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Get to the bridge and I will help you to cross': Merit, personal connections, and money as routes to success in Nigerian higher education

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help you to cross’:
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money as routes to success in
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Chris Willott

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‘GET TO THE BRIDGE AND I WILL HELP YOU TO CROSS’: MERIT, PERSONAL CONNECTIONS, AND MONEY AS ROUTES TO SUCCESS IN NIGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Chris Willott, Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath

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Abstract

The state is acknowledged as the central actor in development, and there are numerous studies on African states and their relationships to societies. However, the vast majority of these studies focus on the highest echelons of politics and policymaking, with very few dedicated to how the state is experienced and lived by its users. This literature tends therefore to be abstract. Furthermore, much literature, particularly that stressing the neopatrimonial character of African states, examines states through the prism of Weberian logic and suggests that, because states do not conform to a rational-legal ideal, they must therefore be deficient or dysfunctional. This literature therefore tends to be quite normative. This paper offers a less normative and abstract understanding of the state in everyday action, through analysis of the workings of the Nigerian higher education sector. It draws on primary data collected through ethnographic methods to analyse how service providers and users of a university in south-eastern Nigeria negotiate their passage into, and through, a highly complex and flexible system.

The paper argues that achieving success in Nigerian higher education is dependent on a combination of merit, personal connections and money. While all students enter the university on the basis of merit (locally referred to as ‘getting to the bridge’), personal connections and money are crucial influences. The relative importance of the latter is stronger among poorer performing students. Furthermore, the paper will demonstrate that amongst academic staff, personal connections to influential people and factions are the most important factors influencing success. The notion of ‘get to the bridge and I will help you to cross’ is also important for staff as official credentials are a necessary but not sufficient criteria for academic success. Strong personal connections play a key and decisive role.

The case presented in the paper offers an important corrective to the rather abstract and normative ideas that underpin the theory of the African neopatrimonial state. It argues that a better understanding of the state requires a stronger focus on the routine and real experiences of service providers and users, as well as on their everyday interactions

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1 Introduction

This paper analyses the Nigerian state using empirical data gathered in its higher education sector. It examines the experiences of students and staff as they attempt to gain access to, and successful passage through, an elite university, entitled the University of South Eastern Nigeria (USEN). In this paper, I argue for a grounded, non-normative perspective on the Nigerian 'everyday state', which contrasts with the approach taken by the body of literature characterising contemporary African states as neopatrimonial. I use empirical data to illustrate some of the deficiencies of this approach. The paper is split into two sections, examining the experiences of service users, in the form of students, and service providers, in the form of academic staff. Achieving success for both of these two groups is dependent on a combination of merit, personal connections and money, though the way individuals make use of these three types of resource is dependent on circumstances.

2 Student experiences

The experiences of students as they attempt to enter USEN, and their careers once inside, are incredibly diverse. Academic ability and hard work have an influence on success and failure, but to these factors must be added the hugely important role played by integration within influential kin and social networks, and the ability and willingness to use money to influence events. This section examines the interrelationships between official – merit-based – and extra-legal – non-merit-based – practices in influencing student attainment. It is possible to discern general patterns about the way these factors operate, and the impact they have on the experience of Nigerian higher education for students. Much neopatrimonial state literature is deficient in its examination of the ways in which official and extra-legal processes intersect, instead conceptualising African states as wholly 'captured' by society (see for instance Clapham 1985; Chabal 2002; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Medard 1982). Some neopatrimonial state scholars (notably Bratton and van de Walle 1997) and scholars from other approaches (such as Therkildsen 2005; Erdmann and Engel 2007; Olivier de Sardan 2009), by contrast, acknowledge the hybrid nature of contemporary African states, and view the state as ambiguous, and the product of constant tension between two sets of norms. My analysis suggests that both official and extra-legal processes are important but that the interrelationship between them is critical for an understanding of Nigerian higher education.

