Wealth in Kenyan Poverty
What is there for Black America to Learn?
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WEALTH IN THE AFRICAN STORY:
WHAT IS THERE FOR BLACK AMERICA TO LEARN?

This paper will not address the conditions in Africa in its broad sense. There are many exhilarating methods currently applied in the study of this continent’s rich history. This data has been connected to the origins of humankind; therefore, to understand it could possibly mean understanding our humanness and our own conditions as it is related to the topic. We will reference archaeological and comparative linguistic data to tell the prehistoric stories, and ethnographically, we will hear and read the stories told by those braving this land in its pre-colonial, colonial, and current existence. This humble overview is an attempt to reveal the historic progression of the African epistemological framing (their general language, their natural history, and their theories of wealth), and the dismantling of these institutions by external influences (using the colonization of Kenya as a model), and conclude with the Black American perspective on the subject.

The African’s plight in America has been a painstaking one that includes many climacteric stages that freed them enough to claim America as home. Much of the early Black American’s dilemma has been quieted, and the opportunities for socio-economic movement have swollen. Safely perched, the Black American can and should take a look and listen to actual depictions of what the African’s plight has been in Africa. From today’s Black American’s vantage point, the images can be mind boggling, but if the above-mentioned study is weathered, Black America gains valuable outsight and serendipitous insight that could springboard them into another dimension of moral, political, and economic existence.
AFRICA

Early African life can be equated with early humankind life; therefore, we can amazingly follow the many epochs of these people often called primitive by the likes of Hobbes, where there is no pre-European Africa; or Hegel, where “Africa is a land of childhood still enveloped in the dark mantle of night….“ (Rodney 1982 and Wa Thiong’o 1986). What is ironic here is the thought that these great theorists could make the many intelligent contributions to sociological thought yet such an unintelligent insinuation when it comes to the peoples of Africa – they were not alone.

The early African’s social/cultural existence was basic involving relationships between a people and their environment and relationships within a people. Prosperity was directly determined by ecology. They hunted and gathered what they needed to survive and relocated based on the yields from their land. These yields were often connected by their religious concepts – concepts deeply rooted in their social superstructure. There is more to be said later about African religions and the crucial fact that both Islam and Christianity experienced shaping and coinciding existences in Africa (Rodney 1982). Their nomadism would not allow them to accumulate much, so material possessions stayed basic (Kerbo 2003 and Spear 1981). Exploiting one’s environment is nothing new as these early travelers often found it necessary to do so. People were forced to migrate and the encounter of other groups brought on mergers of technologies, languages and cultures. This challenge for the early Africans brought on new foods, healing practices and customs.
Land, which was the major means of production, was owned through kinship – of those passed and of those yet unborn; therefore, it is right to say that members of a community were connected by ancestry, marriage, or some other form of family extension. Distribution of the yields was based on kinship or clan ties, so hardships were often remedied by someone unknown but somehow related (Rodney 1982).

Crops were meticulously chosen based on what the soil and temperatures would yield. These subsistent economies were maintained autonomously and often yielded surpluses that allowed these agriculturalist groups to trade with each other. There were four-day markets, border markets and trade expeditions. The regular four-day markets allowed neighboring groups to trade with each other, the border markets allowed adjacent groups to trade with each other, and the trade expeditions allowed vendors to travel to neighboring areas to trade their wares. India and Arabia demanded many of these goods and traded cloth, beads, and wire for them; therefore, the East African coast became rich as the first center of trade out of Africa – foreign exchange that had been going on hundreds of years before European intervention. This trade provided broad economy but forced major shifts of longstanding cultural institutions (Spear 1981).

The younger men acquired wealth in the deaths of the elders. This transfer was usually connected by lineage. Exchange in trade ranged from bartering to sophisticated monetary systems and the distributive principles of property grew from the distribution of wealth based on family exclusivity and age. This was inevitable considering the advances in technology and the divisions of labor in their booming society. With wealth available to younger men who sought it, intercultural relationships increased resulting in
some exogamy and the enlistment of foreign allies (Kwena 2005, Spear 1981, and Rodney 1982). Rodney (1982) points out that the increase in social stratification and the transition from communalism to feudalism meant that Africa was well on her way, in many districts, to developing sophisticated political states. Smaller ethnic groups grew into wider identities which could be “suggestive of nations.” Nevertheless, there was interdependence between several groups in trade. It is especially interesting to note that oftentimes these groups did not meet harmoniously on other matters, but in order to engage in the business at hand, an agreement in ceremony silenced the quagmire until that business was taken care of.

