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From Class Struggle to Civic Reawakening: Applying Marxist Political Consciousness to Local Governance in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Local governance in Nigeria has long been mired in inefficiency, corruption and political disconnection from the grassroots. Despite the constitutional intention for local governments to serve as the closest tier of representation to the people, they have become increasingly alienated from the masses they are meant to serve. This disconnection has manifested in chronic infrastructural decay, lack of transparency, and citizen apathy. Drawing inspiration from Marxist political theory, particularly the concepts of class struggle, ideology, and political consciousness, and this article interrogates the systemic conditions that underlie political alienation at the local level. The central problem this work identified is the failure of local government institutions to engender genuine civic participation due to the prevalence of false consciousness, elite capture, and a lack of historical awareness among citizens. This article employs analytical method, grounded in Marxist theory, to evaluate the political structures of Nigerian local governments. It integrates a case study of Ayamelum Local Government to concretely demonstrate how alienation plays out in practical governance. By critically engaging the works of Karl Marx and African philosophers such as Chukwuemeka Iloanya and others, this article develops a framework for civic reawakening rooted in political education, ideological clarity, and structural reform. Ultimately, it argues that the transformation of local governance must begin with a reinvigoration of political consciousness at the grassroots, one that reclaims civic agency and redefines the relationship between the governed and the governing class.

Keywords: Marxism, political consciousness, local governance, Nigeria, alienation, Ayamelum, class struggle, civic reawakening.

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of this inquiry lies the tension between the theoretical ideals of local governance and the lived experience of Nigerian citizens. The constitutional provision for democratically constituted local governments in Nigeria presupposes a participatory framework in which governance is brought closer to the people. However, this vision remains largely unfulfilled. In practice, most local governments have become administrative extensions of state executives, lacking both autonomy and accountability. Budgetary dependence, political interference, and weak institutional capacity have all contributed to a widening gap between citizens and those in authority. These failures are not isolated administrative mishaps; rather, they reflect a deeper ideological and structural distortion embedded in the political system.

A Marxist reading of this condition reveals that the problem is not merely one of policy failure but of class domination, ideological manipulation, and civic inertia. Marx's theory of ideology explains how ruling classes maintain control not only through coercive means but also by shaping the consciousness of the subordinate classes in ways that make their oppression appear natural or unchangeable. According to Marx, the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: that is, the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.¹

The above assertion highlights how material domination is sustained through ideological control. In the context of Nigeria's local governance, such control manifests in the political marginalisation of the rural poor, who are often excluded from policy discourse and denied access to transformative political education. Yet, it is precisely among these oppressed classes that the potential for civic reawakening resides. Withal, if they can develop the political consciousness to question their condition, articulate their interests, and act collectively, the promise of democratic local governance may begin to be realised beyond formal structures.

MARX ON CLASS, IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Karl Marx's understanding of history as a narrative of class struggle remains one of his most enduring contributions to political thought. According to Marx, the capitalist mode of production inevitably gives rise to structural contradictions between those who control the means of production and those who are dispossessed of them. In this framework, class is not merely a sociological label but a lived condition that determines one's position within the matrix of political and economic power. Crucially, Marx viewed class as both an objective reality and a potential site of resistance. Political change, therefore, hinges on the ability of the oppressed class to attain awareness of its exploitation and the ideological mechanisms that sustain it.

Central to Marx's analysis is the concept of ideology, which refers not just to ideas but to the dominant worldview imposed by the ruling class. Through ideology, social relations are mystified, making systems of oppression appear natural or legitimate.

As Marx and Engels note: *"The ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas..."*² This insight reveals that subjugation is not sustained only by economic might but also by cognitive manipulation. Ideology obscures exploitation, inhibits collective awareness, and stifles the emergence of political consciousness.

Within Nigerian context, this ideological distortion manifests through patronage politics, ethno-religious divisions, and elite manipulation of democratic institutions. To understand and transcend these conditions, one must not only analyse economic structures but also re-educate the citizenry. Here, African philosophical perspectives offer crucial insight. In that line, Henry Odera Oruka, reflecting on the African experience of political exclusion, insists that what Africa needs is not the mere transplantation of ideologies from west or east, but the critical application of reason grounded in African historical experience and guided by sages within our tradition.³

This assertion challenges the uncritical adoption of Western models and affirms the need for homegrown frameworks of analysis. According to Henry, African citizens must interrogate their condition in the light of local histories, communal identities, and the lingering effects of colonial rule. Only then can political participation become meaningful rather than formal.

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 64.

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 64.

³ Henry Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, ed. Barry Hallen (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 31.

