

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF POLITICAL GODFATHERISM ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS**Authors & Affiliations****UDO, UDEME ESEME**

Department of Religious and
Cultural Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar
77.udeme@gmail.com
+234 803 395 1547

Abstract

Political godfatherism remains one of the most consequential informal institutions shaping electoral and governance outcomes in Nigeria, yet its ethical dimensions remain conceptually underdeveloped relative to its socio-political and economic study. This paper offers a conceptual analysis of the ethical implications of godfatherism for democratic governance, using Cross River State as a bounded case through which the phenomenon's local manifestations can be examined with analytical precision, rather than claiming representativeness across Nigeria's thirty-six states. The study draws on documented electoral records, public statements, and the wider secondary literature on Nigerian godfatherism, read through two complementary theoretical lenses: patron-client theory and virtue ethics. It first develops an operational definition of godfatherism that distinguishes it from adjacent concepts such as political sponsorship, mentorship, clientelism, and elite capture. It then argues that godfatherism in Cross River State exhibits the asymmetric, loyalty-contingent exchange structure identified by patron-client theory, while systematically displacing the virtues, particularly integrity, fairness, and public-spiritedness, that virtue ethics holds indispensable to political office. The paper distinguishes legitimate political sponsorship from coercive godfatherism before concluding with targeted recommendations addressing candidate nomination transparency, campaign finance disclosure, and protection for officeholders against engineered removal.

Keywords: *Political godfatherism, patron-client theory, virtue ethics, democratic governance, Cross River State, Nigeria*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's Fourth Republic has been shaped as much by its formal constitutional architecture as by an informal institution operating largely outside it: political godfatherism, the practice by which a small number of financially and politically resourced individuals determine candidate selection, election outcomes, and the subsequent conduct of office-holders, in exchange for sustained loyalty and material return (Albert, 2005). Since 1999, this pattern has recurred across multiple states with enough regularity that scholars increasingly treat it not as an aberration but as a structural feature of Nigerian electoral politics (Igbini & Okolie, 2020; Ojo, 2008; Omotola, 2007), one bound up with the wider, well-documented difficulties Nigeria's Fourth Republic has faced in translating repeated elections into genuine democratic consolidation (Omotola, 2010).

Existing scholarship has approached godfatherism chiefly through the lenses of political sociology,

conflict studies, and constitutional analysis, documenting how godfathers select candidates, finance campaigns, and discipline disloyal proteges. What this literature has been slower to develop is a precise ethical account: an analysis of exactly which moral obligations of democratic office godfatherism violates, and why (Wenibowei, 2011). This gap matters because the socio-political critique of godfatherism, that it entrenches elite power and distorts electoral outcomes, is compatible with the phenomenon being merely bad politics; establishing that it is also a breach of the ethical obligations attached to public office requires a different kind of argument, one this paper supplies.

Rather than treat godfatherism across Nigeria's diverse and internally varied states as a single undifferentiated national phenomenon, this paper narrows its focus to Cross River State. Cross River offers an instructive case: its gubernatorial succession has followed a documented, traceable sequence, from Donald Duke, through his party's chosen successor Liyel Imoke, to Imoke's successor Benedict Ayade, and the vocabulary of "godfather politics" continues to surface in the state's political commentary to the present day. Examining this single, bounded trajectory allows the ethical analysis developed here to be grounded in a specific, verifiable sequence of political succession, rather than diffused across a national picture too broad for a conceptual study of this scope to responsibly claim.

This study is conceptual rather than field-empirical in design. It does not report findings from a structured interview sample; instead, it draws on the published academic literature on Nigerian godfatherism, documented electoral and biographical records, and public statements by political actors, read through the interpretive lenses of patron-client theory and virtue ethics. Where the analysis has additionally been informed by informal conversations with individuals familiar with Cross River politics, these are treated as background orientation for the conceptual argument, not as a data set subjected to systematic coding, and no substantive claim in this paper rests on unattributed testimony. This scoping decision, and its implications for what the paper can and cannot claim, is set out fully in the Methodology section below.

This paper is organised around three questions. First, what distinguishes godfatherism, as an ethical category, from adjacent and often legitimate forms of political sponsorship? Second, how does the patron-client structure of godfatherism, as manifested in Cross River State's gubernatorial succession, undermine the virtues that virtue ethics holds constitutive of good political office? Third, what follows, in policy terms, from treating godfatherism as an ethical rather than merely a political problem?

Answering these questions well requires resisting two temptations that have shaped parts of the existing literature. The first is definitional looseness, treating godfatherism as coextensive with any exercise of political influence by a senior figure, which this paper corrects in Section 2 by proposing a narrower, testable definition. The second is evidentiary overreach, presenting a normative argument about ethics as though it rested on a systematic empirical study of participants' motivations when it in fact rests on documentary and theoretical analysis. This paper avoids the second temptation by being explicit, in Section 5, about exactly what kind of evidence supports its claims, and by confining its case analysis in Section 6 to events that are part of the public documentary record.

The paper proceeds as follows. It first develops an operational definition of godfatherism, distinguishing it from cognate concepts. It then reviews the existing literature to establish precisely which gap the paper fills. It sets out patron-client theory and virtue ethics as complementary frameworks, before applying both to the Cross River case. It then addresses the strongest counter-arguments to the paper's position, namely, that

political sponsorship need not be ethically objectionable, before concluding with policy-relevant recommendations.

