

## Elitist Economy and the Inherited Culture of Class Stratification Amongst African Masses.

By

**Otumala Simon Jonah, PhD.**

Political Science Department, Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Ogun State  
[otumalasimon@gmail.com](mailto:otumalasimon@gmail.com)

&

**Salahu, Moshood Olayinka, PhD**

Department of Politics & Governance, Kwara State University, Malete  
[moshoodsalahu@gmail.com](mailto:moshoodsalahu@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This paper examines the nature of inequality amongst the people of Africa which is evident in the economic gap and the disparity that exists between the continent's largely poor citizens and economic elites who dictates the run of events in the various countries of the continent at the expense of the masses. Data for this paper is drawn from journals, articles and documents to illustrate the degree of inequality between economic advantaged elites and the economic disadvantaged masses. The paper employs the Marxist Class theory to substantiate the obvious problem that has divided the continent of Africa along distant lines of haves and haves-not. It further argues that the colonial policy of inequality which is geared towards capitalist accumulation of wealth bequeathed to the continent of Africa has become a culture meant to perpetuate the elite in power at the expense of the masses whose continuous existence and satisfaction is dependent on the whims and caprices of the elites who controls the machinery of the state for personal benefits. It recommends that to rescue the masses from the grip of the elites there is need for questioning amongst the masses through the employment of mass-power which is inherent in the various prepositions of Pan-Africanism.

**Keywords:** Inequality; Colonial Legacies; Pan-Africanism; Elites; Masses.

### Introduction

The culture of class difference or stratification is visibly evident across third world countries of Asia, North America and most conspicuously in the continent of Africa where the rate of poverty is significantly higher amongst the masses. The culture of poverty is characterised by hunger, unemployment, communal and religious conflicts, high mortality, diseases and lack of basic social amenities like electricity, pipe borne water and good roads. These conditions when contrasted with the living conditions of the few wealthy and ruling class in the continent aligns with the classical writings of Marx and Weber cited in Buder and Savage (1996), where it was posited that, "modern societies are divided into two unequal lines between the bourgeoisie who controls the means of production such as capital and equipment and the proletariat who are victims of exploitation whose only possession is the labour power which drives the production process through profit.

The driving force of the class stratification thesis is the culture of inequality and exploitation of the masses and working class especially for the satisfaction of the exploiter in continuation of the ideals of the capitalist aspiration that is geared towards perpetuating the working class in lack for continued exploitation. Capitalism focused on the accumulation of wealth by the capitalist class a culture which has its history in western capitalist societies supplanting the socialist culture of many pre-colonial African states. African states under respective leaders

like Tanzania under Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso and Oginga Odinga of Kenya have focused on and practised the African version of Socialism which advocates for the sharing of economic resources in a traditional African way.

Justifying the adoption of the principle of African socialism as distinct from classical socialism and capitalism, Egbomuche (2006) noted that “after independence of most African countries, the newly formed regimes could not easily claim a great victory over the Europeans if they (Africans) continue to use the system that those oppressors (Europeans) had designed namely capitalism”. Therefore, the practice of African socialism though very brief in the continent could not holistically solve the raging problems of inequality through class stratification between the people of Africa thereby laying the foundation for further exploitation of the masses by the governing and economically powerful class.

Contemporary development discourses have focused exclusively on the need to address the gaps and deficit in human lives occasioned by evident failures in human organizations, governance structures and leadership responsibilities. Historically, development efforts have been centred around the drive to erect structures without adequate efforts on the immediate and long term satisfaction of human needs thereby breeding large scale poverty and below-par living conditions. Thus, central to development is the satisfaction of the people measured in terms of the leader’s ability to meet basic needs without recourse to economic indices that does not match empirical realities. Consequently, an insignificant percentage of the population lives in wealth contrary to the larger population who lives in abject poverty.

The living condition of the masses of Africa is at variance with the living condition of its elites who control power and own majority of the wealth either in landed property or financial terms. These disparities are evident in class differences between the wealthy minority of the continent and poor majority across the continent where systemic poverty and want is on the daily increase. The level of poverty in the continent is continuously increasing. It is estimated that a good percentage of African masses slip down the poverty line with an increased level of inequality.

