

Factionalism in an interface bureaucracy: the Nigerian higher education system

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Paper presented at Development Studies Association conference, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 2-4 September 2009

Abstract

Academic literature analyses a multitude of forms of association . patronage, clientelism, kinship . in the context of contemporary African states. But factionalism, despite its impact on the success or failure of those working in African bureaucracies, has received comparatively little attention. The few authors who have touched on the subject (such as Bayart, 1991; Medard, 1982; Lemarchand, 1987; Joseph, 1987; Jega, 2000) tend to examine the concept in the context of the highest level of politics, in particular the role of factions in political parties. An examination of factionalism in interface bureaucracies in Africa is virtually non-existent. My research contributes to the literature by providing an analysis of the formation, role and evolution of factions in Nigerian higher education.

My study shows that factionalism exerts considerable influence in the Nigerian higher education system, in particular on the careers of Nigerian academics, for whom faction membership influences promotions, membership of important departmental and faculty committees and PhD research. Those close to the faction in charge of their department are likely to find their day-to-day lives in the university much easier than those without connections, or connections to a weak or out-of-favour faction.

There is considerable overlap between factionalism and godfatherism in Nigerian universities. Faction members often found that personal links to the faction leader were more important than intra-faction links to colleagues. Factionalism is therefore linked to, though distinct from, broader patterns of patron-clientism in Nigerian higher education. Factions are also constantly evolving, and this evolution provides clues to their social function. In my study, the two main factions began in the 1980s as ideological enemies . one Marxist, the other liberal . but by the time of my fieldwork they had mutated into groups defined by their attitudes towards extra-legal practice. In short, one faction was considerably more likely to take part in extra-legal practices, such as the selling of grades and university places for money, than the other.

My study is based on nine months ethnographic fieldwork in a Nigerian university in 2007. It is empirically grounded and views the state *as is*, in contrast to much academic work on African states, which tends to be abstract, ideological and normative. Instead I argue that an understanding of the state is best achieved through analysis of the way it actually functions and is experienced by service providers and users. I move beyond the abstract to discuss the concrete influences on everyday decisions and encounters.

My paper links closely with the conference theme of clashing values and lifestyles. In particular it focuses on the conflict between the rational-legal basis of the official rules governing Nigerian higher education and local morality, which tends to be based more on kinship and community.

Introduction

Contemporary academic literature on African states draws heavily on analyses of the impact of forms of association such as patronage, clientelism and kinship. Contrastingly, the role of relationships between politically oriented quasi groups (Bujra, 1973: 133) that I characterise here as factions, has received little attention. The few authors who have touched on the subject in Africa (such as Bayart, 1991; Medard, 1982; Lemarchand, 1987; Joseph, 1987; Jega, 2000) tend to examine the concept in the context of party politics. Detailed examination of factionalism in public service bureaucracies in Africa is virtually non-existent. My research contributes to the literature by providing an analysis of the formation, role and evolution of factions in Nigerian higher education. In particular I examine the role of factionalism in the careers of academic staff, including its role in securing employment, promotion and other benefits. My research is based on nine months ethnographic fieldwork at a university in the south-eastern, Igbo-speaking part of Nigeria. In this paper the university is entitled the University of South Eastern Nigeria (USEN)¹.

Factionalism has been subject to a number of theoretical analyses. Perhaps the most useful definition is provided by Brumfiel (1994: 4, original emphasis), who proposes that factions are *structurally and functionally similar groups which, by virtue of their similarity, compete for resources and positions of power and prestige*. The clear subtext of this definition is self-interest: factions are viewed as groups whose main role is acquisition of resources for their members, as opposed to advancing any particular ideology or cause. Nicholas (1977) argues that there are five characteristics of factions: they engage in conflict; are political; are not corporate groups; their members are recruited by a leader; and members are recruited on diverse principles. However, these definitions are by no means agreed upon by all. Friedrich (1968) comments on factional competition in a Mexican village and argues that ideology is one of the defining features of the conflict. It is important, therefore, to recognise that self-interest and ideological considerations may suffuse in factional conflict, each having greater or lesser importance for different faction members.

