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Politics, Political Culture and Socialization: Re-inventing the Nigerian Polity.

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A general point of consensus among many Nigerians is that the nation's development as a political entity has been hampered by the way and manner politics is practised in the country. There have, therefore, been calls, often clamorous and confused, even tongue-in-cheek, by and for Nigerians to be socialized in an atmosphere that will engender a new political

culture. All told, in the more than four decades of the country's freedom from direct British suzerainty, many programmes of mobilization and orientation have been enacted. These programmes have floundered because they were poorly or half-heartedly executed. They have also been characterized by a marked lack of focus, as they have not been directed at the 'appropriate' section deserving of genuine mobilization in society. This paper, therefore, examines the issues involved in the crisis of political culture in the nation, and the calls for a new social order embedded in a new value system as can be assured by a consciously executed programme of cultural and political re-orientation and re-mobilization of the entire population, and the youths especially.

Introduction

Politics and how it is practised in Nigeria is a subject of increasing debate. This is especially so since 29 May 1999, when Nigeria attained, for the second and repeated time, the status of democracy or, perhaps more appropriately put, civil rule. Whether democracy, properly defined is coterminous with civil rule is, however, a moot question – hence the caveat above. What is distillable from public commentary, informed or otherwise, is that a symbiotic relationship exists between the art and praxis of politics. It is a chicken-and-egg situation that finds replication in political activities, their informing paradigms and culture. Thus we may ask: between politics and political culture, which precedes the other? Which is to say, is a people's politics determined by the 'extant' cultures and sub-cultures within the polity, or is it the people's culture and behavioural patterns that inform political trends? While it is both attractive and logical to say that it is the culture in the larger society that defines the whys and wherefores of politics as practised in society, what cannot be denied and can even, with equal certitude be averred, is that the manner a society's

politicians practise their art is a definitive pillar in the overall structure of its political culture.

This paper proposes, therefore, that the trouble with Nigeria, *ala* Chinua Achebe, is one of leadership ineptitude. It is anchored on the conceptual framework that the Nigerian project will succeed on the conscious and deliberate nurturing of a new leadership that is at once responsible, accountable and selfless. (These fundamental values of the nation's cultural heritage have been relegated to the background). Such leadership, it will be argued, must find its anchor in the most agile, innovative and malleable section of society, which is the youth. The paper will be in three parts, with the first part tracing the problem of leadership and how the failure in leadership has engendered the particular brand of political culture characteristic of the Nigerian society. It will also highlight the salient features of this political culture. The second part will examine the various programmes of directed change by the country's leadership in their bid to effect a paradigm shift, and the consequence(s) of these efforts. The third and concluding part will be an apologia, by way of a historical survey of the contributions of the youth to the development of Nigeria. This is in justification of the argument for their inclusion in the political process and to underline their position as a political force of change for a new social order.

Definition of Terms

A critical point in discourses of this nature is the definition of relevant terms. Of significance here are 'politics', 'culture', 'political culture', and 'socialization'. Our approach will be a mid-way point between theory and pragmatism; for this reason no attempt will be made at elaborate abstraction. Nigeria's problem, to paraphrase Karl Marx, is one of *change* and not philosophical interpretation. More practical than theoretical, the matter is best, if cynically, stated by Nigerians themselves

who often ask: 'Na Grammar we go chop?' Thus in defining politics we must necessarily dispense with superfluous intellection and settle for the most Nigerian of definitions.¹ This is for the practical reason that the Nigerian's practice of politics is evidently inextricably connected to his/her conception of politics.

Politics can therefore be, and is hereby, defined as a 'dirty game'. This definition is more of a description and as Dudley (1975:2-3) states, politics is best described by its components that consist of five elements: consciousness formation, social mobilization, contestation, institutional struggle which converts fight 'into games' and transcendence which catalyses change at the personal and structural (systemic and sub-systemic) levels. Ayoade (1997:2) defines politics as the power to allocate powers among individuals, communities and nations.² Old as humanity itself, politics, he argues, is not a spectators' but a participative and inclusive game.

Culture, as Dafinone (1999:5) put, is a mesh of references indicative of a people's pattern of living (material, intellectual and metaphysical) which as a cross-disciplinary entity impacts upon the intellectual and emotional features that identify a social group. It traverses such aspects of existence as human rights, value systems, beliefs, traditions, as well as arts and craft, and can be descriptive, historical, narrative, genetic or structural (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963, quoted in Dafinone). Culture is also the entirety of man-made knowledge, beliefs, customs, traditions and skills at the disposal of society (Nwosu and Kalu, 1980:3). It is a network of symbols characteristic of a people.

