



THE NIGERIA STATE AND PEASANTS: ANTIMONIES OF MARGINALISED SOCIAL CATEGORY

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ABSTRACT

Abstract

This paper explores the way and manner the Nigerian state responds to changing demands of peasants and how successive policies and programmes tend to undermine, marginalize and destroy the peasants' way of life. Despite enormous state pressure and control, the peasantry has continued to resist change and adaption not necessarily because of their strength as a group but largely due to failure of state policies and programmes to integrate and subdue them. Using the class theory, the study explores the conflicting and often contradictory relationship between the state and peasant in Nigeria. It concludes that the peasantry, despite years of repressive state policies, remains a strong potent social force and that we need more theoretical and methodological search for us to come to terms with complexities of peasant mode of behaviour.

Key words: Peasants, Peasantry, Political economy, Dependent state, class theory.

Introduction

The study of African peasantry and their mode of interaction with the state has been generally problematic. While a lot of scholarly effort has been made by western and African scholars, to explore peasant behaviour, we are still a long way from understanding the complex totality of peasant mode of production and sociology. However, mainstream scholars appear to be more dedicated in terms of wanting to understand and explain the sociology of peasant behaviour. The reasons for this have to do with their fascination with social and economic anthropology of rural African society. Another group of western scholars writing from the Marxist tradition sought to interpret

rural African and Latin American society by adopting variants of Marxist framework of analysis, especially political economy and dependency perspectives. Some of these scholars include Hilgaard (2013, 2016), Brian (2012, 2013), Woodward (2016), Hyden (1990, 1993) Rey (2014)

Among scholars of African origin, the general trend has been to highlight the problems of the rural dwellers in a bid to curb rural-urban migration. By so -doing, they frame the problem of peasants as an endemic problem of rural underdevelopment and backwardness. For example, Akinwale (2015) emphasized the need to improve and expand rural infrastructure as a basis for redressing rural poverty. He emphasized that one of the major factor why rural peasants are poor is that they find it very difficult to move their products due to bad roads. Furthermore, there are no storage facilities in most rural parts of the country. This explains why agricultural products routinely go to waste. Bamidele (2016) insisted that the problem of the peasantry across Sub-Saharan region is that most policies and programmes initiated on their behalf are often hijacked by wealthy capitalist farmers who collude with politicians to take undue advantage of subsidies and loans that are on offer. He concludes that this problem helped to frustrate most agricultural programmes like Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) and Green Revolution. The perspective taken by Masumbe (2015) is that the African state hardly considers the peasantry as a critical factor in agricultural and rural development. This disregard compels the state to pursue arbitrary policies that distort and undermine the peasant way of life.

In Nigeria, it is clear from the foregoing that rural development policy is in a serious crisis. There are clearly unanswered questions which cannot be easily resolved by state and bureaucratic power unassailed by practical experience. Since independence, enormous amount of data have been assembled but we still remain ignorant about the changing features and complex dynamics of peasant behaviour. When careful studies have been conducted, they have often brought into question many taken for granted assumption. For instance, Akanni (2017) holds that very little effort has been made to carefully understand peasant attitudes and values. He questioned why their activities are treated with contempt. To him, the peasant farmers are not treated as a source of knowledge and wisdom to be learnt from, argued with and respected. This top-down approach has had disastrous effect on agricultural development in Nigeria and other African countries.

Peasantry and the State: Historical and Conceptual Overview

We can define the peasantry as a class of people, generally of low social and political status, who depend mainly on agricultural labour for subsistence. In this context, peasants work the and even where they do not own the land that they work, they are distinguished from serfs by their freedom to move and dispose of at least a small part of any surplus output through the market. In Africa, peasants are still a formidable force not necessarily because of their class power but in terms of their huge number and their capacity to resist change and innovation. Historically, their political role has been problematic right from the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Marx had envisaged

socialism growing out of the clash of bourgeoisie and proletariat especially in industrialized western societies where the peasantry was no longer of serious consequence. After an initial attempt to present their regime as one legitimated by an alliance of workers and peasants, the Bolsheviks then decided to systematically destroy the Soviet Russian peasantry or “Kulaks” through a process of collectivization of agriculture as socialism intensified and spread across with the collapse of socialist Soviet Union, the decimation of the peasantry became complete as the country fragmented into various Republics.

