

Consumerism: The Backbone Of Ideological Poverty In Nigeria

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Abstract

Living in poverty in a society of inordinate consumers is always worrisome. Therein, approach to life, issues and projects are usually built around consumer choices rather than work ethics, development, necessary skills or jobs. A consumerist society creates a mirage of social consequences that are rooted in ideological poverty. Thus, this paper criticizes consumerism as the pivot on which the Nigerian growing and perplexing nexus of ideological poverty connects and revolves. Consumerism is described as the theory which celebrates inordinate consumption of goods and services. The paper claims that Nigerians rebranded as royal priests, can embody responsible and creative consumption of goods and services as their theologically rooted task. It underscores that such rebranded Nigerians can live out a unique vision of the fullness of Christ as a theology of grace, whose challenge is a visionary pursuit of Public theology. It seeks a reforming society and a reforming economy.

INTRODUCTION

Nnadozie (2009: 4-5) describes consumerism as the equating of personal happiness with the purchasing of material possessions and consumption. Consumerism is a socioeconomic policy with gravitational emphasis on consumption rather than production and preservation. It is a belief that the free choice of consumers should dictate the structures of society. The term consumerism as it is used in this article describes people's inordinate quest for acquiring and consuming goods and services. It is a

virus that is eating deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian social order, reducing many to the status of unhealthy consumers who are trapped in ideological poverty.

As Professor Anya O Anya (2010: 10-15) has shown, the lack of technical and vocational orientation and content in the Nigerian educational system tends to constitute the fulcrum on which this unhealthy development connects and revolves. The Nigerian education system tends to speak less about ethical transmission of knowledge and ideas, which *inter alia*, pays significant attention to the burning question of value propagation and conservation in the society. In every human society as he also said, there is a body of knowledge, which the society considers so important that it has to be transmitted from one generation to another. Such an exercise often births the belief system of the given society. It embodies a code of conduct and those goals, ideals, interests and expected standards of performance and behaviour which the society values. Anya's position lends weight to view that the Nigerian education system scarcely provides a significant way for human beings to assist their communities to take their places among the comity nations. It is also questionable if our educational system exists as a substantive gateway to a new and secure future. Until recently, education tilts more towards an individualistic struggle for self-centred subsistence in Nigeria. This is a vexation.

The above mentioned issues make it more plausible to describe the prevailing and distressing suffering, hunger, unemployment, etc, which

are ubiquitous in contemporary Nigeria as living proofs of ideological poverty. They are by-products of lack of innovation, creativity and value in addition to the reflections and visionary praxis of the role players in the Nigerian society. It lends credence to Anya's perspective, that we as a nation have lost the sense of propriety and that our leaders have lost her sense of shame. Education in this sense is therefore formal and informal. Many Nigerian victims of this ideological poverty, the literates and the illiterates inclusive, are constitutive of what this author (Ndukwe 2010: 414) following Jeffrey Sachs (2005: 56-57), has described as 'those trapped in the poverty trap.' They tend to live only in and for the present day.

Nnadozie's (2009: 2, 4) view lends credence to this position. He opines that it is not strange in Nigeria (for instance), to see compounds littered with several state of the art cars, which do not serve creative purpose for the owner. People believe in buying and owning those cars just for the sake of some egoistic satisfaction. They rarely show significant concern on how irresponsible they appear or how deep such desire eats into their purse and productivity. Consumerism is often rooted in unbridled sacrifice of tomorrow on the altar of today's individual happiness and insatiability.

In addition, consumerism also leads to dependency syndrome. The consumer depends so much on the creativity and productivity of others to gain gratification. Such acquisition of ostentatious goods or services in many cases, do not make significant impact towards the improvement of

his/her social order, economy or social capital. For instance, it is not uncommon to see a Nigerian peasant farmer get a bank loan only to spend the money on reigning fashion, cars, new wife, etc and still depend on the charity of others to sustain her/his business.

Consumerism creates in the mind of the consumer a false self image of contentment. In this sense, consumerism is a spirituality and lifestyle that is only concerned about the present. Consumerism usually leads to a drift away from community values, spirituality and integrity: it inclines towards competition, materialism, individualism and disconnection.

