

# Pronatalism: An Antithetical Value to Nigeria's Reforms

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## **Abstract**

*The Nigerian state is heterogeneous. Despite some very sharp differences, certain values are common to all parts of the country. This paper focuses on one of such values with a view to assessing its role in bringing the Nigerian society to its present state. The value of attention is the value of pronatalism, which is here defined as beliefs and practices which underlie preference for many children. It is unfortunate that the ongoing reforms in Nigeria disregard the role of the value of pronatalism in the decay they seek to undo. A question is raised: What role has the constancy of the value of pronatalism and the resultant surge in population size played in getting the nation into the present political predicament? The paper appraises the stance of government on population matters over the years and notes that the co-incidence of the ills of rapid population growth and non-responsive governance has, more than any other factor, contributed to the present state of socio-political deformation. Based on this diagnosis, therefore, it is advocated that a negation of the value of pronatalism be factored into the reforms, if they must work.*

**Key words:** *value, pronatalism, population growth, deprivation, reforms.*

## **Introduction and Background**

The Social Darwinist's isomorphic theorizing is employed to draw an analogy between human society and an organism which possesses innate instincts for survival. In fact, the allusion should be to Malthus (1789) whose works on population shaped Darwinism in general and Social Darwinism in particular (Martindale, 1960). Early in the history of man, the value of pronatalism was evolved as an adaptive feature to ensure that the brutish nature of human life (of wars and pestilence) did not lead to extinction (Weeks, 2002). Put differently, if in the face of high mortality that characterized the early stages of the evolution of human societies, there was no corresponding high value placed on having many children, the human species would have become history today. It could, in fact, be argued from a social Darwinist point of view, that some communities have failed to evolve this necessary adaptive feature and so have not survived to the present time.

In essence, it is postulated that at some point in the history of all human societies, the value of pronatalism is functional and failure to evolve the value is a step in the direction of obliteration. In Nigeria, the value of pronatalism manifests itself in the names given to children (e.g Omowunmi – Child is desired; Viyon – Child is good; Nwadiuto – Child brings joy/happiness...); feasts in honour of high fertility such as the *ewu-ukwu* in some eastern cultures

of the country (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003); adages/proverbs; and the numerous other practices that make the desire to live one's life without having children an anathema. It is further averred that when evolved features are no longer helpful for the survival of societies, they ought to atrophy lest they become an albatross to the social system.

Historical accounts show that the tribes that make up present-day Nigeria, like other communities of the world, were involved in intertribal wars which necessitated high fertility or, at least made it reasonable to have many children. The importation of advanced western medical practices and the modern nation states have, however, checked mortality resulting from pestilence (with the exception of HIV/AIDS, a major cause of counter transition in the southern parts of Africa) and wars in most of Africa, Nigeria inclusive. Fertility, however, remains high since values, once formed, tend to outlive their essence. The result is what demographic transition theorists have foreshadowed – high population growth rate. A question that may then be asked is: *In what way has high population growth rate contributed to "deformation", by which is meant a regression from what is desired or ideal?* Political deformation, for instance, connotes a weakening from the desired state in which political leaders are elected by those they represent, occupy offices to protect the people's interests, and are accountable to them.

Before this question is answered, it is important to emphasize the obvious, that is, reforms suggest in a subtle way that deformation had earlier occurred. A reform is here defined as the removal of faults or abuses, especially of a moral, political or social kind (Oxford University Press, 2005). Reforms can, therefore, be multidimensional. Common dimensions of reforms include political, social, religious and economic dimensions. In Nigeria, attention has been on economic reforms and political reforms (lately) as a result of the manifestation of monumental deformities in the nation's electoral process.

The economic dimension of the reform has also been multifaceted. It has meant the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the revitalization of the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) with the aim of checkmating corrupt practices in public and private establishments within the state. On the other hand, the administration of public institutions such as the defunct Nigeria Airways, National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) [now known as Power Holding Company Of Nigeria, {PHCN}] inter alia, has, (in the opinion of the immediate past administration) defied all attempts to rid them of corruption, thus making privatization inevitable. It can, therefore, be said that in the name of economic reforms, the federal government has been pursuing the sale of public institutions and the withdrawal of subsidies on agriculture and petroleum products.

