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**Class Conflict and Rural Development: An
Ethnographic Analysis of Traditional Title Dispute
in Southern Nigeria**

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, rural development has occupied the centre stage in development policy and discourse in the developing countries. This was a rational response to the fact that majority of the populations in the region live in rural areas. More significantly, for most of the countries, the inherited pattern of urban-based capitalist development reproduced underdevelopment especially in the forms of poverty,

unemployment and inequality. Even so, the goals of rural development practice are often times compromised by factors unforeseen by policy makers. One such factor which is invariably lost in official circles is social structural. Based on an empirical investigation, this paper focuses on class struggle in a rural community in southern Nigeria as veritable obstacle to rural development. Our data renders jejune the erstwhile romantic conception of traditional (rural) African communities as free of class distinctions. The manifestations and ramifications of the class struggle are presented as defeating the goals of rural development. A major policy implication is that the narrow conception of rural development as the extension of 'urban infrastructure' to rural areas is inappropriate. To effectively deliver the goals of rural development, policy must focus on social currents. Ruralites and their weltanschauung must be considered as part of the new approach to development.

Key Words: Social Class, Political hegemony, Traditional Society, Chieftaincy Titles.

Introduction and setting

Chieftaincy title disputes have become a veritable clog in the wheel of progress in many rural communities in Nigeria. In some instances, such disputes degenerate into open hostilities. When this extreme is not attained, there is uneasy calm and attention is diverted from the wider campaign for rural development. In effect, wherever such disputes exist, the objective of rural development is jettisoned or, at best, compromised.

Through participant observation and non-directive interview research techniques, this study focuses on the *Okpala-Uku* traditional priesthood dispute in Abbi, a popular rural community in Delta State, southern Nigeria. The settlement is located in the south-western corner of Ndokwa West Local Government Area (LGA) of the state and it is a border community hedged in by the Urhobo settlements of Aragba and Orogun to the south and the Isoko settlement of Ilue Ologbo to the south east. To the north-east and north-west, Abbi is

respectively bordered by Ogume and Ezionum, all rural communities. The location at the border with Urhobo and Isoko communities, two major ethnic groups in the state, explains the minor dialectical differences between Abbi and other Ukwani-speaking communities of Ndokwa West LGA.¹

Officially, Abbi is recognised as a clan made up of three quarters, namely, Elvie, Okwele and Umia. Elovie and Umia are popularly referred to as Abbi-Echala or simply Echala because they were founded by a common ancestor, *Ndiche*, whom they jointly worship. Owa-Abbi, a village some thirty kilometres away, is also regarded as part of Echala. This is due to common ancestry and kinship affinity. Because of physical distance and the inclusion of Owa-Abbi in another LGA, lineal affinity with Echala kin appears to be gradually waning. On the other hand, Inam Abbi, a village some five kilometres away, is part of Okwele. Together, Inam-Abbi and Okwele are known as Abbi-Ubulu or Okwele-Ubulu and they worship a common *Ndiche*. Therefore there are two ancestral deities in Abbi pantheon.

According to local sources, both Echala and Ubulu are names adopted from the original homes of the founders of the quarters who arrived in different migratory streams and lived in mutual independence until security considerations obliged cooperation and co-existence. Thenceforth, their different sovereignties were given up and a larger settlement, Abbi, was co-founded.

Elovie is said to be the first settled area. This was followed by Okwele and then, Umia. Some deference is given to Elovie on account of this. A notable symbolism of this deference is enacted annually during the *Ukwata* festival during which the dance troupe of Elovie takes its turn after those of Okwele and Umia in order of juniority.

Oral sources have it that the founder of Elovie soon became a victim of the *Obi* of Aboh who allegedly demanded and actually extracted an occasional tooth from the former. The harassment from the *Obi* was such that some Abbi-Echala leaders were forced into exile for their own safety. Peace and stability returned when the leaders of

neighbouring Okwele intervened and scared off the agents of the *Obi* of Aboh and militarily terminated their nefarious expeditions.

