

## **Reflections on Public Holidays and Productivity in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Public holidays are periods set aside by nations or states to observe particular events like national days, independence anniversary or religious festivals. These days are different from the usual periods of statutory leave or vacation provided for workers in the collective agreement or rule of engagement at the point of entry. These periods of leave enjoyed by workers include annual vacation, casual leave, sick leave, maternity leave, paternity leave and others as may be recognized within an establishment. Individual worker's period of leave is personal and at the discretion of the worker or the organization as the case may be, but public holidays involve the stoppage of work by the entire workforce within the period it would last. Nigeria observes many public holidays some of which, at times, are unplanned for by the people. This has attracted arguments for and against on the basis that these holidays are too many and detrimental to productivity and the national economy. Using secondary data, this paper examines the issue and opines that there is the need to review these public holidays with a view to halting their negative effects on the nation's economy. Also, measures to manage these holidays in line with constitutional provisions are espoused.

**Keywords:** Public holidays, Workers, Economic Development, Productivity, Nigeria.

### **1. Introduction**

Public holidays are periods generally established by law as non-working days during the week. All workers within such sovereign nations are off duties while their organizations or establishments are closed down for the periods. However, it should be noted that private employers are not required or compelled to observe these holidays though due to circumstances they are often "compelled" by a union contract. These holidays are based on events of significance to the history of such nations and they often serve as memorials to signify their importance. They vary by country and may vary by year as nations have different historical background that is unique in their evolution. Public holidays are days of celebration, like the anniversary of significant historical events, or can be a religious celebration like Christmas holidays which can be on any day of the year, but certain to be on the 25th day of December of every year, irrespective of the day it falls. It is exclusively on the authority of the government in a country, in accordance with the law of the land that public holidays are declared. Generally, the President or whoever such power is delegated to will provide a reason behind the declaration of the day(s) and the citizens are called upon to observe.

In Federal nations, many states recognize most or all national holidays as state holidays, even though the government at the center cannot compel them to do so. Also, components states can declare other days as state holidays separate from federal holidays. For instance, all states in Nigeria observe all federal holidays but federal workers do not comply with state public holidays. In the United States of America, for instance, the state of Texas observes all federal holidays except Columbus Days and in addition recognizes Fridays as non-work days. In other words the uniqueness of each country determines the nature and type of public holidays to declare and when to declare them. For example, in addition to statutory federal public holidays in Nigeria the former President Olusegun Obasanjo declared May 29 of every year as Democracy Day to commemorate the successful transition from military to civilian government after sixteen years of military dictatorship – 1983 to 1999.

## 2. Public holidays in Nigeria

According to Iredia (2011) the economic principle of diminishing returns refers to a point in time when a worker irrespective of incentives, cannot produce at the same rate, volume or quality. Thus, workers occasionally need some rest hence governments worldwide often declare public holidays for them. Therefore, Nigeria like other sovereign nations of the world has many statutory public holidays which are already established and known by the citizens. Some of these holidays are fixed on particular days of particular months during the year while others are movables due to their peculiarities.

The power to declare public holidays by the Federal Government of Nigeria is derived from the Public Holidays Act (1979). It empowers the Minister of Interior, not only to declare public holidays, but also to adjust the declared days and/or dates as the case may be. The tables below show the public holidays, the dates and their significance in Nigeria. However, it should be noted that they are public holidays under the purview of the federal government who has the power and authority to declare such and other public holidays as it may deem fit.

**Table 1: Public Holidays, Dates and their Significance in Nigeria**

Holiday	Date	Notes
New year day	1 <sup>st</sup> January	The beginning of the new year
Workers day	1 <sup>st</sup> May	Commemorates Workers/labour movement internationally
Children’s day	27 <sup>th</sup> May	Commemorates school holiday for children
Democracy day	29 <sup>th</sup> May	Commemorates the returns of democracy in Nigeria
Independence day	1 <sup>st</sup> October	Commemorates Nigeria’s independence from Britain
Christmas day	25 <sup>th</sup> December	Christian holiday -the birth of Jesus Christ
Boxing day	26 <sup>th</sup> December	Christian holiday –the day after Christmas

Source: en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public-Holidays-in-Nigeria

In addition, the country officially celebrates the following under listed movable feasts through public holidays on different dates every year.

