



Land Miniaturisation and Class Formation in Africa: A Re-Assessment (Bugisu Region, Eastern Uganda)

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the role of land miniaturisation and commuting in class formation in Africa with reference to East and Central Uganda. It presents the argument that land miniaturisation in East and Central Uganda coalesced with ineffective mechanisms of resource allocation have led to rapidly decreasing availability of natural resources for rural households resulting into new changes in the agrarian economy and thus commuting. The changes in the economy have had far reaching effects on traditional livelihoods of the rural population in Africa and Uganda in particular leading to emergence of new production relations. The discussion presented in this paper fits well into John Murton's (1997) analysis of the agrarian changes in Machakos, Kenya in which farmers have become more dependent on non-agricultural sources of livelihoods. It embraces Karl Marx theory on production relations between the proletariat and bourgeoisie ingrained in access to and ownership of capital. It fits into Max Weber's analysis of class formation in his book "The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism". I take the case of commuting phenomenon in the East and Central Uganda to piece together my arguments. Conclusions are drawn from both primary and secondary sources.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Competition and conflict over land in sub-Saharan Africa reveals processes of deepening social divisions and class formation (Pauline E. P, 2004). The history of Africa is inclined to land as a major economic resource. The distribution of land rights defines and shapes the political economy of many African countries (Koehn P., 1983) and forms a basis for social exclusion and or gratification. This paper in re-examines the role of land in supporting livelihoods with reference to east and mid-western regions of Uganda. It makes a reassessment of the new forms of class relations that have emerged as a result of access, use and ownership of land. The paper integrates Karl Marx and Engels theory of class that define class in the context of people's relation to the means of production: the degree to which wage labor is purchased as a commodity and its consumption within capitalist production (Ernesto Screpanti, 2019). It brings on board the territorial theories of development pointing to the role of urbanization in regional development (Germán Adell 1999). It highlights how land miniaturisation has grown out of customary tenure and population growth leading to commuting and thus creating new forms of class relations.

1.1. The Concept of Class (Karl Marx and Engels, 1848 & Max Weber, 1930):

The concept of class is not new but is also complex and sometimes misused. The key questions in class analysis are: is class terminology “income” or “asset” based; does it relate to the “means of production” or the “entire complex modes of production?”. Phrases such as “upper class”, “middle class”, “bourgeoisie”, “petty bourgeoisie”, “the proletariat”, “lumpen proletariat” and “working class” have been used in class analysis and have left many without more questions than answers. The aspect of class analysis brings forth differences that groups of people hold in relation to shared attributes. It is an attempt to categorise groups of people on the basis of access to and or possession of resources of value and the relations they hold in due process. Following Karl Marx analysis (Karl Max & Fredrick Engels, 1848), the concept of class is pinned to production relations between the owners of means of production (bourgeoisie) and those who control labour power (proletariat). To Karl Marx, class is a product of property relations not income or status. In contrast to Karl Marx underpinnings, sociologists - Max Weber analyses class in terms of personal skills and education rather than production relations (Eugenie Samier, 2002). This further raises the complexity of the concept of class. Despite the differences in definitions, we cannot run away from Karl Marx preposition of class in terms of production relations, which this paper discusses though looks at it from the angle of forms of social stratification rather than classification on the basis of class.