On the political scene, there have been some attempts at making office holders accountable to the people they serve. This is directly connected with the phase of economic reforms that addresses financial crimes and corruption since office holders have a greater opportunity of displaying their dexterity at looting and laundering money. On the other hand, the degree of corruption in

the political class has been revealed in an unprecedented way during the April 2007 elections during which voting materials such as ballot papers and boxes were snatched at gunpoint in some instances in different parts of Nigeria. Without exception, the elections were utterly flawed and the contest was in fact an armed-rigging contest. The best of the armed-riggers are our rulers today. This has also pointed in the direction that the nation needs reforms in the electoral system.

The different forms of corruption discussed above have a common origin – poverty. Poverty in this context is of two intertwined variants - material poverty (i.e. deprivation) and poverty of values (i.e. depravity). Essentially, this paper argues that deprivation is the most potent force in the depletion of our value system. In a more succinct way, it is argued that deprivation leads to depravity. This shall be explained further in this discourse.

### **Theoretical orientation**

As suggested in the opening paragraph, the paper is built on the evolutionary theory of Social Darwinists and contemporary functionalists. The choice of this theoretical perspective is not to be seen as a justification of the position in moral terms. Rather, its utility as an explanatory tool should be of primary interest. More theoretical insights are gained from Merton's anomie theory.

### **Evolutionary Theory**

Spencer (1892, 1964) employs organic life as an isomorph in explaining social life. Spencer avers that society has in common with organisms the feature of growth in size and structure. Primordial society corresponds to the earliest stage of growth in an organism, with parts which are hard to differentiate. With growth, however, parts of society become differentiated and complex. There is also specificity of functions as institutions evolve in society. Extrapolations on the theory of evolution bring one to the inevitable conclusion that as social groupings evolve, they develop features in form of values, customs and artifacts which ensure their survival as the process of evolution is essentially that of survival of the fittest. All values evolved in are rooted in the perceived need to ensure the survival of society.

Parsons contributes to this perspective with particular emphasis on functions. By function is meant a "system-determined and system maintaining activity" (Martindale, 1960: 445). The concept of adaptive upgrading is also very instructive in the works of Parsons. He argues:

*If differentiation is to yield a balanced, more evolved system, each newly differentiated substructure... must have increased adaptive capacity for performing its primary function, as compared to the performance of that function in the previous, more diffuse structure.... We may call this process the adaptive upgrading aspect of the evolutionary change cycle (Parsons, 1966 cited in Ritzer, 1996: 247).*

Parsons further underscores four functional imperatives necessary for all systems to survive: Adaptation (A), Goal Attainment (G), Integration/pattern maintenance (I), and Latency (L). The AGIL scheme, it should be noted, begins with adaptation, showing the importance of the evolution of features necessary for the survival of any social system. Quite interestingly, the last component also has to do with values. Ritzer (1996: 238) states that “the cultural system performs the latency function by providing actors with the norms and values that motivate them for action.”

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the value of pronatalism, like other values, is evolved as an adaptive feature at the early stage of development in virtually all societies. This value was needed to neutralize mortality which was very high. Failure to evolve adaptive features necessary for survival translates to extinction. Davis (1964) shows, however, that the importation of technologies from the developed west hastened the decline of mortality faster in Africa as well as other less developed parts of the world. The implication is that what necessitated the evolution of the value of pronatalism – high mortality – was beginning to take its leave, the result being a surge in population.

One of the many reasons for the failure of a corresponding decline in fertility to emerge in Nigeria is patron-clientism which spreads the burden of child upbringing among kins. In the west, the value of individualism puts the burden on parents, thus necessitating a reappraisal of the essence of pronatalism (Davis, 1964). The position of Spencer on the consequence of failure to evolve appropriate adaptive features is summed up in the assertion that “When it resists metamorphosis, a society will tend to revert to an earlier state” (Martindale, 1960: 69).

### **The Theory of Anomie**

Merton (1968: 216 cited in Ritzer, 1996: 252) defines culture as the “organized set of normative values governing behaviour which is common to members of a designated society or group.” Anomie implies a state of normlessness. In society, there is strong emphasis on specific goals such as wealth. Merton shows that when there is a disconnexion between socially approved means of attaining goals and the goals themselves in society, anomie occurs. This means that as a result of the positions occupied by some members of society in the social structure, they are unable to act in line with normative values. Thus Merton shows why some members of society adopt illicit means of achieving socially approved ends.

