

The State as an Instrument of primitive Accumulation: the Nigerian Example, 1999 – 2013

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ABSTRACT

One of the factors responsible for the crisis of underdevelopment plaguing Nigeria is the fact that those who occupy state offices in the country use their positions not for service delivery to the people, but for the primary goal of self-enrichment. This essay draws attention to this fact by examining the Nigerian state as an instrument of primitive accumulation. It is argued that those at the helm of affairs of the Nigerian state since 1999 have used its institutions and apparatuses to feather their nests at the expense of delivering public goods and services. It is also contended that the wealthiest people in Nigeria are those who have occupied state offices – either directly or through proxies. The paper concludes that Nigeria needs – and deserves – a new system in which the enormous resources of the country shall be deployed only for the purpose of meeting the needs of the masses.

Keywords: State, wealth, primitive accumulation, ruling class, corruption.

1. Introduction

There is another sense in which politics underdevelops Nigeria. This is the use of political power for the accumulation of wealth...The wealthiest people in Nigeria are generally people who have acquired wealth through state power: by political corruption, by access to state contracts, agency rates or concessions such as import licenses – which does not usually involve them in direct productive activity....

- Claude Ake (1996: 29)

Since the attainment of political independence in 1960, Nigeria has been governed by members of a political class whose desire for wealth acquisition and accumulation is insatiable. A major recurring decimal in governance in Nigeria since 1960 is that people who occupy public offices leave those positions of responsibility much wealthier than they were before they assumed those positions. There are even cases of people who could barely eke out a living – before they were appointed or elected into offices – but who suddenly became members of the wealthy and property-owning class. Indeed, there is no doubt that the richest people in Nigeria are those who have either personally occupied public offices or have done so through proxies.

This essay examines the Nigerian state as an instrument of primitive accumulation which is often deployed by its operators to essentially serve their class and self-interests. Our analysis is restricted to a thirteen-year period: from 1999 to 2013, but it is important to state *ab initio* that limiting the scope of this essay to Nigeria's Fourth Republic does not imply that the situation in the country prior to 1999 was any better. Rather, it is because huge volumes of encyclopedias would be required for an adequate analysis of the situation in the country since independence in 1960. The point has been made that since the state is the major avenue of wealth accumulation for those who control it, a major preoccupation of the ruling class has been to expand and consolidate the state's role in the economy, and the state itself has even been likened to a warehouse in which each member of the ruling class must collect his or her share of the loot (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1989: 124). Infact, to borrow Nzongola-Ntalaja's phrase (1989: 125), members of Nigeria's ruling class "have privatized the state itself – in the sense that state resources, including state enterprises, are used not to promote the public good but to serve private interests".

The reality in Nigeria is that the Nigerian state is controlled by a very greedy and rapacious ruling class whose essence is self-aggrandizement, and to the members of this class, the welfare of the citizenry means very little or nothing. As pointed out over a decade ago,

the fact that the Nigerian state is not a neutral umpire and does not exist to serve the interests of the entire citizenry is clearly accentuated by the manner in which it has been used by its managers to suppress the majority of the Nigerian people while furthering the interests of a microscopic and parasitic minority. The apparatuses of the Nigerian state are regularly mobilized to sustain and reinforce the domination and exploitation of the majority of the masses by an unproductive and philistine minority. Indeed, the viciousness of the Nigerian state and its operators is brought to the fore by the fact that after more than four decades of self-rule, the rights of Nigerians to basic

human needs – food, clothing, and decent shelter – are far from being realized... (Obo, 2002: 114-115).

There is enough empirical evidence to support the view that those who control the Nigerian-state use it to facilitate their self-enrichment and promote their vested interests as well as reinforce the misery and want of the masses. And the ultimate loser or victim is the Nigerian society. As Onyekpe (2004: 114) puts it, the wealth and surplus of the vested interests are explained and paid for by the poverty and impoverishment of the people and the underdevelopment of the whole society. And as Okey Ndibe (2014) has rightly observed, a culture of depraved accumulation has seized Nigeria, and in turn, that culture has created one of the most pestilential crises of deprivation, hunger and disease anywhere in the world. We can only add that as long as the Nigerian state is under the control of the ruinous class, there can be no light at the end of the tunnel for the Nigerian society and its people.

