

Poverty And Peasantry: The Problem Of Concept Cloning In Nigeria

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Abstract

Government's efforts to tackle rural poverty in Nigeria have a relatively long history and have varied largely with each new regime. What is constant to all these appears to be the categorization of rural-dwellers who are treated with a model that parallels them with this social type as encountered in Asia, the Americas and Europe. This paper interrogates such a strategy and argues that the persistent sterility of those programmes might be traceable to such a classificatory error. A zoologist who works under the illusion that a panther (which Africa has) is exactly the same as a tiger (which it does not have) may get his analysis seriously wrong and consequently reach a misleading conclusion. This paper draws from observational data mainly on the Nigerian case and documentary materials from Nigeria and the rest of the world. Its main position is that the Nigerian social settings are not exactly comparable with those in other parts of the world. Here, the existence of peasantry is a tiny exception, not the rule. If those in the sociological sciences are to assist in alleviation of rural poverty, the first step to get their classification of the social types right.

Introduction

Cloning is a term borrowed from the biological sciences where it identifies the practice of producing offspring of an existing life form by reproducing the parent from a body cell and not through normal sexual reproduction that involves contribution of haploids from both male and female partners. The resultant offspring is therefore a carbon copy, as it were, of the person whose cell reproduced it. In our context, concept cloning refers to uncritical borrowing of a concept that was developed in reaction to a social reality in a different environment without bordering about its suitability in the new environment.

Generalization of peasantry to all African rural populations is just one of such errors in the study of post-contact societies in this part of the world. Examples abound in the study of the autochthonous systems, not least political institutions, religious institutions, and the like. Each time our social scientists encounter some allochthonous structure, process, or institution, they typically make efforts to see in the home-grown system something they will insist is a variant of the exogenous one. It is for this reason, for example, that against all ethnological evidence religious scholars amongst us insist that the Christian concept of God and Devil has always been with all African groups, forgetting that ethical religion such as is well documented among the pre-contact Igbo is a well known human phenomenon of which the more populous groups elsewhere are still proud of (Talbot, 1921/1966: 40, 41). I have also read texts that labour to see in home-grown African political organizations mere parallels to European models that have received more attention in printed pages (Murunga,

2009). Those with enough patience to carry out unhurried observation note the peculiarities (Salih, 2003:27).

The more serious consequence of this attitude is not the impression it gives that our people that are thoroughly intimidated from the experience of slavery and colonization are incapable of being accepting, or even in some cases being proud, of their own situation. The real danger is that, as I will illustrate in the case of peasantry, bad epistemics always lead to wrong strategies and therefore ineffectual results. No people can successfully tackle poverty and achieve sustainable progress if they do not first all understand their own true situation. What I say is not an advocacy for insularity in a world that has become more interdependent than human beings ever managed to. My position is that it is impossible to develop except a people first harness properly the most useful intangible resource, i.e. knowledge. And that useful knowledge starts with correct accurate identification of the categories that are at issue.

Poverty

Since the focus is on peasantry I would like to start by identifying the sense in which I employ the term, poverty, in this discourse. Three denotations are usually identified under poverty by English dictionary writers. 1. the state of being poor, where **poor** itself is used in the sense of having too little money compared to one's needs. 2. lack of something. 3. poor quality. It is in the sense of this last gloss that translators of Karl Marx could entitle the polemic in which he inveighed against Pierre Joseph Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*. While the writers of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 7th edition, are content with only these glosses, those of *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 1983 edition, add unproductiveness and infertility to the list. Writers of *The New Bantam English Dictionary* add an interesting strategy. They include synonyms and antonyms of the word. The synonyms are nine: destitution, need, penury, privation, mendicancy, indigence, pauperism, beggary, and want. The antonyms are wealth, abundance, riches affluence, opulence, substance, property, and treasure. What all this points to is either directly to money, some measure of value of a material type, some medium of exchange for objects or entities of some material worth. The first two dictionaries gloss the word in a manner that is much wider than the strategy by the *Bantam* writers. They clearly bring out the problem of polysemy to which I will return presently.

