

# Rethinking deification, gerontocracy and clientelism in the Nigerian political space

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## Abstract

*Up until now, blanket respect, loyalty and veneration have been given to ancestors, living elders and godfathers in all cultures in Nigeria and their celebration in politics has become worrisome. These practices derive from deification, gerontocracy and clientelism. Most of the existing works in African anthropological studies written by cultural apologists have romanticised these socio-religious practices and found them sacrilegious but only a few connect them to democratic milieu of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Thus, more than historicising and romanticising these socio-religious beliefs, this paper employs critical discourse analysis to confirm, legitimate, reproduce and challenge their power relation with the Nigerian people. This paper argues that dogmatic acceptance of the unquestionable powers of these phenomena negatively impact on societal well-being. The paper consequently submits that only a few of these past celebrated personalities should be recognised and respected and that only the living and the dead who are not self-serving and whose interests as well as conduct are not diametrically opposed to societal good, deserve veneration. It is suggested that we must free ourselves from avoidable hegemonic control of seen and unseen powers.*

**Key words:** ancestor, living elder, godfather, power relations, socio-religious practice

## Sumário

*Até ao presente momento, o respeito superficial, a lealdade e veneração são dados aos ancestrais, anciãos vivos e padrinhos em todas culturas na Nigéria e a sua celebração em política tornou-se preocupante. Essas práticas derivam da deificação, gerontocracia e clientelismo. A maioria dos trabalhos existentes romantizaram essas práticas sócio-religiosas e encontraram nelas sacrilégios, mas alguns destes se conectam ao meio social democrático. Assim, mais do que historiar e democratizar estas crenças sócio-religiosas, este artigo faz uma análise crítica do discurso para confirmar, legitimar, reproduzir e desafiar sua relação de poder com o dominado. O estudo argumenta ainda que, a aceitação dogmática de poderes inquestionáveis desses fenómenos tem impacto negativo no bem-estar social. O artigo, mostra também que apenas algumas personalidades celebradas cabem no espaço de reconhecimento e respeito que, somente, os vivos e os mortos que não são serventes de si próprios e cujos interesses assim como conduta não são diametricamente opostos ao bem social bem venerado. É sugerido que nós nos devemos livrar do evitável controlo hegemónico dos poderes visíveis e invisíveis.*

**Palavras chave:** ancestral, ancião vivo, padrinho, relação de poder, prática sócio-religiosa

## Introduction

Inokoba and Ebiefa (2013) affirm that West Africa is one of the poorest regions on earth and that ECOWAS countries have some of the lowest standards of living indexes in the world. They state further that thirteen of the fifteen countries in West Africa were among the thirty listed countries at the bottom of the UNDP Human Development index in 2009. It is quite clear from the UNDP ranking that as a West African state, Nigerian is also lagging behind in social, political and economic status more than half a century after independence. This is because Nigeria, which is claimed to be the giant of Africa, has yet to come out of its social, economic and political doldrums despite its abundant human and material resources. In every corner of the country, there is an acute shortage of drinkable water, electricity, good roads, industries and employment opportunities for the ever-increasing population of teeming school leavers. Most analysts and social commentators blame this situation on bad governance culture and corruption. Painting a gory picture of corruption in Nigeria, Transparency International in 2005 ranked Ghana 50, Senegal 66, Cote d' Ivoire 71 and Nigeria 101 (the second most corrupt country in the world) (UNODC, 2006). A retrospective look at the situation would generally raise such questions as:

- How did we get into this mess?
- What have our forbearers done right or wrong to put us in this mess?
- What is wrong with our cultural heritage?
- What are the living elders doing to get us out of the present quagmire?
- What are the plans of the young ones for the foreseeable future?

It is assumed that some of our worthy ancestors would be upset with the level of social decadence, political logjam and economic woes in Nigeria while the unworthy forebears would be complacent and muse at our plight. But even if the forebears were not happy, what are they capable of doing? This question would sound profane in a society where we generally believe that both dead and living elders have pervasive influence over the fortunes of the living. In the same vein, in cultures where old age and ascendancy have a touch of venerability, elders both dead and living are respected because they are our predecessors and have served as purveyors for our existence today. In most cases, veneration is accorded them. It is generally believed in Africa that the ancestors enter into a spiritual state of existence after death. This entry of the dead elders qualifies them to have a say in the affairs of the living. They are seen as intercessors between the Supreme Being and the living. They are perceived as “the font of life and well-being” (Sangree, 1974: 66).

