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**THE SOCIOLOGY OF POVERTY IN AFRICA:
THE CULTURAL PARADIGM**

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Summary

Poverty as a phenomenon is so pervasive and the various programs to address it in Africa have tended to fail. This paper adopts the sociological/ Anthropological paradigm as the perceptual prism to analyze the phenomenon. It identified that the social environment in pre-industrial Africa made, the social institutions of polygamy and its attendant large family size a necessity. No one in this society was unemployed. Furthermore, large family and number of wives married earned one high social statuses. The very factors, which hitherto earned one high social status in the society, marked the beginning of poverty in Africa. This is because African children, men and women who did not need formal education in the old social order to function and hard none anyway, could not fit into the new industrial state, which required a modicum of western

education to function. The people remained largely unemployed and poor. This created the poverty regime -which is still subsisting today hence the pervasiveness of poverty. The termination of the poverty dynasty in Africa would require a robust economy with enormous state intervention, redistribution of wealth through a carefully grafted fiscal policy. Population control should be embraced by African states with visionary leadership.

Introduction

Beside HIV/AIDS pandemic, one of the burdens of the 21st century is the prevalence of pervasive poverty. The paradox is that, the situation is increasingly looking helpless despite several poverty alleviation programs introduced by the Government. The endemic nature of poverty has made it a worrisome subject matter. As a national epidemic, everyone should be interested in its causes, effects and cures. This paper is one of such attempts, to evaluate just an aspect and introduce a paradigm towards a holistic consideration of the 'African condition' of poverty. The adaptation of science and technology has positively affected almost all aspects of life except poverty. Why has poverty in Africa persisted? Could it be that Africa needs more time to address the problem?

The paper seeks to explain how an aspect of African culture which generated wealth in pre-industrial society, has become one of pervasive poverty in

industrial society. It further argues that any effective program to address the problem of poverty must take into cognizance, the cultural norms and values, which generate the variables, which transmute into poverty. In order to address the issues raised herein, the paper adopts a sociological/ anthropological paradigm for understanding the African poverty condition and how this has engendered an endemic vicious circle of poverty in Africa. The paper is structured into; section 1- Africa and conceptual issues, section 2- the African kinship and the adequacy of African Socialism, section 3- the inadequacy of the African culture in an industrial setting, while section 4- suggests public policy option to address the situation.

Poverty in Africa

In terms of resources Africa is one of the best endowed regions of the world ...Africa has about 96 per cent of the non-Communist world's diamonds, 60 per cent of its gold, 42 per cent of its cobalt, 34 per cent of its bauxite and 28 per cent of its uranium. Africa's iron reserves are probably twice those of the United States, and its reserves of chrome are the most important by far outside the Soviet Union. In the 1970s the United States... imported 98 per cent of its manganese from abroad, nearly half of which has been from Africa. Then there is Africa's agricultural potential (Mazrui, 1980) which could be used to feed the entire continent.' The paradox of this rich continent is that, though Africa is the best-endowed region of the world, it is still the less

developed of the inhabited continents. The continent as a whole is so fragmented that it includes the majority of the poorest nations of the world. The paradox here is of a rich continent, which contains many poverty-stricken societies. This is the pathology of a fragmented economy (Mazrui, 1980). It is instructive to state that in spite of the paradoxes in Africa; all the African states, before and immediately after Independence had agriculture as the mainstay of their economy, and as a major contributor to its GDP.

Conceptual Issues

In order to evaluate how the African culture affected the social organization of the people, sociological/anthropological paradigm has been adopted. A paradigm is an intellectual framework that structures one's thinking about a set of phenomena. Paradigms are nothing more than 'cognitive maps' that help to organize reality and to make some sense out of the multitude of events that occur in the world each day. Different paradigms offer different models of reality or views of the world, and thus have the effect of focusing attention toward some things and away from others (Rosenau, 1961). In order to understand how the African culture had conditioned Africans into poverty, we turn to Sociology and Anthropology for an understanding of how the social milieu conditioned the people's ways of lives.

