

An Educated Elite: Class versus Nationalism

by Peter Lloyd*

Broadly speaking, we usually differentiate between persons according to two sets of criteria - one in terms of social inequality in respect of power, wealth or prestige, the other in terms of an ascribed and often primordial characteristic, descent or religion. At one extreme the two criteria can be congruent - the social ranking is perpetuated from one generation to another; at the other extreme there can be a high degree of incongruity. Most African post-colonial states are of the latter pattern in that the dominant western educated elite has been drawn from a wide social base, spanning rich and poor families in the several ethnic groups which comprise the state. In this situation one refers often to the dichotomy between class and ethnicity in that there seem to be rival and largely incompatible criteria for the organisation of social groups. It is not that one has to decide whether Nigeria has a class structure or not, ethnic groups or not; but that one has to distinguish situations in which values or demands are expressed in terms of one or the other criterion.

The same distinction can be explored at the international level in the incompatibility of class and nationalism. It is true that we usually study social class as an intra-national phenomenon; and it is obvious that the workers of a western industrial state have few interests in common with (and perhaps some opposed to) those of the peasantry of an African state - let alone a consciousness of shared interests. But the elites of the industrial and African states do have much in common. Often they are products of the same universities in the metropolitan country. They are in similar professional bureaucratic and managerial occupations. Often they are employees of international organisations - for example, the multinational firm or a United Nations agency. It is inconceivable therefore that situations arise in which their "class" interests are incompatible with those of their "national" interests.

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One problem which arises at this point lies in defining the "class" interests of the educated elite of the African state. In other situations one finds it easy to describe the interests of a landowning aristocracy or an industrial bourgeoisie; they are owners of the means of production and our everyday class terminology seems readily applicable. But the African elite is a meritocracy, employed largely in the public service, and would be in the same dominant position if the state were "capitalist" or "socialist". We distinguish with ease the attempts of land or factory or factory owners to protect their interests from encroachment; but what interests are the civil servants guarding?

Let me illustrate my argument, henceforth, from a small part of Africa - the Yoruba-speaking area of Lagos and southwest Nigeria; for though this area has, like any other part, many peculiarities of its own, yet in broad terms the situation is of general application.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Lagos was a colonial territory; administrators visited, and missionaries settled in, the interior Yoruba kingdoms, but these were not brought within the Protectorate until the very end of the century. West Africa was "the white man's grave" and the number of expatriates remained small. From the outset Africans filled most executive positions and a few rose to quite high office in Church and State. In Lagos such men were usually from the families of men who had been taken to Sierra Leone as slaves where many had been converted and educated before their return, not it should be noted to the towns and villages of their birth, but to the new capital. Though of Yoruba stock, many of these men had become alienated from traditional Yoruba society. They tended to take as their reference group the locally resident English; family portraits showing these people - the men in their top hats and stiff winged collars, women in crinolines and bustles, children in sailor suits - demonstrate their slavish desire to conform. And although these Lagosians were never completely accepted as social equals by the English residents of the 1880s and 1890s, the degree of social mixing seems to have been greater at this period than in subsequent decades. Nevertheless there were, even then, some who, perhaps experiencing rejection, turned to Yoruba society, wearing Yoruba dress, writing books and pamphlets on Yoruba culture. Such rejection accounts, in part, for the foundation of the African Churches.

After 1900 the situation changed radically. Colonial rule became more highly developed; an evangelical revival provided more missionaries; malaria was largely conquered

by quinine, and as before, Englishmen resented working under Nigerians. Nigerians were restricted to the "junior service" or executive posts. The only openings for the better educated were in the independent professions - law and medicine. (In the mid 1920s, Nigeria had but thirty lawyers and doctors, mostly resident in Lagos.) Parallel processes halted the development of entrepreneurship. Lagos had a number of prominent traders at the turn of the century but, for a number of reasons, most of these businesses died with their creators; on the other hand the expatriate firms tended to amalgamate, and such giants as the United Africa Company emerged to control much of Nigeria's total trade. The small group of professionals, property owners and traders dominated Lagos' social life in the 1920s and 1930s. Their political demands were of a liberal nature - an extension of elective government, more education, free trade, africanisation of the public service.

It was this social group which created the Action Group, the party which governed the Western Region of Nigeria in the 1950s. The electoral support, for the party which ensured their success at the polls came from the local elite - a category comprising traditional chiefs and rulers, many of whom were by this time literate men, and traders, produce buyers, lorry owners, all deriving their wealth ultimately from cocoa, and who were predominantly traditionally oriented, semi-literate, living in their family compounds, and with few exceptions unknown outside their own towns and districts.

The same decolonisation process which brought the Action Group to power also contributed to the rapid expansion of secondary and university education. But it was not until 1953-4 that the intake of expatriates into the permanent civil service stopped and that Nigerians were admitted in large numbers. In the subsequent years Nigerianisation was vigorously pursued; anti-British headlines dominated the newspapers, though on the individual level personal relationships remained good. In 1959 almost all the expatriate permanent secretaries in the Western Region were replaced by Nigerians. These civil servants (and others similarly employed) acceded to the salary scales and perquisites of the expatriates whom they replaced. They tended to be young men (and sometimes women), drawn from a wide social base - as many came from homes with illiterate parents as from homes with primary-educated parents (the clerical elite of the provincial towns).

For a brief period in time there appeared to be polarisation in Yoruba society between the western-

educated nationally-oriented meritocracy, stationed in the regional and national capitals, enjoying a substantially western style of life, and the locally traditionally oriented chiefs, traders and peasants. One must not overdraw the distinction - but it is a useful device against which to measure the degree to which the educated elite is pulled towards international elite society or towards local Nigerian or Yoruba society.