In the same light, Olaoba (2005:57) opines that ancestors worship and veneration presupposes the fact that “the living and the dead are in continual partnership and association in the day-to-day governance of the society.” He sees the living elders as the representatives of the ancestors whose opinions and verdicts on matters must be respected and taken as sacrosanct. Mendosa (1976: 57) extends the argument to social relations when he notes, “the ancestors among the



Sisala of Northern Ghana are also perceived as a reflection of social relations quite often extended to symbolic expression". Ray (1976: 147) sees ancestral rites in Africa as a process of ritualising rules and social relations. West Africans generally believe that the ancestors and heroes still live on and that their interventions in ordinary day-to-day affairs of man are incontrovertible. In the process of socialising young ones, this belief is passed from generation to generation through folktales, stories, anecdotes, taboos and ritual worships. Evidences abound in most Nigerian cultures of theatrical pettiness in the ritual worship and veneration of ancestors and living elders on grounds of their being progenitors only, warfare achievements and physical prowess without reference to the immediate and far-reaching effects of their actions and inactions. For example, Achebe (1958) tacitly refers to this misplaced focus when he reveals that in the Igbo society, man is celebrated for his physical prowess, not on the strength of his intellect and emotional stability. In Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart', nobility is conferred on Okonkwo as a mark of his victory in a wrestling bout, war gallantry as well as food production capacity. Okonkwo's violence and labour heroism has unfortunately permeated our democratic practices, which is now dependent on possession of both state and non-state forces and material wealth.

Arguably, looking at the history of Nigeria, heroism is misplaced on some people (living and dead) whose beliefs, interests and behaviours have impeded Nigerian growth and development. One may ask the following questions:

- How many of the hitherto celebrated heroes have not engaged in egocentric undertakings at the expense of the general masses?
- How many were opportunists who were only favoured by the tide of their times or real achievements?
- How much of good have they delivered to the social collectivity? Beneath their actions what could we fathom – hegemonic pursuit, dynastic rule or liberalism?

In answering these questions, historical revelations have been most perturbing. In the recent past, 'godfatherism' entered the vocabulary of African politics as an advanced form of clientelism. The term refers to an evolving institution of individuals in the political plane whose influences through force, money and manipulation, strategically but tragically placed them in a superior position to dictate the political practices of their times. Political godfathers are thus, individuals who possess both economic and political power to determine who are selected or voted into political office. This is an emerging trend in African politics with its debilitating effect on political development and democratic transitions. In most instances, states are held down by unnecessary veneration of ancestors, living elders and godfathers. For example, the boiling sectarian and ethnic cauldrons that Nigeria has represented in the last five decades are probably traceable to its historic past and emulation of virtues and behaviours of unworthy ancestors, living elders and godfathers who fan the ember of disunity. In the light of this awareness, Albert (2012:14) rightly notes that "modern African studies, rather than just romanticize history of great Mali, would simply interpret the opulence involved in Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 – 1325 as evidence

of a pre-colonial example of wasteful foreign trips and financial recklessness that now inflict contemporary African leaders.” In order to get out of this problem of misplaced history, scholars argue that we need to have a more critical look at each of these ancestors, living elders and godfathers. For example, Raji-Oyelade (2013) opines that for Africans to forge ahead, they need to search their innermost self and sever relationships with those who hold them down. He opines that rebirth begins from within; it involves a revolutionary twist in the collective mind/consciousness. Above all, the desire to speak truthfully, even if this leads to self-sacrifice, has become paramount if they want to get out of spiritual bondage. This appears to be the only way to national rebirth and development.

No doubt, individual nations as well as the African continent at large needs emancipation, not only from the clutches of imperialism, but also from the strangle hold of a past and present not worthy of celebration. Thus, this paper utilises critical discourse analysis in the pattern advocated by the behavioural school of thought to confirm or challenge power and dominance in relation to deification, living eldership complex and clientelism. As power relations are salient to society and culture, we focus on political development of Nigeria over the ages with reference to the above phenomena. The assumptions are that the problems in the personification of powers have mummified Nigerians and that they need to critically challenge these powers to find solutions to and ways out of their present social, political and religious predicaments.

## **Conceptual and theoretical discourse**

Ancestors, living elders complex and godfatherism will be conceptualised as they are used in this paper. The paper will also benefit from power exchange relations theory.