Equally significant is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who insists on the spiritual and moral dimensions of decolonisation. He contends that language is not merely a tool of communication but a vessel of culture and memory. In his work, he writes: “Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a bearer of culture... Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.”⁴

Here, Ngũgĩ links cultural emancipation to political consciousness, arguing that a colonised mind cannot lead a free people. The liberation of African identity, therefore, must include linguistic and ethical revival. Applied to the Nigerian context, particularly within local governance, these perspectives extend Marxist political consciousness. It becomes not only an awareness of material conditions and class struggle but a deeper interrogation of ideology, cultural loss, and ethical dislocation. In local governments such as Ayamelum, where democratic structures are weakened by poverty and elite manipulation, this multidimensional consciousness—rooted in structural critique and moral reawakening holds transformative potential.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIA: STRUCTURE AND SHORTCOMINGS

Local government in Nigeria is constitutionally recognised as the third tier of governance, intended to function as the closest administrative unit to the people. According to the 1999 Constitution, local governments are to facilitate grassroots development, promote democratic participation, and enhance service delivery in areas such as health, education, and rural infrastructure. In theory, they are autonomous entities with elected officials and fiscal responsibilities. However, the practice of local governance reveals a disjunction between constitutional ideals and institutional reality.

Local governments across Nigeria are characterised by weak administrative capacity, financial dependence on state governments, and limited accountability to the people. Statutory allocations from the Federation Account are often intercepted or mismanaged through opaque joint state-local government accounts, leaving councils unable to meet basic developmental needs. Additionally, local elections are routinely delayed, manipulated or even denied, resulting in the imposition of caretaker committees loyal to ruling elites. This undermines democratic legitimacy and perpetuates political apathy among citizens. The structural defects of local governance are further compounded by historical and ideological legacies. The postcolonial Nigerian state inherited a centralised governance framework designed for control rather than participation.

Although federalism was later adopted, the local government system remained largely subordinate and technocratic. This colonial residue continues to shape administrative culture, favouring bureaucracy over community involvement. Iloanya and Anowai, pointing to colonial residual, observe that these issues may have foundation from colonial slave / master relationship. He holds that slave labour became the basis of society’s existence, society split into two basically opposed classes, slaves and slave-owners... The population was divided into free men and slaves. The free had all civil, property and political right... The slaves were deprived of all these rights and had no right.”⁵ This has constantly translated into the present situation we have. This disconnection is evident in the absence of effective participatory platforms within local councils. Town hall meetings are rare, community needs assessments are often ignored, and development projects are imposed without consultation. The political elite, both at state and local levels, often use councils as instruments of patronage rather than tools for development.

⁴ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 16.

⁵Iloanya Chukwuemeka, Anowai Eugene: *Marxist Philosophy: A perusal*. (Onitsha: Bookpoints LTD, 2006) 86.

More so, the marginalisation of local knowledge and civic voices exacerbates a culture of alienation. Thus, discussions of Yoruba ethical philosophy, particularly the concept of *Omoluwabi*, emphasise that effective governance must be grounded in moral character and service to the community not merely procedures. In this light, Oyeshile argues: “The omoluwabi ethic... stresses not only the individual’s moral uprightness but also the imperative of social solidarity and selfless service to the community.”⁶

From the above quotation, one can see that for a meaningful change to occur, local governance must transcend procedural reforms and adopt a people-centred, participatory approach. Withal, in Nigeria, the restoration of trust between local councils and the people will depend not only on legal reforms but also on ideological renewal that aligns governance with communal values and moral accountability. Ultimately, the shortcomings of local governance are not accidental; they are products of systemic neglect, elite manipulation, and ideological alienation. To address these, there must be a deliberate reconstruction of political institutions and a reinvigoration of civic life. Citizens must be empowered not merely as voters but as co-creators of governance.

AYAMELUM LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Ayamelum Local Government, located in Anambra State, offers a vivid example of the structural and ideological deficiencies that afflict many grassroots administrations in Nigeria. Comprising several rural communities, the area is largely agrarian, with most inhabitants depending on subsistence farming and small scale trading. Despite its significant role in regional food production, Ayamelum has been plagued by chronic underdevelopment, poor infrastructure, and recurring governance failures. These issues stem from long-standing patterns of exclusion, elite domination, and civic disengagement.

A primary issue in Ayamelum is the near-absence of genuine political participation. Elections are typically characterised by low voter turnout, voter apathy, and limited competition. In many cases, candidates are selected by political elites at the state level, leaving the masses with limited options. This system perpetuates elite capture and diminishes accountability, as councillors often regard their mandate as deriving from partisan affiliation rather than popular support or communal interest. This results to having kleptocratic leaders. This kleptocratic capture of local government is in many instances orchestrated by governors, tolerated by state legislators, and perpetuated by its local beneficiaries, effectively extinguishing grassroots democracy through repeated electoral sweeps by ruling-party candidates. This highlights the ritualised nature of local democracy as a ceremony rather than a choice for ordinary citizens. Consequently, community members often view local governance as distant and unresponsive.