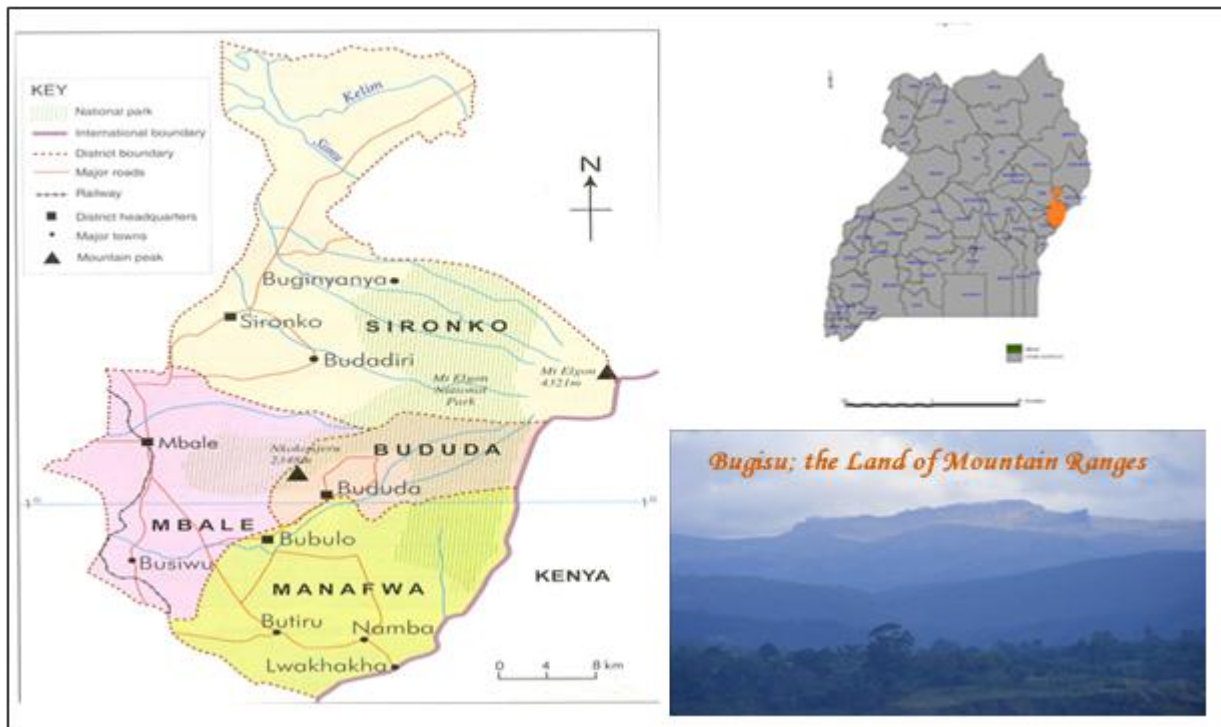
1.2. Methods and Area of Study:

This paper is a product of studies on class analysis and the role of urbanisation in regional development. The study was conducted in eastern Uganda covering the districts of Mbale, Manafa, Budduda, Sironko and Bulambuli. The study relied on primary and secondary sources. It adopted a triangulation of methods, combining information from different sources of data collection namely; unstructured expert interviews, focus group discussions, review of secondary literature, use of questionnaires, rapid rural/urban appraisal and observation. Photographs were also taken to validate primary data collected during field visits.

The study considered a sample population of four hundred and sixty (460) respondents comprising of; three hundred and twenty (320) local community members engaged in business and or agriculture (commuting activities), fifty (50) District Local Government Officials, fifty (50) Urban Authorities, twenty (20) Civil Society Organisation officials and another twenty (20) officials from financial

institutions. A sample size of 460 respondents was arrived at on the basis of mathematical calculation of the target population size of the selected areas for investigations. The study adopted the Yamane (1967:886) formula to calculate its sample size.

Cluster sampling, purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used to select the four hundred and six (460) respondents. The researcher mapped the study areas and classified them into clusters (one rural village and one urban centre treated as a village) per district from which the respondents were selected. The use of snowball sampling technique was useful in the selection of respondents engaged in specific business activities.



Map 1: Greater Bugisu Region: Source: BMK Atlas, 2010

Greater Bugisu region is situated in eastern Uganda and comprises of five districts: Mbale, Manafa, Budduda, Sironko and Bulambuli. It lies approximately between Latitudes 45'N, 1 35'N and Longitudes 34'E, 34 35'E. The region covers a vast area of 2.467 sq km.

