The Precariousness of Prebendalism

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What subjects will precarious Kings regard?
Dryden, *Conquest Granada* i. i. i. 9

Introduction

A critical aspect of Richard Joseph's argument in *Democracy and Prebendal Politics* is easily overlooked. His analysis of the short-lived Second Republic (1979-83) is well-known for identifying access to public office as the dominant political imperative in Nigeria, and that ethnic and regional identities became entrenched as a result of this quest for state resources. Less evident, however, is the basic, taken for granted motivation which sustains this prebendal system - insecurity.

Insecurity has several senses in Joseph's work. In the first instance he observes that individuals seek attachment to 'big men' for protection and advancement in conditions of insecurity where 'legal guarantees of physical security, status and wealth are weak or non-existent' (1987: 68). Joseph therefore draws on Sandbrook's (1972) analysis of patrimonialism where insecurity, conflict and disorder were seen to derive from the 'institutionless arena' of African post-colonial political life. In a related sense insecurity also appears in Joseph's work to refer to the politics of exclusion in Nigeria. In the conclusion to *Democracy and Prebendal Politics* Joseph compares the Nigerian model with Clapham's (1982) analysis of Ethiopia and agrees that the appropriation of critical resources by one particular group over another generates a sense of 'vulnerability and insecurity' which spurs on further patrimonial behaviour. This is a vicious circle in which insecurity produces the very behaviour that generates exclusion and further insecurity. Hence, as Joseph states 'In Nigeria, this sense of insecurity is felt as much by those who temporarily win control of critical resources as by those who feel excluded from them.' (1987: 191)

The state of insecurity therefore animates prebendalism. Insecurity, the perception and production of uncertainty, is more pervasive and more powerful than the lack of institutional protection and perceived marginality alone. Insecurity in this context creates an overriding sense of vulnerability, anxiety and threat through the material assemblages which underpin, saturate and sustain everyday life. This constitutes not only physical and material insecurity, though they are primary, but also uncertainty in political and epistemological fields. Insecurity is not an episodic moral panic as Joseph has most recently framed Nigeria's 'season of uncertainty' (Joseph & Gillies 2010) but the context itself (Vigh 2008), a permanent, radical sense of 'uncertainty, unpredictability, and insecurity' (Mbembe & Nuttall 2004).

We may identify related concepts in Taussig's 'nervous system' (1992) or 'siege' (2004), Lubkemann's 'social condition of war' (2008), Mbembe's 'state of war'. All these frameworks share features of uncertainty, lack of trust and produce 'structures of feelings' that 'generate and register' the contradictions and contingencies of lived experience. Mbembe and Roitman, for instance, refer to this insecurity in Africa simply as 'the crisis' – the 'incoherence, uncertainty, instability and discontinuity', wrought by the conjunction of economic depression, instabilities, fluctuations and ruptures - giving rise to experiences lived by people at all levels of society defined by physical and mental violence (Mbembe & Roitman 1995: 324).

This paper therefore attempts to capture several different senses of the relationship between insecurity and patronage, or the precariousness of prebendalism. This relationship refers to the context of insecurity that fosters and is fostered by prebendal behaviour, and it refers to the insecurity of prebendal office-holding – the risks of being such an office-holder and of those who seek the support of such an office-holder. There is, in fact, an uncanny affinity between the terms 'prebendalism' and 'precariousness'. Both refer to states of social dependence. A prebend, an ecclesiastical stipend (a right to receive revenues), is by its nature uncertain or 'precarious' as it implies dependence on the mercy of another and sometimes by means of prayer or supplication. Precarious, similarly, means to be vulnerable to the will or decision of another – though obsolete precarious once also meant suppliant or supplicating. In capturing the deeply social contingencies of insecurity and patrimonialism I find precariousness particularly apt variation of the more familiar concept of uncertainty (Whyte 2009).