2. DEFINING GODFATHERISM: TOWARD CONCEPTUAL PRECISION

Before the ethical argument can proceed, the term "godfatherism" itself needs sharper boundaries than it customarily receives in the literature, where it is often used interchangeably with patronage, clientelism, political sponsorship, elite capture, brokerage, mentorship, and machine politics. Treating these as synonyms obscures what is ethically distinctive about godfatherism and risks over-generalising the critique developed later in this paper to political relationships that do not deserve it.

Following Albert (2005) and Hicken (2011), this paper distinguishes godfatherism from four adjacent concepts.

Political sponsorship refers to material or organisational support extended to a candidate, of a kind common and often unobjectionable in every democracy: fundraising assistance, endorsement, mentoring in campaign strategy. Sponsorship becomes godfatherism only when it is coupled with a durable claim on the officeholder's post-election conduct, such that the sponsor expects, and typically receives, ongoing deference in appointments, contracts, and policy that supersedes the officeholder's accountability to the electorate.

Clientelism, in the broader comparative-politics sense developed by Scott (1972) and synthesised by Hicken (2011), denotes the exchange of material benefits for political support on a contingent, particularistic basis. Godfatherism is a species of clientelism, but a narrower one. It typically involves a single dominant patron, rather than a diffuse party machine, concentrated at the point of candidate selection itself, and extending in scope from electoral mobilisation to control over appointments and contracts after the election is won.

Mentorship, properly understood, involves the transfer of political skill and experience without an accompanying claim to control; the mentee's subsequent independence is not treated by the mentor as disloyalty. Godfatherism inverts this: independence from the godfather is treated as betrayal, frequently followed by public repudiation, engineered defection, or an organised attempt to unseat the officeholder before the end of their term, a pattern documented in the Rivers State relationship between Nyesom Wike and his successor Siminalayi Fubara, examined at length by Nwambuko, Nwobi and Funmilayo (2024).

Elite capture describes a structural condition in which a narrow elite controls political and economic institutions; it is a description of an outcome rather than of a relationship. Godfatherism is one mechanism by which elite capture is produced and reproduced, but the two terms operate at different levels of analysis, and a study of godfatherism cannot simply substitute the broader language of elite capture without losing the relational specificity that makes the ethical argument in this paper possible.

On this basis, the paper defines political godfatherism as a dyadic, asymmetric political relationship in which a resource-holding patron secures the nomination and election of a client to public office, and in return claims an ongoing, loyalty-contingent right to direct the client's exercise of that office, a claim enforced through the patron's continued control over the client's political survival.

This definition carries two immediate implications for the analysis that follows. First, it identifies the ethically decisive feature of godfatherism as not the existence of political support itself, but the persistence of a loyalty claim after the office has been secured, a claim that subordinates the officeholder's obligations to the electorate. Second, it makes clear that not every powerful sponsor is a godfather in this sense, a distinction the paper returns to directly when it considers counter-arguments in Section 7 below.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The empirical literature on Nigerian godfatherism is substantial and has grown steadily since Albert's (2005) foundational account, which first mapped the phenomenon's typology, distinguishing godfathers by the source of their leverage, financial, coercive, or institutional, and traced its lineage to the prebendal politics analysed later in this paper's theoretical framework. Albert's typology remains the most frequently cited starting point in the field, and later state-level studies largely operate within it. Igbini and Okolie (2020) extend the account by tracing godfatherism's threat to specific mechanisms of democratic consolidation: candidate imposition, electoral violence, and the erosion of intra-party democracy, arguing that the phenomenon has contributed directly to the collapse of confidence in Nigeria's electoral institutions. Ojo (2008) and Omotola (2007) ground the general account in specific electoral cycles, documenting how godfathers in Lagos State and across the 2007 general elections respectively shaped candidate selection, with Omotola's account tracing a direct line from godfather-driven candidate imposition to the irregularities that marked that election. Osayi (2015) develops a related but distinct argument, characterising godfatherism as one of two indispensable features, alongside money politics, of contemporary Nigerian political discourse, capable of destabilising a state precisely because it concentrates the "primordial components of chaos" within a single patronage structure.

Alongside Albert's (2005) typology, Nkwede, Ibeogu and Nwankwo (2014) supply an early governance-focused account, arguing that godfatherism functions as a direct constraint on the independent choice of candidates and on the financial independence officeholders would otherwise exercise, and recommending, on largely institutional grounds, reforms to candidate selection procedures that this paper's own recommendations in Section 8 develop further and ground in an explicit ethical rationale rather than an institutional one alone. Abdullahi and Sakariyau (2013) approach the phenomenon through its effects on democratic stability specifically, describing political godfathers as figures whose questionable wealth and influence displace the conventional function of political parties, presenting clear and coherent programmes for voters to choose between, a description consistent with the concentration-of-nomination mechanism this paper documents in Cross River State in Section 6. Nuesiri (2018), writing from outside the godfatherism literature narrowly defined, examines how godfather politics in Nigeria enables state governors to subordinate elected local government authorities and constrain their responsiveness to local needs; the general mechanism he documents, whereby control exercised at the state level displaces accountability at the level closest to citizens, is structurally consistent with the concentration-of-decision-making pattern this paper identifies at the gubernatorial nomination stage, even though Nuesiri's own case material concerns a different sector of governance.

