

## DO POOR AFRICANS OR MEDIEVAL PEASANTS HAVE IT WORSE

### Who Has It Worse? Modern-Day Poor Africans or The Medieval European Peasants?

Imagine living in a place that deprives you of some of the most basic necessities of life. Tomorrow is not guaranteed and each day is a struggle. You are well aware of starvation, disease, and danger, as all these things are common to you. This is just the tip of an iceberg for the two different lifestyles, of two different people, living in two different time periods.

First, I will talk about the modern-day habitants of Africa, who are poverty-stricken. Poverty in the sense that they lack basic human needs. I will then compare them to medieval European peasants, who were among the lowest in the feudal system at the time. More specifically, I will compare their lifestyles, and their place in society.

Africa is home to approximately 48 per cent of the world's unprivileged population (Oluwatayo, 2016, p. 98). Research conducted in 2010 showed that, 414 million of these people are living in extreme poverty, of which about half live off of less than \$1.25 a day (IFAD, 1995-2016). Most of these people work in agriculture, particularly due to the climate which is favourable to agriculture, and the millions of square kilometres of land not yet cultivated (Oluwatayo, 2016, p. 94). Climate change is becoming a big issue (Oluwatayo, 2016, p. 95). You would think since most of Africa's poor population makes their living from agriculture, that they would have decent supplies of food to eat, but that is not the case. Currently, over 223 million people are malnourished, while 30 million are underweight (Oluwatayo, 2016, p. 94, 98). The homes that these people live in are also constructed simply of mud and straw. From the data collected, it can be deduced that these people's lives lack some of the most basic necessities.

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One of the major causes of poverty in Africa is government corruption due to poor leadership (Oluwatayo, 2016, p. 98). An example of this poor leadership, is Africa's second longest serving president, President of Angola, Jose Eduardo dos Santos. Nsehe points out in his article how Santos "has always run his government like it's his personal, privately-owned investment holding company," as the country is rich in natural resources. But Angola's socio-economic conditions are vile; education is flawed, poverty is extremely high, and about 30 per cent of its people are malnourished. Still, the President does not pay heed to the country's conditions, rather he puts the state funds into his own pockets (Nsehe, 2012). Because of this, unemployed youth resort to other means of income such as fraud, piracy, and other societal ills (Oluwatayo, 2016, p. 98). HIV/AIDS is also very common in Africa. This causes financial struggle among poor households. Africa consists of approximately two thirds of the 34 million people in the world with HIV/AIDS (IFAD, 1995-2016). That is about nine times the population of Toronto; the most populated city in Canada consisting of 2.6 million people. These are few of the other reasons poor Africans are not able to progress.

Marriage in Africa is seen as sacred, for it solidifies relationships, brings about new life, and new hope (2001-2016). The initiation of a wedding starts with an engagement in which the groom-to-be gives his bride-to-be money to buy jewelry and furniture, as well as a ring to signify their alliance. Before the wedding, the bride applies henna to her hands and feet (2001-2016). The next day, the wedding ceremony takes place in a mosque or a church, after which the bride and groom are now married. According to different countries and practices, weddings last for three to seven days (2001-2016). But if poor families can not afford such weddings, they sell their daughters off to people willing to pay a large amount of money for them. These girls

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are usually underage and experience rape and beatings in their in-laws' home (Chutel, 2015).

Marriage in Africa, can then become something that is not looked forward to, like it should be.

Education rates in Africa are inflating drastically. The African government is looking to improve and make education more accessible to all its citizens. Various countries in Africa are preparing action plans to provide everyone with basic education, as is the priority of every government (1995). Still, poverty reduces the chances for children to go to school (2008).

For many poor people in sub-Saharan Africa, it is difficult to escape and come out of poverty, because of land ownership belonging to the Europeans who had colonized parts of Africa in the late 1800s. This prevents the Africans from finding other means of gaining wealth; land being a solid form of security, and passing down their accumulative wealth to their children, therefore inhibiting their escape from poverty (2005).