According to a study by Afrobarometer, “for years the continent has been recording some of the highest economic growth rates with African Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increasing by 4.7% between 2000 and 2018 without corresponding increase in the living condition of its daily impoverished citizens. The study categorically noted the role of inequality as the main driver of poverty in the continent. By implication therefore, inequality in the continent is largely a function of elite conspiracy manifested through bad leadership and corruption amongst the governing elites and their cronies. The implication of these negative experiences is that the continent of Africa has become the theatre of insecurity and all manners of diseases.

The continent of Africa is conspicuously synonymous with raging and inhuman ills such as poverty, unemployment, insecurity, diseases and all manners of issues that have made living condition below expectations. The challenge of security and other social problems in Africa particularly Sub-Saharan Africa was aptly captured by Akokpari (2007) when he noted that,



Insecurity has attained high levels in Africa, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Over 40 percent of its 800 million people live below the poverty line and this percentage is predicted to rise. Also, Africa has high incidents of conflicts and instability. Currently, Ivory Coast, the Great lakes region, Somalia, Darfur (Sudan), Northern part of Nigeria, Niger and the Horn remain highly volatile. Africa currently has the largest contingent of UN peacekeepers – 17,000 strong in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In addition, Africa is ravaged by various diseases, and is currently the global epicentre of the dreaded HIV/AIDS. Food and nutritional inadequacies have reached monumental proportions. Over 28 percent of all children in SSA are underweight as a result of malnutrition. And, while the average percentage of under nourishment in the developing world is 17, that for SSA is 33 percent. Southern, Central and the Horn of Africa continually remain vulnerable to droughts, painting a bleak scenario for food security. At the same time, environmental degradation is on the increase, reflected in deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, pollution, and depleting fish and game stocks. The ecological problems in Africa are compounded by the inability of African governments to establish credible environmental regimes and their willingness to trade the environment for scarce foreign exchange.

The forgoing captures the dilemmas which are however compounded by the fact that Africa is home to abundant human and natural resources. Giving a picture of the state of resources both human and material available in Africa, the culture of disparity in citizens economic capability is conspicuously manifested especially in the distribution of economic resources between the citizens (the haves and the haves-not), the control of state power between the few ruling class who have the characteristics of forcefully perpetuating themselves in power against the wishes of the governed and by implication exposing the majority of the citizens to growing insecurity with the aftermaths loss of lives and property.

Within the forgoing positions, Ushie of Oxfam Nigeria (cited in Wilhelm, 2020) noted explicitly that “if we want to fight poverty in Nigeria for example as in other countries in the continent, we must first fight inequality. He was of the view that, inequality is the biggest driver of poverty in the world”. Inequality and the realization of same has birth the culture of exclusionism which has caused citizens to take arms against the state despite the drive and adoption of democratic principles in the continent.

It is against the above background that this paper examines the nature of elitist economy and the inherited culture of class stratification amongst African masses. Specifically, it attempts a historical analysis of the nature of capitalism and the process of capitalist penetration of the continent of Africa; analyse the culture of inequality and exploitation in Africa and as well examine the consequences of the manifestation of inequality and exploitation in Africa. It employed the qualitative method which is based on thematic analysis while data were

obtained from secondary sources like books, journals, articles, and seminar papers and internet materials.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Inequality is a major issue in the continent of Africa. The nature of this problem is manifested in economic classes which places the citizens on different economic and social status. The masses of Africa are greatly improvised given the cause of capitalism as inherent from its contact with Western capitalism where the means of production is concentrated in the hands of selected few. This culture has found its place into contemporary African societies with grave consequence to human existence and ability to meet daily needs because of dwindling economic power and capabilities.