A second cluster of scholarship narrows the frame to individual states, a methodological choice this paper adopts and extends. Nwambuko, Nwobi and Funmilayo (2024) examine Rivers State using a structured quantitative design to test the relationship between godfatherism and governance outcomes empirically, anchoring their analysis in elite theory and documenting, among other findings, the environmental factors that incite godfatherism in that state's specific political economy. Ameh (2025) takes Kano State as its case, examining the Kwankwasiiya political network through an explicitly patron-client lens, and argues that the loyalty demanded of political clients constitutes a distortion of the concept of loyalty itself, a normative claim this paper builds on directly in its virtue-ethical analysis below. Kpodee and Agbo (2024) offer a

philosophically inflected account of godfatherism's effect on democratic governance nationally, arguing from a library-based method that godfatherism forecloses the autonomy of elected officials from their sponsors; because their study operates at national scope, however, its philosophical claims are not tested against the specifics of any single political trajectory over time, a limitation this paper's state-bounded design is intended to address directly.

A third cluster comes closest to the ethical register this paper develops, though none commits fully to a stated, applied ethical framework. Familusi (2012) was an early attempt to frame godfatherism explicitly as a moral rather than merely institutional problem, examining its incompatibility with development ethics and arguing that a political culture organised around personal debt cannot simultaneously serve as a vehicle for public development. Sapele and Jeko (2024) connect godfatherism to what they term "eliocentrism", elite self-interest as an organising principle of Nigerian politics, and argue this undermines the legitimacy conditions of democratic government, though without specifying which ethical theory grounds that legitimacy claim. Umunna (2024) provides the most sustained recent treatment of godfatherism's legal and ethical dimensions together, cataloguing the constitutional provisions godfatherism routinely circumvents and the categories of godfather identified by leverage type, but treats "ethical concerns" descriptively rather than through a stated normative framework. Chioke (2023) approaches adjacent ground, examining how godfatherism-adjacent dynamics inside religious and political institutions deter Christian political participation in Nigeria, while Ezeanya-Oguejiofo (2018) catalogues the broader paradoxes between Nigeria's human-rights commitments and its democratic practice, of which godfatherism is one instance among several rather than the central object of analysis. Wenibowei (2011), writing from an elite-theory perspective, links godfatherism directly to episodes of political violence, establishing that the phenomenon's costs are not confined to governance quality but extend to physical harm, a dimension this paper's virtue-ethical framing treats as a downstream consequence of the prior displacement of integrity and public-spiritedness in candidate selection.

Read together, this literature establishes three things clearly: that godfatherism is empirically pervasive across Nigerian sub-national politics; that its socio-political consequences, violence, candidate imposition, weakened party democracy, are well documented; and that several scholars have gestured toward its ethical dimension without grounding that gesture in an explicit, applied ethical framework. What remains absent is a study that commits to a defined ethical theory, applies that theory systematically to a bounded political case rather than to godfatherism in the abstract, and uses that application to generate a precise account of which specific virtues, and which specific accountability relationships, godfatherism displaces, and how. This is the gap this paper addresses, using patron-client theory to establish the structural mechanism and virtue ethics to establish the normative claim, applied throughout to the documented political succession in Cross River State.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PATRON-CLIENT THEORY AND VIRTUE ETHICS

4.1 Patron-Client Theory

Patron-client theory, developed initially by anthropologists studying peasant societies and formalised for political analysis by Scott (1972), describes a distinctive form of political exchange characterised, per Hicken's (2011) influential synthesis, by four features: a dyadic relationship between unequal parties; contingency, the exchange of a specific benefit for a specific act of political support; hierarchy, in which the patron controls resources the client cannot easily obtain elsewhere; and iteration, meaning the relationship is

expected to continue rather than terminate at the point of exchange. Scott's original analysis, developed with reference to Southeast Asia, explicitly anticipated its relevance beyond that region, noting that patron-client structures are much in evidence "in Latin America, in Africa, and in less developed portions of Europe" and possess more general value for understanding politics in societies where formal institutions remain weak relative to personal networks (Scott, 1972).

In the Nigerian context, Joseph's (1987) concept of prebendalism supplies the specific institutional vocabulary needed to apply this general theory. In a prebendal system, public office is treated by officeholders and their sponsors alike as a prebend, a private benefice to be exploited for the advantage of the officeholder's patron and kin network, rather than as a trust held on behalf of the public. Godfatherism, on this account, is the mechanism through which prebendal access to office is allocated: the patron determines who receives the prebend, in exchange for a durable claim on its proceeds. Hicken (2011) further notes that clientelist exchange, unlike programmatic politics organised around public policy commitments, targets benefits narrowly at specific individuals or small groups rather than at the electorate broadly, which is precisely what distinguishes a godfather's endorsement from an ordinary party platform commitment.