The method

Participant observation and non-directive interview were the data gathering techniques adopted for the study. Leaders in both Echala and Okwele as well as members of different age grades were interviewed. Oral histories were obtained from elders in all the quarters. Further, members of community development associations and youth clubs were also interviewed. Absentee actors in the dispute were not reached. No attempt to obtain a rigorous and representative sample was made, a procedure considered unnecessary in view of the depth of the non-directive interview and participant observation.

In obeisance to scientific expedience, it is important to note the potential hazard posed by the participant observation technique in this study. Being concerned with the crisis situation and absorbed in the local culture, it is easily possible to take some behavior patterns for granted, gloss over others and make biased deductions from available data. However, field experience, awareness and wariness of the pitfalls were constant checks. This awareness has made it possible to separate citizen concern from the present analysis.

The religio-political leadership structure

The autochthonous social structure is age and gender-based. Functions are clearly defined and separated between members of different age grades. Only the position of the *Oyiwa* priesthood is hereditary as it is confined to a few families. The *Oyiwa* is based in Elovie quarter where his shrine is located.

Although the *Oyiwa* is well respected on account of his belonging to the 'elder' quarter, the *Okpala-Uku* is the most powerful priest in Abbi. He is the priest and chief worshipper of the *Ndiche*. Each of the three quarters has an independent *Okpala*. However, the entire community is represented by the elder *Okpala* from either Abbi-Echala or Abbi-Ubulu and he becomes the *Okpala-Uku* of Abbi. This

underscores the religio-political significance of the *Okpala-Uku* of Abbi, being derived from a dual ancestral heritage. The position of *Okpala* is attained only through old age and the *Okpala-Uku* is decidedly the oldest man in the entire community. It follows, of course, that each *Okpala* is the oldest man in his quarters.

The female counterpart of the *Okpala* is the *Ada*. However, because the community is patrilineal, there is no female version of *Okpala-Uku*. The *Okpala* and *Okpala-Uku* combine their priesthood duties with general administration and adjudication. From the above, Abbi is clearly gerontocratic, a characteristic shared with other Ukwani communities and peoples elsewhere. Political administration is carried out through a prestigious chieftaincy society, the *Onotu* which is led by the *Onotu-Uku*. Each quarter has an *Onotu-Uku*. Members of the *Onotu* are referred to as *Inotu* collectively. Becoming an *Onotu* is not automatic as it requires the attainment of some economic standing and other social responsibilities. One can, therefore, attain the requisite adulthood and maturity without joining the *Inotu*. An *Onotu* carries the prefix of chief to his name. Because it is now the vogue for the nouveaux riche to bear titles or become chiefs, joining the *Onotu* society has recently become quite expensive. Yet, even though wealth is playing an increasingly larger role in the membership of the society, rascals and deviants, no matter how rich they may be, are usually excluded. How long this norm will subsist in the new era of increasing power of wealth will depend a great deal on the character of the *Onotu-Uku*.

Power, prestige and some measure of affluence combine to mark out the *Inotu*. As chief agent of the *Okpala*, the *Onotu-Uku* is a very powerful and respected position. The choice of *Onotu-Uku* is usually based on chronological age, membership tenure and the principle of rotation among families/streets in the respective quarters. The *Onotu* is a male society although a few outstanding women may join.

Below these principal officials and positions are the worker age grades which take charge of all manners of assignments and duties

ranging from hunting to security, road building and allied works. These age grades include the *Otu Aya*, *Otu Ndokume*, *Otu Nta*, *Otu Ole* among others. Special mention is to be made of the *Okwa* age grade, a grouping of very old and retired men. This is a largely advisory age grade to which the *Okpala* and *Okpala-Uku* belong.

Class in a traditional society

According to Phelps (1998), a fundamental postulation of Marx and Engels was that in pre-capitalist social formations, class struggles assumed different forms, depending on the level of development of the productive forces, and the forms of appropriation of the surplus. As in pre-colonial African societies, land was the main means of production and complex patterns of land ownership were indicated in complex networks of class relations and struggles between the wealthy and the poor. Leander (2001) and Rodney (2007) gave impetus to Weber's formulation of a three-component theory of stratification in explaining the nature and structure of social classes in most societies, as Weber had argued that political power or influence in societies was actually an interplay between class, status and group power. The factors or components are class (a person's economic position in a society); status (a person's prestige, social honour or popularity in a society); and power (a person's ability to get his way despite the resistance of others).