Sociology is a social science, which studies the social relationships between people as individuals and as groups and the influence of social conditions on these

relationships (Peil, 1977). Another view described sociology as a systematic or scientific discipline, which studies human society and social behavior. It focuses on processes and patterns of organizations and conducts that are recurrent in society...rural sociology is mainly concerned with the study of the social and cultural factors affecting the lives of those in rural or agrarian communities (E ng, 1988). Sociological studies are more capable of explaining the African past when combined with Anthropology. This is because Anthropology studies man and the works of man in simple societies.

A look at pre-colonial Africa through the perceptual prism of Sociology and Anthropology reveals the following social facts;

- i) That Africa was and is an agrarian society, which engendered agriculture as the main occupation of the people.
- ii) That the social organization of the people, to meet the need of labor to plough the fields made polygyny and large families a social necessity.
- iii) Male social prestige depended on how many wives and children one had, how many acres of land one cultivated, the number of yam barns, groundnut bags, bags of cocoa seedlings and the number of bunch of palm fruits a family head was able to accumulate were all determinants in the acquisition of chieftaincy titles.

- iv) The production of agricultural produce though conducted through crude means, produced enough food and finances for the inclusive pre-industrial communities. There was hardly anyone left in poverty because of the social dynamics of the kinship system. This is because whoever had nothing was cared for by the extended family system. African value system frowned at indigent persons who were not cared for by their families.
- v) It is instructive to note that formal education was not invoked in pre-industrial African society. The level of technical skills available could not be transferred to the demand of the industrial societies, which emerged thereafter.

The Concept of Poverty

It is herein hypothesized that the collapse of the traditional economic system in Africa, caused by Industrial revolution and its application in Africa, provided the onset of poverty in all its forms in the continent. The phenomenon poverty is difficult to define. A major problem in defining poverty is the absence of adequate statistics. For instance, the United States spends more money than any other nations in the world upon statistical investigations, yet we know less about the poverty of the people than almost any other great nation of the Western world (Patterson, 1986). These difficulties have informed the description of the characteristics of poverty rather than the

definition. Incidentally, Franklin D. Roosevelt painted some of the unique features of the phenomenon in 1937 when he observed that one-third of (the) U.S.A. was 'ill-housed, ill clad and ill nourished. This was by almost any contemporary definition of poverty conservative (Patterson, 1986). Rubinow (1986) on his part stated that escaping poverty is an opportunity to enjoy life. Myrdal (1964) stressed that poverty was an economic condition stemming from blocked or unutilized opportunities.

He opined in 1964 that poverty is drawn between the people in the urban and rural slums, and the majority ...who live in a virtual full-employment economy...There is an under-class of people in the poverty pockets who live an ever more precarious life and are increasingly excluded from any job worth having, or who do not find any jobs at all (Myrdal, 1964). The sociologist Herbert Gans shared Myrdal's perspective when he posited that the poor were 'an economically and politically deprived population whose behavior, values and pathologies are adaptations to their existing situation, just as the behavior, values, and pathologies of the affluent are adaptations to their existing situation (1968).

The World Bank Glossary of Poverty and Human Development (1997) divided poverty into; Poverty line or Poverty threshold: This is the basic or lowest amount of money an individual needs to survive per day. In 1985, the World Bank set an international poverty line at US\$1 per person per day for the purpose of international

comparison. Nations are expected to establish their own poverty line using either 'cost-of-basic' needs (food and non-food items) methods, 'food or dietary energy intake' method, or 'food share' method. Poverty line to be adequate, must not only take into consideration the cost of balanced diet but other expenses like clothing, housing, medical costs, and transportation (Ekong, 1986).

It could be synthesized from the above views that poverty refers to a situation in which a group of people survive in low quality housing lacking basic amenities, who cannot afford balanced diets, as a result, they are malnourished. They do not enjoy life's abundance and do not partake in the industrial state for lack of skills, hence unemployed. Above all, they are victims of blocked economic opportunities through poor public policies. Both the rural and the urban poor are always discounted in the calculation of public policies. This people generate a culture of poverty in African societies.

