

KROEBER ANTHROPOLOGICAL
SOCIETY, 99(1): 184-200

Rural Development Intervention and the Challenges of Sustainable Livelihood in an Oil Producing Area of Nigeria¹

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In 2007, in Igbokoda, the headquarters of Ilaje local government, an oil-producing area of Nigeria, Adebayo Asogbon, a man in his mid-thirties, brought to me two brand new desktop computers, which he and his wife had received from the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) after a “successful completion” of an apprenticeship training scheme organized by the intervention agency as part of its alternative livelihood programs for people in the devastated oil-rich region. Adebayo wanted to sell the two computers, as he confessed to not knowing what to do with them. Though he worked as a rate officer in the local government council, his desire to benefit from the monthly subsistence allowance attached to the training influenced him and many others to register for the skill acquisition program. Adebayo was also a local politician, a status that bequeathed him, at least, a trainee’s “slot,” which he could either fill in person or offer to any other fellow. When I asked him why he had not considered setting up a business center with the computers, he snorted and, in turn, asked me how much I thought could be made from such a business in a place like Igbokoda. In a tone of finality he declared that the proceeds from the sale of the two computers would be utilized to meet immediate needs while other future commitments were to be catered to as they emerged. Adebayo was indeed confident about the prospect of future incomes, as he had over the years been receiving unearned incomes from different sources such as oil royalties and patronage from political parties. People across the area referred to incomes earned outside of employment and productive activities as “sit at home” and generally interpreted them as their own share from the oil resources that had been completely appropriated by the federal government.

For so many years, the story of the oil-producing areas had centered on benign neglect after the displacement of farmsteads and a devastation of the environment due to exploitative activities that dislocated people’s productive bases. The oil areas, Ikein (1990) observes, suffer doubly from the impact of oil due to existing socioeconomic disparities and the activities of the oil industry, which exacerbate poor conditions. Consequently, for much time, the Niger Delta populations had been aggrieved over their continued impoverishment, considering that their lands had produced a majority of the wealth that sustains the nation. In the 1990s the visible neglect of the oil-producing areas and the escalation of ecological problems instigated a wave of restlessness across the Niger Delta region. The clamor for resource control that assumed a central feature of the people’s agitation was followed by hostilities directed, mainly, at multinational oil companies. It was at the peak of the numerous agitations that the Nigerian government

established intervention agencies like the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to conceive and implement such projects as required for the sustainable development of the Niger Delta.

The alternative livelihood programs of rural development intervention agencies were, therefore, indicative of an attempt at economic empowerment. But observation of local conditions showed widespread joblessness and poverty amidst huge development spending. Ironically, many graduates of the Niger Delta Development Commission's (NDDC) apprenticeship programs, like Adebayo, failed to practice the skills which they acquired even when training opportunities, tools and other incentives were provided. Rather, several young men in Igbokoda identified themselves as politicians, and in most cases were aspiring to vie for a political position either at the local government or state level. Party politics and oil industry related youth activism are typically seen as the fastest and easiest means of accumulating wealth and achieving upward mobility in social status. Surprisingly, even when there was an apparent limit to the number of people that could be engaged through these two sources, making visible appearances at political gatherings and youth meetings while waiting for their turn was an option that many young men and women were willing to take.

Previous works on the political economy of oil in Nigeria have treated the Niger Delta populations as victims of resource exploitation (Omoweh 1995; Naanen 1995; Osaghae, 1995; Welch 1995). Leadership problems and pervasive corruption are also popular explanations for the underdevelopment of the region amidst organized intervention. Scholarly accounts, in most cases, accorded little or no recognition to the probable ways in which the prevalent "materialization of traditional ethos" (Amuzegar 1982:832), the decline in virtue of individual self-reliance, and the propensity to rely on unearned income for livelihood could have contributed to the present state of underdevelopment. Though the above mentioned traits possibly emerged as reactions to the destruction of the local economy, they could have equally and negatively impacted the development intervention efforts of governments. The attitude of Adebayo and other youths toward productive enterprises and the NDDC intervention skills in particular was, therefore, neither fortuitous nor cursory. The people themselves agreed that the work ethics had undergone severe alteration since the advent of oil exploitation in the area. The story of an enterprising people who once dug a ten mile-long canal manually (Barrett 1976) has dramatically changed to that of dependence on unearned incomes. What led to this trajectory? Which factors inhibited the success of the NDDC skill acquisition program? How did the people's attitude toward productive activities draw on the national work ethics? In this paper, I argue that people's contemporary occupational preferences, which are best represented as negative attitudes toward productive activities, are products of both the conditioning role of the indigenous economic enterprise and an integration into "a world of meanings created by state power through its administrative and bureaucratic practices" (Mbembe 1992). The low level patronage of artisan occupation and the general inclination toward party politics and monetized activism, as presented here, are aspects of what Okowa (1994) aptly captured as a culture of *abdulistic* capitalism.

