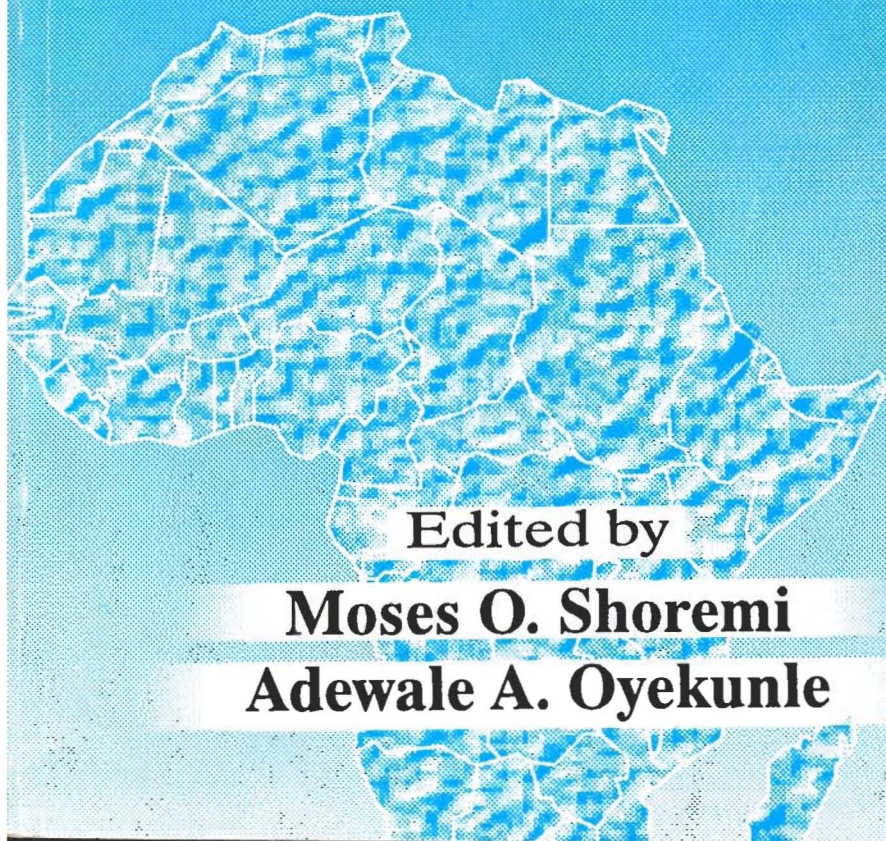


THE
SOCIAL STRUCTURE
OF
CONTEMPORARY
AFRICAN SOCIETIES



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CHAPTER TEN

AFRICAN ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

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Introduction

The consideration of the social structure of any society cannot be said to be complete without an examination of economic structure of such a society. Indeed, the economy is a very crucial social institution. This is because it is the institution responsible for the production and distribution of goods and services, all of which are very essential for human survival. For a society to be able to survive as a social organism, it must be able to produce those goods and services necessary for the upkeep to its members. It is the economy that is concerned with this basic task. The economy has been regarded by some scholars as the basic structure of society. For example, Karl Marx (1818-1883) considers the economy as the foundation on which society rests. To him, the economic infrastructure or sub-structure is the basic structure on which rests the super-structure which consists of such social institutions as polity, religion, the family and educational institution. In other words, although economic, political, legal and religious institutions can only be understood in terms of their mutual effect, economic factors exert primary influence and largely shape other aspects of society.

Our concern in this chapter is not to expound Marx's position on the economy. Rather, we have simply used his point of view to underscore the importance of the economy. Of interest to us in this chapter on African economic structure, is the kinds of economic organization (hunting and gathering, pastoralism, agriculture), subsistence and peasant economies as well as colonialism and changes in African economic structure. Africa comprises a multiplicity of peoples and cultures. The ways the people organize their societies differs from group to group and also around different economic items. The people of the Kalahari Desert, for example, organize themselves as hunting bands. Among these people, animals killed are shared. In some African kingdoms, people give part of their farm produce and certain types of animals to their rulers. Yet, just as is found among certain contemporary societies of America and Europe, some contemporary African societies have economies organized around the market.