Political culture, therefore, refers to that aspect of a people's culture that concerns their knowledge and practice of politics. 'It is the system of beliefs about patterns of political interaction

and political institutions' and is the point of connection between a people's micro politics and their macro politics, permeating such areas as politics, economy and the personality of individuals (Agbaje, 1997:144,145). The crucial nature of political culture is its location at the subjective realm in politics and 'the role of belief and perception in the definition of the political situation' (S. Verba, quoted in Agbaje). Socialization, on its part, is the process of interpersonal relations between and among individuals, groups or communities. It is the integration of individuals into social groups by the inculcation of group culture (Sanda, 1976:5), diverse skills, motives, attitudes, values etc., in social situations. It is a mode of learning that aids the learner's performance of his/her roles as a member of a group; it is the process through which new members of a group acquire knowledge of the existing culture of the group (Onwuka, 1980:116).

The Leadership Imperative

Nigeria, it has been said, is less than fortunate in its leadership (Achebe, 1983). This is one of the more *gracious* indictments of the country's leadership and it underlines the high degree to which Nigeria's underdevelopment relates to its poverty of good leadership. Indeed, when it is recalled that political leadership refers to the management of any voluntary activity and joint efforts aimed at the attainment of common goals in the realm of politics (Vaney, 1939, quoted in Olugbemi, 1987), it can then be appreciated why it is the primal *sine qua non* for building a nation and without which all other factors are well-nigh a nullity (Chikendu, 1987:250). There is no doubt that the failure of Nigeria's leadership to effectively mobilize Nigerians of different ethnic groups under common political goals has been at the bottom of the country's failure as a nation. This situation has turned Nigeria into a veritable Tower of Babel where intra- and inter-group relations are often characterized by mindless monologues, a stiffening of positions and eventual

trench digging. Mutual jealousies, suspicions and political bickering become the norm as are economic instability and social insecurity. But why, it may be asked, is Nigeria's leadership such an egregious failure, and why is politics what it is in Nigeria? The answer to this is not unrelated to the way Nigerians conceive of politics.

Politics, as we have noted, is considered a game. The predicate part of this is that the game is dirty, and we may add, number-governed - a game of number, putatively of the majority. Simplistic as this may sound, there is a lot to suggest that this vertical and nihilistic concept of politics has defined its practice amongst Nigerians, in more sense than one, in the country's more than four decades of independence from colonial existence. With this view of politics, Nigerians, especially the political elite, are only a step from beyond the pail and thus proceed to 'politic' with the same *laissez-faire*, unconscionable spirit with which one engages in a game without rules or one in which the interpretation of such rules are, at best, subject to the whims of participants.

Perhaps, a precise understanding of what leadership means may demonstrate its palpable absence here and, hopefully, result in a change in the way politics is practised in Nigeria. A definition of who a leader is may, therefore, serve as a counterpoint to what obtains in Nigerian politics. The leader, in ordinary terms, is supposed to be a pathfinder, the one who takes the lead for others to follow. He/she is not necessarily a populist - a 'people pleaser',³ but a person whose human management ability should be such as to be enough to motivate and inspire the followers in a desired direction. In the particular instance of Nigeria, the leader should be that individual with the capacity to ensure unity among the disparate groups in the country with all their centrifugal potentials. The true Nigerian leader must be a person of high intelligence,⁴ ability and

integrity (Aguda, 1995); a person able to see beyond the perceptual vista of those he/she leads, appreciate their needs and be able to motivate them for the achievement of those needs. Such a leader must typify the fundamental creeds that define the nation's ideals, and in him/her all these ideals must cohere (Opata, 1995).

Nigeria's political leadership is distinguished by the absence of the above attributes. It is, therefore, of no surprise that that leadership is the opposite of useful, which is a regrettable but well-known fact, lending credence to the thesis of such as Achebe who have resorted to slamming it in vehement frustration. The deleterious attributes of Nigeria's body politic, it may be safely said, are traceable to the self-aggrandizing leadership with which the country has been plagued in the wake of British rule. The features of the body politic which are, in turn, reflective of the prevailing political culture find expression in one word: corruption.