The primary data reported in this paper are derived from in-depth and key

informant interviews conducted during fieldwork in Ilaje Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria between 2003 and 2005 and through a follow-up study carried out in 2007 and 2010 respectively. Ilaje Local Government is an oil-producing area, and the communities are as devastated as other Niger Delta communities in states like Delta, Bayelsa, and Rivers. Being the only oil-producing area in Ondo State, Ilaje Local Government has been a center for the activities of rural development intervention agencies such as NDDC and the Ondo State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (OSOPADEC). To this extent, the local government, and by implication, Ilaje people, prove to be a practical case study of rural development intervention in the oil-producing areas of Nigeria.

Ethnographic Setting

Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State lies along the Atlantic coast of Nigeria and is located 133 kilometers south of Akure, the state capital. The area falls within the geographical region known as the Niger Delta. Although it shares almost the same environment with other parts of the Niger Delta, its unique geomorphic feature, known as the Mahin transgressive mud coast, sets it apart as a very difficult terrain in terms of transportation. Three major types of forest characterize the wetland of Ilaje Local Government Area. The first is the mangrove swamp forest, which occurs at the southern end and extends from Araromi in the east to Awoye in the west. The freshwater swamp forest covers the area between Igbokoda and Ayetoro and is a major source of timber, in addition to being the main habitat for the rare and endangered wildlife of the local government. The third is the lowland rainforest, which is well developed at the northern flank of the freshwater swamp. The coastal section forms about 70 percent of the total land area and is flooded during the rainy season. The upland area constitutes the remaining 30 percent. Here various food and cash crops such as cassava, yam, plantain, banana, coconut and pineapple are cultivated.

Ilaje Local Government is wholly occupied by the Ilaje, a Yoruba subgroup. The traditional political system is organized along four kingdoms – Mahin, Ugbo, Aheri, and Etikan, each ruled by a king (*oba*). Although no form of cultural differentiation marks the entire population, every Ilaje person is associated with a kingdom. The Mahin and Ugbo are the most well known. A major feature of the domestic economy is the indigenous decision-making bodies, which consist of the traditional councils of the respective kingdoms. The numerous village theocracies are another distinctive feature of the Ilaje society. These religious communities, known as Zion towns, have the unique distinction of practicing mono-denominational Christianity. A classic example is Ayetoro, a communally-organized settlement, which Duckworth (1951), as cited in Barrett (1976), describes as Nigeria's most successful case of village-level development. The leaders of the village theocracies are spiritual *obas* and they too maintain councils of elders that are more or less advisory. On every decision, the leaders have the final say and their words are laws. They also initiate and supervise development projects in their respective communities while invoking collectivism to propel members towards participation.

The modern political division consists of twelve Wards. With the exception of Mahin Wards Three and Four, all Wards are either located on or close to the coastline. With this political division, it becomes obvious that most of the population resides on the Atlantic coastline. By reason of location, villages on the coastline are most affected by the environmental impact of oil exploitation. These villages, generally regarded as oil-producing communities, are the major focus of intervention where a series of projects are sited to cushion the negative effect of exploitation.

For a long time, not much was known of Ilaje land and its people by other subgroups occupying the Yoruba mainland. Other than what was then known as Mahin Country serving as the only route from Lagos to the Ondo, Ife, Ijesha, and Ilorin countries throughout the era of the Yoruba internecine wars (Ayandele 1979:58), little mention has been made of the area in scholarly literature. It would not be too far-fetched to suggest that the fishing occupation opened up the Ilaje and their environment to the outside world. As early as 1951, communities like Ayetoro already “boasted a sophisticated fishing industry with fully mechanized ocean-going trawlers constructed with hardly any outside help” (Barrett 1976:162). Ayetoro people also built several large launches that carried passengers and fish resources to urban trading posts, especially Lagos, the erstwhile federal capital city, and Sapele, a commercial town in the Niger Delta region. Today the fish market located at Igbokoda, receives traders from nearly every part of southern Nigeria.

