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The Appropriated State: Political Structure and Cycles of Conflict in Nigeria, 1900 — 1993

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Abstract

Three times has post colonial Nigeria tried to operate a democratic constitution; three times have these attempts generated centrifugal conflict. Defective constitutions, inherently corrupt politicians and class struggle as explanations have limited causal logic. The recurrence of conflict only under particular conditions has tended to indicate the validity of the structural explanation, and the phased succession a cyclical interpretation. How valid is the discernment of cycles in Nigeria's political history? If the claim that "historical events are unique" is not demonstrated to follow from the nature of events, that "history repeats itself" becomes an equally possible hypothesis. All history, therefore, is reasoned history. Yet, the phases of the Nigerian conflict cycle: Northern hegemony – Southern challenge (Crisis) – military rule, indicate a struggle to appropriate the state and reveal the existence of conflict units, the needs of which are usually sought and met in the same manner. Could these conflict cycles be said, therefore, to have immanent causes?

Introduction

An influential class of explanations attributes the visible non-sustenance of democratic government in Nigeria since independence in 1960 to defective political and constitutional structures (Oyovbaire 1987; Olagunju *et al* 1993: 33-34). The extent of official acceptance of such explanations is indicated by the otherwise ornamental re-working of the basic independence constitution, finally effected in 1963, 1979 and 1991, and by modifications in the number and organisational structure of political parties. The outcomes have been changes in the relationship between the component territorial units and the central government,

and from the Westminster parliamentary to variants of the American presidential arrangement. That Nigeria in 1993 still grappled with the problem of sustaining democratic government implies that these explanations have failed to explain the problem. Yet, conflict has generally followed any case of democratic breakdown.

The conflict-generating capacity of pluralism, particularly within a democracy (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972) appears to have ample demonstration in Nigeria's political history (Post and Vickers 1973). The retort that ethnic differences are not "inherently conflictual", but "lead to strife only when they are politicised" (Ake 1991: 34) ignores the fact of the conflict-generating competition for the resources of the state that is a feature of coexistence within the same state. Ethnicity is inherently political, hence conflictual.

Closely associated with the failure of democratic continuity, conflict of the kind defined as national, i.e., motivated by the struggle primarily for exclusive hegemonic advantage, and that engenders suppressed clamours for ethnic or regional autonomy or separation, is rarely a feature of military rule. In fact, such national conflicts usually lead to, and justify civil-military regime change. That such conflict is not a regular feature of military rule only means that a military-dictatorial framework has a better capacity to withstand civil conflict. This quality also applies to one-party rule, and accounts for the generally low incidence of civil conflicts in one-party states or under authoritarian regimes compared to states with multi-party systems (Collier 1982: 95-112; and Young 1994: 2). Nevertheless, the occurrence of coups in one-party states and the military-military coup are indications that this capacity has its limitations, and a test of the immunity of the military to factional political divisions. In Nigeria since 1960, there have been three such successful military-military coups – 1966, 1975 and 1985.

If therefore the features of democratic practice and breakdown, and regime change are super-imposed on Nigeria's historical time-chart between 1900, when formal colonial rule began, and 1993, when another attempt at democratisation failed, the recurrence of a particular succession of events is discernible. Is it possible to construe this recurrence in terms of inexorable cycles of conflict? Could these cycles be argued to have their own logic of succession? Or is their occurrence merely a reflection of creative imagination?

The Appropriated State and the Politics of Pluralism in Africa

So much rationality, unreality, eurocentrism has characterised the analysis of the post-colonial state in Africa. Political analysis has been so blunted by the apparent theoretical possibilities in the prescriptive conception of the state that the problematic state in Africa is confusedly and inappropriately defined in terms of what the state should be rather than what it is. Running through statist approaches, as demonstrated by the classifications of Chabal (1992: 69-70) and Chazan *et al* (1992: 40), is the emphasis on formal prerequisites, and characterisation in terms

of institutions, of their structures and functions. The implication is the conception of the state not only as a political actor, but as an autonomous and impersonal actor. For post colonial and culturally plural Africa, this is invalid.

In spite of the Marxist instrumental theory of the state, the state in Euro-American theoretical and historical tradition has been presented as autonomous, impersonal and impartial (Simons 1997: 279). The pre-condition for such a state is that social relations are sufficiently pluralistic and diffused, guaranteeing liberty and objectifying the state. So the state is autonomous, since its acts are:

- (i) directed by "organisationally coherent collectivities of state officials, ... insulated from ties to currently dominant socioeconomic interests", and
- (ii) "not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society" (Skocpol 1985: 9; Zartman 1995: 5).

