

MATERIALISM AND COMMODIFICATION OF THE SACRED: A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SPIRITUAL MATERIALISM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to proffer a political economy reflection on the phenomenon of spiritual materialism in Nigeria. By way of qualitative analysis of relevant secondary sources, predicated on the Marxian Political Economy approach, the paper posits that spiritual materialism is a manifestation of the ‘queer capitalist tendency’ in the context of the contemporary global market economy order, characterized by excessive consumerism, commercialism, monetization, and marketisation of the wider society. The paper adds that the prevailing material and existential conditions arising from the Nigerian political economy tend to promote the consciousness and practice of spiritual materialism. The paper recommends that the activities of spiritual materialists in Nigeria should be harnessed and taxed by the government so as to raise revenue for the state.

Keywords: Materialism, commodification, spiritualism, political economy, religion, spirituality

1. Introduction

Commodification is notably the soul and underlying “logic of capitalism” (Skoll, 2011:67). In its context, production and exchange are basically commodified in such a manner that gives rise to ‘a market economy’ “dominated by profit-oriented and market-mediated activities” (Jessop, 2012:8). In contemporary capitalism, commodification is not merely an element of the economic realm. It has continually sought expression, dominance and paramountcy even in the wider societal spheres, including the hitherto non-economic spheres that were exterior to the conventional realm of the market. Accordingly,

In addition to engendering a market economy, contemporary capitalism is increasingly transforming into a sort of ‘market

society' characterized by the paramountcy of commercialism (and consumerism). In this context, virtually all aspects of societal affairs are 'economized' marketized' and 'monetized' (Okoli, 2014: 1).

The trend has given rise to the trend of commercialism whereby commodification of the market economy is replicated in the outer societal space in the form of inclusive marketization of society. This embedding of "the market economy in a market society" (Polanyi, 1977) tends to have occasioned a pattern of queer capitalist and commercialist tendencies, leading to over-commercialization of society. Curiously, this trend is also finding expression in "commodification of the sacred (York, 2001). It is in the light of the foregoing that this paper attempts a political economy exploration of the phenomenon of spiritual materialism in Nigeria with a view to situating its material cum socio-economic underpinnings.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Marxian Political Economy

As a matter of theoretical approach, this paper subscribes to the Marxian Political Economy. At its core, the Marxian Political Economy probes the organic and dialectical relations among social phenomenon from the standpoint of econo-centricism -- what critics refer to as economic determinism (cf. Momoh and Hundeyin; 1999; Okoli, 2014). This is in a conscious attempt to understand the society as well as its workings and dynamics more historically, holistically, comprehensively and concretely (Ake, 1981, Okoli, 2009).

The Marxian Political Economy is a critique of the established knowledge in social thinking and praxis. Influenced by the pioneer works of Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), the theoretical tradition is predicated on a number of principles and assumptions, prominent among which are:

- (i) the primacy and paramountcy of economic/material conditions in determining the general complexion and direction of society;
- (ii) the organic but dialectical relations among social realities;
- (iii) that society and history are in constant dynamics and dialectics of transformation, occasioned and propelled by the interplay of forces inherent in the societal mode of production;
- (iv) that every social order pertinently reflects the existential imperative of its economic base;
- (v) that the realm of matter (existential conditions ordained by the societal system of production) is superior and precedential to the realm of spirit (ideas, consciousness, beliefs, values, knowledge);

(vi) that the contradictory essence of matter is the reason for the dialectical dynamics of societal transformation/change (Ake; 1981; Ake, 1985; Okoli, 2007; 2009; Mclean and Macmillan, 2003).

Applied to the purpose of this paper, the Marxian Political Economy would enable us to come to terms with the understanding logic and motif of spiritual materialism in Nigeria. In this regard, it could be posited that the phenomenon of spiritual materialism is indicative of ‘queer capitalist syndrome’, which in essence, reflects the peculiarities of material cum socio-economic state of the Nigerian society. The existential realities arising from people’s material conditions in the country have collided with the imperative of the global capitalist dynamics to produce a phenomenological outcome exemplified in spiritual materialism. The material and livelihood crises in Nigeria has not only made it possible and permissible, but rather compelling to take to queer capitalist ventures, such as crime, corruption, and all sorts of illicit dealing so as to ensure economic survival and subsistence. Here, commercialization of religion and its spiritual essences, therefore, become inevitable.

