general debate about the consensual interpretation of concepts in the social sciences also affects the elucidation of primordiality. Again Lentz asserts that, primordiality explains the conscious actions taken by individuals either individually or collectively based on strong ethnic identification. Lentz further describes this strong identification as "ethno-nationalism", (Lentz. 1995:303). It should be explained at this point that primordiality refers to the conscious actions based on the ideology of primordialism – which essentially entails both ethno-religious identification and cultural reinforcement based on particular values.

Primordialism as explained by Williams (2015:147), argues that ethnic identity is ascriptive, in that membership to such groups is assigned at birth and thus difficult to change. This view is also shared by Isajiw (1993). Geertz (1973:250) observes further "...ethnics are inherent in us as human beings and we have deep natural connections that connect us to some people and produce natural divisions with others based on race, religion, language or location" This fundamental definition community defined by biological origin is also reflected in the views of Cohen (1974) who also notes that in the context of primordiality, the following features are distinct:

- People can't help being attached to those like themselves
- Seek refuge within their groups and are disoriented by rapid change

- People have deep-seated need for rootedness to belong
- Presence of a culture of affection for in-group members
- Identification even without advantages
- The presence of long standing cultural practices.

The submissions above are further affirmed by Perez and Hirschman (2009) that primordialism perceives an ethnic group as an objective entity and identity is explained within singular, timeless and fixed social boundaries. Group identification and reinforcement in this socialization process start at the individual level and build up to a collective identity. We may add at this point that primordialism is exclusive and not fluid. In building in-group identity, the out-group is usually vilified. The fundamental notion of “belonging” is created by biological origins of birth and blood. It is this very strong identification that in consequence creates the dislike out outgroups because it creates rivalries and the fear of external domination even if such fears have no factual basis. Geertz (1963:11) extends our understanding of primordialism thus;

...the congruities of blood, speech, beliefs, attitudes, customs which are perceived by people as inexpressible and at the same time overpowering per se. One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbor, one’s fellow believer, ipso facto, as a result not only of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest or obligation but in great part by virtue of some absolute importance attributed to the very tie itself.

The degree of attachment and reinforcement however differs from individuals to groups, communities and locales within various periods but the strong notions of attachment are very visible and are observed in the relationships to out-groups (Bacova, 1998:31). *Prebendalism* is defined by Ugwuani and Nwokedi (2015:1) as the practice of utilizing official positions by public office holders for selfish personal gains. One of the early conceptualizations of prebendalism was given by Joseph (1987:16) as “the pattern of political behaviour which reflects as its justifying principle, that the offices of the state may be competed for and then utilized for the personal benefit of the office holders as well as that of their reference or support groups”. In essence it explains the personalization of public office and resources.

Ugwuani and Nwokedi (2015) further explain that prebendalism as can be observed in Nigeria is two pronged. The first is a situation where political offices are regarded as *prebends* that can be appropriated by their holders and actually used to generate personal material benefits. The second perspective exposes the paradigm of political clientelism where ascendancy to public office is facilitated by very powerful power brokers (God fathers) who usually dominate ethnic or kin groups and must be rewarded in sundry ways using the profile of the public office. Resistance to the remittance of rewards leads to removal from office or the loss of favour with the Godfather and in the end, popularity among the electorate. Conjoining these perspectives Ugwuani and Nwokedi (2015:19) opine that “prebendalism means the use of political office for direct selfish personal gains or the benefit of political masters, cultural groups and other kin groups. Nigeria’s culture of governance is hinged mainly on this general outlook.

The concept of nation building is also multi explanatory. It is readily explained by scholars such as Booth (2009) and Egharevba and Chiazor (2012) as good governance while Abagen (2015) and Gbenga (2007) explain it as a unifying process of national development. This paper utilizes Bacova’s definition

which explains nation building as the articulation of the principles and processes of national identity creation, (Bacova, 1998). This perspective underscores the development of a national identity as the paradigm for the mobilization of congruent groups within a polity for development. National identity creation is related to cultural fusions where the heterogeneous ethnic cleavages within the polity are molded using values, consensus, governance and socio-economic justice. It is through this process of nation building that issues of homeland, ethnic affiliation and identity become generic and inclusive. Interestingly while primordialism pulls apart, nation building ethos seeks to pull together and create conditions of permanence, an environment where mutuality and cooperation exists and thrives giving more impetus for progressive development.

