

How Not to Define Poverty: An Anthropological Understanding of Poverty in Yoruba Philosophy

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Abstract

There is an agreement among scholars that there is no 'one fits all' definition of poverty. Diverse reasons can be adduced for this agreement. This paper seeks to unravel the definition and cultural perception of poverty using the Yorubas of Southwestern Nigeria as a case study. Poverty among the Yorubas is generally perceived as an amalgam of diseases that requires more than money/income, capability development or empowerment, but also spiritual efforts to 'cure'. The essence of this preoccupation is to call the attention of scholars, and public policy experts, to the need to be mindful of local understanding of poverty and consider a holistic analysis of poverty while formulating or reviewing poverty reduction or eradication policies.

Keywords: Poverty, Yorubas, diseases, capability, Public Policy, development

Poverty from Global Perspective

Poverty is one of the existential phenomena that confront humanity today. It is a state of an unmet human need, which means that "persons and families in poverty lack the goods and services needed to sustain and support life and the income to purchase the goods or services which would meet those needs" (O'Boyle, 1999). It is a very pitiable human condition that exudes emotions, generates debate and has been widely discussed; policy makers have also put forward different policies and plans to deal with it, the most recent global policy being the Millennium Development Goals 2015 that codifies 'Freedom from Poverty' as fundamental human rights. Scholars of diverse fields have also studied societies/human conditions and proposed various theories on/of poverty (Ajakaiye & Olomola 2003; Ali & Thorbecke 2000; WorldBank 2000; Walton 1990; Sen 1987; Aluko 1975); but all these efforts, as commendable as they are, have not produced a foolproof solution that would take poverty into extinction, even the MDG goal of eradicating poverty by 2015 became unrealizable, hence MDG has now become SDG (Sustainable Development Goals). The truth of the issue in focus is that poverty, both at theoretical and practical levels, remains an intractable problem that needs to be continually pontificated on for the sake of humanity and development.

There are so many definitions of poverty depending on the context and how it is discussed. Out of the many definitions that are available, a cluster of four meanings has been identified by UNDP International Poverty Centre. These clusters are:

- *Income-poverty* or its common proxy, consumption-poverty. When many, especially economists, use the word poverty they are referring to these measures. Poverty is what can be and has been measured, and measurement and comparisons provide endless scope for debate.
- *Material lack or want*. Besides income, this includes lack of or little wealth and lack or low quality of other assets such as shelter, clothing, furniture, personal means of transport, radios or television, and so on. This also tends to include no or poor access to services.
- *Capability deprivation*, referring to what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be. This meaning is derived from Amartya Sen, and it includes but goes beyond material lack or want to include human capabilities, for example skills and physical abilities, and also self-respect in society.
- The fourth meaning takes a yet more broadly *multi-dimensional view* of deprivation, with material lack or want as only one of several mutually reinforcing dimensions (UNDP, 2006).

Viewed from the four clusters above, poverty is undeniably a complex set of deprivations with many dimensions. Laderchi, Saith and Stewart (2003) also identify four different approaches to defining and measuring poverty:

1. approaches that attempt to measure individual deprivation (and how they struggle to manage their livelihoods);
2. approaches based on monetary income or on indicators of capability failure;
3. approaches that are based on concepts of social exclusion; and
4. approaches that rely on participatory methods to establish the views of the poor themselves.

Each of these approaches illuminates the complexities associated with the analysis of poverty, its nature and measurement. In most cases, it is assumed that living on a particular monetary value per day (e.g. One US Dollar) is enough to justify being poor or being in poverty. While this is true in some climes, it is totally untrue in many other climes. This is essentially because poverty is about livelihood and the 'space of livelihood or living'. While a dollar can place food on the table in a 'space of livelihood', it cannot in some, or many, others. The 'space of livelihood' therefore becomes a key determining factor in deciding poverty values, even within the same state. Livelihood is about the ways people make a living and how they live, hence poverty is often described as a state of reduced or limited livelihood opportunities (Francis, 2006).