This essay is composed of five sections; following this introduction is section two where the concept of the state is briefly clarified. In section three, the concept of primitive accumulation is examined, and in section four, an attempt is made to establish the correlation between the Nigerian state and the accumulation of wealth during the period under study. Section five contains the conclusion.

2. Understanding the Concept of the State

There is no definition of the state that is universally accepted and this is not peculiar to the concept of the state; it is a fundamental and an unresolved issue in the study of human society (Obo and Coker, 2014: 528). The proliferation of definitions of the state is not unconnected with the fact that the state is an immensely important phenomenon in human society. In Africa, for instance, there is virtually no subject that one considers without emphasizing the role of the state because the state not only leads, it also, in a sense, embodies the society in Africa (Osaghae, 1989: 32).

According to Merilee Grindle (1996: 3), the state is conceptually distinct from both economy and society, with inherent interests in expanding its scope for autonomous action, asserting control over economic and social interactions, and structuring economic and social relationships; and these interests derive primarily from the state's concern to establish and maintain internal and external security, to generate revenue, and to achieve hegemony over alternative forms of social organisation.

The state may be regarded as an organisation within the society where it co-exists and interacts with other formal and informal organisations from families to economic enterprises or religious organisations; but it is however distinguished from the myriad of other organizations in seeking predominance over them and in aiming to institute binding rules regarding the other organizations' activities (Bratton, 1989, cited in Obo and Coker, 2014: 528). The state can also be simply seen as an organized body of institutions and structures within the boundaries of a given territory, and which also monopolises the use of all the coercive apparatuses in that territory. To some, the state is a neutral umpire established for the protection of the interests of all. That is, it is a non-partisan force put in place for public good. To others, the state is simply a tool in the hands of the dominant class in the society for the exploitation of the weaker class. In other words, for this group, the state is mainly an instrument for the subjugation of one class of people by another (Obo and Coker 2013: 38).

3. A Note on Primitive Accumulation

According to **The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics**, primitive accumulation is the process described by Marx, beginning with the gathering together of commodities, then gold and silver, and finally money by which nascent capitalism created the material base (through the systematic exploitation of labour, expropriation of resources, and colonial plundering) that facilitated its dominance in the economic and political spheres (McLean and McMillan, 2003: 439). In his analysis, Claude Ake (1978: 16) points out that the process by which the few seize the means of production and reduce the many to selling their labour power is primitive accumulation; primitive because it constitutes the prehistory of the capitalist system. According to him, primitive accumulation has already occurred on a world scale; by colonialism and the different forms of imperialism, some countries have deprived others of access to the means of production and thereby created the preconditions of the contemporary capitalist global economy. Ake also posits that it is important to add that global primitive accumulation performed a dual function: on the one hand it created the preconditions of global capitalist accumulation, and on the other, it created a world economy, that is, it integrated a multiplicity of economies into one coherent whole. The core of the integration, in his words, is the reciprocal dependence of those who own the means of production and those who sell labour power.

On his part, Eskor Toyo (1985: 10) describes what he calls "primitive capitalist accumulation" as the process of transition from a pre-industrial economy to an industrial capitalist economy when this process is looked at from the point of view of capital formation. He contends that the core process in all primitive accumulation is the break-up of the peasant and handicraft modes of production or the subordination of these modes of production to

the process of formation and enhancing of capitalist accumulation not by exploiting wage workers but by exploiting peasants and handicraftsmen. To him, it is the process by which capitalist enterprises come to exist in the first place and grow through interaction with an eventual liquidation of traditional small commodity sectors. The point has also been made that primitive accumulation consists of a number of sub-processes, prominent among which are:

- (i) gains made from profiteering internal and international trade in an increasingly commercial economy;
- (ii) land rent as a result of urbanization in an increasingly urban-centered economy, or the letting of land for cash-crop production or animal husbandry;
- (iii) money lending in an increasingly money-using economy;
- (iv) the foundation of banks to store up, aggregate and lend funds in an increasingly money-using, commercial, cosmopolitan and risky economy;
- (v) the creation of additional money by banks, a process all monetary economists are acquainted with;
- (vi) gains from monetary and real estate speculation;
- (vii) funds and gains from government contracts and the sale of goods to the governments and their agents at all levels;
- (viii) government loans or loans from banks funded by the government;
- (ix) subsidies of various kinds, including government investments in infrastructure. This is a huge subsidy in kind to capitalist business, since they relieve private profit sectors of a heavy and often prohibitive investment on infrastructure that they would have had to make;
- (x) speculation, i.e. fraudulent appropriation of government property;
- (xi) theft and fraud generally;
- (xii) large perquisites from the holding of public office;
- (xiii) gains from services to big foreign businesses;
- (xiv) large gains from smuggling and criminal transactions; and
- (xv) privatization of public land, other property and enterprises (Toyo, 2001: 109-110). For this essay, points ii, vii, viii, x, xi, xii, xiv and xv are regarded as the most salient.