The factional struggle in USEN's public administration department

In USEN's public administration department, where I was based, there are two broad groupings, and every member of academic staff bar one is closely allied to one of the two groups. The split exerts a large influence on departmental activity, and was acknowledged as existing by every staff member I spoke to. One senior member of staff described the departmental split as *a huge chasm, bitter and fascistic* (Professor Ekene Okpara, interview, 3 September 2007), while a prominent member of one faction humorously mentioned his distaste for the other in his inaugural lecture, illustrating the level to which the conflict was acknowledged within the university. Faction membership is very much a zero-sum game: by being closely allied to one faction individuals will find it extremely difficult to become close to members of the other camp. In the case of the non-aligned staff member, Chigozie Emerenini, it was even more difficult, in that . according to him . people in both camps believed he was closer to the other, meaning that establishing close, trusting relationships with anyone in the department was difficult. The difficulty of associating with both camps also had an impact on my data collection, in that during my research I took

¹ The name I have given to the university, department and all individuals are pseudonyms. In some cases characteristics such as the ethnicity, state of origin, gender or academic department of respondents has been changed to protect their identity. I have chosen to do this because many of the issues discussed are highly sensitive and my first priority is to protect my respondents.

strong steps not to associate myself openly with one faction for fear of alienating myself from the other. However, these efforts were unsuccessful, and members of one camp began to associate me closely with the other. In this way my own experience illustrates both that it is not possible to be close to more than one faction, and the ease with which one may become associated with a group. In my case, this occurred when a member of one faction saw me in the office of a member of the other camp.

My closeness to one faction and corresponding alienation from the other had an impact on my data collection. One of the two factions I describe in this paper was generally made up of people who were sympathetic to me and my research and were happy to discuss their experiences, even those concerning relatively sensitive topics. By contrast, with one exception, the members of the other faction were much less open and I found it difficult to gain an understanding of their views. My difficulty was compounded in the latter part of my stay at USEN when I became concerned that some members of this group were not happy with my research and my presence on campus. Indeed, at this time I was rather concerned for my own safety. As a result of this fear I was extremely reluctant to ask for interviews from certain people, and I certainly felt unable to ask them for their views on sensitive topics such as patronage and corruption. Therefore this analysis of factionalism draws heavily on the views of one faction . the anti-select club . and other members of academic staff and students, but, with one exception, not members of the other faction I describe here, the select club.

The factionalism in the public administration department began in the 1960s and 1970s when the department was largely split along ideological lines, in that there was a liberal group and a Marxist group, each led by a charismatic member of senior staff. At the time all the departments in social science were split along Cold War lines. During this period ideological differences did not prevent staff from enjoying each other's company socially: differences were to do with academic debate rather than personal animosity. However, the mid-1980s were a time of great upheaval in Nigerian universities (Anugwom, 2002), as in the country as a whole, as structural adjustment and the devaluation of the Naira brought increasing scarcity, following the plentiful years of the late-1970s oil boom. Conditions for staff, including salaries, worsened considerably (ibid) and some used this as a justification for participating in extra-legal practices in order to augment their wages. The splits in university departments at USEN took on a different character around this time, the new cleavages being based more around beliefs on the acceptance of extra-legal practices and less on national politics, though personnel remained broadly the same: those who had been in the liberal camp were those who were viewed as most likely to participate in extra-legal practice and those in the Marxist camp the least, though this was by no means absolute. It is not clear why the Marxist group were less likely to participate in extra-legal practice, though the importance of ideology . which would be likely to be stronger amongst Marxists, a doctrine that tends to attract committed followers . over self-interest is a plausible explanation. Indeed, Nicholas (1977: 57) argues that ideology forms a greater part of factional conflict for socialists than for conservatives. The division over the issue of moral standards at USEN persisted while the ideological divide did not. Many of those who had formerly been in the Marxist camp retained their belief in socialist ideology, but it no longer formed the basis of factional conflict. Lemarchand (1987) comments that factions in Africa are capable of transformation and have an inherent fluidity. The factions at USEN illustrate this capacity for change.