In such settings, meetings are infrequent and poorly publicised, and where they do occur, they are dominated by political insiders. In the absence of inclusive platforms for genuine deliberation and feedback, local authorities are neither transparent nor participatory. It would be largely observed in such settings too that the concerns of citizens ranging from inadequate rural roads to primary health centre neglect, are seldom addressed. Rather than fostering trust, councils breed resentment and cynicism. This crisis of participation also has profound social and economic ramifications. Meanwhile, without accessible official platforms for advocacy, citizens resort to extra-legal or informal methods ranging from petitions to religious or kinship-based mobilisation to register grievances. While such strategies may address immediate concerns, they neither alter institutional dynamics nor build sustainable mechanisms for community control. Instead, they reinforce the status quo, where governance becomes reactive and fragmented.

⁶Olatunji Alabi Oyeshile, “Traditional Yoruba Social-Ethical Values and Governance in Modern Africa,” *Philosophia Africana* 6, no. 2 (July 2003): 85,

Nevertheless, in recent years, there have been sporadic attempts to broker change through civil society initiatives and youth mobilisation. Local NGOs and religious organisations have also made efforts to raise awareness and advocate for better service delivery. Yet, their impact has been limited due to insufficient coordination and resources. Attempts at civic education, though laudable, struggle to match the ideological weight of entrenched elite interests. To transcend these conditions, Ayamelum requires a transformative shift in political consciousness. Ordinary people need to recognise that governance is not only a matter of waiting for state benevolence but of collective responsibility and direct engagement. It calls for the recovery of public spaces, the reconstruction of participatory institutions, and the cultivation of civic virtues. This redirection is not only political; it is moral, historical and communal. Without it, local governance in Ayamelum will continue to mirror broader systemic failures rather than become a site of democratic renewal.

RETHINKING ENGAGEMENT: THE MARXIST IMPERATIVE

To address the challenges identified in Ayamelum and perhaps similar local government areas, fundamental rethinking of civic engagement is required, one that is informed by the Marxist imperative. This is because Marxist political theory reminds us that passive participation and bureaucratic inclusion are insufficient; genuine engagement must be anchored in collective awareness and structural transformation. This perspective shifts the discourse from mere procedural reforms to an ideology-based mobilisation of civic forces.

Marx posited that meaningful change is possible when the oppressed not only recognise their exploitation but also become capable of organised collective action. In local governance, this necessitates embedding political education and class consciousness within community life. According to Antonio Gramsci, a key follower of Marx, the notion of a “war of position” requires sustained engagement in everyday cultural and educational institutions to challenge dominant ideologies.⁷

This insight is especially relevant in settings like Ayamelum, where ideological control remains strong, and where counter-hegemonic initiatives must begin with local, community-based institutions. Importantly, such participatory mechanisms must extend beyond formal councils to include local associations, cooperatives, religious groups and youth clubs. These networks often have stronger roots in communal practice than political structures and are ideally placed to cultivate critical dialogue. By formalising these participatory spaces and equipping them with resources for civic education, communities can become incubators of political consciousness.

Moreover, procedural improvements transparent budgeting, accessible meetings, and participatory planning remain necessary but are insufficient on their own. Thus, Marxist engagement requires a dual process: structural adjustments and ideological transformation. Citizens need access to information, but they also need the tools to decipher how power operates and manipulates discourse. Here civic education must be emancipatory, teaching people not only how to read budgets, but also how budgetary decisions reinforce or disrupt class interests. Such education should also integrate local histories, traditions, and forms of collective memory, contextualising political action in the historical and material realities of the people.

⁷Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971),12.

In practice, rethinking engagement on Marxist terms implies a phased strategy. First, one will diagnose the specific ideological blockages within the local political culture whether they stem from patronage, apathy, or clientelism. Second, one will mobilise grassroots groups through conscientisation workshops, theatre for development, and dialogue circles. Third, one will create coalitions between civil society, cooperative societies, and local government representatives to initiate bottom-up planning processes. Fourth, one will institutionalise these initiatives through policy frameworks that guarantee citizens' participatory rights in local governance. This Marxist-informed strategy will inevitably encounter resistance from entrenched elites, structural inertia, and ideological apathy. Yet, history shows that hegemony is maintained as much by ignorance as by force. If civic reawakening can be initiated at the community level, it can gradually alter power relations. By transforming local government into sites of ideological contestation and collective action, citizens reclaim agency and reshape the democratic process from the ground up.