In an interesting and impressive essay, Humphrey Asobie (2012: 8-9) surmises that at a certain stage in the development of capitalism in any society, the imperative of capital formation becomes a preoccupation of the ruling class, and where the ruling class consists of an alliance of the comprador and the petty bourgeoisie, than capital formation mostly takes the form of primitive accumulation. Primitive accumulation, in his view, consists in crude and mindless exploitation of labour to extract as much surplus from it as possible in order to build up capital for investment by the ruling class and this is said to be a normal trajectory in the development of capitalism. A system, in the words of Asobie,

embroiled in primitive capital accumulation witnesses the absence of the rule of law, the brazen breach or perversion of public rules and social norms, great inequality of income and much social distance between the people and the ruling class. In such a society, corruption is merely a dimension of class exploitation and an instrument of class formation... (2012: 9).

The above view clearly depicts the reality in Nigeria. It may be added that primitive accumulation is a process of acquiring wealth – through illicit and anti-social means – which is fuelled by an avaricious, unquenchable and opportunistic desire for luxury and materialism. As Omotoye Olorode (2013) observes, accumulation promotes personality cult and megalomania among political leaders, subverts collective morality and popular power, and members of the ruling class are imposed on public consciousness, and the imposition transforms public morality from cooperation and collective survival to private and individual survival, from public-purposed governance to private-purposed government policies.

4. The Nigerian State and Wealth Accumulation: Establishing the Nexus

The point has to be reiterated that in Nigeria, state offices are used by their occupants primarily for wealth acquisition. In the words of a news magazine in Nigeria,

we do not need the grading by Transparency International to know that it is not a miracle that those who got into public office with the deafening sound of Nairalessness number themselves among the rich, the truly, stinkingly, mind-bogglingly rich in our country today (**NewsWatch**, January 13, 2003: 19).

“Nairalessness” in the above quotation means “lack of money” – “Naira” being the Nigerian currency.

Since 1999, Nigerians have endured what Adebayo Williams refers to as “an anti-democratic political elite” which has turned spaces of governance to sites of “feeding frenzy, of permanent plundering by a succeeding band of marauders”, and this, for him, amounts to elite conspiracy against “democratic growth and the genuine economic and political transformation of Nigeria” (cited in Amuwo, 2012: 171). As Amuwo (2012: 172) has observed, Nigerians have suffered almost irreparable damage from the deliberate, deliberative and pre-meditated collective looting of the public treasury by criminally-minded and under-performing politicians and senior bureaucrats, and thus waste, mismanagement, squandermania, and profligacy have become the name of the game at the expense of the delivery of basic public goods and services.

The Nigerian state is controlled by a rogue elite, a group of persons whose primary goal is to enrich themselves and to privatize as much of public resources as possible. The situation in the country indicates that there is a complete prebendalisation of state power and virtually all acts of public officials involving public expenditure or public goods of any kind have led to the appropriation of state finances or property by officials, and the routine operations of government are being subjected to prebendal rules (Ibrahim, 2003: 5). This reinforces Bala Usman’s view (cited in Nkom, 1986: 238) that in this kind of system, “public institutions are only public in name because they are run, in fact, for the purpose of accumulating private wealth”, and “this is a normal feature of a capitalist society”. Indeed, the Nigerian state, in the words of Abubakar Momoh (2005: 50), is a class state controlled by a cabal with traditional, technocratic, military and militician backgrounds, informed by a self-serving posturing intellectual class, foisting the tyrannizing Brettonwoods ideology on the Nigerian people. According to him, this class of dominating elite have continued to tyrannize the people, prevented a healthy debate about the causes and bases of Nigeria’s continued underdevelopment, and have lied with employment statistics, inflationary trends and about the fight against corruption.