**Table 2: Moveable Feast-Induced Public Holiday in Nigeria**

Holiday	Notes
Mawlid	Muslim holiday – the birthday of Prophet Mohammed
Eid al-Adha	Muslim holiday – willingness of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son (2days)
Eid al – Fitri	Muslim holiday – the end of Ramadan (2 days)
Good Friday	Christian holiday – the crucifixion of Jesus
Easter Monday	Christian holiday – the Monday after Easter

Source: en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public-Holidays-in-Nigeria

It would be observed, from the tables, that most of these public holidays are religion based that is, Christianity and Islam. In essence, though Nigeria is constitutionally a secular state it still continues to pander to the two major religions while total disregard to the sensibilities of the adherents of other faiths (for example African traditional

religion) is obvious at the national level. Other public holidays which the country has experienced include 'last minute' public holidays involving periods of elections, registration of eligible voters, census-taking among others, and are usually for public servants. However given the structure of the Nigerian economy, activities within the public service do have ripples effects on the private sector generally.

Also, Article 2(b) of Public Holiday Act specifies that state governors have the right to declare additional, state-level, public holidays (FGN, 1979). The states have leveraged on this provision to declare all sorts of public holidays. For example, the Northern states, since 2003, have used this provision to declare public holidays on the occasion of the Islamic New Year. In a similar vein, in the South West states like Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti and Lagos had at one time or the other recognized June 12th as 'democracy day' as against the May 29th declared by the federal government. Very often when the President is visiting a state, public holidays are declared 'to welcome him'. In other words, in federal states there may be different holidays for the constituent states or provinces, as in the United States of America where holidays that were established by the federal government are called federal holidays. They are declared non-working days when the official arms of government and all businesses are closed down. Federal holidays are generally expensive as they allow federal workers to take a day or more off duty (Aremu, 2016).

However, a major trend in the practical aspect of public holidays in Nigeria requires the examination of relevant sections of the Public Holidays Act, Chapter 378 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria. Section 5(c) which states that "if two days appointed as public holidays fall successively on a Saturday and Sunday, only the Saturday and Sunday concerned and no additional day or days in lieu of the Saturday and Sunday shall be kept as public holidays". This Section has variously been contravened severally without reason, as if it is not in existence. This has manifested at various times, most especially since the beginning of the current civil rule, thereby increasing the number of non-work days in the year. Worse still many of them are not planned for. For instance, in 2010 the Ministry of Interior declared holidays on September 9th and 10th, November 16th and 17th and yet another one on December 27th and 28th because the previous two days in each case which were supposed to be public holidays fell on Saturday and Sunday as well as October 1st with September 30th as half-day for public sector holiday 'to enable Nigerians prepare for memorable Golden Jubilee independence' celebration. Also, Democracy Day, May 29 which fell on Saturday was moved to Monday May, 31st.

The same law which says if any holiday falls on Saturday or Sunday, then only that Saturday or Sunday shall be a public holiday, was again contravened by the federal government as recently as 2016. The government shifted two public holidays, May Day (May 1st) and Democracy Day (May 29th) which fell on Sunday to the following Monday. Meanwhile, when holidays are declared impromptu they disrupt long standing business and even social plans (Iredia, 2011).

The federal government also in 2016 increased the Eid el Fitr's holiday from two to three days. The government had earlier declared July 5th and 6th, 2016 as public holidays to mark the end of Ramadan fasting. However, when the moon was not sighted on the 4th as expected, the Sultan of Sokoto, being the leader of the Muslim faith in Nigeria, directed that the fasting period be extended till July 5th, 2016. This made the federal government to extend the holiday by an extra day. The implication, according to Ejikeoyen (2016), was that the entire week was rendered work-free as the holiday started on Tuesday. Obviously, Monday was used to prepare for festivity and Friday being a conventional, though unauthorized, half - working day, that week was a major loss in relation to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Similarly, the Christmas holidays, December 25th and 26th of the same year were extended to the 27th because the 25th fell on a Sunday. The same 'courtesy' was accorded the New Year day holiday which was extended to the 2nd of January, 2017, a Monday, since the first day of the year was a Sunday.