The structural defects in the Nigerian society makes it extremely difficult (if not impossible) for some members of society to access resources of society. The result is the adoption of means which are not socially approved. Merton further shows various options open to social actors in such situations: conformity (acceptance of socially approved goals and means); innovation (i.e. acceptance of goals but rejection of institutional means); ritualism (rejection of goals but acceptance of institutional means); retreatism (rejection of both

cultural goals and institutional means); and rebellion (which is the rejection of goals and means and substitution of both with a new set of goals and means) (Martindale, 1960). In the Nigerian case, many of the mass of people living in poverty as a result of “*misgovernance*” (a negation of governance) resort to innovation. Hence the high level of corruption in all walks of life.

In the section that follows, the path the nation took to deformity is traced. The aim is to identify the role of the value of pronatalism in aiding the swift descent of the Nigerian society into the present state of socio-political deformation in which it has been wading for some time.

### **The Path to decay**

The value of pronatalism appears benign and unconnected with the state of decay in society. This opinion is not entirely correct. As argued earlier, there has been some decline in mortality since the advent of western orthodox medical practice in Nigeria, whereas, there has been no corresponding decline in fertility. About half a century ago, the population of Nigeria was just about 32 million. From 1950 to the present time, the population has more than quadrupled – that is, it has multiplied itself by 4. It should be noted that while the population of the nation was growing exponentially, or geometrically as Malthus would put it, there was evolving in the name of a state, a vampire or a monster. The period in which Nigeria experienced this phenomenal growth in population coincides with the period during which she experienced the worst form of irresponsible and irresponsible governance.

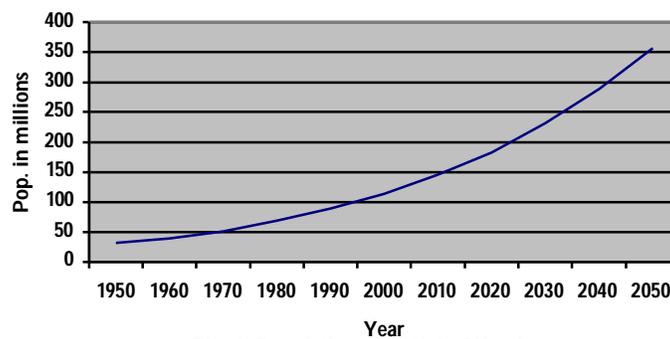
Just like Malthus proposed, the rise of population in Nigeria was matched with the rise of poverty. Whether poverty is an inevitable consequence of population growth is an inconclusive debate that may never end. Therefore, this paper does not intend to go into that debate. The discourse is, however, interested in tracing the trajectories of the two variables in the case of Nigeria. Below is a table showing population trend from 1950 to the present and projecting into the future to show what might be expected if the value of pronatalism is not addressed appropriately.

**Table 1: The Population and ranking of Nigeria from 1950 – 2050**

Year	Rank (among nations of the world)	Population
1950	15 <sup>th</sup>	31,796,939
1960	15 <sup>th</sup>	39,914,593
1970	14 <sup>th</sup>	51,027,516
1980	11 <sup>th</sup>	68,550,274
1990	10 <sup>th</sup>	88,510,354
2000	10 <sup>th</sup>	114,306,700
2007	9 <sup>th</sup>	135,031,164
2010	8 <sup>th</sup>	145,032,482
2020	8 <sup>th</sup>	183,697,154
2030	6 <sup>th</sup>	231,000,139
2040	5 <sup>th</sup>	288,543,564
2050	4 <sup>th</sup>	356,523,597

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2007).

The projections made are on the assumption that the prevailing circumstances persist. If there is no intervention, the figure below pictures the manner of growth to be expected over this period of one century.



**Fig. 1: Population growth in Nigeria**

It should be stressed that a country like Japan had a population of about 84 million inhabitants in 1950, ranking 5<sup>th</sup> among the nations of the world. Projections show that a century later (2050), the population of Japan would be about 100 million and the nation shall be ranking 17<sup>th</sup> position among the nations of the world, possibly with a negative growth rate. In the case of Nigeria, UN (2005) reports show that between 1975 and 2003, the population was growing at an average rate of 2.7% per annum. At some point, the population was growing at about an unimaginable 3% per annum. At present, it

grows at about 2% per annum. The implication of the present growth rate is that in about 35 years, the population of the nation shall be twice its present size. Accounting largely for the growth is the high fertility rate of about 5.8 children per woman. This is far above the replacement level of 2.1 children.