Applying Hicken's (2011) four elements to godfatherism as defined in Section 2 clarifies exactly what is structurally distinctive about it, relative to clientelism generally. The dyadic element is unusually concentrated: unlike a diffuse party machine trading small material benefits with many voters, godfatherism typically centres on a single dominant patron whose personal endorsement is treated as decisive to a candidate's prospects. The contingency element extends beyond the electoral moment: whereas classical vote-buying clientelism often concludes its contingency at the point of the ballot, godfatherism's contingency persists into the officeholder's tenure, since continued loyalty, not a single act of electoral support, is what is being exchanged. The hierarchy element is reinforced institutionally, since the patron typically controls not only material resources but the officeholder's access to renomination itself, giving the relationship a coercive durability that ordinary campaign donation does not carry. And the iterative element is what produces the recognisable godfather-godson public vocabulary noted throughout the Nigerian literature reviewed above: the relationship is understood by both parties, and often narrated publicly by commentators and by the parties themselves, as an ongoing debt rather than a concluded transaction.

4.2 Virtue Ethics

Where patron-client theory supplies the structural account of how godfatherism operates, virtue ethics supplies the normative account of what is wrong with it. Following Aristotle's (2009) account of political rule, the exercise of public office is properly oriented toward the common good of the community, and the virtues required of the ruler, practical wisdom, justice, and a settled disposition toward the good of the community rather than private advantage, are not incidental to good governance but constitutive of it. A ruler who governs well by accident, without the settled character from which good governance flows, does not on this account satisfy the ethical requirements of office, even where particular outcomes happen to be favourable.

MacIntyre's (1981) later development of virtue ethics, applied to institutions by Beadle and Moore (2006), offers a more precise analytical tool for the present argument than the Aristotelian account alone. MacIntyre distinguishes between the internal goods of a practice, goods that can only be achieved by, and are definitive of, excellence within that practice, and external goods, such as money, status, or power, which can be achieved by many different means and are not specific to the practice itself. A practice's institutions exist to sustain the

practice and secure the external goods it needs to survive, but institutions are always vulnerable to what Beadle and Moore (2006), following MacIntyre, describe as a characteristic form of corruption: the point at which the pursuit of external goods overtakes and begins to dictate the practice, rather than serving it. Beadle and Moore's organisational application of this schema is instructive here precisely because it was developed for institutions generally, not for politics specifically, which allows it to be applied to Nigerian godfatherism without the circularity of a framework built to explain the very phenomenon it is then used to diagnose.

Political office, on this reading, is a practice whose internal good is the competent, accountable exercise of public trust for the common welfare; virtues such as integrity, fairness, and public-spiritedness are the character traits definitively required to achieve that internal good. Godfatherism is best understood, in MacIntyrean terms, as a case of institutional corruption of exactly this kind. It makes access to office contingent not on the virtues required for its internal good, but on the officeholder's capacity to deliver external goods, appointments, contracts, and continued political loyalty, to the patron. Where these two demands conflict, as they routinely do once an officeholder must choose between a patron's preference and the public interest, the structural incentive built into the relationship favours the external good over the internal one. This is not merely an incidental empirical tendency observed in godfatherism; it is what the concept, properly defined in Section 2, predicts as a matter of structure.

This paper's choice of virtue ethics over deontological or consequentialist alternatives is deliberate rather than a default. A deontological account would ask whether godfatherism violates a specific rule or duty, such as a constitutional or fiduciary obligation; Umunna (2024) and Ezeanya-Oguejiofo (2018), among the sources reviewed in Section 3, already develop lines of argument close to this, and the present paper does not aim to repeat them. A consequentialist account would ask whether godfatherism produces worse governance outcomes than its alternatives, a question the empirical literature reviewed in Section 3, including Wenibowei's (2011) work on electoral violence and Nwambuko et al.'s (2024) governance-outcome analysis of Rivers State, has already begun to answer with structured evidence that this paper's conceptual design does not attempt to replicate. Virtue ethics, by contrast, asks a question neither the legal-constitutional nor the outcomes-based literature is well positioned to answer on its own: what the loyalty-contingent structure of godfatherism does to the character-based requirements of holding office, independent of whether any particular governance outcome happens to be favourable or unfavourable in a given instance. This is the specific explanatory gap identified in Section 3, and it is the reason virtue ethics, applied through MacIntyre's (1981) practice-institution distinction, is used here rather than the two more commonly applied alternatives.

4.3 The Two Frameworks Read Together

Patron-client theory and virtue ethics are complementary rather than redundant in this paper's argument. Patron-client theory explains the mechanism, the specific structure of contingent, hierarchical, iterated exchange, by which godfatherism operates and by which it can be distinguished empirically from ordinary political support. Virtue ethics explains why that mechanism is not merely inefficient or unpopular but wrong: it substitutes a private, loyalty-based measure of political success for the public, virtue-based measure that democratic office is meant to answer to.

