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# PROVENANCE OF GODFATHERISM IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

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By

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## **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to capture the forces and the context that informed the rise of the godfather as a latent structural source of power in a nascent democracy. It is argued that, the overthrow of duly constituted civil authority by the military, has taught the lesson that any organized institution of state with appropriate capacity to compete with civil order can undermine the state. As a response to this institutional challenge, a “power complex” composed of constitutionally recognized state and non-state elites of power have emerged alongside a latent structural source of power (godfathers) with sufficient influence and capacity to confront and undermine the government. In the rise of the godfathers, the long period of the political armies, the rise of a statist economy, globalization, privatization and mass disqualifications of politicians are implicated.*

The notion of godfatherism or paternalism or simply, patron-client relationship has provoked a new epistemological contestation in the politics of contemporary Nigerian state. It is in the rationalization of the universality of godfather notion in national politics that Plato in the Republic (Dukor, 2004: V) opined that “The human race will never see the end of troubles until political power is entrusted to the lovers of wisdom”. The lovers of wisdom in this context (the godfathers) are some kind of gate keepers (who have) access to office rewards and channels to political space. Through them, office positions and power are allocated.

Godfatherism is not a modern phenomenon. It has an ancient origin and its modern usage has acquired political and commercial meaning. In contemporary Nigerian politics, the godfather performs certain services for his client with the aim of enriching himself and consolidating his political base at the expense of his client and the larger society (Ekiyo, 2004:25). Although the practice has universal application and

phenomena status, its operationalization within the Nigerian context has given it a latent structural status within the “black market system” of power that is not constitutionally recognized. Contemporary history, particularly in the context of nascent democracy, has shown that this system of power can engage and overwhelm the state in the power game (Ebohon, 2009).

This paper attempts to reconstruct the provenance of the godfather role in Nigerian politics. It is organized in 6 sections. Section 1 introduces the discussion while section II discusses the emergent “power complex”. Sections III and IV discuss the taxonomy of godfatherism and the rise of godfather politics respectively. The impact of globalization of politics on godfatherism in Nigerian politics and concluding remarks are presented in sections V and VI.

### **Godfatherism and “The Power Complex”**

Post modernism offers an important insight into the fractured and problematics of state, social organizations and social life when it insists that power is complex, ambiguous and located in a multiplicity of social spaces (Isaac, 2004: 63). The notion of “power complex” pre-supposes the existence of multiple centres of power, many of which are not often captured within the traditional conceptions of power, while methods of study do not often capture this complex grid. Thus, in the politics of modern state, “latent structural sources” of power may not only co-exist with “manifest structural sources” of power. The latter can dominate the former in strategic matters of state. The force and character of each level is determined by the age of the state, the degree of nationalism, and the centrality of the state in the process of class formation.

Overlaid upon the Nigerian state is a complex mix of forces which has given it the character of a “power complex”. The strategic roles of the executives, the legislature and the judiciary make them part of the power complex”. Similarly, the resort to traditional rulers and religious leaders for legitimation in the face of distorted state processes makes them part of “the power complex”. The nascent character of democracy with a weak lumpen politicians who lack the resources; material and financial to organize elections, creates space for retired soldiers, retired bureaucrats and businessmen who cannot feature in the nascent regime, to stay behind the scene and feature as “black market” political leaders: they also form part of the “power complex”. It is within this context that we can capture and rationalize the role of the godfathers in the nascent democracy.

Outside the multiplicity of informal structural sources of power, the centrality of the state as the major instrument for creating social classes has created the psychology of power syndrome. The state therefore, is confronted with politics of warfare, politics of the belly and politics of governmentalities in which, power and ultimate control over the major structures and institutions of states, do not only become paramount but constitutes the driving force of those who are not formally located within the institutions of state.