2.1 Accessing USEN for students

Higher education is very important among Igbo people, both as a marker of social status – a family with no graduates is seen as shameful or a failure – and as a way into the congested job market. Igbo people are more likely than most other Nigerian ethnic groups to apply and gain entrance to university. In 2000-1 39.4% of students admitted to Nigerian universities came from the Igbo-dominated south-east zone (Langer et al, 2007: 33), despite the fact that Igbos comprise just 18% of Nigeria's population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). It is therefore unsurprising that universities in Igboland are heavily oversubscribed. At USEN, for instance, in 2006-7 35,000 students were examined for entry and only 6,000 admitted (Prof. Uzochi Eze, interview, 16 March 2007). The combination of oversubscription, clamour for degrees and the prestige of USEN produce a degree of desperation among those seeking to gain admission. This

desperation often leads to students and, more particularly, parents, using any means necessary to gain admission for themselves or their wards. Often this runs counter to official procedure, which emphasises high marks on a number of different examinations.

Accessing USEN is dependent on a combination of merit, personal connections and money. For those with very good scores on their exams – primarily those run by the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB) and, since 2005, USEN itself – merit is often enough to secure entry, regardless of other considerations. For others, however, the situation is considerably more complicated. The first hurdle students must cross is that they must ‘get to the bridge’, which means that when they apply to USEN they must have a score of over 200 on their JAMB exam. My research suggests that, regardless of the strength of connections or the ability to pay to secure entry, a score of 200 on JAMB is an absolute prerequisite for entry.

However, there are many reasons why JAMB scores are not viewed as a reliable indicator of students’ ability, and a number of ‘sharp practices’ through which students’ scores are inflated. These include exam malpractice, including the use of contractors or mercenaries – individuals who charge students to sit their exams for them – collusion with invigilators and impersonation; and artificially inflating JAMB scores after the exam, such as by lobbying JAMB staff, using a connection within JAMB or the USEN admissions department, or hacking into the JAMB website. One respondent told me that JAMB has a reputation for ‘students paying for whatever score they wanted’ (Prof. Uzochi Eze, interview, 16 March 2007). Students who do particularly well on JAMB and post-JAMB internal screening will be admitted to USEN on merit. It is, however, also possible to secure admission through three other means – semi-official discretion, personal connections and making financial payment, which is known as ‘lobbying’. Sometimes entry is secured on the basis of a combination of these factors.

There are two forms of semi-official discretion in access to USEN: Vice Chancellor’s list and staff quota. These two methods of entry were previously termed ‘discretion’ in Federal Government guidelines. At the time of my fieldwork this aspect of entry had been removed *de jure*, but still operated *de facto*. Vice Chancellor’s list refers to places offered to students at the discretion of the Vice Chancellor. A senior member of staff informed me that there are approximately 5% of places available through VC’s list, which usually covers the clients of major donors to the university and which correlates closely with Smith’s (2006: 70) argument that discretionary places at secondary schools may go to ‘powerful people [the school] cannot afford not to help’. A further 5% of places are available through staff quota, which refers to the practice of providing staff members, as a form of benefit in addition to salary, with a place at the university to study for their spouse or child. Smith (2005: 41) comments that this is seen by staff as ‘one of the biggest perks of the office’. The final decision about which staff relatives are admitted usually falls to the VC. Despite the Federal Government’s removal of discretion from official entry criteria, staff quota is still widely and openly used.

The semi-formal nature of these types of entry reveals much about the relationship between state and society in Nigeria. Until the Federal Government decided to remove discretionary entry, it had been officially enshrined in university policy that 10% of entrants should be decided by the VC. This reflects, first, the extremely hierarchical nature of decision-making at USEN, where lower-ranking staff can make representations to the VC but he will always retain the final

decision. Second, it illustrates the degree to which individuals cannot be conceptualised without reference to kinship ties. A student could, according to the official rules as recently as 2005, gain entry to USEN with the final decision being based solely on kinship. The fact that this is widely accepted also illustrates the extent to which Nigerians view supporting kin as an essential obligation (Smith, 2001).

2.2 Extra-legal methods of entry

For those students who have not been able to gain entry to USEN through merit or semi-legal discretion, there are still a variety of different methods they can adopt in order to secure admission. This process is chaotic and competitive, with those in a position to influence events coming under extreme pressure to assist their friends, relatives and others to help them secure a place. The lengths to which some students go to ensure admission are surprising, such as paying large sums to people who have no official connection with the university in the hope that they will be true to their word and can help them gain entry.