Because it is autonomous, it is also impersonal (Held 1989: 180).

Theorists of the post-colonial state in Africa have insisted on the historicity of the African state, linking its peculiarity particularly with its colonial origins¹ (Chabal 1992: 70,74; Dornbos 1990: 180). The consensual inference from historical analysis seems to be that the distinguishing feature of the state in Africa is its prominence, defined by Rothstein (1987: 143) as "the centrality of the state," and as the centralized state (in relation to local centres of power) by Wunsch and Olowu (1995: 4). The state in Africa may not be the minimal "arbiter" state of western political theory (Chabal 1986: 15), but its characterisation has not been incompatible with the autonomous-impersonal state. Thus, the state is said to act, intervene in society and to have its own agenda (see, for example, Lubeck 1987: 16).

If the state does act, by whose agency and on whose behalf does it act? The autonomy/impersonality argument presupposes a state-society divide where the state acts to strengthen itself against society. But can the state be so conceived in Africa where the most visible feature of politics is cultural pluralism? Lasswell and Kaplan (1950: 184), following Laski's empiricist conception of the state, have argued that the acts of the state are "the concrete acts of certain persons and groups". The state is in fact a social institution, and reflects the tensions and conflicts among social groups. Indeed, it is instrumental in determining and sustaining outcomes, hence it is importantly an object of appropriation by competing groups; hence the state is a source of violence (against non-ruling social groups).

Callaghy (1986:31) has defined the "model African state" as:

an organisation of domination controlled with varying degrees of efficacy by a ruling group or class that competes for power, for sovereignty, with other political, economic, and social groups.

Rothstein (1987: 144), describing the pathological state in Africa as a robber

state, has noted the de-autonomisation of the state by referring to its transformation as “the spoil of spoils for special interests”. What these writers have not done is to link this process of state appropriation with the politics of pluralism, to the inter-group competition for access, domination and exclusion (Ifidon 1996). This is explicit in Kuper (1971: 33).

In the plural society the state is the representative political organ of the ruling section organised as a concrete group, its exclusive and ultimate instrument for the internal domination and corporate control of the institutionally distinct subject populations ...

The state in Africa is neither autonomous nor impersonal: it is not law that rules, but groups, their interests and members. True, it is centralised, but centralisation has been a condition for the emergence of the appropriated state, while further centralisation has been effected by the appropriated state to reproduce itself. The state does not have ideal attributes. The attributes of the state are the attributes of the appropriating group. Africa’s regressing cycle of re-democratisation is traceable to the operation of the appropriated state.

Political Structure and Cycles of Conflict in Nigeria, 1900-1993

Nigeria is an appropriated state: “The Nigerian state serves as a financial conduit for sectional political forces” (Whitaker 1991: 269). The use of the concept of cycle to describe what has been referred to as “the recurrent crisis and conflict in the Nigerian political system” (Akinyemi 1976: 135) is not novel. Ihonvbere and Shaw (1988: 14) had explained the predictability of the 1983 democratic breakdown (and military coup) by reference to the general fact that the “nature and direction of Nigerian politics in the 1980s did not appear to be fundamentally different from what it was in the 1950s and 1960s until 1984”; but specifically to the repetition of the “conditions which prompted civil unrest in the first republic and forced the military to intervene on behalf of the bourgeoisie”.

A political-economy rendition locates the conflicts in the “production, market, state and moral relations of Nigerian society”. But neither military rule nor democratic government has shown “the will or capacity” to address these problems at source. Civil rule, therefore, is “likely to repeat the ‘failure of politics’, and hence to invite in its turn a fresh demonstration from the military of the ‘failure of administration’” (Williams and Turner 1978: 172).

A similar description sums up the crisis as that of under-development, and the failure of the dominant class (having both civilian and military factions) to overcome it. Military rule, in the first instance, owes its origin to the inability of the civilian faction to grapple with the crisis. The military also fails to “correct” the

Nigerian society” and relinquishes power either through its own judgement or through vociferous public demands. But the crisis is already worse, so civil rule again fails. “Thus, the circle of civilian misrule followed by military coups/military rule and again by further military disengagement repeats itself” (Kieh, Jr. and Agbese 1993:410).

In relation to the proposed cyclical model, three phases are identifiable.

- a. An authoritarian political phase that features non-representative rule. The rule is defined as authoritarian with regard to its nature and ultimate source. Thus, military rule is as authoritarian as colonial rule.