3. Conceptual Frame of Reference

For the sake of shared understanding and conceptual operationalization, it is germane to consider the basic concepts that constitute the thrust of the subject matter in this discourse. The concepts are materialism, commodification, spirituality and spiritual materialism. Highlighted in the following sub-sections are the operational meanings and nuances ascribed to these concepts in the context of this paper.

3.1 Materialism: This refers to the excessive desire to acquire and consume material goods (Wikipedia, 2014). It is both a psychological and socio-cultural attribute that celebrates, if not deify, material acquisition or possession as the ultimate guarantor of human happiness and satisfaction (cf. Belk, 1985; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Richins, 1994).

Materialism is inescapably an abiding feature of capitalism. In capitalism, acquisition of material wealth and goods (possessions) is considered “a pragmatic form of enlightened self-interest” and a mark of socio-economic wellbeing (Wikipedia, 2014: para. 1). Materialism has been variously criticized as the cause of corruption, avarice, injustice, inequality, crime, poverty and other forms of social vices.

3.2 Commodification: The concept of commodification derives from the notion of ‘commodity’. By commodity it is meant “anything created essentially for exchange rather than use, and therefore is subject to market relations” (Ibeanu, 2007:1). Commodification, therefore, refers to that

process by which a material value “takes on the form and substance of a commodity; that is “the transubstantiation of a ‘use value’ into an ‘exchange value’ (Okoli, 2014: 78).

Commodification is an indispensable attribute of capitalism. Capitalism is ineluctable dedicated to “commodity production and exchange” (Jessop, 2012:14). This reflects the logic of the embedding of “the market economy in a market society” (Polanyi, 1977: n.p; see also Okoli, 2014:79). The concept of commodification has often been confused with that of commoditization. For the avoidance of doubt, ‘commodification’ belongs to the Marxian scientific nomenclature, referring to production dedicated to exchange and market relations. On the other hand, ‘commoditization’ simply refers to commodity production in a free market order. The two concepts, however, have often been interchangeably applied in recent usage (see for instance Ibeanu, 2008:1).

3.3 Spirituality: Broadly the notion of spirituality encompasses both religious and trans-religious aspects of man’s essence as a conscious being. Hence, Okoli (2008:1) defines spirituality thus:

Spirituality in all its denotative and connotative implications comprehends religious and transcendental, as well as intellectual and attitudinal essences of man, whether as individuality or collectivity.

For the purpose of this paper, however, our conception of spirituality is restricted to its dominant theological apprehension to the effect that spirituality implies the expression of man’s relationship with the divine or the outer-worldly.

3.4 Spiritual Materialism: The notion of spiritual materialism refers to the manifestation of the capitalist tendencies of materialism and commodification in the religious domain and/or relations (York, 2001; King, 2011; Shaumyan, 2006). The concept has been popularized particularly by Malone (n.d) and Shaumyan (2006). According to Shaumyan:

Spiritual materialism refers to commodification of spirituality in a consumeric society. In other words, spirituality is treated like every other commodity - it’s something you pay for to gratify a certain need. Spirituality is something you can buy much in the same way as you might buy self-help book for self-improvement (2006: para 1).

Spiritual materialism thrives on excessive commercialism (Okoli, 2014), which reflects the marketization of the wider society (Polanyi, 1977) in contemporary capitalism. King (2011) describes this commercialist

degeneration of religion as capitalist spirituality, apparently to underscore the fact that it is a pattern of spirituality that reflects the logic of capitalism.

The penetration of spiritual materialism into the religious domain of society has led observers to raise critical moral cum ethical concerns concerning the propriety of the emerging trend. Coming from a standpoint of religious orthodoxy, Shaumyan (2006), shares some concerns as indicated in Box 1.