Corruption as the major attribute of Nigeria's political culture is manifested in such diverse forms as violence, mistrust, hostile and fractious cleavages along ethnic, religious and ideological lines, nepotism, unaccountability, misappropriation, maladministration, etc. These are features that result in the mass alienation of the people, further widening the breach that inheres in the advent of Nigeria as a British patchwork of diverse nationalities. The Nigerian politician, Abati (2002) posits, 'should be able to tell lies... needs thugs...needs a group of barrel-chested men when a fights breaks out ... to teach the opposition a lesson'.⁵ The political leadership has indeed failed to draw the line between personal and national interest, much less attaining the 'heights of self-abnegation and sacrifice for the sake of the fatherland and the masses.' It may therefore be argued that while each community, local or ethnic groups can at different periods of their history, lay claim to

good leadership, there has never been any nationally acknowledged Nigerian leader who has had the beneficial effect of impacting on every section of the polity by winning a pan-Nigerian mandate. The dominant current in contemporary Nigerian politics, besotted and laid prostrate by the crisis of ethnic identity, quite regrettably sees its leaders as very able but ethnic leaders.

This is not to suggest that all blame should be put at the threshold of the leadership, while the followers/masses are completely absolved of complicity in the entire malaise. As Dafinone (1999) rightly notes, the process and methodology of governance of Nigeria in the last forty years, and the level of socio-economic and political development, have been indicative of the shared cultural values of both the leaders and the led. The point to be understood, however, is that when society regresses into a state of anomie, physical, moral or metaphysical, the responsibility to lead the way forward, out of the morass, devolves on the leader. Though the undermining elements of the Nigerian political culture are generated by both the dominant class and the masses, it does appear that the ameliorative and restorative measures must emanate from the ruling class, no less because they control the reins of governance than because the less salutary aspects of Nigeria's political culture are generated 'more often by the structures, processes and institutions of governance'.

While caught in the web of its own making, the political elite in Nigeria has not been entirely oblivious to the demands of its position, or the need to rein in some of the more dangerous consequences of its politics. Efforts have been made to effect a change in the political culture, even when these efforts have been marked by confusion and have largely been self-serving or cosmetic. Efforts at directed change embarked upon, since

independence, by Nigeria's leadership is what we next examine.

Mobilization Programmes in Nigeria: A Cartography

Mobilization indicates the deliberate inculcation of the core values of awareness of the beliefs and attitudes that inform the activities of government into a people, group or individuals with the purpose of ensuring their full participation in the act of governance (Ojior, 1987). It is one of the major components that describe politics. One proof that the political leadership in Nigeria recognizes the adverse potentialities and consequences of contemporary but uninspiring political culture can be seen in the series of mobilization programmes formulated over the years. Such programmes, according to Agbaje (1997:144), are designed to 'bring about commensurate changes in the values, beliefs, attitudes and norms of the people'

Mobilization programmes in Nigeria are as old as Nigeria's emergence from direct British rule in 1960. The primary objective of these programmes was, and is still, for unity among the various ethnic and social groups in the country, as well as for economic and political development. At independence, Nigeria's political leadership both at the regional and national levels drew up all sorts of National Development Plans. The first National Development Plan was designed to span a ten-year period and it led, in its case, to the introduction of Social Welfare Service in the then Northern region. The Social Welfare Policy had earlier been adopted in the Western region in 1953. In addition to the series of development plans, 'unity schools' such as the Federal Government Colleges, and leadership training programmes, military institutions like the Nigerian Defence Academy, etc., were established from the 1960s right through to the 1980s. These were to foster unity and intergroup relations. Not to be beaten to the game, state governments have since established

their own variants of the 'unity schools'. It remains to be seen whether the local government authorities would one day embark on similar programmes.

Perhaps, the most extensive and 'effective' tool of mass mobilization in Nigeria today, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), has its origin in the Second National Development Plan of 1970. The principle underlying the Service Corps is today, almost three decades after it was established, largely eroded, as it is plagued with some of the same problems it was originally designed to eradicate. Maladministration, financial ineptitude, nepotism, undue politicization, poor funding, etc. are some of the more apparent vices: 'As morality and integrity took leave of the Nation, so the scheme, once a proving ground for the budding and vibrant leadership of tomorrow, replicated the decadence under which the nation reeled...' (*The Guardian* Editorial, 6 September 2002). Other ancillary programmes of mobilization with special focus on various aspects of national existence include the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the stillborn Ethical Revolution, and the War Against Indiscipline (WAI), later re-named War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC).

Both in enactment and implementation, the mobilization programmes were classical instances of the proverbial cart put before the horse. Even when virtually all the programmes were ostensibly targeted at the youths, it is remarkable that there was not a single ministry with the charge for youth affairs all the while the programmes were being run. It can be thus concluded that the youths were effectively taken for a ride. When eventually a ministry was established for youth affairs in 1982, a National Youth Policy was only to be formulated a year later before it was approved in 1984. Indeed, the confusion in the youth development programmes of Nigeria is best demonstrated by the fact that between 1982 and 1999, a

seventeen years period, the youth development department had been relocated through nine diverse Federal Ministries ranging from Social Development, National Guidance, Information and Sports, to Education and Women affairs.