3. Primordiality, Prebendalism and the Social Practice Theory.

Social Practice theorizations come from the field of Sociology. Hence the doctrine of Social Practice derives its theoretical strength from sociological analysis. Foremost among the use of social practice to analyze human social behaviour is Pierre Bourdieu, a French theorist and sociologist. Later scholars such as Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault and Theodore Schatzki further extended the dimensions of the framework by including aspects such as Structuration; an analysis of how principles of order and identity produce and perpetuates. Foucault and Schatzki developed the concept of the “horizon of intelligibility”, that underscores the notion that “people do what makes sense of them to do”, (Dougherty, 2004 and Ortner, 2006). What makes sense here is the habitual identification of oneself to the core values of an ethnic group. Such values govern behaviour and are responsible for the nature of the collective disposition to other ethnic out-groups.

Essentially Bourdieu (1977:75) explains social practice as a “theory of how social beings with their diverse motives and diverse intentions make and transform the world in which they live”. He asserts in further studies that, “social practice theory underscores the dialectic between social structure and human agency working back and forth in a dynamic relationship”, (Bourdieu, 1994:35). Bourdieu’s thesis readily explains the connections between primordiality, prebendalism and regressive nation building. In Nigeria for instance these are indeed obvious as the factors (ethnic identification and reinforcement) that strengthen the primordial dispositions where particular interests and intentions further create the prebendalist universe. The consequence of this is that a “world” is created where primordial sentiments lead to prebendalist tendencies that exclude and marginalize less powerful ethnic groups. It is a development that enhances distrust, dislike, hatred and rivalry. The dominant social practice as explained by Bourdieu centres on the behavioral stimulant whether ideological or cultural that forms the basis for inter-group relations. Negative intergroup relations lead to the erosion of the united and progressive nation state and substitute it for a regressive one where congruence among groups is rare but conflict is easily visible.

The submission at this point here is that the nature and character of the polity that evolves from such circumstance is directly related to the primordial sentiments of the ruling political elite. If these primordial sentiments are exclusive and perceive other congruent groups as inferior rivals, a regressive model of nation building results. It is these primordial values that reinforce the culture of prebendalism wherever it exists. From Bourdieu’s thesis the process of social practice is hinged on the permanent internalization of core values. This strong identification is interpreted by him as “habitus” the bodily internalization of structures constitutive of a particular type of environment, this produces “habitus”

which are systems of durable transposable dispositions. These he further explained are the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g language, economy, leadership culture, out-group perceptions) to succeed in reproducing themselves, (Bourdieu, 1977:72).

Therefore primordialism is hinged on habit. As Bourdieu (1977:77) succinctly asserts here; “what is commonly interpreted as rational interest seeking behaviour is in fact habitual, an acting out of habitual constraints encoded in unexamined assumptions about what is reasonable and unreasonable”. What this implies is that out of habitual response, the primordial orientation of a ruling elite may be indeed negative but these are rationalized if they serve core ethnic interests. In most cases these exclusive interests tend to challenge the general nation building ethos.

4. Primordality and Prebendalism in Nigeria’s Political Culture

Nigeria’s culture of ethnic rivalry can be traced to her pre-colonial existence. During this period, political control was in the leaderships of various indigent Kingdoms, Emirates and Chiefdoms. While history recollects rare periods of cooperation, most of the pre-colonial period was one of inter-ethnic wars and conflicts. In South Western Nigeria for instance the various Yoruba Kingdoms at various periods warred against the Fulani and each other. The loss of Ilorin to the Sokoto caliphate in the late 18th century is a result of such intra-ethnic conflict.