COLONIZED

“I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.” ~ Aimé Césaire, 1955

As a reminder, the ethos of this paper is to offer some clarity, and in some instances, accurately inform Black America about the travesties involved in colonizing Africa, their processes toward independence, and the possibilities that, just as the worldviews of African societies have required reclaiming and reshaping, the same holds true for Black America. This statement is purposefully spoken in the present tense – these processes are ubiquitous for the colonizing structure (“the domination of physical space, the reformation of native minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective”), as defined by Mudimbe (1988), embeds itself deeply. This exegetic from the works of the experts that I cite are just a scratch on the surface. I preface my efforts with some encouragement to the reader to explore the trail of citations,
and I intend to provide as many as I can! It is at this point that we narrow our examination of Africa down to the East – Kenya in particular because the processes of colonization and the social movements toward amelioration are clearly and painstakingly documented.

We have established the fact that there is an increase in production, wealth, a system of distribution, social stratification and early formations of nation/states in Africa before colonialism. The objective of colonialism was to derail these developments, to establish economic leverage, and to do so primarily through military conquest and political dictatorship. In order to totally dominate the African, the colonizer sought to attack the “mental universe” of the colonized and to reshape their worldviews defined as their relationship to the world, their view of their culture and of themselves (Wa Thiong’o 1986)!

**Kenya: The Land**

The act of *alienating* the East African from their land was brutal. There were 13 British Settlers in 1901 – 342 occupied 222,000 acres of East Africa by 1904, and 28,997 of these settlers where there by 1941. Among the first of the colonists/imperialists to arrive was Lord Delamere who hand picked 100,000 acres of fertile land between the Aberdare and Lake Naivasha for himself. Other aristocrats soon followed, and the shift toward imperial dominance began for the Kenyan with the formation of several stock companies purchasing *African* land from the British government’s “land board” (headed up by Lord Delamere). It is said that these purchases were for as little as one cent per acre. The economic / sentimental value of the Highlands was immediately recognized by
the colonizing imperialists, so much of this land was preferred. Black Kenyans were forced to settle in areas that were not so fertile – native reserves, and those unable to find their places there squatted on the colonizer’s turf (turf that the Black Kenyan could have previously claimed through family ancestry or clan ownership). These squatters were further handicapped by being forced into labor for the colonizer with little pay if any. Herein lies the groundwork incenting increased monopolization of the Kenyan’s total universe (their land, their economy, their politics, their minds, and in some cases, their spirits).


The economic disparity reported by the 1953 United Nations Report on Social Conditions in Non-Self-Governing Territories showed these numbers: Black Kenyans equaled 97.1 percent of the population obtaining 49.1 percent of the total personal income; while Non-African Kenyans equaled 2.9 percent of the population obtaining 50.9 percent of the total personal income. Being the agriculturalists and pastoralists that the Black Kenyans were, we can assert with confidence that they could have made major contributions to the market, but through the efforts of those with power, these attempts at earnings were thwarted. For instance, Lord Delamere and the Kenya Cooperative Creameries (a group formed by Delamere and other dairy farmers in an attempt to save their failing businesses) blocked Black Kenyans from selling milk to the hotels or surrounding households. These inequalities formed a swell in social change but not before the expansion of the East African unskilled or semi-skilled worker, landless peasants, rural laborers, squatter-traders, and artisans. The balance of the East African
population was the lumpen-proletariat type that settled in urban areas (Padmore 1956 and Good 1976).


The Black Kenyan was without land, forced onto native reserves to work without benefits, and then had laws imposed that perpetuated these absurdities. Here are a few pertinent to this study: 1) A squatter was not allowed to rent land from Europeans, 2) They had to work for the use of the land squatted on, 3) Contracts involved one- to five-year agreements where the squatter had to ensure labor on the plantation 180 days per year, 4) The European had the last say about what the squatter could grow (for himself on his assigned plot), 5) The squatter was passed on with the sale of property, 6) Runaways could be imprisoned, 7) Squatters’ meager earnings were heavily taxed, and 8) Kenyans had to carry a labor pass (a “Kimpande”) in their possession at all times. One can preface the rest of this story by saying that this form of government is based on ‘white supremacy’ (Herrenvolk – the philosophy that posits the African at the bottom of the hierarchy and Europeans at the top). This is indicated by political representation in Kenya during this period of time. However deformed, this is the democracy administered by the British Colonial Office:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Number of Representing Members of the Legislative Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europeans</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africans</td>
<td>5,500,000</td>
<td>6 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabs</td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*This number of representatives was hand-picked by the Governor from a list submitted by district officers and these representative could be removed at any time by the Governor.

