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Governance and Social Order in Traditional Societies: Lessons for Modern Political Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

Prior to the emergence of modern political structures, indigenous societies in Africa and indeed Nigeria had within them, traditional mechanisms for governance and by extension social order. However, these indigenous ways of maintaining social order which hitherto were invested in the collective conscience of the people became strongly endangered when colonialism was entrenched. Since then, the basic social cement of society which was enabled by shared belief system and communal living were relegated into the rubbish heap of social history and replaced by individualism, private property and profit motifs. This created widespread social disorder despite entrenching a distinctive kind of governance known as western democracy. This paper examined the issue of governance and social order in traditional societies with a view of highlighting some useful lessons that could be mainstreamed into modern political systems in Nigeria. To do this, the paper relied on content analysis for its data collection as well as the Marxist Political Economy theory as its framework of analysis. Based on the analysis of information and data gathered from secondary sources, the paper concludes that modern day governance systems are largely driven by profit maximization for incumbents rather than the collective good that characterized traditional societies. In light of this, the paper recommends that while it would be difficult to revert to the communal style of governance that characterized traditional societies, modern political or governance systems can achieve social order if they ensure that the dividends of democracy are enjoyed by majority of the citizens in the country.

Keywords:
Governance, Social order, Traditional societies, Modern political institutions, Nigeria

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Background to the Study

Prior to the emergence of modern political structures, indigenous societies in Africa and indeed Nigeria had within them, traditional mechanisms for governance and by extension social order. However, the preliminary stage of globalization that was occasioned by the industrial revolution meant that African societies had no choice but to face the predatory wrath of the western societies. This relationship that emerged through trade and later political as well as economic domination under colonial rule became the singular most important factor that led to the cataclysmic change in traditional societies across the African continent. One of the critical changes that occurred as a result of globalization and European contact with Africa is the transformation of the mode of production from a largely communal to a peripheral capitalist system. This structural transformation provided the necessary and sufficient conditions for several other alterations to occur including the issue of governance and social order.

The sense of community associated with the communal system of traditional societies prior to the emergence of colonialism in what is now known as Nigeria and indeed other African countries, provided meaning to all spheres of human endeavour including governance, economics, religion and morality as well as education among others. According to Olowu (2018), traditional practices that are based on the communal mode of production found in pre-colonial African societies kept the heart of society in harmony. This is an indication that within the communal character of the traditional societies, there were inbuilt mechanisms that defined how the societies were administered and how people conformed to the rules and regulations in that society. Perhaps the Durkheimian collective conscience which rests on the aggregate sentiments of traditional societies woven around their belief systems, culture, values and norms stood as the key determinant of governance and social order.

Interestingly, the colonial affront on the African continent by the European nations is known to have greatly altered the traditional way of life of the people leaving them with no choice but the unhealthy integration into the world capitalist system as peripheral societies that have to contend with the strange contradictions of a new kind of social relation. It is the argument of this paper that the indigenous ways of maintaining social order which hitherto were invested in the collective conscience of the people became strongly endangered when colonial capitalism was entrenched. As a result, the basic social cement of society which was enabled by shared belief system and communal living were relegated into the rubbish heap of social history and replaced by individualism, private property and profit motifs. By extension, the new way of life brought about by colonial capitalism paved the way for an unhealthy political economy scenario that is defined by widespread social chaos which African societies felt obliged to follow albeit with mixed fillings.

While a good number of academic papers have been written on the pre-colonial traditional societies and how the colonial administration affected the way of life of Africa and indeed Nigeria, very few attempts have been made to provide an understanding of

how traditional governance and its relationship with social order can influence modern political behaviour in the country. In light of this, the focus of this paper is to provide a detailed knowledge on the link between governance and social order in traditional societies and how associated lessons can influence the modern political behaviour in Nigeria. To achieve this, the Marxist political economy approach is deployed here both as a theoretical framework and a method of analysis to show that a distinctive feature of the traditional societies was the fact that they were devoid of the kind of sharp and contradictory class relations that now characterize modern peripheral capitalist political systems as is the case with Nigeria.