A further change in the ideological nature of the split took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the fall of the Soviet Union. Many of those who had previously declared themselves Marxists immediately disassociated themselves from the ideology and began to characterise themselves as liberals. Two of my respondents did this, and were also viewed as particularly likely to take part in extra-legal practice. The jump to the liberal camp was viewed as crass political opportunism by those remaining on the Marxist side, and illustrates the fluid nature of affiliations at USEN and the way in which ideology may be used as cover for self-interest. It was widely remarked that factionalism had become more personal and more pervasive over time.

During my time at USEN, respondents were in broad agreement that the issue of morality in working practices remained the driving force behind the split, though attitudes towards scholarship were closely related. As one respondent put it, there are those who are *here to trade* and those who *want to contribute to the university realising its [official] objectives* (Chizoba Ndukwe, interview, 2 October 2007). These people inevitably gravitate towards others who share their views. One faction member said that he seeks to establish relationships with people with the same *value system relationship* as him, meaning a belief in hard work and upholding the stated values of the university.

The next two sections outline the characteristics and personalities in the two main factions. I address the anti-select club first, despite it being in many ways a response to its select club counterpart, because of my superior knowledge of its functioning and personalities.

Anti-select club

The first of the two main factions in public administration I have called the anti-select club (ASC). The group does not have a name for itself, unlike in factions mentioned by Auyero in Argentina (2000) and Devine in Bangladesh (1999), both of which take the name of their leader as the basis for their title. As its name implies, the ASC exists only by default, a direct result of the existence of the select club, the other main faction. Its inception occurred soon after the inauguration of the current Vice Chancellor (VC) in 2005, when the select club went *over the heads of the department* to appoint a Head of Department (HoD) who would *give them leeway* to participate in extra-legal practice (Nnanna Umunna, interview, 3 October 2007). As a result of this, all lecturers who had not been involved in this endeavour were called for a meeting by the VC and *that's how we became a group* (ibid). The ASC therefore owe their existence to a successful attempt by the select club to install their preferred candidate to the position of HoD. Prior to the existence of the ASC, the departmental split had been much more informal.

The ASC is an extremely informal group of academics, mainly in public administration but also in other departments in the social sciences faculty. During my time at USEN the ASC, like the select club, had a clear leader, though other very senior staff were also closely allied to the ASC. These academics, however, did not have an active role in the ASC during my time in Nigeria. The *de facto* leader of the ASC during my time at USEN was a charismatic Marxist scholar named Professor Arinze Okafor, who was also in a position of authority within the faculty. He also has a PhD from a prestigious American university and is an internationally-renowned scholar.

The vast majority of staff members associated with this group espoused an ideology that can be described as socialist or Marxist; as noted above, though the factional conflict no longer

concerned this issue, a number of Marxist scholars retained their belief in its ideology. This was a key aspect of the way the group presented itself. Many of the group were also heavily involved with the trade union for Nigerian academic staff, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). However, neither of these two characteristics were prerequisites for membership². A number of ASC members were not active members of ASUU³, nor were they adherents to a Marxist ideology. This situation has evolved since the origins of this faction, and illustrates the dynamic nature of the factional struggle at USEN.

In addition to a leftist ideology, many members of the ASC saw themselves as guardians of a long-established tradition of scholarship at USEN and within the public administration department. Faction members would often emphasise the *traditions* and *culture* of the department, and how those currently running the department . the select club . are moving the department away from its roots:

This particular department ... has a culture rooted in hard work. So for you to move in from elsewhere and start academic work here ... if you are not too careful in learning and understanding how we function, the tendency that you might bring in some of the practices that are not known here (Wilson Nnaji, interview, 25 July 2007).

