
Rural Communities in Nigeria: Issues of Conceptualizations and Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Essentially, the paper is a contribution to the various discourse, sometimes erroneous presentations, on rural communities in the developing world generally and the Nigerian society in particular. It aims at presenting a balanced view of rural communities, beyond the seemingly popular but misleading assumptions and misconceptions that had earlier been propagated against the rural people and their environment. The research methodology relies on secondary sources of information and data collection. The paper examines some existing conceptions, perception and features of rural communities. It appraises and also criticizes earlier theoretical assumptions and perceptions of rural people and rural life. The paper argues that the rural communities and rural people are not as backward and unimaginative as they have been portrayed. It therefore calls for a paradigm shift in the current theoretical expositions, conceptualizations, perceptions and assumptions about rural communities and rural and rural dwellers.

Keywords: Rural Communities, Conceptualization and Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, rural communities have remained one major area of study interest among various scholars, especially the sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, geographers, agricultural extension practitioners, educationists as well as rural development planners/experts and governments. Similarly, various literature abound on rural communities with each work representing the views, biases, opinions, assumptions and value-perceptions of the individual scholar. Most of the early anthropologists and historians who served as colonial administrators in Africa and other parts of the developing world, for example, referred to the indigenous people and their traditions and

culture as primitive and undeveloped. The biases and ill perceptions of rural people and their communities are such that, to most uninformed people, the term, 'rural', connotes such negative stereotypes as 'primitive', 'uncivilized', 'poverty', 'ignorance', 'backward' and 'remote' (Nwosu, 2015).

This paper, therefore, aims at presenting a balanced view of rural communities, beyond the simplistic, seemingly popular but misleading assumptions and misconceptions that had earlier been propagated against the rural communities and their people. It aims at a reconstruction and synthesis of some missing links both in the perception and conceptualization of rural communities.

Perhaps, the need to have an unbiased view and more informed knowledge of the rural people and their communities would be better appreciated when considered against the fact that majority of the people in the developing nations live in the rural areas, most of whom are poor and depend on agriculture for their livelihood (Ekong, 2010; Nwachukwu, 2003; IFAD, 2001). It is expected that with more objective information about rural people and their environment, policy makers, rural development planners and agencies such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), would be in a better position to appreciate the problems and needs of rural communities and assist them to improve their socio-economic conditions. It is also expected that the issues raised in this paper will assist researchers and students alike, particularly, students of rural sociology, agricultural extension, education and other related disciplines, who may like to carry out further studies on rural communities and related subjects. This paper, therefore, explores, among others, the conceptual and differential perceptions of issues of rural communities.

What is a Rural Community and what are the Features of Rural Communities?

It may be difficult to give a universally acceptable definition of the term "rural community". Various scholars have approached the subjects of rural community and community in particular from different perspectives. First, the term 'community', within the context of our discussion, will refer to a place where people live, usually in a group, whether in the urban or rural area. According to Nnadi (2004), the term community refers to a group of people inhabiting a continuous geographical area with common interests, social and cultural values that give members a sense of belonging and identification. A community can also be referred to as a concentrated settlement of people in a limited territorial area, within which they satisfy many of their daily needs through a system of inter-dependent relationships (Hogan, 2006). Members of a community develop a feeling of common identity, shared values and interests as well as mutual cooperation among themselves.

On the other hand, the term 'rural', to many people, conjures such negative images as 'remoteness', 'traditionalism', 'backwardness', 'fetish', 'nature', 'poverty' etc. For purpose of this paper, the term, 'rural community' would be synonymously referred to as 'rural area' and 'rural society'. A review of the early and recent sociological studies on the community will highlight some of the perceptions of the rural society, especially the main features or characteristics, of community relationships. This includes the works of Ferdinand Tonnies (1955), Emile Durkheim (1964) and Talcott Parsons (1953). In summary, these sociologists described community relationships in terms of the following identifiable characteristics:

- (a) A high degree of interpersonal intimacy where relationships are strengthened by face-to-face relationships;
- (b) Social order is based upon concerns of wills and supported by folkways, mores and religion.

- (c) High moral commitments and dependency on reciprocity norms, filial ties, kinship obligations, neighbourhood ties and high degree of communalism.
- (d) The constant association between the natural and supernatural leading to the belief that the supernatural is reflected in every reality we observe (Mbithi, 1974).