Table 1: Regime Change and Cycles of Conflict in Nigeria, 1900-93

Phase	First Cycle 1900-1966	Second Cycle 1966-1983	Third Cycle 1983-?
Authoritarian	1900-1950	1966-1977	1983-1987
Transitional	1950-1960	1977-1979	1987-1993
Civil	1960-1966	1979-1983	?

- b. A transitional political phase marked by the dual rule of authoritarian and representative elements (even at different levels of government), and with the objective of ultimate transition to full representative government.
- c. A civil political phase, which by virtue of being based on election, can be described as democratic.

These phases form a recurring succession, hence their cyclical integration. As Table 1 shows, the first phase of the first cycle started with formal colonial rule by Britain in 1900 and ended in 1950, from which time is dated the transitional phase of Nigerian rule and colonial over-rule through quasi-representative institutions. The transitional phase ended with formal independence in October 1960, and initiated the civil political phase which featured a *de jure* all-Nigerian government. The second cycle started with the military coup of January 1966 and the reinstatement of authoritarian rule. Three military governments ruled during this phase: J. T. Aguiyi-Ironsi (January – July 1966), Yakubu Gowon (August 1966 – July 1975) and Murtala Muhammed/Olusegun Obasanjo (July 1975 – 1977). In 1977, with the local government election, the transitional phase began it featured military over-rule, but civil rule at the local level. This phase ended with the swearing in of Shehu Shagari as president in October 1979. The military again struck in December 1983 bringing the second cycle to a close.

The third cycle began in 1983, and its authoritarian phase ended in 1988 with the inauguration of the transitional phase in December 1987 with the local government election. Two military governments ruled during the authoritarian phase: Muhammadu Buhari (January 1984–August 1985) and Ibrahim Babangida (September 1985–1988). Between 1988 and 1993, the Babangida government shared power with elected local government chairmen, and later with elected state governors, senators and representatives till its exit in August 1993. Although there was a presidential election on June 12 to complete the process of transition, it was annulled by Babangida on June 23. On August 26, the civilian-headed Interim National Government was inaugurated, and on November 17, it fell to the new military dictatorship of Sani Abacha. The transitional phase was not completed, therefore no civil political phase followed. Why this breach?

A logical or merely creative reading of the phases described would characterise the central tendency in Nigeria's political history as the "Triumph of Order", or the "Search for Stability". When authoritarian rule became too long or severe, it engendered contrary tendencies. The result was gradual disengagement represented by dual rule, and ultimately civil political government. The absence of a central ordering structure encouraged juvenile freedom in partisan politicians which resulted in strife and near-anarchy. To prevent the state from expiring, and in response to popular clamour for order, authoritarian rule was re-established. The June 12 presidential election seemed to have created conditions that could undermine Nigeria's integrity, hence the reversion to authoritarian rule. But there was no civil political phase for which authoritarian rule was the solution. The disorder was generated not by the election, but by its annulment. This scheme, for its inability to explain the breach, must be abandoned.

Explaining the Breach in Transition

Explaining the breach in transition must lead, not only to a reconstruction of the pattern of recurrence, but first to an explanation of the persistence of conflict, and therefore the very source of recurrence. There seems to be a limit to the applicability of the cultural pluralism model in its traditional formulation, or its conglomerate variant, to the explanation of conflict and its persistence in Nigeria. The unit of conflict for the above model is the plural section defined as the ethnic or cultural group. Using Otite's (1990: Appendix II) list of 374 ethnic groups, for example, the kind of conflict that should ensue is that of all against all. But from the first national conflict of 1953 to date, such conflicts have not been patternless or directionless, and the ethnic group has not been the unit of conflict, nor has ethnicity been the basis of alignment.

Instead of the plain ethnic groups of the traditional cultural pluralism model, the units of conflict have been arrangements of these groups on geo-historical and clientele based principles. The starting point is the emergence of a tri-polar

regional structure in 1939 and its politicisation with the introduction of broad based electoral politics. The extent of intra-regional socialisation has been understated. To speak of the West or East is not a mere reference to the multi-cultural Yoruba or Igbo dominant centre. What has happened in the period between 1939 and 1963, when Nigeria was given a four region structure with the creation of the Midwest Region (from the Western Region), and 1967, when Nigeria became a twelve state "military" federation, was a region-based elite integration and cultural inter-penetration. The ensuing bi-polar structure in the south prevented the emergence of a viable political South.

