

## Social Stratification in the Workplace in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Nigerian society in pre-colonial era was stratified according to royalty, military might, wealth and religious hierarchy as the case may be. But with the advent of paid employment, the social stratification shifted from a traditional format to one outlined with Western societies. The argument put forward is that social class in modern time has only been re-defined, thereby giving Nigeria a unique social stratification with a strong traditional/religious influence. This paper examined the social stratification in Nigeria with the backdrop of the introduction of paid employment and the impact of this unique social classification in the workplace. In examining social stratification in the workplace, four hundred and eighty respondents were interviewed using structured questionnaire in a onetime survey. Data collected indicates that seventy-nine percent of the surveyed group preferred to be classified with traditional or religious strata than academic class. Indicating that, royalty takes the front seat in the stratification of the Nigerian society even in the work place. This scenario may account for the emphasis Nigerians place on traditional and religious titles over academic titles in almost all sphere of life including the workplace. This calls for the strengthening of the traditional and religious institutions so that they can assist to impart core social values on members of the society, while giving proper honour to those who are accomplished professionals in their various fields of endeavours.

**Keywords:** Social Class, Workplace, Stratification, Hierarchy

### 1. Introduction

Most societies are stratified either along economic or royal status. While a number of some other societies such as Great Britain, Spain, Southern Arabia, Japan, Morocco, Australia, Denmark etc are stratified mainly according to nobility.

In America and most parts of the West, wealth is used as a major index for measuring social class, as explained by Conley (1999). Like other industrialized countries, Great Britain has a class system which is unique. In describing this class system, Savage (2014), explained that there are seven social classes in modern day British society namely: the elite, established middle class, technical middle class, new affluent workers, traditional working class, emergent service workers and the Precariat. While a tiny class perhaps just 1% of the population, makes up the wealthy, powerful, and highly educated. These must be mentioned here. Compared with Americans, Britons are very class conscious. According to Macionis and Gerber (2010), the characteristic of the British class system are: language and education because, characteristics such as accent and distinctive speech are peculiar to each class and these has come to have a powerful impact on British life. As soon as someone speaks, the listener is aware of that person's social order or class and treats him or her according to the privileges and respect belonging to such a class. The United States of America on the other-hand is not entirely a meritocratic society. They recognize class distinction on the basis of the type of car a person may be driving or the class of stores the individual patronizes.

The major way by which the elite in Britain perpetuate the class system from one generation to another, is through education. It may be surprising to know that, almost all children go to neighbourhood schools, while Great Britain's richest (about 5% of the population) who are believed to own about 50% of the nation's wealth, send their children to exclusive boarding schools (these schools are strangely "public" schools). In these schools, the children of this elite class are trained in some subjects that are considered to be "proper" for members of the ruling elite class. The British tend to respect their social classes even in the workplace. Just like Britain, the social structure of some other countries is stratified along lines of nobility. Among these groups of nations are Canada, Spain and Saudi Arabia. While in Nigeria the social structure in pre-colonial era was just like that of Britain which was tailored along the line of royalty. The situation however became different after the colonial era as it has been argued that the social class in Nigeria was re-defined with some elements of traditional traits being incorporated into the social stratification as it exist today. The Nigerian social structure can be said to be unique as it has strong traditional and religious colouration. The advent of paid employment, only slightly modified social stratification from a purely traditional format to one outlined with Western societies thereby aligning the stratification with that of other nations but with strong traditional influence. This is clearly seen from the number of people who are willing to add either traditional or religious titles to their names. According to Gere (2013), in Nigeria, it is not uncommon to see people address themselves or others as High Chief, Chief Priest, Chief, Elder, Reverend, Pastor, Bishop, Apostle Etc, even in the workplace.

### 1.1. Conceptual Framework

**Social Class:** A large category of people within a system of social stratification who have a similar socio-economic status in relation to other segments of their community or society (Hogan, 2006).

**Income:** refers to wages and salaries earned from paid occupations, plus unearned money from investment, from local and international sources (Giddens & Duneier 2000).

**Social Stratification:** Hogan (2006), defined it as a system by which society ranks categories of people in hierarchy. The existence of structured inequalities among different groups in a society and sharp social division are at times based on unequal access to wealth and power. This structured inequality also affects the way people relate and interact within the society.