For Chinese communist, a generation later, the rural peasantry was of great importance that Mao Tse Tung gave them a lot of ideological recognition. However, as Maoist socialism grew, they were once again deprived of effective access to markets by intense collectivization of agricultural output which continued till 1978. In both the former Soviet Union and China, the decline in agricultural output following collectivization provided a cogent and serious critique of the challenges of socialist practice. Throughout Western Europe and North America by contrast, the relevance of peasantry has been diminished by large scale corporate and commercial agriculture which drastically reduced the number of peasants after the Second World War in 1945.

In Africa, the story was different as Western Imperialism provided an avenue for colonialism and subsequent integration of the continent into the global capitalism system. Ake (1981:60) characterized the following features of peasantry in Africa:

- The family, immediate or extended is the basic unit for the organization of production.
- Land is the essential means of production.
- Land tends to be communally owned but usually privately ‘exploited’ subject to certain obligations.
- Commodity exchange among relatively equal petty producers who produce predominantly use-values.
- Limited production of exchange-values and intermittent contact of some petty producers with wage labour.

Against this background, what is the relationship between the capitalist in the capitalist sphere and these peasants when it comes to Africa? It would seem that the relationship between the capitalist and the peasant is radically different between the capitalist and the workers in capitalist enclaves. Indeed, it would seem that there is hardly any relationship of exploitation, subordination and domination, antagonism and struggle, which exists between the capitalist and labour. The peasant does not appear to be separated from his means of production, and so is not obliged to submit to exploitation. But how can this be when the peasant is an independent producer? The answer to the question is that the colonial and post-colonial state on behalf of its capitalist clients engages in exploitative manipulation of conditions of peasant production and exchange Ake (1981). Furthermore, capitalist uses state power to regulate the conditions of peasant

by (a) making laws about who might produce what, as was the case in colonial Nigeria; (b) imposing agricultural development programmes which put the peasant in position of using inputs such as fertilizers, and different techniques and tools; the process of compelling the use of these inputs and techniques was ostensibly to help the peasant, but in fact they aid the integration of the peasant into exploitative commodity relations; (c) imposing laws which standardize products and production processes, (d) encouraging large-scale and foreign-assisted capitalist agriculture as well as wholesale expropriation of communal lands in a bid to transform agriculture Ake (1981:61).

Theoretical and Empirical Overview

This study relied a great deal on Marxist class theory as a basis for explicating the complex dynamics of peasant mode of interaction with the state. Marxist class theory sees all capitalist society as essentially, a class-based society. These classes differ in terms of their access to power and economic resources. According to Toyo (1999) class theory emphasized production relations by examining how contending social classes struggle for state resources and the consequences of that struggle. Brian (2014) argues that any society where capitalist relations prevail is necessarily a class society. By looking at the class structure of the society we are in a better position to discern how classes relate and the implications of that relationship.

Ake (1981, 1983, 1996), Nwoye (2016), and Bernard (2015), Ade, (2012) have emphasized the importance of social classes as a basis for understanding the complex interplay of social forces especially in developing political systems. Ake was particularly keen to posit that colonialism and its made of incorporation of African Political Economy clearly exacerbated the formation of social classes. These classes continued to evolve after independence as the Nationalists became the dominant political class that took over from the colonial master. Rather than attune their class interest to the needs of the society, what ensued was an intense intra class struggle to control the spoils of postcolonial state, resulting in military intervention and a particularly bloody civil war that ended in 1970.

Therefore, Nigeria is a class-based society to the extent that class relations through which producers are exploited and marginalized involve the relations among the classes of Nigerian society and their relations to transnational capitalism. Politics in Nigeria thus has two related dimensions, the competitive pursuit of class interests, and the determination of public policy. But the nature of both private and public interests is defined by class relations. Classes are groups which arise out of the division of labour in society. They are defined by their place in the process of production, their access to markets for commodities, including labour power, and the relation of the state. Where producers have access to their own means of production, surplus expropriation takes place through control of market and state relations. Class relations link together different groups within societies, and between societies.