Theoretical Framework

There have been several theories, which attempt to present a logical rationalization of poverty some of which include;

Structural Theory

i) Structural theorists stress that poverty is an economic condition stemming from blocked opportunities. Gunnar Myrdal, had maintained that position for years, and used as his key word 'exclusion.' 'Something like a caste

line... is drawn between the people in the urban and rural slums and the majority of Americans who live in a virtual full-employment economy ...there is an under-class an under-class of people in the poverty pockets who live an ever more precarious life and are increasingly excluded from any jobs worth having, or who do not fund any jobs at all' (Patterson, 1986).

This theory opined that the exclusion of a group from the social benefit of public policy, naturally impoverishes the group that has been blocked out. The inadequacy of public policy, is responsible for poverty according to this theory. As a way out, the antipoverty policy should be such as to ensure income as a matter of right, an amount sufficient to maintain all persons throughout the nation at a uniformly adequate level of living.

ii) McClelland in the book 'The Achieving Society' upheld that a nation with a generally high level of 'n-achievement' would produce more energetic entrepreneurs who, in turn, produce rapid economic development. The basis of this theory is the assumption that it is values, not motives or psychological forces that determine ultimately the rate of economic and social development (Offiong, 1980). The implication of this theory is that African societies have low achievement orientation, which culminates in poverty.

The overall implication of the theory for African continent has always been underdevelopment since it has never been fortunate to have many individuals with 'n-achievement.' This accounts for the pervasive poverty of the African continent.

iii) Another Eurocentric explication of poverty in the African continent assumes a vicious circle dimension. It states that poverty prevails in Africa, because Africans are poor, thus they cannot generate enough savings, hence not enough capital can be put together to be lent to others as capital for business. This is compounded by the fact that traditional societies, which abound in Africa, are peasant-based, lacking in significant economic growth, custom-bound, hierarchical, unproductive, and characterized by authoritarian personality, long-run fatalism, and low ceiling of attainable output per head because of the primitive nature of its technology. Rostow (1960) added that the productive capabilities of these societies are characterized by pre-Newtonian science and technology and pre-Newtonian attitudes towards the physical world (Offiong, 1980). This translates into low productivity low-savings and poverty. This situation is compounded by the large family size of the Africans, whose income from traditional occupation can hardly sustain as a living wage.

iv) Political Scientists on their part linked poverty to colonial exploitation, and neo-colonialism..."it has now been agreed that in most instances the 'causes' and effects of poverty interact in that what makes people poor also creates conditions that keep such people poor. The factor that correlates with poverty includes, over-production, resource base, wars and instability of government; illiteracy, inadequate education and unemployment, natural and man-made and

mismanagement and insensitivity leadership (Ekong, 1988).

Deduced from the theories above, poverty is generated from; (i) blocked opportunities which result from the inadequacy of public policies (economic, social, cultural and political which discounts rural and people of certain social classes; (ii) Absence of the 'achievement' drive in Africans, (iii) the poverty of Africans which has not allows them to generate enough savings, to accumulate surplus capital to drive the economy with trickle-down effect on the general populace. These variables have been identified as the major causal-factors of endemic poverty in Africa.

African Socialism and Poverty in Pre-Industrial Africa

Africans had large families yet hardly was anyone in poverty. Today in the same continent, the people who were earlier having full employment are faced with poverty because of the change in the means of production and social organization, which requires high technical skill, which they do not have. The social organization in pre-colonial Africa rested on the kinship system, which accommodated everyone hence a bulwark against poverty.

According to Julius Kambarage Nyerere, socialism, like democracy, is an attitude of mind, and not the rigid adherence to a standard political pattern. The basic difference between a socialist society and a capitalist society does not lie in their methods of

producing wealth, but in the way that wealth is distributed. The organization of traditional African society, the distribution of the wealth it produced was such that there was hardly any room for parasitism...and because of this Africa could not produce a leisured class of landowners (Wikipedia, 2006). When a society is so organized that it cares about its individuals, who are willing to work, no individual within that society should worry about what will happen to him tomorrow if he does not hoard wealth today. Society itself could look after him, or his widow, or his orphans. This was exactly what traditional African society was doing. Both the 'rich' and the 'poor' individuals were completely secure in African society. They depended on the wealth possessed by the community of which he was a member. In traditional African society everybody was a worker, there was no other way of earning a living for the community (Wikipedia, 2006). This was the social order, which did not know poverty.