It is possible to argue that the North existed before Nigeria. It largely existed in the Fulani ruled Sokoto Caliphate for about sixty years before it was incorporated into what is now called Nigeria. The British did not have to work on "building up the North as a separate entity" (Ekeh 1989: 23); a historical basis already existed. But the British did define the separateness of the North in relation to the South. The implication of this prior existence is that the structure of relations in the Caliphate has been carried along, unchanged, into Nigeria.

Although the principle of state organisation in the Caliphate was religious, social organisation was based on a "horizontal stratification based on class and rank" (Sklar 1983: 350), a hierarchical patron-client system that integrated muslims and non-muslims, negroid and hamitic elements. With the emergence of a politically conscious North (largely as response to the aggressive politics of leaders of the West and East of the country), the distributive basis of the clientele based system was vastly expanded and functionally trans-ethnic. Yet, the dominant centre has remained the Fulani. It is an understatement to represent these regional formations as Yoruba, Igbo and Fulani (or less correctly, Hausa-Fulani). Certainly, there have been intra-regional difficulties,² but in the context of a national conflict, sympathies, alignments, and especially mobilisation tend to be regional. These regions, in their different stages of integration or disintegration, are the units of conflicts.

Before Nigerians themselves manned these conflict units, British colonial officers had fought among themselves on the basis of these units, purporting to do so on behalf of the respective Nigerian peoples. Frederick Lugard had thus complained of the "growing divergence of administrative methods" in Nigeria (Kirk-Greene 1968: 58-59). In consequence, he recommended amalgamation under one governor-general "so that there may be no jealousy or rivalry between the North and the South" (p. 27).

Why would there be jealousy or rivalry between North and South? An indication of the objects of intra-colony competition over which conflicts have been recurrently generated in post-colonial Nigeria was given in an apologia for the colonial North by E.D. Morel (1968: 19):

The position of Northern Nigeria is very anomalous. A vast protectorate

shut off from the seaboard by another less than four times its size; having no coastline, and the customs dues on whose trade are collected by the latter. Southern Nigerian enjoying a very large revenue; its officials decently housed and catered for; able to spend freely upon public works and to develop its natural resources. Northern Nigeria still poor, a pensioner upon the Treasury, in part upon Southern Nigeria; unable to stir a step in the direction of a methodical exploration of its vegetable riches; its officials housed in a manner which is generally indifferent and sometimes disgraceful, and now deprived even of their travelling allowance of five shillings a day.

Such a dependent position arising from geographical location, while certainly better than outright separate existence, had political implications. A federal or confederal system, allowing for a measure of autonomy, would confirm such dependence; but a unitary structure would ensure state control of the benefits of coastal endowment. To control the benefits, the North must control the state.

Although this was written in 1911, and about those sympathetic to the British North and those sympathetic to the South, the structure of needs has remained essentially the same, except that oil has become one of the resources possessed by the South (minorities), the revenue from which has become the object of sectional appropriation through control of the state. The principle of revenue allocation by derivation, supportive of a federal structure, would ensure northern dependence, or at least inadequate resource base. But other principles such as those based on need and population would have a contrary impact.

The relationship between political domination of the Nigerian state and accessibility to all its resources, and infrastructural development of the region controlling power has been studied extensively (Bamishaiye 1976). From 1950, with the indigenisation of the competition for resources, the political insecurity of the "privileged classes of the North", as in 1953 and 1966, initially led to the threat to secede (Nnoli 1978: 162). But the outcome of the events of 1966 and the consequent civil war have demonstrated that unitarism is the solution to insecurity or fear of southern domination, and *real* federation the solution to the fear of northern domination.

The only way the North could ensure access to, and control of the System of Rewards in the early 1960s was to "ensure a strong presence for itself in the Federal Government" (Post and Vickers 1973: 65); in later years it was to dominate it. In conflict terms, the realisation of this objective has meant the creation of *the* equilibrium. The crisis of the mid 60s has been attributed to Ahmadu Bello's determination to maintain this favourable equilibrium in the face of a strong southern challenge:

... the Northern leader was not prepared to contemplate any change which might alter the balance precariously achieved at the end of 1959, which he regarded as favouring his own region and giving a preponderance in Nigeria to his own Hausa-Fulani people (*ibid.*: 73).

The outcome was the disfigurement of the electoral system, riots and a *coup d'état*.

The same pattern recurred during the 1979-1983 civil government period. Dominated by the same conflict unit, in 1983 it faced another potent western led electoral challenge. Another mutilated general election followed. Between October, when the second term of Shagari as president started, and December, when a *coup d'état* occurred, Nigeria groaned under total paralysis arising from the contested electoral victory of the northern controlled National Party of Nigeria.