In earlier times, when Ilaje land experienced a relative degree of isolation, the values of community, hard work and self-pride characterized the people’s worldview. But the oil exploitation years have since produced remarkable changes in the people’s attitude and behavior. New lexical items like “sit at home” and “autonomous communities,” which suggest reliance on governments, intervention agencies, oil companies, and politicians for provision of basic livelihood needs, have found their ways into the local vocabularies. The economic reality of the oil exploitation era is such that government and oil companies’ patronages occur as veritable means of subsistence. However, while only a small number of people appear to have benefitted in real terms from such patronages, a significant proportion of the population has negatively adjusted their attitude towards productive activities. The youths and the elders alike are oriented toward oil activism and party politics which are the most common means of receiving quick and unearned income.

Oil, Unearned Income and Productive Capitalism

Nigerian oil debuted in the international market in 1958 with an insignificant volume of 5,000 barrels a day. The revenue then realized from this source represented less than one percent of total government revenue. By 1974, however, oil has grown to account for 95 percent of total government revenue (Turner 1985). Since then, Nigeria has relied on the receipts from oil exports as the sole source of government revenue. Michael Watts in his seminal article, “Economies of Violence: More Oil, More Blood”, criticized and blamed this economic path for different shades of socio-political tensions that the Nigerian state regularly contends with (Watts 2003). Scholars like Jahangir Amuzegar examined the

effects of oil fortune on the economy of oil producing countries and concluded that “the outcome ... has been astonishingly less rosy and far more checkered” (1982:814). The level of economic disequilibrium associated with countries like Algeria, Venezuela, Ecuador, Saudi Arabia, Gabon, Norway, Indonesia, Libya, Kuwait, Nigeria, Iran and Mexico, he further observed, necessitated questions that had been asked not merely about “what the oil affluence has done for the petroleum exporters, but also what it has done to them” (Amuzegar 1982:815). In a similar vein, Ann Genova and Toyin Falola were of the view that while the discovery of oil pleased hopeful Nigerians and gave them an early indication that economic development was within reach, it at the same time signaled a danger of grave consequence. In their words, “oil revenues fueled already existing ethnic and political tension and actually ‘burned’ the country” (Genova & Falola 2003:134).

A growing literature on the political economy of oil in Nigeria has explored, in various terms, the way in which the discovery of oil has ironically undermined the process of economic growth. Many of these works focus on the appropriation and mismanagement of the vast oil wealth by a section of the elite (Barber 1982; Ohiorhenruan 1989), the concentration and over-reliance on oil incomes to the detriment of productive activities (Okowa 1994; Lewis 1996), and the centralization of resource control, as well as its impact on socio-economic development (Watts 2004; Dibua 2005; Ikein et al. 2008). The oil wealth, as Karin Barber represented it, produced an elite class who became stupendously rich without doing any productive work and for whom it became irrational to engage in production when greasing the wheels of the export-import economy was more lucrative (1982:436). This situation has remained largely unchanged even as agitation for the adoption of fiscal federalism becomes more intense. Ikein et al. (2008), for instance, posit that the political structure of Nigeria, which supports a centralized control of resources, has encouraged a struggle for shares in an oil financed corruption. A complete decentralization, they argue, would return Nigeria to a nation of producers rather than consumers. Other scholarly literature on oil and the Nigerian state follow the above perspective by representing the federal government as predatory, greedy and unimaginative in its complete reliance on oil to run the economy. Invariably, the story of oil and the Nigerian state is mainly an account of elites’ self-centeredness, inter- and intra-communal conflict over the control of oil rich areas, and a region’s quest to exercise power over the resources located in its territory. However, the negative impact of oil is not only visible at the level of the state and the ruling elites. There is existing evidence to infer that the political economy of oil has directed the energy of the common people from productive activities (Ololajulo 2006). The conflicts, which competition for oil largesse have engendered among different interest groups in oil-producing areas, and the low level patronage of artisanal skills indicate possible untoward outcomes at the level of the ordinary Nigerian.

Anthropologists have investigated the relationship between unearned income and individual productive effort. Wilson and Wolfe tested a particular case of a proposition that large quantities of unearned income cause individuals to lose interest in productive tasks, especially if they are provided with an income adequate enough to sustain their current living standard (Wilson and Wolfe 1961). The researchers determined the

correlation between per capita payments to members of the Jicarilla Apache tribe and change in the number of individually owned sheep, and from the study, discovered that at least one segment of the Jicarilla population increased their productive efforts with the aid of per capita payments. The treatment of the effect of unearned income by Wilson and Wolfe was rather mechanical with little or no attention devoted to other social processes that may influence the economic behavior of members of the Jicarilla Apache tribe. But, rather than discountenance an association, which their study indeed established, they concluded that the relationship between unearned income and productive efforts may be examined in terms of several variables. Such a suggestion could not have been misplaced in view of the varying circumstances that inform and surround people's reception of unearned income.