Given the foregoing, it becomes obvious that consumerism constitutes itself as an affront to meaningful engagement of many Nigerians in nation building, social transformation and development. It interferes with the workings of the society by replacing the normal commonsense desire for the supply of life's necessities, community life, a stable family and a healthy relationship with an artificial status and insatiable quest for goods and services and the means of acquiring them. Consumerism often pursues same without meaningful respect for the true utility of what is acquired. Consumerism works against the human sense of responsibility. It pitches persons against themselves in an endless quest for the attainment of material things and creates the fantasy of a world that is yet beyond reach. A consumerist philosophy as this author (Ndukwe 2010: 49) has shown thrives more on negative competitiveness and incorrigible individualism.

These issues bequeath this paper with the impetus to criticize consumerism as the pivot on which the Nigerian growing and perplexing nexus of ideological poverty connects and revolves. Ideological poverty as it is used here represents life of poverty which originates, thrives and revolves in the vicious circle of the poverty trap that is rooted in the beliefs and value systems of a given (Nigerian) social order. Such life in poverty is ideological because it shapes and propels the way the victims (Nigerians) think, act and understand the world. As earlier said, encoded in belief and value systems of a given society, is a core of assumptions which often guide individual lives. It embodies a code of conduct as well as goals, ideals, interests and expected standards of performance and behaviour which the said society values.

Hence the central concern of this paper: to lend a helping hand to the Federal Government's efforts to rebrand Nigeria and Nigerians as a place to be and a people to relate with. The challenge before us as Emeka Anyaoku (2010: 205) has said is how and when what most of the international community regard as Africa's sleeping giant will wake up. Nigeria's friends and well wishers are optimistic that the giant is destined to wake up when she succeeds in managing more effectively her enormous human and material resources. From its Christian theological perspective, this paper holds that this feat is achievable with the generation and installation of rebranded Nigerians as royal priests who seek to serve God by ruling the worlds of their various locations within the Nigeria political economy.

Rebranded Nigerians as Royal Priests: This speaks about a reformed, regenerated and repackaged Nigeria and Nigerians as a place to be and a people to relate with. Royal priests or priesthood represents an ethical vision for theological practitioners who seek to re-interpret godly ethics to mean serving God and ruling the world as well. It is about God's people who gather to do business in His name, as a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, who are called and mandated to declare the praise of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet 2: 9). These unique persons disperse to embody the will of God as a historical reality. What is at envisioned here is a godly witness of regenerated Nigerians, by which the blind can see, the deaf can hear and through which the lame can experience and appropriate the leap of faith. Such rebranded Nigerians will exist as by-products of conscientisation.

Conscientization is a significant approach towards nation building, social transformation and development and a reformed society. From its Portuguese rendering, i.e., *conscientização*, conscientization describes a process of mindset regeneration which challenges and inspires people to move from magic thinking toward critical consciousness. This process of mindset regeneration also recognizes meaningful reflection and action against oppressive elements in one's life as an aspect of education. Hence it is crucial for rebranding Nigeria and Nigerians as a place to be and a people to be associated with. Conscientization also refers to an approach to teaching and learning which is focused on perceiving and exposing social and political contradictions.

As a result, such rebranded Nigerians will not permit the free choice of consumers to dictate the structures of the Nigerian social order. They will place weighty emphasis on production and preservation rather than excessive acquisition and consumption of goods and services. Their concern is to find out what it means here and now to put into practice that unique quality of life which represents God's promise to the royal priests and their promise to the God and service to Nigerians. Historically Nigerians as many other Africans, are incurably religious. They embody their religioculture (culture which originates from religion, thrives in religion and seeks consummation in religion) as indispensable religiosity.

As rebranded people who seek to serve God and project theological politics, such Nigerians will also work towards political, economic and social emancipation of the despairing section of the populace, i.e., the poor. They seek substantive ways to appeal to the conscience and attitudes of people across boundaries and cultures in their embodied attempts to promote meaningful ideas and values for the salvation and development of the society. Godly inspired lives and work ethics will propel them to engage the Nigerian political economy and its citizenry with a unique theological vision. Such is the vision for social ethics which the life and ministry of the biblical rather than the ideological Euro-American Jesus Christ initiates, ushers, enthrones and empowers.