Class conflict or class struggle is usually about the deliberate antagonism that is generated in societies driven by competing socio-economic interests between actors of different classes, which does not preclude intra-class conflicts that showcase sharp social tensions arising from divergent desires in surplus accumulation amongst the upper and middle classes in societies (Streeter, 2008; Hunt, 2011).

In relation to social class structures and rural change in West African societies, it is important to underscore the fact that most traditional societies are protected against change without large scale impact through their cultural values, whether they are class values (subcultures), interest strong values (clubs, traditional associations),

and internal contradictions emerging from selfish tendencies of the dominant elite. Uchendu (1968) argued that a critical factor that has conditioned the attitudes of the different social classes in many African societies to rural change in the past half a century was economic opportunity and the varying degrees of authority structures which characterize African society. In traditional and modern African societies, higher degrees of economic performances have been associated with political competitiveness, irrespective of the fact that the unit of competition may be a village or an ethnic area. Whether centralized or not, in many African societies, the relatively static economies and poor social infrastructures were manipulated and exploited by the social class with dominant political leverage, which is usually tantamount to exercising immense control over people in the distribution of resources and patronage.

In propounding the thesis that traditional African societies are classless, Hill supported her view by claiming that economic classes cannot be said to exist 'in a society in which neither labour nor land is scarce, where there is no slavery or serfdom, or land-owning or landless groups, where there are no craft guilds, and where there are little physical property of any value...' (1972:175). After acknowledging and then dismissing Smith's earlier listing of several classes among the Hausa of northern Nigeria, Hill declared that rural West African society is commonly classless.

Such romantic notion of classlessness in traditional Africa promoted such bogus concepts as African socialism which radical politicians embraced in the 1960s.² Consigning such concepts to myths, no less a radical politician than Nkrumah (1970) believed that nothing could be farther from the truth than the postulate of classlessness. He contended that, on the contrary, 'a fierce class struggle has been raging in Africa,' a struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed (Nkrumah, 1970:10).

The perception of abundant land and labour and the absence of distinctions of slavery and serfdom is simplistic. In fact, land was not

always plentiful in Africa and disputes over land were commonplace. History texts are replete with wars fought over territory and its ownership. Similarly, labour shortages led to the seasonal immigration to several farming regions. And although serfdom was largely non-existent, slavery was rife and guilds were not unknown.

There are clear class distinctions in Abbi community. The simplest approach is to adopt the Marxist-Nkrumaist dichotomy by separating between the elite and the masses. In this sense, the elite will include the traditional priests and the *Inotu* while the worker age grades will constitute the masses. It may be argued, as Hill did, that the insubstantial nature of physical property may be an intervening variable, yet the high class consciousness among the elite group, especially the *Inotu*, lends strength to our classification. Some elaborate status distinctions have been erected and the elite group savour the privileges associated with their high class. Even so, what is classified as substantial is relative.

To protect class privileges and keep down membership, joining the *Onotu* chieftaincy society has become quite expensive. When members of the elite group in Abbi do not own the land outright, they control its use. And because land is the sole means of production, the elite could, following Marx, be appropriately referred to as the bourgeoisie while the members of the worker age grades make up the proletariat. Weberian modifications are unlikely to damage or improve much on this classification.

The priesthoods, chieftaincy society and age grades are not amorphous or neutral status groups as some may be led to suggest from Weber's hypothesis. Weber differentiated between purely economically determined 'class situation' and the 'status situation' which is determined by social estimation. The *Okpala*, *Inotu* and other age grades are status groups which are squarely placed within the economic production system. The status-honour enjoyed by the elite reinforces privilege and class distinction.

The 1979 instrument

A new dimension in class alliance was introduced in Abbi community with the promulgation and publication of the Traditional Rulers and Chiefs Edict by the Government of Bendel State of Nigeria, 1979. Among other things, the law which was meant to regulate succession to the title of *Okpala-Uku* stipulated that:

1. There is only one Ruling House in Abbi known as Echala comprising Elovie and Umia quarters; and
2. Succession is gerontocratic and devolves on the oldest man in the Ruling House.

