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Prebendal Politics and the Quest for Eradication of Pervasive Poverty in Nigeria's Cross River State

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[0175] Abstract
Poverty with its attendant risks of deprivation in the life of the citizens is the bane of social and economic development in Cross River State, Nigeria. At different periods, the State has introduced diverse poverty programmes (Youth Empowerment, Electrification, Roads, etc) with a view to improve the miserable conditions of the poor at the grassroots. However, these laudable programmes were marred by the evil forces of prebendal politics which turned the expectations of the people into a grim social condition of frustration. This paper-canvasses that prebendal politics should be eradicated in order to effectively implement poverty eradication in the State
Key words: Prebendalism, Prebendal politics, Poverty, poverty eradication, poverty pervasiveness

Introduction:
Cross River State is one of the coastal States in the Niger Delta Region of Southern Nigeria. The State which is made up of eighteen (18) local government areas is named after the major river called "Cross River" that passes through it. The State occupies about 20,156 Square Kilometers with heterogeneous population. It is predominantly rich in agricultural produce like rice, palm oil, cassava, yams, garri, vegetables, and numerous untapped solid mineral resources.

Paradoxically, the State which is considered rich compared to others in Nigeria suffers severely from poverty which have been difficult to eradicate. In short, since its creation in 1976, the masses have something in common: "cold blooded monster" of poverty which for years have made development impossible. This social and economic problem has given rise to several concerns by successive governments, individuals and civil societies in terms of ways and means of eradicating it.

The State acting in line with the federal poverty eradication programme known as National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) has embarked on several programmes relating to youth empowerment, rural and urban mass transit, roads, electrification programme, etc. to better the conditions of the poor. Unfortunately, this effort by the State was not adequate enough to solve the poverty situation in the area for many could not still meet their basic needs as conditions get worse daily. This worsening condition result in severe lamentations of scarcity by the people which scholars (Joseph, 1999; Eteng, 2015) attributed to prebendal politics. Prebendal politics gives rise to "structural and social cleavages with identity along ethnic, culture or religion" (Eteng, 2015). This shows that those who are saddled with the responsibility of managing the affairs of grassroots have not done enough to ensure rural transformation (Opara et al, 2024). The social picture painted under this situation is one of "primordial identity" (Joseph, 1999) which promotes corruption, mismanagement,

segregation in appointment, favouratism and "ethnic watchers" over who gets what and from where.However, following the aim of the State government to eradicate poverty, this paper examines prebendal politics, poverty pervasiveness and eradication in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

It is necessary to attempt an explanation of some of the terms used in this paper. This will facilitate communication and ease understanding. Thus the terms that need to be clarified include: prebendal politics, poverty pervasiveness and poverty eradication.

Prebendal politics Prebendal politics is a term which seeks to describe the determined activities of the political leaders to control the political process in the State, or take advantage of the public offices they occupy. This situation enables them to corruptly enrich themselves at the expense of the poor masses and in turn pass on largesse to others who are down the line, especially to those that seek their help or support (Joseph, 1999).

Poverty pervasiveness The term poverty pervasiveness is used to describe the prevalence of poverty at a particular period in an area. The term seeks to explain the social condition that exist in which majority of the people are adversely affected. This miserable condition thus affects the well-being of the people in terms of satisfying the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, and cloth. In Cross River State, the gradual spread of poverty is manifest in the low standard of living of the citizens and the inability of the rural and urban dwellers to meet the essential needs of life as in most other states of the federation.

Poverty eradication This refers to the strategy of providing the citizens with skills which enhances or empowers them. By implication, this could be understood to mean a system of assistance which is packaged to make the people realize income that can make them live above the one dollar ($) a day. (Eteng & Agbor, 2006).

Theoretical approaches to poverty Poverty is an unpleasant condition. Its socioeconomic impact is frustrating. It is necessary therefore to examine some of the theoretical foundations to poverty. This is because such analysis will provide the grounds on which we can understand clearly why poverty exists in the society. Poverty implies unwanted condition in which an individual or a group of individual lack the means and facilities to live a healthy life style. It is a social problem that puts individuals in discomforting situations in the society. (opara et al., 2023)

Individualist attributes theory The individualist attributes theory views poverty in the society in terms of an individual personality within the environment. This theory which is as old as man in the society assumes that an individual's qualities or attributes will without doubt and to a large extent determine the resources that can accrue to him. In line with this idea, it is assumed that people with strong ability are likely to acquire more resources than others with less capability. This therefore makes such an individual to be richer than the other individual with poor attitude or who inherently dislike work and tries to avoid it.