I will now compare the poor Africans with the medieval European peasants. Many describe peasants' lives to be harsh, tedious and exhausting. All they did their entire life was work in the fields they owned for their lords, and pay taxes, with a few celebrations and festivities here and there. Although a few rebellions did occur due to the harsh treatment by the peasants' higher-ups. The law was made clear by Jean Froissart, a medieval French author and court historian, who wrote in 1395: "It is the custom in England, as with other countries, for the nobility to have great power over the common people, who are serfs. This means that they are bound by law and custom to plough the field of their masters, harvest the corn, gather it into barns, and thresh and winnow the grain; they must also mow and carry home the hay, cut and collect wood, and perform all manner of tasks of this kind." (Trueman, 2015)

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The houses the medieval peasants used to live in were not any more luxurious than modern-day poor Africans, although they were a bit more spacious. The houses had very small windows by the door; the door usually was left open through which animals and children would wander freely in and out through. Floors were made of beaten earth that was covered over with straw, and a hole in the roof to let smoke from a fire; usually lit in the middle of the living room, escape (Gies & Gies, 1991). Outside the home, peasants would build a wall or a fence to protect their livestock, which was a source of food and income, made from wattle and daub. Wattle being vertical stakes woven with horizontal twigs or branches, then daubed together with mud or clay (2016). Food consumed by the peasants was what they themselves produced, primarily, fruits, vegetables, bread, and ale (Gies & Gies, 1991).

Children were considered children until the onset of puberty. They would start working from a very early age to help support their family, and did not have many toys to play with throughout their childhood. They did not go to school, therefore staying illiterate their whole lives. The only education they could receive was from the Church for priesthood, but that too was very rare (Davis, 1922, p. 267). Religion was highly regarded back then as it was believed to take them somewhere easier, as in Paradise, than the place where they lived. Since the Catholic Church was also the only one back then, Church leaders had much power and even played leading roles in the government (AF, 2016). Few of the main purposes in the peasant's life was to work for their higher-ups, and pay taxes and fees for everything to their higher-ups. These burdens included rent for the land they owned to their lord, and a tax to the Church, called a tithe, for which ten per cent of what they made had to be given up in order to avoid "eternal

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damnation". They were also expected to work on Church land for free with this same excuse (Trueman, 2015). This shows that peasants back then had very limited freedom.

Marriage was the climax of every girl's life. She would do all sorts of old wives' tales to just get a glimpse of her future married life, such as dance around a bonfire and throw pins into a bubbling fountain, or crack an egg on someone's head and then throw it into a well. While young men who were interested in getting married to a certain girl would go over to her house to impress her parents in order to ask for their daughter's hand in marriage (Davis, 1922, p. 266). Peasant weddings were usually held very simply; dowry was given to the wife, and vows were spoken at the Church gate, after which rings were exchanged, and the couple were pronounced married. The couple would then go inside the Church where a nuptial mass was celebrated, and a feast followed (Gies & Gies, 1991). Weddings and marriage were typically seen as very auspicious in the peasants' lives.

Along with days of work, peasants had their days of enjoyment to relieve them of the tedium that came from the same routine they would do every day. They would celebrate Christmas, Easter, May Day (a traditional springtime festival), and other such holidays. There were actually more festivities back then than there are now (Alchin, 2014).

If a peasant wished to quit a barony, they had legal rights to do so. Although, if they did, they would face new complications. They would sell their property, with great difficulty, and then move to another place, where they would then face discrimination for being "criminals" for abandoning their lords. They would also have to risk their security provided to them from their lords. The good that came from being free was that a peasant could marry any woman he

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wanted without having to pay a fee or asking for consent from their lord, so you could now be an individual and not have to live under somebody else's rules and regulations (Davis, 1922, p. 256-257).

To conclude, who has it worse, I would say, from my research through multiple and various sources, that sub-Saharan Africans that are poverty-stricken have it worse. The reasons being the lack of basic necessities, such as food to eat, clean water to drink, and proper shelter that is conventional to the countries' climate. Typically, the European peasants had it better in this aspect, for these needs were provided by their lords unlike for the Africans. Another reason the Africans have it worse is because of helplessness in some situations, such as financial strain, that lead them to heinous offences. Finally, Africans have it worse because they have it much harder getting out of their situation, due to lack of land ownership, and government corruption, than the medieval peasants, who were legally allowed to leave peasantry, with the exception that they had to provide for themselves and their families.

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