Ancestor worship is a belief system that is a result of the indelible impressions, conceptions and perceptions ingrained in African psyche by experience over time of an existing relationship between the living and the dead. Thus, it is a product of man’s mind and notions. Opoku (1973) opines that the ancestors are respected because they are our elders and our predecessors. Respect, power, fear, protection and imparting of wisdom to the living are central to the ancestral system (Mendoza, 1976). Patrimonial perception of human relations is also a key issue in the concept of the ancestor belief system and their deification. Fortes (1969:30) describe the ancestor cult as “the transportation to the religions planes [of] the relationships of parents and children in the ritualisation of filial piety.” He notes that others describe it as an extension of human relations to the supernatural sphere or, as a reflection of these relations, and as their ritual and symbolic expression. Ancestors are thus members of the society that we deify after death.

Ancestors are perceived as having dominant powers and this belief creates fear of the unseen in the mind of adherents. Olaoba (2005: 141) is of the view that “the neglect of the ancestors who need recognition and propitiation can also bring about afflictions which can cause conflicts within the family, lineage, and society.” Sangree (1974) and Calhoun (1980) paint the authority of the ancestors as pervasive and absolute. The foregoing positions of ancestors suggest that there is a power asymmetry between the ancestors and the living. There seems an exaggerated perception



of their infallibility even while on earth. It also amounts to arrogating too much power to them at the expense of living members of society who ordinarily should be architects of their own fortunes. However, there is no empirical evidence to validate this claim of superiority of the ancestors except that the claim remains in the psyche of men – a mostly unquestionable, whimsical and imaginative psychosocial belief. The ancestors have a lot of responsibility to their families and the divinities in the sociological realm (Clarke, 1930). The question is: how much of these have they dispensed?

Recognition of living elders as custodians of wisdom and knowledge is widespread in Nigeria. Living elders are the ones to be heard in a society where gerontocracy as a style of government dominates the socio-political sphere. This belief system is tagged 'eldership complex' (Mendoza, 1976:60). A junior is expected to honour and obey anyone who is older than him. This practice is in conformity with West African culture in which old age has a touch of venerability (Opoku, 1973). The living elders link the present to the past. Thus, respect, power and fear are used to sustain the institution of living elders as representatives of ancestors on earth. Sangree (1974) avers that by stressing the structural and cultural continuity between elders and ancestors, African societies are held together. Mendoza (1976:57) differs on the belief that "there is no significant difference between the dead ancestors and living elders in the beliefs and actions of the living". However, Sangree (1974:70) notes that "indigenous distinction between the living and the dead reflects and reinforces structuring and resolution of inter-generational conflicts." Mendoza (1976:63) also asserts "there is a conceptual separation between the world of the living and the world of dead ancestors, as well as subtle comprehension of the similarities between the two spheres." He notes further that both living elders and ancestors have authority and power over juniors as both are to be feared and respected. Kopytopp. (1971) describes ancestors as living elders as well as superior to living elders who hold authority on behalf of members because they are forebears. Calhoun (1980: 313) argues that "the fact that ancestors are dead makes it easier to idealise them, to have them represent lineage values as opposed to personal interests or idiosyncrasies of judgement". In the same light, Oyeboode (2012:36) notes that the mogaji (the lineage head in Yorubaland) as "office-holding elder represents the ancestors of his family and his verdict on conflict issue is sacrosanct." Thus, he affirms that an elder who holds office functions as a traditional, religious, cultural, judicial and political controller of his people, and as a representative of the ancestors.

Godfatherism is an advanced form of clientelism in African political vocabulary. Whereas, clientelism stands as the intervening linkage between the ruler and the ruled, it is over celebrated in godfatherism. Omobowale (2006) sees political clientelism as a kind of connective cord between politicians and the people. He further agrees with the description that recognises this belief as a process through which developmental expectations are met through loyalty to the patron and political elite. It is a phenomenon that is sustained through the patron-client relationship that is mutually beneficial to the parties involved. Usually, there is power asymmetry as godfatherism involves hero-worship and over adulation of the godfather by the godson who depends largely on the godfather's authority for the achievement of his political pursuit.

Although godfatherism is not new in Nigeria, it became more pronounced in Nigerian political history during the second republic (1979-1983). Party primaries were unethically manipulated by the rich political elites and influential civil servants who benefited from the oil boom of the early 1970s. These elites used financial and material inducements to win clients who became loyal to them. This trend has continued to date. Omobowale (2006:106-107) avers, "Godfathers gain honour and respect from the people through their (philanthropic) deeds." They openly identify with the low-class as well as effectively court in political power. Through their interactions with the people, they identify their needs and strive to obtain them from the political class to be able to continue to enjoy respect and veneration. They also dispense favour in return for loyalty by making use of their personal wealth to provide for such needs. However, godfathers usually perceive the support they give either to their clients or the people as a form of investment that must bring dividends in the form of loyalty and material gains. Omobowale (2006) opines that political godfathers usually bring political godsons into politics but usually end up controlling them.