Kinds of Economic Organization

There are different types of economic organization in Africa. They range from hunting and gathering to pastoralism, agriculture as well as the western type industrial organization which can be found in most contemporary African cities.

Hunting and gathering

This is a mode of subsistence which depends on the exploitation of wild or non-domesticated food resources. It involves the hunting of animals, fishing and the gathering of wild fruits, plants, honey and insects of the forest. Many hunting and gathering societies in Africa comprise small nomadic bands although others have shown greater social organization (Marshall, 1996).

The fact that vegetation is abundant and animals are hunted has a number of implications for social life and economic organization. In the first place, food gatherers and hunters normally migrate from one place to another after exhausting the available food in a particular place, usually after a few days or weeks. Consequently, their accommodation is usually very temporary in nature, consisting of "a few thatches or leaves on top of sticks or poles with improvised beds" (Otite and Ogionwo, 1979). Household materials normally include cooking materials, hunting tools and gadgets including bows and poisoned arrows. These are usually carried about whenever they abandon their houses or camps for new environments at the exhaustion of available food in a particular environment.

About ten to twenty persons in all could be in a place at a time, comprising kinsmen of three generations - grandparents, parents and their children with close kins. These combine as a hunting and gathering group. Division of labour in the group is based on sex, with hunting done mainly by males and gathering by females (Otite and Ogionwo, 1979; Marshall, 1996). There are usually little or no politics in these societies and neither are there much differences in position or rank - no divisions in terms of the rich and the poor. The only differences in position or rank tend to be limited to age and sex

(Giddens, 1997). Their activities are normally connected with economic survival, sometimes in very inhospitable environments. To a large extent, both kinship and economic units as well as their organization coincide.

Examples of hunting and gathering societies in Africa include: the people of the Mandara mountains of Borno State of Nigeria, the Khoi Africans of the Kalahari Desert and the Mbuti pygmies who live in an area of Zaire, in central Africa. These normally organize in small units in set but temporary patterns. There is order in the manner in which the exploitation of forest resources is done. While a hunting and gathering group may be restricted to certain territories, their neighbours may be restricted to other territories. Each hunting and gathering group is headed by the oldest man and he exercises authority over the members and also directs the movement of the group. Among the Khoi Africans, a band consists of several families. Each band produces its own food in its own hut. They tend to scatter over a large area during the rainy season but congregate around water holes during the dry season. The dry season thus affords them the opportunity to meet one another. The family unit constitutes the household. The man who heads it is the leader. He sets out with his son or apprentice to hunt for animals and also gather fruits, roots and leaves (Otite and Ogionwo, 1979).

The Mbiti inhabit a heavily forested area in Zaire. Their houses are not permanent dwellings. They are made of leaves on a framework of branches which they abandon after about a month. Membership of these bands is fairly permanent. It is the duty of the older men to settle quarrels and to quiet any 'noise' that could arise from such because this is believed to displease the spirits of the forest (Giddens, 1997). The traditional way of life of the outside world has increasingly encroached on the forests. Consequently, they are becoming drawn into the money economy of their surrounding villages. Their traditional way of life is, in fact, on the verge of extinction (Giddens, 1997).

Pastoralism

Pastoralism is a form of economic life based on herding. It is a

form of subsistence technology practised in environments where aridity or temperature extremes inhibit successful domestication of plant foods (Oke, 1984). Depending on the kind of environment in which they live, pastoralists rear and herd such animals as cattle, sheep, camels or horses. Pastoral societies in Africa are found in regions where there are plenty of grasslands, or in deserts or mountains. While these can support various kinds of livestock, they are not amenable to crop cultivation. As such, pastoralists seldom cultivate land.

Owing to the fact that they depend on natural vegetation, they migrate from place to place in search of grass for their grazing animals. This migration depends on seasonal changes. Their movement from place to place inhibits the accumulation of material possessions. Indeed, their nomadic habits render material possessions burdensome. However, their way of life is more complex than that of hunters and gatherers in material terms (Giddens, 1997).