Ekong (2010) defined 'rural Nigeria' as those places in Nigeria with less than 20,000 people as well as those with larger population of inhabitants (50 percent or more) are engaged in farming. Similarly, Oko and Erondu (2010) refer to the word 'rural' within the context of the following connotations as derived from literature:

- Farm settlement or a settlement whose population has agriculture as a major occupation or means of livelihood;
- A part of society that is relatively more natural than artificial;
- Countryside lacking in the glamour and sophistication that characterize the city or urban centre.
- Folk community/society characterized by traditionalism or old ways.
- The neglected part of a society populated by what has been variously described by Olatunbosun as the 'neglected rural majority', by Fanon as 'the wretched of the earth' by Anthonio as 'stagnant sector', and by Ijere as the 'other Nigeria'.

The rural people in Nigeria represent the powerless and voiceless majority. The general impression created in the minds of most people, both Nigerians and foreigners who visit the rural communities is that of total abandonment and neglect of voiceless and powerless people who reside in these areas. According to Gwary (2011) in Adedoyin (ed.2011), the rural areas have over the years been the most neglected with resultant underdevelopment and endemic poverty as manifestation of the comparative neglect. The rural communities appear to have been bypassed by the transformational forces that characterize modern societies.

Essentially, the rural community would be better appreciated in terms of the contradistinctions between the rural and urban societies including:

1. Demography differentiated in terms of population density and ethnic traits index
2. Culture differential
3. Occupational differential
4. Levels of standard of living differential and
5. Social stratification differential (Ebii, 2000).

The foregoing social contradistinctions between the rural and urban centres are also evident in Ferdinand Tonnies' dichotomous approach to the study of the rural and urban societies. Tonnies argued that certain patterns of social relations tend to predominate in under-developed and non-industrialized societies (rural societies) as opposed to highly technological societies (urban societies). In this regard, he identified two patterns of social relations:

- a) *Geminschaft*: The social order which being based upon consensus of will rests on harmony and is developed and enabled by folkways, mores and religion.
- b) *Gesellschaft*: The order which being based upon a union of rational wills-rests on convention and agreement, is safeguarded by political legislation, and finds its ideological justification in public opinion (Mbithi, 1974).

Emile Durkheim's approach to the study of communities which falls closely to Tonnies' *Geminschaft* analysis also leads to another dichotomy: the classification of communities into those which have 'mechanical solidarity' and those which have 'organic solidarity'. Durkheim's mechanical solidarity type of society which is characteristic of simple pre-literate societies based on collective conscience and moral order presents another approach to a better understanding of the rural community. The organic society type is characteristic of modern or advanced societies which consist of dissimilar individuals (Otite, 1979).

Similarly, Talcott Parsons' dichotomous concepts (pattern variables) which appear to capture the social realities from the views of Tonnies and Durkheim attempt to show that rural and peasant communities are inscriptive, paternalistic, affective and diffuse in their role relations, while the urban individual is characterized by universalism, affective neutrality, functional specificity and achievement motivation. Instructively, there are other studies of communities in developing countries and characteristics of the rural people which are exemplified by the works of David McClelland (1961) in his book, the 'Achieving Society' and Oscar Lewis (1962) in his essays on the 'Culture of Poverty', especially among the Mexican villages. McClelland found that most of the rural people are non-achievers, and enumerated the characteristics of the rural people to include low achievement motivation, high degree of fatalism, low risk taking and collective orientation. Oscar Lewis established the indices of a non-achievement syndrome which he called 'the culture of poverty' i.e a total systems rationalization of misery, disease and ignorance (Mbithi, 1974). Another scholar who has made contributions to the understanding of rural communities; rural people and their mode of life, is Rogers (1969) in his thesis on the 'Subculture of Peasantry'. The central elements in this subculture of peasantry include:

1. Mutual distrust in interpersonal relations,
2. Perceived limited good
3. Dependence on and hostility toward governmental authority
4. Familism
5. Lack of innovativeness
6. Fatalism
7. Limited aspiration
8. Lack of deferred gratification
9. Limited view of the world
10. Low empathy