Box 1: Shaumyan’s Concerns against Spiritual Materialism

- True spirituality is about selflessness, genuineness and concern for others
- It’s about a genuine search for meaning
- Spirituality is not something you can buy. It’s how you live
- It’s about being concerned about the world, not about materialistic aggrandizement
- Spirituality without substance is shallow and meaningless
- It’s (not) all about bandwagon mentality and imitation
- But spirituality you can buy is a fake spirituality.

Source: Shaumyan (2006); <http://www.shaumyan.com/spiritualmaterialism.aspx>

4. Spiritual Materialism in Nigeria: A Political Economy Digest

The conception of religion or spirituality in this paper is context-specific. It refers to a global religious cum spiritual mode and current called New Age movement. The New Age is a sort of syncretic and eclectic religious movement that fertilized in the 20th century in the West. As observed by King (2011: para. 6):

By the second half of the twentieth-century, religion has entered the market place of human choice and experimentation, resulting of course in the development of that eclectic and amorphous phenomenon known today as the ‘New Age’.

According to York (1995:34), New Age refers to “a blend of pagan religions, Eastern philosophies, and occult-psyhic phenomena”. This blend of religious movement is characteristically esoteric, eclectic and exegetic (Van Hove, 1999; York 2001). Otherwise referred to as the “New Religious Movements (NRM), New Age is multi-faith and multi-denominational both in essence and outlook. Hence, it liberally draws from all religious traditions and heritage in such a manner that renders it an ‘amorphous blend of all sorts’. Examples of New Age include:

- i. Neo-primal (neo-pagan) movement
- ii. Healing/miracle homes
- iii. Spiritual science (and/or philosophy) movement
- iv. Independent churches/autonomous religious organisations
- v. Revivalist crusades (see Hackett, 1999; Enang, 2012:27).

The New Age can be found in Islam, Christianity, as well as African Traditional Religion (ATR). It has also been variously designated as ‘prophetic movement’, ‘separatist sects,’ ‘millennial or messianic cults’, as well as ‘nativistic’ revitalization or ‘adjustment’ movement (Turner, 1974; Anderson, 1994; Marsdern, 1987; Hacket; 1990).

A number of factors have accounted for the emergence and proliferation of the New Age religious movement on the global scale. These factors include:

- (i) the rise of scientific and humanistic rationalism, which questioned the ‘superstitious interference’ of religions
- (ii) the spread of liberalism across the world, with propagated the ideas of individualism and free thought
- (iii) the rise of Protestantism and the decline of religious orthodoxy
- (iv) the de-sacralization of civic affairs by way of secularism and secularization of civic relations
- (v) the emergence of globalization with its enduring impact of spiritual pluralism
- (vi) the spread of corporate capitalism with its inherent consumerist, commercialist and ‘mercantilist’ tendencies (Wilson, 1988; York, 1995; York, 2011; King, 2011).

One abiding attribute of the New Age is spiritual materialism or the commodification of the sacred. According to York:

As an aggregation or congeries of client services and competing audience cults, New Age is part of what is described as the ‘religions consumer supermarket’ - one which thrives on competition and the offering of various spiritual commodities. Rather than a rejection of free market principles, New Age endorses a spiritualized counterpart of capitalism – one which seeks ever extended markets, new sources of marketable goods, and expanding profits (2001:367).

The New Age spirituality is materialistic and capitalistic in the sense that it involves “the subordination and exploitation of religious themes and motifs, to promote an individualistic or corporate-oriented pursuit of profit for its own sake” (King, 2011: para. 2). The New Age movement represents what could be described as the ‘individualization’ or ‘privatization’ of religion/spirituality (King, 2011). The movement has been reinforced by the trend of marketization of society, which has been an abiding characteristic of global capitalism in the contemporary era (Polanyi, 1977; Okoli, 2014). It is within this operational context that the problematique of spiritual materialism in Nigeria is herewith conceived and understood.

The infestation of spiritual materialism in Nigeria has taken the form of materialization of religion and commercialization of spiritual providence. It is a tendency that has manifested in all religions in the country, even though it has appeared to be most manifest in Christianity. The trend has, over the years, found expression in a variety of curious religious practices, some of which are highlighted in the sub-sections that follow.