Most African cultures allow clientelism as the foundation on which trust and accountability are predicated. Clientelism is perceived as a platform for check and balances in the political sphere and its provision of linkages between the ruled and the ruling class is incontrovertible. It also enhances social order within social structures through satisfaction of valued interests of both parties i.e. the patron and the client. Its reciprocal nature ensures the satisfaction of the expectation of both parties, thus resulting in inter-dependence, which is critical to political relationships.

Power exchange relation theory is defined by Omobowale (2006) as a process involving social beings that interact with one another for the exchange of valued resources. Cook (2000) opines that behaviour in this social exchange is as a result of payoffs, which are reciprocal. Power exchange relation theory presupposes a state of equilibrium whereby the parties in relationship will have mutual benefits. Beyond the ordinary man and man's affairs, relationship with the superhuman is also expected to be mutually rewarding. These rewards may be in the form of love, support and provision of needs for the person to continue to feel obliged to continue to service the relationship. God also expects loyalty and worship from man.

However, in power exchange relations' theoretical frame, power is shared as nobody, whether human or superhuman, enjoys a monopoly of power. Although there may be power asymmetry, Molm (1989) posits that the dominated too may exercise some level of power to make the dominator conform to their wish provided they have greater punishment power to exercise. Although the dominator has greater punishment power, he may feel some loss of power or relevance should the dominated withdraw from the relationship. This loss may be in the form of loyalty, respect, reverence and worship. Thus, the dominated in unbalanced power relations has a legitimate right to withdraw his loyalty. This withdrawal is much easier if the power of the dominators not really seen but only exists as a conjecture of the mind. For example, while the powers of the living elders and godfathers are real and physical, those of the ancestors are spiritual. Omobowale (2006:30) avers, "If the dominated are deprived and subjected to injustice, they may take recourse to opposition value to draw legitimacy for the exercise of power to contend



against institutionalised powers (authorities) which have breached the norms of reciprocal and fair exchange.” Douglas (1999) cites other authorities to conclude that subordinate entities will usually perceive predominant influence or control, regardless of intentions, as a potential threat and seek to realign the power relationship. Thus, the possibility of freedom from entanglement of dominant powers is explored in this paper using a behavioural theoretical model.

## **Dominant power and retrograde politics in Nigeria**

Behavioural school is “located in the skeptical philosophy of David Hume, the pragmatic worldview of William James and Charles S. Pierce, and the instrumentalist outlook of John Dewey” (Asirvatham and Mistra 2008:803). It is argued that all of them stressed empiricism, voluntarism, individual activity and a practical approach to truth based on observation of an objective, pluralistic world. They state further that behavioural theorists rejected the speculative, idealist mode of thinking and the rationalistic or logical deductive analysis of political thinkers belonging to the classical tradition. The behavioural point of view is a historical because it does not wholeheartedly accept stories passed from generation to generation. Thus, using this historical approach, the classification of every dead member of the family as ancestors seems general, abrasive and demeaning of the status of somebody who should presumably be the link between the creator (God) and the creatures (living beings). Marx describes unquestionable acceptance of myths as another instance of man allowing an alien power to rule him, which in reality is his own creation (Esirvatham and Misra). In an objective analysis, fundamentally, some dead and living members of the society may not be fit to perform the function of human-God relations” officer. The dead or living elders who erred, shirked their responsibilities and disrupted social order while on earth, would not qualify to fit into our class of revered ancestors as their transformation to the spirit realm would not be beneficial to humanity. This thinking contradicts Olaoba’s (2005:145) position that “their transformation to the ancestral community makes ancestors infallible.” It is hereby argued that bad dead members of the family who neither repented nor asked for forgiveness before death may continue to constitute a cog in the wheel of society’s progress while in the spirit world. This thinking is in line with the personification of Esu Elegbara as an unrepentant member of Nigerian society while alive, whose transfiguration further empowers him to unleash more terror on the society. Oyebode (2012:146) notes that Christians and Muslims see Esu Elegbara as a malevolent spirit. Esu Elegbara is seen as a trickster, prankster or shower of dissension who is feared by both worshippers and non-worshippers. Thus, Esu Elegbara, who incidentally belonged to the early progenitors of man, should not enjoy veneration. However, in some traditional cultures in Nigeria, Esu Elegbara occupies a respectable position in the spiritual consciousness of worshippers who deify and venerate him as a both a benevolent and malevolent spirit. Esu Elegbara is thus perceived as a harbinger of good and bad. However, critics of traditional belief opine that Esu Elegbara does well by accident. The present leadership in the country may be perceived to be symbols of Esu Elegbara character because they only do well by accident not by design. Unfortunately whatever they do badly, they blame Esu Elegbara for their failures.

