

# SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN AFRICA

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### Chapter 1: Pre-modern Sub-Saharan Africa

**Overview** Generalizing about African social structure before the 20<sup>th</sup> century is challenging. The subcontinent is huge, and embraced a number of different social and economic systems. Hunting and gathering persisted in some places, such as the Kalahari desert, with the characteristic lack of formal social structure. Several agricultural areas in west and west-central Africa continued to be “stateless” societies, without a very formal hierarchy. Many port cities on the Indian Ocean coast had a large merchant class that mixed natives and Arabs, along with usually small regional governments that included some aristocracy. In West Africa the growth of trade, including trans-Saharan trade, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onward, created the growth of merchant and artisan classes (often largely hereditary), and increasing distinctions between urban and rural social structures.

**Kinship** Kinship ties helped organize African social structure. This was a common element in stratification in many agricultural societies, such as China and India, but it may have played an even greater role in Africa (in both patrilineal and matrilineal families). Many Western African merchants, for example, shared common kinship and came close to being a hereditary class. Many African regions sponsored extensive polygamy, particularly though not exclusively among the wealthy (including royal families, which in some cases surrounded monarchs with scores of wives). This was an obvious source of inherited kinship ties often linked both to occupation and to status. Children were schooled in kinship relationship, carefully learning the respect due to various collateral relatives but also learning how relationships would provide mutually beneficial social and economic service.

**Aristocracies** A number of African kingdoms developed formal aristocracies. In some parts of southeastern Africa migrating Bantu peoples by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, gaining access to land and often exercising considerable force, formed a durable aristocracy over more local ethnic groups, that would last into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In some cases hereditary aristocracies formed from groups of priests. In the empire of Mali, by the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, aristocrats may have originated as particularly successful merchants, then taking a rank right below that of the royal family, though successful warriors were also involved (sometimes called the “nobility of the quiver”). Emperors of Mali recognized particular kin groups in terms of hereditary occupation and status, in what for a time bore some resemblance to a caste system. As in other societies, West African aristocracies enjoyed diets and living standards far different from, and superior to, those of ordinary people.

**Slavery** Slavery was pervasive in many parts of Africa, quite apart from the important slave trading that developed for the Middle East and, later, for the Atlantic trade. However, the system involved a number of special features. Many different forms were present. Prisoners of war constituted a standard group, and were probably the worst treated. Other slaves were seized as debt payments. Impoverished parents sometimes sold children into slavery. Criminals were also frequently enslaved. Considerable slavery centered on prostitution. Slaves were also used as domestics and for service in royal courts. Slaves were also used on agricultural plantations, particularly in East Africa and some Western regions. This was a diverse system. Upper classes in the empire of Mali competed with each other in terms of the numbers of slaves they held; when the North African Ibn Batuta visited in the 14<sup>th</sup> century he was given a slave boy as a gift. Considerable slavery was inherited and indeed formed part of larger kinship systems; on the other hand slave kinship groups sometimes intertwined with those of the master, allowing some individual slaves to acquire great social importance. (This particularly contrasted with the inferior position of captured or socially-outcast slaves.) In some places slaves were freely bought and sold, but in others, particularly where kinship links were involved, domestic slaves could only be sold in rare circumstances.

Some slaves could even own land and pass it on to their children. As in the Middle East, some slaves were also used in the military. This was, in sum, a complex and highly varied system. (In a few cases, slaves were also used in religious sacrifice.) However, slavery was rare in the stateless societies and several West African kingdoms banned slavery outright. Estimating slave numbers is difficult, particularly because of the variety of systems involved, but in 19<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia up to a quarter of the population was regarded as slave (mainly domestics and sex workers). Finally, economic slavery undoubtedly increased in many parts of Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the end of the Atlantic trade, as plantation owners sought cheap labor to produce vegetable oil and other products for export. This continued until the burst of European imperialism brought efforts to end internal slave trading and slavery itself – though some European colonies, like the Belgian Congo, introduced systems of forced labor for mining that were essentially a form of slavery.

**New urban centers and the Atlantic slave trade** Prior to the pressure of European traders, coastal areas in West Africa were far less populous than those of the rural interior. However, the rise of slave ports promoted new African activity, based on but not confined to the transmission of slaves. Various urban social structures developed, in some cases centered on enforcing the authority and privilege of African royal families. In other cases, however, clear new urban elites arose among the African population. As usual, large extended families provided much of the composition of this new social structure. In some cases, as in Angola, small urban elites as well as regional aristocrats participated in church-run schools, enhancing their power by allowing them to serve as intermediaries with the Europeans.

### Further reading

Hilda Kuper, *An African Aristocracy: rank among the Swazi* (Routledge, 1961)

Martin Klein, "The Study of Slavery in Africa," *Journal of African History* 19 (2009)

Monika Baumanova and Ladislav Smejda, "Precolonial Origins of Urban Spaces in the West African Sahel," *Journal of Urban History* 75 (2017)

Guy Saupin, "the Emergence of Port Towns in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1450-1850," *Journal of Maritime History* (2020)

## Chapter 2: Modern Sub-Saharan Africa

**Overview** Social structure in post-colonial Africa (late 1950s to the present) continued to be marked by several legacies from the past: in some areas primarily in the south, a substantial White minority made race a key differentiator in social and economic status, despite political change. In many parts of Africa, shading off from race, patrilineal lineage continued to define many identities. Among several groups particularly in west and central Africa (but also Madagascar), caste systems still prevailed, little changed from before the colonial era. Traditional stratification was bolstered in many cases by the fact that the majority of the population remained rural. However, considerable urbanization increasingly cut into the traditional social structure, with mainly familiar effects including the growing role of both income and differential educational levels in reflecting and promoting social inequality. At the same time, low-wage labor in some cases created some degree of working-class consciousness among some Africans (both rural and urban), here too cutting across older forms of social differentiation.