Lobbying. Lobbying refers to a student gaining admission to the university through monetary payment. The term is a synonym for the standard English term bribery, though I never heard this term used at USEN. Students or their parents or friends may lobby academic staff or non-academic staff, particularly those who work in the admissions department, to help them to secure a place. Lobbying is very common and its existence was acknowledged by everyone I spoke to. Lobbying is often closely linked to the phenomenon of connection, whereby a prospective student will use a personal connection to assist them in getting a place. If a prospective student seeks to lobby but does not have a personal connection, they may find that they lose their money on a fraudulent admission. The amounts of money required to secure admission vary, and are often open to negotiation. Usually students find themselves paying over ₦50,000 (approximately £200) to secure admission, with the figure being higher, sometimes up to ₦200,000 (approximately £800), depending on the demand for that particular course.

Connections. Students who have not found themselves on the first list of candidates admitted to USEN may try to use personal connections – often referred to as just ‘connection’ or *imma mmadu*, an Igbo term meaning ‘who you know’ – to secure admission. Those outside the university may try and contact anyone working inside, but more senior academic staff – such as Heads of Department and Deans of Faculty – and those working in the admissions department are most likely to be able to help. If there is a close connection – usually kin-based – between the member of staff and the prospective student, or if the patron is particularly wealthy, the student may not be required to pay, but in the vast majority of cases, some payment, even if just a token gesture, will be required. Indeed, one respondent told me that ‘connection’ simply means that you know someone who you can then pay. Many of the lecturers I spoke to mentioned that they are put under pressure from friends and relatives to assist in getting them, or their wards, into USEN.

Lecturers stated that the people who contact them asking for help to gain admission usually come from one of three categories: friends, people from their home communities and people who worship in their church. The number of people seeking help will depend on the strength of ties each lecturer has in these three arenas. Literature on Nigeria (such as Smith 2001, 2005, 2006) tends to suggest that kinship is the strongest of these, but my research found that this

may not always be the case. Friendship is an important aspect of extra-legal practices at USEN, and a number of people told me that the combination of kinship and friendship is likely to be the most fruitful combination for those seeking informal assistance to enter university. However, others commented that kinship will always play the strongest part.

Smith (2001: 353) comments on the impact of 'social distance' in determining the amount of money changing hands in an informal encounter. He suggests that for close kin, no money whatsoever would need to change hands; for a looser connection – in this case a friend of the sister of the person seeking a favour – money would need to be offered; while for a complete stranger the request would be rejected. Two criticisms can be made of Smith's assertion. First, he implies that 'social distance' refers only to kinship, and that friendship relations are invariably weaker than kin. My research illustrates that this does not always hold true, and a particularly strong friendship could, for instance, exert stronger pressure than weak kinship ties. Second, the implication of Smith's work is that there is some implicit formula for calculating the level of 'dash' according to the level of connection. In fact extra-legal processes are much messier than this, and much more complicated; negotiation often plays a strong role, as do the seniority and wealth of the participants in the transaction. Kinship plays a part, but it is far from the only factor.

Often having a connection means little more than asking this person for assistance in information regarding which courses are full up, or asking for somewhere to stay for the duration of the screening exams. Information on the number of places left on particular courses is not made public during the admissions process, so those with connections are at an automatic advantage. It is not clear why the university chooses not to publish this information – I was unable to find the official reason – but is likely to be a combination of administrative lapses and a desire to ensure that the first opportunity to fill empty places goes to the well-connected. It echoes Blundo's (2006: 807) argument that in Senegal some administrative procedures are kept deliberately opaque in order that only certain people benefit.

Connections form a very important part of the process of accessing USEN, especially after the 'merit' list has been published. For students not on this list, attempting to gain admission without the ability to lobby or any connection can be almost impossible. For those willing to pay but without connections the situation may be even worse, as they may end up with a fraudulent application, as the section below on agents makes clear. Lack of advice from an insider can make the process seem impossible to understand, as Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006: 140) comment when they characterise a different West African bureaucracy – in this case Nigerien courts – as illustrating 'the impenetrability of structures from the perspective of the anonymous user'.