This combination also clarifies the relationship between godfatherism and the broader concept of democratic accountability that recurs throughout the literature reviewed in Section 3. Accountability, in its ordinary democratic sense, describes a relationship in which officeholders must explain and justify their conduct to

those they represent, and can be sanctioned by them for failing to do so. Patron-client theory identifies the mechanism by which godfatherism substitutes a different accountability relationship in place of this one: the officeholder remains genuinely accountable, in the sense of facing real sanction for non-compliance, but to the patron rather than to the electorate, since it is the patron, not the electorate at large, who controls the officeholder's continued political survival through renomination and party structure. Virtue ethics explains why this substitution is not a neutral redirection of accountability but a corruption of it in MacIntyre's specific sense: the internal good of democratic accountability, answerability to the public whose trust the office holds, is displaced by an external good, the patron's continued satisfaction, that accountability was never meant to serve. Section 6 below applies both frameworks in combination to the documented gubernatorial succession in Cross River State, and Section 7 uses the same combined framework to distinguish godfatherism from forms of political sponsorship that do not warrant the same ethical objection.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design, drawing primarily on documented secondary sources rather than a structured empirical interview sample. This scoping decision reflects a deliberate judgement about what a study of this length and format can responsibly claim to demonstrate, and it is stated explicitly here so that the analysis that follows is read on its actual evidentiary basis, rather than on the basis of a claim to primary fieldwork this paper does not make.

The primary sources used are threefold. First, the published academic literature on Nigerian political godfatherism reviewed in Section 3, spanning national-level accounts (Albert, 2005; Igbini & Okolie, 2020; Osayi, 2015) and state-specific case studies (Nwambuko et al., 2024; Ameh, 2025; Kpodee & Agbo, 2024). Second, documented public records concerning Cross River State's gubernatorial succession: election results, dates of office, and the sequence of party primary outcomes linking Donald Duke, Liyel Imoke, and Benedict Ayade, drawn from published electoral records and contemporaneous news coverage of each election cycle from 1999 to 2019. Third, public statements by political actors and commentators concerning godfather politics in Cross River State, cited and attributed to their original published source rather than treated as unattributed testimony.

Where the analysis has additionally been informed by informal conversations with individuals familiar with Cross River State politics, conducted in the course of developing this paper, these conversations are treated strictly as background orientation, helping to identify which public events merited closer documentary examination, rather than as a data set from which findings are drawn or from which quotations are presented. No substantive claim in the case analysis or discussion sections below rests on an unattributed statement from these conversations; every substantive claim is traceable to a cited, published source. This is a narrower evidentiary basis than a structured qualitative interview study would provide, and the paper does not claim the latter. Readers seeking a study built on a documented interview sample, with participant identifiers, coding procedures, and evidence of thematic saturation, are directed to the empirical literature reviewed in Section 3, notably Nwambuko et al. (2024), which the present paper complements rather than replicates.

The analytical method is directed textual and documentary analysis: the assembled sources were read with the operational definition of godfatherism developed in Section 2 and the two theoretical frameworks set out in Section 4 as an explicit analytical lens, identifying instances where documented events in Cross River State's political history satisfy the definitional and theoretical criteria established earlier in the paper. This is

consistent with what Kpodee and Agbo (2024) describe as a library-based, philosophically oriented method, applied here to a single bounded case rather than to godfatherism nationally, in order to generate the kind of case-specific precision their national-scope study could not.

This design carries a specific limitation, stated here rather than left implicit. Because the paper does not draw on a structured primary interview sample, it cannot report on the subjective experience of Cross River political actors in their own words, nor can it quantify how widely particular views are held among them, nor can it establish the private motivations of any specific named individual. What it can offer, and what it is designed to offer, is a rigorous conceptual and theoretical account of the ethical structure of a single, well-documented political succession, an account intended to generate hypotheses and definitional clarity that future interview-based research, of the kind Nwambuko et al. (2024) and Ameh (2025) exemplify, could test directly against primary testimony from Cross River State.

6. GODFATHERISM IN CROSS RIVER STATE: A BOUNDED CASE

Cross River State provides an unusually clear window onto the succession dynamics that patron-client theory predicts, because its post-1999 gubernatorial history follows a documented, traceable sequence rather than a series of disconnected contests. Donald Duke won the state's inaugural Fourth Republic governorship election in 1999 on the platform of the People's Democratic Party and served two terms ("1999 Cross River State Gubernatorial Election," n.d.). His party's successor candidate, Liyel Imoke, contested and won the 2007 election on the same platform ("2007 Cross River State Gubernatorial Election," n.d.), was re-elected in a supplementary poll held in August 2008 ("2008 Cross River State Gubernatorial By-election," n.d.), and secured a second full term in 2012 ("2012 Cross River State Gubernatorial Election," n.d.). The party's subsequent candidate, Benedict Ayade, secured the People's Democratic Party governorship ticket in 2015 through a primary contest in which several rival aspirants, including Legor Idagbo, Mike Aniah, Larry Odey, and Ntufam Fidelis Ugbo, withdrew before the vote and publicly endorsed his candidacy, delivering Ayade 752 of 782 primary votes; he went on to win the general election that year ("2015 Cross River State Gubernatorial Election," n.d.) and was re-elected in 2019 with approximately 73 per cent of the popular vote across all eighteen local government areas of the state ("2019 Cross River State Gubernatorial Election," n.d.).

6.1 The Concentration of the Nomination Decision

This sequence displays a feature that the patron-client framework set out in Section 4 helps to make analytically precise: the concentration of the effective nomination decision well before the formal vote that is supposed to determine it. Nigeria's PDP primary process formally allows multiple aspirants to contest, but the 2015 Cross River primary resolved decisively once a critical mass of rival aspirants withdrew in favour of a single candidate. Whatever the specific political calculations behind each individual withdrawal, the structural effect, per Hicken's (2011) account of clientelist hierarchy, is that a small number of senior party figures, rather than the wider party membership or the electorate, determined the effective outcome of the nomination before it was formally ratified by ballot. This is precisely the mechanism patron-client theory identifies as characteristic of godfatherism: control is exercised earliest and most decisively at the point of candidate selection, not at the ballot box, which is left to ratify a decision substantively made elsewhere.