Similarly, Imbens et al. (2001) investigate the relationship between the amount won in lotteries and economic behavior as measured by subsequent earnings, labor supply, consumption and savings. They argue that labor supply and individual participation in the labor force tends to reduce as the amount won in the lottery increases. The differential effects which are related to the size of lottery winnings might possibly be theorized since other variables such as frequency of playing and winning are factored into the conclusion reached. In this manner, rather than generalizing on the effect of unearned income on economic behavior, it may be useful taking each case of unearned income on its own merit. The per capita payment, the lottery prize, and the free cash from party politics and oil patronage are different cases of unearned incomes, whose impact on economic behavior may be determined by a combination of other factors. In the case of the Ilaje romance with unearned income, the concern centers not just on a decline in people's participation in the traditional fishing economy, which is directly affected by the activities of oil exploitation, but also on their lack of interest in other productive activities offered as livelihood alternatives.

Intervention Agencies and Local Economic Empowerment

Increased government spending on physical infrastructure projects expectedly brings about a quantum leap in the amount of money circulating in any locality, and this too is supposed to enhance the prospect for growth in the economy and the per capita GDP. But this goal appears beyond reach in the case in Ilaje Local Government where non-indigene artisans who are in the majority repatriate their wealth on a regular basis to their respective hometowns. For many observers, development intervention agencies have generally been ineffective in addressing the most pressing issues in the Niger Delta region, of which local economic empowerment ranked very high. As reported by a UNDP administrator in Nigeria, "it is clear that in the case of this region, development choices over the period have failed to galvanize the people into optimally effective productive activities" (Brown 2003:29). Two intervention projects implemented by NDDC and the Ondo State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (OSOPADEC) highlight the challenges of sustainable livelihood in Ilaje local government area.

The NDDC, in 2002, opened two skill acquisition centers at Igbokoda to train local youths in computer literacy and skills such as carpentry, metal works, tailoring,

bricklaying, mechanics, electrical, plumbing, and so on. Incentive for prospective trainees was, as well, introduced in the form of a monthly subsistence allowance in addition to the provision of start-up tools at the end of apprenticeship. A mass of self-employed youths was envisaged as an outcome of the intervention program. But if observation and accounts of key informants can be taken as a guide, it seems that the dream of extensive job creation has not materialized. For instance, as of 2009, only two mechanic workshops had been set up in Igbokoda. These workshops were not products of the intervention program as they were opened and operated by non-indigenes. Despite the marginal change, owners of automobiles have continued to travel some twenty kilometers to fix minor faults at Okitipupa, a town populated by the neighboring Ikaes. Indeed, the tools given to the apprentices at the completion of training might possibly have ended up in bedrooms or been sold to practicing artisans.

The manner in which the skill acquisition program was implemented, I was informed, could not have produced much success or better outcomes. According to one of the skill center proprietors, the program was predominantly a medium through which local political leaders distribute patronages. There was a particular case, he said, where a notable politician came with a long list of candidates he wanted registered as trainees. The list, as usual, contained names of his children, nephew, and nieces that are either in high schools or tertiary institutions. But the proprietor could not do anything to stop the scam since the “Nigerian factor” would not allow him to have his way in a contest with a powerful local politician. Another category of “apprentice” was the *gwa ma* boys, a group of militant youths that supposedly tackled and contained the Ijaw militants during the 1998 internecine crisis between the Ilaje and the neighboring Ijaw. The *gwa ma* boys have since grown into a standing local militia, which politicians used for violent activities against political opponents. As such, in every local economic empowerment program, special consideration is accorded the *gwa ma* boys especially when such programs involve doling out cash. The *gwa ma* boys make no pretence about being apprentices and are interested only in the training allowance, which they classify in the mold of the “sit-at-home”. Other apprentices, the proprietor said, came around once in a while but turned out en-masse when the monthly allowance was due for payment.

The OSOPADEC fish ponds scheme, on the other hand, was an attempt at situating intervention within the traditional fishing economy. The project was implemented in the form of granting unsecured loans to prospective fish farmers who were supposed to make much profit from an enterprise considered booming. An administrative officer from the Commission explained that they expected that the anticipated profit would attract more unemployed youths to the industry. Unfortunately, only a few of the beneficiaries dug a pond! Others were said to have complained that the first installment of the loan disbursed was grossly inadequate to commence the project, thereby leaving them with no other option than to spend the money on some other needs. An informant described the fish pond project as an idea of OSOPADEC with no input from the local people.