### **Taxonomy of Godfatherism**

Idowu (2004) identified four typologies of godfatherism in Nigerian politics: ideological model; ethnic/religious model; the materialist military godfatherism model. Each model has arisen as a response to the political challenges facing the country in the nation-building project. In 1967, (Organski) identified four stages of political development; the politics of primitive unification, the politics of industrialization, the politics of national welfare and the politics of abundance. The politics of unification attends to the birth and childhood of nations as demonstrated by the amalgamation of Nigeria by the colonial masters. The necessary logic of birth and childhood of the Nigerian nation-state therefore gave rise to the phenomenon of father of the nation in instrumental and expressive terms. Having gone through this stage, the nation may be viable but still is far from full-growth. Indeed, a nation in the modern sense does not yet exist in Nigeria. The fabric of economic and political unity is thin and torn. A vast chasm separates the rulers from the ruled. The mass of the common people are politically subject and they participate little in the life of the nation... Unification in short, is "primitive". Nevertheless, it exists and forms a necessary base for the developments that follow (Organsk, 1967: 9).

Thus, the Nigerian State, handicapped by the absence of a national political culture that enjoys wide attachment, resorted to godfather political architecture in the context of de-stated social formation. This had become imperative even before the collapse of the colonial order. A word about each is in order at this point.

The provenance of "ideological godfatherism", derived from the anti-colonial ferment and surge of pan-African consciousness, got to its peak during the colonial era. Thus, the challenge of constructing new ideas and ideals of nationalism, pan-Africanism and socialist doctrines for legitimizing and mobilizing social forces for anti-colonial struggle, engendered the emergence of ideological godfathers in Nigerian politics. Awolowo's social welfarism, Zik's Fabian Socialism, Ahmadu Bello's capitalist attraction punctuated by Aminu Kano's populist socialism were to provide the needed expressive and instrumental platforms for galvanizing the people's currents of thought on the emerging Nigerian social formation. This pattern was reinforced by continent-wide ideological consciousness such as Negritude, proclaimed in the writings of Senghor of Senegal (1975), Nkrumah's neo-colonialism (1975), Nyerere's Ujamaa (1975), and Azikiwe's political blueprint of Nigeria (1975) etc.

The second type of godfatherism finds practical expression in ethnic domain politics as well as ethnic or tribal reductionism of national political process by ethnic conscious political leaders. The existence of a tribal leader with cultivated charisma derived from his demonstrated embodiment of the volition and vision of his ethnic group, confers on him the moral authority to determine who gets what, when and how within the ethnic domain. In this context, the personal predilection of the leader is supreme following the popular belief in him. Other influences, thoughts, ideas and perception are secondary. The belief in the ethnic godfather is then transported to

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political empowerment at regional and national levels. Often times, this kind of political godfatherism derive added strength from the political dimensions of local religion and kinship bonds. Ahmadu Bello's godfatherism derived largely from his repository of ethnic vision rooted in strong Muslim religious fervour and passion. He injected the idea of Northern supremacy into Nigerian politics as a way of securing pre-eminence for the Northern political elites. This was borne out of his ongoing Jihad from Sokoto to the Atlantic Ocean. Awolowo's commitment to the spiritual deity of Egbe-Omo Oduduwa was constructed to create the charismatic personality that erected a political godfather around him.

The third type of godfatherism is the materialist model. This typology is based on the political market notion of democracy where political entrepreneurs invest in the mandate business to harvest the "cash-cow state". The size, intensity and regularity of financial investment determine the level of access or political capacity for state expropriation. Office ascendancy therefore, opens the political market context for the show of power between the godson and the godfather. Often, as in the politics of veneer states, the contest for hegemony between Chris Uba (godfather) and Dr. Ngige (godson and former Governor of Anambra State) and Lamidi Adedibu (godfather) and Rasheed Ladoja (godson and former Governor of Oyo State) in which the godfathers overwhelmed the godsons and expropriated the state for alternative leadership is proof of the godfather's might in the politics of veneer state.

Three principles have gained popularity in the analysis of military provenance in politics or more precisely, the phenomenon of military godfatherism. These are (i) the principle of civil inadequacy (ii) the military competence principle and (iii) the birth right principle. Finer (1988) adduced certain explanations for military intervention in politics thus:

- (a) Providential mission of soldiers as saviours of their countries;
- (b) The unique awareness of soldiers and their identification with the national interest, protection of certain sectional interest e.g., class interest, regional interest, religious interest, ethnic interest, and the individual interest of certain military officers. (Idowu, 2004: 172).