Olaoba (2005) ascertains that the supernatural realm to which the ancestors belong wields a great moral influence on the day-to-day progression of human affairs. This means that those whose deeds were immoral while on earth should not qualify to enjoy veneration, worship or ritualisation. As noted by Napoleon (2013), ancestors who were locked in perpetual warfare, incessant raiding of one another and land grab, and who made woman the cause of their warfare, would not fit into the social category of influential personalities. In his study of the Yanomanmo of Venezuela and Brazil, he tries to answer the question: what were our early ancestors really like as they accomplished the transition from a hunter-gatherer to a more complex, settled society? Thus, for the purpose of this paper the concept of ancestor, forefathers will at the end of the discourse be limited to only those deceased political and historic figures whose sojourn on earth was and is still globally relevant to the social, political and economic progress of their people. The classification will not be by ascendancy but by achievement.

Power exchange relations in Nigeria are a concern for scholars. The dominator directly or indirectly controls the apparatus of the state and this control enables him to dole out whatever pleases him. However, Molm (1989) avers that though the “exchange relation may be unbalanced, its reciprocal nature ensures the satisfaction of the expectations of both parties and this creates inter-dependence.” Thus, the patron-client relationship is mutually reinforcing in politics in Nigeria. However, in order to sustain this relationship, the patron and the client enter into a kind of gang-up relationship at the expense of the masses. In Nigeria, for example, they both patron and client steal the resources of the state and concentrate power in the hands of a few who are ready to dispense favour in return for loyalty. They control the politics and resources of the state in ways that are similar to pre-colonial Nigeria, which abounded with examples of egocentric power pursuit at the expense of the state. These actions included inter-tribal warfare, marauding and other savage behaviours.

In the past, while western cultures pursued technological advancement, agricultural development and economic revolution, most Nigerian progenitors were engaged in myopic and self-centred pursuits. Their actions and inactions accounted and is still accounting for the nation’s underdevelopment. In fact, when Europeans arrived, they tagged Africa as a ‘dark continent’. What did our ancestors do to match the global trend towards better living conditions? The sixteenth to nineteenth century marked the period when civilisation was reversed in Nigeria as a result of inter-tribal wars. Adesote and Ajisola (2012:36) note, “This was a period when flourishing towns were destroyed”. Awe (1964:140) cites other authorities “the interior tribes were continually warring with each other and that these civil wars and marauding continued intermittently until the definite occupation of the hinterland in 1897.”

Although extensive military pacification was required to subdue the restive natives who opposed colonialism, many African political and religious leaders were fighting wars of supremacy or were engaged in expansionist wars within. They did not come together to resist colonialism; rather these leaders sought the support of white explorers, slave traders and strategists to engage their kinsmen in wars. They bought guns and ammunition from European traders in exchange for African slaves. Thus, it was possible to subdue Benin Kingdom in 1897, Sokoto Caliphate in 1903





and Lagos in 1821. Although sovereignty of African states was tactically robbed by the colonial powers with great effort using the logic of predation, violence and oppression, it was made possible by the greed of past leaders who put self-interests above the corporate interests of their nations. This theory is evident in the complicity of traditional political leadership with European powers even to date.

A critical review of events that led to colonisation of African nations would reveal bravery, cowardice and complicity with European colonisers. Personalities like King Jaja of Opobo and Ibadan chiefs gallantly resisted western hegemony and only “being brow beaten to submission” by stronger power (Awe 1964:327). However, other personalities like Oba Dosumu of Lagos and Oba of Dahomy and other slave traders condescended to western control with furtive resistance and collaboration in slave trading. Lack of bravery and wisdom on the part of those who colluded with slave traders to rid Nigerians of their freedom was queried by Duru (2013:12), thus: “What could make an umbrella worth 40 human lives and a medium-sized mirror worth 20 people? Why would 10 able-bodied men and women be worth not more than 10 coral beads? It is simply a language of slavery, oppression and dehumanisation”. Exploits of western powers led to competition, inequality, expansion and subjugation of African nations with the complicity of a few powerful natives who were engaged in inhuman trades prior to colonialism. Adesote and Ajisola (2013) rightly note that before the advent of European slave trade, there existed internal slave trade and a ‘pawnsip’ (iwofa) system in Yorubaland. This was not peculiar to Yorubaland as all cultures in Nigeria also had ways of enslaving the less privileged members of the society. Alas! Are these traders in human beings the ones we venerate today? Is their inhumanity to man worthy of celebration?