In pre-colonial Northern Nigeria, the Jihadist campaigns of the Sokoto caliphate are well known. Other smaller kingdoms such as the Jukuns also fought against the Igala in today’s North Central region of Nigeria. The entry of the Tiv ethnic group into the Benue Valley from the present day Cameroonian mountain range, led to the conquest of most areas of Tivland through war. Among the ethnic groups the Tiv encountered are: the Chamba, Kutep, Jukun, Alago and Yalla (found in Northern Cross River State), (Makar, 1994). In the South South region, the battles between the Itsekiri and the Benin Kingdom and the Izon (Ijaw), Itsekiri and Urhobo are well known and have left contemporary consequences, (Otite, 1990, Nnoli, 2008). Therefore ethnic supremacy, religious domination and the quest for economic wealth (tribute from vassal states) were strong primordial interests. Nigeria was not a homogenous political entity then but prebendal tendencies were virtually non-existent. Political leadership during this period was generally based on inheritance and conquest than consensus, (Otite, 1990).

During the colonial period the British authorities fused together large swaths of ethnic populations and put them under ones they easily identified with centralized structures of governance. These newly created Chiefdoms, Kingdoms and Emirates were themselves subject to British control (Hembe, 2002). This Indirect Rule system was developed to reduce pressure on British Colonial administrative personnel who were few and to reduce the cost of governance. In addition to this policy, the colonial authorities maintained that despite the so called amalgamation of ethnic based territories, the inclusive ethnic groups should remain distinct, (Hailey, 1951 and Adeleye, 1971).

One of the outcomes of this colonial policy was the subjugation of some ethnic groups under others which prior to colonial rule had not been conquered by war. The Tiv for instance were not conquered by any ethnic group during the pre-colonial period but suddenly found themselves under the jurisdiction of the paramount Jukun Traditional Ruler, the Aku-Uka in the old Muri Province, a situation that led to many years of bitter ethnic conflicts in the post colonial period. What can be deduced here is that the actions of the erstwhile colonial authorities led to reinforcements of ethnic bias. The British Colonial

authorities had a rather negative biased view of the Tiv as land grabbers and took decisions to fragment the Tiv under the jurisdiction of other ethnic groups, (Jibo, 2002, Hembe, 2002). Makar (1994:19) cites Governor Robert Palmer of the Northern Region who declared; “the policy we have to pursue is for Nigeria to absorb the “Munshi” (Hausa-Fulani term for the Tiv which means – ‘we have eaten’ - not for the Munshi to absorb Nigeria”. Along the geographical stretch of the colonially created Nigeria non-centralized ethnic groups were subjugated and brought under the authority of others who prior to colonial rule were considered rivals or inferior thus reinforcing both supremacist and inferiority sentiments.

Colonial rule modernized the Nigerian polity and introduced new social and political structures of political and socio-economic ascendancy. Even during colonial rule it could be easily seen that ethnic groups that were favoured with western education opportunities and appointments into the colonial administrative system and became part of the colonial ruling elite even though such persons were inferior from an ethnic point of view. Ethnic groups and persons favoured by the colonial authorities also had their social and political state elevated. Interestingly it was the inherent primordial values in the now emergent western educated Nigerians that later led to greater affinity with the African identity and led to the serious crusade for political independence, (Hembe, 2002).

It must be noted that ethnic rivalries between the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and Ibo were already entrenched and thus there was also the awareness of the impact of political power in elevating the economic positions of ethnic cleavages. This is what characterized the political culture in the twilight period of colonial rule and became firmly established in Nigeria’s post-colonial period during the First Republic from 1960-1966, (Otite, 1990). The three major political parties were formed from ethnic group associations. Thus the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) was a metamorphosis of the Jamiyar Mutanen Arewa, the predominant and powerful Northern ethno-political group.

The other ethno-political groups transformed into regionally dominant political parties. The Égbè Omo Oduduwa which dominated Nigeria’s South West became the Action Group which spread to Urhobo and Itsekiri territories. In the South East and Southern Cameroons, the Ibo Peoples Union in agreement with the other Southern Nigerian ethnic minorities such as the Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Ijaw, became the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). The Tiv and other smaller ethnic groups of central Nigeria formed the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC). The political leaders of these parties were also ethnic leaders. The NPC had Sir Ahmadu Bello, the AG had Chief Obafemi Awolowo, and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe led the NCNC while the UMBC was led by Chief Dr. J.S. Tarka, (Otite, 1990, Anifowose, 1982).