What matters most to them is the mind of God for God's people who are created in God's image and for God's own glory and excellence, their religious affiliations notwithstanding. Rebranded royal priests in this sense will mean ecumenically oriented and disposed God seekers who desire to serve God and at the same time seek to rule their worlds with an embodied proclamation of the victory which God in the biblical Jesus Christ procured. They will educate Nigerians that this victory is to be demonstrated over the principalities and powers in the various sectors of our national economy. Such conscientized Nigerians will also seek to reform public opinions, raise and install rebranded royal priests to constitute a royal priesthood, which can take the challenges of consumerism very serious in the various sectors of our national economy. Irrespective of their religious affiliations, these unique Nigerians will seek to re-present an embodied proclamation of the fullness of Christ as theology of grace.

The Fullness of Christ as a Theology of Grace: This is about re-presenting the witness of the biblical Jesus Christ as a visionary reflection and practice of godliness that seeks to recover, empower and release every human being to become a beneficiary and dispenser of God's grace in history. As this author (Ndukwe 2011: 10) has shown, human progress is also concerned with influencing others while at the same time being open to welcome meaningful influences from others. Talking about the fullness of Christ as a theology of grace is about emphasis on how God's people as beneficiaries of the Sovereign and gracious bequests of God, can doxologically assist the victims of the society, as a theological response.

Cornelius Platinga (2002: 129-130) has said that it is very fitting for those who have received grace at so great a cost to offer it to others and by so doing build up both the faith community and the Kingdom of God. The Sovereign and gracious bequest of God also encourages human beings to develop virtues which inspire people to see things for the benefit of others. From Platinga, it is obvious that embodying theology of grace is a theological maxim that is crucial in dealing with the challenge of ideological poverty in Nigeria today. It centers on the burning issue of human capital development challenge.

Anya (2011: 13) has argued that the Nigerian human capital development challenge yearns for an appropriate balance and critical mass of human resource base. The challenge further calls for the provision of enabling environments for all persons to be meaningfully engaged in nation building, social transformation and development. Of great importance here is the challenge of how meaningful opportunities can be created for all human beings to discover and develop their potentials through education, training and motivation. Anya's position will help a lot in taming the tides of the prevailing vicious circle of ideological poverty in Nigeria.

What is at stake here is a more meaningful approach for recovering and re-presenting the common calling of humankind as an ecumenically oriented social ethics that is grounded in theology. It has to do with a more substantive vision for theological ethics that can reclaim, empower

and re-present rebranded Nigerians as change agents whose life and daily engagements will present theology of grace as a call to reconstitute and celebrate human dignity especially that of victims of society. As John Howard Yoder (1988: 53) has said, the first step in reaffirming the human dignity of these victims of society is to reconstitute their celebrate life to affirm the rule of God in human lives and hearts. On one hand, complacent attitudes of the privileged members of the society towards these victims of society dismisses and relocates them to the identity of unhealthy consumers as well as mere objects of pity. On the other hand, the despondent attitudes and reflections of these victims of society themselves often reduce their lives and services to consumerism, utilitarianism and opportunism. In other words, what is needed is rebranded Nigerians as royal priests who can embody the fullness of the biblical Christ as a theology of grace.

Praxis based vision for altruism rather truism or drifting away from community values, spirituality and integrity, towards competition, materialism, individualism and disconnection will be celebrated as a theological virtue. Proclamation of the lordship of the universal Saviour and culture transformer will play substantive roles in ways they will also to proclaim and seek to restore the quest for human dignity as constitutive and indispensable in the theological reflections and praxis of Nigerians. The search here is for a visionary praxis towards a unique vision for living out social ethics as a theology of grace which view on the burning question of human dignity can be of great assistance to Nigerians. Praxis also speaks about the discovery and the formation of

theological truth out of a given historical situation through personal participation in the society because the challenge here is about a public theological vision.

Challenge of Public Theological Vision: Public theology connotes the sustained attempts of faith practitioners to address the question of the public implication of the calling and being of the *laos* of God within a concrete larger society. It seeks to address issues that affect society as a whole and to deal with them in significant ways that are accessible to everyone in the public sphere. In this sense, public theology describes the ways in which claims of truth functions in a particular faith community's attempt to address issues that affect the larger society without compromising the historicity and the identity/spirituality of the concerned faith in the process.