In Nigeria, classes have been stabilized into accepted relations of domination and subordination, or organized into relations of patronage and clientele. Class relations

have also been contested, both in their particular forms, and in general. However, stabilization and contestation require reference to values to justify claims and inspire actions. Thus politics comes to be a contest over values, and not simply over interests. Orthodox Marxists, such as Rey (2014), Aminu (1995), Shivji (1985), and Neo Marxists such as Usman (2015), Ake (1983) and Onimode (1983, 1987) have all argued that the social relations which define class relations are generally contradictory and therefore generate inherently opposing interests. Hence, for example, the interest of the dominant ruling class is different from that of the working class or proletariat. In this regard, it is in the interest of the ruling class to exploit the proletariat and in the interest of the proletariat to overthrow the ruling class. Note that this definition of interests is in-built to the definition of class. This is because classes have clearly defined objective interests which they struggle to protect at all times.

Therefore, class structure is seen as a terrain of social relations that determine objective material interests of actors, while class struggle is understood as the forms of social practices which attempt to foster these interests. Ahmed (2015) posited that class consciousness is the subjective processes that shape intentional choices with respect to those interests and struggles and it is a key to any social class. He noted that in the transition from a “class in itself” (a category of people having a common relation to the means of production) to a “class by itself” (a stratum organized in active pursuit of its own interests); the tendency in Marxist analysis has been on how to develop the revolutionary potentials of the working class. This has not been easy particularly in Africa due to number of reasons. The first has to do long years of military rule that entrenched authoritarian and personalized rule for long time. Secondly, there is the problem of limited commodity production in the sense that precapitalist relations are still common across the continent. The third factor is that the African state remains highly exclusive and therefore caters to a narrow range of interests. Therefore, class consciousness of common interests rooted in the process of production and lead to a practical mass-based action through political mobilization.

To Bonnard and Karrua (2015), class interest is meaningless unless it is guided and informed by class consciousness at all times. Most conceptions of proletarian class consciousness envisage its development as an explosion of mass consciousness often culminating in spontaneous violent action. However, in an interesting attempt to introduce rational choice theory into Marxist analysis, Elster (1982) Davidoff (2017) and Badden (2015) have all made interest in observations that a class-conscious class is one which has solved the free-rider problem? In varying ways, they observed that class consciousness is not individualistic and spontaneous since it involves the capacity of class organizations to pursue class objective by systematically controlling sectional struggles or intra-class Squabbles. In short, Cohen and Bront (2016:29) insisted that class consciousness is essentially an attribute of class organization rather than individual awareness. In this sense, it is the capacity of a class to transcend individualistic tendencies and behave as a collective whole. From this perspective, what is at issue is therefore the ability of class organizations (such as labour unions) to effectively mobilize members behind a common objective on behalf of the class rather than particular

interests and once mobilized, to hold in check groups or individuals who would 'free ride' or pursue sectional gains at the collective expense.

Zomba and Odinga (2017) observed that the common perception about the ignorance of African peasants is often misplaced in the sense that very little has been done to actually understand in detail their way of life. As a marginalized and exploited social class, peasants are acutely aware that they are being exploited by the state. However, they lack the revolutionary potential and capacity as a class to act on their own. The same view is shared by Ake (1993) when he argued that the way and manner the Nigerian state is structured disadvantages the working class and the peasantry. This is due to elitist and winner-take-all character of politics in the country. In short, he argued that the problem of workers and peasants in Nigeria are compounded by the fact that the very processes by which they participate reinforces their disempowerment and exploitation.

Overall, class theory provides a refreshing insight through which we can discern why and how the state has failed to serve the workers and peasants well. This is because of the narrow class interest which the state represents. By disregarding the peasants and nomads, the state is paying an unusually heavy price as evidenced by the Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen/farmers crisis currently ravaging the country. It is also reflected in the structural dependence of the country on food importation and chemicals, as well as the steady collapse of the agricultural sector.

The Post-Colonial State and Distortion of Domestic Food Production:

The period 1970-1990 was marked by the twin push, of (a) the ruling class in Nigeria accumulating wealth through importing foreign food products, - machinery, fertilizer, other chemicals, and agricultural equipment; and (b) foreign firms wanting to sell cereals (particularly wheat and rice), fertilizers, equipment and machinery and livestock feeds in Nigeria. This was done through the importation of rice, wheat, beef, and powdered milk, by governments through middlemen in order to make huge profits in the imports, the transport and the sales, which are made below the market price of the domestic foodstuff. It will be interesting to illustrate the confusion and distortion in the agricultural sector by showing two notable instances of disastrous state intervention in agricultural production. We start with the Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs)