The military regimes, from 1966 – 1999, no doubt, haunted by their 'corrective regime' tag and their much vaunted claim to discipline, were quite adept at designing programmes of mobilization, even when they represented the worst purveyors of the excesses they sought to correct. Seeing them more as 'correctional' rather than 'corrective' regimes, Ayoade (1997) sets no store by such an inherently undemocratic institution that sought to midwife democracy via a process that is 'the perpendicular expressions of horizontal desires'. Without doubt, the most elaborate and ambitious programmes ever of political mobilization and orientation in Nigeria were enacted during one such regime: the Ibrahim Babangida 'presidency'.

On assumption of leadership on 27 August 1985, the regime embarked on its orientation programme that had been designed to both displace and surpass any such programmes before it. Professing an open door policy, the regime proceeded to transform the twenty-month old militaristic WAI of the Muhammadu Buhari regime into a National Orientation Movement (later, National Orientation Agency). On the recommendation of the regime's Political Bureau set up to chart Nigeria's political future, the National Directorate of Social Mobilization and Political Education (to manage the regime's programmes of social and political mobilization under the direct supervision of the 'president') were inaugurated on 1st July 1987. The Directorate had the four major responsibilities of mobilizing Nigerians for self-reliance, economic recovery, and social justice (MAMSER), political education and mass education. In the area of politics, and to underline its commitment to a programme of change, the

regime embarked on a deliberate nurturing of a new class of youthful politicians dubbed 'new breed'.

The culmination of this process was the imposed creation of two political parties, the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) via Decree 27 of 1987. This was in the wake of a most draconian Decree 25 of 1987 (as amended by Decree 9 of 1989) that excluded certain categories of Nigerian politicians dubbed 'old breed' and the refusal of registration to thirteen political associations. This was reminiscent of the situation during the Murtala Mohammed/Obasanjo 1976/79 regime when there were calls for the exclusion from politics of certain old politicians and the rejection of several political associations that applied for registration (Adinoyi Ojo, 1997: 192). The non-registration of political associations has become a draconian tool of controlling and/or limiting political participation to a privileged few, as the Abubakar Abdusalami regime did when, applying uneven yardstick, it registered three associations for the 1999 elections (PDP, APP and AD) after proscribing five previous ones granted registration under the Sani Abacha regime (Agagu, 2002). The Olusegun Obasanjo government may have realized the backbreaker the denial of registration represented when its Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) refused registration to political associations that applied to it.

To go back to the Babangida regime, in furtherance of its mobilization programme the administration claimed connection to the youths and unborn generations of Nigerians: 'for their tomorrow, we give our today.' According to Babangida himself:

From our experience, our political programme must be gradual, purposeful and effective. It must aim at laying a solid

foundation for a new set of values – a new set of political attitudes or political culture aimed at ushering in a new social order. For this administration, this is a duty we owe to the future generations yet unborn. For us, it is a challenge we shall face with resolve and fortitude characteristic of our military profession. We are committed to laying such foundations for political stability as will render military intervention unnecessary as a vehicle for altering or changing governments. ... The decision of the Armed Forces Ruling Council should be seen as ... a necessary step to give Nigeria a fair chance to develop a new political culture and leadership. ... Our history as a nation, before and after independence, has been such that we have not had enough exposure to party politics – its culture, organization, its challenges and its successes as well as frustrations. ... Government has no choice but to give leadership in the form of the provision of the needed technical expertise for political party constitution and management. (Olagunju et al., 1991: 2,9,16).

While we may ignore the paternalism of the sentiments expressed in that rather lengthy remark, it should be noted that such paternalism is a trait typical of Nigerian leaders, especially of the 'corrective' (correctional?) regimes kind. Such paternalism has no basis in social reality or in the people's experience of the military as a national institution. But the military, nevertheless, relishes playing the paterfamilias even when, as is often the case, it is most unwarranted and is

only meant to create a veneer of impartiality, when it is not exhibiting its 'tough guy' image (see Gorgette, 2002: 144).