2. Land and Agrarian Economies:

Land constitutes a backbone to most rural economies. It is the single most important asset in agricultural economies (Boyce J K. et al, 2005). In light of Adam Smith (1957) price theory, land is an important factor of production in that naturally-occurring goods like water, air, soil, minerals, flora and fauna are important in the creation of other products. To Karl Marx, land is "subject of labor". These accounts speak volumes of words about the importance of land in economic development. For, most rural economies and in the developing world, land constitutes a major source of livelihood. In Uganda where over 80% of its population lives in rural areas (UBOS, 2009/2010), about 68 percent derive their livelihoods directly from agricultural sector (Bihunirwa M. et al, 2012)

The role of land in the agrarian economies dates way back to the 18th century England's industrial revolution when agriculture was a key precursor to industrial development. By 1960's it became

evidently clear that agriculture was a major driver of growth and many economists of the time began to see the link between agricultural growth and industrial development (Byerlee et al, 2009). In the Asian countries, the Green Revolution experience of 1960s – 70s became stimuli to growth of many economies. More importantly, rising incomes of rural households were seen as vital to providing market for domestically produced manufactures and services. Many scholars argued of the importance of agriculture to economic development in that it would provide growth and employment linkages (Mellor, 1976). Recognition of agriculture's broader roles for development started in the 1970s with the focus on equity and employment, and the growing evidence that productivity growth across millions of smallholders was strongly pro-poor (Byerlee et al, 2009). By this time agriculture transformation was seen as a model of growth in its own right.

The Green Revolution of the mid-20th century spread over to many developing countries in which agriculture acted as an engine of industrial growth and overall country's development (Hazell P., 2009). The buzzwords of the then development economics were “*agricultural transformation*” and “*big push*” growth. Coffee, cotton and tobacco production became the dominant cash crops in Uganda and played a dual role of stimulating growth at national level and improving household income of the peasants. In the 1970s-80s, Bugisu region as a result of the coffee boom became a hub for coffee production in Uganda in which coffee was the main source of income to many households.

2.1. Land Miniaturisation in Bugisu and Rwenzori Regions of Uganda

Despite its contribution towards rural development and to the wellbeing of agrarian households, land has been subjected to high levels of miniaturisation due to high rates of population growth. Land miniaturization is a practice in which households split the existing pieces of land into smaller and smaller ones as the family grows in size. This practice of land miniaturisation in Africa has grown over the years due to growth in population size. On average land holding in Uganda is estimated at 0.4 to 3 hectares *per* typical household of seven persons (UBOS, 2019). The same UBOS 2019 report has it that arable land (ha) per head of agricultural population in Uganda declined from 0.33 to 0.31 between 1995 and 1997. This scenario is worse in the highland areas of Bugisu, Kapchorwa, Kigezi and Rwenzori region than it is for the lowlands. In Bugisu region for example land holding is estimated at 2.1 ha per household (UBOS 2014). With an average household size of 6.1 persons, this represents a mean per capita landholding of 0.4 acres (0.15 ha), very little land on which to produce both for household food consumption and market (McKinnon and Reinikka, 2000).

Land miniaturisation in Bugisu and Rwenzori regions is a result of two main factors namely; population growth and customary land tenure. While the average national annual population growth rate is 3.32% pa, Bugisu region records a growth rate of 3.2% pa (UBOS Abstract, 2019) one of the highest in the country. The fertility rate in Bugisu on the other hand stands at 6.7 children per woman, (Uganda Demographic and Health Survey, 2016) and 7.8 per cent for Kabarole which is way above the national fertility rate of 5.4 per cent (<https://ugandaradionetwork.net>). Such fertility rates in both Bugisu put a lot of pressure on land. Whereas population density in these regions has resulted into drastic decrease in farm size and more intensive use of land, its role has been exacerbated by land tenure systems. Customary land tenure, the most popular in rural Bugisu plays a big role in fostering land miniaturisation. The land tenure system in these areas operates in such a way that, sons inherit their father's land who, eventually sub-divide the pieces of land into very small plots amongst their sons, making it more fragmented and less useful for large scale farming. This system of land tenure coupled with population pressure, have made land scarce among the Bagisu. Interviews with rural communities in Bugisu region of Uganda, reveal that it is common to find a household of six (6) cultivating about ¼

an acre of land.