The Agricultural Development Projects

Hundreds of billions of naira have been spent by the Federal and State Governments, in addition to loan obtained from the World Bank, on the Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs). The World Bank has constituted itself as the main source of external agricultural finance in Nigeria. Prior to 1975 most of the World Bank lending was in non-agricultural sectors. Between 1970 and 1980 the Bank granted loans totaling over N500 million for non-agricultural projects including railways, roads and port construction out of which, only N200 million was given for agriculture. But since the establishment of the ADPs in 1975/76, most of the World Bank lending has been in the area of agriculture (World Bank, 1985). Between 1990 and 2000, the Federal Government in conjunction with

the World Bank has spent over five billion naira in agricultural sector (World Bank, 2000). The main philosophy of the ADP strategy is supposed to be based on the needs of the small-scale farmer, but actual experience and the research work that has been done on the area covered by ADPs has confirmed, beyond reasonable doubt, that the projects have benefited large-scale “progressive” farmers, rather than the majority of the peasantry. This is largely because it is these categories of farmers who have the political contacts, and the financial and other resources, to take advantage of the services and facilities offered by the projects Hyden (1993).

Donor agencies also played crucial role in the funding as most states obtained external loans worth hundreds of millions of dollars either to introduce the ADP in the state, or to expand existing ones. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the ADP expenditure has very high foreign-exchange component, used to pay for the import of fertilizers and other agricultural chemicals, and machinery, from foreign agribusiness corporations; as well as the services of foreign 'experts' whose huge salaries, fringe-benefits and allowances are paid for in foreign exchange (Aminu,1985:15). This foreign-exchange component in some cases reaches up to over 40% of the total investment of some of the ADPs. This constitutes a significant drain of foreign exchange reserves, and discourages the development of domestic industries for the production of these basic agricultural inputs. Another interesting feature of the ADP approach to agricultural development is its package approach, which has the built-in assumption that all farmers are the same. Technological innovations hence come in a package to be applied religiously, irrespective of the nature, and structure of the farming population and agricultural production enterprises. Thus, only farmers whose scale of operations, and resources, enable them to adopt the whole package, benefit. Small-scale peasant farmers, on the other hand, are only able to adopt certain aspects of the packages.

The River Basin Development Strategy

Another direction in which massive funds were spent under the “Operation Feed The Nation” and “Green Revolution” programmes was in the area of irrigation. It was estimated that the irrigated area of the country under these schemes would jump from 13,000 hectares in 1970, to an estimated 274,000 hectares by 1991 at the cost of N2.2 billion, at 1977 prices. The River Basin Development Authorities (RBDAs) are large-scale, costly and capital intensive projects, designed to create areas of year-round cultivation of crops, such as wheat, rice, maize and vegetables, which will provide food and the raw material base for the establishment of agro-based industries. The cornerstone of the schemes are huge, and expensive dams, massive irrigation infrastructure and land-clearing equipment, all built and supplied by agribusiness corporations; some of whom are also under contract to manage the projects. This heavy foreign exchange component, we believe, is the real attraction, for Nigerian planners, policy-makers and their foreign associates, of this RBDA strategy.

In the Bakalori irrigation project, for example, whose contracts were given to Impresit and Bonifica, and key subsidiary of the Italian multinational, Fiat, the contract cost had risen from N159.0 million in 1975, to N300.00 million in January 1980; and 57%

of this was to be paid in foreign exchange. Part of this went into the building of lavish and expansive mansions and chalets, in a specially built new town, for the, largely Italian, expatriate staff on the project. Weekly flights from Italy brought food, wines and other household goods for them, to enable them to live a life of luxury in the middle of that arid Sahelian countryside, with its impoverished peasantry rendered landless by the project,

Moreover, dam construction, in tropical semi-arid environment, is not the best way of developing river basins, because these areas, apart from having a very high rate of evapo-transpiration, need constant flow of surface water to enable greater land area and populations to be adequately served -by the water systems. As it is now, the Bakalori and Goronyo dams, have severely affected the Lower Rima Basin, extending from Sokoto in the north, to Argungu, BirninKebbi, Bunza, and Jega, down to the confluence of the Rima and the Niger. A whole economic and cultural system, built around farming and fishing in the flood plains of the Lower Rima, sustaining over one million people, has been cut off from, the flow of the river supply, necessary for its survival, and as a result, the very lives of these people is being seriously threatened. To date, no effort has been made to either rehabilitate them, or provide them with alternative river water supply. These areas, with very extensive *fadama* plains, used to be the major source of rice and other products, such as sugar cane, onions, and fish to the whole Sokoto region and beyond.