(Padmore 1956)
Needless to say, legislature swayed away from the Kenyan and toward the colonizer in funding for health services, housing, agriculture, and education.


It is important to remember that Europeans did not bring education to Kenya. Kenyan education before the arrival of the European empowered and enhanced the Kenyan experiences in all aspects of their lives, and these processes were more lineal than the dichotomous European images of education. These processes, termed informal education, shaped Africans well for African societal existence, and this African society was developing just as other societies were on the globe. In this sense, it is easy to re-assert that many processes of education were originally taken *from* the African continent. The formal processes of education (“conscious divisions between teacher and pupil”) were also pre-European and were set up at different stages of the African’s development. Advanced development involved skill specificity as the mode of production shifted from communal life to feudal life where technologies and divisions of labor increased (Rodney 1982).

Pre-colonial *European* education in Kenya was established near Mombasa in 1846 by the Christian Missionary Society (Stanfield 2005). This concept gets tricky for even though religious / moral instruction was dying in Europe, it finds this new home in Africa. Rodney (1982) questions whether this system led the way for colonizers or vice versa. He goes on to say that the missionaries may not have thought of themselves as such, but they were truly a part of these colonizing processes. Obvious colonizing interests in education seeped into the dynamics in the 1920s. Sensing a loss of customs
and traditions, Kenyans established an independent school movement. There were sixty-three of these schools by 1939 educating 12,964 students. In the same year, the need for an institution to train instructors was met with its opening (Stanfield 2005 and Rodney 1982). Kenyan systems of education eventually seized at the hand of colonialism. The gulfs of inequality widened, and three systems of education emerged in Kenya (European, Asian, and African). The Kenyan independent schools came to its grinding halt leaving only government or Christian missionary education available for Kenyans. The new problems were that these systems offered no Kenyan-specific curriculum, fewer Kenyans were being educated, and those receiving instruction were being brutally colonized. We have alluded to the subtle intrusion of colonialism through the processes of socialization delivered by the missionary schools. After the state of emergency was declared (1952), the brutality of colonialism became evident as it stripped the Kenyan of their Weltanschauungen – a corruption that totally thwarts the Kenyan epistemological landscape – namely, their theories of grammar, history, and wealth (Mudimbe 1988, Rodney 1982 and Wa Thiong’o 1981).

WaThiong’o (1981) tells of beatings because of a student “caught speaking Gĩkũyũ (the student’s natural language) in the vicinity of the school.” He goes on to describe degrading punishment and the system of pitting students against each other as they fingered others speaking Gĩkũyũ in the vicinity of the school. Wamwere (2002) tells of students beaten by instructors because they wore shoes to school. A more blatant offense is the instruction that colonial instruction only prepared the Kenyan to become clerks and messengers; therefore, there was no need for secondary school. All of these
experiences can be considered maimers regarding the Kenyan’s self image and future economic choices. As an observer, the paradoxes of colonial education were endless, but we should take a closer look at a couple. Imagine, if you will, receiving instruction as a Kenyan on how the European “discovered” Mount Kenya, or on a more serious note, receiving instruction on the concept of individualism. The Kenyan knew that Mount Kenya had always been in place (long before the arrival of the European), and just as obvious was the absurdity in the concept of individualism – none of the wealthy colonizers got wealthy on their own! Nevertheless, this irresponsible act of imposing this concept destroyed Kenyan’s history of social solidarity and promoted this individualistic spirit disregarding the social-responsibility spirit (Rodney 1982). Further, the arrogance of the European in Kenya was astounding.

I end this section on education with what had to be the most difficult for the Kenyan to navigate – the mixed messages of instruction delivered by Christian mission. Being the lesser of the colonial evil, the Kenyan being transformed in the name of God was being transformed in the name of the missionary’s political affiliation at the same time. Mudimbe (1988) coins the term that the Christian missionary served with great enthusiasm as an “agent of a political empire, a representative of a civilization, and an envoy of God.” For the Kenyan seeking education, he did so from what was felt to be the softer blow, and externally, education from this source was, but as we look deeper we see that there are paralleling themes from both European camps – the conversion of the Kenyan mind and space.
What is there for Black America to Learn?