4.1 Proliferation of Faith-Based Organizations: There has been an unprecedented rise and preponderant spread of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in Nigeria over the years. This ranges from New Independent Churches (NICs), religious ‘ministries’ to Non-governmental bodies with declared ‘spiritual/sacred mandate’. These organizations are founded and led by self-called ‘apostles of faith’ who utilize such platforms to advance their self-regarding interests. In some cases, such organizations have been used to perpetrate organized crimes, such as advanced fee fraud (aka 419), child trafficking (baby buying/selling), and money laundering (Okoli, 2014; Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014). This is in addition to the routine manipulation and exploitation of unsuspected faithful who identify with and patronize the organizations.

4.2 Religious Prebendalism: This refers to materialization of religion and commercialization of its spiritual providence. Nowadays in Nigeria, religion is a serious business, a big-time employer of labour, and a super income generator. The sacred endowments and spiritual providence of religion are highly commercialized and consumerized. Hence, sacramental, spiritual books and CDs are no longer necessarily produced to edify and uplift the ‘souls of the faithful’; rather, they are designed expressly for material profiteering. Worse still, prayers, healing, miracles and anointing are dispensed apparently according to the principle of ‘earn as you pay’. In the same vein, one may need to even pay a ‘consultancy fee’ in order to enable him/her see the ‘man of God’ for consultation. Incidentally, spiritual providence has curiously become a matter of material auctioneering. Religious prebendalism in Nigeria has produced a curious pattern of spirituality characterized as “Fellowship and Business with religion sprinkled to add flavor” (Kukah, 2007: 38).

4.3 Monetization of Faith and Grace: The trend of spiritual materialism in Nigeria has also led to the arcane phenomenon of monetization of faith and grace. Faithful are often encouraged to make financial commitments to the ‘man of God’ or his ‘Ministry’ as a mark of their spiritual dedication. In this connection, it is held that the level of your financial commitment determines the proportion of ‘divine favour’ you

would elicit in return. In other words, financial given is advocated as a pre-condition for God's Grace. This thinking has been supported by the pro-Calvinistic prosperity-centric teachings of some of the New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Nigeria (Enang, 2012). In this regard, it is taught that the financial giving is a key to prosperity. This form of materialist spirituality has produced a crop of faithful who could cheat or steal in order to raise money for the purpose of sowing a 'seed of faith'.

4.4 Corporate Merchandising: This refers to the use of aggressive advertising, publicity and market promotions to woo public patronage. The billboard and media advertorials are innovative crafted in market-sensitive slogans and catchwords, such as: grab your miracle now!; Harvest of success!; Miracle extravaganza!; Anointing bazaar!; Encounter your breakthrough here!; Prosperity guaranteed!, etc.

The use of the mass media to frame impressive but unfounded corporate image is crucial to the purpose of spiritual materialism. There is a conscious attempt, by way of televangelism, to rule the airwaves in a tacit effort to make a window display of various spiritual products: healings, miracles, breakthroughs, deliverance, curse-breaking, etc. This stratagem is strategic to swaying popular patronage and following.

4.5 Ostentatious Religiosity: Another subtle dimension of spiritual materialism among Nigerians is the issue of ostentatious but affected religiosity. The leaders often wallow in unfounded opulence while the faithful are encouraged to put up conspicuous lifestyle, prosperity mentality, and outward manifestation of 'divine grace'. This is to affirm their total well-being, even when there is no material evidence to that effect. The propagation of 'false consciousness and fake living in this fashion has interplayed with other factors to reinforce the prevalence of spiritual materialism in Nigeria.

Other indicators of spiritual materialism in Nigeria can be identified thus:

- i. concentration of religious activities in the centres of mega cities in prospect for material profiteering;
- ii. exploitation of the faithful through incessant levies and financial contributions;
- iii. personalization and selfish appropriation of the religious common wealth.
- iv. propagation of parasitism through faith-giving, and the like;
- v. the use of religious or faith-based platforms as a conduit for money laundering, human trafficking, and other dimensions of primitive accumulation.