The aim of this paper is to show how the governance structure and system of traditional societies enabled social order and how modern political systems in Nigeria can benefit from the key indicators that defined this sense of administration and tranquility associated with these largely pre-colonial social enclaves.
The specific objectives of the paper are to:

i. Examine the issue of governance in traditional societies in Nigeria
ii. Determine how the political economy of governance enabled social order in traditional societies
iii. Highlight the lessons that modern political institutions can learn from traditional societies in terms of governance and social order

Research Questions
The questions that were answered in this paper are as follows:

i. What was the nature of governance in traditional societies in Nigeria?
ii. How did the political economy of governance enable social order in traditional societies?
iii. What lessons can modern political institutions learn from traditional societies in terms of governance and social order in Nigeria?

Literature Review
This section dealt with the review of the few literature that were found to be relevant under the different sub-headings. The review focused on two key areas namely; conceptual clarification and theoretical framework since the entire paper relied on secondary sources of information.

Conceptual Clarification
There are four variables associated with the central thesis of this paper. These are governance, social order, traditional societies and modern political institutions. Hence, as is the Weberian directive for sociologists to always define the concepts that they treat, an attempt is made to clarify these four concepts below. However, by extension, a conceptual framework is equally provided to show how these concepts interact.

Governance: Within the social sciences, the concept of governance has been variously defined. However, for the purpose of this paper, the definition by Fukuyama (cited in Iwarimie-Jaja & Raimi, 2018 p.110) which sees governance as an act and a process through

which governments carry out their day-to-day activity of administering or managing the affairs of a state is adopted. As a result, governance becomes the conscious attempt by a designated group of people either elected, selected or otherwise to regulate the affairs of a given set of people and ensure the maintenance of order.

Social Order: Just like the term governance, social order has equally attracted a riot of definition from different scholars. However, for our purpose, social order is defined to mean the state of social existence in any society where very minimal crises exists amongst and between groups in their everyday social interaction. In light of this Iwarimie-Jaja and Raimi (2018, p.110) contend that social order simply embodies the extent to which class relations do not generate social antagonisms that undermine the co-existence of the inhabitants of any society.

Traditional societies: This refers to all those societies that are still in their non-complex stages that depend on mostly rudimentary methods of survival as well as simple division of labour that is based on age, sex and status with strict dependence on cultural belief systems and customs. Operationally, the concept refers to all hitherto existing societies prior to the emergence of colonialism in Nigeria.

Modern Political Institutions: For the purpose of this paper, the term modern political institution is defined as political organizations that came into being following the wake of colonialism as distinct from those that existed in the pre-colonial period in Nigeria.