The entrenched system of exploitation under which the majority of the poor working class live have great consequence on the development and continued existence of the continent without resolve to the positions advanced by Marx in the working class inspired revolution. Therefore, in realization of this fundamental challenge and many others across the continent of Africa, this paper examines the historical development of capitalism and situate same within the plight of the African masses from the stand point of raging class stratification which is a major attribute of the capitalist system which find its way into the continent during the long years of Europe and Africa engagements.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Different theoretical paradigm exists that explains the basis of and the contending issues confronting individuals and the society at large (Matthew, 2017). Marxist postulations have vigorously brought to the fore the place of class and inequality in human societies with special emphasis on the relationship between the capitalist and the working class with a distinguishing attribute of exploitation and deepening inequality.

Given the forgoing, the paper adopts the Marxist Class theory as its framework of analysis. The Marxist class theory holds its existence to the many postulations of Karl Marx as elaborated by Parkin (1979) who noted that, the position of the individual within a given class or hierarchy is a function of their role in the production process, and averred that, political and ideological consciousness is measured by the class or position a person occupies in the society.

Marx idea of class stratification and class struggle was inherited from the school of utopian socialism and the writings of Henri de Saint-Simon. The positions were further elaborated by the other French Historian like Adolphe Thiers and Francois Guizot of the French revolution of 1789. Differing from the positions of the French revolution, Marxist postulations draw on the place of class consciousness and struggle as the primary force of social revolution. He noted conspicuously that, ‘the history of all hitherto existing human society is the history of class struggles’.

The central thesis of the theory is the division of the society into classes based primarily on economic capabilities of individuals. The development of capitalism allows for the contending class to take an acute form. The contending classes are systematically opposed to each other in the capitalist system such that, the owners of the means of production (the



bourgeoisie) and the working class (the proletariat) struggles for the survival of their groups at the expense and satisfaction of the other. However, the collapse of the bourgeoisie) and the eventual triumph of the working class over the former is inevitable because the bourgeois relations of production are the last contradictory form of the process of social production, contradictory not in the sense of an individual contradiction, but of a contradiction that is born of the conditions of social existence of individuals; however, the forces of production which develop in the midst of bourgeois society create at the same time the material conditions for resolving this contradiction. With this social development the prehistory of human society ends.

For Marx there are two contending views of revolution. One is that of a final conflagration, “a *violent* suppression of the old conditions of production,” which occurs when the opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat has been carried to its extreme point. This conception is set forth in a manner inspired by the Hegelian dialectic of the master and the slave, in *Die heilige Familie* (1845; *The Holy Family*). The other conception is that of a permanent revolution involving a provisional coalition between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie rebelling against a capitalism that is only superficially united. Once a majority has been won to the coalition, an unofficial proletarian authority constitutes itself alongside the revolutionary bourgeois authority. Its mission is the political and revolutionary education of the proletariat, gradually assuring the transfer of legal power from the revolutionary bourgeoisie to the revolutionary proletariat.

The class theory is therefore the driving force for the displacement of the capitalist class whose grip on the institutions of the state has perpetually alienated the masses and placed them under economic subjugation in the midst of limitless economic and financial prosperity across the continent of Africa. Therefore, the working class holds the key for their eventual emancipation within the positions advanced by Marx in his work on revolution as the fundamental ingredient for establishing an inclusive government across the African continent.

### **Nature of Capitalism and the Process of Capitalist Penetration of the Continent of Africa**

Capitalism as an economic system is rooted in two fundamental attributes which are profit and market. The drive for profit maximization by the capitalist has significantly placed the working class as a tool in the hands of the capitalist class for exploitation and domination. Also, the continuous belief that every space available in the society is often accorded the status of a market for which commodities are exchanged for profit by the capitalist class further opens the debate of class distinction as a major subject in contemporary socio-economic relations in developing societies like Africa.

Specifically, Laclau (1971) noted that given the ‘extended positions and argument over the conceptualization of capitalism, it should be given concerted attention in order to give a clear and unambiguous meaning to the age long concept’. It was noted exclusively of capitalist societies as those where profit motives overrides other intentions. Others see the taking root of capitalist relations and structures of production as the definitive feature of a capitalist society. Yet for many ordinary people, a capitalist society is understood as simply one that is characterised by exploitation and inequality of one section or groups of society by another.