Ethnicity. If a prospective student doesn't have a personal connection with a member of staff they may be able to utilise broader loyalties such as around ethnicity to assist in gaining entry. The term ethnicity is commonly used to refer to groups of people who are members of broadly-defined ethnic groups ('Igbo', 'Yoruba', 'Igala', 'Tiv' and so on). This meaning is important at USEN, but, in a university where nearly 90% of the students are Igbo, it can be narrower, intra-ethnic categories that are of greater importance, as noted by Young (1981) at the University of Ibadan, a predominantly Yoruba university. These sub-ethnic categories often intersect with

official administrative units – states and Local Government Areas (LGAs). So, in access to USEN, an influential member of staff may assist a student seeking admission on the basis of the fact that they are both, for instance, from Imo state. This illustrates the fact that in Nigeria ‘ethnic’ loyalties are not primordial and constant, but may be opportunistic and open to change: an Ebonyi indigene, for instance, may give preference to his state-mate when he applies to USEN, despite the fact that just fifteen years ago the two people were from different states and might have had distinctly different views on whether they owed each other loyalty. Ethnic loyalty in this case therefore stems from a closeness that appears primordial on the surface, and may feel so to the participants, but is actually mediated by the ‘modern’ state. This point – that patterns of ethnic identification are influenced by administration as well as ethnicity – is made forcefully by Mustapha (2004), who argues that three of the seven major ethnic cleavages in Nigeria incorporate administrative units in ethnic rivalry.

Agents. At USEN there are a large number of people, known as agents, who work unofficially to assist students to gain places to study. Their main role is to provide students with the registration number they require to take up a place in exchange for financial reward. In many cases, agents will work for people inside the system, particularly lecturers and those working in the admissions department, who want to make extra income but do not want to risk their positions by meeting prospective students directly. They therefore employ agents to act as go-betweens. Agents are often ex-students who already have close personal links with a lecturer or member of admissions staff who engages in ‘lobbying’. As with almost anything in Nigerian society, prices are subject to negotiation between the prospective student and the agent. Agents working at USEN are similar to those highlighted by Blundo (2006: 802-803) as working in a variety of Senegalese petty bureaucracies – ‘informal actors evolving on the fringe of the administration [who] guide the public services users through the complexities of the ... bureaucracy’ – though at USEN these actors did not appear to have the same importance as in Senegal, where Blundo suggests they are ubiquitous (2006: 817).

An important issue is false registrations. Often an agent, knowing how desperate students are to secure admission, will provide a registration number they know is fake and ‘eat the [student’s] money’. Agents may tell students that they are closely linked to a senior member of staff in order to convince them to part with their money. Many students have gone through an entire university course of four years before they realised that their original registration was false. In this instance, the student will have to use other extra-legal methods to extricate themselves from their situation.

2.3 Succeeding at USEN for students

As with access, the opportunities for students to succeed at USEN – to pass their exams and leave with a good degree – are decided by a combination of factors that include a great deal more than simple academic achievement. Personal connections and financial corruption also play a significant role in the educational careers of some students. The issues that influence student success overlap with those influencing access, but are different in a number of significant ways. In many ways the student has more say over his or her destiny once entry to the university has been secured, because it is their decision whether to work hard and attempt to achieve through merit, or to engage in ‘sorting’ courses, paying others to write assignments and exam malpractice, all of which are commonplace at USEN. Prospective entrants are, to a

significant degree, subject to the whims and caprices of those in positions of influence; once inside, the student is much more the architect. As with access, some students are committed to achieving success through formal means. But there are also significant numbers who are not. This section examines the methods employed by these students to navigate their way through USEN.

One of the commonest ways students advance through USEN is through exam malpractice. Many of the techniques employed by exam cheats inside USEN are the same as those employed in exams for those seeking entry. One of the most interesting aspects of exam malpractice is its normality and acceptance by both students and staff. I invigilated many exams, and estimate that the numbers of students taking part in malpractice of one kind or another is around ninety percent. Talking to one's neighbour in an exam is not viewed as malpractice, and nearly every student took part in it. If this type of 'malpractice' – defined by the university's rules, but not by the actors concerned – is removed, the numbers are significantly lower. Among students, malpractice is so widespread and accepted that some intelligent students sit at the back in exams in order to help less gifted colleagues and some students have been known to write two papers during an exam, one for themselves and one for a friend.