Power theory The power theory maintains that poverty exists in the society because of the magnitude of power held by certain group of people in the society. Power makes an actor to overcome his victim despite resistance. Thus, the distribution of political power in the society determines the poverty situation of the people. When fewer people hold political power and structure society in such a way as to economically benefit them against the underprivileged ones, poverty tends to be on the increase. It is therefore on this premise that modern political leaders hold on to power as a "do or die' affair. They become rich even when they are emerging from poor backgrounds. The necessity to hold on to power can thus be explained by the psychological reasons of security and fear of falling back to the poverty condition they once experienced. Therefore many want to die in power as was common with many African leaders like, Mobutu Sesseseko of Zaire (now DR Congo), Amin of Uganda, Nquema of Equatorial Guinea, etc who also were found to be corrupt.

Corruption theory Corruption is a societal monster. It deprives a nation of abundant economic resources that could have been used for socioeconomic transformation of the areas. Corruption is believed to give rise to poverty. This is why all nations try to eradicate it. The corruption theory holds the view that corruption gives impetus to poverty in the society. Basically, the looting of the public treasury, and other forms of extortions by public officials tend to deprive the innocent masses huge sums of money that could have been used for the development of the people. With corruption, development becomes elusive and the people are usually trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty. Majority of the corrupt public officials spend their stolen money on irrelevant matters like buying cars for girlf riends, or making holiday trips abroad, and can hardly develop their environment. Corruption is therefore detrimental to the society and does not promote development rather it creates opportunity for a few criminals to trap public money.

Administration o f Poverty Eradication Programme i n Cross River State, Nigeria

Poverty Eradication Programme in Cross River State was introduced to better the socioeconomic conditions of both urban and rural dwellers in the State. It was introduced in line with the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) in early 2011. The programme was aimed at tackling the poverty conditions of the masses who for years have been plagued by the devastating influence of poverty and were alienated from self and from society. Thus as a policy model of the Federal government, poverty eradication activities in Cross River State were carried out by both State and the Local Governments as well as other stakeholders. Institutions, Agencies and development centers were created to be of service to the people. For instance, core ministries and commissions at state, and local governments co-operated in the drive towards the administration of poverty eradication. Some of these ministries covered areas like health, education, environment, agriculture, youth development, water resources, transport, housing, etc.

Unfortunately, the scoreboard of poverty eradication in Cross River State indicates that the entire programme has been marred by the ugly face of prebendal politics. As a form of sociopolitical reward system, prebendal politics merely services the interests of a few political and bureaucratic elites to the neglect of the poor in the society. The development of this phenomenon depends first and foremost on the dynamics of the interest of the leaders, and only peripherally, on those of the followers. Generally, the total character of this political practice is fundamentally determined by the leaders' interest. The development of prebendal politics has been the bane of poverty eradication in Cross River State.

All over the world, government is remarkably known to control the people, and conserve the abundant natural resources for the good, and general wellbeing of the people. This role has been one of the most popular functions of modern government. Cross River State as a second tier of government in Nigeria is however not exempted from carrying out this laudable goal. As is usually the case with all known good governments, and in line with the Federal Government policy on poverty eradication programme, the government, at periodic adjustments, have made efforts to eradicate poverty by setting up the necessary machinery to ensure that the programme succeeds and is continually sustained.

Generally, poverty eradication would imply that the people are assisted in the pursuit for sustainable means of livelihood. This will give them hope and guarantee reasonable self- reliance in a poverty stricken segment of the society where hope for the future depends heavily on the charitable inclinations of the political leaders. Such collective and individual fulfillment of sustainable means of livelihood enables people to be above the "bread level". This dream has always remained the central goal of the Cross

River State government. This is because majority of the people are predominantly poor and can hardly make ends meet. Besides, the rural poor have no access to mass transit, medical facilities, good roads, portable water, and qualitative education, etc.