Conversely, UN (2005) statistics show a negative (-0.5) annual growth rate GDP per capita for Nigeria during the period 1975 to 2003. Over the years, the proportion of Nigerians living in poverty has risen. As shown by Erubami and Young (2003), the proportion of Nigerians living on less than a dollar a day was a paltry 5% in 1970. At present, the proportion has risen to 70.2%. This contrast shows that in Nigeria, population growth has posed a challenge that government has been unable to respond to. It is common knowledge that some military rulers bereft of ideas once felt that the nation never had the problem of resources. To them, the problem was where to channel the nation's resources. It was during this long period of misrule that the nation was plunged into poverty as the leaders never foresaw the need to make provisions for the additional millions of people.

It is difficult to say that the problem of poverty would not have arisen, had the population grown at a much slower rate. But the belief is held strongly that the level of poverty would not have been this high with a population of about 90 million in 2007. Population forces wages down as supply of labour outstrips its demand, particularly in a state experiencing misrule like ours in the early days after independence and several other African states in the past and at present. Demographic projections do not suggest to the contrary. According to Kent and Haub (2005), the fastest growing countries in the next 50 years will be among the poorest and least developed. This shows the incongruence of our millennium development goals to achieve development with the fast population growth rate.

### **The cycle of poverty and corruption**

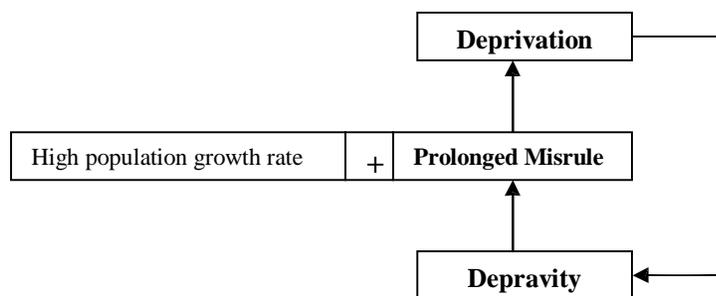
Although some argue that necessity should lead to invention, the variant of poverty plaguing the Nigerian society is that type that has brought out the beast in the people. The measurement of poverty/deprivation in proportions living on less than one dollar per day, though is useful for comparison among nations of the world, obscures the quality of deprivation in some parts of the world. The systemic defects in the nature of governance (which was characterized by misrule) experienced by Nigeria has over the years, taken the people back to the state of nature, recreating the Hobbesian state of brutish living. In essence, the people may have been conditioned to live brutish lives by the long years of deprivation. The result is that an average person who has undergone this nature of deprivation finds her/his survival as the only thing that matters. All other rules bordering on morality are thus suspended.

The foregoing gives insight into the pervasiveness of depravity in our society. This paper argues that corruption feeds on poverty. Our day to day observations bear us out on this. A man, whose survival is not assured, like a drowning man, makes no sense of morality. Man must survive to moralize. An

unfortunate side to this nature of deprivation is that it conditions its victims. This variant of poverty afflicts the minds of people, conditioning them to going in search of means of survival without any sense of morality. The consequence is that even when survival is no longer an issue, a person whose depravity is a function of deprivation has already become kleptomaniac, having an irresistible urge to steal. This explains the wantonness seen in leaders who steal beyond a sane person's ability to rationalize the act.

Were the scene to end there, the nation still would have been in El-dorado, at least in comparison with what is now being experienced. The act of stealing has somewhat attained the status of the essence of the existence of our state. The picture is clearly painted by a scholar whose words are employed here. "Today 'government' as an entity is totally divorced from the people and is perceived by the ruling elite as a vehicle not to serve but to fleece the people. The African state has been reduced to a mafia-like bazaar, where anyone with an official designation can pillage at will. Thus, what exists in many African countries is a 'vampire' or 'pirate' state – a government hijacked by a phalanx of gangsters, thugs and crooks who use the instruments of the state to enrich themselves, their cronies and tribesmen. All others are excluded" (Ayttey, 2002: 61).