**Change and diversity** An obvious challenge in dealing with recent African social history involves regional diversity. The subcontinent as a whole has seen considerable urbanization as well as expansion of literacy, both particularly in recent decades. Overall the urbanization level is now about 44% (up from 35% in 2000), but this ranges from 67-68% in places like South Africa or Botswana, to 52% in Nigeria (the most populous nation), to countries like Rwanda and Niger where urbanization remains below 20%. Literacy rates range similarly: 94% in South Africa, but 37% in the Central African Republic, 62% in Nigeria (64% for the subcontinent as a whole).

**Race** Legal systems of racial stratification ended with the collapse of the Apartheid system in South Africa in the mid-1990s, preceded by the termination of minority White rule in what is now Zimbabwe. Politically, majority Black rule prevailed. In South Africa Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected president, proclaimed a nation defined by a "rainbow coalition" of all the races and ethnic and linguistic groups, and

his vision was widely hailed. In fact, however, Whites continued to control many agricultural estates and major businesses, leading to a persistent stratification based on wealth and economic power. This was not however a significant feature of social stratification in other parts of the sub-continent.

**Lineage** More significant generally was the continuation of affiliations and identities based on extended family relationships, and particularly patrilineal relationships, which also contributed to larger ethnic linkages and tensions within a number of the new African nations. This system of stratification placed a premium on the status and authority of older males, rather than simply income or property levels, and in principle it could cut across rural-urban divides. Urbanization and growing interest in consumerism did place a strain on this older system, with some families pulling away from the obligations (including extensive hospitality) that were customary for extended family relationships.

**Caste** In many parts of Africa particular ethnic or tribal groups maintained older caste systems, often with little modification and independent of any government support. There are a number of examples, from many different regions. Thus the Amhara people in Ethiopia maintain endogamy and pronounced hierarchy, with different castes assigned to distinct occupations and patterns of social interaction (including marriage); caste identity is fixed through inheritance. The Fula people, a Muslim group widely distributed in parts of West Africa, divide into nobles, then priests, then cattle-owning agriculturalists, then artisans, then groups that were once slave. No intermarriage occurs among the groups. Elsewhere castes similarly still reflect former slave status as well as endogamous occupational groups such as agriculturalists or blacksmiths. In some cases entertainers and story tellers (griots) also form castes. In Madagascar the Merina people maintain castes that reflect former free or slave status, and that ostracize inter-caste marriage.

**Upper class** In a number of African nations a partially new upper class developed after independence, based on a combination of business success and special ties to the government. The group might include some traditional tribal leaders. It often benefited from the dominance of a particular ethnic group in the government, as well as links to authoritarian leaders bent on perpetuating their power. Access to government contracts or grants of mineral rights was sometimes involved. Wealthy Africans also often had special ties to global businesses, serving essentially as middlemen to the larger corporations. Many enjoyed fairly elaborate lifestyles: a preference for Mercedes Benz automobiles provided special cachet and also (in Kenya and elsewhere) a somewhat derisive class label, *wa benzi*.

**Urban classes** Recent assessments of South Africa contend that race has diminished as a stratification factor mainly because a noticeable number of Black South Africans have risen to middle class or lower middle class status based on income and education. (An upper class of top managers and owners represents about 1% of the total.) Middle-class groups – businessmen and professionals – now constitute about 6% of population holding formal jobs, and lower-middle class elements (teachers, clerks and so on) about 29%. 25% belong to a semi-skilled working class, 18% to the unskilled (along with 6% in the category of domestics). This distribution reflects the nation's relatively high urbanization and education rates, so should not be taken as characteristic of the whole region, but it suggests some of the trends that are generally associated with recent patterns in the regional economy. Everywhere, the emergence of an urban middle class is associated with new interests in consumerism and educational opportunity, and an emphasis on the nuclear family.

**Rural society and the informal economy** Rural populations divide between peasant smallholders and large numbers of estate workers producing export goods like cocoa or vegetable oils, often under miserable conditions. African social structure is also marked by substantial numbers of people operating in an essentially informal economy with often occasional jobs, both in cities and the countryside. Overall, clearly, African society in recent history has been marked by unusual variety, both in conventional social class terms and because of the mixture of stratification systems particularly in the countryside – all complicated by rapid recent social change.

### Study questions

1. What social structural systems operate in Africa besides economic class?
2. What is the interaction between race and class in South Africa since Apartheid?
3. What are the bases for the African middle class?

### **Further reading**

Jeremy Seekings, "Social Stratification and Inequality in South Africa at the End of Apartheid," Centre for Social Science Research (Capetown) *Working Paper* #31, 2003.

Steven Danver, *Native Peoples of the World: an encyclopedia of groups, cultures and contemporary issues* (Routledge, 2015)

John Iliffe, *The African Poor: a history* (Camb