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STATE SYSTEMS IN PRE-COLONIAL, COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW

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STATE SYSTEMS  
IN PRE-COLONIAL, COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL NIGERIA:  
AN OVERVIEW

*Pre-colonial Nigeria*

The first point to note is that the pre-colonial epoch was not a static era during which all social and political systems existed in a finished and final form. In other words, different types of state systems and societies existed. There were kingdoms, empires, statelets, principalities, city-states and acephalous societies.

These political systems fall broadly into two categories. The first is referred to as the Centralised State System and the second variety is referred to as the Stateless Society.

In pre-colonial Nigeria, the Yoruba, the Hausa, the Kanuri, the Edo, the Jukun and the peoples and societies influenced and/or conquered by them had the centralised forms of state<sup>(1)</sup>. A distinguishing feature of this system is the existence of one ruler as the focus of power and source of authority. In the Nigerian States, these rulers were variously referred to as Sarki, Oba, Obi, Aku, etc. Such rulers were often hereditary. The historical background to their assumption of power is often lost in myths and legends. This amnesia over the origins of the kings is often actively fostered by the rulers themselves in order to confer on themselves antiquity and the social legitimacy deriving therefrom.

Because of the seeming agelessness of the monarchies, they have come to be referred to as “natural” or “traditional” rulers as if they always were part of the natural environment of their societies. Hence, claims of state leadership often go with claims of having founded the particular political community. In reality, these leaders acquired their state power either through the manipulation of peoples’ religious and spiritual beliefs or because they had economic power. In structural terms, monarchical systems are generally complex, elaborate and hierachical. The kings often governed in alliance with titles and position either from their families, wards or they had it conferred on them by the king. The kings and their councils constituted the apex of the centralised state systems.

Below this level, within the state or imperial headquarters and in the outlying districts and provinces, there were subordinate functionaries. These functionaries may have been directly appointed from the centre or they may have been pre-existing rulers who had been conquered and incorporated into

(1) J. A. ATANDA, “Government of Yoruba-land in the pre-colonial period”, *Tarikh*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1973, pp. 1-12.

the larger states and now were confirmed by the rulers at the centre. Legislative, executive and judicial authority was exercised at the centre. In practice, however, specific functionaries existed, both at the central, provincial and district levels to exercise state power.

In the centralized states therefore, state power was exercised through a variety of distinct structures and institutions all underpinned by the values of a monarchical political order. In general kings, councils, and palace bureaucracies exercised state power. With variations, the above format was characteristic of most centralized states.

It should be emphasized that this form of state power evolved, and kept growing over time as society developed in general. These states have never remained static. The dynamic feature in the career of centralized states is best exemplified by the experience of the Hausa states. The Hausa people by the end of the 19th century had already developed centralized state systems — albeit of the city state variety. However on the successful execution of the Jihad of Usman dan Fodio, the autochthonous Hausa kings and state systems were overthrown; and a new political order equally centralized, but now grounded on Islamic principles of government, came into existence in Hausaland.

A number of communities in pre-colonial Nigeria did not have formal, elaborate and highly visible state structures and specific functionaries, hence they are referred to as stateless societies<sup>(2)</sup>. Such societies were found among the Igbo, the Ibibio, the Annang, the Idoma and the Tiv for example. The exercise of power was diffuse and did not rest entirely within one family or group of families. Because these societies did not have a single identifiable ruler, they are also called acephalous or headless societies. In some places the system of governance was gerontocratic — i.e. the governing of the society by the oldest members of that community. The elders were generally heads of wards, age groups, occupations, or lineages. In these stateless societies important political and social decisions were taken either in an assembly of the entire community or by a broadly representative council.

A feature of these societies is that they were usually small in scale vis-a-vis the centralised states. In spite of their pun size, however, these societies performed functions and exercised the same powers and responsibilities that the more centralized states performed. In other words, they were not rudderless, anarchic entities.

In the past, such societies were generally regarded as “backward”, and as yet undeveloped specimens of the larger centralized states which were regarded as the necessarily logical limits of human political development.

(2) ROBIN HORTON, “Stateless Societies in the history of West Africa”, in J. F. A. AJAYI & M. CROWDER, *History of West Africa*, Vol. 1, Longman, 1976, pp. 72-113.

(3) Y. B. USMAN, *For the liberation of Nigeria*, New Beacon, 1979, p. 3.

However, students of society have come to recognise rather belatedly, that such societies constitute distinct and unique forms of societal organisation. As F. Engels noted long ago "There have been societies that did without it, (i.e. formal state structures — EEGI) that had no idea of the state and state power" (4). Some of these societies could and did evolve into larger central states and some did not. As a matter of fact, some scholars concerned with the character of states, even consider these societies as democratic in contrast to central states which were often autocratic.

Be that as it may, the essential points to note is that these societies did not have highly visible state structures and distinct functionaries but nevertheless carried out the regular functions of a state. These two political systems co-existed in Nigeria, before British imperialist conquest and the imposition of colonial domination on Nigeria.