2.2. Decline of Agrarian Economies in Supporting Livelihoods:

The role of rural economy in supporting livelihoods in Africa has been declining over time (Scott, P. 1994). The demise on land as source of livelihood in region was a result of the collapse of coffee market in which prices began falling faster than the yield rise leading to a fall in rural incomes and making productivity growth increasingly more difficult to achieve. Globalisation, climatic changes, population growth and poor land use practices deepened the crisis. Changes in land use patterns have resulted in decreased access to water, soil erosion, land degradation and deforestation (The Economic commission for Africa, 2012). This has resulted into worsening conditions of landlessness, poverty and food insecurity. (FAO 2015) reported that land-poor and landless households in rural areas account for 80 percent of the people who are chronically hungry in the world today.

The unreliable climatic conditions in the country leading to low agricultural crop yields coalesced with rising trends of urbanisation has to some extent dislodged farmers from their traditional activity of growing crops prompting them to diversify their activities by taking on both farm and non-farm activities. Maize, beans, vegetable, bananas which were originally food crops began to play a dual purpose as food and cash crops. The study findings reveal that, in light of the problem of land miniaturization, many households could not produce enough for both domestic consumption and market and were forced to commute to urban areas exploring into new opportunities in town.

In the new paradigm shift, many young energetic men and women began to see the city as a panacea to their rural misfortunes and sought to salvage the situation by traversing the rural-urban divide regularly deriving a living from livelihood opportunities from either side. Reports from urban authorities in Mbale town reveals that their night population is between 30 – 40% of the total day population with 60 – 70% commuting from the nearby suburbs and surrounding villages (Edaku C, 2022). Despite the assumed benefits accruing from urban livelihoods, the new economic undertakings have altered the old forms of social stratifications and labour relations bringing on board new forms of class relations.

3. New Forms of Social Stratification Arising from Land Miniaturisation:

Land miniaturisation in Uganda, has led to process of social stratification and class formation. The concept “social stratification” here is used to denote classification of people into groups based on systematically unequal distribution of power, wealth, and status (Kirby et al, 2000). It illustrates the hierarchical organization of society in which caste systems and class systems are examples of stratification (Oluwatayo et al, 2016), the relationships between individuals and groups within a wider society. In Bugisu region, rural and urban communities are visibly seen traversing the rural urban continuum on regular basis deriving a living from either side of the continuum. Although it may appear as a normal practice and something of culture, the problem is deeply rooted in land miniaturisation. The fundamental ramification here is the emergence of new production relations that have accompanied this process.

One of the notable changes in Uganda is *occupational mobility* in which two categories of classes have predominantly emerged in the urban areas namely; the “*working class*” and “*business community*”. Due to declining importance of rural economy in supporting livelihoods, commuters who were traditionally peasants having lost their position as owners of both land and labour [means of production] have been forced to urban areas looking for economic opportunities. While in the urban, new arrivals in the urban/city take on formal and informal employment by selling their labour for a pay. In the Marxian definition, this group would constitute “a class of proletariat” or “lumpenproletariat”, a social class who

entirely rely on the sale of their labour power for a living a factor that leads to expropriation of surplus value by the bourgeoisie (Skillman G L, 1996). By proletariat, reference is made to the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to earn a living [Engels, 1888 English edition].