This paper therefore aims to illustrate the precariousness of prebendalism based on an ethnography of youth in the Niger Delta and to show how insecurity leads to prebendal logics. The link between electoral politics and violence in the so-called "south-south" zone of Nigeria is principally a result of a shift in the internal political economy of Nigeria's federation since the return to democracy in 1999 and to the associated re-distribution of oil revenues. With increasing proportions of high oil prices being directed at the middle tier of Nigerian government, the federal states, governors in the oil-producing states of Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa have, and can expect, considerably more revenue than ever before. The zero-sum politics for access to these resources has given rise to the arming of street gangs in political campaigns as well as incidents of post-election violence when former political sponsors have failed to redistribute the spoils of office. Violence in the Delta region and its hinterland primarily concerns these youth gangs and militia that have been armed by political patrons (Human Rights Watch, 2003, 2005b).[1]

[1] It is estimated that there are around 100 gangs in the oil city of Port Harcourt, for example, whose members are said to represent 'a standing army of the dispossessed' (Africa Confidential, 10 September 2004; Concannon & Newsom, 2004).

Nigerian cultures of insecurity

Mary Douglas bequeathed us the cultural theory of risk perception - that risk and uncertainty are social constructions where society's common values shape its common fears and where consensus relates natural dangers to moral defects and social subversion (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982: 7). These ideas continue to inform our understandings of the political construction of insecurity, especially, the propagation of discourses of danger by the state. The contemporary literature on fear and uncertainty, for example, shows that the production of insecurities requires considerable social work and ideological labour.[2] Statist discourses not only provide representations of danger but also legitimating discourses for the state's disciplinary practices. In Nigeria 'youth' has come to occupy a category of risk, it labels a dangerous, insurgent and unpredictable force which threatens the social and political fabric.[3]

For Giddens (1990), the concept of 'ontological uncertainty', the generalized anxiety to cope with unseen and unknown risks is a consequence of modernity. Modern society, for Beck too, has become a 'risk society' in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing uncontrollable risks that it itself has produced (Beck 2006: 332). A key feature of this theoretical literature, however, is its focus on a western object of study, and we may therefore echo Beck's question:

> how can non-Western risk society be understood by a sociology, which so far has taken it for granted, that its object - Western modernity - is at once both historically unique and universally valid? (Beck 2006: 345)

If different societies have different ways of socially producing insecurity, discursively portraying it, symbolically representing it and politically managing it, we may ask with Bubant and others, how useful is the idea of 'vernacular insecurity' (2005: 277)?[4]

In Nigeria, for example, it is apparent that the subjectivities of young men in the oil-producing Niger Delta region are fostered out of a generalized and profound sense of insecurity. In the creole pidgin of southern Nigeria this is captured in the concept of 'the rugged life'. This conception of a tough, arbitrary, unpredictable life – in Annang of *ntime ntime* – trouble, *akeme itipe* – of anything can happen. How useful is this emic, vernacular perception of the 'rugged life' in understanding the lived experience, the life worlds of young southern Nigerians. Is the rugged life a vernacular version of 'radical insecurity' – a structural, epistemological uncertainty?

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[2] On this point see for example, (Füredi 1997, 2005; Glassner 1999; Robin 2004).

[3] For comparative, historical overviews see (Comaroff & Comaroff 2005; Waller 2006).

[4] Béland also concludes that among the most pressing issues that require scholarly attention are the cross-national variations in the construction of insecurity. … and the extent to which the framework developed in … reference to advanced industrial societies applies to countries of the global South (Béland 2007: 336).

It is important not only to interrogate vernacular understandings of the concept of insecurity, but also to be more specific about generalised states of uncertainty and insecurity. On the whole scholars have addressed the concept of insecurity holistically, aptly reflecting the depth and range of its affect upon subjectivity and experience. To analyse these processes, however, it is also necessary to delineate the key axes upon which uncertainty is experienced – material, physical, epistemological and political. This context of 'radical insecurity' is neither paralysing nor entropic, therefore, but productive of modes of youth action – a politics of youth – based on niches youth carve out for profit and protection, evidence and truth. Hence, against this context of material, physical, epistemological and political insecurity we must also trace the political processes that seek to conjure up 'safe, imagined communities' and those contradictory practices which, while disordering, seek order and security.