### *The colonial state*

Colonial rule was formally established in Nigeria in 1900. The colonial state had two complementary tiers of government. At the central level a single colonial authority was imposed on the entire country. The central colonial authority was made up of the Governor, the advisory council and later a legislative council, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the police and a military contingent.

The second tier of government was the provincial (or regional) level. It was made up of the lieutenant - Governor, the regional bureaucracy, the regional judiciary and a "native" police force and, the all important and powerful provincial residents who overseered the administration of the provinces which were purportedly still under their "traditional" rulers. The system of governance at the provincial level was referred to as the Indirect Rule system because the colonial authorities claimed to administer these areas indirectly through the preexisting political institutions and leaders.

The debate on whether this form of rule was direct or indirect need not detain us here. The important point to note is that with the imposition of colonial domination, the colonial power's state system, structure and its values were imposed on Nigeria. In other words, since the colonising power, Britain, was a parliamentary liberal bourgeois democracy, it sought to foist the structure and ideology of a capitalist democracy in Nigeria. Within the justificatory ideological baggage of colonialism, the introduction of bourgeois democratic institutions and practices was considered as part of the civilising mission. In theory, therefore, it was a liberal democratic state that colonialism established in Nigeria.

(4) F. ENGELS, *The origins of the family, private property and the State*, Moscow 1977, p. 170.

In practice however, partly because of racism, and partly because of the economically exploitative motivation and goals of colonialism, a full blown bourgeois democracy could not be allowed to operate without various qualifications. As Professor Claude Ake has argued:

« One could not be a colonizer and a democrat at the same time. If the colonizer allowed popular participation in the government, colonialism would automatically end.

However much the colonizer professed his commitment to democracy — the primary goal of his politics was the exclusion of subject population from power — though not necessarily from token participation » (5).

The disabling qualifications which prevented the operation of a bourgeois democracy included the following: the restriction of franchise to certain classes of people and to certain areas, the absence of universal adult suffrage, and the absence of the various formal rights which constitute the essential decorative bricks of a bourgeois democracy. Their absence in colonial political practice ensured that the colonial state in Nigeria was in essence an authoritarian administrative state.

Being a bourgeois state, albeit an administrative one, state structures, state power and state policies were directed towards enhancing the undisturbed exploitation of the mineral and human resources of Nigeria. This exploitation was undertaken by the European firms and the tiny emergent Nigerian comprador and merchant class.

The colonial state lacked political, social, and customary legitimacy. Consequently, its exercise of power was based on the possession and monopoly of instruments of violence, as well as on the fact of conquest. The state apparatus of coercion was the police and the military. Lacking a social base in the colony, state power was exercised without restraint since the colonial power was not accountable to the subject people.

### *The state in post-colonial Nigeria*

The colonial state through its socio-economic policies and practices had set in motion the processes which led to the emergence of social classes in Nigeria of the type which existed in typical capitalist state. Such classes included the comprador bourgeoisie, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, and the working class. The creation of these classes also meant that in terms of its location and exercise, state power was in the hands of the emergent bourgeois class. Thus when the British embarked on their programmed decolonisations, there was no mistake about whom the "anointed" heirs were. The Nigerian power elite included, merchants, traders, businessmen, property owners, lawyers, doctors, journalists.

As these Nigerian foster elite had become reconciled with the colonially

(5) CLAUDE AKE, *Revolutionary pressures in Africa*, Zed Press, 1978, p. 86.

imposed socio-political order, from which they benefitted, they maintained the system even after independence.

On the eve of the departure of the colonial power, the Nigerian power elite in collusion with the departing colonial authority, drew up an elaborate constitution for a liberal bourgeois state — complete with provisions for parties in government and those in opposition. The usual plethora of bourgeois rights found their way into this independence constitution. Such rights included the right to life, right to property, to freedom of thought, and religion; right to freedom of expression; right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, right to freedom from discrimination, right to freedom of movement etc.

In structural terms, the constitution made provision for a ceremonial Head of State, the President; an executive Head of Government, the Prime Minister and his cabinet of Ministers. There was also the bicameral legislature or parliament which was responsible for making national laws. There was also the independent judiciary which provided authoritative interpretations of the constitution and the adjudication of criminal and civil cases. This structure of government with slight modifications was replicated at the regional levels.

In theory in a bourgeois state, power derives from the people who exercise it by electing into executive and legislative offices their representatives. The practice on the contrary demonstrates that the political and economic elite wield state power to foster their own class interests, with scant regard for the interests of the purportedly sovereign people from whom the rulers derived power.

In Nigeria, the first civilian regime (1960-1966) or what is usually referred to as the First Republic had to contend with the contradictions inherent in its origins. On the one hand, the political structures and traditions developed under colonialism and bequeathed to the new power elite were authoritarian in essence and in fact. On the other hand, the independence constitution was a parliamentary democratic one. The mutual antagonism between the two systems in uneasy co-existence, contributed to political instability, economic mismanagement, social incoherence and the mobilisation of ethnic consciousness (or “Tribalism”) — all of which eventuated in the collapse of that experiment in neocolonial parliamentary democracy.