Promotion of African values and cultural practices dominated our struggle for independence, nationalism and post-independence ideologies. Pan Africanists introduced Afrocentric models of development in both our economic and political pursuits. These Afrocentric models were noticeable in Julius Nyerere’s Ujama, Nkruma’s African socialist movement, Muammar Gaddafi’s Jamahiriya, Senghor’s theory of African cultural superiority, as well as African communitarianism. Other African leaders who promoted wholesome African cultural renaissance were Patrick Lumunba of Congo, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Sekou Toure of Guinea (Alozie (2012). In the present dispensation, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe is still locked into his struggle with western power over his promotion of land reforms in his country whereby blacks take over farmlands from whites. Unfortunately, most of these leaders disrupted their ideological pursuits with ‘sit-tight syndrome’, which later made them lose focus and become unpopular in their countries. For example, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana lost focus as a result of his embrace of occultism to retain power and perpetuate his regime. Thus, while Awolowo remains a hero and ancestor of repute, late General Sanni Abacha continues to attract wide condemnation for his record of human rights abuse. In the same vein, while Nelson Mandela would easily pass as a legend for promoting transitional democracy in South Africa, General Ibrahim Babangida could not enjoy the same veneration for scuttling democratic ideals in Nigeria for several years.

Oracular consultation of ancestors, deities and gods remains a retrogressive cultural practice in Nigeria, especially during the selection of traditional leaders. In most instances, this consultation is skewed in favour of unpopular candidates who merely enjoy the patronage of the living elders. Thus, ancestor worship becomes a divisive power to cheat the majority. These are parochial and retrogressive power relations. Injustice is often obtained through monetisation of political and selection processes. The rich often promote themselves as 'living elders' at the expense of the aged who are poor, especially in the Igbo society where wealth is power.

Traditional and political leadership is gradually losing its pride of place as a result of indiscipline. Although traditional chieftaincy institutions represented by the Sarkis, Emirs, Obis, Obongos, Obas and other traditional office holders typify the living elders complex in Nigeria, many actions and inactions of the custodians of great traditional institutions have brought their sacredness into disrepute. Two instances readily come to mind because of media publicity given them. One was the case of the deposed Deji of Akure, Oba Adesina, who fought in public with his estranged wife. Second was the case of Owa of Ilowa, who allegedly raped a youth service corps member and justified his action. Many of such incidents abound among the custodians of Nigerian culture. Albert (2012: 157) affirms "modern political leaders have seen traditional political leaders as rivals and as impediment to their aspirations or as instruments to be manipulated and co-opted to achieve their goals." Because of material gains and zeal to remain relevant, most traditional leaders have become pawns in the hands of the political class. They are co-conspirators in the suppression of the wishes of the masses.

It is a common practice in Nigeria to use big ancestors' names to deceive the populace. While the Northerners use Uthman Dan Fodio and Ahmadu Bello, the Westerners bank on names like Oduduwa and Obafemi Awolowo and the Easterners use Nnamdi Azikwe and Odumegwu Ojukwu to gain political relevance. They claim to be adherents of their philosophies during electioneering but on getting into political office, they pursue different agendas. Even once dead, some of these revered personalities remain kingpins whose names people throw about to gain political favour. In the present political dispensation, offspring of deceased politicians are compensated with plum political jobs irrespective of their progenitors' contributions to Nigeria's present state of want. Most of the time, nobody weighs the forefathers' contributions to judge if their children deserve what is being given to them. Most of these children also turn out to be a disappointment like their parents because they lack enviable pedigrees.

Marginalisation of the youth as a result of perpetuating living elders in the political space is widespread in Nigeria. These elders are either retired military officers or their collaborators who shortened democratic regimes for twenty-nine years and looted the country's treasury in the past. Most other living elders are complacent except for a few activists like Wole Soyinka, Bala Usman, Abubakar Umar, Sheu Sanni, Femi Aborisade, Femi Falana and Ogbonaya Onu, who continue to resist dictatorship and imperialism. Misappropriation of oil subsidy funds in Nigeria in 2011 revealed complicity on the part of the living elders with their collaborators in government.

