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**EMOHUA CAMPUS, P.M.B 5080, PORT HARCOURT
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editor@ijsds.org
www.ijsds.org
editor.ijsds@gmail.com
+234 808 022 4405

**ABSENTEE STATE, DISMISSIVE PEASANTS:
INTERROGATING STATE-RURAL
COMMUNITY RELATIONS
IN NIGERIA**

Azeez O. Olaniyan

Department of Political Science
Federal University,
Oye Ekiti
azeezolaniyan@gmail.com

Adegbenga I. Aladegbola

Department of Political Science
Crawford University,
Igbesa
stainlessade@yahoo.com

Oluwasola M. Odewusi

Department of Economics
Ekiti State University,
Ado Ekiti
odewusisola@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the pattern, nature, and outcomes of the relationship between the Nigerian state and its rural communities. The central argument of this work is that factors shaping the interaction between the Nigerian state and the rural communities are in the realm of two interrelated perceptions: absenteeism and dismissal. Using the rural communities in Ekiti Southwest Local Government Area of Nigeria as case studies and employing an ethnographic, qualitative research method, the study interrogates the absentee-dismissive conundrum of state-local community relations in Nigeria. Fieldwork was conducted between 2020 and 2021 across the villages and hamlets of Ogotun Ekiti, drawing on twenty key-informant and in-depth interviews with village inhabitants, community leaders, and government officials, supplemented by direct observation. Specifically, the study discovered that with a state presence that is at best sporadic and minimal in substance, the Nigerian state is perceived by rural dwellers as habitually absent, and this perceived errant behavior has resulted in a dismissive attitude towards the state. The study further engages Goran Hyden's thesis of the uncaptured African peasantry, which attributes rural underdevelopment in Tanzania to peasants' refusal to be captured by the modern economy, and finds that the Nigerian case differs: no modernizing project was ever extended to the rural populace under study, so their dismissiveness functions not as a cause of underdevelopment but as a coping mechanism for surviving it. While state absenteeism deepens underdevelopment, dismissive attitude serves some psychological purposes, and acts as a coping mechanism for the rural populace. The study concludes that so long the Nigerian state continues to neglect the rural majority in planning and execution of policy, rural communities will continue to display dismissive attitudes toward it, complicating efforts to mobilize them for nationhood and development.

Keywords: Nigerian State, Absentee, Peasants, Rural Communities, and Underdevelopment

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As a result of the adverse effects on the rural populace, the Sahelian drought of the 1970s seems to have been the tonic needed by scholars to step up serious interests in the rural life as evident in high rise in publications on rural life afterwards (Mortimore, 1989). In the case of Nigeria, the interests in rural studies seem to have been massively reinforced by the presence of majority of Nigerians in rural areas; the ubiquity of the rural places, even sitting side-by-side with the urban places, the unprecedented trends of poverty in the places, the visible level of underdevelopment, ceaseless rural-urban migration with great consequences on the national economy as a whole (Abass, 1998, Mabogunje, 1981, Olayiwola and Adeleye, 2005, Jega, 1985, Beckman, 1988) and the seeming hopelessness of the rural situation following serial collapses of several rural-intervention programs (Paul, et al, 2014; Isamotu, 2023).

Specifically, the plethora insightful analyses on the rural situation in Nigeria has seriously underlined the importance of the places to the Nigerian state. Of the Nigeria's huge population of about 200 million, less than a quarter live in the urban centers (Abass, 1998), making the rural areas the home of most of the Nigerian populace. It is also the supplier of the food that nourishes the nation. Thus, for a long time, the rural places serve as the base for the majority, the place to produce food and fiber, the major sources of capital formation for the urban centers, and a principal market for domestic manufactures (Olatunbosun, 1975, Ofuatey-Kodjoe & van Eeden, 1990; Gebre and Gebremedhin, 2019). But the case of the Rural Nigeria is one of great irony: it occupies strategic place in the Nigerian state, yet it is bereft of state presence (Akpan, 2012). There have been so many writings that dwell much on the factors and reasons for the underdeveloped state of the rural areas in Nigeria, but few have been devoted to knowing the reactions of the people to the situation. How do the rural people see

the Nigerian state? What is the reaction of the rural people to the environment they find themselves? One of the best ways of interrogating these questions is to engage in empirical case study analysis. This is what this study achieves by focusing on the rural communities of Ekiti South west Local government area of Ekiti state in Nigeria.