Nigeria, it should be clear, and given its long history of mobilization, is not and has never been short of models of mobilization for the inauguration of a new political culture. Why then the constant failure to rise above the enactment of programmes? It might, indeed, be said that as with most things Nigerian, we are never short of 'laudable' programmes; the devil is, however, always in the detail – in the execution of policies and 'Development Plans'. Such was, therefore, its commitment to its mobilization programmes, that the Babangida regime went ahead to shift the handover date to its 'new breed' politicians no less than three times, and in the process unbanned the 'old breed' elements of earlier dispensations, and eventually annulled the presidential election of 12 June 1993, that was supposedly the culminating event of the entire political process it had initiated eight years earlier.

The regime was practically taking Nigerians for a ride until it was forced out by popular dissent on 26 August 1993. A world of intrigues, an Interim National Government, and a six-year run of two military dictatorships were to follow Babangida's transition and mobilization. The nation's soul, sorely tried, teetered on the cusp of disintegration. Violence became a convenient tool for settling scores- bombing and state-sponsored terrorism during which real or perceived government opponents were mowed down; and mindless looting of the treasury all typified the political culture of the period and assumed prominence on the cluttered vice list of Nigerian politics. The trend has continued in new proportions in the second coming of General Olusegun Obasanjo.

Rather than bequeath a new political culture to the nation, the Babangida regime introduced a tinge of asperity into Nigerian

politics, and strengthened the derelict and adverse culture of old, which has so far been the benchmark for succeeding administrations. Nigerians were mobilized for open hostility, albeit by default (that is by the unintended consequences of governance, rather than by deliberate choice), given the prevailing atmosphere of violence, obscene display of corrupt wealth in the midst of squalor, religious and political intolerance perpetrated by the country's leadership. The ruling class practically resorted to these divisive factors as elements in governance, proving the truth of Himmelstrand's thesis (1969, quoted in Anifowose, 1982) that Nigeria's 'tribalism' is a political one that originates not from primordial ethnic loyalties, but 'politically exploited and re-inforced reactions to contemporary African societies'.

The unsurprising consequence of such governmental dubiety is that Nigerians became impervious to government mobilization. They would, it seems, rather take their cue from their leaders. The leaders, on their part, determined to make the people 'do as I say and not as I do', resorted to the use of force by way of enacting laws to enforce their agenda, for which law enforcement agents (civil, military and para-military) employ both naked force and threat to ensure compliance. They conveniently forgot, as they still do, that political culture is also dependent on the people's daily experience of political and social life. The success of such programmes in some quarters is, for this reason, hinged on the empowerment of civil society groups and 'associational life', rather than government or its agencies.

This leads to the age-long debate as to the effectiveness or otherwise of the law as an instrument of change. This, as we shall see, is enough justification for the inclusion of Nigerian youths in the political process. Mobilization programmes have been efforts originating from a belief in the sure-fire approach

of law as an instrument of behavioural change. Such changes can be individual, social, structural or generational (Katz, 1974). However, the success of law in this regard is hinged on certain factors. The first is the degree of compatibility between the new or proposed law and the dominant values already existing in the society. Laws such as those establishing Nigeria's programmes of directed change (WAI, NOA, WAIC, etc.) failed precisely because they were not consistent with the prevailing values in the society. While they were able to effect behavioural changes, their effectiveness in the more fundamental aspect of attitudinal change has been well-nigh of cipher value.

The extent or degree of enforcement of such laws is the next consideration. The thesis here is that the behaviour or attitude earmarked for change must be identifiable for the effective implementation of the law to combat it. A keen observer of the Nigerian society will know that while we are necessarily long on enactment of laws, we have been abysmally short on implementation. This is the undenied and undeniable bane of government policies. The inexplicitness of public policies is another factor, while the socio-demographic characteristics of the target of change is yet another. While the former is, it is taken, self-explanatory, the latter holds that there is a direct relationship between age and the potential for change or otherwise.

A young unmarried person, for example, is likely more amenable to change than a person who is both married and of a relatively advanced age. This can be explained by the phenomenon of primary and secondary socialization, which we have described as the internalization of skills, motives, attitudes and values in a social environment. This process is not yet complete in one's youth. Thus the degree of success in effecting behavioural and attitudinal change is inversely related

to the age of those targeted for change. The younger the target the greater is the potential for success. The youths are therefore best suited for programmes of mobilization with the projected intent of behavioural and attitudinal change. One does not learn to be left-handed in old age, is a relevant Nigerian proverb in this regard.

Towards a Youth Agenda: Re-inventing the Polity

The youths of Nigeria have a lot to commend them to the country's leadership, in view of the less than enviable performance of the old guard of Nigerian politicians. In this section, we shall examine the long history of youth participation, as proof of their leadership credentials for the vanguardist role that Nigeria's history of the future holds for them. In discussing the youths as an alternative purveyor of leadership, it is important we have a clear definition of our term, namely who is a 'youth' when talking of Nigeria's 'leaders of tomorrow'.