The standard of life was relatively high and there was no one without a stake in the means of production. The system accommodated everyone hence, poverty was unknown. It is pertinent to state that the skills, which were needed to operate this society, were not commensurate for the industrial societies, which emerged.

The transition to Poverty

In the 17th century, precisely in England in the years between the ascension of George III and Williams IV, the face of England changed and this was to have global implication. This change is referred to as Industrial revolution. The phenomenon could be described as a state of the creation of mechanized factory system which produces vast quantities at a diminishing cost as to create its own demand because of its ability to produce cheaper products. This leads to high demand because of its cheapness. The old guild system broke down giving room for initiation to test new ideas. The 1624 statute of monopolies had swept away the old feudal system. The intervention of the state encouraged inventions and those willing to place their inventions at the disposal of industrial system. For instance, the Government of England at the time paid £14,000 to Thomas Lombe for inventing the silk throwing machine, £30,000 to Edward Jenner for inventing the inoculation vaccine and £5000 to Samuel Crompton for the mule (Ashton, 1947).

Otite and Ogionwo (1979) in their discourse of industrialization posited that, once an industry is established, for example to manufacture clothes, palm oil, iron, etc. it generates changes in the social and economic organizations of the people concerned. The interaction between the people, the society and its industries is the accompanying complex changes in values, goals and needs of a society and its establishment of new or different kinds of industries, or

the modification of existing ones. It would be recalled that with this development, the burden of production was taken off the shoulder of man unto that of the machines. The machines could produce more, cheaper and effectively than human could. The operations of the machines needed human skills different from that obtained in pre-industrial societies. The training naturally implies formal education from where the relevant skills, aptitude and attitude relevant to the production processes were obtained. The introduction of this means of production to the African condition as described above created a deep gulf between the new means of production and the available human resources in Africa. The changes brought about by the industrial revolution in industrial organization in the global economy rendered the values and norms, which underlay the possession of large families irrelevant. By this token, the large families paradoxically became liabilities in the post-industrial era. This marked the cradle of poverty in Africa.

The Industrial Society and Africa

The Industrial society, which emerged because of the industrial revolution, rendered the system of production in pre-industrial Africa obsolete. The numerous working age children, who were both a means of status symbol and a source of labor for production in the local industries in the tradition societies, could not fit into the new industrial system. They were therefore left out of the new social formation of the industrial society. The

confrontation between the old African cultural values and the new industrial state, left structural unemployment in its trail. This illustrated the direct relationship between industrialization in Africa and poverty for as Hunter (1904) stated, much of our poverty is directly due to a whole series of economic disorders, which seem actually to make waste of human life necessary. Moreover, in so far as poverty is a result of such deeply seated and fundamental economic disorders, due either to the method by which industry is organized or the present ownership of the means and materials of production. The African workers' lot will only improve, in all probability, only through struggles between the workers and the capitalists (Hunter, 1904). Unemployment, which was the outcome of the confrontation between the old African cultural norm and the industrial society, has become the purveyor of poverty.

It has been stated earlier that agriculture had been the mainstay of the economy of all African states, before industrialization and the discovery of other sources of foreign exchange earners. As long as agriculture played this role in African economies, it yielded incomes to the family for the maintenance of both the nuclear and extended family. Again the new industrial state which emerged denied Africans of incomes from local production. They could not partake in the new system because of lack of the requisite skills. The problem of low income in a depressed economy was identified by John Maynard Keynes, a Brooking

Institution economist who stressed the problem of income mal-distribution and appreciated the utility of countercyclical fiscal policy...His solution work relief, rested on the conviction that purchasing power was the key to recovery (Patterson, 1986). After the introduction of the new industrial system, Africa not only lost their means of income, their purchasing power also dropped. First, agricultural products were now processed in factory setting. Secondly, they were not engaged in the factory production system because of lack of relevant skills. They were also not involved in the distribution of the finished products of the industries because of the lack of adequate capital to do so. On all fronts, they were not involved. This meant considerable loss of income and want of human capital.