In its varied attempts to contribute to public opinion and to respond to the challenges and concerns of the particular moment, public theology is always occasional, contextual and historical. As it is evident in Nico Koopman's (2009: 6) view, public theology also embodies prophetic speaking and action as perhaps the most prominent of Christ-centred public involvement. It is normally associated with public criticism in order to initiate and enthrone a more meaningful vision for public life. Prophetic speaking also includes the technical analysis of public challenges and the participation of churches and theologians in policy-making, policy-implementation and policy-monitoring process. Such a vision for ethical or technical public

theological discourse can illuminate and broaden godly approaches to combat the challenge of ideological poverty in Nigeria.

Consumerism misrepresents many Nigerians as people who have lost the sense of propriety because even their leaders have lost the sense of godliness and shame. In many cases those who are trapped in the circle of poverty are both perpetrators and victims of this ideological vicious circle. Consumerism deludes them to eat the seed and the harvests of their visionary pursuit of a society where no one is oppressed. Consumerism results from lack of creativity and value addition in the reflections and visionary praxis of the role players in the Nigerian society. Thus, public theology's plethora of approach towards the challenges and concerns of the particular moment can serve as Nigeria's bailout from the vicious circle of ideological poverty. Public theology also speaks about a renewed kind of language in theological quest for a reforming society that is concerned with issues that have much to do with social transformation and development.

Theological Quest for a Reforming Society: Theological quest for a reforming society as this article describes it, speaks about a vision for a society where *semper reformanda* (continuing reformation) that is rooted in the fear of God and the respect for the human dignity of persons prevail. In Nigeria we have a society that is in the extreme. The anguish cry for the conscientization of both the rich and the poor members of our societies to see themselves as change agents is very much pronounced.

For instance, about 70 per cent of Nigerians live below the UN poverty threshold of US\$1 per day. Many among her rich are so wealthy that they can scarcely manage and redirect their resources to create opportunities for breaking the vicious circle of ideological poverty. They celebrate ostentation, individualism and egocentrism as significant religiosities. Worse still, most of the poor cannot even gain access to the meagre capital base that can give them the needed leverage for growth. While unabashedly, the few poor who are privileged to receive take off capitals are often drenched in the waters of consumerism which deludes them to eat both the seed and harvests of wealth creation. One can therefore understand the necessity of this vision for a society where *semper reformanda* that is rooted in the fear of God and the respect for the human dignity of persons is in vogue.

Thus, what at stake here is a ‘theocentric’ vision for *semper reformanda* that is much concerned with the burning issues of human capital development as well. As Anya (2011: 14-15) has shown, Nigeria’s predicament can be squarely placed on poor human capital development and poor utilization policies which do not encourage balanced and progressive pedagogical development. A nation that desires guaranteed economic stability and self-sufficiency, high quality human development indices, social well being and qualitative life for its citizenry must of necessity place high premium on human capital development.

Given a gravitational theological support, Anya’s view is very crucial

for a meaningful attempt to surmount the challenges of ideological poverty in Nigeria. It will gravitate into a vision for theological enterprises whose *teleos* is very concerned with how to usher in and sustain a reforming economy through the public theologically envisioned life and works of theological practitioners who seek a reforming society. Within the Nigerian social order, economics metamorphoses into a religion with its own vision for ideological priesthood.

Theologically Rooted Vision for Reforming Economy: One of the most distressing discoveries of an objective observer of phenomena within the Nigerian political economy is the endemic manifestations of consumerism. This often reduces this blessed country's economy to a dependant on the mineral oil industry. Several attempts especially, from the former President Olusegun Obasanjo-led administration have been made to tame the tides of this consumerist ideology which often turns the polity, politics and economy of Nigeria into a shark-infested water.