Fig. 1: Conceptual interactions between the key variables

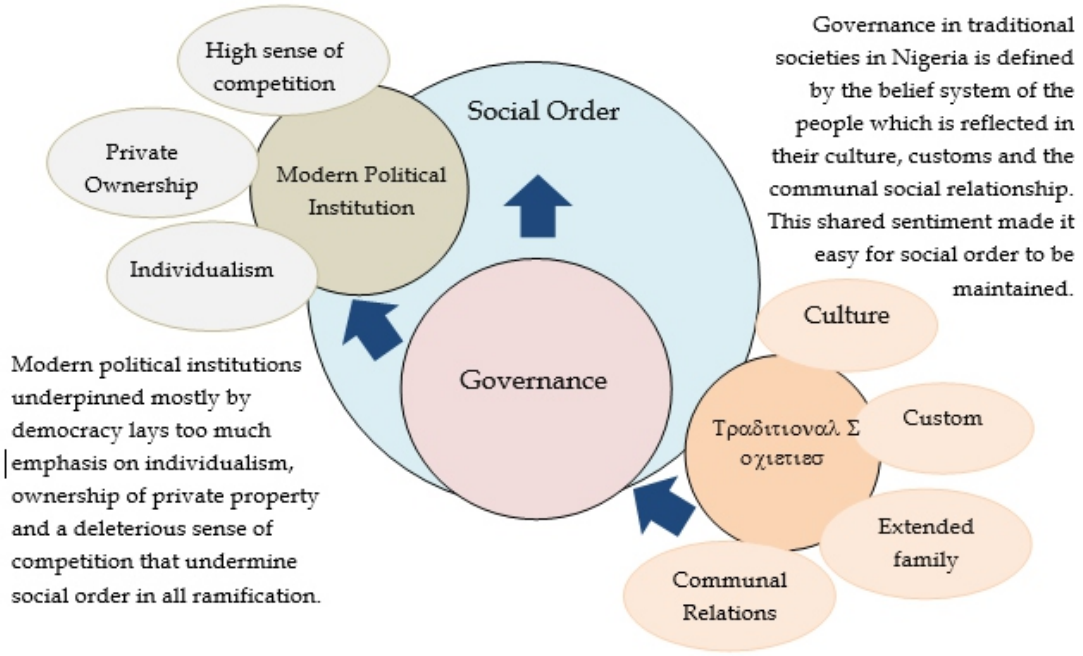

Fig. 1 above captures the interface between the four basic concepts in this paper. It shows that governance in traditional societies is characterized by the collective conscience which is woven around the culture and custom of the people and given meaning by the extended family and the communal social relations of these societies. However, with the modern political institution which emerged as an inevitable outcome of the colonial administration, these traditional ways of life gave way to individualism, private ownership defined by colonial capitalism and above all, a high sense of competition which ensured that people now socially, economically, religiously and politically conflict with each other. This latter social scenario paved the way for a progressive distortion of the social order that characterized the traditional governance system associated with the pre-colonial era in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The Marxist Political Economy Approach

The Marxist political economy theory as the name implies is associated with the German scholar Karl Marx who developed and made the theory popular in the social sciences. Marx is known to have outlined the inner workings of the theory especially its historical materialist character. As a theory, the analytical architecture of the Marx's variant of the political economy approach rests significantly on the assumption that the economic sub-system provides social meaning to the political sub-system with the latter reciprocating this relationship. It is in support of this that Ryazanskaya (1993) opine that this established relationship between the economy and the polity becomes the unavoidable foundation upon which the overall values as well as culture and norms of any society rest. In other words, the social relations and the nature of the classes that emerge within the dominant mode of production goes a long way to determine the political behaviourin any society. Furthermore, this same class relations that act themselves out with regard to the economy and polity also provide direction to the other sub-systems such as; religion, education among others.

As Amundsen (2010) observed, the Marxist political economy approach provides a dialectical framework for understanding how the different parts of society function based on the dictate of the economic infrastructure. In this sense, the relationship between the economic sub-system and other sub-systems in society is one that is defined by the dialectical interface between the class of those who own the means of production and those who own nothing but their labour power. Interestingly, the theory also submits that the class exploitation that plays out in the economy also reflects in the political system as the ruling class in alliance with the owners of the means of production use the instrumentality of power to further oppress and exploit the masses. In other words, Marx maintains that the economic sub-system significantly influences the political sub-system and by extension, the social fallouts of this intricate relationship goes a long way to give meaning to social life in other spheres of human endeavour.

Consequently, the Marxist political economy perspective as a method of analysis presents a unique model involving the use of the tool of dialectics. It is in light of this that we argue that the Marxist political economy approach sees dialectics especially that which is rooted

in the material existence of men and the relationship emerging from this existence as the best possible way of explaining or analyzing the inner workings of the society as a whole or the relationship between its structures. In adopting the dialectical method of analysis, the theory further emphasizes the undercurrents of class relations and class struggle within the mode of production as the major determinant of change in any society. As a result, the Marxist political economy approach maintains that class and class struggle represents a historical event that gave birth to the social currents which determined the movement from one society to another in human history.