FROM ALIENATION TO REAWAKENING: PATHWAYS FOR TRANSFORMATION

The transformation of local governance in Nigeria requires more than constitutional amendment or administrative reorganisation. It demands a radical reawakening of political consciousness at the grassroots. As Marx understood, alienation is not only economic or institutional; it is a psychological and existential condition in which people become estranged from their power, agency, and communal responsibilities. To reverse this condition, citizens must recover their place as active subjects in governance, not passive recipients of state benevolence. In some local governments like Ayamelum, alienation is visible in the routine disconnection between leadership and the people. Local officials rarely consult their constituents, and the political process is often dominated by elite interests. Public spaces that once served as arenas for dialogue and communal decision making have withered. Reawakening must begin with the restoration of these civic spaces and the reactivation of public discourse.

In the light of the above, political education stands at the heart of this effort. Not merely the transmission of facts about government structures, political education should involve critical reflection on power, justice, and social responsibility. It must encourage citizens to question existing hierarchies and to imagine alternative forms of governance rooted in equality and shared interest. This will take men away from the traditional ways of doing things into a more egalitarian and just society, As Iloanya contends: As the primitive communal system develops, the clan gradually loses many of its original functions... and ceases to be the foundation of the society. As people become reawaked in diverse ways, they moved away from the old practice to a more civilized mode of doing things.⁸ This insight resonates with Marx's belief that liberation comes not through charity or reform alone, but through self-activity through the process by which individuals become aware of their conditions and act collectively to change them.

⁸Iloanya Chukwuemeka, Eugene Anowai: Marx's Philosophy: A Perusal (Onitsha: Bookpoints LTD, 2006)

In practical terms, this reawakening could be supported by integrating participatory governance mechanisms within local councils. Citizens' assemblies, public budget hearings, and community monitoring initiatives are examples of platforms that can enhance transparency and inclusion. Yet, for these to be effective, they must be supported by institutional commitment and ideological clarity. The media, faith institutions, and civil society also have critical roles to play. In rural areas especially, radio, and religious forums remain powerful instruments of consciousness formation. Harnessing these platforms to promote civic dialogue, expose corruption, and celebrate collective achievements can deepen political awareness. These interventions must be rooted in the cultural realities of each community, respecting language, tradition, and local leadership structures. The ultimate goal is to create a civic culture where citizens feel responsible for and capable of shaping their own governance.

Strengthening this argument, Kofi Annan noted that in Africa, communities from the village upwards have traditionally decided their course through free discussion, carefully weighing different points of view until consensus is reached. So Africans have much to learn from their own traditions, and something to teach others, about the true meaning and spirit of democracy.⁹ This emphasis on indigenous agency resonates with Marxist principles while situating them within an African epistemological framework. Reawakening in this sense is both political and philosophical, a rediscovery of the public self and the moral obligation to participate in communal life.

CONCLUSION

Proceeding from the preceding arguments, we can see that crisis of political participation at the grassroots in Nigeria is not simply a matter of poor governance or administrative inefficiency. It is a deeper problem rooted in structural alienation and ideological manipulation. This article has sought to illuminate how Marxist political consciousness can provide a critical framework for understanding and transforming local governance, using Ayamelum Local Government as a representative case. By examining the intersection of class, ideology, and civic disengagement, it becomes evident that any meaningful reform must be grounded in an ideological shift that empowers citizens to see themselves not as subjects of governance, but as its co-authors.

Marx's emphasis on class consciousness and ideological critique offers a powerful lens through which to analyse the failures of local government in Nigeria. However, as demonstrated, scholars such as Iloanya, Anowai and others have helped to translate these concepts into forms that are contextually relevant to African political and philosophical realities. Alienation in some local government is not just a function of poverty or under-development. It is a reflection of a system that has distanced the people from decision-making and reduced participation to ritual.

To overcome this, communities must be re-educated and re-organised, not only institutionally but also ideologically. This includes embedding political education in community structures, revitalising traditional public spaces for dialogue, and institutionalising mechanisms of inclusive governance. Media, religious bodies, civil society, and even schools must be enlisted in the task of transforming civic culture. Above all, citizens must reclaim their agency through collective action and historical awareness. As Fanon reminds us, each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.¹⁰

⁹Kofi Annan, "Africa's Thirst for Democracy," United Nations Secretary-General(5 December 2000), <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/articles/2000-12-05/africas-thirst-democracy>.

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 145

The mission before local communities in Nigeria is therefore to reject the passivity imposed by false consciousness and to construct a new political identity, one that is informed, participatory, and transformative. Such a reawakening does not only promise better local governance; it offers a foundation for democratic renewal across the Nigerian polity. Through this shift in consciousness the ideals of representation, accountability, and justice can be realised at the grassroots level and beyond.

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