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People as Infrastructure - “Every Household its Own Government” Book Review

In his book “Every Household Its Own Government: Improvised Infrastructure, Entrepreneurial Citizens, And The State in Nigeria,” Daniel Jordan Smith details six necessary infrastructures that Nigerian citizens must supplement through their ingenuity due to the government’s inability to provide such support. This notion, understood as “entrepreneurial citizenship” or more nuanced as “infrastructural citizenship” of the everyday Nigerian, expresses the fact that every household indeed acts as its government in Nigeria; providing for the necessary water, electricity, transport, education, security, and communication needs one might assume the government would ensure for its people. In his book, Smith reveals the public and private as well as state and non-state actors present in the everyday Nigerian’s attempt to simply survive their environment. He makes it clear that this supplementation of necessary infrastructure through entrepreneurial or informal means explicates other social norms which plague Nigerians, such as constant insecurity, divisive class consciousness, and the troublesome presence of the state despite its absence.

Smith’s mode of expressing this neglect of the government and ingenuity of the citizen is through first-hand narratives from the communities of Umuahia, Owerri, and Abakala in Southeastern Nigeria. The intentionality of detailing stories within these urban and rural areas allows the reader to enter into the lived experience of what Charlotte Lemanski articulates as “infrastructural citizenship.”[1] The narratives of Chica, Uchechukwu,

[1]Smith, Daniel Jordan, and Project Muse. 2022. Every Household Its Own Government : Improvised Infrastructure, Entrepreneurial Citizens, and the State in Nigeria. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 178.

and Emmanuel's daily work relay important insight into the laborious task of making up for the unreliability of the formal water system, NEPA's shotty electricity, and the undependable or inherently corrupted police force. Using citizen's stories to illustrate his research findings makes the writing extremely palatable and portrays AbdouMaliq Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure" as a foreground to how one must understand the efficiencies of a people despite the deficiencies of their state. Through anecdotes, Smith paints a picture of the truth of daily life in Southeastern Nigeria in a way that is critical of the inclination to over-emphasize persisting lack and ignore skillful practices or to embellish survival mechanisms and turn a blind eye to what is necessary for flourishing.

Commonplace within each story of the Nigerian citizen is the need to "manage" one's circumstances in light of government neglect. In fact, this term is used in each chapter and is directly quoted from four citizens. The usual sentiment of "manage" in these cases relates to the Oxford Disctionary's definition, "to succeed in survive" rather than to "be in charge."[2] The former description speaks to Smith's details about the control of formal systems which in many cases was passed down from colonial rule. For example, the colonial militant rule exemplifies elitism which affects the police system and explains normalized dashing or the need for connections to get a job done. Smith details that electricity and water infrastructures were also designed to be advantageous for colonial authorities and Nigerian elites today. Such inequities sustain the wealth of elites by neglecting the needs of the vast majority of the population.

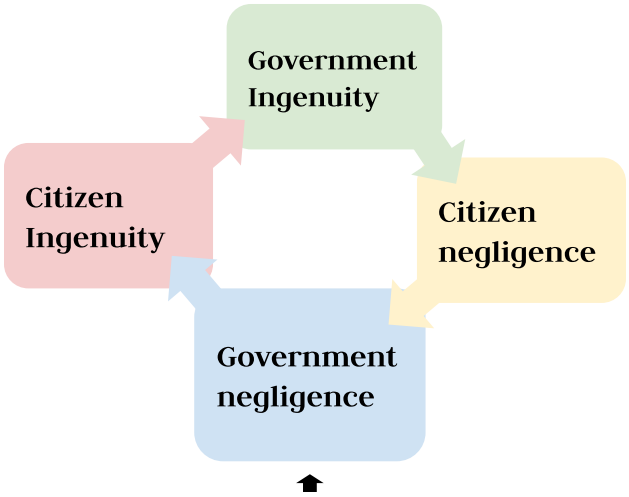
The latter definition of "manage" is seen in the privatization of infrastructures and its relation to class. An example is the privately owned public transportation of the keke napep, community-organized security through guards and vigilantes, or the use of private tutors.