The huge cry however, has always been for the government to make life interesting by providing those facilities that are enjoyed in big cities with a view to ameliorate if not eradicate poverty. This poses several questions in the minds of the people. Some of these questions may include the following: what is the quality of poverty eradication in Cross River State? How does prebendal politics manifest in the administration of poverty eradication in Cross River State? Or what are the indicators that one can see to conclude that there is prebendal politics in the administration of poverty eradication in Cross River State? Who are the beneficiaries of poverty programme in Cross River State? Why both urban and rural areas are still deeply engulfed in poverty situation?

These issues however, involve an understanding of the social and political practices among the ruling elites. This is because prebendal activities of the political elites adversely affected the citizens within the period under survey. The peoples' experience was however not a happy one during this period. It is generally believed that the poverty eradication strategies adopted by the government was grossly inadequate, superficial, and fall far below expectation and standard (Eteng, 2015). This view was buttressed by Eteng & Agbor (2006) who described the strategies as "shallow and weak". Anam (2011) argued in the above typical tradition and described the mechanism adopted by the elites to eradicate poverty as "exclusive mechanisms" aimed at excluding "problem groups" that constitute the programme.

Prebendal politics has been described as the use of the office of the state for personal gains and for the interest of one's followers as reward for past services (Joseph, 1999). It manifests in the form of favouritism in terms of the distribution of economic goods, social amenities or services rendered to the poor. One can see it clearly in terms of political or bureaucratic appointments in the State, award of contracts, and all other facets of life that are political or economic in nature. Richard Joseph (1999) makes this picture clear in a vivid description of the situation in Nigeria in which Cross River State is an integral unit. "A man who supports the party in office will be rewarded with contract for official projects, enabling him to pass on largesse to those further down the line who look to him for generosity" The above political and economic life according to Allan Cowell (1982) facilitates continued dominance of the elites' positions and wealth. This miserable socio-economic condition of nepotism introduced a number of abnormalities into the system. Some of these anomalies include inability to reach the target group (the poor) in the implementation of poverty programmes as well as promote official corruption. These anomalies have been attributed to prebendal politics which have marred the good intentions of government to eradicate poverty. In a Field Work on poverty eradication strategy in rural Cross River State, Eteng & Agbor observed that:

> What goes for poverty eradication is simply the distribution of inadequate motorbike sewing machines, and paltry handouts, then they cannot boast of affecting the life of the rural poor in terms of assisting them to come out of their precarious state. (Eteng & Agbor, 2006 106)

The table 1 below shows Cross River State local government councils and strategies of poverty eradication from 2003 – 2006.

Table 1: STRATEGIES OF POVERTY ERADICATION, 2003 – 2006

L.G.A.	**Motorcycle qty.**	Sewing machine qty.	Hand out: No. of persons	Amount	Manual labour: No. of persons	Amount
Abi	10	5	80	100 000		-
Akamkpa	20	15	120	300 000		-
Akpabuyo	8	3	20	30 000		-
Bakassi	5	2	50	60 000		-
Bekwarra	10	2	60	80 000		-
Biase	11	5	30	50,000		-
Boki	15	12	200	500,000		-
Calabar Municipality	5	6	50	80,000		-
Calabar South	5	4	30	50,000		-
Etung	10	5	50	60 000		-
Ikom	9	3	40	50 000		-
Obanliku	9	4	30	60 000		-
Obubra	12	5	50	80 000		-
Obudu	8	2	30	50,000		-
Odukpani	10	10	80	90,000	20	300,000
Ogoja	8	4	50	80,000		-
Yakurr	10	5	70	98,000		-
Yala	10	6	90	120,000		-
Total	**183**	**98**	**1 160**	**1 938 000**	**20**	**300 000**

Source: Eteng & Agbor, Field work, 2006 (in *Global Journal of Social Sciences* Vol. 5, No. 2, 2006:126)

The administration of poverty eradication in terms of policy implementation of the programme rests in the hands of both the political and administrative leaders. These political and bureaucratic elites became the state's men and women of wealth. They acquire their riches through stealing public funds. This is because stealing public funds is regarded as a means to wealth. This explains the reason why people are inclined to stealing. In this practice, most of the benefits meant to be distributed to the poor end up in the hands of party men and women rather than the poor for whom the programme is centered upon.