Analysed from the sociological perspective (which will first of all consider the gregarious nature of man because man is by nature a social being), we can define poverty in terms of the 'inability to participate in society' and a 'space of livelihood' which does not only portrays him or her as comfortable but that he or she has access to opportunities and capabilities to resources that will enable him or her to live meaningfully. Although, this definition looks somewhat narrow but it is broader than the UNDP first and second clusters of definitions examined earlier because the two definitions confined poverty to subsistence needs. The sociological view also goes beyond the third and fourth clusters as it takes 'inability to participate owing to lack of resources' as the vital point of poverty (that is the 'inability' to participate in all that such human will ordinarily wants to take part in). The closest to the sociological view is the measurement approaches that are based on social exclusion. However, the measurement approaches definition is restricted 'to those areas of life where consumption or participation are determined primarily by command over financial resources' (Lister, 2004). By implication, the sociological view might also be considered as excluding non-material elements found in broad UN definitions, for example: 'lack of participation in decision-making', 'a violation of human dignity', 'powerlessness' and 'susceptibility to violence'. But this is not the case. The foregoing submissions are part of the misconceptions of the 'inability to participate owing to lack of resources' clause. 'Inability to participate owing to lack of resources' includes exclusion from decision-making because the belief in societies and communities where such definition hold is that 'without resources' you are not a 'being' to be reckoned with in any form which includes 'decision-making process' and also some of the non-material aspects emphasized by people in poverty themselves, such as lack of voice, respect and self-esteem, isolation and humiliation.

The next consideration that is germane to the study is how one comes into poverty situation? There are various factors that account as the origin of poverty. Employment as one of the factors has an important effect on earnings and consequently poverty. Important factors include job loss, declines in earnings, reductions in wages or hours worked, and growth in low wage sectors, lack of capability to secure employment, etc. Also, a number of household composition factors including having more children than one could cater for, teen parenthood, marital status, and female-headed households are highly correlated with income and poverty. In terms of household structure, households that have an adult with a health problem or disability which prevents them from working or which limits the kind or amount of work they can do are at heightened risk for economic insecurity or to be in poverty.

Neighbourhood, neighbours and network also play a role in understanding how one comes into poverty and being poor. The state of poverty is also very easy to study, and fluid, with studies showing how families moving into and out of poverty at different points in time (Rynell, 2008 and UNDP 2006). Almost half of the spells of poverty are quite short not moving outside of 'two generations'. Rynell (2008) in one of his studies concludes that "the longer a person has been poor, the less likely it is that he or she will escape poverty within his/her lifetime and may affect his or her offspring", and also network of friends. Further complicating matters, though many spells of poverty are short, there is substantial risk of returning to poverty after having exited if the newly found status is not well-managed. Poverty re-entry rates, from global perspective, are therefore relatively high, and this "has no spiritual" but mere economic and attitudinal explanations.

Poverty is also directly related to the concept of need. Human needs are somewhat insatiable yet every human tries albeit successfully and otherwise, to satisfy the seemingly 'insatiable' in their own ways. Of course human needs have important bearing on determining if someone is poor or not because they are 'located at both the material hub and the relational or symbolic rim of the poverty wheel (Lister 2004). There is also a vital relationship between wellbeing and poverty. Wellbeing is not just happiness; it is about capabilities and achievements. Poverty means low levels of wellbeing, not just low income; therefore, poverty measures must relate closely to people's lives.

From the foregoing analysis, it is quite glaring that there are other explanations of poverty and being poor outside of the commonplace economic/income explanations that pegged the international poverty line at \$1 per day. Poverty is not just this; it is this and more.

The Yorùbás of Southwestern Nigeria

The Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are found in six states in Nigeria and in some parts of Cotonou, Republic du Benin, Togo and even Brazil. The Yorùbá constitute over 40 million people in total; the majority of this population lives in Nigeria. Yorubas have a common ancestry that traces their root to Ile-Ife, in modern day Osun state, Nigeria. They claimed to be descendants of Oduduwa who mythically descended with a chain from heaven, and the chain is preserved till today in the ancient town, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. There is another version of their history that traces the origin of the Yorubas to migration from Mecca. The point to note here is that the Yorubas like many other African nations has two versions of their origin: myth and migration.