6.2 The Persistence of Godfather-Politics Vocabulary

A second, more modest feature of the Cross River case is the continued salience of "godfather politics" as a

recognised and reputationally costly category in the state's contemporary political discourse, independent of the specific succession sequence documented above. In October 2025, an All Progressives Congress chieftain in Cross River, commenting publicly on the defection of a serving senator to the party, took explicit care to frame his own support for the senator as resting on performance and integrity rather than political affiliation, and separately cautioned Nigerian politicians more generally against what he termed the culture of godfatherism (Vanguard, 2025). The commentator did not describe the senator's defection itself as an instance of godfather politics; if anything, he explicitly distinguished his own position from that category. What the statement demonstrates is narrower than a direct application of the term to the succession pattern analysed in Section 6.1: it shows that "godfather politics" functions, in contemporary Cross River discourse, as a live and reputationally significant category, one a political actor felt it necessary to define his own conduct against, unprompted by academic research. This is offered here only as evidence that the vocabulary this paper analyses theoretically is one Cross River's own political actors actively use and contest, not one imported wholesale from the academic literature; it does not, on its own, establish that any specific individual named in Section 6.1 was being described in these terms.

6.3 Virtue Displacement in the Nomination Structure

Read through virtue ethics, the structural pattern described in Section 6.1 carries a specific normative cost that is easy to overlook if the analysis stops at the level of political mechanics. When nomination is substantially resolved before the primary vote, through a small circle's coordinated withdrawal and endorsement, the internal good MacIntyre (1981) associates with democratic candidate selection, the practice of testing competing claims to office against a genuinely contested field, is displaced by an external good: the demonstration of loyalty to whichever figure or coalition controls the pre-primary consensus. This does not require attributing dishonest motives to any specific individual named above; it is, rather, a predictable structural consequence of a nomination process in which withdrawal and endorsement are more consequential than the vote that follows them.

The virtue most directly at risk is what Aristotle would recognise as practical wisdom exercised in service of the common good rather than of a narrower loyalty. An officeholder whose path to office ran substantially through consensus-building among a small prior circle, rather than through a genuinely open contest, carries, structurally, a debt to that circle that is not owed in the same way to the wider electorate, and the loyalty-contingency that patron-client theory identifies as definitional to godfatherism means that debt does not expire on election day; it is precisely what the iterative element of the patron-client relationship, discussed in Section 4.1, predicts will persist through the term of office. Fairness, understood as the equal standing of all qualified aspirants before the party's decision-making process, is compromised at the specific moment a small circle's coordinated withdrawal substitutes for a contested vote. And public-spiritedness, understood as the disposition to treat the public interest as authoritative over private loyalty when the two conflict, is placed under sustained structural pressure for as long as the patron retains practical control over the officeholder's prospects for renomination.

6.4 Accountability Implications Beyond the Governorship

The concentration of decision-making documented in Section 6.1 is not, on the theoretical account developed in Section 4, confined to the governorship contest itself; patron-client theory predicts that a patron whose

leverage rests on control over renomination and party structure will extend that leverage downward, into the selection of local government chairmen, party officials, and legislative candidates who owe their own nomination to the same circle. Nuesiri's (2018) national-level study of godfather politics is instructive here, even though his own case material concerns environmental governance rather than Cross River specifically: he documents how, across Nigeria, godfather politics enables state governors to subordinate elected local government authorities, constraining their responsiveness to local needs and substituting the governor's preference for the accountability relationship that ought to run between local officeholders and their own electorate. Applied cautiously, without asserting Cross River-specific facts beyond what this paper's documentary sources support, the structural logic Nuesiri identifies is the same one this paper has traced at the gubernatorial level in Section 6.1: a single point of patronage control, once established, tends not to remain confined to the office at which it first appears, precisely because the iterative element of patron-client relationships, discussed in Section 4.1, gives the patron a continuing interest in extending the same loyalty-contingent structure to every office whose occupant might otherwise check the patron's influence.

6.5 Comparative Context

None of this establishes that any individual named above acted in bad faith, nor does it establish that Cross River's succession pattern is worse than comparable patterns documented elsewhere in Nigeria. Rivers State's Wike-Fubara succession and Kano State's Kwankwasiyya network, both examined in the literature reviewed in Section 3 (Nwambuko et al., 2024; Ameh, 2025), display structurally similar features: a dominant patron, a chosen successor, and, in the Rivers case in particular, an eventual public rupture once the successor sought to exercise independent judgement, consistent with the loyalty-contingency this paper's definition identifies as the defining feature of godfatherism rather than of ordinary political succession. What the Cross River case demonstrates is that the theoretical account developed in this paper is not merely abstract: it identifies a specific, traceable pattern in a single Nigerian state's documented electoral history, analysed using a vocabulary, "godfather politics", that remains active and contested in the state's own political discourse, as Section 6.2 shows, rather than one imported wholesale from the academic literature.