3.1. The Working class:

Nonetheless, the working class occupy a distinct space that sets them apart, from the business community or the rural peasants. The study findings reveal that, although it is wrong to use consumption habits or life styles to define class, the owners of labour power exhibit a unique life style known of urban populations marked by consumer behaviour in terms of dress style, eating habits, expenditures and personal expression. Demonstration of power and status is even bigger during festive seasons such as Christmas and marriage ceremonies in which they (what Karl Marx calls the “proletariat” or “lumpenproletariat”) would want to dress smartly, demonstrate gentility and knowledgeability in everything. They are the ones often consulted when it comes to key economic and political questions, this group exhibit a character that puts them in a position of high esteem.

Within the working class emerge class differences; the “*super*” and “*less privileged*” working class. “*Commodification*” constitutes an important yard stick for stratification of the working class based on the type of job and level of income. The “*super*” working class occupies a privileged space than their counter parts the “*less privileged*”. The “*super class*” constitutes the highly educated who migrated to the urban/city and now take on prestigious positions as bankers, lawyers, engineers, local government administrators and professors. This category of employees, drive relatively better cars although most of them are reconditioned cars from Japan; they live in fairly furnished houses most times personal and in quarters of “the rich”. In Mbale for example, such a category of the “*super class*”, live in senior quarters: Quarter London; Maluku estates and Indian quarters. Most of their children are in boarding schools studying in Kampala schools “the home of academics” as it is popularly known and not in Mbale schools. The “*less privileged*” working class/ a category of employees occupy junior positions in civil service and or work in the informal sector. Their earnings are meagre not even enough to make any saving. Usually the expression used is “*they survive from hand to mouth*”, they are indebted and live in junior quarters. This category of the working class resides in slum like places such as Namatala, industrial area and Nkoma as for Mbale – Bugisu region. Social disorder and dirty run-down housing characterize their habitats. Their children study in day schools in their home towns with a few of them able to afford boarding schools for their children.

3.2. The Business community:

In this study, “petty bourgeoisies” as originally coined by Karl Marx and in our case refer to local “*Investors*” or “*Business Community*” also called the “*Basubuzi*” in the local context are a category of commuters who accumulated some financial capital and invested in businesses in the urban. Most of them started as commuters working for others in the urban. In due process they made savings and learnt more about business management through apprenticeship identifying profitable business in which to engage in at a later date. Whether one commutes or fully migrates to the urban is all determined by the size of business or the amount of capital for investment. The type of businesses undertaken by commuters varies according to skills and capital at hand. The common businesses however, are vending in which commuters sell in stalls or on verandas along the major streets dealing in both industrial and agricultural products.

Findings of this study also reveal that those commuters with reasonable amounts of capital usually open up shops, supermarkets or bars, restaurants and guest houses. Whether to classify them as “petty bourgeoisie” or “middle class” is an intricate decision to make. Fundamentally, petty bourgeoisie are small scale merchants who are neither proletariat nor bourgeoisie. The distinguishing feature is, petty bourgeoisie own businesses and therefore own part of but not large share of the means of production. They buy labour and work alongside their employees.

A majority of the business community in Bugisu according to this study, hang in balance between petty bourgeoisies and proletariat. The dominant group in this category are street vendors, hawkers and “boda boda” riders. They don’t make huge profits and most times find it very difficult to sustain their businesses for a very long time without eating up the capital due to the enormous expenses. Accumulation of capital is not an easy thing to achieve and they find it very difficult to expand and or diversify their businesses. To place this category of the business community in the same class with those owning big wholesale shops, super markets and petrol stations could be a mistake. Although they own their businesses and capital, most of them established these businesses to salvage themselves from the problem of poverty and unemployment. They are self-employed and sometimes use family labour until at such a point that their capital has grown. Often, when capital grows commuters change businesses upgrading to a level of being a wholesaler [shopkeeper] or exporter especially for produce.