It is within these contexts that we can situate military godfatherism in Nigeria. Two typologies of military godfatherism abound; supportive and impositional military godfatherism. Supportive godfatherism is constructed with a military passion, seeking to influence the policies of existing regime in order to make it subservient to the military's interest. In this supportive type, leading members of the "military oligarch" commit the institution to protecting the candidacy of a preferred likely military prefect (apologist). The impositional typology picks a serving or retired officer for office position for the purpose of effective representation of the military constituency in the emerging democratic construction. The support enjoyed by Shagari in the 1979 Presidential election proved the case for the supportive type, while the Obasanjvo's case of 1999 proved the case of the impositional typology. It is within the context of a

perceived non-military interest compliance regime, that we can locate the failure of June 12, 1993 Presidential election and the eventual death of the presumed winner, the SDP Presidential candidate Chief M.K.O. Abiola.

Prominent but often neglected in the discourse on political godfatherism are the crime bosses or the violence barons who, with a vast arsenal of force, alternate and threaten the security apparatus of state. Such arsenal of force is constructed to serve both economic and political interest. Politically, it is able to unleash the force needed to threaten, intimidate, rig elections and expropriate the electoral opportunities needed for the sustenance of “cleptomandate” democracy. Its related economic value derives from the fact that the crime bosses are paid for such force deployment. Secondly, the hostage taking business derives its strength from such organizations. During elections, godfathers often collaborate with crime bosses or show a double face phenomenon, often, pictured in Nigerian politics as youth wing of the party; like “A.G. Vanguard”, NCNC Youth Movement, etc. These movements are essentially political as they seek to influence and direct the affairs of state. They thus, serve a political purpose. These movements are often constructed and funded by godfathers and could be deployed to oust a failing godson from office. The growing strength of militant group derives mainly from the human and organizational resource conversion, spilling from politically constructed force structures and informal military institutions.

### **The Rise of Godfatherism**

The godfather phenomenon has a biblical root. In the context of guardian/custodian figure, constructing the socio-religious life of the young, along the Godly/spiritual path in order to attain heavenly glory is part of Nigerian social system. This concept called paternalism in the west has attained earthly equivalent in the contemporary global political economic environment. The popularity of this phenomenon even in the advanced democracies has been captured in the ruthless Puzo’s (1969) kingpins of the Italian Mafia setting, where the fictional godfather is fictionalized as a shadowy, dare-devil manipulator, who combines huge enormous underworld financial muscle with near mythical powers of enormous proportions. The godfather phenomenon in Nigeria enjoys both pre-colonial and colonial roots. Awa in his seminar contribution to the Igbo socio-political system intimates that the normal Igbo family seeks out a guardian, sort of a godfather for the sons “who are expected to be inspired and motivated by the streak of perfections, deftness, contact, courage, experience and accomplishment associated with the guest master”. In the traditional Yoruba political system, the role of the selectors or king makers who exercise the right of the choice of a king, automatically made them godfathers (Laguda, 2004). Similarly, the caliphate system where the ruling families field candidates who have to be considered by the kingmakers, equally confer godfathers status on the selectors. Thus, it is to be noted that the godfather phenomenon is not a political innovation or post-colonial political structure.

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However, its new character and construction are influenced by the colonial system of state expropriation, the politics of false start, the military politics of state expropriation, the doctrine of economic statism, abuse of widespread ignorance by the media and the growth of executive corruption that has attracted emergent aristocrats. These issues will be highlighted within the context of the rise of this latent structure. It is in this context that Wateburg (1977) summarized the situation by pointing out that patronage mechanism will be more pronounced where the weak are disproportionately weak, the strong disproportionately strong, and formal, alternative mechanism for protecting citizens', laws, court systems, police, procedural rules of the game remain embryonic, malleable or perhaps, imbued with little or no legitimacy.