This act has attracted series of criticisms from many Nigerians, both at home and in Diaspora, who feel that frequent holidays at a time the nation's economy needed a revamp was most inappropriate. As a measure of concern to this, a Lagos-based legal practitioner, Chief Malcom Omirhobo, recently asked a federal high court to declare as unlawful, the rescheduling of public holidays and an interpretation of the Public Holidays Act of 1979, on the legality of rescheduling public holidays from Saturday and Sunday to Monday and Tuesday. He further sought an interpretation whether it was lawful for the defendant (government) to even extend public holidays beyond the days set out for them. He equally, proactively, requested the order of the court to compel the federal government not to declare October 2, 2017 (Monday) as a public holiday for the celebration of Nigeria's 57th independence, in place of October 1, 2017 (Sunday) (Vanguard Newspaper, November, 2, 2016, P.34).

In Nigeria successive administrations have effected some changes to the widely accepted holidays since the advent of the fourth republic in 1999. Before then, in accordance with the constitutional provisions, any holiday that fell on a weekend was observed on that particular day irrespective of the day it was and not extended to other days. However, since the return of democracy in 1999, politicians, especially state governors, have intentionally created more public holidays and extended some traditional holidays beyond the usual statutory work-free days, just to score cheap political points among the electorate. Nigerians now observe more public holidays in a year compared to

many other countries. In 2016 alone, the Federal (central) government reportedly declared 27 days as public holidays. (Aremu, 2016). In other words, public holidays in Nigeria are of different forms. Some are declared by the government/public sector while some others are regional public holidays which are declared by state governments for various reasons.

### **3. Public Holidays in other Countries**

According to Manish (2016) Nepal tops the list of countries with the most public holidays with thirty – six days a year followed by India with twenty – one days, Columbia and the Philippines with eighteen days, China and Hong Kong seventeen days, Thailand, Turkey and Pakistan with sixteen days. Japan, Argentina and Sweden each with fifteen holidays per year. However, Nepal only has one – day weekends and therefore the national holidays compensate for it. Thus, if Sundays are counted most of the other countries would have forty – eight day off in a year. Also, Botes (2014) earlier explained that South Africa has thirteen public holidays in a year, while Malaysia has twelve and the United States of America (USA), Singapore and France have eleven days each. The only exception would be China with only four public holidays, but with specific other days where a certain population groups, such as women or children, receive a day off. This stance made Aremu (2016) to say that with only forty – eight working hours in a week, almost 120 days rest days (inclusive of Saturday and Sundays) in a year, Nigeria has the highest man-hour loss due to public holidays in the world compared to Malaysia, China and Indonesia which work fifty two hours, seven days a week.

In the United States of America (USA) New Year Day, Independence Day, Veterans Day and Christmas Day are observed on the same calendar day each year. Holidays that fall on Saturday are observed by federal employees who work on standard Monday to Friday of the week on the previous Friday. Federal employees who work on Saturday will observe the holiday on Saturday. In essence Friday will be a regular work day. Holidays that fall on Sunday are observed by federal workers the following Monday. The holidays always fall on a particular day of the week.

Traditionally, holidays are declared to allow individuals tend to religious duties with important date on the calendar. In most societies, however, holidays serve as much of a recreational function as any other weekend days. In Nigeria also, where the North is predominantly Muslims, and South mostly Christians, religious holidays are the most looked forward to by citizens. In the United States of America, the most popular holiday is the Thanksgiving Day. This is traditionally observed on last Thursday in November of every year. According to Lawani (2017) the day is hugely celebrated and synonymous with Turkeys as they are served on Thanksgiving Day. It is time that people drink and eat as they travel far and wide from and within America, to celebrate with their families. Thanksgiving is more popular in America than Christmas. They don't declare Christmas, Boxing Day or New Year Day. What they do is to place workers on vacation which usually begins anytime from December 23rd till January 2nd or 3rd. Rather than having two, three days holidays they go on two, three weeks straight vacation but the Chinese don't observe these holidays as they work their staff to the bones (Lawani, 2017).

Japan, Malaysia, Argentina, Lithuania, Vietnam and Sweden are the fifth less-holiday observing countries in the world with 15 holidays, while both Colombia and Philippines are tops with 18 days followed by China, Hong Kong with 17 days; Thailand, Turkey, Pakistan are fourth with 16 holidays. With Nigeria declaring close to one month holidays on a yearly basis since 1999 the country may well be the top country in the world when it comes to declaring public holidays (Wikipedia).