From the scenario depicted above, the failure of the NDDC skill acquisition program and OSOPADEC fish ponds project, whether ascribed to the quantum of unearned wealth in the locality or the rising corruption and nepotism within the Nigerian environment, say a lot about the contemporary work orientation prevalent

in the area. Many of those employed in government service also displayed a kind of negative attitude towards work. For instance, I observed that most of the local council workers rarely report in office, except when their monthly salary was to be paid. But, interestingly, no one was sanctioned over absenteeism since most workers belonged to a wide network of relationship that cut across kinship, political, and religious interests.

Meanwhile, it could be said that the attitude of the beneficiaries, notwithstanding, the skill acquisition program in both planning and implementation did not take into consideration the infrastructure and other social factors that are essential for the success of an intervention project. When people discussed the intervention program, they also deplored the erratic state of electricity supply, which was sometimes blamed for abandonment of productive activities. From this it was clear that the skills taught were not completely irrelevant. Even while the skills were not productively employed, the sense of need was contained in the responses of some of the trainees. They spoke about the prospects of the program but condemned its politicization, a factor identified as a cog in the implementation process.

The Fisherman King

The pre-oil exploitation Ilaje society could be rightly described as a fisherman's world, as they, the fishermen, were the most important occupational group in Ilaje land. Being the dominant vocation, emphasis was further placed on individual achievement. Thus wealth and success were measured by the number of fishing crafts a man owned. Successful fishermen commanded great respect from all and were also highly motivated by the fortune made from the daily expedition to the river or the ocean. With a marketing network built around their wives, profit was extensively maximized. Other locals called them *ologho-orijo* (daily income earners), a title they seem to have cherished. They were said to have become used to lavish spending at social events and boasting of their abilities to recover everything after a day visit to the ocean. An informant described the social life of the fisherman in the following words:

They attend all social events they are aware of including those not invited to. At such events, they want their presence to be known so they spray musicians with good cash to announce their names and sing their praises. [Segun Leke, personal communication, 2007]

In the above manner, every successful fisherman assumes a household name in Ilaje land. The fishing trade then seemed to be about making quick money and spending it freely. The free-spending culture was said to be so widespread that it became a factor used to distinguish an Ilaje from his other neighbors like Apois and the Ikales who happened to be mainly farmers. As far as there are fishes in the ocean, there will always be money to spend. Such seems to be the philosophy that guides the Ilaje fisherman's behavior.

My informants dished out stories about once successful fishermen and their exploits. The stories, in most cases, end with the reversal of fortune for the *dramatis*

personae. Even when some of the accounts might have been exaggerated, the level of wastefulness and profligacy that characterized the fishermen's world was well captured. Fishermen were further depicted as ignorant and uncouth fellows who desired social recognition in a rapidly modernizing society where few educated elites were gradually becoming the center of community attention. The 'wannabe' life of fishermen was equally represented by Segun Leke in the following words:

They often wear very expensive *agbada*, which is ignorantly matched with bathroom slippers to social parties where they spend a lot of money on musicians to sing their praises. They also buy costly furniture for their shanties but lack the refinement to keep them in good shape. [Personal communication, 2007]

The above description of Ilaje fishermen corresponds to Mbembe's portrayal of the postcolonial subject who in his activities and inactivity also desires "to be 'honored', to 'shine' and to take part in celebration" (Mbembe 1992:27). It could also be observed that the fishermen's choice of clothing and furniture, contained in the above description, is an effort at navigating and subduing a burgeoning space of elitism characteristic of many post-independence African societies.

An appreciable decline in fishermen's catch was said to have been observed in the later part of the 1980s. In a larger context, the reduction in catch coincides with the intensification of oil exploitation activities along the Ilaje coastline. By then, some fishermen had expanded their economic options by investing in transportation, and much later fuel service stations – two ventures made more lucrative by the difficult terrain of the area. Many of the fishermen that invested in transportation and oil marketing thereafter left fishing. Obviously, some changes have started taking place within the Ilaje fishing economy and this has been widely explained within the context of the negative impact of oil exploitation. During the 1990s the fisherman king gradually disappeared from the social arena and to many people, only a political office holder can match or equal the profligacy of the Ilaje fisherman.

“The Lazy Man Learns Skill”

The traditional and contemporary Yoruba society is characterized by numerous skills. Among the popular ones are carpentry, bricklaying, blacksmithing, sewing, praise singing, fishing, hunting, traditional healing, mechanics, art works, and so on. As with most other ethnic groups in Africa, the Yoruba attach different social values to these occupations, and as it appears, the most economically and financially rewarding ones rate higher on the social scale. Skills, it must be noted, are acquired through long rigorous training and tend to be passed from parents to their children. In this manner, a particular occupation is often retained and perpetuated within a family through generations. However, nothing quite systematic is known of the disinterest the Ilaje display toward artisanship. For one, the people from all indications are not lacking in values that are considered central to entrepreneurial success – competitiveness, the need

for achievement, the pursuit of profit or strong notions of private property (Roth 1997). The negative attitude to craftsmanship, most of the people often agree, dates well back to the period prior to the emergence of oil as an economic factor.