Following the above assumptions of the Marxist political economy approach, it is necessary to point out that the dialectical method of analyzing social occurrences is founded on the logic that the antagonistic social relationship that ensues in the economy further generates similar social contradictions which by far determine the nature of social order in the society. It is in support of this viewpoint that Ryazanskaya (1993) points out that the Marxist political economy approach takes note of the social relation of production given the fact that the social production of human existence is one that is characterized by class antagonisms which provides the parameter for which society oscillates. Drawing from this, therefore, it follows that for any reasonable understanding of society to occur, social analysts only need to comprehend the economic system and the social relations of production associated with it. When this is done, those who are scholars of society can then begin to appreciate and put in perspective the spillover social intricacies associated with other aspects of society. In very simple terms, government and the entire political machinery in any society rests on the social relations emerging from the economic system which Marx clearly referred to as the real foundation of society. What this simply means is that the economic system plays a significant role in determining whether a government can be categorized as bad or good.

The position of the Marxist political economy theory makes it easy for us to see that the nature of governance in any society and indeed Nigeria, in totality is a reflection of the dialectics associated with social classes within a given mode of production. This is because the owners of the means of production either become the owners of political power or maintain a strong and unholy alliance with the ruling class forming a solid bourgeois social structure. When the bourgeois class becomes formidable by virtue of this alliance, a dominant ideology that supports the progressive exploitation of the poor masses ensues. As a result, the ruling ideology serves the interest of the bourgeois class while exploiting the poor masses. This character of the ruling class is a necessary and inevitable outcome of the capitalist society given its highly predatory and exploitative tendencies. However, this does not happen without some level of influence on the social existence of society as the exploited class continue to wage war against the ruling class in demand for a better life. Class struggle, therefore, becomes the central force of change in such societies with a major adverse effect on social order(Iwarimie-Jaja & Raimi, 2018).

It should be clarified that the Marxist political economy recognizes the fact that traditional societies were relatively classless and as such, devoid of any form of sharp class antagonisms. Now the reason for this, is that the mode of production did not generate a social relation of production that is divided along class lines. Instead, the social divisions were based on age and sex. Hence, the very absence of or relatively minute evidence of economically defined social classes reduced the rate of social chaos. In this regard, social order was strongly maintained as people in traditional societies had mutual respect for one another given the communal nature of the period. Much as this is the case, the Marxist political economy theory provides insight into the static of governance in traditional societies as well as the dynamics associated with modern political systems as well as their relationship to social order or disorder.

Method

The paper adopts the qualitative approach which in itself depend on a rigorous content analysis of existing documents on the subject matter. This method of gathering and analyzing information plays a very significant role in providing empirical rigour in any study. However, to support the qualitative method of data analysis adopted in this paper, the Marxist political economy as an analytical method is deployed to serve as a complementary tool of analysis. Goldfrank (2005), is of the opinion that the Marxist political economy has developed to the extent that its central logic especially its insistence on dialectics can be applied as a method of analyzing social issues. Goldfrank's position is corroborated by Amundsen (2010), who argued that the Marxist political economy approach as a method of analysis is often used to understand how the relationship between the economy and political sub-systems direct the happenings in other sub-systems of society. By extension, the combination of content analysis and the Marxist political economy approach to interpret the link between governance and social order in traditional societies and how this can enable similar processes in modern political systems allow us the latitude of supporting theoretical claims with empirical evidence.

Presentation of Substantive Information

This section deals with the discussion of the objectives highlighted in this paper. To do this, the various research questions are represented here and associated themes are identified as well as discussed following the assumptions of the Marxist political economy approach.

Q1: What was the nature of governance in traditional societies in Nigeria?

Governance in Traditional Societies in Nigeria

The nature of governance in traditional Nigeria societies can be clearly associated with the dominant mode of production of these societies. This mode of production largely depended on a communal system that reflected the collective conscience of the people which in itself is a falloff of the feeling of community and the significant place of the extended family in all of these. Governance depended on the traditional and religious belief systems of the people where the practice of justice delivery is usually derived from. Due to the fact that the traditional value system and indeed the cultural practices of the

people determined the way and manner the government of these societies functioned, members of these traditional societies were significantly involved in the day-to-day political administration of their various communities. Perhaps this is why Ikenga (n.d. p.81) maintained that "It is discovered that the Igbo have a very rich notion of justice which quintessence is precipitated into its reconciliatory, communal, social, and religious nature.