[2] Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. "Manage."

Such systems are or are not available based on the means of a household and are visible expressions of class difference. This is also seen in the additional phone gadgets or the ability to leave a generator running all night. Such class consciousness is certainly not lost within the informal or popular. Smith notes that the desire to "pass my neighbor" is only obstructed by adequate means.

Smith also expresses the conflict of citizen agency being thwarted once again by the government's apparent hand within the informal sector. Whether it is the value-added tax on the entrepreneurial borehole business, formal requirements for tapping electricity despite informal and proficient dashing, or the use of once communally created and applauded vigilantes for political standoffs, the government has a way of being ever present in the everyday dealings of citizens surviving in the subpar state perpetuated by the government itself. Inherent in this reading of the state is a feedback loop–citizens contribute to the corruption they despise due to their limited resources and the lack of incentive to "do the right thing." This is seen in the diagram below (created by author, Eburuoh), which shows the reproduction of negligence and ingenuity at the scale of the government and the individual citizen. In light of Smith's writing, one might also call this a feedback loop of resistance (or resilience) and compliance.[3]

[3] Smith, Daniel Jordan, and Project Muse. 2022. Every Household Its Own Government: Improvised Infrastructure, Entrepreneurial Citizens, and the State in Nigeria. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 181.



The problem of compliance is evident in the entrepreneurial efforts entangled with state inadequacy. This is true because, as Smith points out, citizens are even dependent on thie state neglect. For example, for Obiageri's borehole business to remain lucrative, water from the municipality (as well as rain) must not come.

In his conclusion, Smith mentions the infrastructures lacking in his overview of Southeastern Nigeria–specifically the infrastructures of "housing, health care, and waste removal." Despite this, the networks of such infrastructure are certainly within the periphery. It is not difficult to picture how sewage and water systems are tied together, how housing might impact both transportation and education, or the fear imbued by the electrical needs of the healthcare system. These networks of infrastructure, as Smith notes, are inextricably tied together in practice.

Smith's discourse on modernity through infrastructure was fascinating at the book's onset. Smith lists modernity as "commodities that aid household tasks, reduce labor, or contribute to pleasure, leisure, and sociality."[4] Somewhat disappointingly, Smith does not return to this idea at his conclusion, yet this conversation alludes to how life is measured

[4] Smith, Daniel Jordan, and Project Muse. 2022. Every Household Its Own Government : Improvised Infrastructure, Entrepreneurial Citizens, and the State in Nigeria. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Page 65.

across households globally. Such commodities are foundational for what many philosophers describe as "the good life." In order to obtain the virtues necessary for flourishing (Aristotle), to live a worthy life in modern times (Gandhi), or to obtain a greater fullness of personhood (Menkiti), one must not worry about the basic necessities to survive- such as water, security, transport, electricity, communication, etc. As a standard of what one might call modernity, there is a level of security within one's surroundings that Nigerian has not seemed to obtain quite yet, according to Smith's observations. Infrastructural deficiencies, or what Smith has coined "infrastructural insecurity,"[5] plague the everyday life of even the most elite Nigerians. This concept is adequately summarized in the quote below by Smith:

> By infrastructural insecurity I mean the aggregate effect of the daily uncertainties about whether and when water will flow from the taps, whether NEPA will provide electricity, what the daily commute will entail in the midst of fuel scarcity, whether children are learning what they need to in school, and so on.[6]

This collective sense of scarcity leads to greed within each section of the above feedback loop diagram. The constancy of this fear feeds citizen cynicism about government and political intent. At the same time, Smith notes that there is a want for the government to remain and a somewhat blind hopefulness in the future of Nigeria panged by the popular statement of "managing" current circumstances. Smith's concluding words about the #EndSARS movement again break the everyday experience of "managing" from a mode of survival to that of agency in a way that mimics the everyday Nigerian's sustained hope for a better future.

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[5] Ibid. page 166.
[6] Ibid. Page 153.

Sources

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