Appraisals and Criticisms of Earlier Theoretical Assumptions and Perceptions

At this juncture, it must be admitted that the foregoing theoretical assumptions, conceptualizations and perceptions of the rural communities/societies as propagated by earlier writers have been criticized on a number of grounds. In fact, it would be grossly misleading, for example, to say that the rural people's world view is limited and shaped by the present tense and by restricted social environment. It may also amount to an overstatement and an obvious error to generalize that the rural people are characterized by such cultural traits as perceived limited aspiration, low empathy, familism, fatalism, and lack of innovativeness, among others. Furthermore, from the theoretical perspectives of structural functionalism and ethno methodology, we should not be in haste to make conclusions on people's norms, values, traditions, institutions and culture generally, without first understanding the functional imperatives of structural elements in the society and the methods and procedures used by members of society to construct, account for, or give meaning to their social world (Igbo, 2003). Within the context of this discourse, therefore, it would be safer to appraise and understand the rural people and their communities within the context of their immediate physical environment, historical experiences and socio-cultural circumstances.

The rural communities, after all, are not as useless and backward as they have been portrayed. As a result of continuous direct contact with urban values arising from improved means of transportation, media exposure, rural-urban migration and influences of education (both formal and informal), many of the rural dwellers are no longer limited by their immediate social and physical environment. It suffices to say that because of the dynamic nature of societies generally, some of the rural communities are progressively undergoing a process of social change.

Similarly, governments at various levels, non-governmental agencies, other developmental agencies and even individual rural communities are carrying out various developmental projects at the rural setting, aimed at improving the quality of life and general conditions of rural communities. As a result, many rural communities are gradually wearing 'urban faces' in terms of the availability of some basic infrastructure such as electricity and pipe borne water supply, modern health centres and schools, recreational centres, good roads, police posts, community banks, cooperative societies, small and medium scale industries. Today, it may be safer to say that 'rural' and 'urban' are two phrases in a continuum (Kemjika, 2010). This explains why Ekong (2010) introduced the concept of 'rural-urban continuum' in his study of Nigerian rural communities, explaining that rural and urban communities range on a continuum from the very rural to the very urban with a lot of combinations in between.

Figure 1.

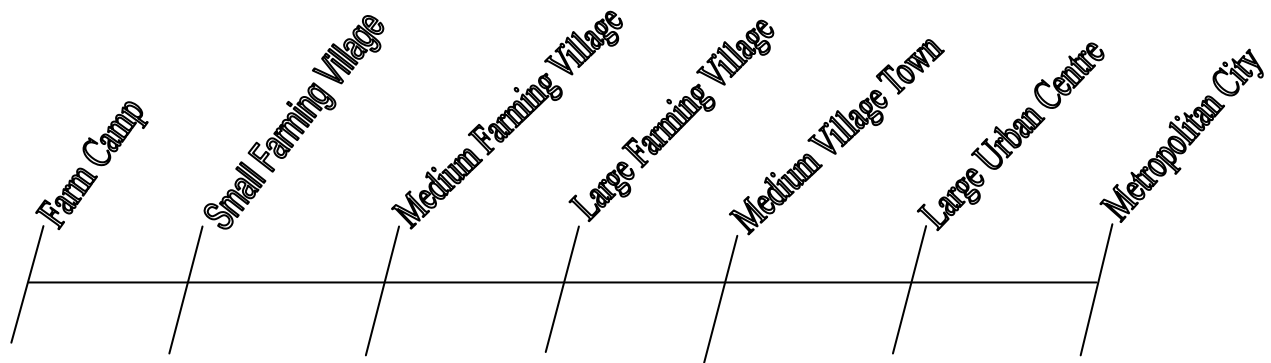


Fig. 1: The Rural-Urban Continuum

Source: Adapted from Ekong (2010)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it suffices to say that it would be grossly misleading and incorrect to conceptualize and perceive the rural communities and rural life from the simplistic assumptions of such earlier scholars as Ferdinand

Tonnies, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, David McClelland and Oscar Lewis, among others, based on generalized cultural elements and bi-polar distinctions. Perhaps, the time has come for a paradigm shift in our current theoretical expositions, conceptualizations, perceptions and assumptions about the rural people and their communities, within the context of the on-going social processes and dynamics of change in rural communities.

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