Consequently, the issue of participation and ownership of governance processes were very central to traditional political systems given the fact that in the various societies, the existing governments were products of the cultural history of the people. Writing on the Hausa-Fulani governance system, Halidu (2011) is of the opinion that the various emirates that made up the Hausa-Fulani society evolved a centralized system of government that is consistent with her religious, social and cultural history. In other words, Islam, communalism and cultural indicators played a prominent in the nature, character and direction of governance in the Hausa-Fulani society. This is also similar to what was obtainable in the Yoruba societies were almost the same centralized system of government was practiced. According to Awobanjo (1999), the governance system of the Yoruba's in the pre-colonial era and in most parts of the existing kingdoms was largely defined by the structural-historical circumstances that gave birth to the emergence of the Yoruba society.

Drawing from the above, it is clear that culture and the collective nature of the people were the major social infrastructure that gave meaning to governance among the various traditional societies in pre-colonial Nigeria. This is also the case in other parts of Africa as a typical example from Tangayika (Tanzania) where the practice of Ujamaa largely framed the political behaviour of the people indicates. In discussing the Tanzanian experiment, Ibhawoh & Dubia 2003 (cited in Okoro, 2010) opine that in Tanganyikan (Tanzania) traditional society, the concept of 'Ujamaa, though made public by Julius Nyerere, was the defining paradigm of the social existence of the people and it was rooted in traditional African value sand its core emphases on the African family-hood system and communalism of traditional African societies provided the basis for governance and other social life. Extending this further, Osabu (2000) maintained that Ujamaa is a socio-political philosophy that underlies the Tanzanian's communal living and informed the fabric of its moral values, which advocates mutual respect, common property, and common labour.

What Marx referred to as primitive communalism in his elaborate narrative on the nature of dialectical materialism provides an outstanding treatise for the understanding of how traditional societies survived prior to the emergence of class and class struggle in the societies that followed. Primitive communalism as Marx held, depended on a mode of production that was classless with gathering and hunting as their basic source of livelihood. However, the underlying model of governance was more rooted in collective rather than individualistic administration. This style of collective management or administration of the affairs of the society made it easy for the people to maintain a high

sense of mutual respect for each other. This was further strengthened by the culture of the people especially because traditional value system tends to have a strong hold on its adherents.

Similarly, the mode of production of the traditional societies which is embedded in primitive communalism also replicated after its like a communal governance system that promoted a kind of social solidarity rather than divisive tendencies among the people. This is why Ekeopara and Ogbonnaya (2014, p.40) posit that "individualism and selfishness is a vice, hence it is condemned and solidarity is a major virtue with traditional ethics holding and ensuring that all people live together and rendering mutual service to each other. Hence, whether in the more politically centralized societies like the Yoruba and Huasa-Fulani kingdoms where the Emir or the Aalafin ran the government or in the more politically decentralized Igbo society where some degree of village democracy was practiced, the underlying governance style was largely people centred. Thus making it easy for the people to be more involved in the governance of their communities with significant impact on how order is maintained.

Q2: How did the political economy of governance enable social order in traditional societies?