While the intervening stage between childhood and adulthood is often loosely called youth, the concept on its part lends itself to various definitions as a scientific construct (Adalemo, 1999). This is to say that there is no one single generally accepted definition of the word. It may, in that case, not be far-fetched to say there are as many definitions of the concept as there are researchers, or that the concept is culture-specific. What is undeniable, however, is that age and institutional location/position tend to be the defining standard for the concept. The original version of the Nigerian Youth Policy put the youth age at between twelve and thirty, while the revised 1989 version puts the youth age brackets at between twelve and thirty-five (Soyombo, 1999; Enemu, 1999). The youth can also be anyone, as among some ethnic groups in Nigeria, yet to live independently of parental control. In this regard the

definition could be so elastic as to apply to adults and other elderly persons yet to outlive both parents.⁶

It is, however, apparent that the emphasis placed on age as the major determinant in the definition of who is a youth has been a major albatross with very adverse consequences for youth participation in Nigerian politics. This is even more so in an environment as ours in which the respect and responsibility a person commands bear close relation to the position one occupies on the age ladder. The main attributes of the youths thus tend to be defined in the negative. They are not beyond being patronized, talked at and generally considered immature and incapable of the right decisions. Provisions such as Article 12 of the UN Convention, guaranteeing the right of the child to personal opinion on issues are, as likely as not, accorded expression in the breach. The observation of Hill *et al.* (1997) becomes as instructive as it is apt, applying in large measure to the short shrift to which youths are treated:

... compared to any other social group, children do seem to be the most governed, as social control increases both by overt physical means and more covert psycho-sociological means. ... part of the 'government' of children comes from fears that they are out of control.

In Nigeria, such views of the youths as above are by no means helped by the growing tendency of the youths to engage in anti-social acts, especially such as place them on the margins of civilized conduct. In this regard, violence has become, in recent years, the one single element that defines youth culture in Nigeria. The increasing trend of urban youth terrorism and fraternity-manqué, and the attendant haemorrhage of the most active social group, should be a cause for concern. Outside

some minor cases of outright delinquency, this situation is in popular reckoning attributed to the widespread miniaturization and reutilization of societal psyche, in the wake of long years of military rule. The support and patronage extended to these violent youth groups, mostly located in tertiary institutions, by politicians of diverse hue is another dimension to the issue. This is one more instance of proof of a palpable absence of 'political virtue' which 'consists in commitment or loyalty to the state' or what Eruvbetine (2002) calls 'poetic existence'.

Despite evident complicity and demonstrated impercipient, in the most part, to correcting the situation, Nigerian governments over the years have had to come down heavily on the youths, especially when its interest, often masqueraded as the national interest had been threatened.⁷ One of such heavy-handed approaches takes the form of proscription of the umbrella body of youth organizations like the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). The Student Union Activities (Control and Regulation) Decree 47 of 1989, which was aimed at controlling student union activities, was another device (Nwankwo, 1997:401). There is, perhaps, no greater indictment of the Nigerian youth than that from a former president of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Oludare Ogunlana who alleged that 'cultists' have taken over the organization as students now tot guns at the organization's congresses (*Thisday*, 21 August 2002: 48-59).⁸

Given the constrictive lifestyles of the youth, the general situation of joblessness and social anomie in society, violence has, in many cases, become an avenue for social expression, the ventilation of ideas and the youths' sense of frustration. In such a context, violence can be rationalized as part of the political process. This is more the case when it emanates from groups or individuals with one grievance or another (see Smith 1968, quoted in Anifowose, 1982) or when it remains the only

available avenue for change when all others seem exhausted. Relative deprivation accompanied by rising expectation, frustration and then aggression is one identified cause of such violence. Violence in this instance is also traceable to disjunctions in the social fabric.

In relation to the issue of youth violence, three groups, it should be stated, have (historically) employed violence, in various social contexts. These are those seeking power, those holding onto power, and those in the process of losing power. This has necessarily led to the division of society into three social groups consisting, respectively, of the privileged who have pursued violence, euphemistically called force, in defence of order or the status quo; the oppressed who have resorted to violence in the name of justice and the threatened who have employed violence in fear of displacement (Anifowose, 1987:1). The accelerated mushrooming of fringe youth groups like the OPC, IYC, APC, the Ijaw Youth Congress *aka* Egbesu, Bakassi Boys, and indeed, the exponential rise in the activities of the *Area Boys*, *Almajiri* and the *Yandaba* - all terrorist/destitute groups that find existence on the fringe of conventionality, may be a foretaste of the implosion that may yet bring our society to its knee.