The rural villages are booming with population that came from different parts of the country. It therefore makes a lot of sense to talk of rural communities in the places. This pattern of rural life owes strategically to the migration of people to the place over some period. Specifically, towards the middle of the 19th century, the vast lands of Ilawe, Igbara-Odo and Ogotun Ekiti had started witnessing an influx of people from neighboring towns and cities. Several reasons have been adduced as the causal factors. These include those who are either escaping from petty family squabbles or fighting over arable family land in their places of birth. Some were returnee from Ghana after the forceful eviction of Nigerians in the late 60s. A vast majority of Igbo ethnic group had, after the end of the civil war, came to make a living (Fieldwork, 2021). Some had arrived as traders from the North but on discovering the arable nature of the place, decided to stay and farm (Fieldwork, 2021). While few stayed in the main towns, a huge number decided to move to the forests and engage in farming and subsequently erected living tents therein. Initially, they were numerically few but as time went on, the population swelled to the point of political relevance, making them often become beautiful brides during election times. But as the environment was at the time of their arrival, so it is after years of habitation: bereft of modernity, filthy and abandoned and living standard of the people abysmally low. Yet, the population continues to grow. So, two major posers arose: what could be the reason for such pronounced and visible underdevelopment and, what is the reaction of the people to the situation they found themselves? The study set

out to interrogate these questions.

2.0 STUDY AREA AND RESEARCH METHOD

This study was based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out among rural populace of Ogotun Ekiti, in Ekiti Southwest Local government area of Ekiti State in Nigeria. Ekiti Southwest local government is one of the sixteen local government areas of Ekiti State. The state is itself one of the thirty-six states in Nigeria with a population of about 1.6 million people. The local government is made up of three major towns of Ilawe-Ekiti, Igbara-Odo-Ekiti and Ogotun-Ekiti. The 2006 population puts the population of the place at close to 200,000 people with an area of 346 km². The three towns are however adjoined by over twenty-five villages and hamlets. However, over twenty of the villages are in Ogotun Ekiti, making the place ideal for the study. These are Ilupeju, Bolorunduro, Edetedo, Olorioko, Omuaran, Oshogboto, Aba Ijesa, Edunabon, Kajola, Osunrin, Itamerin, Otapete, Lawrence Camp, Johnson Camp, Ajamuro, Aba Ibadan, Kona, Adubu, Omiogun and Alabameta villages.

Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. The primary data was collected using key informants, and semi-structured interviews triangulated with in-depth interviews (survey). The fieldwork was conducted in the villages and hamlets at Ogotun Ekiti: Some of the key informants were also located in the main town of Ogotun Ekiti. The study covered all the villages in the town, and was conducted between 2020 and 2021. Three set of respondents were focused on: (1) inhabitants of the villages (2) religious and community leaders in the villages (3) government officials. The study also benefitted from direct observation by the researchers who are indigenes of the town. The study's reliance on twenty key-informant and in-depth interviews was due to the need to concentrate on individual case studies, while in-depth

interviews were designed to establish an overview of popular perceptions of rural populace to the Nigerian state. These methods were complimented by materials sourced from books, journals, and the Internet.

The data collected were then subjected to qualitative analysis. Excerpts were the preferred method for analyzing the primary data. Excerpt involves usage of verbatim quotations in report writing. This has been regarded as a standard practice in qualitative social research (Long & Godfrey, 2004; Corden and Sainsbury, 2006). In empirically and philosophically based frameworks, excerpts had been found crucial because it brings clarity to how evidence and conclusions are derived (Spencer et al, 2003). It also converts credibility on research report, which ultimately converts authenticity, reliability, and auditability on research outputs (Beck, 1993, Greenhalgh and Taylor, 1997, Lingard, 2019). In a nutshell, excerpt allows researchers to interrogate the reasoning of respondents, while at the same gives readers the opportunity to hear directly from them.