How Governance enabled Social Order in Traditional Societies

Inferring from the narrative above, it is quite easy to see how the dominant economic system of the traditional societies in pre-colonial Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa defined the nature of governance as well as the character of the social solidarity that existed within the various communities. However, by far the most viable social adhesive associated with the traditional societies was the interplay between culture and governance. This is because, the political administration of traditional societies relied heavily on the culture of the people as a way of ensuring committed followership as well as social order. In support of this view, Ekeopara and Ogbonnaya (2014) argued that traditional governments relied on the culture of the people to define a system of collective association that enabled them to live in such a way that they can co-exist peacefully and promulgate laws as well as moral principles or ethics to guard human behaviours and conduct thereby maintaining social order in their respective communities. In addition, primitive communalism as the dominant mode of production was defined by the need for cooperation rather than competition among the people. This meant that the political economy of the traditional societies relied mostly on the communal nature of the production process which invariably gave direction to governance. In other words, the governance system associated with pre-colonial traditional societies in Nigeria also followed the path of ensuring the same sense of community life among the people thereby ensuring that little or no divisive tendencies existed in such societies.

As a result, the nature of the communal economic infrastructure served as architecture for the political sub-system in traditional societies. Since the economic sub-system was based on a classless social relation of production, the political system which in itself is a mirror of the economic system by virtue of the assumption of the Marxist political

economy approach, dispensed nothing less than a people-centred government. By extension, when the dominant behaviour of governance is people oriented, minimal social shocks were experienced in the pre-colonial traditional societies and social order was easily achieved. In other words, the traditional governance system functioned in more democratic terms even though it has been described as rudimentary in nature. Fig. 2 below shows how governance enabled social order in traditional societies.

Fig. 2: How Governance Enables Social Order in Traditional Societies

Fig. 2 above highlights the structural interface between governance and social order in traditional societies. It is clear from the diagram that at the base of the interaction between governance and social order in traditional societies is the structure of the economic infrastructure which is defined by primitive communalism. The operational character of the communal production system survived on the social strength of the extended family and the collective conscience that came along with the culture of the people as well as their religious practices. As a result, governance and all forms of political administration revolved around this shared sentiment making it easy for the people to reckon with their leaders.

As a result of the fact that the communal nature of the mode of production as well as the political structure of the governance system in traditional societies were all woven around the culture of the people, mutual respect, justice and equity which are considered as integral ingredients of social order became easy to achieve. It should be emphasized that a central character of the communal mode of production is the issue of the distribution of wealth which was done on the basis of the need of every individual rather than unhealthy competition for private aggrandizement of the surplus of society. As Murithi (2006)

rightly observed, in traditional African societies, upholding the collective conscience which in South Africa is referred to as Ubuntu, provided constructive social relations within which communal undertakings were made to which every person is committed. This is perhaps why Okoro (2010), submits that the collective orientation towards the maintenance of social values and social order formed the nerve of African traditional societies. In addition, the tradition and culture of the people also played a significant role in defining the nature of governance as well as social order in these societies. While the traditional social system did not have written laws that were punitive or recitative in nature, it nevertheless achieved social order by enforcing culturally held sanctions where necessary. The potency of the traditional governance system in terms of ensuring social order was largely influenced by the collective willingness on the part of a significant number of people in the various communities to get involved in the affairs of governance knowing fully well that no form of intimidation and oppression would arise in this regard. This is because the primitive communal character of traditional societies promoted a people-centred government.

However, with the coming of colonialism and the disarticulation of the hitherto existing communal system, and its replacement with capitalism, Christianity and democracy, the social architecture of the traditional societies which was rooted in the extended family also witnessed a significant alteration. In its place came individualism and a vampire-like competition that almost returned society to the Hobbesian state only this time with scientific regalia. As a result, this created a widespread social disorder that is now reflected in the numerous violence, armed conflict and economic desperation that underscores the modern political era.

Q3: What lessons can modern political institutions learn from traditional societies in terms of governance and social order in Nigeria?

Lessons for Modern Political Institutions in Nigeria

Modern political institutions now widely run on democratic tenets except for pockets of monarchies around the world. Even some of the monarchic systems now seem to have imbibed some elements of democracy in order to support the reigns of such monarchs. No matter the nature of the modern political institution, the underlying mode of production which is capitalism remains a fundamental driver of social chaos given its obvious insistence on competition and private ownership of property. As Mahmood (2017) has observed, capitalism and its allied governance structures have to grapple with the problem of individualism and private property ownership which pitches people against themselves economically with strong political outcomes. Hence, modern day governance systems are largely driven by profit maximization for incumbents rather than the collective good that characterized traditional societies.