Thus, the supposed benefits of the dams are limited only to the project areas, and in the process they have deprived a far larger population of the level of water supply necessary for their survival and caused, in the whole Lower Rima Region, ecological degradation, social and economic disruption, and the conditions for a large-scale famine. This situation is true also of the Hadejia-Jama'are River Basin where large populations, in areas of the river systems downstream, up to Gashua, are finding life increasingly made difficult by the enclave nature of the river basin development strategy. Even for the peasants in the project areas the benefits of the schemes are at best questionable. This is because land allocations normally goes to project officials and rich "absentee" farmers, with the bulk of the land worked by the project itself, in a form of inefficient estate farming (Akinwale, 2015).

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the discussion so far, we could see that the only difference between what was happening in the fifties and early sixties, to what is happening today, is the changing nature of dependency relationships. In the earlier era, agricultural underdevelopment was based on dependency relationship around export of agricultural commodities. Today, agriculture is still underdeveloped with dependency relationship now based on imports of food, agricultural raw materials and agricultural inputs ranging from seeds, fertilizers, day old chicks to heavy tractors and earth moving equipment. For agriculture to develop therefore there is a need to breakout of this relationship of dependency by placing the peasants at the centre of agricultural production at all levels.

To do this requires the courage and vision to recognize that our agricultural problems are caused neither by lack of appropriate technology, or by resource scarcity. The problems of Nigerian agriculture revolve around the way and manner in which production is socially organized, and the structural inequalities between peasant and the state which this organization entails and reproduces. There is vast amount of evidence to show that technical and technological basis for progress exist in all the sub-sectors. In specific terms, we outline the key steps that need to be taken especially in the area of food production.

The most important and urgent action that needs to be taken to revitalize Nigerian agriculture is emancipating the peasant farmers, and other rural producers by giving them direct control over the productive resources especially land which should be managed by those who live and work on it. This should be accompanied by a nationwide mass literacy campaign to make every peasant literate and numerate in order to raise their consciousness and their agricultural, accounting and other skills. A peasant for example, who was able to survive on his famer earnings in 1960 can hardly do so today due to high interest rates, high cost of manufactured commodities and high prices of agricultural products. This is largely because of the presence and predatory position of middlemen in all transaction entered into by the peasant farmer. Therefore, middlemen of all shades should be eliminated from agricultural production and management.

It is important to note that it is the administrative structures created by the federal, state and local governments in the rural areas that have consistently been working against agriculture and the morale and productivity of the peasant farmers. To this end, relevant democratic structures should be initiated to help integrate the peasants into a new economic system that has their interest as its primary objective. In the short term, we recommend that each village should have an agricultural committee made up of heads of peasant household, whatever their tenure status, as well as representatives of primary school teachers and village youth/age grade associations. The committee should be charged with organizing agricultural activities as well as the distribution of agricultural inputs and credit. Village cooperatives should also be established at the village level so that farmers could deal directly with the buyers or other concerns wishing to purchase agricultural products from them.

Basically, the answer to agricultural and rural development lies in democratically elected village peasant councils to take direct charge of day to day administration and management of village affairs. They should be the basic grassroots organs of local government with power to allocate land and manage inter communal relations and maintain security. The activities of Agricultural Development Project (ADPs), most of whom are now state wide and collapsing should be restructured, streamlined and coordinated to meet the extension and credit needs of the village agricultural committee, which should also be well represented on the boards of each ADP. The role of the World Bank in these projects should also be revived as there are many qualified Nigerians to take over their places to the benefit, and at less cost to the nation.

River Basin Development Authorities should be dismantled and their assets transferred to the states where they are located. Construction of new dams should be

suspended immediately until a thorough and detailed hydrological map of the country is available to help the federal and state governments make viable decisions regarding alternative irrigation and water management systems. Investment into agriculture should henceforth be through newly created State Agricultural Production Agencies. These agencies should be controlled by farmers' council majority of whose members come from elected representatives of village agricultural committees from each local government area of the state. The rest of the membership should come from those appointed by Federal and State governments, scientists in universities and research institutes. The task of the agencies should be to take over land development by the RBDAs and decide on whether to base production of peasant farmers' cooperatives or large scale autonomous farm enterprise, owned by both the government and the peasants.

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