3.0 ABSENTEE STATE, DISMISSIVE PEASANTRY: A CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

As the African states continue to exhibit crass inefficiency and structural ineffectiveness in service delivery, quite to the disappointment of its long-suffering citizens, so has scholars continued to engage in search of adequate phraseology to capture the essence. The result has been a plethora of catchy nomenclatures, captured by Williams (2004:401) as "proliferation of tropes of epochal forebodings". These include the Blackman's Burden (Davidson, 1992), the lost continent (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000), the vampire state (Chabal, 1999), predatory state (Castells, 2000:104), vast penal colony; a museum of political and economic atrocities; a gross and murderous caricature (Williams, 2004:401), the Blackman's dilemma (Oyebola, 1976).

Its Nigerian mutation, because it has displayed the same features, has not been spared of such unedifying verbiage: Adebayo Williams talked about a “colonial cage” to depict the contradictions and the problem of integration of Nigerian disparate nationalities, which to him has continually stymied development (Williams, 2000), Eghosa Osaghae described Nigeria as a “crippled giant” to vent his anger on its inability to fulfill its manifest destiny in the comity of African nations (Osaghae, 2000). Bolaji Akinyemi sees Nigeria as the “Blackman’s burden” because of its inability to fulfill its fatherly role in the African continent because of wrong foreign policy (Akinyemi, 2007). Obafemi Awolowo long ago dismissed Nigeria as a mere “geographical expression” to describe the presence of assorted nationalities clobbered together by colonial fiat (Awolowo, 1947) and Ahmadu Bello used the phrase “mistake of 1914” to express his frustration in respect of the amalgamation of Nigeria (Bello, 1962). It is in the context of the foregoing phrasing-game that the concept of “absentee state” becomes relevant.

We can now begin an analysis of features of an absentee state. In the first instance, such a state is unavailable to meeting its responsibilities of service delivery and welfare provision. Secondly, such a state is found wanting in exerting its dominion over the entirety of its territory. Third, its response to emergency is often delayed, clumsy or total failure. Four, it excludes a vast number of its citizens from participation in decisions. Five, its citizens count for nothing in its planning and execution of projects. Six, in the words of Manuel Castells, it “constitutes a formidable obstacle not only to the development but to survival and civility” (Castells, 2000:104). Seven, it cannot adequately secure its citizens. Lastly, if it is going to be seen at all, its presence is at best sporadic, making its activities rather ad hoc, non-permanent and by so doing, incapable of standing the test of time.

The last feature vividly captures the case of Nigerian state towards its rural populace. This is in the sense

that the case of Nigeria is never one of dearth of rural transformation attempts. Indeed, the rural areas had witnessed several intervention attempts, particularly following the 1976 Reforms in the Local Government (Olowu, 1985). Olusegun Obasanjo came up with Operation Feed the Nation (OFN). During the Shagari era, there was “Green Revolution” (Idachaba, 1980). General Buhari pursued “back to the land program”, which encouraged people to go into farming as well as plans for rural transformation. Ibrahim Babangida’s government created a rural-focused “Directorate of Food and Rural Infrastructure (DFRI)”. The fact of the matter is that the numerous attempts had over the years never translated into opening anywhere. Often, they remain on the tables of the government officials in the capital city while the peasants wait in vain. It is from the penchant for not showing up when needed that the concept of absentee state becomes relevant.

The phenomenon of dismissive peasantry takes its inspiration from Goran Hyden’s celebrated, challenging, and thought-provoking thesis of the uncaptured African peasants in Tanzania who managed to escape the cultural and political tentacles of colonization and exerts their independence. The main thrust of Hyden’s analysis is that by refusing to be captured, the peasants had inadvertently opted out of modern economy, the situation he blamed for their underdevelopment. In other words, the main obstacle to development in Africa is not the relationship between the capitalist metropole and African periphery, but rather the ability of African subsistence farmers to opt out of the modern economy through refusal to be captured. Dismissive peasantry refers to the peasants who also managed to escape the frustrations occasioned by state failures by living their lives as if the state does not exist, evidenced in verbal outbursts such as “the state can go to hell”, it is “good for nothing”, “it is not responsible”, “we don’t see them”, as well as communal efforts to embark on activities that are supposed to be provided by the state (series of fieldwork, 2020). In

other words, dismissive behavior is a coping mechanism against frustrations engendered by state behavior.