The character of the colonial state, as an expropriated structural and institutional objectification of the colonial society laid the foundation for its post-colonial and neo-colonial construction. Young (1986) argued that its predatory and repressive character is located in the instrumental value organizing institutions for surplus appropriation for the colonialist. The state, as a foreign imposition is composed of a congeries of ethnic nationalities, seething on diverse centres of loyalty, occasioned by forced amalgamation. The cult personalities, who executed the nationalist project and inherited the colonial super structure at independence, reproduced the mysterious colonial agents with their image of small-gods served in office by uneducated pre-independence Nigerian countrymen.

Closely related to the foregoing is the political sociology of "false start". The western-style consumerist oligarchs who ascended leadership positions at independence had cut the image of a state whose surplus is needed to sustain the opulence and life style of the new elites of power. The temptations and attractions of wealth and associated state power form the ultimate path of the aspirant godfathers. In this context, the state as an enterprise is a 'cash cow' which must be expropriated by the godfathers of the "sole-proprietorship" genre. The crisis of false start is a crisis of continuity and self-reproducing elites who have acquired wealth without production structures and whose challenge of social perpetuation is guaranteed only by political godfatherism.

The provenance of the political armies in the Nigerian political system of power in 1966 set the stage for repeat of colonial type repressive and predatory state. With military-bureaucratic oligarchy having adopted a tradition of forced accession to power, an authoritarian order fostered by arbitrary culture, created the climate for privatization and instrumentalization of the state as a prebendal institution. Militarism in Nigeria was not just an overthrow of government or a seizure of power; it equally implied colonial type state expropriation. The spate of privatizations of state structures including military security by military Heads of State has been well documented by Fayemi (2002). The huge revenues that accrued to the militicians who navigated the military bureaucratic oligarchies equipped certain cult personalities and crowd-hiring political comedians with the resources to play the godfather of Nigerian politics. Adebayo Williams of Africa Today Magazine is disturbed by the values set by those he called "retired

military chieftains, their paramilitary adjutants and civilian storm troopers” (Nnamani, 2004:7-8).

### **Godfatherism in the age of Globalization**

In the current age, states confront a new geography of power and new local and international actors, unleashed by the imperatives of economic globalization. The rising phenomena of new cross border mergers and acquisitions in the context of globalization have accentuated specific denationalization of state authority. Thus, globalization, privatization and associated commercialization programs have occasioned a reduction in state authority and the acceleration of state decay. Sassen (2004: 1093) pointed out that “denationalization (globalization) is thus multivalent”. It endogenizes global agenda of many different types of Actors not only corporate firms or financial markets but also human right objectives, into the national institutional order. Two observations derive from the linkage of globalization with denationalization and privatization. In the third world states like Nigeria, it has led to the transfer of huge state resources to few elites. These few elites are recruited by the state from the military and security establishments, the top echelon of the civil service, the business class with access to state apparatus and the latent political classes that went under as a result of military rule. In the process, a class of nouveaux rich was created by the political army. Secondly, this class may have lost out of the political game and thus, resorted to the use of their newly acquired wealth for political influence in the black market system of power. This process, was promoted by a global trend towards denationalization of authority in the context of global politics. Thus, globalization as centralization and concentration of resources at the level of the national space, is creating national level godfathers.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Godfatherism and the Phenomenon of State Fragility**

Institutional fragility makes for state susceptibility within the context of “the power complex” where latent structures acquire relevance due to the low political culture and attendant political instability. Thus, the instability that characterized the Nigerian state since independence and particularly since 1966, when the political army overthrew an elected government did not only validate the thesis of low political culture (Finer, 1988). It also proved that any organization for power or structural construction for power that is able to undermine duly constituted civil authority can compete for power within the state. It is in the context of this political psychology that latent structures of power like rogue aristocrats, violence barons, militicians, retired civil servants, religious leaders, traditional rulers can transform into political godfathers to construct a “black market system of power” that compete with the formal structures and institutions of state.

The phenomenon of institutional fragility implies the absence of environmental institutional support and or failure of those structures and institutions to engage in best practices institutional performance that can give the state the credibility and legitimacy needed for state stability. Thus, the failure and weakness of the executive arm, the

legislative arm and the judiciary make for a prostrate and bed-ridden state to the extent that the society is considered de-stated, and controlled by private proprietors of state (godfathers) outside the formal governing process.

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