The contemporary geographical location of the Yoruba nation provided them with the opportunity of being good farmers. Most of them are farmers dealing in cash and food crops. In fact, the current six south-western states of Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Ekiti, Osun and Lagos are built on proceeds from cocoa and other farm cash products utilized meaningful during the reign of the Action Group in the Western Region led by the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the then premier of Western region.

Dialects such as Ijebu, Ibadan, Onko, Ikale, Ijesa, among others, apart from the major language, Yoruba, are widely used among the Yorubas. Yoruba as a language, with its lexis, structure and syntax, has been a veritable vehicle through which social, cultural, as well as economic thoughts are communicated. One of such concepts with firm socio-cultural root in Yoruba language is 'poverty', which they refer to as 'ise'.

Methodology

Due to the subject of study, poverty, that has lots of traditional/sociocultural embellishments and in order to be able to sufficiently explore relevant issues, qualitative method was particularly chosen for this study. Thus, in-depth interviews and extended multi-sited observations were employed in the primary data collection process. One hundred respondents of Yoruba origin were randomly sampled through in-depth interviews in Oyo, Ogun, Osun and Ekiti states between 2011 and 2013. Data from in-depth interviews and observations sources were transcribed, carefully sorted, analyzed and reported using ethnographic narrative analysis. Narrative analysis provides

an insight into two realms: (i) the realm of experience, where respondents lay out how they as individuals experience certain events and confer their subjective meaning onto these experiences; and (ii) the realm of narrative means (or devices) that are put to use in order to make (this) sense. This guides us as we examined responses to questions to ensure that research objectives were addressed. The three main research objectives were to:

- i. Understand the meaning of poverty
- ii. Attempt to understand the 'poor'
- iii. Seek views on reduction, eradication and poverty-reentry

As a result, responses from every respondent and material within the methods were used in the final analysis on the merit of their pattern representations and relevance to the research objectives.

Definition and Social Perception of Poverty and the 'Poor' among the Yorubas

Poverty, among the Yorubas is known 'i⁰¹'. It is widely regarded not in straight monetary term but rather as amalgam of diseases, human and extra-terrestrially induced (Field, 2011). Some of the definitions of poverty from our respondents are:

- a. Deprivation of access to what to eat (ki a ma ri ona lati ri ounje je)
- b. Having nothing to eat (Ki a ma ri ounje je)
- c. Inability to measure up to the living standard of one's mates (aitegbe)
- d. Living a life that one does not want (ki a ma gbe aiye ti ko wun eniyan)
- e. Living an excruciatingly demeaning life (igbe aiye ti o buru jojo)
- f. Having no money to buy what to eat (ki a ma ri owo ra ounje)
- g. The father of all disease (olori gbogbo aisan)
- h. Having no money to spend at social functions and peer gatherings (Ki eniyan maa na oju ni ibi ti o ye ki o na owo)
- i. To be excluded from one's age-grade (Ki a yo ni ninu egbe)
- j. To be a slave to one's age-grade (Ki eniyan se eru egbe re) (Field, 2011)

From the above, and other data gathered, we can group the variants or explanations of poverty into five variants based on the submissions of the respondents. They are:

1. *airijé*, - 'lack of access to food'
2. *airimu*, - 'lack of what to drink or access to water'.
3. *airina*, - 'lack of sufficient income to spend in order to cater for responsibilities'.
4. *airilo*, - 'lack of materials that could make one look good or fits into the society'
5. *aitegbe* - 'lack of wherewithal to participate in social gatherings' (Field, 2011).

Underlying these five ‘diseases’ listed above is the “ai” pre-fix, which means ‘deprivation or lack’. For example ‘ai’ and ‘rijê’, have separate meanings. While ‘rije’ means ‘to eat or have food’, the prefix ‘ai’ means ‘lack of or deprivation’. The implication of this is that like other definitions of poverty examined earlier, the definition of poverty, though seen as an amalgam of diseases among Yorubas, has ‘deprivation’ as its underpinning. But unlike other diseases, however, the Yorubas do not believe that poverty can kill anyone. Hence their popular saying “Ise kii pa ni, ayí ni pa eniyan” (poverty does not kill rather it is excessive expression of happiness or joy that does). Diseases are known as ‘aisan’, this is different from ‘ailera’ (illness).