Here my informant characterises himself as an academic of long-standing who understands the departmental culture, despite the fact that he is one of the department's newest recruits. He alludes, through the phrase *some practices that are not known here*, to extra-legal practices such as sorting and selling handouts that members of the select club engage in. Wilson appears to suggest that those who favour hard work and academic culture are guardians of an old tradition in Nigerian higher education, while the newcomers he refers to are implicitly seen as part of a newer, inferior tradition based on personal gain. The safeguarding of old traditions was presented as one of the ASC's main *raison d'être*.

The ASC in public administration consisted of approximately ten to fifteen people, including some postgraduate students whose supervisors were members. The majority of these students did not appear to have any commitment to the group's ideology, but seemed to attend meetings either because they felt compelled to by their supervisor, or because they believed that establishing strong relationships with academic staff could assist them, either while they were still students or afterwards. The group is extremely disparate, with students and staff members having a variety of relationships with other members of the group.

At the time of my research, the ASC were rather marginalised within the public administration department, with members suffering in regularization . the process academics go through to become permanent members of the faculty . promotion and committee membership at the hands of their select club rivals. The main function of the ASC at the time was to forward the interests of its members, such as to ensure that they received regularizations and promotions on time. At the time of my research it was not able to fulfil this function particularly well. Its ability to influence the prevalence of extra-legal practice in the university and to encourage scholarship, which I noted above as being one of its primary roles, was also severely hampered by its lack of power within the department.

²There was no formalised way of joining the ASC. I use the word membership here to refer to a sense of belonging to a like-minded group and participating in their activities.

³Every member of academic staff in Nigerian universities is automatically an ASUU member, and subscriptions are automatically deducted from salaries. However, there are many staff who are nominal members but actively work against the union in university politics.

Despite my close relationship with some anti select-club members, I was still not privy to the internal workings of the group. Indeed, it is quite possible that there was no group working at all, outside bilateral relationships between members, particularly between each member and the leader. One of the main functions of the ASC appeared to be to link each individual with Professor Okafor, a man who, as a senior academic, could have a significant impact on their current and future careers. This corresponds to suggestions in literature (Bujra, 1973: 134; Nicholas, 1977) that factions are more about the relationship between members and the leader than within the faction as a group. This suggestion is also at the root of considerations of factionalism as little more than an aspect of broader patron-client relations (Olivier de Sardan, 2009). The largely bilateral relations within the ASC were very different from the internal organisation of the select club.

Select club

The select club is a group of academic staff at USEN that, in contrast to the ASC, is a semi-official group of which staff can become members. It is much more organised than its opposite number in public administration. The club contains members from across the social science faculty, but is particularly dominated by the public administration department. The openly espoused goal of the select club is the acquisition of material wealth, which has recently superseded educational attainment as a marker of social success in Nigeria (Chukwuezi, 2001: 60), and members see themselves as *select* in these terms, not in terms of academic or intellectual prowess. During my time at USEN the select club was *in control* of the public administration department, meaning that it had significant influence over decisions on such issues as allocation of resources, staff promotions and committee memberships. A number of factors contributed to this. First, the HoD at the time was a man who, while not a select club member, was nonetheless sympathetic to their aims. A number of my respondents suggested that this was simple opportunism on the HoD's part. Departmental Headships are particularly important roles in Nigerian higher education as the final say over numerous departmental activities rests with the Head. Second, the select club had close links with the Vice Chancellor . a position of unrivalled importance in Nigerian higher education . which substantially improved their ability to act independently: one non-select club member of staff commented that their association with the VC allowed them to *become liberated* from constraints on their action (Professor Charles Ozo, interview, 6 September 2007). Third, the *de facto* leader of the select club was a particularly powerful member of staff who had close ties with the VC independent of his position as leader of the select club. He had previously held important positions in national politics.