This edict introduced the institution of Ruling House which was hitherto restricted to the *Oyiwa* priesthood and more, importantly, expunged Okwele quarter from the scheme of things. These are the clauses over which the community has been divided into two opposing groups, namely, Echala (the majority group which supports the edict because of the obvious suzerainty it confers) and Okwele (the minority group which opposes it).

The enactment of the edict was facilitated by a famous Elovie *Onotu* and technocrat who was then a civil commissioner and member of the Bendel State Executive Council. The provisions of the edict give Abbi-Echala a headstart and privilege on any issue pertaining to leadership in the entire community and, more specifically, disqualifies aspirants or rivals for the *Okpala-Uku* traditional priesthood/title from Okwele quarter. In essence, it relegates the quarter to a residual and subordinate member of the community, a new scenario which Abbi-Ubulu immediately denounced and rejected. Thenceforth, Abbi became a community polarized by intra-elite class conflict which has posed a grave threat to extant unity. This bears eloquent testimony to Otite's thesis that '...struggle for power and privilege generates irresistible concern for the mobilization of the public at the local level for support and survival...' (1975:69). Subsequent on the 1979 edict, several events epitomizing the advantages conferred on Echala have taken place. Okwele has expectedly fought back and has, on account

of its minority status in the community, lost out severally and subsequently resorted to the court of law where the legality and substance of the edict was to be determined.

Some evidence of the class conflict occasioned by the 1979 edict

The cordial co-existence between the three quarters of Abbi literally ceased with the promulgation of the 1979 edict. Hitherto, the elite groups managed to reach compromises which enabled them to coexist peacefully and share or enjoy the perquisites of government-sponsored rural development and social change. A high point of the cooperation was in 1976 when the three quarters co-operated in successfully presenting a joint Echala candidate for the chairmanship of Ndokwa Local Government Area. The antithesis to this political cooperation occurred in 1979 when State elections were due and it was time to support an Okwele candidate to represent the local constituency. Echala reneged on the cooperation leading to the emergence of two Abbi candidates, both prominent Inotu from Echala and Okwele, for the same seat. Abbi-Echala rallied behind its candidate and it is obvious that promulgation of the edict at this time help in no small measure inn this mobilization. Echala group support of their candidate was the single most important factor that contributed to his victory at this election, an event which was arguably the first major open confrontation between Echala and Okwele Inotu after the 1979 edict. Thenceforth, the Inotu elite intra class struggle has been waged under the camouflage of the *Okpala-Uku* title dispute. We are thus confronted by a false class consciousness as the contrived hegemony of Echala *Inotu* was based on equally false and contrived sovereignty of their *Okpala*. For, it stands to reason that the 1979 edict was consciously introduced to promote Echala elite interests and power over those of Okwele elite.

In the build up to the edict, the influential Echala *Onotu*-technocrat-commissioner under reference was known to have engineered a lopsided distribution of the material artefacts of rural development in the community. For example, the only bank, the police station and

rural electricity generating plant in the community were all located in Elovie, far from the community centre where access to all would be ensured and security of installations better assured. Further, a state radio relay station which was to be erected in Okwele was mysteriously relocated away from Abbi altogether ostensibly because the Echala elite opposed its physical location. The lopsided development of the community in favour of Abbi-Echala was cherished by the latter who subsequently derisively described Okwele as *Munchi*, a corruption of *Mushin*, a notorious slum in Lagos.

Perhaps Okwele has not been altogether left out in the scheme of things. For example, there is one primary school (formerly owned by the Catholic Mission) and a girl's high school which was opened in 1980 but shut down in 1984, only to be re-opened in 1988 as Okwele-run school. When it was initially opened, Echala elite openly discouraged their wards from enrolling in the school, ostensibly to make it unviable. A "modern school" in the quarter was shut down before the Nigeria Civil War when that form of schools was scrapped. All other educational institutions in the community are located in Echala. So also are the central market, the motor park, the postal agency, town hall, customary court, magistrate court, dispensary, the health centre and a proposed hospital. By allegedly influencing the location of the bank, police station and rural electricity plant in his quarter, the Echala *Onotu*-technocrat-commissioner was only fuelling existing latent class antagonism in the community by promoting himself as a champion of exclusive Echala development thereby exacerbating existing disadvantage as Okwele was already less endowed with socio-economic infrastructure before he came to power.