7. DISTINGUISHING LEGITIMATE SPONSORSHIP FROM COERCIVE GODFATHERISM

The argument developed above should not be read as a claim that all political sponsorship, mentorship, or intra-party coordination is ethically objectionable; such a claim would be both implausible and, per the operational definition set out in Section 2, definitionally incorrect. Political parties everywhere rely on senior figures to identify, finance, and mentor emerging candidates, and this function can supply real democratic goods: political recruitment, campaign resourcing, elite coordination that prevents ruinous intra-party fragmentation, and continuity of policy expertise across administrations. A serious ethical analysis of godfatherism has to be able to distinguish these legitimate functions from the coercive, loyalty-contingent structure this paper critiques, or it collapses into an indiscriminate condemnation of ordinary party politics, a tendency this paper's literature review noted in parts of the existing scholarship.

The distinguishing test, on the definition developed in Section 2, is not whether support was given, but whether the relationship survives the transfer of office intact, as an enforceable claim on the officeholder's subsequent conduct. A political mentor whose protege, once elected, makes appointments and policy independently of the mentor's continuing preference, and suffers no organised sanction for doing so, has

engaged in legitimate sponsorship. A patron whose client faces defection engineering, public repudiation, or an organised attempt at removal for the same independence, of the kind documented in Rivers State's Wike-Fubara relationship and repeatedly referenced in the literature on godfather-godson conflict (Nwambuko et al., 2024), has engaged in godfatherism as defined here.

This distinction also answers a second objection worth addressing directly: that a normatively one-sided account of godfatherism forecloses in advance the possibility that patron-client structures serve any positive function, an objection with some force against parts of the existing literature, which tends, as the review in Section 3 noted, toward uniformly negative treatment of the phenomenon. Patron-client theory itself does not support this uniform reading. Hicken (2011) notes that clientelist structures can lower the barriers to political entry for candidates who lack independent wealth or name recognition, and Scott's (1972) original account treats patron-client ties as, in part, a rational adaptive response to weak formal institutions rather than as a pathology with no explanatory logic of its own. Applied to Cross River and comparable Nigerian cases, this suggests that the coordination function godfatherism performs, resolving intra-party competition before it becomes destructive, is not without value; the ethical failure identified in this paper lies specifically in the loyalty-contingency that persists after office is secured, not in coordination or sponsorship as such.

This qualification matters for the policy implications that follow in Section 8. A reform agenda that tried to eliminate political sponsorship and mentorship entirely would be neither feasible nor, on the account developed here, ethically necessary. What virtue ethics identifies as requiring reform is specifically the enforceability of the post-election loyalty claim: the mechanisms, control over renomination, access to party structures, capacity to engineer defection or impeachment, through which a patron converts pre-election support into an ongoing claim on the officeholder's independent judgement. The recommendations that follow are directed at these enforcement mechanisms specifically, rather than at political sponsorship in general.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has argued that political godfatherism, properly and narrowly defined, is best understood through the combined lenses of patron-client theory and virtue ethics: the former identifying its structural mechanism, a dyadic, hierarchical, loyalty-contingent exchange that persists beyond the point of election; the latter identifying its normative cost, the systematic displacement of the virtues, integrity, fairness, and public-spiritedness, that MacIntyre's account of institutional practice holds constitutive of legitimate political office. Applied to the documented gubernatorial succession in Cross River State, this framework clarifies why the phenomenon is not merely inefficient or unpopular but represents a specific and traceable failure of democratic accountability: a nomination process substantially resolved by a small circle before the formal vote, and a persistent local political vocabulary that recognises and names this pattern as godfather politics independent of any academic prompting.

The paper has also argued, against the tendency of some existing literature toward uniformly negative treatment, that not all political sponsorship deserves this critique. The distinguishing test proposed in Section 7, whether the sponsoring relationship survives the transfer of office as an enforceable claim on the officeholder's conduct, offers a more precise basis for policy intervention than a blanket condemnation of political patronage would.

On this basis, three recommendations follow, each targeted at the specific enforcement mechanisms through which godfatherism converts pre-election support into post-election control, rather than at political

sponsorship as such.

First, political parties should be required, as a condition of primary election guidelines submitted to the Independent National Electoral Commission, to conduct primaries under rules that make late, coordinated aspirant withdrawal, of the kind that resolved the Cross River 2015 primary before the formal vote, transparent and independently monitored, so that the effective nomination decision is not made earlier and less visibly than the formal one that ratifies it.

Second, campaign finance disclosure requirements should extend beyond the candidate to major individual financiers, making the scale of any single sponsor's contribution to a campaign a matter of public record, which would allow voters and party members to assess for themselves the degree of financial dependency a candidate carries into office before they cast their vote.

Third, statutory or party-constitutional protection should be strengthened for officeholders against organised removal attempts, impeachment threats, or engineered defections initiated within the first year of a term, a period during which, per the loyalty-contingency this paper has identified as definitional to godfatherism, patrons are most likely to test and enforce continued deference from a newly installed officeholder.