## 2. Theoretical Consideration

A group of people who are within a society and who may possess the same socioeconomic status can be referred to as being in the same social class. The term class was first widely applied in the early 19th century following the change of industrial and political revolutions that occurred during the late 18th century. The most influential theory used at that time to explain the issue of class was Karl Marx's theory of Class, which focused on how one class in society controls and attempts to direct the entire process of production while the other classes who are the direct producers of goods and providers of services remain subservient to the dominant ruling class. The relationship that existed between these classes was antagonistic in nature. Max Weber from his viewpoint emphasized the important role that political power, social status and prestige play in the uppers class's determination to maintain class distinctions in the society.

Despite the controversies and criticisms over the theory of class, there is consensus agreement that the characteristics of classes as outlined by the theory is expertly as it exist today in modern capitalist societies. In most cases, the upper (wealthy) class are easily distinguished by the possession of wealth largely inherited, while those of the working class which is made up of mostly manual labourers and semi-skilled and unskilled workers. These are often in service industries and these individuals earn wages that are considered moderate/low wages and they have little or no access to inherited wealth.

The middle class on the other hand includes individuals who may be in the middle and higher levels of clerical work, individuals who may also engage in the technical and professional occupations such as supervisors, managers, self-employed workers in small-scale shopkeepers and businesspeople may fall within this class.

### **3. Types of Stratification**

#### **3.1. Slavery**

Slavery has been described as a form of social stratification in which people are bought and owned by other people as private properties. The process of slavery turns human beings into goods that can be traded on, in a market, bought, sold and exchanged as commodities. According to Schaefer (2006), slavery is the most form of legalized social inequality for individuals or groups. In Igbo land south-east Nigeria, ownership of slaves was very common. The system was called (Oru). The ownership of slaves was an indication of a high social standing.

While in the United States, slaves had no rights whatsoever and had to work till death in plantations. Bales (2000), explains that in ancient Egypt, slaves served national economic assets as they were used in the building of numerous pyramids. Although slavery was abolished globally in the 1860s, slavery in other forms still exists, namely human trafficking. According to Bales (2000), modern day slavery is not hinged on direct ownership of slaves, but on control of slaves through violence with economic exploitation as a principal feature. Maduka (2015) explains that modern day slavery is common in Nigeria in form of “house-help” and the trafficking of individual to prostitute in Europe and other parts of the world. Maduka continued by explaining that those trafficked either outside the shores of the country or within the country have no rights just like slaves.

#### **3.2. Age Group**

In traditional African society, the more a person get older, the more he or she becomes important in the society and this is particularly common in gerontocratic societies and Nigeria may be considered as such. Status is ascribed with age being the qualifying characteristic. According to Nnonyelu (2009), some communities such as Nri in Igbo land South-east Nigeria, the transition from puberty to adulthood goes with initiation rites. This goes with a lot of respect and acceptance in the society.

#### **3.3. Estate System**

According to Macionis and Plummer (2005), the estate was “a system based solely on a rigid system of interlocking hierarchy of rights and obligations” (p. 194). It refers to divisions between strata based on land ownership with land gentry or nobility owning most of the land and the peasants who work on the land or farms and these peasants are very powerless as they have no right over the land. Between the land lords and the peasants are the serfs who were merchant craftsmen.

#### **3.4. Caste System**

Caste is another form of stratifying society and members of a caste are determined by heredity roots. The society determines its members, prestige, occupation, place of residence and social relationships. The castes of a society form a hierarchy of superior-subordinate rank and relationships that are justified by religion, law and magic. An example of a caste system is the Osu system that existed among the Igbo people in South-east Nigeria, in pre and colonial eras. The Apartheid system in South Africa was a system that regards the minority white as superior to others including the majority blacks and Indians. This is another example of caste system where individuals are classified on the bases of the colour of the skin.