Fig. 2: Schema showing the cycle of deprivation and depravity

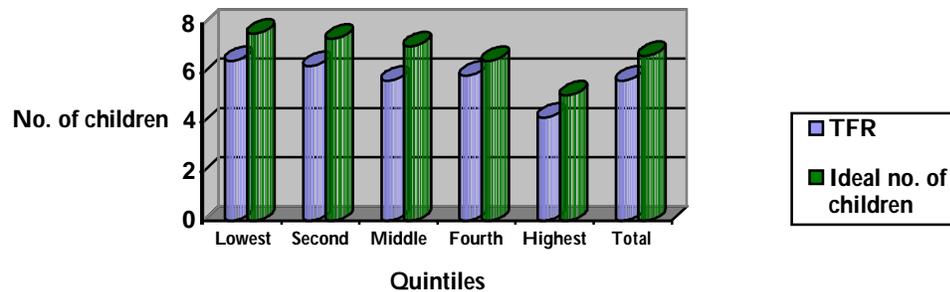


### **The poor will increase**

It takes very little logic to come to the conclusion that the unquestioned acts of stealing by leaders will further impoverish the masses. Deprivation in turn leads to depravity. The result is a cycle of poverty and corruption in which the former contributes to the latter and the latter further increases the former. It should also be pointed out that fertility is highest among the poorest quintile (6.5 children per woman) within the population (NPC, 2004). Kent and Haub (2005) also agree to this. The implication is that more children are born into poor families and are likely to be poor since access to education and resources is not guaranteed. Poverty feeds corruption which further raises poverty.

Essentially, the deformities targeted by the reforms have just one name – corruption.

**Fig. 3: Fertility rates and ideal number of children by wealth quintiles**



Source: Constructed based on NDHS 2003 statistics

The figure above shows that fertility rates and ideal number of children decline with wealth. The poorest quintile has the highest level of fertility as well as the highest ideal number of children. Consequently, there is bound to be a natural increase in the number of people born into poor homes and in this way, poverty breeds poverty and the cycle continues.

### **The value of pronatalism and the ongoing reforms**

The value of pronatalism as shown in the desire for many children by Nigerians is rooted in a complex manner in the traditional belief system that attaches material and spiritual blessings to fertility. The value is supported by the patriarchal system in our society (Bankole, 2000; Obono, 2002; Isiugo-Abanihe 2003); religious beliefs (Izugbara, 2005; Raimi, 2000); poverty and the system of using children as a form of support in old age (Ebigbola, 2000; Oyekanmi, 2000; Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003); and state policies which are either not cognizant of the cultures of the people or pronatalist in themselves (Obono, 2002). Family planning programmes have been successful only in isolated parts of southern Nigeria (NPC, 2004) and the crisis of numerical supremacy among the various parts of the state has also fueled the value of pronatalism (Nnorom and Kunnuji, 2006).

An exponentially growing population is incongruent with the ongoing reforms. If the ongoing reforms are to be effective, the rate of population growth ought to be reduced. The pool of unemployed must be reduced and wages must improve. High unemployment and uncertainty about life in retirement are factors that motivate citizens to adopt corrupt practices. Merton's model of options available to persons in a state of anomie is applicable. A vast majority of Nigerians are innovators getting to the ends

through illicit means. This has also been made an attractive option by the system which attaches very little sanction to deviation by office holders.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

In the course of this discourse, the authors have shown the importance of the value of pronatalism to the survival of human race and its transformation into an albatross at some point. The paper has further shown the central concern of the ongoing reforms in Nigeria which is the eradication of corruption in private and public spheres of the economy and in politics. The paper looks into the past with the aim of tracing the trajectory of population growth and the rise of poverty in Nigeria. The conclusion is that the coincidence of a rapidly growing population with a long period of misrule – post independence – resulted in forcing down wages and the lowering of human quality of life. The resultant impoverishment of the generality of the people in turn led to the employment of illicit means of achieving socially approved goals by the majority of the people, although there are notable exceptions.

Consequently, the nation has sunk into a state of socio-political deformation. Although population may not automatically translate into poverty, it does so where there are no adequate plans to cater for the extra mouths being added. Our infrastructural base in the country can barely meet the needs of half the population of the nation at present. The gross inadequacy and the unmet basic needs of the people have taken them back to the state of nature, a state of war of all against all and might makes right.

It is therefore suggested that further studies be channeled in the area of solving the puzzle of how the whirlpool in which the nation spins can be halted without violence. Scholarly attention should also be focused on factors that may motivate poor families to reduce fertility since they contribute the most to the growth of the nation's population. To solve the social problems identified, state policies should be holistic in approach and the reforms should not ignore population issues.

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