On January 15, 1966 the armed forces seized state power and imposed a military dictatorship, thereby inaugurating the second regime in Nigeria's post independence history. Having acceded to power via a “*coup d'état*” the government lacked a formal popular mandate and political legitimacy. It however justified its seizure of power and its right to popular acclamation and acceptance, on the basis of its action being congruent with popular aspirations and sentiments for “peace, order and development”.

The truth however is that the military junta acquired state power because



it monopolised the state apparatus of violence and coercion. Its exercise of power therefore was not surprisingly crude.

The military government in Nigeria, consistent with their stated motives for intervention, promulgated a vacuous reformist ideology of correctivism, since they came to power to "correct" the ills of the civilian government. However, as colonial creations, they were unable to transcend their origins and become agents of progressive social development. In their governance of the Nigerian state they ran the country in alliance with bureaucrats, and the politicians they displaced.

The frequent threats of counter-coups and successful counter-coups suggests that the correctivist ideology of the military is an inadequate basis for using state power to create political stability. In the context of bourgeois political thought this failure is indeed ironic, in so far as military power represents the most visible manifestation of power and yet it is unable to achieve what other forms of political power are able to achieve.

In structural terms, military power in government, consistent with its own hierarchical structure and traditions, foisted on Nigeria a highly centralized state system. This type of governmental structure it was thought would make for integration and unity in Nigeria.

At the central level, there was the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces who was also Head of State. Below him was the Supreme Military Council (SMC) — which was the policy and law making body over which the Head of State presided. There was below the SMC, a mixed civilian — military cabinet of Commissioners called the Federal Executive Council (FEC). These Commissioners were the heads of ministries which were responsible for executing policies. At the state levels, power was in the hands of the military governors who appointed their own cabinets.

In October, 1979 the military handed over power to an elected civilian regime after fashioning out a new constitution<sup>(6)</sup>. This constitution has given a legal gloss and sanction for the exercise of power by the bourgeois in Nigeria.

For the bourgeoisie and most of the petty — bourgeois elements in Nigeria, reflecting their fetish for form over substance, the major feature of the constitution is the institution of the executive president. He has considerable powers and is elected on a nation — wide basis.

Structurally, the constitution provides for the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. The executive is made up of the President, the Vice-President, the ministers, the bureaucracy and the armed forces. The executive is responsible for executing laws and policies made by the National Assembly.

The National Assembly is bicameral, made up of a House of Representatives and the Senate. These two bodies are the law making agencies in the

(6) See *The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979*. A Daily Times publication.

country. The members represent state constituencies and Federal senatorial districts, and are elected for a four year term. It makes "national" laws. The third arm of the state is the judiciary which is made up of judges appointed by the executive. The highest court of the land is the Supreme Court of Nigeria, followed by the Federal Courts of Appeal, and Federal High Courts. The Courts are ultimate interpreters of the constitution. They also dispense justice.

Apart from the existence of a unicameral legislature in states, the structures at the Federal level are replicated at the state levels.

The constitution, consistent with its bourgeois orientation, has its full complement of formal bourgeois civil rights which are justiciable. On the other hand, social and economic rights, like the right to free education, right to work, right to free health and right to a decent wage are not justiciable and in consequence the state is not constitutionally bound to implement these rights or work towards their realisation. And yet, in order to be able to exercise the fundamental rights to life, liberty, freedom of speech, conscience and so on, a minimum level of social and economic existence is an inescapable necessity.

Thus various state systems and forms of power ranging from monarchical, gerontocratic, acephalous, authoritarian, bourgeois democratic and military autocracy have been operated in the area of present day Nigeria from pre-colonial times to the present neo-colonial period.

In conclusion, power or more specifically state power within Nigeria, at least since the days of the Kingdoms and empires through the era of colonial domination to the present post-colonial period, has always been held by small power elites. These include the pre-colonial aristocracy: Obas, Sarkuna, Emirs, Obis etc., the colonial bureaucratic - military bourgeoisie, and the post-colonial alliance of comprador bourgeoisie and the military, bureaucratic bourgeoisie.

During all these phases, the power of the ruling classes has been underpinned by their control of the coercive apparatus of state power, including the army, the police, the prison system and other security agencies. The non-institutional instrument of social control has been the ideology of the ruling classes which they foisted on society. The function of this ideology is to legitimize their control of power and to present their social order as the quintessence of human social evolution. But the fallaciousness of this view has been repeatedly demonstrated by the disintegration of the old order and the inauguration of a new one.

In addition to the control of the coercive apparatus of state and the ideology of society, the control of the economy by the rulers or their allies confers on them the ultimate power to determine the character of society and the direction of its advancement.

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