Fishing as a dominant occupation among the Ilaje has implications for the patronage of other skills, including formal education. As suggested earlier, the huge and immediate financial reward from fishing makes the occupation very attractive, with the younger ones looking forward to controlling fishing crafts of their own. Careers in the trade often start with parents recruiting their children who are of the age of eight and above as boat boys and making them learn the rudiments of fishing. Invariably, the children grow up in the trade and subsequently take to it. Though dependents they supposedly are, the children of fishermen earn regular income from the sales of fishes which their parents often allocate them from daily catches. This early access to cash is shown to have had adverse effects on the children's education, as many who are of school-going age are engaged in active and full-time fishing.

There are other occupational sectors that serve the fishing trade. For instance, the carpenters construct the fishing crafts, while the mechanics fix faulty outboard engines. But since the demands for these skills are not all that regular, only a few are trained in them. Some other skills can best be represented as "Ilaje won't touch". The people do not only distance themselves from artisanal skills like bricklaying, blacksmithing, sewing, and mechanics, but have considered these the prerogative of foreigners or the upland dwellers like the neighboring Ikale and Akure. An informant provided insight into why these skills were not patronized by the indigenes:

The fishing job brings quick and reliable income. You don't need to wait till when a customer will come to patronize you. So far there is fish in the ocean; one will always have money to spend. [Caleb Asogbon, personal communication, 2007]

An Ilaje is expected to be man enough to embark on fishing expeditions to the sea. A seeming alternative is what the people generally regard as "doing business" and this involves embarking on highly risky and most times illegal ventures that produce quick and huge monetary returns. Another informant, Goodluck Tedunjaye explained the people's occupational preferences in the following words:

Our people cherish economic activities that will yield immediate wealth. When smuggling from the neighboring Benin Republic and Togo was very lucrative, they built large boats for smuggling in goods from the ports of Lome and Conotou. Even now, many of our people are involved in the bunkering of oil. [Personal communication, 2007]

The implication of the occupational preferences of the Ilaje for small scale enterprise in the area is quite obvious. While the people occupy themselves with the fishing enterprise and "business," other economic activities are left in the hands of their neighbors. In essence, apprenticeship training for artisan skill acquisition is not so much emphasized

such that most craftsmen in the local government are non-Ilaje.

“This Oil Wealth is Enough for All to Share”

The under-performance of the NDDC skill acquisition program may be indicative of the negative effect of the oil economy. But the failure of the intervention, definitely, goes beyond the fact that apprentices were not committed to the training program or that the acquired skills were not practiced. These apart, the consequences of the oil economy on the productive economy were clearly visible in popular discourse and commentaries on the extravagant lifestyle of politicians. Local people made constant mention of what politicians earned in income, the mansions they built, and the flashy cars they owned. An informant was very particular about the fact that the oil wealth was enough to go around every Nigerian if not for the greed of politicians. Another opined that since oil was produced from the remains of his forefathers (a veiled reference to the formation of crude oil from fossils of organic matters), he was, as such, entitled to receiving unearned income. In other words, the attitude towards the alternative livelihood skills is related to the manner in which rights are constructed.

An elemental but discontenting feature of the oil age is the attitude of dependence it foists on the people. The Ilaje have hitherto prided themselves on being a group of people that frowned at fawning behavior and servility. Every individual had, in the past, ensured that he achieved a level of productivity that would decrease the likelihood of stooping or begging for essential needs from his neighbors, or requesting others to meet obligations that are primarily his. But the last two decades, the people acknowledged, have seen this traditional worldview undergo dramatic changes, with beggarly disposition, well depicted in popular phrases like “*fe run ghun mi*” (let me have something from you) and “*t’owo n’apo*” (dip your hand into your pocket) gradually becoming a part of their everyday life. The most intriguing thing about this clientele behavior is the manner in which disguised panhandling is embodied and represented in rights (*eto*) or as a commitment owed by a supposed patron. It is usually a serious matter if the patron happens to be a political office holder because his unwillingness to part with some cash, or his giving out of an amount considered meager will attract name-calling and a reminder of his being privileged by virtue of a political office and access to a commonwealth. So when people beg for money or solicit financial assistance from those perceived as political elites, they do so with the understanding that they are requesting only a rightful portion of the oil wealth.