“I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkeys.” ~ Aimé Césaire, 1955

The Black American should take time to have a perspective on this matter.

Conditions worsened in Kenya before the budge for change; nevertheless, this movement made the history books as being a great social movement. This movement did not start because of a theophany of the oppressors– they did not get tired of bashing the heads of Kenyans! Kenyans decided that it was time to take back what had been so brutally taken from them. The processes of reclaiming were intense and often brutal. Surprised colonizers were repulsed at the fact that Kenyans placed in positions were some of the first to meet the agitator. Frantz Fanon (1967) mentions the dangers of one “taking into [one’s] head to be the equal of the European…”

The fecund structure of the African family/community life, their contribution in the development of the world’s basic survival tools, and their proud connection to this above-mentioned heritage melted away as they raced from those seeking them for pecuniary gain. They, and centuries of agriculture, medicine, astrology, worship, the arts, architecture, and political systems were poured onto this unfamiliar turf, into an unfamiliar social system, given unfamiliar (non-African) names, in unfamiliar ceremonies. We have to acknowledge the many centuries of the African’s fruitful existence (and its dismantling) to feel the depth and breadth of the “damage” done to this precious cargo. The beating of the drums stopped, and in this silence, they were forced to unlearn all that they knew. The shaping of new knowledge was forced by beatings.
This disempowerment continued as laws denied them freedoms of African religion, the sanctity of marriage, ownership of property, political rights, education, the right to assemble without supervision, and the right to use their own language. Their hope of freedom came through the Anglican Church, but was quickly derailed as laws were created and imposed relegating them to bondage (Costen 1993). Metaphorically, if we were surfing the ocean of degradation, we would find the African in America during those times nested in the hadal zone!

Nevertheless, for the Black in America, gone are the times for whining and navel-gazing. Our problems are American, so our answers will be American. The European worldview monopolists have persuaded the Black in America to put the thoughts and theories of those recognizing monumental human violations on a shelf, and tragically for the most part, we have. Because of America’s limping educational system, this fact is will probably come as a newsflash to many of Black America – thoughts and theories about recovering from the degradation of slavery and colonization is nothing new – it began to swell as soon as slavery and colonialism began to swell! Black thought on African history, African in American history, Black existence in adversities, Black drive to meet potential and self fulfillment has been penned and published by the likes of E.W. Blyden, W.E.B. DuBois, John Henrik Clarke, Cheikh Anta Diop, and more for many years, yet Black America has gravitated toward and lulled to sleep by the theodicean thinker – less aggressive and complacent. Spiritual connection is crucial and there is the need to know that life involves coexistence with forces pulling in many directions (mainly good versus evil), but just as important is wisdom and understanding. With this
in mind, the spirits of Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Martin Robinson Delaney, and Henry McNeal Turner can and should be embraced. Asante (1988) refers to this as “honoring the righteous brothers and sisters who have gone before us.” The works that Black America shelved must be picked up, dusted off, and recognized for how aged these theories are, how accurate these thinkers were, and just how far behind Black America is in re-claiming and cultivating a worldview consistent with her origins.

The point has been made that there are many parallels in the stories of the Black American and the Kenyan. Accurate assessment of the problems and appropriate resolve for them is a challenge for Black America. If the problems are economic, the solutions will be economic. When the problems are educational, the solutions will be educational. It has become obvious that looking for political leaders to resolve economic issues of Black America yields nothing. The destiny of Black America is rightfully in her hands. Ending racism or any other “ism” right now would not undue all of the damage. One can use the analogy of not being able to see an iceberg after years of chipping away at it – the tip is gone (ten percent of the obstruction) – ninety percent of it is still there just beneath the surface. Thinking in terms of the captain on a large ship – there’s no need for “full steam ahead!” Many thinkers have elaborated on the effects of slavery and colonialism. Kunjufu (2004) speaks of the “post-traumatic slavery disorder,” Fanon (1963) penned “Colonial War and Mental Disorders,” Woodson (1992) reveals the “large amounts [Black folk] paid for in devices trying not to be Negroes,” and finally, Lambo (1981) acknowledges that just the increase in the many freedoms for the African have negative
effects because of social disorders. Although this latter statement describes conditions in Africa, it can also apply to the conditions here in America.