The material insecurity of Nigerian urban and rural economies continues to be marked by stark inequalities. For the large cohort of 'youth' in the Delta region livelihoods are marginal and mobile. Many who are 'stuck in the compound' find themselves in this precarious position precisely because a senior family member, their father, uncle or mentor, had not been able to complete the sponsorship of their education, apprenticeship or training. The material insecurity of the Nigerian urban and rural economies generates a range of practices for young people to get by. This cohort of the dispossessed turn to the transport sector in droves – touting at motor parks and riding motorbike taxis. It is against this context that the figure of the agbero – the motor park tout emerges. Agbero is a derogatory term for motor park touts common throughout southern Nigeria.[5] An agbero is usually a young man who loads passengers into taxis and buses, carries luggage and can impose fines and impound unlicensed vehicles. Most definitions refer to agbero as street thugs, miscreants and small-time extortionists. Agbero is a sort of trickster who survives can 'eat' without having 'handwork'.[6] In the moral reckoning of honest labour taxi driving is 'real' work, loading the vehicle is agbero work.[7] 'Agbero' then refers to a mode of survival, and making do.

Physical insecurity is evident for most villagers, farmers, traders and business people, in the violence wrought by the figures of the armed robber, the cult boy and now the militant and the kidnapper (Pratten 2008). There is an episodic nature to perceptions of physical insecurity, punctuated as it is with periods in which families decamp into churches to sleep at night, but its persistent, underlying presence is undeniable. The young men of this study perform a 'hyper-vigilance' towards such violent threats partly in the classical form of vigilante night

[5] Agbero is a Yoruba word meaning 'conveyors of passengers'. In Hausa-speaking areas Dan Tasha refers to the same category.

[6] See, for example, Wole Soyinka's play 'The Road' which includes a character, 'Samson Baba Agbero – King of Touts, Champion of Motor Park (Soyinka 1965).

[7] To the public all motor park workers may be described as 'touts' but important differences are derived from their union membership. Members of the NURTW (Nigerian Union of Road Transport Workers) who are licensed drivers and conductors distance themselves from their non-dues paying fellows.

patrols, but also because clashes with other youth groups and gangs, along with what is sometimes seen as arbitrary arrest by the police, are often cited as sources of physical insecurity.

Epistemological insecurity centres on anxieties over the authenticity of information and the veracity of claims in a highly generalized context of fraud, '419' tricksters and everyday deception (Apter 2000; Smith 2006). In this context of fake licenses, fake drugs, fake policemen and fake fuel causation for misfortune depends on the micro-politics of blame and on proximate social contingencies. These ideas are extended by Ashforth's (1998) notion of spiritual insecurity in relation to the fear of witchcraft accusation and attack. A key feature of local practice in the face of the insecurity of knowledge is transparency. An imperative to transparency is born out of a fear of accusation – of taking the law, the deal, the money, into your own hands covertly and illegitimately. The social significance of transparency is evident in numerous everyday and extraordinary practices. Turning a conversation onto speakerphone to show to groups of angry young applicants that no secret arrangements are being made is imperative for youth leaders in their negotiations with oil companies and contractors. The public nature of the 'rough music' of vigilantes parading a stripped and beaten thief through the village is also compelled by a moral imperative to reveal that bribes have not been taken secretly in order to release a thief.[8]

Political insecurity centres on the politics of belonging and patronage – the intertwining of political leadership and identity so neatly captured in Joseph's concept of prebendalism. These exclusionary practices are configured in the logics of proving of who's who and have violent potential. In 2008, for example, some young men returned to the village in which I have based my research in Akwa Ibom State because a rumour in the oil city of Bonny circulated that the indigenes (the 'sons of the soil') were planning to behead strangers found in the town in order to assert their rights over employment opportunities with the oil companies. Lines of inclusion and exclusion are constantly redefined between indigenes and strangers and at levels far below 'ethnic' significations to lineage and family levels. Since 1999 and the return of multi-party democracy this process increasingly penetrates to the most basic level of electoral politics – the councillorship ward – it is these wards around which constituents now mobilize – often on generational lines which makes youth as a political category an important site from which to investigate patronage. Sometimes uncertainties are opportunities. Youth routinely insert themselves into practices of recruitment, appointment and election, to vet or 'screen' candidates on the basis of their claims to authentic indigenous origin and their character and demeanour (Pratten 2006).