It is also important to note at this juncture that unless there is an ‘extra-terrestrial or spiritual dimension’, diseases and illnesses among the Yorubas are often treated with herbs found nearly around every home. So ‘ailera’, lack of good health, is never considered as poverty-related. More so, unless one is struck by ‘airina’ (lack of spending power or lack of money to spend), all diseases could be healed except one is fated to die, which can either be ‘amuwa olorun’ (the will of God), or ‘ise awon enibi’, (the power of the evil ones most especially the witches). While ‘amuwa olorun’ cannot be cured, ‘ise awon eni ibi’ can be cured through sacrifices and herbal concoctions.

From the foregoing analysis of ‘poverty’, one could move on to describe a poor man or woman as that person who is afflicted with any of the ten indices of poverty; the five variants of ‘ise’ (poverty) and who is either aware or unaware of the affliction (Field, 2013). Such persons (the suspected poor), in the view of Chief Z (a forty-seven years old; Ado-Ekiti, 2013), can:

sise bi erin ki o si maa je ije eliri bi o ti wu ki o side too; ki o le maasoro laarin egbe

Meaning:

working so hard yet be unable to feed or have voice in social gatherings (Field, 2013)

On how poverty can be reduced or eradicated, the general belief is that the family, as social network, has a pivotal role to play. In her opinion, Mrs X (an eighty four years old woman; Osogbo, 2011) opines that,

Ko si bi o se leri, gbogbo wa la ni oko; gbogbo wa la ni ebi; gbogbo wa la ni ara; gbogbo wa la ni esin; pelu pelu gbogbo wa la ni ore. Kaka ki ebi pa eniken ku, okan ninu gbogbo awon ti mo ka sile yi, a se iranlowo, ayafi ti kii ba se oju lasan (Field, 2011)

Meaning:

No matter what or the situation, we all have farms in our villages; we have family members; we have neighbours and colleagues; we have members of the same faith and also friends. Instead of dying of hunger, one of these people will offer help, unless it is spiritual affliction’ (Field, 2011)

To the above respondent and many others (95% of my respondents) who shared her view, the fact that ‘poverty is a disease’ does not mean that it could kill the ‘poor’. Once the ‘poor’ can

summon the courage to request for help from his or her networks of friends, relatives, colleagues, members of the same faith, etc he or she is bound to survive unless "is not natural". 85% of the respondents are also of the view that the derision attached to farming for white collar jobs is the cause of poverty, majorly in towns and cities.

In the opinion of one Mr XY (a sixty-two years old, Ibadan, 2013):

Ise loogun ise, paapaa julo ise agbe! Ise kii se arun loko. Ninu ilu ni ise ti fi ara han ju. Ati wipe gbogbo wa ni o fe se ise alakowe. Ko si eni to fe se ise agbe mo. Ounje wa loko sugbon a ko ri eni da oko

Meaning:

Hardwork is the antidote to poverty, most especially farming. Poverty, most especially access to food, is not an illness in the villages but in towns and cities. It is a big problem in towns and cities because nobody wants to farm anymore. Everyone in towns is searching for white collar jobs (Field 2013)

Mr XY was simply echoing a popular Yoruba maxim that says "bi ounje ba kuro ninu ise, ise bu se" (once there is access to food, poverty will disappear). Underpinning that idea is the belief that the best way to deal with poverty or reduce poverty is through the provision of food. With access to food, 'airije' will be cured and the person will have enough resources to deal with other variants of 'ise'. Hence, the Yorubas also believe that unless there is 'oungbe-ile' (drought), poverty could not be too critical. 'Access to food' is also taken as 'okun-inu' (the inner strength) with which other variants could be cured. Lack of access to food is therefore considered as the worst of all the variants of poverty which are considered as 'okun-ode' (the radiant or the outward that others see).