Often, a capitalist society is defined by the existence of free-market enterprise, and freedom to sell and buy goods and services, distinction between the owners of the instrument of production and the possessors of the power of production. In a broader sense, Bruce Bartlett (1990) conceptualizes capitalism in Africa thus: "Throughout Africa today, capitalism is staging a comeback. After a century of colonialism and 30 years of African Socialism,' the continent is at last returning to its capitalist roots. It is often asserted that Africa has no capitalist tradition, but this is not so. Africans are natural traders with a long history of barter, exchange, and entrepreneurship that was stifled by government control.

The thoughts advanced by Alavi (1982) on capitalism shows that, it is the social relations of production emanating from the capitalist mode of production which define a capitalist society in the Marxian system of thought. Analysts who use this framework to analyse capitalism in Africa often conclude that most African societies are pre-capitalist, perhaps on the 'long road' to becoming capitalist. Reasons given in support of this view include that most Africans have not been 'captured' into capitalist relations and structures of production (Hyden 1980, 1986); giving rise to what has been termed 'a stunted form' of capitalism (Cox and Negi 2010), meaning that the process of separating the direct producers from the means of production has been incomplete and nebulous.

The place of capitalism in the continent of Africa has been subjected to varying positions. It was asserted that capitalist relations have long been established on the continent, and therefore African societies have been capitalist for a long time. Proponents of this view argue that from the time Africa came into contact with the capitalist world, African societies have been irreversibly drawn deeper into capitalist social relations (Amin 1972; Wallerstein 1980). Wallerstein (1980), in particular, argues that the incorporation of a society into the capitalist system through exchange of necessary goods or services draws that society into capitalist relations by means of a unified global division of labour.

The nature and characteristics of capitalism was aptly captured by Ake (1981) thus:

the capitalist mode of production has two main features. The first is that the means of production are very unevenly distributed to the point that we have, for all practical purposes, a society divided essentially into a small group of people who monopolise the means of production and the rest of the population who have no means of production. The second major characteristic of capitalism is commodity production, which gives capitalist society some of the characteristics of a market.

The above explains the system of operations of capitalist societies and its inherent character which subject the mass of the working class under the whims and caprices of a privilege few either because of economic advantage amassed through collaborative exploitation, corrupt practices and access to political power which is used for personal and family interest as evident across African countries like Nigeria under corrupt military regimes, Uganda, and Zimbabwe under the long rule of Idi Amin and Robert Mugabe respectively.



The historical development and penetration of capitalism in Africa is varying. Chitonge (2017) noted that it is possible to track the development of capitalist relations and production structures in African societies over time, it is always difficult to lay claim to a particular time when the three basic features of capitalism manifested in African societies. Therefore, there are scholars who argue that in a true Marxian sense, capitalism can be said to emerge only when the capitalist mode and social relations of production are entrenched, i.e. the separation of the 'direct producer' from the means of production (Alavi 1982; Bettelheim 1972; Laclau 1971). This view holds that, the 'fundamental economic relationship of capitalism is constituted by the free labourer's sale of his/her labour-power which determines the creation and multiplication of wealth through profit for the capitalist, whose necessary precondition is the loss by the direct producer and ownership of means of production' (Laclau 1971, 4).

This forgoing approach further reinforced the fact that, African societies can only be capitalist if the direct producers have the means of production. As long as small fragment of the society possess and control exclusively the means of production, these societies have not fulfilled the 'necessary precondition' of being a capitalist society. It is further argued that the claim that capitalism existed during the mercantilist period is a result of confusing the exploitative exchange relations with the core Marxist concept of capitalist modes and relations of production.

### **Inequality and Exploitation in Africa: An Outcome of Class Stratification**

The post-colonial states in Africa are divided across two unequal lines which is a clear manifestation of the inherent economic, social, political and religious structures that is practised in the various countries. These unequal lines are evidently structured with reference to individual or group economic strengths or weaknesses. The upper and lower strata of the society represent distinctively the elite and the masses or put differently the haves and the have's-not, these structures are based on the predominate character of inequality which is closely tied to the inherited system of class stratification.