### 3.5. Different between Class System and Slavery

Class system is quite different from the caste and estate system in the following ways: (1) Class system is fluid in that it is not established or created by either the law or any religious institutions and the line between classes is not also clear cut. This is evident in the case of caste and estate. (2) class can be achieved by an individual due to hard work unlike caste system where a person's status is determined right from birth depending on the family the person is born into, but an individuals can climb from one social class to another. Movement can be from down to up or up to down. (3) Class is economically based in that, it is judged according to the material possession a person has, unlike the caste system that is based on religion and non-economic factors. (4) The class system is impersonal and large scaled. It is not based on the responsibilities of an individual but on his economic power.

### 4. Social Stratification in the workplace in Pre-Colonial Era

In explaining work relations in pre-colonial Nigeria, Onwuejeogwu (1981), stated that paid employment had always existed in this region even before the political structure called Nigeria was created in 1914 as there were methods of reward for services rendered by individuals

While examining the class structure in the Hausa society, Ajayi (2002), stressed that, the class among the Hausas was purely based on royalty where individuals are grouped according to class based on their royalty. To be a member of this upper class, you have to be born into it and it was not by choice. Some outside this class would have loved to be within this royal class, but cannot because of their lineage and this is accepted by all.

According to Kottak (2004), some traditional societies are ranked into noble and common classes. In the ranked societies, individuals tend to be stratified in society with regards to their genealogical nearness from the chief. Relatives who are closer to the chief have a higher rank or social status than those who are distant relatives. This type of social stratification can be seen from the social structure of the ancient Benin Kingdom as the title holders were of the noble lineage and these were on the top of the stratified empire. This fact can be buttressed by the action of the Oba of Benin who usually appoints his brothers as *Enogies* (head) of towns and villages within the empire. This practice makes any Benin chief in a social ceremony higher than the commoners present as he is often offered the privilege to break the kola nuts signifying, blessings from the gods, the palace and the official opening of such event (Osagie, 2002).

In examining social stratification in the workplace pre-colonial Nigeria society, the Nri people (Igbo people), who are traditionally farmers, traders and ritualists were examined. Their population was put at 10,000 in 1967. The Nri people live in three wards formally villages, called Agukwu, Diodo and Akamkpisi which lies at latitude 6<sup>0</sup> 09 North and longitude 7<sup>0</sup> 00 East and located in present day Anambra State, South-east Nigeria

In explaining the economic life pattern of the Nri people, Onwuejeogwu (1981), stressed that the most interesting thing is that, even in the workplace, the traditional social class system was still observed that social class system was divided along the lines of nobility, wealth and seniority by age. Before the emergence of an industrial capitalist society, it was much easier to identify the few who controlled wealth, land and political power. These individuals are easily identified. They were the kings, emperors, favoured provincial governors, clergy, some learned persons and these dominated such societies (Otobo, 2005).

Nri town has a sacred king who is regarded as a spirit "*mmuo*," called Eze Nri. Traditionally, he rules Nri town through his two state councils called "*Nzemabua*" and "*Ndi Nze*" and an association of women called "*Illimadunate*." The Nri men sold the knowledge of rituals, to all who are willing to pay for it. This

knowledge is believed to assist in boosting yam production in their various communities and the bumper harvest that follows will lead to acquire wealth and importance. In that way, they sold the yam cult called the “*Ifjioku*” to all in Igbo land. This was a major source of income for the Nri people-(Onwuejeogwu 1981, p.48). The belief that Nri was a great ritual centre and has the controlling mystical force over the markets, made Nri the “Mecca” of Igbo land.

The trade groups in pre-colonial (Nigerian) Nri community were organized in each compound with an adult male, who is also the head of the compound group. Each compound is made up of adult children, wives and extended family members usually between four and fifteen persons. Membership of each group is chiefly by birth, adoption, marriages, or naturalization (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). The men of the compound were engaged in the sales of ritual services to other Igbo communities; they also sold salt, life stock, elephant tusks, hinds, and skin (Obi, 1995).

Each trading group as earlier discussed, is organized into families and there was always division of labour. The leader of each compound was called the “*Onyesi*”, who maker major decisions and take leadership based on his knowledge and experience. The leader of each group determines the assigned roles to each member of the group. The group was also opened to anyone who wishes to join such a group. Each group allows the social structure of the society to operate in it. Those of royal lineage in each group, are given prominence, followed by the wealthy within the group and then the others. These group or compounds, at times do have dispute such as; the price of goods, profit sharing in terms of remunerations for services rendered and unfair working conditions are all handled traditionally.