The question now is this: if Hyden concluded that the chronic poverty of the Tanzania farmers flows from their refusal to be captured, can we also say the same of the case under study? Put differently, can it be said that the pervasive underdevelopment of the rural areas is responsible for the dismissive attitude of the Nigerian peasantry? This is what the findings of the fieldwork will tell.

4.0 FINDINGS

An analysis of the major findings of this research will now be engaged in. As argued earlier, this is majorly a result of fieldwork carried out for a period. The findings are discussed under sub-headings.

1. Peasantry and *Peasantry-fication*: The first finding of the study is the existence of two forms of peasantry formations. The first is traditional rural peasantry, which grew out of the desire of traditional local farmers to engage in farming as a matter of vocation. They have neither other jobs nor training for other things than farming. This is peasantry by choice. The second is what we would describe as *peasantry-fication*, which refers to the turning of people into peasant farmers because no other choices of living are available to them. This is peasantry by force. Discourses on the phenomenon of rural peasantry in study will have to be situated within the content and context of the two forms.

The formation of thriving rural villages by traditional farmers follows two patterns: reinforcement of existing rural settlements and outright establishment of new ones. In respect of the first, the indigenes of Ogotun Ekiti, the research area, had been farmers by occupation and they had set-

tlement outposts in the forests as resting places or outright lodging for few days before coming to the main towns (Fieldwork, 2021). This was the setting before the coming of migrants from neighboring towns and cities to join them. When the migrants arrived, some of them joined the existing farm steads, bought, or hired lands from the indigenous populace and settled down in the existing settlements and subsequently expanded them because of persistent human action. In respect of the second, some of the migrants came as cocoa plantation hired hands; or purchase lands or even got some portions leased to them. They then decided to erect hamlets in the forests to ease their transportation from the places, which are most often far away. In no distant time, the hamlets grew up to villages because of increased migration and procreation (Fieldwork, 2021).

Findings reveal different factors behind the emergence and growth of these settlements. In an interview with some indigenes of the town, major motive behind the invitation of migrant farmers is the need for some forms of shield to prevent further encroachment by adjoining towns and communities. The argument is that the small town of Ogotun was finding it difficult to secure its vast lands and there has been serious encroachment and even outright claiming of large portions of the land by the neighbouring towns and communities. This has led to fights at various times. An idea then came to encourage migrants to move to the borders of the town to act as shields to prevent further encroachment. This is the case with the emergence some of the villages in the town such as Omuaran, Olorioko to prevent encroachment from Ikeji-Ile town. Also, Aba Oshogbo and Edetedo were established to prevent encroachment from Owena town. In the same vein, Aba Ijesha village was set up to safeguard the traditional border between it and Igbara-Odo. In respect of the

other villages, the migrants only joined existing settlements already established by the indigenous farmers. Villages such as Ilupeju and Abuja in Ilawe, Oko-Oshodi in Igbara-Odo as well as Itamerin, Ajamuro and some others in Ogotun fall into this line (Fieldwork, 2021).

The use of peasantry by choice derives from the statements by the farmers themselves. Some farmers argued that they have been encouraged to move out of their places of birth by a combination of reasons such as family problem, disagreement over land in their places, shrinking employment opportunities in their towns, crises, and wars in their localities as well as quest for trade opportunities (Fieldwork, 2021). A vast majority of them never attended schools at all, making them, in the absence of employment opportunities in the government establishments, turned to farming. According to one of the respondents, “I had to run from my place of birth when I was facing many problems. Several forces were arraigned against me. I must run to save my life and earn a living. I have come here and doing well. I have been able to erect buildings at home and I thank this community for giving me a place to stay” (personal interview, 2020). Saying in another interview, one argues that “I never attended any school. What else can I do than farming? Now, I can take care of my family” (Personal interview, 2021). There is the same line of argument in the words of the head of Bolorunduro village that

Farming is good. Only the lazy are afraid to engage in farming. That is why we have so many armed robbers around. They are lazy and can't work”

The most important reason, however, is the presence of arable land and the willingness of the hosts to accommodate them in their land. There is a large swathe of uncultivated land prior to the arrival of the new population. In fact, despite the presence of large number of cultivators, there are still large portion of uncultivated land. In the scheme of analysis, the major reason for the making of the rural populace must be situated within the contest of the availability of land and the readiness of the landowners to release.

