FACTIONALISM AND STAFF SUCCESS IN A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY: A DEPARTMENTAL CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years a narrow group of approaches and themes has come to dominate analysis of the African state. From a methodological perspective, broad brush approaches that provide a homogenous vision of the African state shorn of empirical content have gained pre-eminence. These approaches tend to use the methodologies of the discipline of political science, and are often normative, in that they examine African states through the prism of Weberian logic and conclude that, because states do not conform to a rational-legal ideal, they must therefore be deficient. Thematically, corruption, patronage and informality dominate, and are held to be the characteristics that define all African public service bureaucracies. Taken together, these approaches and themes can be termed the neopatrimonial approach to the African state.

A key question arising from this dominance is, when one undertakes long-term, ethnographic analysis of African public institutions, to what extent are these themes actually apparent? To what extent do corruption and patronage, compared to the official rules, structure access to rewards? How do patron-client systems actually operate for those who are embedded in them? This chapter seeks to analyse these processes in the context of an institution in Nigeria’s elite Federal university sector. In particular, I analyse the pervasiveness of one aspect of patron-client relationships, but one that has been relatively excluded from the dominant neopatrimonial approach: factionalism, defined as competition for resources between structurally and functionally similar groups of individuals.

This chapter argues that factionalism exerts a significant influence over the careers of academics in a Nigerian university. This conclusion supports the general neopatrimonial thesis: that it is personal connections

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rather than formal competence that exert a greater influence over access to rewards. Despite this, however, the influence of factionalism and other non-merit considerations are not absolute: merit still exerts an influence on both staff entry and promotion. Prospective academic staff who do not have the required qualification will not gain employment regardless of their personal or factional connections, and decisions about promotions that are not based on merit—either the promotion of unworthy candidates or the ‘frustration’ of meritorious ones—can only reach a certain level before the official rules act to rein them in. The neopatrimonial characterisation of Nigerian state institutions as operating wholly for the benefit of those working for them and their client groups (see for instance Chabal and Daloz, 2006; Joseph, 1987) has clear limits and must be tempered by an understanding of the micro-dynamics of individual institutions. Entry to and promotions within Nigerian higher education are not a power-politics-led free-for-all; they operate on the basis of clearly defined logics that combine emphasis on personal connections with merit. That the former often take precedence does not mean that the latter are non-existent.

SETTING AND METHODS

This chapter is based on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a university in the Igbo-speaking region of south eastern Nigeria in 2007. In this chapter I will refer to the university where I carried out fieldwork as the University of South Eastern Nigeria (USEN).² During the data collection process I became close to one of the two factions I describe, the anti-select club (ASC), which was generally made up of people who were sympathetic to my research and were happy to discuss their experiences, even those concerning relatively sensitive topics. By contrast, the members of the other faction, the select club, were much less open and I found it difficult to gain an ‘insider’ understanding of their views. It could be argued that, in becoming closely associated with the ASC, I suffered from what Olivier de Sardan (2003) terms encliquage—literally, becoming factionalised. Olivier de Sardan notes two particular difficulties engendered

² Throughout this paper the name of the university, the department where I worked and all individuals are pseudonyms. In addition I have changed some details about individual members of staff in order to protect their identities.