The inability of the NPC to win an outright majority in parliament led to a coalition government with the NCNC. The A.G. formed the opposition in parliament. The N.C.N.C. later became the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens when Southern Cameroon voted to be excised out of Nigeria in a referendum on 11th February 1961. The relationship between these political parties was antagonistic; dominated by ethnic chauvinism and rancour. It further created a political culture of mediocrity and marginalization. The emotional intensity from these incongruous group rivalries led to open violent political and ethnic based conflict. The Western Nigeria political crises erupted due to the intense rivalry between the NPC supported Nigeria National Democratic Party, NNDP, led by the Premier, Sir Ladoke Akintola and the Obafemi Awolowo led AG. This rivalry soon degenerated into open hostility and violence and in the process turned south Western Nigeria into a warzone, (Anifowose, 1982, Otite, 1990).

Unfortunately the military's intervention aggravated the conflict as the 15th January 1966 military coup led by young officers of South Eastern origin executed political leaders from the North and South West Nigeria. The Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Premier Northern Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello and Premier Western Region Chief Ladoke Akintola were killed. Dr Michael Okpara, Premier Eastern Region was not harmed and this deliberate oversight can be explained as ethnic sympathy and particularization. The non-execution of this coup in the East was perceived as an ethnic affront and the aftermath led to the counter coup of July 1966 in which the 1st military Head of State Major-General J T U Aguiyi-Ironsi, Col Fajuyi and others lost their lives (Dudley, 1968, Adeleye, 1971).

The deduction from there is that despite the fact that the Nigerian polity had undergone structural political and economic changes its primordial ethnic kernel had not changed. The Military despite controlling state power from 1966 to 1979 and from 1983 to 1999 a cumulative period of 29 years in governance, struggled with its image of an ethnic controlled institution. Therefore the Nigerian military as a core unifying organization could not insulate itself from primordialism. The activities of the military in the counter coup of July 1966 catalyzed the chain of events in the pogroms in the North and South Western Nigeria that consequently led to Nigeria's first secessionist conflict – the Nigeria-Biafran War, from 1967-1970 ((Adeleye, 1971, Otite, 1990). Sadly, attempts at progressive nation building failed as the Northern elite within the military viewed officers from other parts of Nigeria with distrust and suspicion.

5. Corruption and Conflict as Consequences of Primordiality and Prebendalism

As elaborated earlier by Joseph (1987:18), "Nigeria's political culture was strongly influenced by the fact that holding public office provided officials with access to resources and that the theft of such resources went largely on punished" Joseph's submission is reinforced by Ayobolu. (2011:4) thus:

...Occupants of public office at all levels in the second republic felt that their positions entitled them to unbridled access to public resources with which they are not only satisfied with their own material need but also serviced the needs or wants of subaltern clients. This land of criminal diversion of public resources for selfish private ends starved the polity of funds for development, increased poverty and inequality and intensified an unhealthy rivalry and competition for public office that triggered pervasive instability.

In supporting Ayobolu's assertion, Van de Walle (2013:1) adds;

prebendalism here explains the permanent struggle in Nigeria over access to public resources, which structure the array Nigerians perceive citizenship and in consequence shapes the country's complex and sometimes contentions ethnic dynamics and contributes to growing social inequality.

As Van der Wall (2013:2) expresses further, "theirs is a cultural disposition that quickly personalized the power, influence and economic resource of supremacy in the quest for the trappings of public wealth". Prebendalism in Nigeria readily provides a very effective platform for primitive accumulation. Primitive accumulation itself is indeed an indicator of official corruption. The inordinate objective of the congruent ethnic groups to outdo each in contests led by their various political, bureaucratic, community and

traditional leaders created an environment of perennial conflict. These conflicts which start as political struggles soon assume broader ethno-religious dimensions and rapidly escalate.

Therefore prebendalism easily reinforces patron-clientelism which has been very pervasive in Nigeria's national governance culture. Joseph (1987:30) readily explains here that "state offices are regarded as prebends that can be appropriated by office holders who use them to generate national benefit for themselves and their constituents and kin groups". This singular factor is the reason official corruption in Nigeria is wide spread and has a consistent high corruption profile on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.