The point has been brilliantly made by Pius Adesanmi (2013) that for members of Nigeria’s political class, looting the treasury is no longer just about stealing money to rival the material acquisitions of Arab oil sheikhs in choice locations all over the world; it is no longer just about aping the glamorous lifestyle of Hollywood royalty. It has now acquired a psychological dimension with a tinge of impunity. Beyond material acquisition, Adesanmi (2013) continues, “loot creates the desire in the rapists of Nigeria to invade and make their odoriferous presence felt in those areas of national life which still provide some form of psychological cushion for people”. Thus, in his words,

when the Nigerian politician or government official has acquired enough property in Abuja, Lagos, Dubai, Johannesburg, London, Washington, and Toronto; when he has acquired a private jet; when his fleet of expensive exotic cars in Nigeria makes his compound look like a car dealership; when he boasts a permanent year-round reserved room in Sheraton or Nicon Hilton, agony and restlessness set in. What to do next? Ah, yes, let me colonise other areas of life of Nigerians. Let me take my loot into other zones, other spaces that ordinarily ought to be inviolable.

Given the overwhelming constraints of space and time, just a few instances of how the Nigerian state has been used by public officials for wealth accumulation shall be highlighted. Nigeria’s Fourth Republic took off on May 29, 1999 with Olusegun Obasanjo as the country’s president. Prior to his assumption of office as the head of the Nigerian state, Obasanjo was widely reported to be materially bankrupt and almost in a state of mendicancy. But by the end of his two terms as Nigeria’s president in 2007, Obasanjo had become a proud member of the country’s stupendously-wealthy class. As Tayo Oke (2013) has reasoned, Obasanjo is a very wealthy man indeed today, not because of his business acumen or artistic endeavours, but for the sheer fact of having been President of Nigeria for two consecutive terms. According to him, if Obasanjo had left office the same way he did when he was military head of state, he would have gone hungry again in no time; so he took no chances this time around as he not only made certain of his own massive personal financial security, he made certain of same for members of his family, his cronies and acolytes as well.

Chinedu Ekeke (2012) has reported that in 2006, Goodluck Jonathan, a former Deputy Governor of Bayelsa State, South-South Nigeria was indicted for false declaration of assets by a Joint Task Force (JTF) on corruption that was set up by the Obasanjo’s regime and headed by Nuhu Ribadu the (then) head of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nigeria’s anti-graft agency. According to Ekeke, the Joint Task Force said Jonathan was in possession of properties he could not explain within his legitimate income. In his words,

now hear the worth of the properties...: a seven-bedroom duplex worth ₦18million at Otuoke, Ogbia LGA acquired in 2001; a four-bedroom duplex, valued at ₦15million at Goodluck Jonathan Street, Yenagoa, acquired in 2003; and a five-bedroom duplex, at Citec Villas, Gwarimpa II – Abuja, valued at ₦25million, also acquired in 2003. There were also two cars: a Lexus Jeep valued at ₦18million, and a BMW 7351 Series worth

₦5.5million. If you check the dates, the purchases were made starting from 2001, just two years after becoming a deputy [governor]...

It is instructive to note that Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, the man under whom Goodluck Jonathan worked as Deputy Governor was detained by the authorities in the United Kingdom for money laundry and other offences. Kikiowo Ileowo (2013) has drawn attention to the fact that the United Kingdom authorities had seized \$1.5million (₦225million) cash in Alamieyeseigha's London home as well as \$2.7million (₦405million) held in bank accounts at Royal Bank of Scotland Plc and Satolina Investment Corporation; his London real estate valued at \$15million (₦2.25billion) was also seized by the U.K. authorities. Ileowo also points out that Alamieyeseigha had €203,753.34 in his Barclays Bank Plc accounts, and his Bank of America had \$1,600,000.00 account balance as at January 2005. Moreover, €1.9million in a Royal Bank of Scotland account belonging to his company (Santolina) which he had requested to be transferred to an account in Cyprus was also seized. Ileowo also reminds us that

other properties acquired with Bayelsa State funds in London include one at 247 Water Gardens, W2 2DG which he acquired for €175million, another at 14 Mapesbury Road, NW2 4JB which cost €1.4million and yet another at Flat 202, Jubilee Heights, Shoot Uphill, NW2 3LJQ with an approximate cost of €3million. Properties in South Africa acquired with Bayelsa funds include but are not limited to V&A Waterfront, Cape Town, which is worth over €1million.