3.3. The Landlords (the Bataka or the Landed):

Land miniaturisation in Bugisu has also led to the emergence of a class of landlords, (*the Bataka or the Landed*) popularly referred to by the local community as “absentee landlords”. Absentee landlords are the business community “the upper proletariat and petty bourgeoisie” who upon accumulation of some money return to their villages and purchase land from rural peasants who are desirous of selling part of their plots of land to raise money and solve a pressing domestic problem. Bit by bit, this category of business community accumulates larger chunks of land that they may keep renting to other tenants [the landless] on yearly basis. Some of them may diversify their livelihoods by investing in agriculture growing coffee, onions, cabbages, maize or beans for commercial purposes. They hire cheap rural labour to work in their farms from which they accumulate a lot of profits from produce.

3.4. The Privileged Rural Class:

This study also reveals that, remittances from the urban immigrants to their relatives back home in the rural have played a role in social stratification and emergence of a “privileged rural class” in Africa. This is evident in cases where some of the children of the landless rural peasants (the “Batambi”) have fully migrate to the urban as evidenced in Bugisu region of Uganda. While in the urban they continue to send remittances to their relatives living in the rural areas. Remittances sent create some sort of resource inequality among rural households. Usually, such parents or relatives whose children send remittances begin to occupy a particular space in the rural social strata. Out of the remittances they are able to hire labour from rural counterparts to work in their farms or homes. They live a relatively luxurious life and sometimes assume local political positions due to their privileged positions and social connections with their children or relatives in the urban. This does not only raise their status but allows them to subjugate others under their control. They may also acquire additional pieces of land and invest in both farm and non-farm businesses. Usually such a category of households enjoys relatively better life than their neighbours with no remittances coming from the urban.

3.5. The Propertied Housewives:

Findings of this study also show that new changes in domestic relations have come into being as a result

of commuting activity. The new changes have led to the rise of a new group of women whose domestic roles have changed from housewives to local investors, taking on businesses alongside the men. Having accumulated capital this category of women now employ other women as house helps taking on their former roles in home management. Some of them have ventured into buying plots of land from the surplus income earned entering into a class of the “propertied housewives or landlords”.

3.6. Non-commuters:

Non-commuters refer to a class that take the form of households who were originally landed but kept on subdividing their land into smaller units due to population pressure to the extent that they do not have enough for their own subsistence. Unfortunately, they are not so much educated or exposed to go to places beyond their geographical confines. This category of households would prefer to remain in their ancestral land and make a living from there. But by the fact that the size of land in their possession cannot support their needs, they are forced to look out for opportunities from within their geographical settings by renting plots of land from the absentee landlords. By this they are subjected to new forms of labour relations and new terms of tenure as tenants. Though have scanty pieces of land, this group can be classified as the landless [the Balejaleja] also called the poorest of the poor who survive by working for local landlords or “village bourgeoisie” or the landed and or rich.

The issues of economic inequality in Africa have centred on access to agricultural land argues Oluwatayo et al (2016). In his study on the socio-economic trends arising from shrinking holdings of land due to population growth in Machakos district in Kenya (John Murton, 1999) reported that, “the farmers with shrinking plots who were unable to find jobs in town resorted to participating in rural labour markets working in richer farmers farms”. A similar situation is happening in Bugisu in which some of the non-commuters have been forced to work in people’s farms, homes taking on domestic jobs as house helps or “shamba boys” from which they are paid a wage or in kind in terms of food and other household requirements. The scenario reveals how households change status and how new production relations emerge arising from problems of population growth and land miniaturisation. In his study “the evolutionary theory of land rights as applied in Africa”, Jean Philippe (1996) presents a scenario where new forms of land ownership create imperfections in the labour and rental markets resulting into transfer of cheap labour to large farms.

4. Conclusion

A critical analysis of class description in Bugisu region just as other parts of Uganda and Africa as a whole reveal that, the true Marxist definition of class does not apply in Africa and perhaps most of the developing world. This in itself calls for a re-assessment of class territorialization in Africa.

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