USEN also exhibits a strong culture of patronage in the form of what might be termed 'godfatherism', 'favouritism' or 'grooming', a phenomenon that Joseph (1987: 56) suggests is at work across Nigerian society. Many, though not all, lecturers have a favourite student who acts as their informal assistant or helper. These people will help out with such activities as marking essay and exam scripts, invigilating exams and enforcing discipline. Some assistants may even teach courses for their patron. Among those lecturers who engage in extra-legal methods of income generation, assistants may link lecturers to students who are prepared to 'sort' courses, or sell handouts or books. Assistants may also use their connection to make money for themselves through 'sorting' courses without the lecturer's knowledge. This is one reason why some more 'serious' lecturers are wary of using assistants.

For students who do not have a personal connection with a lecturer, financial avenues are often used to assist advancement. Often lecturers produce handouts to accompany their modules. Some lecturers, however, demand that students purchase these handouts and will not let them pass unless they do. Some lecturers take this process even further, and tell students that they must purchase a 'textbook' in order to pass the module, even though it has little or nothing to do with the course. An example occurred when I was due to invigilate an exam and arrived to find large numbers of students outside the exam hall. I asked a couple of students what the problem was and was told that before the students went in to the exam hall the lecturer would check that they had purchased 'the textbook'. I asked what the textbook was and was told that it was a copy of a US journal that had nothing to do with the course, which students had to purchase for ₦1000 (approximately £4). With a class size of approximately 200, if every student purchased the handout the lecturer would make around ₦200,000 (approximately £800), which corresponds to around 2-3 months salary of the lecturer concerned. One student commented that 'it's just like dashing him money', dash being Nigerian English for money offered to ensure a transaction takes place. In general students are not happy to have to pay lecturers in this way, but they accept that this is how the system operates. Smith (2006: 5) has commented at length about the fact that, in Nigeria, 'ordinary Nigerians', like these students, are simultaneously

‘active participants in the social reproduction of corruption even as they are also its primary victims and principal critics’. Likewise Chabal and Daloz (2006: 267) comment that Nigerians are forced to accept the way the system works, engendering a ‘fatalism and an inability to conceive that the situation could be any other than it is’. There is very little complaint, partly as a result of the serious sanctions that students may face if they complain.

These patterns are by no means ubiquitous, however, and there are many lecturers who assess students on the basis of their performance, will not accept payment to pass courses and work hard to uphold the stated values of the university. However, evidence both from my fieldwork and literature (such as Anugwom, 2002), suggest that these lecturers are becoming rarer as extra-legal practice becomes more widespread. Additionally, these members of staff are often marginalised within the university and bitter about their experiences.

As the arguments outlined above suggest, there is a great deal of complexity to the relationship between students and USEN. My research suggests that, while kin-based patronage and financial corruption do have a significant role in university life, they are tempered by official rules and there is a constant interplay between the two norms, as noted by a number of authors (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997; Therkildsen, 2005; Erdmann and Engel, 2007; Olivier de Sardan, 2009). There will always be people within the higher education system who work for ‘merit’ and who believe that the university should conform to these principles. Those working at USEN are engaged in a constant struggle to meet the obligations they have to those outside the university while simultaneously trying to run an institution that operates – and, crucially, is seen to – on the basis of merit.

Despite this, and the desire among certain groups for extra-legal practices to stop, certain practices have general social acceptability, reflecting, for instance, the importance of supporting one’s kin that is so prevalent in contemporary Nigerian society (Smith, 2005). The fact that discretion has been effectively institutionalised within the higher education system through Vice Chancellor’s list and staff quota illustrates this very clearly. But there are limits to discretion, as pressure is placed on individuals to support those outside the system who want to get in while simultaneously ensuring that these practices stay within acceptable boundaries. Generally the flexibility of these boundaries depends on one’s position in the university hierarchy, with significantly more discretion being awarded to those near the top.

The prevalence of extra-legal practice at USEN is also encouraged by students. Due to the importance of a university degree for reasons of status and job acquisition, many seek to enter the university and gain a degree without the desire to play by the official rules. Aside from a small number of students, success is judged in terms of acquisition of a place at university and a qualification, rather than knowledge and hard work. This can be viewed as a rational response to circumstances, as possession of a degree is valued in Nigeria’s crowded job market, while the knowledge normally required to gain it is not valued nearly so highly (Afigbo, 2004). As a result, the prevalence of extra-legal methods can be viewed neither as service providers forcing service users to play by the unofficial rules, nor vice-versa. The prevalence of unofficial norms at USEN is the product of numerous influences that emanate from staff, students and their parents, alongside norms that favour the acquisition of qualifications over the acquisition of knowledge.