However, it must be noted that it is not only migrants that are involved. In fact, those who see themselves as indigenous to the towns are overwhelmingly farmers. The difference is that most of them only use the village outposts as resting places and not permanent places of abode. In the words of the respondents in one of the hamlets, “This is a family heritage. My grandfather built the first hut here several years ago. It was bequeathed to my father who also passed it to me before his death. I must maintain the family heritage. I must keep the hut and ensure it is standing.” In a similar vein, another respondent, a local farmer, argues that even though he has a house in the town, he still maintains his hut in the farm because he spends more time in the farm than in the town. Most of the time, he only comes to town to attend Sunday service and return to the farm second day. To him, farming is his job.

Peasantry by force is what we would call peasantry-fication. Research finding locate some educated youths living in the villages doing subsistence farming. In an interview with one of them, farming in the village was not what they would have

“My father founded this village over fifty years ago. He was the first to arrive in this bush before several others came to join him. As the first son, I took over from him. To us, this is home. I was born here, and I am very close to fifty years. I have lived all my life here. To me, I am doing well. Most people in the cities can't match what I have been able to achieve.

loved if alternatives were available. According to him,

“After we left secondary school, life was very tough. I couldn’t secure employment even with so much effort. I then decided to stay back in the farm with my parents. Eventually, I got married and we have been living here ever since then. (Personal interview, June 2021).”

The implication of the foregoing is that some of the populace in the villages engaged in farming out of nothing else to do. The general import of the peasantry-fication argument here is that more people are turning into peasantry life out of frustrations with the system. To them, the state has refused to provide them means of advancing their lives beyond subsistence farming. This level of frustration becomes visible when addressing the people on democracy and government. The response is always that the state doesn’t care for them and the politicians are only interested in getting their votes to advance their own interests.

2. Visible Neglect by the State: Findings also show a real absence of the state in the villages. Poverty is everywhere and basic needs are denied as the communities’ needs for shelter, clothing and other necessities of daily life are below the minimum level. Access to public services like drinking water, sanitation, health, and education have seldom been the business of the government. Again, opportunity to participate and exert influence on decision making both in the local government, state and national politics are grossly limited. Infrastructural facilities are limited. For example, there are only seven primary schools, and one secondary school to serve the villages numbering about twenty-five and scattered apart. The conditions of the schools are pitiable: no chairs and tables and teachers only show up occasionally. They too complain of poor working condition (Fieldwork,

2021). According to one of the teachers at Bolorunduro/Ilupeju Primary School,

“I took up teaching job because there was nothing for me to do. When I was posted to this bush, I could not reject because I had nothing to fall back on if they take the job. But I know there is no way I can live in this bush. So, I must come occasionally. As you can see, there are even no pupils.”

Only four of the villages have buildings they refer to as clinics. It was only in one of them we found some semblance of medical activities. Others were overgrown with weeds. There is only one doctor to serve the whole local government, and he too stays in the council headquarters. Medical personnel do not like postings to the villages due to inaccessibility and very poor environment.

3. Poor Transportation and Communication: Road accessibility was near-zero. At Edetedo, one of the respondents replied questions posed to him this way:

“You can see how you got here. Even with your big vehicles, you can’t reach here. This is how we have been operating here. We hardly see them (i.e., the state). They have abandoned us. The last time we see them was during the last election. We see them once in four years. Anyway, we have been living our lives (Emphasis added).”