The above point is corroborated by Japheth Omojuwa (2013) who has revealed that one of Nigeria's politicians – the Governor of the least populous state – had 48 posh properties in Abuja seized from him not long ago, and he was governor for only four years. That is one house for every month he spent in office and those are the ones identified for Abuja alone! Omojuwa concludes that the mathematics is pretty simple: the bigger the money available to Nigerian public office holders to spend, the bigger the money they spend on themselves, friends, cronies and relatives, and this has been proven over and over again.

It is important to emphasize that the problem of accumulating wealth by Nigerian public officials via the state is not limited only to the few cases cited in the preceding passages. It has been an incredibly widespread phenomenon in the country during the period examined. If a thorough and comprehensive probe is conducted on the actions and activities of all public office holders in Nigeria – senior bureaucrats, local government councillors, heads (i.e., Chairmen) of local government areas, state governors and deputy governors and their cabinets, state houses of assembly (i.e., the state legislatures), state and federal judicial officials, President and Vice-President and their cabinets, the national parliament (Senate and House of Representatives), ambassadors, heads and members of state and federal government boards, agencies, committees and commissions, etc. – since 1999, it would be realized that billions of dollars (in cash and properties) have been accumulated by these officials from the state offices they occupied.

And the consequences of this for the Nigerian people are grave. To use the words of Eghosa Osaghae (1989: 38), when we look at the peoples over whom state power is exercised in Nigeria, we find the worst face of the Nigerian predicament: the mass of the people are ignorant, poor, hungry, malnourished and unhealthy, and barely manage to eke out a living. Indeed, according to him, man's basic needs – food, clothing and shelter – are so acutely short in supply that one hesitates to use the concept of well-being as a directive principle of state policy in Nigeria. Side by side with this mass squalor, Osaghae continues, we find droplets of affluence of a few who are either major operators of the state apparatus or clients of patrons in government or, if they are in the private sector, local representatives, agents and salesmen of multinational corporations.

From the foregoing, it is easy to understand and appreciate the anger and frustration expressed by Yinka Odumakin (cited in Ademosu, 2012: 28) when he declared that Nigeria is gradually turning out one of the greatest tragedies in human history, as an underdeveloped country created out of a blessed political-economic place by the greed and avarice of a delinquent political class. In his words,

corruption is our Commander-in-Chief; rogues are our captains of industry and thieves our political leaders. That we are afflicted by unemployment, extreme poverty, violent crimes and reign of terror should not be surprising. Nigeria, at the moment, is careering at the edge of the precipice. If it collapses, the epithet should read: 'Here lies the ruins of a would-have-been-great nation that failed to evolve under the crushing weight of a thieving elite, which behaved as if they had another country'.

5. Conclusion

Nigeria is a country of paradoxes: it makes billions of dollars annually as revenue from only one resource (i.e., crude oil); yet millions of its people are wretched. In fact, over seventy percent of its population is said to be enmeshed in extreme poverty. A major causal factor responsible for this disheartening and unacceptable situation

is that occupants of state offices in Nigeria use their positions to criminally accumulate wealth for themselves at the expense of the welfare and wellbeing of the masses. This is what this essay has attempted to demonstrate.

It is obvious that the manipulative end of Nigerian politics has yielded a country that is so degenerate it is being led by its debris; it has yielded an armada of looters and diggers of graves rather than planters of food and disbursers of hope; and it has yielded a shameful situation where very few Nigerians, including recent heads of governments have pocketed most of the nation's wealth along with her access to achievement and self-respect (Olumhense, 2013).

From the foregoing passages, it can be incontrovertibly concluded that the Nigerian ruling elite is a failed elite; that it has become the albatross hanging round the nation's neck and weighing down her national development and citizen welfare; and that this elite has become the single most significant obstacle to the development and advancement of human civilization in the country (Gaskia, 2013). It is also clear that as Amuwo (2012: 176) has rightly observed, as presently constituted, the Nigerian state is perhaps worse than useless; it can hardly do anything worthwhile for the mass of Nigerians. Thus, we agree with the view that we need a new politics which will inspire and rebuild Nigeria by deploying its resources into serving its people and protect that system by placing the law above everyone (Olumhense, 2013). Any situation where public resources are privatized for the comfort of a few while the welfare of the majority is neglected is condemnable.

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