Pastoralists are not normally found in the equatorial forests because the forest vegetation cannot sustain the animals. Besides, the existence of tsetse fly in the forest regions is a threat to the lives of the animals. Pastoralists are exposed to a lot of risks and dangers. As a result of this, they have to protect themselves and their animals as they move from place to place. Some learn to fight and defend themselves and in this process they become aristocrats. Most pastoralists are highly competitive and tend to be hostile to their neighbours. This is probably because of the harshness of their environment and their limited resources.

The produce of pastoral economy are used for a variety of purposes. Some of the animals are produced or raised for food, others are for wool while others are for milk which can also be converted to cheese. Some animals are for riding and for wars. Hides and skins are obtained from some of these animals and they are used to produce leather works.

There is a definite division of labour in the pastoral economy. Whereas the men do most of the grazing activities, young children and women do the milking and they are also involved in the sales. Milk is

sold to or exchanged with neighbours for agricultural products. This kind of economy prepares certain categories of people for jobs ahead and this is the picture of pastoralism anywhere in the world.

Examples of pastoralists in Africa are the Masai of East Africa, the Fulani of West Africa and the Nuer of southern Sudan. It is important to point out that there are local peculiarities in the social organization of pastoral people. Among the Masai, for example, there are patrilineal exogamous clans which are subdivided with each sub-clan serving as a domestic unit. At marriage, a man gives a substantial part of his stock to his wife to take care of. Wives hold cattle in trust for their husbands and sons. A man pays bride price in cattle and sheep which may be handed over to the girl's father only after she has given birth to a child. In many cases, grand parents and their children and relatives live in the same or near the same camps. However, the young men of say between sixteen and thirty years live apart from their parents and they form groups of up to fifty or more men in one camp. They act as warriors to defend their district and possibly add to their cattle through raids (Otite and Ogionwo, 1979). Some Masai people are partly agriculturists and may also be involved in food gathering and hunting. This is particularly so among those to whom cattle has a religious, ritual and ceremonial value which, indeed, overrides the economic value. Among these, agricultural production may serve to supply their economic commodities.

The cattle Fulani are mainly located in Northern Nigeria but they can also be found throughout the north-western part of West Africa or wherever they can find grass and water for their cattle. In the dry season, they move southwards in search of pasture and water while in the wet season they move northwards particularly to avoid tsetse fly. There is variation in the distance they cover in their movement. Availability of pasture, water and the presence of tsetse fly are the three factors that determine their movements. It is interesting to note that up to 1970, the Fulani nomads supplied Nigeria with over 80 percent of her beef and other bovine by-products (Onwuejeogwu, 1992). Although most pastoralists tend to be hostile to their

neighbours, owing partly to the harshness of their environment and their limited resources, the Fulani of West Africa now live peacefully with their neighbours, particularly the Hausa. There tends to be cooperation and interdependence between them in the area of trade. Being farmers, the Hausa supply most of the plant food needed by the cattle Fulani while the cattle Fulani supply the Hausa the meat and dairy products that they need.

The Nuer of southern Sudan depend mainly on the raising of cattle for their livelihood. However, they also grow some crops as well. They attach no particular significance to land, except in so far as it provides a place to graze their cattle. During the dry season, they move to live in camps near water-holes. In many ways, cattle is central to the culture of Nuer people and much of their life is bound up with their cattle. They have little regard for neighbouring people who have just few or no cattle. Every major phase of life - birth, entering adulthood, marriage and death is marked by rituals having to do with cattle. The Nuer show considerable sentiments and attachment to cattle as can be seen in the fact that men are addressed by the names of their favourite oxen and women by the names of their favourites among the cows they milk. Just like they live for cattle, they also fight wars for cattle's sake (Evans-Pritchard, 1940, in Giddens, 1997).

Agriculture

Agrarian societies are believed to have originated at about the same time as pastoral ones. As time went on, hunting and gathering groups began to plant their own crops rather than rely on wild fruits. This practice first developed in the form of what is called 'horticulture' which involves the cultivation of small gardens with the use of simple tools (like cutlasses and hoes) and digging instruments. Many people of the world, particularly those in Africa and other less developed countries still rely primarily on horticulture for their livelihood. Majority of the Igbo, Urhobo, Isoko and Yoruba of Southern Nigeria and many other groups in different parts of Africa are engaged in farming.