Writers approaching the issue from such technical standpoints as demography, philosophy, and economics take pains to underline that poverty is protean. They will go on to list 1. absolute poverty, 2. relative poverty, 3. material poverty, 4. income poverty, 5. human poverty. One remarkable dimension has been the recognition of urban and rural poverty as necessarily dissimilar categories (Okafor, 2004: 7 – 10). What can be said about these types of efforts from the standpoints of semantics and workaday life is that there are tenable insofar as they present material poverty as gradable. Victims are not usually affected by poverty at the same levels. And particular victims are not usually affected by poverty at the same levels at different times. One may experience abject poverty because one's lack of material possession is so total or nearly so that one is incapable of attending to one's needs in a way that other members of one's or other contemporary human society usually do. Another person's or another group's poverty may be relative because they do not have as much in material terms as others in the same or another society. Thus one may be rich in Nigerian terms but poor in German terms. The problem with this sort of view is to work out acceptable cross-societal, pan-human criteria for the measurement. This is why Okafor (2004: 4) could talk of "controversies" when it comes to working out such criteria. Citing Scott (1981) he

outlines the difficulties in using the prevailing yardsticks of poverty line, income, and poverty data. At personal levels, a bank manager who suffers a demotion or loses his job for another one of lower pay is in a state of relative poverty. He now earns less than he used to, and so may not be able to satisfy as many of his needs as he used to. Two factory workers in two different environments who do comparable jobs but gets paid in a way that places one of them at a higher pay and better conditions of service also present a good illustration for this condition. The one with lesser pay and less attractive condition of service is in a condition of relative poverty.

Polysemy resembles homonyms in being one spoken or written linguistic form but which has different meanings. It could be considered the converse of synonymy. The latter is several forms with more or less the same meaning. However, whereas homonyms do not share concnity, polysemies are cognates with extended meanings. Examples of the former are **bank**, a place where money is kept for safety and is lent to customers; and **bank**, the part of the river or canal that is closest to land. **Head**, in the sense of the part of the human body on the top of the neck, and **head**, in the sense of someone who is in charge of a group of people, are an example of a polysemy.

All the various shades of meaning of poverty are in shape of polysemy. They are related by extension; they have a common etymon. They ultimately refer to a lack, usually either of quality or of quantity.

What is Peasantry?

Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (2000: 259) defines peasantry as “ a class characterized by small scale agricultural production, economic self sufficiency, low division of labour and relative political isolation from urban working class.” An inventory of all efforts at defining peasantry will produce this summary: small-scale farmers or fishermen who live in rural areas and who are poor and lack political power, vis-à-vis their city-dwelling counterparts. Some add that the family in that setting consists of production and consumption units (Spencer, 1998). In other words, peasantry is defined in terms residence, occupation, and econo-political status. However, some, including Abercrombie, *et al* (2000: 259) now subcategorize peasants into rich, middle, and landless.

Peasantry is sometimes considered a middle stage in a lineal social evolution between foraging and industrialized society. Goldthorpe (1985) actually contains a schema apparently illustrating such evolution. But this cannot be supported by evidence from pan-human studies. Some parts of Nigeria have a different history of the rural/urban dichotomy (Shenton, 1986). In Southern Nigeria, when migrants leave the rural area to settle in the city their link with their original place is not severed for good. Elsewhere in Africa, Dabire (2007) has studied the Burkinese case which links collective kin interest with rural-urban emigration in the first place (Dabire 2007). In Burkina Faso people migrated to the cities so that they could make more money and be in position to help their members of their kin back in the rural areas. Urban residence is in such cases not functionally permanent.

The kind of residential category that informs the distinction between urban and peasant categories in terms of residence on a permanent basis is absent in most parts of southern Nigeria and some other parts of Africa. This absence has important implications for formulations and policies that are based on contrary assumptions.

Until the confusion of globalization came along in 1990s Malinowski (1944) in his functionalism and theorists working after him in the structuralist schools: Radcliffe-Brown (1952), Parsons (1951) and Levi-Strauss (1963) have all demonstrated that the tenability of

cultural relativism. Human societies could not have developed along one lineal path. Because each has its own peculiar ecological and other existential challenges they could only have devised cultures and social organizations appropriate to those needs, and not necessarily in reference to what other groups were doing.