A number of my respondents commented that the glue that holds the select club together is their collective participation in extra-legal practices. One of the main functions of the club, therefore, is a form of protection from external sanctions on their behaviour. As a result, it was widely believed that the select club in public administration operated on the basis of collective decision-making. This marks it out as being significantly different from the ASC, which seemed to have no such codes of behaviour. In addition, it was commented to me that the select club are much more exclusionary than the ASC, specifically because of their participation in extra-legal activities.

To join the select club one must be seen as acceptable to current members, meaning that one must have similar attitudes to members about participation in extra-legal practices. New members are usually introduced to the club by an existing member. However, an introduction alone may not be sufficient, as the experience of one of my respondents illustrates. A select

club member with whom my respondent was friendly had invited him to one of their meetings . organised to celebrate his acquisition of a new 4x4 . in the hope that my respondent might join the club. However, when he arrived at the meeting he found that there was open hostility to his presence, and other staff members present, who my respondent said were usually very cordial to him, did not speak up in his defence. He was forced to eat alone outside the meeting, then left. I asked what the meeting had concerned, and was told that the guests were discussing their ~~mundane~~ acquisitions. He has not been asked to join the select club since. This respondent has had difficulties throughout his time at USEN, both as a student and a member of staff, because of his unwillingness to support things he does not agree with. My feeling is that the select club regarded him as too independent and therefore untrustworthy. As noted above, unwavering support for the club and collective decision-making is a vital part of the select club ethos.

Like the ASC, but perhaps to an even greater extent, the select club in public administration was dominated by one man. In this case the individual was a very senior staff member with considerable experience in national and local politics. As a result, the benefits accrued by members of the select club are likely to be derived from a combination of closeness to the faction and closeness to the leader. A respondent commented that one of the reasons certain select club members are able to secure promotions is because they are tied ~~to~~ the apron strings of their leader.

Despite differences in organisation and goals, the select club performs extremely similar functions for its members to its opposite number, which I discuss in greater detail below. Its primary role is to act as protector of individuals and to ensure that they advance up the academic ladder as quickly and efficiently as possible which, in turn, gives greater power to the group. During my time at USEN the select club performed this function extremely effectively: of four promotions announced at the departmental board meeting I attended, all were select club members. This is despite the fact that some of these promotions were to grades not yet achieved by other staff members who had considerably longer service in the institution. Length of service is a key criteria for promotion.

Non-faction members

As noted above, there was just one member of staff in the public administration department who was not a member of either of the two factions. Chigozie Emerenini presented his situation to me as one of choice, though he was regarded with a degree of derision by some ASC members, and the select club were very keen to stall his attempts at gaining promotion, so it was extremely unlikely he would have been welcomed as a member of either group. In addition, Chigozie was the keenest of all public administration academics to make my acquaintance, something I put down to his isolation within the department. Despite Chigozie's non-membership of the ASC, he had Professor Arinze Okafor as his patron, which had a positive impact on his career.

Through my observations of relationships within the public administration department, it was clear that Chigozie did not fit into either of the two groups. He appeared to be very interested in advancing his own position without working particularly hard to achieve it, something that would have naturally put him into the select club camp. During conversations with Chigozie it was clear that he had a broadly anti-colonial, though not avowedly Marxist, political stance, something which would have allied him more closely to the ASC. My feeling was that he was

viewed as rather lazy, something that did not fit with the ASC ethos of the value of academic work.

Chigozie himself was unequivocal about his position within the departmental camp structure. He was a member of neither camp, and did not wish to be, stating that he did not wish to abide by any culture of collective decision-making that existed in the two camps. My experiences had led me to believe that this collective decision-making was stronger in the select club, and Chigozie confirmed this. Chigozie's rejection of the factional politics of the department and desire to follow his own path was unique in the department, but it is clear that it would have been impossible without the patronage of Prof. Okafor. His academic career was quite unsuccessful. It had taken him two years just to get his post regularized. It is likely to have been even less successful had he needed to navigate his path alone.