Finally, and moving to the topic of this paper, risks are also attached to authority – patrons and patronage are precarious. The Nigerian political economy is defined above all by a mode of political rule and domination defined by personalized,

[8] This revelatory logic applies in many familiar contexts in rural Annang society such as the disposal of poisons, and in the display associated with initiations and transformations of status (Pratten 2007).

patrimonial distribution and excess. As Jane Guyer (1992) argued, people engage with the Nigerian state through securing and making claims on public office which is seen as an imperative if unpredictable link to central sources of finance and which in turn gives rise to modes of clientage and prebendalism which dominate the Nigerian political landscape. Indeed, we may argue that this process has only intensified in the often zero-sum politics of patrimonialism that Nigeria has experienced since 1999 (Hoffmann 2010; Obadare & Adebanwi 2010). Being without a patron is risky and capturing a patron is a necessary labour. In both situations knowing what patrons are doing is paramount and requires a constant vigilance over their behaviour, consumption and connections.

Political accountability, as John Lonsdale reminds us, is part of 'the moral calculus of power; it concerns the mutual responsibilities of inequality' (1986: 128). This unequal relationship of clientelistic support and patrimonial obligation has played itself out most obviously in the post-1999 elections in Nigeria. As Stepputat and Hanson (2001: 26) observed, 'Transitions … from one political regime to another, are privileged contexts for the investigation of ways that regimes pursue and negotiate inclusions and exclusions'. As political patrons have become increasingly dependent on mobilizing youth around election time, as supporters and as 'riggers', so the imperative for patrons to be seen to re-distribute and 'remember' these supporters has become ever more pressing. As I will illustrate further below, in order to ensure their own support and security politicians' redistributive processes have become routinized, and at Christmas-time, when even Abuja-based senators must return home to their districts, full page newspaper adverts invite the public to a timetable of thanksgiving services and public engagements, to 'remember' chiefs, PDP loyalists and of course youth. Reports of politicians being 'embarrassed' – through physical assault and the kidnapping of their family members provide a strong incentive to honour pledges of support to the youth.

No single ethnographic example will capture all of these aspects of insecurity or how perception and practice are formed by them. However, I present the following ethnographic sketch to provide a sense of how multifaceted insecurity is and how the practices of young men produce the insecurity that they are also victims of. Indeed, it is this production of insecurity that is constitutive of the prebendalistic system.

Delta Boys

I had known one young man from the village where I've lived in Nigeria for about 4 years before the following events unfolded. He was 20 when I first met him, and struck a tall, confident pose. Akpan is a rugged guy.[9] He had been in student cults even at Okoyo Secondary School. He was a bunkerer in Warri, a street gang (*dewell*) member in Port Harcourt. He'd been an agbero tout in Mile one watersides in Port Harcourt. When I first caught up with him he said he had joined *agaba*, a banned cult, for all the familiar reasons (of friendship, protection

[9] I have used pseudonyms throughout.

and the performance) but also to use the spirit to identify the person responsible for the unexpected deaths of members of his family (including his elder brother who had been an armed robber).

Like many young men who had lived, worked and fought on the streets of Port Harcourt he had come home to Ukanafun, a local government nearly 2 hours away, in 2003 after the clamp-down on the street gangs. In neighbouring Ogoni villages these gangs had moved into the villages and had become implicated in local violence and chieftaincy disputes (Nyiayaana 2011). On his return Akpan had been working in a new motor-park. Like many village and local government councils there is overwhelming pressure from young men to be given jobs by the politicians they supported during the elections. Often this means 'touting' or loading passengers in the motor-park to earn fare-commissions. There is such demand for this work, in fact, that local governments try to create new opportunities to employ the young men – such as inventing new time-slots or, even better, to license whole new motor-parks like the one Akpan worked at which was established in 2004 for vegetable goods. Work at motor-parks and hand-outs which were once a list of thugs to be paid-off and are now regularised as skills acquisition programmes are familiar mechanisms by which local authorities attempt to keep violent youth on side and in check.

On 4 December 2007 Akpan and several of his friends, who together called themselves the 'Niger Delta Boys', intercepted a shipment of 49 drums of stolen ('bunkered') oil being smuggled in drums through the creeks and out to suppliers along the main Aba-Uyo expressway. It had become common practice for youth of each village through which the shipment passed to be 'settled' with several thousand Naira in order for the route to be secured. The police and local government officials were also said to have been paid off to look the other way or provide protection in the case of the police. On this occasion, however, Akpan and his mates decided the settlement was not sufficient and stole this 'stolen' fuel from 'proper' militants, the real, heavily armed groups of Rivers and Bayelsa States. They quickly returned to Akpan's village with a heavy machine gun and in the ensuing shoot-out recovered their oil drums and left one of the village boys dead.[10]

When I arrived for fieldwork over Christmas 2007 I heard that Akpan had been in police custody at area command for the past two weeks. When the police had swooped on 14 December they had arrested 28 'youths' – releasing 23 of them 3 days later (many had paid N50,000 for bail). The remaining five, including Akpan, had been kept in custody because the village council (the chief and elders of the village) had written a petition against the boys, the 'Niger Delta Boys' for causing the trouble with the bunkered fuel and because, allegedly, they had been pocketing a flat rate fee that they were supposed to return to the village authorities for the running of the vegetable motor-park.