Is Peasantry Pan-Human?

There is no doubt that using the indices of residence, occupation, and inter-group political and economic status the category, peasantry, is a valid category in some African societies. It certainly can be found in Asia, South America, and was and in some cases still is part of the European society. Mao Tse Tung was able to mobilize this group for his revolution that toppled the *ancien regime*. Eric Wolf who has contributed more than most writers to the study of this category has recorded many of comparable peasant campaigns in South America and Northern Africa (Wolf, 1971). In feudal Europe, the peasant revolt led by John Tyler and the peasant wars provoked in Germany by the preaching of the church reformer, Martin Luther, are well documented.

The theoretical relevance of these examples is that mobilization was only possible because there were social categories that saw themselves as peasants in contradistinction to a different category they saw as members of the same larger society but not as part of their own sub-group, namely city-dwellers.

The problem with this, returning to Nigeria, is that we are unable to find an even distribution of such a binary in functional terms. Except in the case of some parts of the pre-contact Yoruba and parts of the Islamic northern districts urbanism is a phenomenon that came with contact with Europe. So, the critical defining diacritic of residence is off. It has also to be added that in all cases in literature where there have been peasantry such a social category also has a history of feudalism.

Most parts of southern Nigeria lack such a historical antecedent and in contemporary social structure do not have a functional distinction between urban residents and rural residents. In functional terms all urban residents that are Ibibio, Igbo or Izon, for example, see themselves as sojourners outside their rural home communities. Any well behaved member of such communities whose livelihood compels to live in the city is expected to visit *home* from time to time. *Home* means the rural community. Definition of *befitting burial* include that such city-dwellers are taken to their native rural communities for funeral at death. And while alive they are expected to *go home* at important traditional or such Euro-Christian festivals as Easter, Christmas and New Year. Despite all the legislations to the contrary, they even repair to the rural communities for voters' registration and actual voting.

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Implications for Anti-Poverty Policies

That Nigeria is poor or in general that contemporary plural society institutions hardly functions efficiently here is one of the greatest puzzles. The country in spite of huge natural and human resources and in spite of occasional sincere efforts on parts of the *qua* government to improve the situation, still shamefully lag behind countries that it is potentially richer than. Okafor's (2004) work on poverty and human development indices is full of such humbling comparisons that are based on field-sourced data. Compared with the resources available to them, it is ordinarily surprising that such smaller African countries as

Botswana and Namibia perform better than Nigeria in terms of efficiency of the economy (Johns, 2009).

If the resources are present, the ecology is relatively good, yet a group is finding it difficult to develop then perhaps only the human factor might be suspected. And all the problems that might be responsible in the way a society has done well or fail to do well may be summarized in one factor, **epistemics** -- that is the type of knowledge available to members of such a society and how such knowledge is managed.

Correct identification of the categories that are involved in a process or phenomenon, is half the problem solved in any task of conceptual or practical nature. It is easy to imagine how futile if a doctor labours under the wrong diagnosis that a case is that of malaria whereas the real problem is enteric fever. A zoologist who works under the illusion that a panther (which Africa has) is exactly the same as a tiger (which it does not have) may get his analysis seriously wrong and consequently reach a misleading conclusion. Categories are both similar and different in many ways but the first task for any one that is involved in the challenge of working with them is to first find out what sets them apart and what brings them together. If the aim is to reconcile such multiple categories, it will be an endless exercise in futility except their true nature is first determined.

In the case of Nigeria and rural poverty what we are dealing with is a social phenomenon. And these types of social issues do have experts that are knowledgeable in them. The mistake so far appears to be that people with tangential knowledge on the issues involved have been trying to force unrelated categories on them. Unfortunately no oncologist by merely wishing so can command a malignant tumour to become a benign one. The sensible thing to do is to face up to the facts and do something about it. In the social case that we have in our hand, the first sensible step will be to conduct a pan-Nigerian ethnography. Find out what type of social categories the various groups really are and then go on to work out the policies that are appropriate to those findings.

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