The norms and principles of the new industrial state replaced the African mode of production. There are two main features of this new mode of social relations and organization. The first is that the means of production are very unevenly distributed to the point that we are left within a society divided essentially into a small groups of people who monopolize the means of production and the rest of the population who have no means of production (Ake, 1981). This is in contrast with the African tradition and attitude, which was, based on the 'family hood' what Nyerere institutionalized as Ujamaa. In family hood, all men were regarded as members of the ever-extending family.

The second feature is that of communal production for the market rather than for subsistence as

was the case in pre-industrial Africa. The implication is that those who have no means of production, but have their labor power should offer it in exchange in the new cash economy. The situation for the African is rather hopeless, because though the labor is in abundance, it is unskilled and therefore cannot be hired in the new industrial system. Notwithstanding this, the African has to feed and care for the large family, which he has raised. This situation brings us to the vicious circle of African poverty.

The Poverty Dynasty in Africa

Poverty Dynasty is an African condition, which is cyclical in nature. It takes the following structure;

- i) The typical African homestead is usually large (about 10 or more). Large homestead was a means of acquiring social status and a source of wealth in the pre-industrial agrarian economy. Strangely enough, the earlier source of wealth now constitutes the genesis of poverty in the new industrial state thus; Africans were engaged in agriculture, from where income was derived. The production system did not require educated and skilled labor; it depended on the raw strength of the large number of children in the homestead.
- ii) In the new industrial state, unskilled Africans became unemployed. They were not able to compete in the new system. This means lack of income to purchase necessities required in

the new economy. The children became malnourished because of the lack of resources to purchase food and Medicare. The children of the poor became poor themselves because of the social conditions prevalent in the household economy. A poverty dynasty is consequently created as new generation is born into this web of poverty.

- iii) The children migrate to the cities, in search of paid employment in industries but without adequate structures for accommodation, while immediate employment is difficult to come by. Life in the slum becomes a welcome alternative.
- iv) Having come to the city with no industrial and specific skill, he is faced with unemployment, the very problem that had hitherto driven him from the ancestral home. He is under a great temptation to go into crime, no wonder the slums are the global headquarters of most crimes.
- v) The migrant is married or becomes a single parent. Where he/she is married, the income he/she generates is so low that educating the children and paying fees become a problem. The children are likely to have high dropout rates from school, because of their level of poverty.

The 'poverty dynasty' becomes entrenched. According to Professor Soludo, former Central Bank Governor, most middle and upper income people send their children to private schools. It is the children of the poor or the poorest of the poor that end up in schools in rural communities. These children end up with poor levels of education and face the challenge of becoming poorer and continuing with the poverty circle. It has also been observed that these children have very high probability of ending up poorer, because the children of the poor, who formed a vast majority of the Nigerian population, have less chance of acquiring good education. They end up with low income and the poverty circle continues (Kolapo and Oladepo, 2007). These facts were confirmed by the assertion that low educational level of the fathers was the best predictor of low income for the sons, even after taking into account the mother's income, the father's income or occupation, the number of children in the family, the place of residence, and race. (Patterson, 1986).

Odumusu (1999) succinctly described a graphic imagery of those in poverty when he postulated that 'the poor man suffers from poor nutrition. He is vulnerable to diseases. His average life span is short. He lives in huts and where squalor perpetually surrounds him. He is illiterate in both letter and skill. He does not get meals regularly, but when he does, he is haunted with the fear of where his next meal will come from. He is clad in

rags, if at all. He walks without a pair of shoes....starvation and death stare him at his face as in medieval times...it is he who gives birth to the greatest number of children thus spreading and multiplying misery to the dark universe of destitution. If he is a villager, he may be landless, if he is a town-dweller; he rarely has a roof over his head. When the price goes up, the quality and quantity of his food goes down, because his income can no longer buy him the food he needs. When death comes to him finally, he seems happier than those he has left behind him.