3 Staff experiences

As with students, academic staff face numerous challenges in seeking to gain entry to, and success at, USEN. However, the issues facing staff members are rather different from those facing students, and connections to other individuals and social networks are of far greater importance in staff success. The importance of personal connections make it almost impossible for a Nigerian at the bottom of the academic ladder to gain entry to USEN solely on the basis of their qualifications and experience, in contrast to the situation for students, in which at least some succeed purely on the basis of merit. Once inside the USEN system, it is also difficult to make progress without links to a faction, patron, or both.

3.1 Factionalism

One of the clearest and most important features of relationships between staff at USEN is the way they are modified and influenced by membership of informal or semi-formal groupings that I characterise here as factions, though the term most commonly used to describe them by my respondents was 'camps'. In USEN's public administration department there are two broad groupings, and every member of academic staff bar one is closely allied to one of the two groups. The split exerts a large influence on departmental activity, and was acknowledged as existing by every staff member I spoke to. One senior member of staff described the departmental split as 'a huge chasm', 'bitter' and 'fascistic' (Professor Ekene Okpara, interview, 3 September 2007). Faction membership is very much a zero-sum game: by being closely allied to one faction individuals will find it extremely difficult to become close to members of the other camp. In the case of the non-aligned staff member, it was even more difficult, in that – according to him – people in both camps believed he was closer to the other, meaning that establishing close, trusting relationships with anyone in the department was difficult.

The factionalism in the public administration department began in the 1960s and 1970s when the department was largely split along ideological lines, in that there was a 'liberal' group and a 'Marxist' group, each led by a charismatic member of senior staff. At the time all the departments in social science were split along Cold War lines. During this period the ideological differences did not prevent staff from enjoying each other's company socially; differences were to do with academic debate rather than personal animosity. However, the mid-1980s were a time of great upheaval in Nigerian universities (Anugwom, 2002), as in the country as a whole, as structural adjustment and the devaluation of the Naira brought increasing scarcity, following the plentiful years of the late-1970s oil boom. Conditions for staff, including salaries, worsened considerably (ibid) and some used this as a justification for participating in extra-legal practices in order to augment their wages. The splits in university departments at USEN took on a different character around this time, the new cleavages being more based around beliefs on the acceptance of extra-legal practices and less on national politics. During my time at USEN, respondents were in broad agreement that the issue of morality in working practices remained the driving force behind the split, though attitudes towards scholarship were closely related. As one respondent put it, there are those who are 'here to trade' and those who 'want to contribute to the university realising its objectives' (Chizoba Ndukwe, interview, 2 October 2007). Individuals inevitably gravitate towards others who share their views.

The functions of the two factions in the public administration department at USEN are broadly similar. Both factions exist to protect their members and assist them in gaining benefits such as

promotions and committee memberships. However, during my time at USEN one faction, which I will term the select club, was much more successful than its rival. The select club was 'in control' of the public administration department and as a consequence was able to influence access to the benefits noted above. Members of its rival faction therefore tended to be marginalised and found staff benefits extremely difficult to access. I deal with the role of factions in individual success within USEN in more detail below.

3.2 Patronage or 'godfatherism'

Alongside factionalism, there are also relationships of patronage between senior and junior academic staff. There is significant overlap between factionalism and godfatherism, in that senior faction members acted as patrons to more junior members, though some senior faction members were also godfathers to others who were not members of their faction. Within the public administration department every academic member of staff who was not a patron appeared to have a strong connection to someone higher up in the departmental hierarchy. Some staff members who were patrons to those below were also clients of those further up the hierarchy, something that was remarked upon by d'Azevedo (1962) in his research in Liberia.