The pattern of the 1979 election was repeated in 1983 as both Echala and Okwele re-fielded their famous *Inotu* candidates. In anticipation of the magnitude of malpractice and the dim chances of victory in that election, the Okwele candidate is said to have withdrawn in line with directives of his party. But that did not also help the Echala candidate who lost the election to another candidate from the ruling party at the time. In the 1988 ward election, the bifurcation of Abbi community

was blatantly dramatized. Out of despair or some spirit of rapprochement, Okwele supported an Echala candidate for the election. This support was to cost him the solidarity of his Echala kith and kin who then considered him a *persona non grata* and sponsored another candidate. Further confusion in this election emerged when a bright Okwele candidate emerged without the support of his people. This created a scenario whereby the candidate from Echala got the support of Okwele people and the Okwele candidate the support of Echala people. This was not all as Echala also presented a candidate for the chairmanship of the local government. The latter lost partly on account of split Abbi vote. A major contradiction of the class struggle evident from the 1988 ward election was the victory of the least qualified candidate, a loss to the entire community which the majority group glossed over. The advantage of having numeric vote superiority in the local constituency has not been explored because of intra-*Inotu* differences.

During elections in 1991, the trend established following the 1979 edict held sway. In the ward election, two Echala candidates contested and the one with Okwele support won. Similarly, a popular Okwele candidate won the State Assembly election from the constituency, a significant victory which occurred in spite of Echala opposition as their leading *Onotu* had publicly boasted that the election will only be won by the Okwele candidate “over his dead body.” Perhaps in response to the growing communal strife in the community, Abbi was split into two electoral wards along the Echala-Okwele dichotomy after the 1991 debacle. This has somewhat mitigated the rivalry in the community.

Another notable victim of the class conflict in Abbi is the annual *Ukwata* festival which falls due every February. The festival peaks on an Eke traditional market day during which the dance troupes of each quarter (beginning with Umia on account of its juniority and ending with Elovie, the senior quarter) pranced through the entire community with the *Ukwata* masquerade. This carnival which is the major spectacle of the festival was curtailed following the 1979 edict. Umia

and Elovie have since continued to cover the two Echala quarters in the carnival leaving out Okwele quarter, contrary to tradition. Okwele retaliated by also restricting its dance carnival to the quarter. A death knell on the festival was sounded when Okwele decided on a separate day for it. This greatly reduced the scope and amplitude of the festival. Some rapprochement has been reached and the masquerade dance carnivals now cover the thoroughfare running through the three quarters as in the past. It remains to be seen if the erstwhile pomp associated with the *Ukwata* festival can be restored.

The 1979 edict has had further maleficent effects on the entire community. For example, the popular objective of rural development has almost been jettisoned because of the political division of the town championed by the Inotu. Presently, there exist various groups which all aim to achieve development for the entire town. These pan-community groups have unfortunately been weakened by the Echala-Okwele dichotomy. Youth organizations are similarly divided. Extreme reactions of Okwele include the call for the splitting of the community into two clans; a reaction based on despair but has been rejected by Echala. This call may be said to have been partially fulfilled by the creation of two electoral wards along the dichotomy. Abbi indigenes outside their home and abroad have fallen in line. Separate Echala and Okwele groups have sprung up in Lagos and urban centres elsewhere. Indeed, Abbi is now notorious for its disunity for which other communities have taken swipes at her.

As a prologue to the Third and Fourth Republics, mobilizations for party membership in Abbi were based not on objective ideological choice between the parties but on the Echala-Okwele dichotomy. In the Third Republic, Echala people pitched camp with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) while Okwele people supported the National Republican Convention (NRC). For the Fourth Republic, the Echala joined the All People Party (APP) while Okwele joined the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). This was akin to the 1979 scenario when the distinction was between the Unity Party of Nigeria (Okwele) and the Nigeria Peoples Party (Echala).