In an interview with some chiefs and other local people in Ugep, Yakurr, in Central Senatorial District of the State, the distribution of goods and food items usually has a channel of reaching to the rural dwellers. In most cases, the distribution of economic goods goes from the Ward Chief to other people in the channel. According to a local farmer interviewed (who claimed anonymity) in terms of recent fertilizer distribution in the area, the whole process was faulty and full of anomalies. This disappointment was expressed in the following manner:

> When fertilizer comes from the government, it is stored in the palace of the Ward Chief, and is then distributed only to party supports, relatives or friends of the political leaders. Most us blame our plight to the dominance of only one political party in the State so that if you are not rightly connected to the leaders, then you are out. This has been the practice for many years (

As part of the Rural Electrification Project in Bekwara Council Area in 2003, it

was reported that about twenty two (22) electric poles were distributed to the various communities through their Council representatives. Unfortunately, these electric poles according to some respondents ended up in the hands of party supporters. In some other cases, observers maintained that the poles were used by the Council representatives on roads leading to their personal buildings or where their friends or relatives reside. In terms of contract award, especially in the construction of bridges, culverts, water channels or boreholes, most of the beneficiaries were not the poor who constituted the bulk of the population. In Bakassi, Etung, and Yakurr, the situation is the same. Majority of the beneficiaries were the party supporters who were given contracts as reward for their support and activities during electioneering campaigns.

The elites allied with the local chiefs or leaders to defraud the poor and corruptly enrich themselves. These classes of people are aware of the importance of wealth as a means of acquiring political power and new status. They attach so much importance to the reciprocal relationship between wealth and political power. There is no doubt today, that in this area the politicians and the bureaucratic elites are among the wealthiest in the society. Thus, the dominant social and political will of the elites is to "get ahead and prosper" (Joseph, 1999: **13**).

The craze to get rich quick has given rise to material prebendal structures in the State and the pursuit for prebendal offices at both the political and bureaucratic levels. This search for political offices still dominate the aspirations and thinking of the elites up to these days. They have no changes in attitude instead the struggle became intense as a means to get wealth quick and control the resources. Consequently, this pattern of struggle merely show a self-seeking group of people who clamour for wealth through contracts. They dominate in business practices, get involved in transportation, be it commercial and other forms of business. In response to this form of socio-economic life, they seek to be represented in both the political and the bureaucratic cycles. Sani makes this position clear in a calmer literary manner in terms of the prebendalization of the civil bureaucracy:

> The concept 'ethnic balancing' in the appointment and promotion of officers to intermediate and senior posts has been accorded a great dimension. The various ethnic groups forming the state … clamour for all manner of posts for their respective sons of the soil in the various arms of the public service. Any appointment, promotion, or even dismissal to a new post is seen and judged from the narrow perspective of the effect it has on the unofficial quota of the ethic group concerned. (Cited in Joseph, 1999:**13**).

The above observation points in no small way to the fact that prebendal politics represents an image of a competitive struggle among different segments of the society for a share of the state resources. Most people are of the opinion that unless their own tribal men or groups are in government they cannot secure the socio-economic resources that are distributed by government. Therefore, government decisions to develop the areas through the location of industries, establishment of a mass transit programme, provision of health facilities and qualitative education as well as portable water are closely examined specifically in terms of the benefits that accrue to their communities. This attitude has led to the emergence of "ethnic watchers" who spend their energy to assess the various governmental benefits that go to the different communities that constitute the State.

How does this prebendal system affect the administration of poverty eradication in Cross River State? It is evidently clear from the analysis above that so far, the

central determining factor in the administration of poverty eradication in Cross River State has been prebendal politics with its consequent risk among different factions or groups struggling to dominate the system and use this dominance as a spring board to acquire wealth for themselves, and to their followers in the form of largess. How was this possible? The answer is not farf etched. This merely involves getting the right political connection, and all will be over. This provides the platform for stealing so as to enrich themselves and "allow the crumbs" to fall to their relatives or friends (Joseph, 2013).

Thus, with the right political connection, one can be sure of being appointed into the governing board or bureaucratic organs of the poverty eradication agencies or affiliated ministries. Most of these appointees see their new found positions as opportunity for personal enrichment and that of their supporters through embezzlement, mismanagement and favouratism. Originally, they may lack the necessary funds to achieve their aims for personal economic transformation but as time goes, they try to effect changes in their economic status through corrupt practices of using the public funds meant for the programme for their private businesses as well as use governmental power and resources to create opportunities for themselves. It is therefore not surprising that majority of the public office holders are sympathizers or party supporters. This diversification of public funds for personal benefits grossly affects the administration of poverty eradication in Cross River State. This is because with shortage of funds occasioned by corrupt practices, the available resources can no longer be adequate for poverty eradication programme implementation.