For both patrons and clients, engaging in godfatherism has many different motivations. Understanding the motivations of clients is, however, considerably easier, as the benefits are much more tangible. Patrons can assist in achieving initial employment, regularization – the process academics go through to become permanent members of the faculty – promotion, higher qualifications, committee membership and generally make one's life in the university easier. It was widely expressed amongst my respondents that having a godfather is extremely useful at USEN, though not all my respondents acknowledged having one, or wished to. One of my informants stated that 'I would really have liked to have a patron ... because if I did then I wouldn't have had things as difficult as I'm having them' (Chizoba Ndukwe, interview, 3 September 2007) but acknowledged that he didn't have one because having a patron requires you to 'eat shit' (ibid) for them, which my respondent was not prepared to do. For the patron, the motivations are more difficult to understand. Much literature on patron-client relations (such as Wood and Gough, 2006; Landé, 1977) argues that the relationship is one of inequality, with the patron invariably being the main beneficiary. At USEN, this is not always the case – though among patrons who participate in extra-legal practice it may be – as clients gain materially while patrons gain in terms of non-tangible assets such as loyalty and respect, and acquire clients who work for them. One of my respondents noted that in Igboland the only time patrons receive materially from their relationship with clients is through gifts at celebrations. A second benefit is that the patron will be able to raise support if there is an election in which they are standing or a crisis in which they need supporters. But the main motivations are in terms of status: others will know that you are a powerful person if you have many clients doing your bidding. In Nigerian society this status – sometimes termed that of the 'big man' – is highly sought after.

3.3 Accessing the University of South Eastern Nigeria for staff

Academic staff recruitment at USEN is dependent on a combination of factors, including qualifications and where they were obtained, connections, ethnicity, political ideology and beliefs about the way the university should run. Each member of staff is likely to display a different combination of these factors. The notion of 'get to the bridge and I will help you to

cross' is common in academic as well as student entry, but, with the scarcity of places for academic staff, a combination of qualification and connections is necessary. If an individual has both the qualifications – sometimes nothing more than an undergraduate degree – required to begin an academic career and people of influence – whether individuals or a faction – supporting his or her application, they are very likely to succeed. For those with one but not the other, gaining a position will be considerably more difficult. Andreski (1979) suggests that the limits to purely kin-based appointments are tiny, but my research suggests that unqualified academics, however well-connected, will not secure employment. Young's (1981: 153) research in Zaire argues that discretion – in his case based on ethnicity – plays a part only amongst those who are formally qualified but not outstanding candidates:

[E]thnic preference, conscious or unconscious, can only arise when the relative qualifications of the contenders fall into a gray zone of ambiguity. For example, in Zaire, it would be unimaginable for a candidate armed with a dubious doctorate from Spain or Czechoslovakia to win support over a contender whose thesis, directed by a distinguished Belgian academic, had won a "grande distinction" from Louvain, whatever the respective ethnicity of the aspirants and the voters.

The same situation existed at USEN. A senior academic with a doctorate from Oxbridge or a prestigious US university would be appointed regardless of other considerations. As Young points out, it is the 'gray zone of ambiguity' where influences such as ethnicity and personal connections begin to exert an influence. This gray zone appears larger for staff than for students, reflecting the greater importance of personal connections for academic staff.

A striking attribute of academic appointments to USEN is their informality. Very often an individual – sometimes a postgraduate or ex-student or non-academic member of staff – will be contacted by an academic because there is a vacancy in their department. If the person is qualified and influential people within the department are happy for them to join, they will enter the university. To get around administrative procedures related to advertisements and interviews new academics will often receive temporary appointments initially, which are 'regularized' later. There is a general belief that recruitment is now much more based on connections than previously, a change that began during the financial crisis and subsequent era of austerity and structural adjustment during the 1980s and depends largely on the attitude of those in positions of authority in departments, faculties and, most particularly, the university itself.

3.4 Succeeding at the University of South Eastern Nigeria for staff

Once an individual has been accepted to work as an academic at USEN, the influence of personal connections becomes even more acute. My research suggests that, of the four processes I have examined – access and success for staff and students – this is the most governed by personal connections.

In all higher education systems, as at USEN, promotion up the academic ladder is dependent on a variety of official criteria. Promotions bring with them significant status and financially-based rewards. However, at USEN they are a site of extreme contestation between different groups within the university, and are used by the powerful to advance the interests of those they

favour, and stifle the ambitions of those they are hostile to. Olivier de Sardan (2009: 44) outlines this process well, referring to Francophone African bureaucracies: '[a]ppointments, assignments, promotions and "sidelining" follow the rather systematic logics of networks, individualised protection and redistribution which really have very little to do with officially designated job profiles and skills.' In the case of USEN, this could not be absolute – someone without a degree could not be awarded a job – but, once inside the university, allocation of positions, committee memberships and other benefits were decided largely on the basis of personal loyalties.