In a way, the alternative livelihood skills program equally appeared to have reinforced the notion of rights as constructed by the people in the oil era. By choosing when to attend classes and by focusing more on monthly subsistence allowance rather than the training, and yet, by electing to dispose of their tools, the trainees who are mainly youths could be said to have represented their rights in terms of monetary benefits that are accrued to them from the oil-wealth.

“Every Ilaje is a Politician”

An important aspect of individuals' construction of their relationship with the socio-political milieu was their politician identity, which almost every member of the community bore. This identity, I was informed, was crucial to legitimizing claims and access to unearned wealth. And since politics in Nigeria is widely considered a full-time profession, it becomes logical that identification entails full-time participation, commitment and visibility. Although general elections are held every four years, preparation for the next round of polls commences very early, usually a few months after the inauguration of a fresh tenure. Political activities, therefore, are considered a continuous process, especially as politicians desire to maintain strong followerships essential for unbroken relevance in political schemes. The following informant account shows the extent to which politics is interpreted as a means of livelihood:

Whenever politicians visit the community to look for votes they promise to be fair to all but once they are elected, they never come back and only those identified as politicians see them. These are the people awarded government contracts. But the so-called politicians don't do anything other than holding meetings, singing and dancing. We then think that if this is what would give everyone access to government contracts, it will be better for all of us to be politicians and that is what we all are [Lawson Akintokun, personal communication, 2007].

The above account not only presents an image of what politics is and what it is used to achieve but it also provides a window into the processes that produce people's contemporary job orientation. For instance, the account, on the one hand, decried the privileging of politicians on matters of government patronage and associated this with the large scale migration into the political class. On the other hand, it sets government contracts as a veritable means of economic empowerment, a type of the proverbial 'national cake,' a share of which every Nigerian desires.

The reality of party politics as the dominant discourse among the Ilaje may, at the very superficial level, portray the people as politically conscious and sophisticated. It can also depict them as a people wary of their civic duties and responsibilities. However, a deeper insight into the comportment and rendering of awareness will expose a basic and underlying economic motive, which drives popular participation toward political activities, especially those that border on visibility. An informant, Lawson Akintokun, explained that the crowd at political rallies is, in terms of their expectations, quite different from the average one found in other regions of the country. According to him, most of the people make appearances at rallies not usually because of the pittance or 'appearance fee' usually doled out at such gatherings but to register their presence and involvement in a way that would make valid their claims to government contracts once the political party they support gains power. In his words, "every Ilaje is a politician." There is little need, therefore, to say that the people generally equate politics with economic interest and livelihood provision.

Oil, Corruption and the Quick Cash Ethos

It may hardly be disputed that the advent of “petro-dollars” enthroned the quick cash ethos in Nigeria, especially given the extent to which those in political offices engaged in official corruption and primitive accumulation. The magnitude to which public funds are diverted and quick-riches acquired is often thought to be made possible by the abundant income from oil, which is often regarded as “free wealth”. Unfortunately, reactions to the inequality established in the society through this process have come primarily in the forms of widespread integration and assimilation into an inglorious culture of quick wealth. An average Nigerian is believed to have imbibed the “*ise kekere owo nla*” (little toil and huge income) philosophy in a way that undermines production and productive enterprises, such that it is often said that everyone just wants to attain wealth in a manner that would not be tasking, physically and mentally.

The “quick cash” or “fast wealth” ethos is well reflected in popular accounts of some Nigerians’ illegitimate efforts to become wealthy. From the stories of money rituals, con-men and fraudsters popularly known as *419* or *yahoo* boys, to drug trafficking, which are widely reported in the media, the quick-cash path is established as a preferred route many would take to attain riches. Although stern condemnation of the quick-wealth syndrome is not uncommon in religious circles, many people see such denunciation as mere smokescreen; most especially when some moral institutions are believed to be receiving cash donations from individuals with “questionable” wealth. Nigerian society too is widely seen to have lost all values that emphasize hard work and professionalism. People talk about how some parents throw elaborate parties to celebrate when their children who have no particular job or employment buy expensive cars or build stately houses. And quite unlike what was the practice in the past, traditional chieftaincy titles are said to be conferred on people whose pedigrees are unknown inasmuch as such fellows are able to offer some monetary inducement.