These recommendations are deliberately narrow. They do not propose to eliminate political sponsorship, mentorship, or the coordination function senior party figures legitimately perform; the analysis developed in Section 7 argues explicitly against treating those functions as inherently objectionable. What they target is the specific mechanism, identified through the combined application of patron-client theory and virtue ethics to a single, bounded, and well-documented Nigerian case, by which legitimate sponsorship converts into an enforceable, virtue-displacing claim on the exercise of public office. Future research, building on the empirical, interview-based tradition exemplified by Nwambuko et al. (2024) and Ameh (2025), could test the conceptual distinctions proposed here directly against the testimony of officeholders and patrons in Cross River and comparable states, a task beyond the conceptual scope of the present paper but one this paper's definitional and theoretical groundwork is intended to make more tractable.

REFERENCES

- Abdullahi, A., & Sakariyau, R. T. (2013). Democracy and politics of godfatherism in Nigeria: The effects and way forward. *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance*, 4(2), 1-21.
- Albert, I. O. (2005). Explaining godfatherism in Nigerian politics. *African Sociological Review*, 9(2), 79-105.
- Ameh, G. (2025). Redefining loyalty: A conceptual analysis of the politics of godfatherism in Kano state, Nigeria. *Political Science*, 77(2-3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00323187.2025.2478827>
- Aristotle. (2009). *The Nicomachean Ethics* (D. Ross, Trans.; L. Brown, Ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published c. 350 B.C.E.)
- Beadle, R., & Moore, G. (2006). MacIntyre on virtue and organization. *Organization Studies*, 27(3), 323-340.
- Chioke, S. C. (2023). Participation of Christians in politics and democratic governance in Nigeria. *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law*, 28, 48-61. <https://doi.org/10.47743/jopafl-2023-28-05>
- Ezeanya-Oguejiofo, C. P. (2018). Stalemates to democracy in Nigeria: The paradoxes of human rights and

social justice. *Social Evolution & History*, 17(1), 140-159.

Familusi, O. O. (2012). Moral and development issues in political godfatherism in Nigeria. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 14(7), 11-25.

Hicken, A. (2011). Clientelism. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 14, 289-310. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.031908.220508>

Igbini, D. M., & Okolie, U. C. (2020). Godfatherism and its threat to Nigeria's nascent democracy. *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law*, 17, 93-105.

Joseph, R. A. (1987). *Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the second republic*. Cambridge University Press.

Kpodee, N. T., & Agbo, I. L. (2024). The practice of godfatherism and the challenges of democratic governance in Nigeria: A call for socio-political liberty. *IGWEBUIKE: African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 10(6).

MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. University of Notre Dame Press.

Nkwede, J. O., Ibeogu, A. S., & Nwankwo, O. U. (2014). Political godfatherism and governance in a developing democracy: Insight from Nigeria. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 3(4), 137-143. <https://doi.org/10.5901/ajis.2014.v3n4p137>

Nuesiri, E. O. (2018). Godfather politics and exclusionary local representation in REDD+: A case study of the design of the UN-REDD-supervised Nigeria-REDD proposal. In E. Nuesiri (Ed.), *Global forest governance and climate change* (pp. 17-49). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71946-7_2

Nwambuko, T. C., Nwobi, U. A., & Funmilayo, O. (2024). Politics of godfatherism and democratic governance in Nigeria: The Rivers State case. *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 22(2), 16-32.

Ojo, E. O. (2008). Political godfatherism in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A study of Lagos State. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 2(7), 130-138.

Omotola, J. S. (2007). Godfathers and the 2007 Nigerian general elections. *Journal of African Elections*, 6(2), 134-153.

Omotola, J. S. (2010). Elections and democratic transition in Nigeria under the Fourth Republic. *African Affairs*, 109(437), 535-553. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adq029>

Osayi, F. O. (2015). Regressive democracy: The monstrous role of godfatherism in Nigeria. *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance*, 6, 1-25.

Sapele, F. F., & Jeko, V. O. (2024). The implications of godfatherism and eliocentrism in Nigeria politics for national development. *Journal of Lexicography and Terminology*, 8(1), 72-85.

Scott, J. C. (1972). Patron-client politics and political change in Southeast Asia. *American Political Science Review*, 66(1), 91-113.

Umunna, O. O. (2024). Interrogating legal and ethical concerns of godfatherism, governance, and constitutionalism in Nigeria's democratic praxis. *International Journal of Comparative Law and Legal*

Philosophy, 6(3).

Vanguard. (2025, October 27). APC chieftain warns against godfather politics. Vanguard.
<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/10/apc-chieftain-warns-against-godfather-politics/>

Wenibowei, K. M. C. (2011). Political godfatherism, violence and sustainable democracy in Nigeria. *International Journal of Advanced Legal Studies and Governance*, 2(1), 113-125.

1999 Cross River State gubernatorial election. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved August 15, 2026, from
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1999_Cross_River_State_gubernatorial_election

2007 Cross River State gubernatorial election. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved August 15, 2026, from
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007_Cross_River_State_gubernatorial_election

2008 Cross River State gubernatorial by-election. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved August 15, 2026, from
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_Cross_River_State_gubernatorial_by-election

2012 Cross River State gubernatorial election. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved August 15, 2026, from
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Cross_River_State_gubernatorial_election

2015 Cross River State gubernatorial election. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved August 15, 2026, from
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_Cross_River_State_gubernatorial_election

2019 Cross River State gubernatorial election. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved August 15, 2026, from
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_Cross_River_State_gubernatorial_election