On 7 January Akpan was released and I caught up with him and his friend

[10] For the broader context on the insurgency in the Niger Delta and its associated criminality – of bunkering, illegal refineries and kidnapping – see (Obi & Rustand 2011).

Aniefiok who had also been held. I bought them beers and they told me a story I found incredible. They said that at the Ikot Akpan Abia police headquarters they had been held in a room with 30 others. The room was so small, and the number of men so large, they could not sit or lie down. They stood, they told me, for three weeks. When they complained about the swelling in their lower legs, and showed me the running sores on their feet and calves I began to understand. The rations they received were so meagre that they thought they had gone without food or water for one of the weeks. Many did not survive this ordeal. Still others, as their cases were progressed, were taken outside and shot. Akpan presented his survival as the triumph of his personal power, that his own spiritual, medicinal protection had kept him alive. A local politician, a former State House of Assembly member, whose guy-name is 'Progress' eventually bailed the boys - no weapons had been found in Akpan's home and no charges were brought. The boys who were released, I later discovered, were loyal to Progress' political Godfather (a man who is appropriately nicknamed 'Force') and now these troublesome young men owed him their lives.

The community's reaction to Akpan's release and return home merits a brief footnote. He said he was mobbed by friends and neighbours. Some wanted to know upon whom he would take revenge for the petition – 'who will you finish first' they asked. Others, the more persuasive as it transpired, urged him to attend church. To repent, to forgive, to be re-born? He wasn't sure, but he liked the attention, he had overcome an ordeal which proved his strength, he was feared, and for the first time since childhood he took his seat in the Qua Iboe Church and prayed.

Akpan's story resonates with the concept of radical insecurity, and of the rugged life. The uncertain loyalties of patrons – elders who support and then accuse young men; politicians who denounce but secretly bail them. The unpredictability of authorities who are at once complicit in a smuggling trade they are combating. The assertion of identities of 'village youth' securing ever more precarious economic niches. The conceptions of masculine power and protection through which the events are perceived – with contesting registers of spiritual presence bringing closure and order to events.

It is in this context of insecurity, a 'rugged', precarious life requiring vigilance and fortitude, that young men are liable to recruitment into prebendal political networks. These 'Niger Delta Boys', vulnerable to being denounced (in this case by village council elders) were incorporated into the client network of the ruling political party precisely because of their marginal position. Indeed, the precariousness of electoral politics, the need for 'hard men' on election day who can 'deliver the vote' (by fair means or foul), fosters precisely this patron-client relationship between political godfathers, office-holders and candidates, and marginalised 'youth'. As Joseph identified insecurity and vulnerability produces the very behaviour that generates exclusion and further insecurity.

'Thanksgiving'

This is not to imply that youths such as Akpan are merely 'victims' of a prebendal system. Rather than identifying the dual possibilities of such youth as 'makers' and 'breakers' (Abbink & Kessel 2004; Honwana & Boeck 2005), it is important to recognize that their critical and violent potentiality is configured in precisely the creative forms and insurgent tactics by which marginality becomes a resource. As the following sketches illustrate the apparent impunity with which youth are produced as clients is only one dimension and requires that we account for those practices by which youth navigate the terrains of the prebendal republic.[11]

These repertoires of accountability operate within a framework of implied or explicit violence and at various opportunistic nodes of redistribution. Hence, within these spheres youth groups have presented various responses including vigilantism, screening political candidates, monitoring local government expenditure, checking the award of compensation payments to local chiefs, threatening contractors and para-statals to complete development programmes, and monitoring price controls. These modes of vigilance and accountability are configured by internal imperatives as much as they are by the national and transnational political economy. They are intimately associated with the elaboration of constituencies and their localized rights of political contest and action. And, above all, they are about enforcing localized cultures of accountability that are shaped epistemologically by concepts of the person — especially the patron.