Political and economic organizations among agriculturists are more advanced than those found in hunting and gathering as well as pastoral societies. Similarly, the settlements and territories of agriculturists are more permanent and more defined.

Unlike modern agriculturists in Europe and America who make use of fertilizers, pesticides and modern technological equipment such as ploughs, harrows, weeders and harvesters, most agriculturists in Africa make use of simple implements as hoes, cutlasses, knives and digging sticks. In addition to their labour, they depend on the labour and assistance of their wives, children, kinsmen, friends and neighbours for cultivation of farms, planting and harvesting. Division of labour is based on age and sex. People who live in a compound constitute part of a common work force. The fact that the settlement of related family units is usually close serves to reinforce this communal and reciprocal work assistance. Among the Yoruba, for example, several related family members live together in the same compound.

The compound which is usually surrounded by a wall has one gate through which all members gain entry. The members are thus protected by this wall and common laws. This was particularly so in the traditional past.

There is also the existence of a mutual-help association called *Aaro* among the Yoruba and *Onwe'ru* among the Igbo. This association is formed when the size of labour required for a particular purpose cannot be provided by the family (Shoremi, 1993). The members of this work group, who are usually cultivators of neighbouring farms, combine to work rotationally on the farms of members. The member of the group on whose farm work is done is expected to provide food, palm wine and kolanut for the members of the group during the period of the work.

Bush fallowing is the farming system commonly practiced. In this system, a piece of land is put under cultivation for about two to three years after which the farmer abandons it for other pieces of land while it remains fallow for about five to seven years before returning to it.

Members of a descent or other kin group are entitled to use the land belonging to the group and held in trust for future generations. Thus, the use of one's family land is part of a person's local citizenship rights.

In addition to crop cultivation, agriculturists often keep some domestic animals and birds. They also do some hunting and fishing. However, they always return to their permanent settlements. They may also engage in crafts and local industries when not at farm work.

Subsistence and Peasant Economies

Subsistence and peasant economies concern mainly traditional production and distribution. Both enlist under a condition of low level of economic development and their organizations tend to be simple. Subsistence economies can hardly be found in Africa today. Following European colonization of Africa and with the introduction of the European capitalist economic system, virtually all African rural economies have been peasantized. Although the dichotomy between subsistence and peasant economies is now outdated, for analytical purposes, the two types of economies are here discussed separately in order to better understand the economic history of Africa before and after the introduction of colonial rule.

Subsistence Economies

In these economies, the economic life of the people was organized on the basis of hunting and foraging or agriculture. Hunting and gathering societies as we earlier discussed and certain pastoralists as the Fulani of West Africa and traditional agriculturists had subsistence economies. In these economies, specializations were few and the people used relatively low level of technology in exploiting their environments for livelihood. Social organization was also relatively simple. Their low level of technology made it impossible to have large scale production of food. Hence, everything produced was consumed by family members. The limited food supply characteristic of subsistence economies unavoidably brought about the risks of hunger

and frequent suffering, hardship and insecurity.

Subsistence economies tended to depend on one or few products and this was an economic risk. More than anything else, the concern for economic survival was paramount and consequently, economic relations were predominant although they were analytically distinguishable from other social relations (Oтите and Ogionwo, 1979). In some subsistence economies, herding and agriculture for example, there was seasonal community cooperation at production moments. The low state of the level of technology necessitated this mutual cooperation.

Another important feature of the subsistence economy is that kinship, religion, moral and politics had control on production. Production was done without machine technology and what was produced was locally consumed rather than directed towards any elaborate market system. In this economic system, land, labour and other economic factors were closely related and they constituted part of the mechanism for integrating the society.