When such disputes arise, the Onyesi (leader of the group) usually resolved such issues but when he is unable to do so, the dispute is referred to the next highest in lineage and finally to the Nze Nri court for settlement. The pattern allows for the social structure of the society to be followed closely. This social structure gives so much importance to the traditional class which is regarded as the highest hierarchy in the society. The Igbos to this day have continued with same social stratification system as matters affecting them are handled by the most senior member of the family or group. Among the Igbos, the orsu class are not accepted or allowed to be members of this trading group. From the following, it is clear, that the social structure of the Igbos was stratified along the lines of nobility and wealth.

## **5. Introduction of Western Type of Paid Employment in Nigeria**

As Nigerians started to be introduced into paid employment, there was a re-defining of the social class, as individuals who had limited education, became mini “gods”, because they could understand and speak the language of the “white man”. These individuals were quickly appointed as assistants to the colonial officials thereby re-designing the class structure of the society.

Although individual class status is not used to determine income, data have shown that those in higher social classes have higher incomes than those in lower classes. For example, a doctor, a lawyer or lecturer will definitely earn more than an administrative officer in the civil service. The conditions at work also vary greatly depending on class.

Those who are in the middle/upper-middle class enjoy a measure of greater freedom in their various occupations. They are more respected, enjoy a degree of diversity which include some authority, while those who fall within the lower classes always feel alienated and generally have lower satisfaction from work. The conditions available in the workplace also differ greatly between the classes and the middle-class workers may suffer is called ‘alienating conditions’ or lack of satisfaction from the job. Alienation may also result from blue-collar jobs, due to routine work with obvious physical health hazards, injury and perhaps death.

## 6. Re-defining Social Class in Nigeria

The introduction of colonial administrations in Nigeria made explicit a form of stratification which was based on racial distinction and at times on the possession of some technical and administrative skills and the appropriation of central political power. Aspiring indigenes could do little or nothing about the first form of differentiation but the acquisition of "European" skills - especially Western education, ability to read and write was seen as a platform to challenge the political hegemony of the colonial rulers who were in a different class. Education though very important, was not enough to define the social role of this "new developing class". Wealth and power became another important factor in the quest to change the status of individuals.

The term middle class, has often been used to describe the members of the social group, who are neither in the upper or lower class. This group is called middle class in the sense that, their status rested on their intermediary position. The spatial metaphor may not be inappropriate as they may not necessarily be intermediary. In general term, a middle class implies that there exist two other classes: an upper class and a lower class. In the African context, the 'lower class' refers to the mass of African villagers and peasants. The emergent wage-labouring class must also be added to this group. The social status of this labouring class is not appreciated more than that of the African peasants. The upper class can also be referred to as ruling class. This is a small class of individuals but who are economically and politically dominant. A group made up of entrepreneurs, business administrators, senior colonial officials, district officers, and the array of lesser colonial servants (Kilson, 1958).

Today, the stratification of the Nigerian society is to a large extent influenced by the acquisition of Western education and being "well paid". Despite this influence, traditional/religious leaders are still ranked first among a hierarchy of three classes of people in society. Second in this hierarchy or ranking are individuals who work with multi-national organisations especially those in the oil sector, successful businessmen and women and telecommunication industries and then followed by government employees and those in the private sector.

## 7. Methodology

For the purpose of this work, 542 persons were selected and the random probability sampling technique was employed. The technique determines the chances or likelihood of drawing a member of the public or private sector from the selected organization. Two Federal Ministries were selected one located in Akure South-west Nigeria and the second located in Benin South-south Nigeria. Two state Ministries were selected, one in Enugu, South-east Nigeria, the other in Benin, South-south, Nigeria. Two private organizations were selected with one located in Benin and the other in Ilorin, North-central region of Nigeria. These ministries (public) and private organizations were selected to give a wide spread to the survey.

Although 540 questionnaires were distributed, 501 questionnaires were retrieved, but 480 were found to be usable. The data clearly indicated that both the public and private sectors of the economy were represented in the study. The data showed that 283 respondents representing 59% of the survey group were in the public service while, 187 of the respondents which stand for 41% ply their trades in the private sector of the economy. This study also ensured that it is gender friendly as 202 respondents representing 42% of the survey population were women.