All these may seem to suggest that youths deserve their apparent consignment to political and social oblivion. Nothing, however, could be more counterfactual. The youths, as Letsele (1988) notes, have positive strengths, which, with careful and proper handling, can be beneficial both to themselves and their society. In the particular instance of Nigeria, the youths, it must be re-stated, hold the hope for the future. Both by the advantage of relative mobility and age, they stand eminently recommended, as the future beckons for a new leadership nourished on trust. They must therefore be so empowered. The successful prosecution of Nigerian nationalism and eventual

independence, for example, owed much to the selfless inputs of the youths (see Sklar 1963, Okonkwo 1980, Oyeweso 1996, Biobaku 1992, Olorode 2001). This and other several other examples prove the truth of our national experience.

Indeed, the core groups that founded two of the three foremost political parties in pre-independence Nigeria, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) and the Action Group (AG), had been leading members of NYM (Nigerian Youth Movement), Nigeria's first ever truly national political party, founded in 1938. It introduced some elements of radicalism into the politics of that era and unlike the Methuselah conclaves (read political parties) of today, the average age of the leaders of the NYM (that included most of the earliest generation of Nigerian nationalists such as Herbert Macauley, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Ernest Ikoli, J.C. Vaughan, Hezekiah .O. Davies and Samuel Akinsanya) was forty. In spite of the elitist character of its leadership, the NYM was, nevertheless, neither 'exclusive nor sectarian in concept'.

There is a wide difference between the nationalistic outlook and practice of politics at this time and the ethnic identity politics of contemporary political culture. The undue emphasis on the ethnic origin of political players coupled with the definition of indigeneity in biological terms has not aided true national integration (Back, 1997). Another pan-Nigerian organization of this period was the Zikist Movement. Founded in 1946 by Nwafor Orizu, a Nigerian student in the United States of America, it accommodated, in its leadership, elements like Abiola Aloba, H.R. Abdallah, Kola Balogun, and Anthony Enahoro, who, while still in his twenties, first moved the motion for Nigeria's independence. Described as 'the angry young men of post war Nigeria', the Zikist Movement was founded by an Igbo, had predominantly Igbo leadership and

coalesced round the ideas and ideals of an Igbo politician and nationalist, Nnamdi Azikiwe. But this fact never was an issue in the way and manner in which the non-Igbo members related with other Igbo members like Mokwugo Okoye, M. C. K. Ajuluchukwu etc.,

Just as former NYM members constituted the core groups of Nigeria's earliest political parties, so did these organizations gave rise to the emergence of yet other groups that played key role in Nigeria's independence struggles and have since been relevant in the polity. One such organization is the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), which was, in a sense, a rib of the Zikist Movement. The NLC is one of the handful of groups today with a semblance of immunity to the virus of ethnic and religious partisanship. Even the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) that has played and continue to play an important role among a sizeable part of the youths of this country had its own forerunners in Nigerian Union of Students (NUS) which became the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) and later National Association of Nigerian Students after its proscription in 1978. These are some of the handful of organizations that still cut across ethnic, social and political divide, and that can still lay claims to some pan-Nigerian presence. They were, as they still are, high fliers that have continued to foster national unity and cohesion in Nigeria's national life. The activities and issues addressed by some of these youth organizations showed a great awareness of and commitment to the demands of nation building.

All of these are reflective of a high sense of leadership and justify calls for the empowerment of the youth as credible participants in the political sphere of the country. And in spite of certain acts that tend to give the lie to their claims of today's youths being 'the leaders of tomorrow', present and past governments have taken certain steps suggestive of their

recognition of the leadership potentials of the youths and the need to empower them. It was, perhaps, in sync with that recognition that the military regime of Murtala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo 1975-79, had in 1978, appointed Segun Okeowo, then President of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) to the Constituent Assembly of that year. The Constituent Assembly was a body of influential Nigerians with the great responsibility to debate the draft of the 1979 constitution that was to follow thirteen long years of military rule, after the coup and counter-coup of 1966 that had ousted civil administration and were to lead to a bitter three-year civil war. This appointment signified the highest point in the empowerment and recognition of the leadership potentials of the youths in the country.