Having access to food, *ririje*, and the income to cater for responsibilities, *ririna*, are prized over access to what to drink '*ririmu*' and access to material that could make one fit into the society. The two diseases, *airije* and *airina*, could in all honesty make one do the unexpected or be involved in criminal activities. The vital place of these variants is expedient in the Yoruba maxims:

- a. Aja ti ko yo, ko le ba eyi to yo sere. (A dog that has not eaten cannot play with that that has eaten).
- b. Oun owo ba se ti, ile ni n gbe (money answers all things). (Field, 2011)

While (a) above underscores the importance of food in work and even leisure, the second maxim highlights the significance of having money in life. In the second instance, the quantity of money is not important, rather it is the ability to spend that matters (*riri owo yo*). Again, *ririna* (having access to income) could also solve the *ririmu*, access to drink, *ririlo*, access to materials that would make one fit into the society problems; and *titegbe*, being able to fit into one's social circle.

Apart from deprivation, capability and opportunity are also noticeable in the contextual meaning of poverty among the Yorubas. 'Ai-ri-je' which means, literally, 'lack of access to food', if analysed polysyllabically has elements of deprivation, capability and opportunity imbued in it.

- a. – ai: lack of /deprivation
- b. ri: see/discover (capability to discover)
- c. – je: eat

While (a) above stand for lack of certain needs which one does not have access to or which one is deprived of; being able to see (b) connotes capability. This, on the other hand, is possible if one has the capability or the needed social capital to see or discover the access to (c). Being able to see or discover require opportunity which can either happen per chance, through others' assistance or one can simply fight to create the opportunity.

From foregoing explanations, one could notice that there are two general views of poverty that could determine how it is eradicated or policy formulated towards its reduction. The general views are:

- a. Natural or Self-Occurring Poverty
- b. Unnatural or Afflicted Poverty

Poverty that has an identifiable source (e.g. unemployment) and self-occurring nature is traceable and may be as a result of most of the reasons adduced earlier. But once it becomes a seemingly irredeemable case or constant re-entry, then the unnatural or afflicted poverty is suspected. While any poor can get out of the natural or self-occurring poverty by being "steadfast, hardworking and always exploring opportunities" (Field, 2013), unnatural or afflicted poverty can NEVER be resolved without SPIRITUAL FORTIFICATION by visiting any of the Pastors (most especially the Pentecostal ones), Alfas or herbalists. The spiritualists will then perform cleansings of diverse magnitudes to ward-off the 'poverty-spell'.

Spiritual fortification against poverty is considered paramount among the Yorubas. It has many forms: daily prayers against 'poverty spell'; special prayers against suspected 'poverty-spell' and prayers against poverty re-entry. Each of these three has a special role in ensuring that individuals do not find themselves in poverty. Contemporary Pentecostal Pastors as well as other 'spiritual merchants', have also exploited the constant demand for fortification against poverty, fear of 'poverty-spell', and 'witches and wizards' to fleece many Yorubas of their meager financial resources (Ademowo, 2010). The fear of 'poverty-spell', also known as 'fi osi ta eniyan', is not peculiar to the poor but also to the rich. While the poor 'prays' and perform sacrifices to ward-off poverty-spell, the rich prays and perform sacrifices against poverty-reentry. It is believed that no amount of financial support can get a man out of poverty if such person is afflicted with 'Osi'. So, poverty reduction or eradication projects targeting anyone afflicted with poverty-spell is considered wasted efforts because such a person will only squander the funds and return to poverty. 68% of my respondents therefore affirmed that spiritual fortification or Prayers must first of all, be offered to protect the funds and the beneficiary of the poverty reduction support from the 'evil affliction of squandering spirit' (agbana).

Conclusion

The aim of this work is to call attention of scholars to the existence of 'deeper' understanding of poverty and the effect of this understanding on the perception of the poor and efforts to reduce or eradicate poverty. Our narratives based on the in-depth interviews among the Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria show that poverty is a complex issue with complex understanding among the Yorubas. As an amalgam of diseases, ise (poverty) has ten different meanings and five variants of conceptions among the Yorubas. Although one could get out of poverty based on hardwork and luck, there is a deep seated belief that many will never get out of poverty unless they are fortified against the spirit of 'osi' (excessive squandering of resources). Any poverty reduction or eradication programme that did not include fortification or prayers against 'poverty-spell' is considered time-wasting effort. The obvious implication of the highlighted perception of poverty among the Yorubas is that once not taken into consideration, any policy formulated to tackle poverty is bound to fail.

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