Apart from the data derived from the survey which is the primary source of information, this study also relied on secondary sources of information and one of such source is the work of M. A. Onwuejogwu who did extensive studies on the economic and social lives of the Nri people, an Igbo society.

## 8. Findings and Discussion

A total of 480 persons whose responses were found usable in the survey were analysed. To ascertain the way the working class will wish to stratify the Nigerian society, the respondents were asked various questions. One of such questions border on what titles they (the respondents) would prefer to add to their names if they are given the opportunity to do so. This question was asked taking into recognisance that the respondents were workers. The responses of the respondents are shown on Table 1.

Table 1: What title will respondents prefer to add to their names

S/N	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
1	Would Prefer A Religious/ Traditional Title	379	78.96%
2	Prefer Academic Title	73	15.21%
3	Not Sure	28	5.83%
4	Total	480	100%

Source of data: survey by Okaka 2015

Table 1 clearly indicates that the perception of this social class of individuals, who are workers, is still strongly influenced by the traditional view of social stratification. This influence is seen from the views of 379 respondents representing 79% of the group, who will prefer to add either a traditional or religious title to their names even in the workplace. While only 73 persons will prefer an academic. This figure represents a mere 15% of the group. A total of 28 individuals in the survey which stands for 6% of the group, were not sure where to pitch their tents. The data from this survey shows that irrespective of the attainment of high status in the workplace, the respondents are still much interested in traditional or even religious titles than academic titles. This may be a reflection of the values held by the society.

The respondents were asked how they will stratify the Nigerian society and which of this class of individuals will they place on the top of the social ladder; the following data were derived from the sample population as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Stratification of Nigerian society

S/N	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
1	Traditional / Religious Leaders	254	52.92%
2	Politicians/ Businessmen	112	23.33%
3	Bureaucrats/successful career Individuals	114	23.75%
4	Total	480	100%

Source of data: survey by Okaka 2015

The data in Table 2 indicates that despite the introduction of Western paid employment after so many years, the social stratification hierarchy of the Nigerian society is still strongly influenced by the history and traditional values, hence, majority of respondents would place traditional/religious leaders on the top of the social class system in Nigeria. This view is held by 254 respondents representing fifty-three 53% of the surveyed group of 480 persons, while 112 respondents which represents 23% of the group, feel that politicians and business executives should occupy the top of the social class table in Nigeria. A total of 114 respondents which stands for 24% of those surveyed, see the matter from a different perspective as they indicated that bureaucrats should occupy the top spot of the social class in Nigeria.

## 9. Conclusion

Every society in the world is stratified according to classes in most cases according to the economic stability of the individuals. Nigeria is not an exception as she is also stratified according to classes but, the peculiar case of Nigeria is that Nigerians seems to place so much value in religious and traditional institutions that they would prefer these titles to academic titles even in the workplace. In colonial times, the society was stratified into classes of royals or the ruling class which is made up traditional rules known as the Oba, Obi, Ovie, and Eze, who are closely followed by the Palace chiefs, the wealthy, the class of rich individuals, those in the military and then the workers in the service of the king. In the bottom of ladder are the commoners or poor individuals. Over the years, things have not changed much, despite the period of colonial rule by the British. The social stratification in Nigeria has only changed a little from what was obtainable in pre-colonial times. The traditional and religious class are still highly respected and envied while politicians follow closely. The data retrieved from the survey expressed this thought as 379 respondents representing 79% of the 480 persons would prefer to add either a traditional or religious title to their names in the workplace. To reinforce the fact that the social stratification has changed slightly 254 respondents which stand for 53% of the survey population, say they would place traditional/religious leaders on the top of the social class system in Nigeria.

The average Nigerian still sees the traditional institution as occupying the top of social class table in Nigeria despite the advent of paid employment. This information brings to fore the mindset of the average Nigerian whose idea of the social classification of the society is quite different from the one held by government and others. Hence it is recommended that traditional and religious institutions should be strengthened to impart core values in members of the society, thereby influencing the society positively.

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