The social role of factions

Understanding the nature of the factional struggle at USEN is important to shed light on both the methods individuals use to succeed in Nigerian higher education and the nature of factionalism in the Nigerian state. It is also an arena that has been dealt with extremely seldom in academic literature.

Anti-select club

The anti-select club's role can be interpreted in two major ways. The first interpretation, which reflects the stated views of faction members themselves, is that the ASC is a group of scholars working towards bringing the practice of academic life at USEN closer to its official aims: teaching and research. The group prides itself on its work ethic and non-participation in extra-legal practices, and actively contrasts itself with the select club. ASC members frequently commented that the reason for their animosity towards the select club was based on these two connected principles: emphasis on scholarship and non-participation in extra-legal practices. This interpretation suggests that in fact there are significant differences between the two factions, based on their vision of how the university should operate. The outcome of the factional struggle will, therefore, inevitably produce social change as the success of one faction will have significantly different impacts on the workings of the department and, by extension, the university, than the success of the other.

The existence of the ASC does not appear to influence the workings of the select club, which continues to act in the same way as before the formation of the ASC. Conversely, the ASC is a reactive organisation, as evidenced by its formation as a response to the select club. Once again, this could point to differentiation between the two factions: a group of people (the select club) with a particular viewpoint on the way the university should run gain influence and begin to change the way the university runs, so those opposed to this viewpoint (the ASC) organise themselves in opposition. What is of importance is that different attitudes on the way the university should run provide the primary motivation for the formation of the ASC, as opposed to a viewpoint based on self-interest.

The second interpretation of the role of the ASC is that in fact the group does not have any higher motive than simply seeking to gain control of resources for themselves, and uses its rhetorical support for seriousness and scholarship as a front for self-interest. This was certainly not the impression presented to me by ASC members, but a number of factors suggest that the argument has some merit. First, the main forum that I attended where the ASC met was a discussion group around issues of interest in African and Nigerian

development. The discussions were heavily led by Prof. Okafor, and others . with a couple of exceptions . tended to compete to praise and agree with his views. One lecturer sought to complete his leader's sentences at every opportunity. For some members of this group, therefore, the main reason for attending these meetings appeared to be currying favour with the leader as opposed to the forthright exchange of views that is associated with political discussion, which was the ostensible reason for the meetings. It is also notable that the meetings rarely took place when Prof. Okafor was not on campus, further illustrating the fact that many attendees were more interested in pleasing the leader than engaging in serious scholarship.

A further issue concerns the attendance of postgraduate students at these discussions. I was able to read a number of papers written by postgraduate students attending this group, and all addressed issues relating to Nigerian development through the prism of a neo-Marxist, dependency-theory-led approach. However, when I discussed these issues with the students they suggested that they were simply following the lead of their academic supervisor, and often did not agree with what they were writing or were uninterested in the topic. Furthermore, one student informed me that she attended the meetings because Prof. Okafor was her Masters supervisor and she therefore could not afford to be absent: again, currying favour was more important than scholarship.

The character of these meetings suggests a variety of different reasons people became attached to the ASC. For some, they were genuinely interested in both scholarship and had a leftist political stance. They were not involved in extra-legal practices and sought to change the way the university was run. These people could be seen to conform to a view of factionalism as a mechanism of social transformation, in that their goals are distinct from that of the opposing faction and, should they gain power in the department, its *modus operandi* would change. However, even for these people it is important to note that, despite their assertions that ideology and commitment to scholarship are crucial motivating factors for faction membership, the support offered by the faction in a hostile environment may be equally important. Contrastingly, there were others for whom membership of the faction and, in particular, building and maintaining a strong relationship with the faction's leader, were done in the name of self interest alone, whether to improve chances of a subsequent job offer or ability to gain promotion. Often these people had weaker links to the faction as a whole, but stronger links to the leader.

