

Consumerism: The Backbone of Ideological Poverty in Africa (A Nigerian Engagement)

By
Dr. Olo Ndukwe

E-mail Address: olondukwe@yahoo.com

Phone Number¹: +234(0)803-711-4050

Phone Number²: +234(0)807-159-1261

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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. Such is a consumerist society. It breeds a mirage of unbridled consumerism and 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 represents an anti-development theory which celebrates inordinate consumption of goods and services as a spirituality. 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.

Keywords: Poverty, consumerism, Nigerian, spirituality

Introduction

Consumerism as it is used in this article describes a socioeconomic policy which places weighty emphasis on consumption rather than production and preservation. It is a belief that the free choice of consumers should dictate the structures of society. Tobe Nnadozie in a paper titled *Consumerism A Shame to Marketing* also describes it as the equating of personal happiness with the purchasing of material possessions and consumption. The term represents people's inordinate quest for acquiring and consuming goods and services without meaningful concern for the propagation and conservation of values and ethics for substantive engagement in nation building, social transformation and development. It represents an anti-developmental conduct that is eating deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian social order, which often reduces its victims to the status of unhealthy consumers who are trapped in ideological poverty.

Gleaning from Professor Anya O Anya's view education and value propagation, one can argue that 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. Anya opines that in every human society, 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 behavior which the society values.

Anya's position lends weight to this author's view which holds that the Nigerian education system scarcely provides a significant way for human beings to assist their communities to take place among the 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-centered subsistence in Nigeria. This is a deficiency which can be summarized as a vexation.

This vexation makes it more plausible for one to describe the prevailing and distressing suffering, hunger, unemployment, etc, which are ubiquitous in contemporary Nigeria as living proofs of ideological poverty. They are bye-products of lack of innovation, creativity and value addition in the reflections and visionary praxis of the role players in the Nigerian society. They lend credence to Anya's submission which says that it is as if Nigerians have lost the sense of propriety and that our leaders have lost the sense of shame. Education in this sense is both formal and informal. As a consequence, many Nigerian victims of this ideological poverty, the literates and the illiterates inclusive, are constitutive of what this author following Jeffrey Sachs has described as 'those trapped in the poverty trap.' Such victims of ideological poverty tend to live only in and for the present day.

Nnadozie's view lends gravity to this position. In his view, it is not strange in Nigeria to as an instance, 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 personal happiness. These victims of consumerism rarely show significant concern on how deep such desire eats into their purse and sense of creativity as well as the social fabrics of the nation. Consumerism is often rooted in unbridled sacrifice of tomorrow on the alter of today's individual happiness and insatiability.

¹ Consumerism A Shame to Marketing (2009), Pg 4-5. Available Online: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/31306857/Consumerism-a-Shame-to-Marketing> Accessed June 7, 2012

² Values, Education and the Future of Nigeria. Economic and Policy Review, (2010) Vol 17, No 2& 3: 10-15.

³ Christian Faith and Social Transformation: Yoderian Challenges to Reformed Theology: A Nigerian Presbyterian Perspective. (Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishers, 2011), Pg 414.

⁴ The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time (London, England: Penguin Books, 2005), Pg 56-57).

In addition, consumerism also leads to dependency syndrome. The consumer depends much on the creativity and productivity of others to gain gratification for acquiring an ostentatious good or service, which 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 who picks up loan but spends 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 one as an inordinate dependent. Consumerism is a spirituality and lifestyle that is more concerned about the present. It usually leads to a drift away from community values, spirituality and integrity: consumerism inclines towards competition, materialism, individualism and disconnection.

Given the foregoing, it becomes obvious that consumerism constitutes itself as an affront against 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 ongoing 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 or the imagery of a world that is conjured up and made possible by things yet to be enjoyed or acquired. A consumerist philosophy as this author 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 penurious life 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 is reminiscent of that which Emeka Anyaoku has posed. That 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. As a result, this paper draws from its Christian

theological perspective to submit that this is a feat, which is achievable through the generation and installation of rebranded Nigerians as royal priests who seek to serve God by embodying godliness to rule the worlds of their various locations within the national 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 and live out godly ethics to mean serving God and ruling the world as well. It is about God's people who gather to do business in God's 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 us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet 2: 9). Royal priests as 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, which the blind can see, the deaf can hear and which the lame can experience and appropriate the leap of faith to embrace. Such rebranded Nigerians will exist as bye-products of conscientisation.

Conscientization is a significant approach towards nation building, social transformation and development and for a reforming society. From its Portuguese rendering, i.e., *conscientização*, conscientization describes a process of mindset reawakening and renewal which challenges and inspires people to move from magic thinking toward critical consciousness. This process of awakening and transforming mindset also recognizes meaningful reflection and action against oppressive elements in one's life as an aspect of education. And this approach to awakening and transforming mindset 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, these rebranded Nigerians will not permit the free choice of consumers to dictate the structures of the Nigerian social order. Their weighty emphasis will be on production and preservation rather than excessive acquisition and consumption of goods and services. Central to their concern is finding 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 God and their services to Nigerians. Historically Nigerians as many other Africans, are incurably religious. They embody their *religio*-culture as indispensable religiosity.

Therefore, being a rebranded people who seek to serve God and project theological politics, these unique Nigerians will also work towards political, economic and social emancipation of those who always have their hands on their heads, i.e., the poor. They initiate and propagate substantive ways to appeal to the conscience and attitudes of people across boundaries and cultures in embodied attempts to promote meaningful ideas and values for the salvation and development of the society. Godly inspired lives and work

⁵ Consumerism A Shame To Marketing, Pg 2,4.