5. Spiritual Materialism in Nigeria: One More Pertinent Comment

Nigerians are notoriously religious and hyper-spiritual. The prevailing material and socio-economic conditions in Nigeria makes her a veritable destination for religiosity (cf. Soyinka, 1991). Pervasive poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, disease, and livelihood crisis drive people to seek solace in religion and varying spiritual practice. In this context, religion practically serves the twin purpose of superstitious escapism and popular opiate. This creates an atmosphere that is conducive for spiritual vulnerability, manipulation and exploitation. In Soyinka's (1991:25) view, the condition promotes "religious opportunism". But for Kukah (2007:38), the trend has produced the untoward phenomenon of "merchandizing of religion".

True to above observations by Soyinka and Kukah, religious opportunism, as well as merchandizing, has been pervasive in Nigeria in the contemporary era. There is much enthusiasm about religion, not necessarily as an earnest relationship with the Godhead but as a means of escaping worldly pains and sorrows in a superstitious march toward existential *El Dorado*: the paradise on earth. In the views of Kukah:

The ubiquity of religion has become a matter of worry and we need to pay attention to its implications. Today, Pentecostal pastors are busier than the men and women who run our polity as politicians or bankers. Pastors are scavenging for fortunes in the name of leading souls to God through the organization of endless *spiritual trade fairs* called revivals and vigils (2007:37).

Consequently, there have arisen many 'men' and 'women of God' who have taken to religious enterprise as a means of economic accumulation and personal aggrandizement. In effect, therefore, the Nigerian city centres and peripheries are punctuated by a variety of religious establishments and 'concerns' dealing on sundry aspects of spiritual consulting: prophecy, healing, breakthrough, visioning, miracle, motivation/inspiration, and the like.

The prevalence of religious establishments (spiritual ministries and apostolate) in Nigeria is not unconnected with the vested economic or material interests of the actors. With reference to the Christian experience, Enang (2012:291) opines that:

Many Church founders were previously school dropouts lacking in education credentials, or were unable to secure employment, or could not face the stiff economic competition

of modern times, or perhaps suffered a collapse of their business. Thus they have resorted to the establishment of a new Church for their own economic security.

To safeguard their vested economic interests, the founders of these establishments run them strictly as a matter of ‘family affair’ (Enang, 2012:294). This is important in order to safeguard the family capital and stake in the ‘investment’. Hence,

They are being operated as family businesses. When registering his Church with the government, the founder now ensures that his family members are registered as trustees. Often, on billboard advertisements for such churches as well as on television and radio, both husband and wife are depicted as founders (Enang, 2012:294).

Besides the issue of family ownership and inheritance, such religious organizations are so firmly personalized and ‘prebendalized’ in such a manner that they pass for personal fiefdoms of their ‘founders and general overseers’. The superintending mien of most of these so-called “founders and “general overseers’ equates that of an imperial overlord, whose control over the followers is total and arbitrary. Imbued with high sense of narcissism, the leader expectedly pontificates, expecting the followers to dogmatically follow his lead, and of course do his bidding. The followers, in their characteristic docility, reciprocate, often with bandwagon enthusiasm. This scenario interplays with the material conditions already considered in the foregoing to breed and bolster spiritual materialism in Nigeria.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

Spiritual materialism is a manifestation of ‘queer capitalist tendency’ in the contemporary world. This is because it typifies the practice of capitalism in the wrong context. Capitalism has its domain in the market realm; hence the notion of ‘market economy’. Spiritual goods are supposed to be ‘sacred use values’ that are originally not dedicated to the market and market relations. If such goods have been so de-sacralized and commercialized to the extent that they now have the essence of ‘exchange value’, the implication is that capitalism has, penetrated, permeated and overridden the religious domain. In other words, the ‘market economy’ has metamorphosed into a ‘market society’, wherein imperative of commodification is not only manifest but also compelling. It is thus logical to treat religious enterprises the same way the market enterprises are treated. We, therefore, recommend that government in Nigeria should devise a means of harnessing, regulating as well as appropriating from the endeavours of spiritual materialists in such manner that benefits the country. One sure

promising way of achieving this is to ensure that such activities are appropriately incorporated and taxed so as to garner revenue for the state.

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