Class difference with respect to individual economic capability is a major attribute of a capitalist society built on the formation of elites group with the monopoly of power and economic advantage. The dysfunctionality of majority of African masses compared to their elite's counterpart and the resources available at their disposal constitute a major challenge in the redistribution of wealth to the deeply impoverished masses which has created wide gap with reference to access to the good of the state such as health facilities, educational and employment opportunities. The structure of most states built on capitalist accumulation is a major point of systemic inequality in the continent of Africa where state apparatus are deployed in the interest of a select few.

Arrighi and Saul (1968) suggest that a useful starting point in analysing capitalism in Africa is to look at the structure of African economies, which have always been dominated by independent producers', with limited wage employment averaging 11.1% during the 1960s (Arrighi and Saul 1968) a situation which has largely remained unchanged over the last five decades, with wage employment stagnating in most countries. As noted above, the average wage employment ratio in the continent in 2015 was estimated at 12%, with countries such as Benin, Niger, Sudan, Angola, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Burkina Faso and Liberia reporting

below 10% (ILO, 2015). But these statistics have often led to the erroneous view that the rest of the non-wage labourers are not 'captured' by capitalist relations and therefore are not capitalist societies (Hyden 1986).

### **Consequences of Elitism and Class Exploitation in Africa.**

The effect of long years of exploitation and inequality built on the structure of elitism in the continent of Africa has left the majority of the people under unending poverty made possible through the conspiracy of the elites. The dysfunctionality of the structure of the states enables the exploitation of the masses. This position was aptly captured by Arrighi and Saul (1968) when they suggested that the main mechanism through which capitalism operates and has shaped African societies is through the way surplus value is captured by the capitalist class and their co-collaborators. They further noted that, this process is central to the analysis and understanding of how capitalist relations affect all sections of African societies including independent producers.

They expanded their position by noting affirmatively that, there are three fundamental ways in which the surplus generated in the continent is transferred into the capitalist circuits of accumulation. The first is that the larger part of the surplus generated in African societies is drained through expatriation of profit and payment of salaries to expatriates (now experts/consultants) which has helped to impoverish the working class who are left with crumbs as wages for their exploited labour; the second is that the other part of the surplus is then used by a small section of African society in wage employment (the 'labour aristocracy') through their discretionary consumption; the remnant from the undisposed surplus is deployed and then used as investment in the production of consumer goods against capital goods that can improve the lives of the masses. The draining of the economic surplus through profit taking, interests and dividends paid out to the owners of capital has been 'an efficient device for transferring surplus generated abroad to the advanced capitalist countries' (Arrighi and Saul 1968).

This draining and pillage of the economic surplus from African production process affects not only those who are directly involved in wage employment; it affects even those in non-wage activities through the consumption of products that are linked to the global capitalist product circulation. Peasant farmers in remote villages who sell their crops to buy detergents such as Omo or Ariel are actually participating in the capitalist circuits of accumulation by means of the money that eventually is shipped out of Africa to the mother company Procter & Gamble (P&G) in the United States of America (Chitonge, 2017). This extends the circle of exploitation and deepens the manifestation of poverty and inequality in Africa given the disparities in purchasing power of the elite's core and poor masses of the periphery states in the continent. The interactions have entrenched capitalist relations in these societies, such that they now possess the character of economic inequality which has become the nature and part of the system.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Class difference hinged on economic and social standards is prevalent in the continent which has become a major predicament for development and satisfaction of the people in the continent of Africa. To address the challenges undermining individual and collective



aspiration of the majority of African poor and peasant masses, the place of institutional functions are fundamental. Public and private institutions in Africa need to address the decay of public good and service delivery.

Importantly, the widening gap between the political-wealthy class and their cronies in the private sector on the one hand and the poorly governed electorate on the other hand should be addressed though de-emphasizing exorbitant monetary rewards for public office holders. Emphasis should be placed on erecting an egalitarian political and economic process that would address the need of the masses in the continent.