Political office-holding is a calculus of patrimonial reciprocity. Making account is judged in performative terms on the basis of the 'achievements' acquired for one's people (in Annang, *se enye anam* — your achievements for your people). Wealth begets responsibilities and it is in these aspects that one's achievements are judged in terms of sending children to study overseas; educating poor people through sponsorship; donating in church; employing people in a company; entertaining visitors; holding the peace; and being truthful and steadfast. In short, accountability is judged in terms of redistribution (Ekeh, 1975; Smith, 2001a). Petitioning and impeachment are familiar means by which the excesses of office-holders are screened and checked by youth associations and 'concerned citizens' across southern Nigeria (Pratten 2006). The so-called 'impeachment mania' of the 2000s has been distinguished by a public relish to invoke constitutional means against illegitimate or ill-performing political office-holders. In addition to petition-writing (what Guyer (1992) referred to as 'the discrete overwork of the bourgeoisie') the insurgent mechanisms by which the precariousness of prebendal office-holding is exposed takes a festive flavour.

The Christmas and New Year period is always a fascinating time to study local Nigerian politics. One particular aspect of social and political life that is thrown into relief at this moment is political patronage. Indeed, the politics of plunder and vigilance are perhaps most dramatically visible at this time of the year. The compulsions to return to one's patrilineage, one's home village to perform certain

[11] On the concept of navigation as a metaphor for youth agency see (Utas 2005; Utas et al. 2006; Vigh 2006).

household rites, to give thanks at church and to celebrate the changing year in community meetings, parades and events applies across the social classes – including elite politicians. Those politicians elected to state bodies in Uyo come home, those in federal positions based in Abuja must come home – and in doing so they must subject themselves to the claims of supporters. In these moments they are therefore compelled to perform as good patrons and re-distribute.

Christmas-time, in fact, is now witness to a routinized and bureaucratized process of personalized redistribution. Taking out full page adverts in the local press, politicians announce their intention to 'give thanks', and to attend 'thanks giving' services and events across their constituencies. On 24th December 2007, for example, the Senator from Abuja representing the Akwa Ibom State North West Constituency, Senator Alyonsis Etuk, was due to conduct his thanksgiving in Ukanafun at the local council hall. Live cows, bags of rice, motorbikes, sewing machines and cash was presented to chiefs, party loyalists and of course youth. Young men waited many hours to receive their shares, over which fights and scuffles ensued into the evening.[12] The publicity and public nature of the distribution belied the explicitly personal, prebendal process at work. It is through such work that politicians attempt to ensure support and security during the festive period.

Failure to meet the youth's expectations can be met with the familiar protest of dirtying a politicians clothes (with sand and water), but it can also have more violent consequences. On 16th December 2007 the Honourable member representing the Ukanafun constituency at the Federal House of Assembly was due to give a thanksgiving service at the Qua Iboe Church in his home village. The night before, however, young men from a neighbouring village broke into his compound and kidnapped his brother – demanding N200,000 ransom. They had supported the Assemblyman in the 2007 elections. Their actions were interpreted generally as an attempt to seek recompense for their electoral efforts, and as a claim that since entering office the Hon Member had not re-distributed sufficiently well. Kidnapping has increased across south-eastern Nigeria in recent years – originating from the insurgency against foreign oil companies and their workers, and extending out of the creeks and into the hinterland where family members of prominent wealthy families, and those with access to political funds, have been held to ransom (Osumaha & Aghedo 2011). In such circumstances prebendal office-holding is precarious indeed.