The June 12, 1993 election produced an aberration: Moshood Abiola, from the west, to all intents and purposes, won. As Ali Mazrui (1995: 32) has remarked,

... he was the first southerner to be elected executive head of state in the country's post-colonial history. In previous elections Nigerians brought northern muslims into power. In June 1993, they still brought back a muslim victor — but this time he was a southerner. Did the military government of Ibrahim Babangida nullify the elections for those ethnic and regional reasons?

The question should therefore be posed: Did the electoral victory of Abiola put the equilibrium in jeopardy? Yes, it did because it meant the possibility of entry for another conflict unit with the implication of exclusion for the other two. Abdulkadir Balarabe Musa (see interview in African Guardian, 29.11.93), once the "radical" governor of the northern state of Kaduna, summarized the two reasons why the northern leadership was distressed by the result of the June 12 election and instigated its annulment.

First, June 12 means a change from them calling the shots to someone else calling the shots. This change is something they cannot accept.

Second, these people live on favours, privileges, appointments, contracts. Now, they fear that they may not be doing as well as they were doing and because of their quarrel with M.K.O. in the Second Republic and since M.K.O. is now being sponsored by another party, SDP, they are afraid they would be marginalised on award of contracts, board appointments, all these bureaucratic privileges.

In effect, the election was nullified for "ethnic and regional reasons". Musa further remarked, "if the winner had been a northerner, a Hausa-Fulani. They would have taken it as their own victory". This explains the breach in the earlier cyclical construct. Hence, Post and Vickers' interpretation of the 1993 episode in contrast with that of the early 1960s:

An issue the Northern conservatives seem agreed upon is that under no circumstance must NIGERIA as it is known today mutate. The resolve is: Neither disintegration nor confederation. Even the Sultan had advised against disintegration ... (*African Guardian* 1993: 28).

Hegemony Cycles

The pattern of political change I have analysed above could be characterised as *hegemony cycles*. As shown in Table 2, the first independent government was dominated by the Northern Peoples Congress, a domination challenged by an alliance of the major southern parties (and some northern opposition parties) in the 1964 election. It was inconclusive. The outcome was a period of crisis that culminated in the coup of 15 January 1966. Military rule justified as a response to political disorder ended in 1979. This is the first cycle.

Table 2: Political Conflict and Hegemony Cycles in Nigeria, 1960-93

Phase	First Cycle 1960-1979	Second Cycle 1979-1993	Third Cycle
Northern Hegemony	1960-1964	1979-1983	June 12, 1993 election annulled, western hegemony aborted.
Southern Challenge (Crisis)	1964-1966	Oct.-Dec. 1983	
Military Rule	1966-1979	1984-1993	

The second cycle began with the inauguration of Shagari in 1979. It was essentially a Northern rule, particularly after the North-East *entente* (the NPN-NPP accord) broke down, just as the North-East coalition (NPC-NCNC) of the 1960-1964 rule did. The 1983 general election featured a strong Southern (particularly Western) challenge. The fear of losing grip and the urge to win power led to manipulations of the electoral process. The outcome was the contested results.

Between October and December 1983, Nigeria simply drifted in an expectant crisis. Again the military struck apparently in response to political disorder. Military rule was to last till 1993, ending the second cycle, but the “wrong” conflict unit won the June 12, 1993 presidential election. *As before, it was either victory or crisis.* That the equilibrium may not be destroyed, the election was nullified and military rule continued.

The modified cyclical regime, rather than an expression of reasoned history or transcendental explanation, seems to have followed from the nature of the conflicting units and the objects and mode of competition. Lasswell and Kaplan (1950: 246), explaining the mechanism of cyclical occurrence, have insisted that a pattern is “cyclical only if similar needs continually recur and are continually dealt with in virtually the same ways”. It is in this sense only that these hegemony cycles have immanent causes.

Notes

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1. To describe the African state as “a borrowed institution” (Diop and Diouf 1990:7) would seem to imply that the state is ahistorical, that the African state is not peculiar. The idea of the state may have been borrowed, but not the state itself. The state as a colonial bequest had no parallel in Europe (see O’ Brien 1993: 63).
 2. It is pertinent to note that none of the major ethnic groups has the currently most sought after good in the Nigerian competition circuit: oil; access to it has been through political control of the state. Minority groups in the west and east, with limited success and impact, had tried to mobilise on this basis. In the North, the middle belt communities, particularly the Tiv, have played an anti-hegemonic role.

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