Prospects for order

The opposing groups do not seem to have dialogue as a viable option to the impasse. It is a zero-sum game in which Okwele expects a return to the status quo ante while Echala wants to retain the new order. For some time, Okwele leaders hoped on a judicial restoration of their right to the *Okpala-Uku* title. But this would have involved a declaration voiding a government edict, a ruling very few judges may be willing to undertake. Significantly, leading Echala *Inotu* appear adamant and relentless in their defence of the spirit, if not the letter, of the 1979 edict. This is not unexpected. Privilege is very difficult to forfeit especially where they have been cultivated and enjoyed over a period of time. Moreover, there is apparently no threat from any quarter and it seems unlikely that the Okwele minority will succeed in getting the court to rule against government.

A possible line of resolution of the conflict is the expected report of government into disputes in various communities in the state. Should the report recommend a reversal to the status quo ante in Abbi, the edict will have to be repealed. Significantly, at the instance of the Traditional Rulers Council of Ndokwa West Local Government Area, the court case instituted by Okwele leaders was withdrawn. This was on the ground that it would be subjudice for the Traditional Council to resolve a case already before the court of law. This gesture from Okwele is yet to yield the expected result.

Even so, there could have been no easy way out of the court case. If Okwele quarter were to lose the suit or if the expected government report on community disputes were to favour the new social order introduced by the 1979 edict, the conflict may degenerate into anomie and open hostility. This is a threshold hypothesis. In order words, the two options of resolution amount to a threshold, the crossing of which may lead to either deeper crisis or stalemate. Structural-functionalist analysts will not be impressed by the prognostication of deeper crisis in the hypothesis because of the faith in society's ability to find some means to prevent a boiling over of crisis. An example of structural and

institutional means is the extensive marital and familial relationships between Okwele and Echala. A leading in the latter is known to have actually predicted that the situation will not degenerate if Okwele were to lose the law suit or if the government report on community disputes retains the new order. Similar and endemic enmity is said to exist among the Urhobo, Izon and Itsekiri ethnic groups in the commercial city of Warri in the state. However, the mitigating marriage and family ties did not prevent the cold war in Warri from degenerating into a shooting war in 1998/99 between the Izon and Itsekiri.

Thus, considering the dialectics of class alliance, the more dynamic deduction is an intensification of the class conflict. In other words, if none of the two projected resolutions favours Okwele quarter, the Echala *Inotu* will be encouraged to be more obtrusive in asserting their hegemony and may even concoct new privileges. The Okwele *Inotu* may respond in several ways, one of which is to further press for the demand for a separate clan. On account of numeric weakness, this option may not find favour with the authorities unless there is further deterioration into communal clashes. More desperate courses of action may include further restriction of socio-cultural intercourse with Echala.

ˆIn the event that the resolution favours a repeal of the 1979 edict, the prospects of a rapid return to the status quo ante do not seem very bright. The Echala *Inotu* may continue to exploit the advantages of its solidarity especially as this will keep them in a better stead in party politics and elections. Therefore, Echala *Inotu* may continue to promote the contrived dichotomy in the community in furtherance of their class interests. This prognosis does not preclude a gradual and incremental reconciliation. First, with a restoration of the Okwele right to the *Okpala-Uku* title, the vanguard Echala *Inotu* may return to the rearguard having failed in their venture. New alliances may then develop. Second, a re-unification of the Ukwata festival will certainly promote a new cultural solidarity not only through the dance carnivals but also through extensive commensal relationships which the festival

promotes. Third, with a possible unification of different development associations, communal development projects presently lacking in Abbi may come on stream. The re-unification of youth organizations will also promote community-wide solidarity.

The prospects of re-unification may, therefore, not necessarily be totally dimmed by adamant Echala *Inotu* acting to protect hard won privileges. According to an Okwele *Onotu*, Echala recalcitrance is not a problem as they (that is, the Echala *Inotu*) know that the 1979 edict was a fabular façade erected to promote the political advantage. In this reasoning, a rapid reconciliation may be achieved. Such optimism is not unexpected from a loser.