Excessive adulation of an individual is foolish and unproductive. Idolisation, glorification,



romanticisation and idealisation of living elders are detrimental to personal and societal growth because this only emphasises the status quo. Thus, when 'ancestor cult' and living elders complex roll into one in the psyche of body politics, they tendentiously mummify political actors, either as an electorate or contenders. The imposition of candidates by elders as a result of misplaced idolatry; respect and recognition can be blamed for Nigeria's decline in democratic culture. Living elders should be assessed on and respected for the values of their intelligence, skill, courage, honour, thoughtfulness, loyalty and fairness in interpersonal relationships. When there is a conflict between what an elder wants for himself and what is best for the society, the resolution must be in favour of the society. Commenting on the historical descent and decadent political experience in Nigeria, Soyinka (2013) notes that:

Individually and collectively, we are at war, and the enemy is not hidden. Of its own relation it has given itself name, a profile and an agenda. Others have spr[u]ng up, geared to outdo their obsessed predecessors. Let each community look into its past, and see how both inertia and covert gleefulness have fuelled the raging inferno.

Some scholars see godfatherism or clientelism as a factor militating against entrenchment of democratic principles or good governance in Africa. They believe it sustains corruption, autocratic rule, mediocrity, patrimony and personalisation of power. The case of Anambra state in Nigeria is illustrative of the negative impact of godfatherism on good governance culture. Between 1999 and 2007, Anambra state was beset with godfatherism syndrome, a cankerworm that ate deep into the polity and economic situation of the state. It endangered the polity as it promoted a diversion of public funds by godfathers who insisted on taking a certain percentage of state revenue for personal use. Failure of godsons to heed their demands led to their unceremonious exit from government. Omobowale's (2006:ii) findings on the client-patron relationship reveals that political "clientelism has hindered the direct access of clients to resources", yet the patrons seem to be more interested in their individual survival than in that of their clients.

Dependency syndrome no doubt entrenches underdevelopment of the polity. There is a kind of unbalanced power relationship between the godfather and godson, which usually creates mutual suspicion and threatens the political well-being of the state. In a bid to retain his position, the godfather sometimes becomes despotic, using non-state forces to secure his position. This was exactly the case in the Adedibu-Ladoja saga in Oyo state between 2005 and 2007 where the impeachment of the incumbent governor and the installation of a godson as a puppet governor occurred, who governed for almost five years.

In Nigeria, deification, gerontocracy and clientelism has become an umbrella for the promotion of bad governance rather than promoting good political culture. They are all related to the cultural model under which spirituality, materialism and dominance cultures are used to perpetrate and perpetuate impunity and injustice. Many dead and living elders have promoted and are still promoting ethnic and sectional interests, which have hindered Nigeria's journey towards nationhood.

## Charting a new course

In a real-life situation, though ancestors, living elders and godfathers may possess overwhelming powers or control of resources because of ascendancy, yet the clients or adherents of such faith and belief may sometimes opt out of the relationship to improve their lot. This withdrawal could be illustrated by adherents of new faiths (Islam and Christianity), abandoning ancestor worship without any obvious proof of punishment or affliction from the dominating power. Also, godfather and godson relationships have witnessed contractual breakups as a result of the excesses of the dominating power. In Nigerian political history, Chris Uba versus Chris Ngige of Anambra State, Olusola Saraki versus Muhammed Lawal of Kwara State and Lamid Adedibu versus Rasheed Ladoja of Oyo State sagas, are clear failures of power exchange relations. It must be noted that sometimes revolt against the dominating power results in conflicts or acts of misdemeanour, which are usually temporary but necessary to achieve a turnaround in the polity. Historical evidences point to the triumph of the dominated. This thinking is in line with the concept of freedom as non-domination. Soyinka (2013) conceives of this position as theology of freedom that should not submit to the tyranny of the few.

Obviously, what is needed in Nigeria today is the management of power relations existing in past and present socio-economic experience. As highlighted in the review of Dewey's book, *An Exegesis of Democratic Vision* (Rogers: 2009) sees a method of managing power relations in Dewey's proposition. According to him, Dewey's point is that there is a transactional relationship among self, others and the world resulting from the movement and disruption in life that he called 'problems'. To him, Dewey insists that faith is an imaginative projection of belief in still-to-be-realised potentialities, not just in the existence of divine objects. People must not allow this belief to hold them back from the pursuit of greater enterprise. Rogers (2002) opines that since the care of self is dependent both prospectively and retrospectively on the seen and unseen of nature, man must act to liberate self. Thus, Dewey's idea of religious experience returns the objects of faith to the natural world and its inherent possibilities, rather than sequester those objects to some supernatural realm. It is in the perception of these phenomena as natural that people can liberate their minds and seek justice in their power relations with the dead, living elders and godfathers. The modern conception of liberal society is that the most urgent part of the human task is to supply a critique of religion and tradition. This critique is intended to liberate political life from the influence of religious or traditional myths or superstition. Thus, the belief that angry ancestors may be responsible for enormous human sufferings in the form of spiritual torment and physical misery, are largely superstitious and must be discarded. Hume (1948) sees this capacity in man to assert himself when he states that whatsoever he conceives as existent, he can also conceive as not existent. In light of the foregoing, he asserts that it is only experience that teaches us the nature and boundary of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another. Knowledge is, after all, the source of all human actions and behaviours.

