


BOOK REVIEWS

Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa

By Franklin Obeng-Odoom. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2020. 364 pp., \$27.70 Paperback.

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Keywords: Africa; Economic; Development; Social Stratification

“Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa” by Franklin Obeng-Odoom, published in 2020, offers a compelling critique of developmental economic strategies and their consequences for African nations. Obeng-Odoom argues that conventional explanations for poverty and underdevelopment in Africa, such as cultural factors, human capital, lack of physical capital, or the resource curse, do not adequately account for the economic disparities both within African countries and between Africa and the rest of the world. Instead, the author introduces the concept of stratification economics as a better framework for understanding these issues. Stratification economics examines the unequal distribution of wealth and income within a society and its systemic consequences. Obeng-Odoom asserts that to achieve true development in Africa, it is crucial for countries that benefited from historical injustices such as the Slave Trade, Colonialism, and Imperialism to formally acknowledge their roles, issue apologies, and pay reparations to African nations. He frames this as a matter of Humanitarian Law, characterizing these historical events as crimes against humanity.

Furthermore, the book highlights the ongoing exploitation of African resources by large transnational corporations (TNCs), leading to monopolies that benefit wealthy individuals outside the continent while leaving Africans with limited economic advantages, both in the short and long term. Obeng-Odoom argues that Africa’s development should shift its focus away from relentless economic growth and instead prioritize sustainable resource management, ensuring that future generations can benefit from the continent’s natural resources. Obeng-Odoom draws heavily from the ideas of Henry George, a 19th-century American economist and political theorist known for his advocacy of a single tax on land values to address wealth inequality. This Georgist perspective is applied to the African context and expanded to incorporate concepts from social stratification economics, including the work of Black economists and philosophers such as William Darity Jr. and Sir Hillary Beckles. In contrast

to the capitalist model that promotes individual landownership and collateral for financial security, Obeng-Odoom contends that Africa should maintain and institutionalize formal systems to prevent the monopolization of resources by elites or foreign corporations. Social stratification economics, which examines the impact of economic systems and policies on inequality based on factors like race, class, gender, and ethnicity, is central to his argument.

According to Obeng-Odoom, the persistence of economic underdevelopment in Africa can be attributed to the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a privileged few, often remnants of colonial elites, and large corporations who enter into disparaging agreements for African nations. These elites, along with TNCs, extract and monopolize Africa's resources, often without contributing to the local economies or engaging in meaningful taxation. The book underscores the need for taxation to be imposed heavily on those who monopolize land and resources, with the generated revenue directed toward public good. This, he argues, is a crucial step toward reversing environmental degradation and achieving both economic growth and wealth redistribution within African communities.

Obeng-Odoom's book stands out for its critique of the shortcomings in development strategies in Africa which include human capital development, international trade, and conventional economic growth strategies in Africa. He champions an Africanist approach that calls for a reimagining of economic institutions. Notably, his detailed account of land-titling initiatives in various African countries yields invaluable insights into landownership titling initiatives, emphasizing how they have fallen short in both individual and communal contexts. The book argues that neither capitalism nor socialism offers optimal models for Africa. Capitalism often allows large TNCs to exploit local workers and resources, while socialism frequently results in dictators and government elites controlling natural resources as landowners, reaping rents that rarely benefit the broader public. Instead, Obeng-Odoom advocates for an Africanist development model. In his analysis of land rights, he scrutinizes property rights reforms in Ghana, South Africa, Uganda, and Egypt, revealing how these reforms frequently concentrate land ownership among elites, including traditional power structures, white settler groups, state officials, and private capital, thereby perpetuating poverty and inequality particularly with women.

Women particularly suffer due to old patriarchal land tenure systems that restricts how land is purchased and passed to future generations. Women do not inherit land, it goes to their male heirs. Today, women are stuck in greater realms of poverty because it is their male heirs, husbands, or brothers with rights to land while they have rights to food or domestic responsibilities. In countries where land ownership is better for women, poverty in the country is lower. Furthermore, in some countries women cannot sell or purchase land, preventing business endeavors or profits again with the sell of familial property. Land is an important resource to overcome poverty as it can be used collateral for a business loan. And, with the sell of the land, value earned over the years can go to the owner who sold the land.

The Africanist development or Africanisms model prioritizes initiatives driven by Africans that transcend conventional capitalist and socialist frameworks. This approach involves dismantling cartels and monopolies, particularly those controlling Africa's natural resources. By systematically dismantling these socioeconomic forces that concentrate wealth, establishing robust social welfare states, institutionalizing


mechanisms for addressing historical injustices, and recognizing land as a common resource, Africa can potentially rebalance its relationship with TNCs. However, this struggle is fraught with challenges, as past efforts have often resulted in military interventions by former colonial powers and current neocolonial interests (Obeng-Odoom, p. 237). Africanisms serves as the overarching descriptor for these strategies, with the aim of leveraging the continent's rich diversity to tackle Africa's pressing challenges without resorting to authoritarianism associated with socialism or the monopolization of resources inherent in capitalism. Africanism emphasizes African identity, consciousness, and the historical sense of sharing, fostering unity and solidarity among people of African descent to combat racism and colonialism. It explores indigenous economic development models, prioritizing self-reliance and equitable resource distribution. Obeng-Odoom argues that institutionalizing this awareness in Africa is vital for genuine development on the continent.

In conclusion, Obeng-Odoom's book presents compelling arguments and demonstrates a methodologically sound approach to evaluating the challenges of economic development models implemented in Africa that have benefited the TNCs, the elite, and authoritarian leaders in government. He suggests crucial measures such as rigorous regulation and taxation of natural resource exports or even disengagement from globalization to empower African nations (Obeng-Odoom, p. 284). His emphasis on greater control of TNCs and redirecting tax-generated wealth toward the poor and workers offers a fresh perspective on combating poverty. However, one notable limitation of the book lies in its academic orientation, which may hinder its accessibility to a broader audience. While it boasts rigorous research and analysis, there is a strong desire for this knowledge to extend beyond the confines of academia and reach the masses of people in Africa and worldwide. The hope is that the insights presented in the book can go beyond the academic realm and find a wider audience.

doi:[10.1017/rep.2024.1](https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2024.1)

A Story to Save Your Life: Communication and Culture in Migrants' Search for Asylum

By Sarah Bishop. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.
268 pp.

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Bishop's book portrays and communicates the essentials of the US refugee system in a very touching and overwhelming manner. That essence is composed of the stories of asylum-seekers and their narrative storytelling to successfully be granted asylum.