There are clearly-set rules regarding promotions, but those in positions of influence nonetheless use numerous methods to either assist or thwart promotion efforts. During my time at USEN I came across a number of staff members who believed that their advance up the academic ladder had been 'frustrated', in some cases for many years. Criteria used to judge suitability for promotion are length of service, academic qualifications, publications, teaching and professional experience, and conference attendance. However, a key issue with regard to promotions at USEN is the huge scope for different interpretations of the criteria for promotion.

Publications are a particularly contested site. According to official criteria, books, book chapters and journal articles each receive points depending on the quality of the publication. Journals are assessed on their 'impact factor', with prestigious international journals attracting higher points. However, some in the public administration department have sought to manipulate this process in order to ensure that local journals owned by their members would be categorised as high impact. In this case the journal's owner would then encourage his friends and members of his faction to submit articles to this journal, which he would publish whatever their quality. A number of my respondents remarked on the low quality of some locally-produced publications, but the most important point to note is that the academic quality of publications was given far lower priority than the influence it could have in securing promotion.

As with most types of patronage at USEN, where there are winners there are also losers. Numerous strategies, such as forms not being sent to external assessors, or senior staff 'sitting on' promotion applications, are employed to ensure that lecturers those in charge of the university view as undesirable fail in their efforts to gain promotion. However, these strategies can only go to a certain level before the official rules of the institution act to rein them in. This process is similar across USEN: rules may be manipulated up to a point, but the formal, written policy will act the rein it in once the informality reaches a certain stage. My analysis suggests that the desire amongst academics, even those engaged in extra-legal practice, to uphold some semblance of meritocracy at the university is the salient factor in ensuring behaviour does not exceed certain limits.

There may also be an element of reciprocity involved in promotions. Both staff members and students who 'have people' are at a distinct advantage in accessing rewards. Pressure may be brought to bear on behalf of others to ensure that these rewards are realised. An example of this, which also illustrates the complexity of ties of obligation, concerns a respondent of mine, Chizoba Ndukwe. Chizoba caught a girl cheating in an exam and marked on her paper, meaning that she would either fail or face a significant mark deduction. However, the girl's mother works at USEN, and is friends with other influential people in Chizoba's department. One of these people is also friends with a different Professor who, at the time of my interview with Chizoba,

would shortly be on the panel assessing Chizoba's suitability for promotion. This Professor suggested to Chizoba that he has a good chance of achieving promotion, but it is by no means assured. The Professor gave Chizoba the impression that he is protecting him at the assessment panel and that, in return, Chizoba should pardon the girl he had previously caught cheating. For senior staff, therefore, rewards such as promotions can be used as bargaining chips in order to convince others to do their bidding. Merit is largely ignored.

4 Conclusion

This paper has argued that access to and success in Nigerian higher education are dependent on a combination of merit, personal connections and money. The importance of these three elements suggests a system in which norms rooted in bureaucracy (merit), patron-clientism (personal connections) and financial corruption (money) intersect. My empirical research suggests that characterisations of African states as wholly captured by society and functioning as little more than vehicles for particularistic advancement, both central elements of much neopatrimonial state literature, are therefore inaccurate. The Nigerian higher education system is not particularly efficient, nor does it function as well for some – notably those without personal connections or the ability to pay – as others. But neither is it a façade or a phantom state. 'Islands of functionality' (Olivier de Sardan, 2009: 67), in the form of committed lecturers, remain, and among those with less commitment, norms dictate that patronage can only reach a certain level before the official rules act to rein it in, largely due to a desire to uphold the good name of the university.

The complexity of processes of admission and advancement at USEN also illustrates the need for long-term ethnographic research in order to understand how bureaucracies such as this function. Much contemporary academic literature on African states tends to be focused on the state's essence as opposed to its day-to-day functioning, and therefore fails to conceptualise how the 'everyday state' is experienced by the providers and users of its services.

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