In order to liberate our minds from cultural practices that will hold us down, Ekeanyanwu (2012: 44) recommends, "We should not mistake this liberation from the past as cultural



imperialism.” He explains that cultural development is the synchronisation of indigenous cultural values and norms with that of the global community for the benefit of the society. In the same vein, the discourse in this paper should not be mistaken as cultural imperialism or total rejection of deification, gerontocracy and clientelism, but a recommendation of a cautious selection of those that qualify to enjoy such status. Soyinka (2013) opines that now is the time to close ranks among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria and make up for past dereliction in order to protect it shard-earned freedom against any threat. The marginalised, who have been deceived through ancestor worship, living elders’ complex and godfatherism, need to shed the toga of inferiority. Gramsci’s (1971) entreaty is relevant in assuming balance of power. He notes that:

Power is seldom absolute; groups may more or less control other groups, or only control them in specific situations on social domains. Dominated group[s] may more or less resist, accept, condone, comply with or legitimate such power and even find it natural. Power may become hegemonic if allowed to thrive through laws, consensus or norms.

What Nigerians have done so far is to condone, comply with and legitimate such powers of the ancestors, living elders and godfathers. Now is the time to challenge such powers and ask fundamental questions as to the worthiness of individual living or dead in classification and veneration. These questions border on historical, ideological, interpretative and explanatory discourse of their relevance to societal well-being and promotion of good governance cultures. These questions may include among others:

- In what ways did their pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial conducts enhance Nigerian development?
- What roles did individuals play: dead or living elders that have put us in the present situation, good or bad?
- What is the doctrinal relevance of these practices to liberal democracy?

## Conclusion

This paper notes that the powers conferred on these venerated personalities have mummified Nigerians and have ingloriously permeated political thinking. The paper also avers that we all share the guilt in the present predicament of Nigeria as a retrogressive nation. Nigerians are guilty either through their allegiance to a faulty past or their selection of living mentors whose contributions to nation-building have been retrogressive. Raji-Oyelade (2012: 11) notes that:

We all try to react to the sense of a nation, either through denial, appropriation or reversion of the existing or developing national culture. I think we contribute in our own ways to the rebirth, death or stillbirth of our nation, depending on our imaginative response to the concept of nationality.

The above quote suggests that our greatest undoing is our attachment to the inglorious past and present, which we celebrate and venerate. Our failure is in our inability to decipher, separate and distinguish achievements and foibles. We tend to lump greatness with ascendancy

and we respect mediocrity at the expense of meritocracy. For Nigeria to progress as a nation, it needs to remove fear, affliction and delusion arising from misplaced judgment of who qualifies to be reference points in the trajectory towards democratic excellence. Nigerians need to create free minds that have the capacity to select or reject elders, ancestors, heroes and godfathers, depending on their individual worth. Traits like physical prowess, wealth, possession of force and arrogant displays of profligacy should not be part of our criteria for recommending veneration and celebration. Those who developed political estates, which later crumbled as a result of greed, selfishness and expansionist ideology, should not enjoy a pat in the back. This paper is not a recital of human negligence or foibles to stir-up negative memories and feelings of the violation of humanity; it celebrates excellence and social relations using an ethical framework. The burden of guilt is on the complacent while the martyrdom of the gallant ones remains indelible in the foregoing discourse. Ancestors, living elders and godfathers who resisted oppression, suppression, colonialism, slavery and dominance of the elites in Nigeria all fit into our memory of the glorious past, enviable present and bright future.

Consequently, this paper advocates a revolution of mindset, a walk away from the retrogressive and allegiance to integrity, good conscience, self-esteem and service to humanity. Thus, in stirring this debate, this paper argues that merely describing deification, gerontocracy and clientelism as discourse issues in religion and politics is not enough. We must continue to explain these terms as properties of social interactions that constitute mundane and spiritual problems as well as solutions to our political experience as a nation. We must be concerned with the way social and spiritual powers' dominate and how inequality is enacted, reproduced and resisted to enhance values in the Nigerian society. Thus, the social and political contexts of the existence of ancestors, living elders and godfathers in our psyche calls for constant review in order to purge ourselves of fear arising from our entanglement to seen and unseen dominant powers.

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