A further piece of evidence pointing to the self-interest thesis is the actions of staff at the departmental board meeting I attended. A number of questions were raised at this meeting by ASC members, and, despite the widespread existence of exam malpractice in the university and issues such as low quality of teaching and lack of opportunities for research, all questions raised were directly linked to the factional struggle and to personal welfare. These included queries as to why certain members of staff (predominantly ASC members) were excluded from certain responsibilities, particularly those that carried high remuneration, and other issues related to contracts and salaries. This appears to point to a more general pattern of self-interest in the university, in which factions could be seen as simply the best avenue . or, to use Auyero's (2000) phrase, the problem-solving network . through which individuals gain access to rewards. It links closely to Olivier de Sardan's (2009: 45) argument that 'every-man-for-himself-ism' is rife in Francophone West African bureaucracies. Olivier de Sardan (2009: 45-46) goes on to comment that as a result of this trend, 'meetings involving the collective discussion of measures to improve quality or productivity are extremely rare.'

the case of the public administration department at USEN, departmental board meetings were both rare and predominantly used to advance individual or collective grievances, as opposed to working towards improvement in performance.

Select club

Analysis of the select club is more difficult for this research than analysis of the ASC, for the simple reason that I spent more time with the other group. However, it is still possible to provide an analysis of the functions of the group for its members, through my own observations, conversations with members and those close to the group and the views of others. Unlike the ASC, for whom I analysed two potential interpretations of their role, for the select club there are three: that they are trying to influence the *modus operandi* of the university, and thus can be seen as engaging in a form of social transformation; that they are working in their own self-interest; or that they combine the two, working to promote self-interest but using their wealth to benefit their primordial public (Ekeh, 1975): that is, their home community. The difference between the ASC and the select club in this regard is that, for the select club, all these goals will result in the same outcome in terms of their activities within the university . acting to increase their own wealth . because their professed ideology and individual self-interest are essentially the same.

Given that their *raison d'être* is material gain, it might seem strange to argue that the select club . or at least some of its members . are acting to produce social change. But a short case study of the member of the select club of whom I have greatest knowledge provides some evidence for this. Dr. Chinedu Obi was born into a poor family but had managed to reach the level of Senior Lecturer at USEN, and during my stay there it was rumoured that he was to be made a Professor. Achievement of this sort from someone of humble background is no mean feat in Nigeria, where money and personal connections . which are much less accessible to the poor . are often imperative for success. During my time at USEN I was assigned to help Chinedu run his lectures on two international development undergraduate courses. During these lectures Chinedu suggested that poor people are poor because they are weak and that inequality is a natural state. He suggested that fighting poverty at an individual level is the correct way to address the problem, meaning that it is the responsibility of each person to look after him or herself. On one occasion he took this viewpoint further, suggesting that armed robbers who are successful might be seen as achieving Chinedu clearly had little time for solutions based on mutual assistance or community solidarity.

Chinedu Obi was an active member of the select club, an organisation that also seeks to tackle poverty at an individual level through wealth acquisition, with little regard to the methods employed, and little sympathy for those who do not succeed. Given Chinedu's ideological commitment to individualism, it could be argued that, rather than existing for self-interest, Chinedu's membership of the select club represented the best outlet for his views on how society *should* be structured: each person or family for themselves. As with the ASC, therefore, the select club could be viewed as having a socially transformative role, in that it is a vehicle for the formation of a society based on principles of self-determination and self-interest as opposed to mutual assistance. Rather than simply existing to forward the self-interest of its members, therefore, the select club could be viewed as revolutionary in character. It could also be viewed as an expression of the sorts of values that have seen the rise of 419, an expression for corruption that is selfish and rejects traditional values of patron-clientism and reciprocal obligation (Smith, 2006). Further evidence for this argument is the contention by a senior ASC member of staff that the select club is promoting a rightist

ideology in emphasising wealth acquisition, insisting that theirs is the way to go (Professor Charles Ozo, interview, 6 September 2007). My interpretation of this is that the select club actively promote wealth acquisition as an ideology, believing that self-determination is more worthy than occupational solidarity within the university.