The material self-interests of this educated elite would seem to be three fold:

- (i) To preserve their privileged position in society in terms of absolute levels of wealth, leisure, etc.;
- (ii) To perpetuate this position in their own children (an aspiration not found in traditional society, where the numerous issue of polygynous chiefs followed a wide range of occupations);
- (iii) To raise the level of one's kin so that, in one's exalted position, one is not disgraced by indigent (and as a corollary perhaps criminal) relatives.

Since the completed nuclear family often contains six children and the kin group is large, rapid economic expansion is eagerly sought in order that sufficient elite or near-elite positions are created. An increasing governmental control of the economy would seem a logical response here. Furthermore, civil service and like salaries remained unchanged throughout the 1960s, though the wages of workers rose with the cost of living. Men were encouraged to seek additional sources of income to supplement their salaries; such were often found from the business sector through opportunities created in the exercise of their official duties.

The lack both of capital and of technical and entrepreneurial skills has prevented educated Yoruba from entering the manufacturing sphere. Trading is highly regarded by the Yoruba but does not yield the same initial income for a university graduate as does a salaried post. Studies of successful "modern" businessmen show that their education is not an important factor in their success; other studies have shown that government loans boards have had more than enough money to finance the really viable projects. The educated Yoruba has invested first and foremost in houses; for with a salaried job he easily obtains a mortgage. The better houses are rented to expatriate businessmen whose firms are both loath to invest such capital in Nigeria and happy to

win a local "patron". (The Yoruba land tenure and attitude to land has inhibited speculation in undeveloped land.) Similarly, the civil servant can invest his savings in trading conducted by his wife, or small enterprises run by other relatives - a taxi service, a privately run school, contracting business; he can himself, or through his colleagues, ensure that permits, licences and the like are appropriately allocated. The desire to promote local business enterprise is reflected in a recent national enactment that certain types of business are henceforth to be entirely reserved to Nigerians, whilst in other prescribed types of business with less than £200,000 capital, 40% of them must be Nigerian.

In a few fields, building construction for example, Nigerian and expatriate businessmen compete on equal terms. But almost all the recent growth in the manufacturing sector is attributable to foreign enterprise - though some of the investment may come from within Nigeria and though Nigerians may occupy many managerial posts save those at the very top or demanding advanced technical skills. Attitudes towards these enterprises vary. At one extreme is the man - usually a businessman - who is willing to go into partnership with one of the established expatriate companies, arguing that with these he may deal fairly and honestly, even though it is these companies which have earned the stigma of "exploiting" the country. At the other extreme is the man - often a civil servant or politician - who, for ideological reasons, rejects companies associated with the erstwhile metropolitan country in favour of those from the "uncommitted" nations who promise bargain deals, more perquisites in return for political favours, etc. At worst, these fall prey to the most unscrupulous men, though the loss falls on the nation - losing capital and saddled with a worthless factory - rather than the individual civil servant or politician.

As a non-economist, I would not dare to assert which of the above strategies should yield the faster rate of economic growth; nor would I predict the structural changes in the economy to which each strategy would lead. I merely note that state promotion of industry in Western Nigeria has had very little success as yet. The growth of private business, however, seems to be producing divisions within the educated elite. Nigerian newspapers refer increasingly to the income gap between rich and poor, in spite of the decreasing gap between wages and salaries in the past decade. One explanation of this is that the protests derive not from the poor, but from those of the educated elite who have no other source of income than their salaries, and who are jealous

of their colleagues who have used their greater income, official positions, political influence and so on to increase in wealth.

The educated elite strives to perpetuate its status in its children and in so doing draws further away from the masses. Elite parents probably endow their children with a better genetic inheritance; in speaking English in the home and in providing books and toys they impart those skills which are necessary to academic success; they can afford the fees for private primary and state subsidised secondary schools; they use their influence to gain admission for their children into the more prestigious schools. Few of the university educated elite have, as yet, children old enough to enter university; but the evidence that exists suggests that very many of them will do so, or be guided into alternative channels which result in jobs of similar status.

Yet, as one drives through the provincial Yoruba towns and villages, one is still impressed by the extravagant houses of the local traders, built in the cocoa boom of the early 1950s. But the recent larger buildings are usually of more modern design and belong to educated men, resident in Ibadan or Lagos and anxious to identify with their home town. Furthermore these men are increasingly active in its political life. Local traders do still exist but they seem to be much less inwardly oriented; they invest in education or in house property in the cities; they see their business success as dependent more on their contacts with the politically powerful members of the national elite than on their local reputations as beneficent leaders and patrons.

The gap between the national and local elite would seem to be closing. As it does so the dependence of the national elite upon both its international patrons and on the local elites would seem to present a variety of patterns, often containing conflicting elements. However, the tensions which could arise in these situations must not be divorced from that other sphere of conflict - that between the educated elite and the peasants and urban workers. Here, too, we cannot draw a simple picture for the conflicts of interest which seem obvious to the external observer are often expressed very differently by the Nigerian poor who still retain an image of a relatively open society. However, this image is not unchanging and the increasing awareness of the lack of opportunities open to the poor, the discrepancy between the minimum wage demanded by the trade union leadership (£48 per month) and both existing wage rates (average £10 per month) and the sum which the government is likely to award, and the increasing press coverage of debates on income distribution, all contribute to a greater polarisation between the elite and the masses.