The orientation toward quick-cash, as I argued above, is not independent of the large-scale official corruption financed by the petro-dollar. The culture of sourcing wealth through illegitimate means, it may be reasoned, developed among those without access to public fund as a way of ensuring unhindered participation in a social space that has been completely monetized by political elites. But, to say that there is a prevalent culture of quick wealth in Nigeria must not be mistaken for popular approval since there are usually differentiated responses to quick-wealth associated with money ritual, drug trafficking, conning, and other internet frauds. Public awareness of quick wealth obtained through money ritual is usually followed by outright rejection of the person involved, whereas a known drug trafficker or conman may be tolerated and celebrated in social circles as far as he stays uncaught. What makes a particular case of quick-wealth tolerable or otherwise, I feel, is the level of pain thought to be inflicted on a person whose presence or existence is either considered remote or close at hand.

The Ilaje, however, found a legitimate source of quick-wealth in fishing, whose exploitative nature compares well with mineral extraction. But the consistent exploitation of a marine ecosystem may lead to depletion of aquatic resources. In essence, the quick cash derived from fishing could have encouraged more people into

the vocation. Similarly, the reduction in catch due to massive exploitation could have brought about a cultural change directing the energy of the people towards productive enterprises and other forms of alternative livelihoods. But the reduction in fishermen's catch coincides with the commencement of oil exploitation and the associated patronage culture, which, unarguably, has helped in perpetuating the quick cash ethos.

Conclusion

Incomes that could be reckoned as unearned abound in Nigeria and are associated with the level of official corruption and maladministration that have bedeviled successive administration since the country gained independence from Britain in 1960. The sources of these unearned incomes include monetary largesse distributed by politicians to loyalists and followers, royalties paid by oil companies to host communities and monetary overtures made by governments and oil companies to court militant youths' cooperation toward ensuring smooth oil production activities. In some cases, such incomes were significant enough to be committed to executing house projects and acquiring flashy cars. The preference which many Ilaje people had for party politics or oil exploitation related activism rather than productive enterprise may, therefore, be interpreted within the larger context of the quick riches, which emanate from these sources of unearned income.

Unfortunately, the period of the livelihood skills trainings corresponds to the era when the Nigerian government approved a new regime of salaries and allowances for political office holders. The upward review saw a representative at the local council earning more than a medical doctor and a local council chairman pocketing on a monthly basis what could be the total salary of at least forty-five graduate staffs of a local council. Considering all of this, a choice of career in politics would not just be indicative of a negative orientation toward productive tasks. As it were, the skill acquisition program, the computers distributed, the low level patronage of the acquired skills, and the occupational preference of the youths must be appropriately situated and explained in the context of the socio-political and economic contradiction in which the Nigerian state and the subjects are all entangled. In this regard, I argue that people's contemporary attitude, especially as it pertains to engagement with productive tasks, is an expression of the growing nature of social inequality accentuated by discriminatory access to state resources.

The inclination of many youths to unearned wealth indicates that Abdulistic capitalism (Okowa 1994), which had been treated by scholars as a state culture, has found a dwelling place in individual mindsets. This preference for unearned wealth further suggests popular knowledge of an institutional profligacy. The ordinary masses, it appears, are aware of the manner in which the state scorns productive industry after the discovery of oil and therefore harbor a belief that they too need not engage in productive works since their lands produce the oil resources. Invariably, even when the state, through the intervention agencies, had fashioned the skill acquisition program to provide alternative livelihoods outside the traditional fishing industry, it happens that many people have seen the oil wealth lavishly displayed by politicians and would

prefer income from a similar source. In other words, the failure of intervention efforts, evidenced by low level practice of acquired skills and expressed through the hordes of jobless youths who claimed to be politicians, may be explained by what Achille Mbembe (1992) describes as subjects' internalization of authoritarian epistemology.

The Ilaje, like other Yoruba sub-groups, found dignity in labor, and the values of hard-work, self-pride, and independence are well represented in their common axioms and precepts. To most of the people interviewed, including graduates of the skill acquisition program, upholding these values was not difficult inasmuch as individuals were rewarded in a way commensurate to their input. But many have come to discover that those working hard in the spirit of capitalism witness no change in their fortune whereas people in politics get richer. This, perhaps, is a reason why productive activities lost their relevance as an economic option. The politicians, the people think, cannot, therefore, be offering others computers, spanners, pliers, pincers, knives, drills and other tools as if they too utilized these tools to produce their awesome wealth. Though hard work is well recognized as a springboard for success, the level of wealth achievable through productive activities is considered very much limited compared to what political offices could offer within a short period. Indeed, the "I know how you prosper" conception, which also is understandable, taking into account the fact that the archetypical Nigerian politician is not specially endowed or distinguished, acts as a catalyst, entrenching in many a kind of self-belief essential for nurturing political aspiration.

NOTES

¹ The author acknowledges the helpful and insightful comments of the anonymous reviewer(s) and the editors of KAS on the first draft of this paper.

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