Finally, the masses considering their numerical strength should purposefully become actively involved in the political process that would provoke and produce a radical and pro-masses class of public office holders who would revolutionize leadership responsibilities and public function in line with the writings and postulations of Pan-Africanism and African socialism.

## References

- Akokpari, J. (2007). *The Political Economy of Human Insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa*. A Publication of the Institute of Developing Economics, Japan External Trade Organization. <https://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Publish/Download/Vrf/pdf/431.pdf>. Retrieved on 14/12/2020.
- Alavi, H. (1982). "The Structure of Peripheral Capitalism." H. Alavi and T. Shanin, (eds.) *Introduction to the Sociology of Development Societies*, New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Amin, S. (1972). Underdevelopment and Dependence in Black Africa: Historical Origin. *Journal of Peace Research*, 9 (2): 105–119.
- Arrighi, G. (2002). The African Crisis: World Systemic and Regional Aspects. *New Left Review* 15: 5–36.
- Arrighi, G., & John S. (1968). Socialism and Economic Development in Tropical Africa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 6 (2): 141–169.
- AU/ECA (African Union/Economic Commission for Africa). 2015. *Illicit Financial Flows: A Report of the High Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa*. Addis Ababa: AU/ECA.
- Bartlett, B. (1990). Capitalism in Africa: A Survey. *The Journal of Developing Areas* 24 (3): 327–350.
- Bettelheim, Charles. 1972. "Some Theoretical Comments." In *Unequal Exchange* in Arghiri, E. (ed.). *A Study of the Imperialism of Trade*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Buder, T. & Savage, M. (1996). *Social Change and Middle Classes*, London: UCL Press.
- Chitonge, H. (2017). Capitalism in Africa: Muting Capitalist Relations and Social Formation. *Review of African Political Economy*, DOI: 10.1080/03056244.2017.1372280.

- Cox, K. R., & Rohit, N. (2010). The State and the Question of Development in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Review of African Political Economy* 37 (123): 71–85.
- ECA (Economic Commission for Africa). 2016. Economic Report on Africa 2016: Greening Africa's Industrialisation. Addis Ababa: ECA.
- Egbomuche, L. O. (2006). *Political Thought of Africa*. Onitsha: Golden Value Books.
- Hyden, G. (1980). *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry*. London: Heinemann.
- Hyden, G. (1986). The Anomaly of the African Peasantry. *Development and Change* 17 (3): 677–705.
- ILO (International Labour Organization). 2015. World Employment Social Outlook: The Changing Nature of Jobs. Geneva: ILO. Accessed October 12, 2016. [http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2015-changing-nature-of-jobs/WCMS\\_368626/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2015-changing-nature-of-jobs/WCMS_368626/lang--en/index.htm).
- Laclau, E. 1971. "Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America." *New Left Review* 1 67. <http://newleftreview.org/?view=816>.
- Matthew, R. (2017). International Trade and Classical Liberalism. *Our Politics* April, 22. Retrieved from <http://ourpolitics.net/international-trade-classic-economics> on 6/9/2018.
- Onimode, B. (1988). *A Political Economy of the African Crisis*. London: Zed Books.
- Wilhelm, J. P. (2020). *Africa: More Poverty Despite Economic Growth*. [www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com). Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> April, 2021.
- Wallerstein, I. (1980). Africa in a Capitalist World. *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 10 (1/2): 21–31.

### Brief bio-data of the Authors

**Otumala, Simon Jonah** holds a PhD in Political Science from the Kwara State University, Malate in Kwara State. He teaches Political Science at the Federal College of Education Abeokuta, Ogun State. His area of interest includes International Political Economy, Foreign Policy Analysis and Inter-State Relations

**Salahu, Moshood Olayinka**, holds a PhD, in Political Science from Kwara State University Malete. Specialises in Politics, Public Administration and Policy Studies. He teaches in the Department of Politics and Governance at Kwara State University, Malete in Kwara State, Nigeria.



# FUWUKARI JOURNAL OF POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT

ISSN: 2636-5081



FUWJPD

[www.fuwjpd.com.ng](http://www.fuwjpd.com.ng)