The government failed, thereafter, as have succeeding administrations since, to build on this, allowing the opportunity to mainstream youth participation in national affairs, especially leadership, to fritter away. The NUNS was indeed banned shortly after this and it has, since then, been a steady and accelerated decline from the height of recognition to the depths of infamy. What this demonstrates is that Nigerian youths have a noble political pedigree and given their previous interventions at critical junctures in the country's history, there is no doubt that with adequate support they will rise to their 'manifest destiny' of providing leadership. This calls for concerted efforts, right from the family to social and educational institutions and the state. For the youths' tomorrow, the ruling elite must be seen to truly give their today. The rhetoric of those who campaign 'in poetry but rule in prose' must be curtailed. The youths themselves must not be complacent; they must come once again to the difficult but true realization that leadership is neither given nor won on a platter of gold.

All told, the youths are Nigeria's hope for redefining the polity away from the harmful political culture of past and present dispensations. It is inconceivable that the present lack of foresight among the rulers that has consigned about 60 per cent of the country's virile population to political wilderness will be allowed to persist. It is generally held, and our history has proven, that in times that called for it, the youths of Nigeria have risen to the demands and challenges of leadership and nation building. This they have done without allegiance to any of the primordial sentiments and conduct that have bedeviled the polity to date. Where they have derailed, owing to adult influence and pressure, there is no doubt that their mental and physical conditioning make them amenable to remedial measures. Whence then comes the notion that the youths of Nigeria lack leadership credentials? In disproving such a notions indicative of historical ignorance, the youths of today will do well to reflect on the words of Biobaku (1992: 126):

The question which today's youth might wish to ask is what went wrong? Why are Nigerians so divisive now in their approach to everything? Why are we in danger of ... tribalism... Why are we afraid of merit ... How come that nepotism, corruption and election fraud are rife in our society? ... Surely we can regain our equilibrium only with the emergence of a strong, purposely and dynamic leadership.

Providing that leadership is the challenge before the Nigerian youth of this millennium, it is all he/she needs to confirm his/her bonafides.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the act and practice of politics in

Nigeria, and the defining attributes of the political culture that has given character to the Nigerian polity. It highlighted the various attempts at mobilizing Nigerians for a change from the harmful culture of old for a new one, remarking on the identifiable drawbacks of these attempts. It equally provided a survey, by way of a historical recollection, of the role of the Nigerian youth in the nationalists' struggles that resulted in the country winning her independence in 1960. It calls for a change in the power and leadership balance in Nigeria, concluding that the preparedness of the country for the challenges of the future can only be measured against the backdrop of the degree and extent of the re-mobilization and integration of the youths into the process of governance.

Notes

1. The major current in Nigeria's political discourse sees politics as a game. Examples include Sina Odugbemi's, *Politics and Ideas* – 'Opadokun and the Afenifere power queue'. *The Comet*, 9 June 2002. Femi Osofisan, *Sunday Notes*: 'Soccer is it!' *The Comet*, 9 June 2002. Gbolabo Ogunsanwo, 'The quest for an Igbo president'. *The Comet*, 9 June 2002.
2. In no other area has this been more apparent than in the trenchant calls for 'power shift' by various geo-political regions in the country.
3. Olusegun Obasanjo, Special National Broadcast on 25 August 2002.
4. While academic diplomas do not determine intelligence, it is instructive that no Nigerian head of government, from Balewa to Obasanjo has been or is a university graduate.
5. This image of the Nigerian politician as violent is given graphic portrayal in a *Sunday Punch Cartoon* of August 2002, which depicts a politician in his study busy reading a book titled, 'The Encyclopedia of Thuggery'. Other titles in his well-stocked study include 'Guide to Thuggery', 'V is

- for Violence: Advanced Techniques', 'A -Z of violence', etc. and 'colour of violence'.
6. This is the logic behind the concept of *abiku agba* (adult abiku), abiku being a spirit child born to die at infancy. Also, the idea of independence is not popular among African parents, c.f. 'Sophie: Freedom and the gender question' *The Comet*, 6 April 2002: 'If my son is 21 and he is saying that because he has reached such an age then he is free, what then is he free to do? It simply means that I would not be responsible for him anymore. He then has to fend for himself... So if my son is 21 and he *assumes* he is free, then he should not come to me asking for pocket money'.
 7. This has been especially so during the various 'SAP' demonstrations when the polity was made tense and turned into a battlefield of sorts, with anger against mass poverty.
 8. He asserts, '... cultists have hijacked everything ... people now go to NANS congress with guns and all sorts of weapons ... If we don't try to change this people's orientation now, they will come out and take over power one day and the same trend will continue orientation has to start with leadership training for them ...'

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