4. Absence of Infrastructural Facilities: Only one of the villages, Alaba Meta, has electricity, mostly because of its proximity to Ogotun town. None of them has water facility. They rely on water from streams, ponds, rivers, shallow wells, springs, stream which are, often, shared by domestic and wild animals. These sources are often polluted or contaminated and thus very vulnerable to all sorts of diseases that can be contracted through contaminated water. Thus, most of the water related pathogens in the villages under study areas are dependent on the non-availability and non-acces-

sibility of safe drinking water. In addition, most of them live in mud houses and at the mercy of mosquito. For transportation, they rely mostly on bicycles and motorcycles to convey their farm products to the markets in the towns.

5.0 REACTIONS TO STATE ABSENCE

The people, as argued heretofore, had reacted to the situation by way of dismissal. The dismissal comes in about two forms. At the first level is psychological. Here, the people had formed the mental picture of a state not ready to do anything for them. For example, one of the respondents at Bolorunduro village, said that “Government does not like us. So, we have been doing our things here. We don’t expect anything from them at all because we know they will never give us” (Personal Interview, June 2020). The same view was echoed by other respondents at Ilupeju village when he said that “I finished secondary school in 1985. I can’t find any job. So, I have been here and taking care of my family. I don’t care about what they do in Ado Ekiti (the state capital) anymore” (personal interview, February 13, 2020).

At the second level is the development of communal actions by the villagers. Owing to the absence of the state, the people have mobilized themselves for self-help. One of such is the formation of thriving cooperative societies. Through this, they raise a lot of money for some projects in the villages. They also loan money for personal use. Majority of them claimed that they had built personal houses in their towns of origin. In the words of one of the respondents at Omiogun village, “most of us have our personal houses in our hometowns. We go there during festive periods. We are big men when we get home” (personal interview, February 20, 2020). The psychological dismissal serves some purposes. One of them is the coping mechanism for frustrations. According to a respondent in one of the villages, “if we contin-

ue to wait for the state, we will develop hypertension and die. So, my brother, it is better to assume that no government exists for us here” (personal interview, October 20, 2020).

In addition, in Alagbede village, the primary school football pitch comes handy for the village boys to kick the ball around. There are football clubs. In most of villages, there are some people with power generating sets. Some even installed satellite dishes in their mud houses. Some of the boys even talked about European League. Some claim to be Chelsea, Man U, Liverpool and Arsenal fans. To them, life goes on. They hardly make demand on the state because they assume nobody will listen to them.

6.0 ABSENTEEISM AND DISMISSIVE ATTITUDE

From the foregoing, the absenteeism-dismissive conundrum, which characterizes state-peasant relations in Nigeria, comes to bold relief. As argued, the Nigerian state has been found wanting in the discharge of its responsibilities to the rural segment of the populace. This has resulted in dismissive attitude from the rural dwellers. This absentee state has come with some consequences: apart from stymying development, it also has cynical outcomes on the populace. The implication here is lack of support from the populace. The study has employed Goran Hyden’s postulation on rural farmers in Tanzania as points of analysis. Specifically, Hyden had attributed gross underdevelopment in Tanzania because of the ability of the peasant to escape being captured by the modern state. Can we also same the same in respect of its Nigerian counterpart under study? That is, can we attribute the gross underdevelopment of rural areas because of dismissive behavior of the peasants in the Hydenian tradition? It is difficult. The scenarios are different. In the case of the peasants under study, no modernizing idea was brought to them. They hardly see the state.

At best, the state comes to them only during election cycle. Therefore, the dismissive tendencies are all a coping mechanism to survive the hardship engendered by absence of the state.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The study shows the relationship between state and peasants in Nigeria. It argues that the behavior of the peasants under study underscores the relationship between the Nigerian political elites and marginalized rural minority. As explained in the study, a vast number of Nigerians live in the rural areas, and they contribute a lot to the food chain in the country. However, they are marked by marginalization and neglect, as revealed in their living environment.

To a large extent, the whole scenario signposts the problem of rural areas in Africa. The neglect of this segment of the populace, which invariably has the vast majority, is one of the obstacles to development. The fact that a vast majority of the people are neglected both in planning and execution of policies is not a good attribute of a state aiming at development. As long as the state continues to neglect most of the rural populace, so also will they display dismissive attitude towards it, and it will be difficult to mobilize them for nationalism and development.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. Please ensure every paper has this just before the reference list.

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