A final ethnographic sketch also concerns gift-giving but the consequences here are more nuanced than that of the examples of distribution and non-distribution

[12] Apart from Christmas the other key event in an office-holder's tenure (in terms of keeping supporter's happy) is the 100th day in office. When people complained that the State House of Assembly Member for Ukanafun in 2004 had done nothing for the community he arranged a distribution at the primary school within 2 months: Recipients were pre-screened and he distributed the following: 56 motorbikes (Klink, Skygo and Grand King), 10 Singer sewing machines, 10 bicycles, Barbing kits for young men (including clippers, mirrors and generators), N10,000 for elders, and a car (Mercedes 190) for the PDP chapter chairman.

above. On 25th December 2007 the local government chairman distributed his 'Christmas presents' to friends and supporters. He controls a sizeable monthly revenue allocation. On Christmas day he presented a hamper to the Paramount Ruler, the most senior traditional chief in the community. The chief and his family expected luxury goods commensurate with his status – yams, goats, expensive imported whisky. Instead the hamper contained toilet paper, cornflakes and washing powder. One of the chief's sons said – 'you might give such a gift to a school girl, but not to a chief'. In response to this insult the chief's family returned the hamper. 'There must be some mistake' the chiefs son said when he handed it back to the chairman's rather perplexed looking wife. In local lore, 'the returned gift is a tragedy to the giver', and as such the local government chairman would either see that the delivery boy had seized items from the hamper, or he would realize that the gift was not of sufficient value commensurate with the Paramount Ruler's status. The following day the chief sent a note to the council itemizing the hamper's contents. This additional paperwork was especially important – the family knew that the cost of the hamper would be claimed against the council chairman's expenses and that more than likely its value would be grossly inflated. By providing an independent receipt the family hoped to provide evidence that might be used one day, if necessary, to impeach and remove the chairman from office for fraud. Gift-returning, then, might be seen as a way of counter-acting excessive illicit accumulation.

These examples illustrate Lonsdale's (1986) observation about the location of political accountability in the deep vertical politics of patrimonialism. Here the dyadic relation of patron-client, an intensity of social relations of inclusion and exclusion, is at work in shaping the political through tactics that are sometimes legal bureaucratic, sometimes criminal and subversive. By defining the limits of impunity albeit in an adhoc, fragmented and often instrumental way, these practices, which are clearly not located in some form of liberal civil society, but in a far more insurgent and ambiguous moment, provide us with a more accurate clue as to the nature of the micro-political precariousness of a prebendal system which encompasses both the logics of impunity and accountability.

Conclusion

To appreciate the myriad ways of being and knowing which can account for the contradictory and contingent ways in which order, security, truth and justice are sought, however, perhaps the 'rugged life', the framework of radical insecurity, provides a useful perspective. Akpan's narrative, for instance, demonstrates how radical and rugged insecurity can be for political supporters subject to the uncertain loyalties of patrons. Yet youth also stand at the vanguard of a specific, localised mode of 'insurgent citizenship' (Holston 2008) pressing, sometimes violently, to insert themselves at moments of redistribution. The cultural logic of impunity represented in the literature on patrimonialism in Africa (Bayart 1993; Bayart et al. 1999; Chabal & Daloz 1999; Schatzberg 2002) tends to depend on highly individualist conceptions of the state and of political action, and emphasize the role of leaders and 'big men' at the expense of the lives, politics and collective actions of ordinary people (Mustapha 2002). It is necessary, therefore, to examine

the tactics of those who have yet to win and to study these localized struggles, and to recall Joseph's assertion that prebendalism is animated by insecurity. From this point of view, we are directed to understand the ways in which a long history of material and ontological insecurity in political fields is marked by the multiplicity of normative and regulatory regimes which produce techniques that evade a reductionist focus on institutions and interests.[13]

The 'precariousness of prebendalism' points to the vulnerability of social dependence. A key feature of radical insecurity is a lack of interpersonal trust, a 'crisis of sociality' as Simone calls it (2005: 517). Yet as he identifies this also produces the possibility, the imperative for the creation of new sensibilities and collaborations. Hence investment in social relationship and the practices of being 'social' (burials, meals, marriages), most notably political redistribution, are also investments in forms of insurance and protection and of forming relationships with people on whom one may rely for dispute settlement, bail money and sanctuary. Security in this sense is an organizing principle both horizontally in networks, associations, fellowship, marriage and congregational allegiances, and in the vertical politics of patrimonialism as relations with powerful patrons. The closer one looks, the finer the interweaving of security and sociality. In focusing on the circular dynamics of prebendal precariousness – how it is produced by insecurity and in turn produces it – so we must add insecurity to the familiar tropes by which the Nigerian state is conceptualised. Dryden's question, 'What subjects will precarious Kings regard?' seems especially apt. When office-holding is precarious what type of citizenry and what forms of subjectivity are produced?

[13] Ruth Marshall (pers com).

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