The second interpretation of the actions of the select club is that the group simply exists to further the interests of its members. This interpretation suggests that members of the group are not interested in altering society in favour of greater individualism, but in fact are simply competing with the ASC for access to rewards. It is certainly the case that others believe that the select club operate in their own interests rather than seeking social change. One respondent described the group as a social climbing kind of club and that members were obsessed with materialism and flashy cars and buildings (Chizoba Ndukwe, interview, 2 October 2007). This description does not paint a picture of a group who are interested in fostering social change, but who seek to increase their own wealth and status.

The third interpretation requires analysis of the relationship between the university and society, in particular the communities of faction members. This interpretation emphasises both self-interest and obligations to one's community of origin, an important aspect of contemporary life for Igbo people (Smith, 2005), which is the dominant ethnic group in the region where I carried out my research. Individualism is stressed as an important value, and if the individual achieves success, this reflects well on the community as a whole. Success is usually measured in material terms. It could therefore be argued that select club members are acting for the good of their own community which will gain both economically through sharing of resources and in status terms through the advancement of one of their members at the expense of the university. This argument fits very closely with that advanced by Ekeh (1975: 108), who commented that it is legitimate to rob the civic public [the state] in order to strengthen the primordial public. It is given extra credence by comments made by the leader of the select club to me during my fieldwork, when he argued that place of origin is paramount and other realms of belonging in Nigerian society - religion, trades unions, social groups - are peripheral (Prof. Chibueze Okoro, interview, 16 April 2007). This argument also suggests that select club members have goals they seek to achieve while in the university - in this case, to take from the university in order to assist one's home community - and that factions are little more than vehicles for the advancement of these goals. The select club is therefore very close to being, to use Auyero's (2000) phrase, a problem-solving network.

Conclusion

My research suggests that factions play an important role within Nigerian higher education. In an environment where decision-making about promotions, teaching allocations and other benefits are not always decided on the basis of merit, closeness to a faction has become an important way of getting on for Nigerian academics. As noted above, it is linked to broader patterns of patron-clientism, as faction members often have closer ties to the faction's leader than to other faction members, and many rely on these links to achieve their goals.

My research suggests that the two main factions at USEN serve different purposes for different members. There is an element of resource acquisition in both camps, and there are individuals on both side of the divide who are simply opportunists, who would join any group if it assisted their climb up the social and academic hierarchy. There are also some on the ASC side who combine self-interest with a genuine belief in the official rules and values of

the university, in scholarship and non-participation in extra-legal practices. My research suggests that these people are dominant in the ASC, and if the ASC gained power within the department, faculty or university, the effect would likely be two-fold: resources and appointments would move towards the ASC, but there would also be a reduction in the acceptability of certain extra-legal practices.

On the select club side there are also likely to be differing experiences and opinions within the group. My research suggests that the most common feeling within this group is that their main aim is to increase their own wealth, but that they see this as a legitimate aim in itself. This may be linked to a belief that plundering the state to assist the community is justified. It can be argued for many reasons that societal rules do suggest that this kind of behaviour is acceptable. Pressure from outside the university to provide for home communities, belief in ideas of *in* and *out* groups, in which the university is outside the realm of *primordial public* and thus open to plunder, the belief that individual and community achievement cannot be separated, all point to so-called *individualism* being a mask for something different: support for community at the expense of the institution. Ekeh (1975) argues strongly for this thesis and highlights the colonial era as the origin of the alienation of Nigerian people from the state.

My research at USEN illustrates the complexity of relationships within institutions that provide services for the state. Analysing these relationships and the impact they have on service provision is important to gain a better understanding of the contemporary Nigerian state. My findings illustrate that reducing analysis of contemporary African states to labels such as *neopatrimonial* (Chabal, 2002; Medard, 1982), *prebendal* (Joseph, 1987) or *felonious* (Bayart et al, 1999) does not do justice to their complexity, and more micro-empirical research on public provision of services in Africa is necessary.

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