The United Kingdom has among the fewest public holidays in the world with the most ardently observed being the Bank holidays. It was enshrined in law since 1871 when Sir John Lubbock, a Liberal MP and banker, introduced the legislation as part of his efforts to ease the lifestyles of the most hardly worked classes of the community. Britain, being a predominantly Christian country, does not declare holidays for Islamic events. Aside from Easter and Christian's holidays, the Bank holiday is what Nigerians call the Workers Day while the last of the three Bank holidays, the summer Bank holiday, is also the popular Nottinghill Carnival. (Soyoye, 2017). From the foregoing, aside most of the public holidays outside the established ones the number of public holidays in Nigeria is in line with many developed countries around the world. In the light of this, the need to be critical of unplanned holidays cannot be overemphasized.

#### **4. Effects of Public Holidays**

Public holidays are mutually beneficial for workers and employers of labour at both public and private sector levels. In the first instance, a well rested worker should be a more productive one. Henry Ford, whilst his product was dominating the automobile market in the early 21st century, proved that lowering his employees' working hours increased his profits (Howard, 2015). It has thus been suggested that holidays do the same to invigorate workers, and help them maintain their productivity levels throughout the year (Doran, 2013). So, with no holidays, productivity would likely drop off and lead to less annual revenue generation. However, the length and timing of holidays need to reflect informed thoughts and seriousness. This is because holidays are additional costs on business and it is certain that excessive public holidays will be a disincentive to attracting and retaining foreign direct investment (FDI). During the public holidays, government activities grind to a halt, causing unquantifiable losses and serious inconveniences to private business and individuals.

According to Adeyinka (2016) Nigeria is one of the most stressful places to live and work as the public transport system is chaotic and the road network is in perpetual shamble. Therefore, since most people travel far to work, the number of hours people travel to and from work is often more than half the number of hours they in fact work in their offices. Thus, he concludes that Nigerians deserve their rest. However, in a competitive global world, there is the need to balance the need to provide leisure for workers and the need to retain competitive edge. In other words, it is subjective to conclude that the increasing stress faced by Nigerians in their daily life calls for high number of public holidays. This is because staying at home for additional days offers a pyrrhic succor for the people as neither electricity supply nor road network will be transformed within the periods of these public holidays. In essence what will benefit the people and will not adversely affect productivity is for the government to put in place adequate and well thought-out policies and programmes of work-life balance initiatives, and flexible working arrangements for the people.

Additionally, there are merits and demerits of having so many public holidays. The advantage is that it gives families time to bond, and in many countries public holiday are part of a national strategy to increase social cohesiveness and strengthen family ties. According to Manish (2016) Nepal as a country does not need this so much because it already has a strong culture with plenty of socializing within the family and community. However, a surfeit of public holidays can have a negative impact on the economy if it is overdone. This is because offices are closed down and the general public is affected as businesses are disrupted most especially when these holidays are impromptu or unplanned for. In South Africa for example, according to the National Productivity Institute, each day lost cost the economy around 2.5 billion Rands annually (iFacts, 2015). It is therefore necessary and important for the government to strike the right balance.

Public holidays are cherished by most Nigerians as they have the time to do certain things, which they may have been putting off either due to the work-place stress or otherwise. Public holidays therefore, afford them the opportunity to spend their time with friends and family, stock up on food items, catch up on shows, party with friends and neighbours or do thorough cleaning of their homes. Certainly, holidays mean different things to different people. In Nigeria they afford people to rest, but more importantly especially when they present a long weekend, Nigerians who work far away from their immediate family members utilize the period to attend to some family issues.

Generally, the effects of public holidays, particularly the extended unplanned ones outside the regular ones, are actually felt in the totality of the economy which invariably will touch other sectors of national life. Also, Oluabunwa (2016) identifies Nigerian government's love for public holiday as one of the two extraneous factors which seem to be worsening both national economic growth and national productivity. The second factor is the penchant for Nigerian workers to go on strike, work to rule and all such activities that stop them from effectively utilizing man-hours for productive activities. He noted that state governments in Nigeria compete with the federal government in finding excuses to declare public holidays for every conceivable reason: to register, to vote, to mourn the dead, to watch football, to celebrate victory in sporting activities and lots more. These are in addition to the religious holidays which are increasing by the day as well as other national holidays.