The use of patronage in terms of appointment of public office holders as a reward for certain past services rendered the administration of poverty eradication activities ineffective. Usually, political office holders would want to be assisted by their own party men or women. In the bid to satisfy the people and meet the party's goal, the issue of efficiency is often neglected. Appointment by patronage is always expressed in the governing boards of parastatals and other senior staff positions in the bureaucracy. These positions are, more often than not, filled by the leaders and members of the ruling party. For instance, in the State Rural Development Agency (RUDA), the Board chairman was a strong party supporter. Other members of the Board including the Director General of the Agency were also party supporters. This condition frustrates the masses who lack the voice or strength to protest against prebendal forces.

In most cases however, what is most disheartening is that the caliber of people appointed into these offices are novice who can hardly correlate cause and effect. Therefore, in terms of programme implementation, they lack the necessary vision, foresight, and skill needed for the monitoring and evaluation of government policy of this nature. In some cases too, monitoring and evaluation processes were predetermined by the ruling elites. Consequently, results are usually known even before the pre-evaluation stage. This ineptitude of the political leaders hindered effective administration of poverty eradication programme in Cross River State.

Way Forward to Poverty Eradication in Cross River State

Poverty eradication is a serious business. It requires waging a total war against poverty using adequate materials and human resources. The State with its abundant solid minerals and other agricultural produce should focus greatly at investing on industrialization process so as to absorb the teeming unemployed youths in the area. In all cases, the individuals charged with the responsibility of providing welfare schemes to the people should be men and women of proven integrity who can discharge their duty without fear or favour. This will minimize if not eradicate corrupt practices and such other vices such as nepotism and short- changing of the beneficiaries.

Prebendal politics should be eradicated at all costs and not spared. Political interference in the welfare of citizens on the basis of "who gets what, when and how" (Lasswell) may not always augur well with the masses in a developing nation like Nigeria where majority of the citizens are poor without a voice. Therefore, direct citizen participation especially the beneficiaries will help to promote better understanding and secure compliance since the people are involved. This will help in the success of the implementation of poverty programme.

There should be a demarcation between politics and administration in terms of value and perception of the political class who view the programme as a vent for siphoning the funds meant for the programme and consequently give as largesse to their supporters or relatives for services rendered during electioneering campaigns The State anti-corruption law should be strengthened along with the Federal Economic and Financial Crime Laws to punish offenders. Both anti-crime agencies should partner in this direction.

Conclusion

The prevalence of poverty in Cross River State, Nigeria calls for a serious concern in academic research. This is because poverty causes economic and social afflictions to the people. Poverty also alienates the citizens from themselves and from the society. It is an instrument for dampening the morals and feelings of the common man in the society. It is therefore an unpleasant condition of deprivation that needs to be eradicated at all costs.

However since prebendal politics has been the bane of poverty eradication in Cross River State, it is imperative to uproot this monstrous situation through total transformation and change in the general attitudes, orientation, perception, and psychology of the citizens. This will involve a change in the lifestyle and world view of the citizens. It will also require discipline and the teaching of moral values in schools, churches, mosques, families or homes. To this end, the school curriculum at all levels of the State educational system need to be revised to incorporate studies on prebendal politics, and should be made compulsory for all. Government as a matter urgent concern should design program and policies that will ensure inclusive development of the Niger Delta Region. This can be achieved through development plan which will urgently address the concerns of poverty and unemployment (Ezikeudu, et al., 2024).

Finally, the State government should make a policy declaration mobilizing the citizens to wage a total war against the evil forces of prebendal politics. In all, the Nigerian *Nollywood*, media, trade unions, and students unions should aim at disarming or totally dislodging all forms of prebendal practices in the society. The citizens should emulate the examples in countries like Egypt, Morocco, Syria, and Sudan where the citizens organized uprising and protest as anti-prebendal movements to stop the forces of prebendal politics. It is therefore necessary to emulate these international best practices in order to successfully eradication prebendal politics and implement poverty eradication programme in Cross River State, Nigeria.

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