For instance, with the birth of National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) in 2001, and its subsidiaries such as the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), and the Promise Keepers Programme (PKP) among others, the political economy of Nigeria began to recover the missing link in its quest to return to the paths of success. According to a report that was presented by David Nellor of the IMF African Department in the IMF Survey Magazine of 15 February 2008, Nigeria's current economic situation became the strongest in nation's economic history. The Nigerian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth which for over

the three years prior to 2003 was estimated at an average of 3.5% per day held a promise of about 9% per day in 2008.

This author's (Ndukwe 2011a: 174, 2010: 411) extract from Nellor's report attests to it: Growth is high, inflation is in single digits, and external and fiscal positions are strong....The recapitulated banking sector and newly active financial markets are supporting private activity. These gains reflect implementations of Nigeria's homegrown reform program....prospects for growth in 2008 are good....The non-oil sector, particularly in the areas of services and agriculture, has been growing strongly. Looking ahead, growth in the non-oil sector is on course to reach about 9% this year as long as weather conditions continue to support agriculture. Single digit inflation targets are within reach helped by a strong naira.

The FGN assembled a highly competent, professional group of reformers to implement macro-economic reform, service delivery improvement, anti-corruption initiatives, and poverty reduction, among other strategies. And to God's glory, it is turning many Nigerians from consumerists to creative initiators, though more needs to be done to improve on this success. Nellor expects Nigerians to maintain and, where necessary, improve on this success story.

Nigerians, this author (Ndukwe 2011a: 175) says, are suspicious that the presence of the consumerist and economic worshippers can jeopardize this feat, which the homegrown economic reform programs

of the FGN achieve for all. Better described as greedy insatiable economic priests, these *persona non grata* have no significant respect for the human dignity of the less privileged members of the society. Economics is their god while the privation of the common good is their salvation. The delusions of consumerism are tricky that many who strive to combat it end up becoming baptized and inducted into its pseudo-ideological priesthood hence the need for a theological vision for reforming the national economy.

The resultant theologically rooted royal priests/priesthood will also seek to recover and reconstitute the human dignity of both the rich and the poor. They will challenge Nigerians to see themselves as constitutive of Christ's moral agents for the transformation and development of society in general and the national economy in particular. They will be as concerned about the welfare of the economy as they are concerned with the welfare of members of the society. They embody the fear of God by living out an ethical theological vision, which seeks to combat ideological poverty without compromising such values as substantive respect for human dignity, hospitality and community formation and sustenance among other things, in Nigeria.

As rebranded royal priests, they embody a restorative vision for the diversification of the national economy and an increased Gross Domestic Output (GDO). This vision for economic reforms inspires its devotees to envision and to seek to translate economics from Christ-centred perspective on believers' responsible approach to sharing and

appropriating economic resources at all levels of human existence. They will embody moral osmosis is a painstaking but resourceful approach to a theologically rooted vision for social transformation and development. Moral osmosis as this author (Ndukwe 2011b: 50) has said is an attitude of honesty, transparency, hard work, mutual respect, clean thinking/actions, selflessness in service and tolerance among other Christ-centred values for social transformation and development.

CONCLUSION: Consumerism is the backbone of ideological poverty, which eats deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian social order and cajoles many critics to baptism and induction into its *pseudo* priesthood. This also makes a makes a mockery of Nigeria's identity as the giant of Africa, thereby leaving her citizens with the challenge of how and when this sleeping giant of the continent will wake up from her slumber, hence the need for a theological vision for reforming the national economy. To execute this theological vision, a generation and installation of rebranded Nigerians as royal priests who seek to serve God by ruling the worlds from their various locations within the Nigeria political economy is presented as the bailiff from the vicious circle of ideological poverty. Their praxis based vision for the fullness of Christ as a theology of grace will also address the challenge of ideological poverty and to deal with it in significant ways that are accessible to everyone in the public sphere. A praxis based public theological vision will be embodied as a restorative approach to *semper reformanda* for

the diversification of the national economy. Such rebranded Nigerians will embody moral osmosis as a painstaking but resourceful approach to a theologically rooted vision for social transformation and development. What is at stake in curbing the menace of ideological poverty in Nigeria is a theocentric vision for *semper reformanda* that is greatly concerned with the burning issues of responsible living, an ecumenically rooted and oriented social ethics that is grounded in theology, respect/reconstitution and celebration of dignity of persons as well as human capital development.

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