The Chairman, Kaduna State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), Mr Ishaya Akau believes that numerous public holidays had contributed immensely to the decline in the nation's education system. According to him 'if you look at the world over, children spend about 900 hours in a year in school. The average in some areas is 700 hours, but in Nigeria, it is 400 hours' (Vanguard Newspaper, May 2013, P.42), due to public holidays. The Chairman, Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), Small and Medium scale Enterprise Group (SMEG), John Kachikwu, also believes that public holidays deprive the nation's economy of its daily revenue. (Today Newspaper, July 7, 2016. P71)

For the country, it would appear that there is little quarrel about the numbers of official public holidays which is 15 and compares favourably with such countries like Japan and South Korea, 15 each and Argentina, 19 public holidays. The issue is the 'unplanned public holidays' which usually emanate from shifting public holidays that fall on weekends- Saturday and Sunday, to the following working days. Public holidays most especially the unplanned and unscheduled ones, are periods of idleness for most people, thus the more they consume the less they produce. The extended three-day public holidays declared by the Federal Government in July 2016, for the Eid-el-Fitri celebration reportedly cost the country N138 billion by the time it ended. This is because the government had earlier declared July 5th and 6th, 2016 as public holidays to mark the end of Ramadan Fasting. However, when the moon was not sighted, being a movable feast, on the 4th, the Sultan of Sokoto, the leader of the Muslim faith in Nigeria, directed that the fasting be extended till 5th of July. The directive made the Federal government to extend the holiday by one extra day, making it an unplanned holiday! This was a serious issue in an economy in recession. Scheduled treasury bills auction estimated at N94 billion, as well as N44 billion treasury bills maturity for the week, was put off because of the unusual straight three-day holiday. That is exactly how gains and losses and value addition to the economy also remained in a standstill. An economist Mr. Bismarck Rewane, put the estimated cost of the additional holiday at 1.5 per cent of Nigeria's GDP which currently, put at \$500 billion representing 0.79 per cent of the world economy. Such unplanned holidays also have far reaching implications in the informal sector of the economy where over 90percent of Nigerians eke a living. In essence, unplanned and impromptu holidays, affect both the corporate world as well as individuals in the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

According to Ajayi (2017) frivolous holidays speak a lot about Nigerians' attitude to work. He further notes that:

*We waste a lot of things in this country. We waste power, minerals, water, but sadly, time. Time that could have been spent productively is wasted on holidays. We lose money every day in a working week that state and federal governments declared as public holidays.....We are plain lazy, we rejoice, and even beg for holidays. We are a wasteful nation even the hardworking nations have not got to a stage where they can meet all their economic and other needs, but here we are, wasting almost two months of a year on holidays. That is ridiculous. We should begin to consider reducing the number of holidays that workers are given in a year.*

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Nation-states do have events, festivals, landmarks and even citizens that they commemorate or honour annually. This is usually done by setting aside certain days known as public holidays when such are honoured and celebrated. In the course of time public holidays have become not only important but of a necessity in the global context. Thus these countries have established statutory days they declare as public holidays when workers generally stay off work. Nigeria is not an exception to this and has under the instrumentality of the Public Holidays Act (1979) established some public holidays which are observed and celebrated nationwide. Although these holidays are many when compared with some developed countries, the thrust of this paper is the management of the public holidays with respect to its impact on the nation's economy. The extant law insists that public holidays must be observed on the day they fall into, yet the Nigerian government over the years have demonstrated a penchant to shift the holidays that fall on Saturdays and Sundays to Mondays and Tuesdays. This practice for many, apart from contradicting the law, also sees it as an impediment to work productivity and therefore national development.

Furthermore weekends and public holidays are not included in the existing annual leave regime. This means that workers annual leave period that fall within public holidays and weekends are not counted as part of the leave period. Thus a worker on 30 days annual leave will end up spending not less than 42 days at home. Although such holidays provide some rest and rejuvenation for the workers, it is also evident that the economy is at the receiving end of their consequences. The Nigerian economy is currently experiencing a recession which suggests that the level of productivity should be stepped up. It is obvious that a situation like this does not augur well for the economy. The Nigerian government therefore as part of its efforts to revamp the economy needs to take the following measures:

- i. Ensure that, in line with the extant laws, public holidays are observed on the days they actually fall into. That is, the holidays should not be shifted if they fall on either Saturday or Sunday;
- ii. The annual leave period of public/civil servants should not include weekends as currently being practiced. In the current dispensation a worker embarking on a 30-working days leave ends up spending at least 42 days altogether depending on the number of weekends and public holidays that fall into the period;
- iii. Government should re-orientate the citizenry on appropriate work ethic and the fact that rest follows toil.

These measures are important to increase productivity, accelerate economic development and rescue the country from the impending depression.

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