The general tendency of the ruling elite in Nigeria is to divert public wealth for the benefit of particular groups and exclude others. This is why conflict motivated by the struggle for public office is fierce and intense. This environment rapes the citizens of their political and socio-economic rights and thus the implied social contract is breached. This situation creates a regressive nation building paradigm, one in which the component units are perennially in a state of hostility rather than cooperation. The result of this situation is a dysfunctional Nigerian state in which patriotic citizenship is scarce with dire consequences for progressive nation building. Prebendalism creates corruption, corruption creates poverty and poverty makes life similar to Hobbes's state of nature where life is most times "poor, nasty, brutish and short". In an environment of poverty and strife nation building becomes perhaps one of the most difficult tasks the political leadership hopes to achieve.

According to Ojo (2014:1) Colonialism rather than forge a new national ethos, merely arbitrarily fused divergent and mutually exclusive ethnic groups without consensus, creating the culture of ethnic jingoism that has catalyzed prebendal politics. The pertinent point here is that while the general consensus is that prebendalism exists in Nigeria, it is negative and against progressive nation building. The obvious reason is that prebendalism in our analysis is a symptom of primordiality. It is primordiality that creates the environment of impunity that in turn breeds prebendalism. This situation leads to corruption and conflict thus complicating the nation building process.

As mentioned earlier, conflicts such as the Ife-Modakeke, Tiv/Jukun, Ibo-Hausa Fulani, Yoruba/Hausa Fulani, Boko Haram and even the Biafran Civil War are manifestations of primordiality. This is why the Federal Character Principle of the Nigerian state as the egalitarian platform for the sharing of national resources suffers poor implementation. What usually occurs is that the ethnic group that dominates political power, empowers her members to the detriment of others and since these other groups are far afield in particular geographical locations, complaints and sundry petitions of political marginalization abound, (Anifowose, 1982, Jibo 2000).

The incidence of primordiality and prebendalism in Nigeria has also emasculated the efficiency of state institutions especially ones critical to national security such as the military, police and paramilitary where an ethno-political code and network exists, (Suberu, 2016). The tendency is the neopatrimonial personalization of such institutions. Summary retirement of officers from ethnic out groups considered rivals has always permeated the public space and eroded the native and character of these institutions as independent and neutral conflict resolving organizations. Suberu (2016) further explains this as a result of "intense ethnic diversity, weak class, strong patron-client and communal client networks and the absence of non-communal affiliations. This is the reason why nation building in Nigeria has been a more complicated process than envisaged.

6. Prospects and Conclusion

The general narrative about primordiality especially its effect on the Nigerian policy is that it is negative. Despite the general verdict of its negative impact, primordialism continues to thrive with dire consequences for the Nigerian state. Primordialism as the dominant governance doctrine is retrogressive as it negates movement towards higher political culture. Man usually has ethnic origins that influence his socialization and cooperation with other groups. Therefore ethnic socialization must also include the doctrine of utilitarianism. There must be a movement from ethnic based psychic deductions of “exclusive goodness” that at the same instance vilifies other groups and considers them inferior. Secondly political will must be deployed to show real commitment to the progressive objectives of national unity. National programmes, principles and institutions such as the National Youth Service Corps, the Military, and Civil Service that encourage ethnic understanding, cooperation and consensus should be seriously encouraged. Federalism and the Federal Character Principle must be fully supported and made sustainable. Finally the political leadership derived from any component ethnic group should apply justice and fairness to statecraft douse ethnic tensions and create inclusive platforms for inter-ethnic cooperation to achieve the goal of progressive nation building.

It is explained that prebendalism creates structural poverty as it encourages corruption. Why it exists is readily explained by the colonialism thesis. The arbitral amalgamation of various ethnic groups indeed created ethno-political fault lines that are yet to be bridged. Nigeria’s colonization could have forged a progressive nation building ethos but it did not. This is the reason why this analysis alternately focuses on the link between ethno-religious chauvinism reinforced by historical reality (pre-colonial experiences) as the reason for prebendalism that has entrenched a very regressive nation building process. Despite this unfortunate reality Nigeria’s chances at nation building are attainable as many of the ethnic cleavages yearn to achieve Nigeria’s greatness.

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