The colonization of the East African peoples involved the rewiring of their innate systems of value. Black America shares a similar experience; however, she has much to offer society from her vantage point. With whom will she connect to ameliorate African issues? With whom will she connect regarding Black American issues? With whom will she connect regarding America issues? Could all of these issues be one in the same?

E.W. Blyden’s (1888 and 1978) posited the idea of the African in America rightfully feeling drawn to Africa and of the European coming to the realization that he would die or become “mentally deranged” if he were to stay in Africa. Blyden’s motives were probably clean – he was Black, educated, and was making his view perched on the shores of West Africa. The development or recapture of a system of value is from within – not from without. If this developed system of value were to be left uncompromised, would our inevitable systems of inequality provide better relationships between peoples, better relationships between peoples and their environment, and better relationships amongst a people?

CONCLUSION

I am not from Africa (I was born and raised here in the United States of America), but my challenge of attachment to Africa suddenly grew paramount – could the term “African American” have more meaning to those making such a claim? If not, then why not? If so, then how so? As an aspiring sociologist, I am learning to massage the many concepts and theories on the processes of structuralizing social life, and the question has
increasingly become whether this can be done without social inequalities. I have read and have listened to lectures on the inevitability and/or the essentiality of hierarchies and stratification. I concur that social inequality is inevitable and supports the needs of society instead of the needs or desires of the individual. I am also inclined to agree that members of a society have common interests and social relationships that stimulate advantages (or at least provide the platform from which these advantages/disadvantages can be viewed). Consensus in a society or social system creates social unity. These theories have become truths for me; however, Gerhard Lenski (1966) acknowledges variables that can modify natural systems of inequality. How can we examine anything beyond those variables that modify these systems of inequality? Why not view these “variables” as glitches needing to be tweaked before the system could be trusted as seaworthy?

It seems that what happened in East Africa before Kenya’s independence was the ethos of Gaetano Mosca’s (1939) premise that the ruling class is always a minority of a population. I have questions. If we were to evaluate the early East African existence (without the British influence) and pre-existing variables that modified their systems of inequality, would we see the cultural implosion that we saw with the British influence? Would the pre-existing East African social system been able to address those variables in order to thwart destructive modifications to their systems of inequality? Unfortunately, we will never know the answers to these questions. This system has been thrown off balance and spinning wildly into another orbit.
Allow me to make this analogy. I am one that believes that my home is the only place that has to be my home. It is not, nor should it be, a requirement for my neighbor to model their home by mine. For me to think so would be some form of ethnocentrism. There is nothing wrong in designing what works for me in my home, but it is wrong to think that this design is needed or wanted by my neighbors. Now, this may be close to normal – making my mess, being asked to go home, go home and sulk or wallow in guilt while I watch my neighbors try to recover from my tinkering. What has really happened with colonialism is abnormal or maybe even more accurately stated, anomic! The objective was and continues to be the quest of pecuniary gain evidenced by the follow up with predatory lending. Kenya has a serious problem. Serendipitously, Kenya has an enriched successful history that, if resourced, could ameliorate their current situation. Theirs is an African problem that requires an African solution. I predict that in their introspection, Kenya will gain the independence that they seek, and I do not consider this thought utopian. Upon Kenyan independence was the drive toward “collective and cooperative participation of a community in an attempt to fill perceived needs through utilization of [the communities’] own resources” called Harambee. What is admirable here is that through all the Kenyan’s travail there was the spirit and mindset to heal in this manner (Ngau 1987).

Black America has much to offer society and from this vantage point, there is a need to understand just how she got here, why she got here, accept her place, and consider the options available for self actualization and economic development. There has been no indication that any other group will have her best interests at heart, but this is
not a bad thing nor is it abnormal (according to history) – with this rich history in mind, it may be more abnormal thinking that some other group would have her best interest at heart. Black America can glean volumes from the Kenyan example of Harambee.

In West’s (2001) description of quality leadership, we see the importance of not being ahistorical in matters regarding the shaping of communities from which “talented and gifted persons” are molded. He goes on the say that “only professional conscientiousness survives” giving muscle to Fein’s (2005) premise of a middle class revolution – more importantly, the conscientiousness of personal accomplishment and cautious adjustment that fuel courageous engagements. It is crucial to consider leadership holistically for once the talented and gifted persons are molded from Black America, it would be small to corner them in Black America – or America for that matter.

What is being implied here is that as Black America develops Weltanschauung – an accurately informed worldview; her options expand – possibly globally.
WORKS CITED