Conclusion

Contrary to popular assumption, social classes exist in rural Africa and these are involved in struggles, atimes manifest, atimes latent and subtle, to maintain or appropriate existing privileges and create new ones. The functionalist utopia of a genial social differentiation and classlessness in Africa may now be said to exist only in the pages of anthropological ethnographies and sociological theses. Class antagonism in the rural sector has been further exacerbated by the nature of rural development or modernization which largely involves government patronages. All manners of stratagems are contrived to appropriate the benefits from these patronages. In the resulting struggles, the goal of rural development may in the long run be obfuscated or at least compromised.

The Traditional Rulers and Chiefs Edict of the Bendel State Government of Nigeria 1979 which seeks to regulate succession to the title of *Okpala-Uku* of Abbi may, in conclusion, be conceptualized as a mechanism devised to promote elite social class interests. It has advertently conferred social advantage and promoted hegemonic ascendancy of Echala *Inotu* in particular and the constituent quarters of Abbi-Echala in general. The edict exposed the latent fault lines of conflict in Abbi community and pitted one elite group against another in a bitter intra-class which has polarised the community into two

increasingly exclusive entities, thus negating the historical unity of the constituent quarters. The communal conflict engendered by the 1979 edict confirms Abner Cohen's (1969) observation that we cannot embark on the analysis of small groups in the modern state without making reference to the state itself.

The struggles which ensued following the Edict in 1979 is only a phase in class conflict in the community. If the Edict is withdrawn by whichever means, reconciliation may be long drawn. Moreover, new structures or mechanisms for promotion of class privileges and advantages may be erected. Because the division of the community has proven to be a potent instrument of class ascendancy, future mechanisms for class privilege may be expected to dwell on it. This is more likely as false consciousness has already been created among the *Echala Inotu* who stands to gain from the division of the community.

Finally, we may also conceptualise class antagonism in Abbi as a manifestation of the larger context of dependent neo-liberal capitalist development of Nigeria. The local rural petty bourgeoisie consisting mainly of the *Inotu* forms a continuity with the national comprador elite with whom they share common hegemonic interests. Rural elites do not have any autonomy. In a sense they are extensions of larger national elite groups whose power they exploit to secure advantages. It is their connection to national elite groups. Without such relationships, the social power of the rural elite is limited and may not be deployed to secure any exclusive advantage. The 1979 edict is a product of the exogenous influence of larger national elite.

Through their rural agents, wider class interests are protected through the capitalist rationality of minimum input for maximum output. Thus an edict enacted in the state capital completely polarises an otherwise homogenous rural elite and compromises the development environment. It is not difficult to decipher that rural social currents are reflective of a national class struggle which is directed from the city. Under these circumstances, we may not expect any meaningful rural and agricultural development (Ake, 1981; Omoregie, 1987). Neo-

liberalism has itself engendered a new struggle for privileges and further compounded the feudal contradictions in the rural sector where, as in the case of Abbi community, traditional priesthood is manipulated to foster class interests. The Abbi evidence demonstrates that rural development involves more than merely providing infrastructure, alleviating poverty and revitalizing the rural economy. It also involves promoting political, cultural and religious rights and equity as well as social security.

We may also consider the paradox inherent in neo-liberalism and the demise of international socialism which appear to have anathematized the goals of integrated rural development which, among other things, emphasizes and guarantees equity and fundamental rights of ruralites. Fortunately, the ideology of rural development need not be understood and pursued in the context of the old political divide between capitalists and socialists (Anikpo, 1989:18-19). What is more important is the recognition that policies should reduce poverty and unemployment, and promote equity in all its ramifications as well as fundamental freedoms.

Notes

1. Two largely mutually intelligible dialects of western Igbo are spoken in the area, namely, Ukwani and Aboh. By virtue of geographical proximity the latter is more similar to mainstream Igbo. By the same reason of geographical proximity, some community in the Local Government Area are bilingual, e.g., Obiaruku indigenes in western Ndokwa speak both Urhobo and Ukwani while in Onya (eastern Ndokwa), Isoko and Aboh are freely spoken. The major difference between Abbi and other Ukwani speaking communities lies in the fact that the consonant *w* is used in place of *f* in many words in the former, e.g. *wowu* instead of *wofu* (meaning: take away).

2. First generation African nationalists like Tom Mboya (Kenya) and Julius Nyerere (Tanzania) were particularly vocal about African socialism. See Mboya (1963) and Nyerere (1974).

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