⁶ Christian Faith and Social Transformation, Pg 49.

⁷ Nigeria: Dealing with the Missing Link' in Nigeria: Half a Century of Progress & Challenges, Ikokwu, Constance Chigor, ed (Nigeria: True Expression Press, 2011), Pg 205.

⁸ That is, a culture which originates from religion, thrives in religion and seeks consummation in religion.

⁹ Engaging God's World: A Christian Witness of Faith, Learning, and Living (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), Pg 129-130.

ethics propels them to engage a given national economy and its citizenry with a unique theological 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.

For such Nigerians, what matters most is the mind of God for God's people who are created in God's image and for God's own glory and excellence, religious affiliations notwithstanding. Rebranded royal priests in this sense represents an ecumenically oriented and disposed bunch of 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 has won in the life and ethical praxis of the biblical Jesus Christ. Consequently they will educate Nigerians that this victory is to be demonstrated over the principalities and powers in the various sectors of our national economy.

These unique 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 affinities, they 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. Human progress is also concerned with the burning issue of how to influence others while at the same time being open to welcome meaningful influences from such 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 to celebrate their humanities. Talking about the fullness of Christ in this sense speaks about a theological response.

Cornelius Platinga has observed 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. Gleaning from Platinga's perspective it becomes obvious that embodying theology of grace is a theological maxim that is crucial in dealing with the challenge of ideological poverty in Nigeria today. The challenge centers on the burning issue of human capital development challenge.

Anya has also argued that the Nigerian human capital development challenge yearns for an appropriate balance and critical mass of human resource base. It further calls for the provision of enabling environments for all persons to be meaningfully engaged in nation building, social transformation and development. The challenge centers on how meaningful opportunities can be created for all human beings to discover and develop their potentials through

education, training and motivation. Thus, 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 to recovering and re-presenting the common calling of humankind to reflect an ecumenically rooted and 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 the rebranded Nigerians as change agents whose life and daily engagements will present theology of grace as a call to reconstitute and celebrate the human dignity of all persons especially the victims of society. As John Howard Yoder 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 a bunch rebranded Nigerians to serve 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, will be celebrated as a theological virtue as significant godly religiosity. It will de-emphasize competition, materialism, individualism and disconnection from community values, spirituality and integrity. Proclamation of the lordship of the universal Saviour as culture transformer will play substantive roles in ways they will also 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 whose 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. This will be pursued through personal and corporate participation in social affairs as a theological maxim. 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* (people) 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 every one in the public sphere. In this sense, public theology describes the ways in which truth claims function 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.

¹⁰ Nigeria: The Human Capital Challenge. Economic & Policy Review, Vols 17 & 18, Nos 4 & 1 (October-March, 2011): 13.

¹¹ Armaments and Eschatology. Studies in Christian Ethics, Vol 1, No 1 (1988): 53.

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 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 poverty trap are both perpetrators and victims of this ideological vicious circle of poverty. 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 human dignity is in vogue. In Nigeria we have a society that is in the extreme. This makes the anguish cry for the conscientization of both the rich and the poor members of our societies to see themselves as change agents 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 their resources to create and communicate the needed wealth for breaking the vicious circle of ideological poverty. They celebrate ostentatiousness, 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 to start growing. While abashedly, the few poor who receive the grace of take off capital are often drenched in the waters of consumerism which often 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 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, which 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 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

¹² For God So Loved the World...Some Contours for Public Theology in South Africa (Stellenbosch, South Africa: Sunpress, 2009), Pg 6.

¹³ Nigeria: The Human Capital Challenge: 14-15.

¹⁴ Among the Nations, Pg 174 & Christian Faith and Social Transformation, Pg 411.

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. Nello expects Nigerians to maintain and, where necessary, improve on this success story.

Nigerians, this author quips, 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* (unwanted ambassadors) have no significant respect for the human dignity of the less privileged members of the society. Economics is their god while the privatization and privation of the common good is their salvation. The delusions of consumerism are catalytic to this suspicion. The delusions of consumerism are often so 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. Such unique Nigerians will 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 the process.

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 reform inspires its devotees to envision and to seek to translate economics from a Christ-centred perspective on believers' responsible sharing and appropriation of economic resources at all levels of human existence. They will embody moral osmosis as a painstaking but resourceful approach to a theologically rooted vision for social transformation and development. Moral osmosis as this author 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. With moral osmosis, even non-Christian believers can consciously or unconsciously imbibe many Christ-centred values and this will play significant roles in taming the tides of ideological poverty in Nigeria. The perplexing Nigerian ideological poverty challenge as this work has shown is grounded in consumerism.

Conclusion

Consumerism is the backbone of ideological poverty, which eats deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian social order and entices many critics to baptism and induction into its *pseudo* priesthood. It is a distressing spirituality and identity which

also 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. This calls 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 of 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 every one in the public sphere. A praxis based public theological vision will be embodied as a restorative approach to *semper reformanda* in order to diversify the national economy. Such rebranded Nigerians will embody moral osmosis as a painstaking but resourceful approach to a theologically rooted vision for nation building, social transformation and development. What 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 the human dignity of persons as well as human capital development. These are the major concerns of this article.

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¹⁵ Among the Nations, Pg 175.

¹⁶ Celebration of Life, Pg 50.

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