Peasant Economies

Unlike subsistence economies, peasant economies have a market system. Although peasants are rural people, their lives involve this market system and there is interdependence between them and the urban or city structures. While peasant economy is part of a wider economic and social system, it has its peculiar character. Peasants are found in varying occupations: farming, fishing and crafts. What distinguishes the peasant economy from the subsistence economy is the fact that it is "related to a larger 'outside' society and integrated in a larger 'outside' economy" (Oтите and Ogionwo, 1979). The 'outside' society and economy have tremendous influence on the peasant economy. Production in this economy is also aimed at meeting culturally defined needs. In the words of Oтите and Ogionwo (1979),

In many cases, the peasant produces food and cash crops for the market because he cannot satisfy his needs by operating

only within his socio-cultural milieu. He obtains money from sales in the market and in turn satisfies his needs through purchases of assorted commodities

The reason why subsistence economies are virtually non-existent in African societies today is because the traditional micro-systems have become integrated into new world-wide economic and commercial structures and processes. Market and money systems which determine economic interests in production and distribution have emerged virtually everywhere.

In some cases, a single economic venture integrates economic activities in the traditional and modern spheres. For example, in Nigeria, the organization of cattle production and distribution links the local rural Fulani and Hausa cattle owners and middle-men traders in the northern parts of the federation with the butchers and consumers in the urban and rural parts of the south. The kola trade goes in the reverse direction from the Yoruba rural producers in the south to the Hausa consumers in the north. These two items of trade are not just parts of a peasant economy. They are also to be regarded as key parts of a modern economy, involving calculations of land, labour, risk, profits, market places and market principles, etc (Otitte and Ogionwo, 1979:191).

Colonialism and Changes in African Economic Structure

Constant change is a characteristic of African traditional and modern economies. Colonialism in Africa brought considerable changes to the traditional economies of Africa. Beyond the economic sub-system, these changes have also affected relations in the political, religious and other fields. This is the case among the Ashanti of Ghana, the Tswana and other Africans in South Africa as well as other several African ethnic groups. These changes tend towards a more complex organization of economic life in which there is the production and consumption of a greater variety of goods and services. In some cases,

as in South Africa, the indigenous economic systems are largely destroyed by the colonial political and economic structures as well as the commercial and market systems.

In the interpretation of the influence or impact of colonialism on the economies of contemporary African societies, two major schools of thought have emerged. The first is the modernization or development school. Those in this school are mainly colonial sociologists and economists. They argue that colonialism has brought accelerated economic development to Africa. They contend that without the importation of European technology, trained manpower and capital, it would have been impossible for Africa to have economic, political and other aspects of development, including transportation and communication systems.

The second school of thought is the dependency or underdevelopment school. Notable in this school are Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah, Claude Ake, and Bade Onimode, to mention but a few (Babalola, 1999). They disagree with the modernization or development writers that colonialism had positive effects on Africa. In their assessment, the general trend of events or activities in Africa, as dictated by Western capitalism, has been that of dependency and underdevelopment, attributable to the exploitative relationship which existed between Western capitalist societies and Africa. Europe invaded Africa and tapped the resources of the continent through the use of different strategies and force. "African raw materials produced with cheap labour were bought largely at 'world' prices and exported to Europe and America from where they were returned to Africa as manufactured goods at pre-fixed prices" (Otite and Ogionwo, 1979). Rodney (1972) argues that the development of Europe is essentially part of the process of the underdevelopment of Africa.

Whether colonialism had positive or negative effects on African social structure and particularly, the economic structure, one thing is clear. That is the fact that there is a tendency towards a more complex organization of economic life in which a greater variety of goods and services are produced and consumed in Africa.

Conclusion

The economy is a very important social institution in any society. Owing to the multiplicity of peoples and cultural diversity in Africa, the organization of economic life shows considerable differences from group to group. While some organize themselves as hunting and gathering bands, some are pastoralists while others are mainly agriculturists. Yet, some other African societies have economies organized around the market in a manner similar to what obtains in contemporary societies of America and Europe.

Considerable changes have occurred in the economic structure of Africa since the advent of colonialism. Following European colonization of Africa, virtually all subsistence economies in Africa have given way to peasant economies with a market system. Colonialism has also brought about a tendency towards a more complex organization of economic life in Africa.

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