This is the outcome of the poverty dynasty. What then is the import of this situation for the general economy?

Impact of Poverty

The poor are in both the urban and rural areas. In the urban areas the poor are located in the poor reservation area (PRA)-slums/ghettos which are inhabited by people who have degraded personality as a result of unemployment and slum culture. The families in this social group often face the problem of broken marriages with the children often left alone to care for themselves or by foster parents. This undermines the entire social structure of the society. The slums have been known to be the habitat for prostitutes, and a neighborhood composed of people with high disregard for morals, family disorganized, and people with criminal behavior who are psychologically maladjusted.

The current social problems of trafficking in persons, hawking, raping and slavery are apparently the outcome of social deprivation or poverty. Man, the object of development must eat before he can do anything else. The search for food leads people to engage in different social vices. The human personality is often 'broken' among people in this social class. Africa has more than 80 percent of its people in this social class. This large number of people cannot contribute to development and development has not positively affected them. It is therefore not surprising that Africa is sitting on naturally endowed resources yet cannot take advantage of it because a large percentage of the populations are not involved in the development processes.

There is a correlation between poverty and conflict. Africa is a continent of conflict. The crisis of governance in Africa is intertwined with the high rate of poverty. The poverty-ridden class provides ready source for the recruitment of touts for rigging of elections and attendant social upheavals. It is worthwhile to reason that the various conflicts in Africa could be explained using poverty as one of the causal factors.

The high incidence of poverty also means a loss of revenue for the government. Government to generate revenue cannot tax people without income. This by itself slows down the development processes and keeps people much longer in the poverty dynasty.

Which way out?

The paradigm of this study has shown that Poverty dynasty arose from the large family system, and the incongruent structure of traditional education of African children. Be that as it may be, Africans should go through processes of formal social education and cultural change to come to the realization that even one well educated child, would do what twenty were doing in the pre-industrial era for the father, community and the continent at large.

Poverty is one evil in an economic system that is in many ways dysfunctional and unbeneficial. There should be governmental stimulation of the economy through various processes.

Promoting purchasing power would drive away the old Malthusian world.(Bremner, 1966).This should be accompanied with redistribution of wealth through a carefully grafted fiscal policy. The working poor stands to improve his situation provided the redistribution of income is not rendered ineffective by incessant price increases in general goods and services, for this happens, it is the poor that suffers. Governments in Africa have enormous role to play in aiding-economic growth, as well as effecting redistribution of goods and services as effort towards the resolution of the crisis of poverty in the African continent.

This means that Government should be encouraged to invest in the economy in order to create jobs and wealth. The policy of disinvesting is a sine qua

non for instituting poverty in Nigeria and by implication in the African continent.

Finally, the policy of birth control should be made more attractive in Africa across religious boundaries. This is possible through intensive public education program. Modalities towards this should be set up by the various legislature of the continent or better still through the African Union (AU). As Africa ignores these, so shall it contend with unending poverty?

Conclusion

The pervasive poverty in Africa has been linked to the culture of large family size. This family was large because it served as a status symbol and a source of labor in the agrarian economy. The family was usually composed of uneducated persons at least not in the western education. Consequently, at the advent of industrial revolution, the old order in Africa could not fit into the new industrial state.

The gap led to pervasive poverty. The poverty of the father affected the children also who became poor thus creating a generational problem. This problem persists because many people are left out of the development process because of lack of appropriate skills. This lingering problem has been responsible for various crimes, and violent conflicts in Africa.

As a way out of the problem, the paper subscribes to the thesis of Keynes (1936) that the government should intervene in the economy to make it robust. The institutionalization of birth control in Africa is another way of combating large family size. In the new

industrial state where technology holds sway, Africans do not need many children as labor hands on the farms. This must be preceded by massive education, public enlightenment and mobilization of especially religious organization.

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