As a result, the political economy of governance in modern societies is underlined by widespread feelings of mutual suspicion which makes it difficult for the different societies to co-exist with minimal social disorder. In fact, the opinion in the literature (see; Murithi,

2006; Olowu, 2018) is that capitalism and its individual as well as private property character tends to generate serious internal contradictions in society to the extent that people are consistently warring against each other for the purpose of profit maximization. This inevitably leads to primitive accumulation and sharp class exploitations. In this regard, the dominant class in society become wealthier while the poverty of the masses widens. The end result of this is poverty and hunger which provides the necessary condition for all forms of social vices and deviant behaviours all of which pose a significant threat to social order in modern societies.

While it would be difficult to promote a Marxist-style revolution that would as a matter of necessity lead to the undoing of the capitalist mode of production and possibly entrench a more egalitarian socialist system, modern political institutions can learn a lot from the governance approaches of traditional societies. First, the issue of ensuring participation and promoting collective sentiments is one critical indicator of a people-centred government. In this regard, the government of Nigeria could ensure that every policy decision goes through an opinion poll to allow for widespread participation rather than leaving it at the national assembly level alone. Again, while we do not want to advocate for a scientific communist society after the prophesy of Marx, it should be noted that the current mode of production which is based on a vampire-like sense of accumulation should be redefined to be egalitarian in nature. This can be done by promoting policy actions that reduce the number of properties people can get as well as property taxes especially on houses and cars.

Conclusions

The paper examined the issue of governance and social order in traditional societies focusing on the lessons this can provide for modern political institutions in Nigeria. The paper relied on the Marxist political economy approach to point out that the primitive communal framework of the traditional societies in Nigeria and Africa in general provided the necessary and sufficient drivers for the enforcement and maintenance of social order. The paper concludes, therefore, that communalism as a definite mode of production with its philosophy of the collective sentiment and communal property rather than private property ownership as is currently the case with modern peripheral capitalist societies like Nigeria provided a strong basis for widespread participation in governance in addition to a significantly reduced sense of competition. This system of communal social relations had low class contradictions because of the existence of rudimentary and simple social hierarchies based on sex and age leading to less competition along class lines with positive effect on social order.

The paper also concludes that modern political institutions can learn issues of how to increase participation of the people especially in democratic government which was a major contributory factor to the success of traditional governance in pre-colonial Nigerian societies. This is in addition to redefining the character of the mode of production to at least ensure less emphasis on primitive accumulation as a way of reducing the sharp class contradictions associated with modern day Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the submissions and conclusions reached in this paper, the following recommendations have been proffered:

i. Although it is now very difficult to propose or even recommend a reversal to the communal style of governance that characterized traditional societies, modern political or governance systems can achieve some sense of social order if they ensure that the dividends of democracy are enjoyed by majority of citizens in the country. This can be done following the principle of distributive of redistributive justice where government consciously facilitates the process of ensuring that a large number of citizens now begin to feel the impact of governance through resource reallocations.

ii. Also, there is the need to introduce a sense of community in Nigeria which is currently an illusion in all sense of it. Wherever community sentiment is missing, people find it difficult to live with one another. It is a known fact that Singapore is a multi-ethnic society yet the government has been able to create a sense of community. Doing this has the potential of promoting mutual respect and trust which are key ingredients of social order in any society.

iii. Lastly, there is need to de-emphasize the current rate of primitive accumulation that is associated with the ruling class in the country. This has increased the wealth gap in the country while creating a strong feeling of disdain for government among the masses especially because this primitive accumulation of wealth is believed to be nested on corruption by public office holders. Government can achieve this by placing heavy taxes on property acquisition and strengthen the fight against corruption by ensuring that culprits are tried and punished according to the law. Apart from deterring other public office holders from engaging in such an act, it would rekindle the confidence of the masses in the government of the country.

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