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Examining the Status of Traditional Rulers in the Pre-Post-Colonial Yoruba Society

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Abstract

Traditional rulers in Yoruba society have over the years played significant roles in the social, political and economic development of the traditional society. What constitutes the major roles of traditional rulers as they affect the society generally have been discussed by various scholars. However, there was little or no attention on the dwindling in status of traditional rulers in the modern society due to modernity and civilization which has relegated them. This has over the years rendered them and the institution almost irrelevant and mere figureheads. It has also contributed in no small measure to the security threat, unbridled recklessness and instability in the nation. The paper therefore examines the change in status and prestige of traditional rulers in the pre- and post-colonial periods in Yorubaland and how their status could be re-invigorated and re-energized to play a complementary role in addressing various problems facing the nation today.

Keywords: Yorùbá, traditional ruler, status, society, colonialism

Introduction

The roles of traditional rulers in the traditional Yoruba society cannot be over-emphasized. They are the custodians of norms and values in the society. Their words were laws for the people (Udegha, 1979). These norms and values were the basis upon which the traditional rulers exercised governance, power and authority over their subjects. They played the role of custodians of customary laws and communal assets, preservation of cultural values, dispensing justice, and resolving conflicts (Olusola & Arigu, 2013). Since man is considered as a social being whose action and inaction can either have a beneficial or detrimental effect on the people around him, the resolution mechanism of traditional rulers was borne out of the fact that there is the need for members of the society to live in peace and harmony. To achieve this, conflict must be addressed as they occur so that the society will not turn to a place of lawlessness as Thomas Hobbes puts it (Omoregbe, 2004).

Traditional rulers at various levels interact with warring parties in their communities by developing a common principle and mechanism that would return cordial relationship against violence. They are viewed as divinely ordained individuals chosen by their peoples to control the affairs of their respective domains in accordance with the customs and traditions; intercommunal and intertribal conflicts were settled (Nworah, 2007; Fatile & Adejuwon, 2009). One of the most developed characteristics of African civilization was traditional monarchical institution which is well noted for its dynamism, resilience and unending relevance. In spite of changes and modifications introduced by modernity, the traditional political institution has endured all vicissitudes and has continued to re-define itself for relevance. Traditional rulers made use of unwritten laws to govern their people and anyone who behaved contrary to such unwritten laws would be seriously dealt with accordingly. It has been known that traditional Yorùbá societies, indeed, had a well-established system of administration where public order was provided and maintained; where laws were made and implemented.

However, the experience in the recent time has clearly shown the dwindling powers of these traditional rulers in Yorùbáland as many of them are now involved in politics thereby reducing the prestige, honor, dignity and respect that were accorded them in the pre-colonial era. They have to do the bidding of the governor or the chairman of their local governments since their salaries and allowances are determined by them (Idonije, 2008). The reality now is that the fact that they are directly under the control of the state or local government as the case may be has, to a great extent, demystified the mysterious aura surrounding the spiritual and political authorities of traditional rulers in the country (Tonwe & Osemwota, 2013). It is then quite unfortunate to note that many of them occupy the exalted stools as mere figureheads. But, this was not the case in the pre-colonial society as traditional rulers were given their deserved respect and honor (Olowu & Erero, 1997).

Traditional Rulers and Their Status in the Pre-Colonial Yorùbá Society

Before the advent of colonial administration to the country, there existed a very strong monarchical administrative structure which was well organized in administering executive, legislative and judicial powers. The system of indigenous traditional administration varied from one part of the country to the other (Sokoh, 2018). But, our focus in this paper is to consider the administrative structures applicable to the Yorùbá nation. The *Oba* had the responsibility of making laws, enforcing them and maintaining

peace and order in his communities with the assistance of his chiefs who in most of the communities represent their various compounds, *Agbo Ilé* (Albert et al., 1995).

Monarchical system of government has remained the predominant form of traditional political system in most Nigerian societies and communities. The contributions of traditional rulers to the growth and development of towns and cities in Nigeria and most importantly Yorubaland over the years demonstrate the diligence, astuteness and resourcefulness of those traditional rulers in their domains. It is not far-fetched therefore to say that it was this well-structured traditional political institution in Nigeria that gave the British colonial authorities a soft-landing since the traditional rulers were accorded high level of respect by their subjects. This happened as a result of the strong belief that *Obas* are the custodians of their ancestral, social and cultural values. The introduction of *Indirect Rule* system by Fredrick Lugard in 1914 did not suffer any setback as the traditional rulers were made use of by the colonial authority, most especially in the northern part of the country. Apart from the chiefs who helped in the day to day administration of their communities and towns, the *Obas* were assisted in the discharge of their duties by *Baálès* who were in charge of towns and villages and paid royalties to the *Obas* at specified times of the year. The power of *Oba* was not absolute as the doctrine of checks and balances were strongly enshrined (Fadipe, 1991). Under this pre-colonial constitutional arrangement, traditional rulers in Yorubaland exercised legislative, executive and judicial powers put together. However, in many places, they exercised these powers with the advice of their respective high chiefs, counsellors and a consciousness of being under the close watch of the gods, ancestors and his subjects.

Obaship in Yorubaland in the past was not based on wealth, popularity or connection. The Yorubá people have a peculiar way of selecting their traditional rulers. They were appointed after a due process had been followed and the choice of the *Oba* was confirmed by the *Ifá* oracle. It was expected of Yorubá *Oba* to be a living repository of the history, culture and traditions of his throne, people and race, including their relationship with neighbours. This is why they remain in *Àkòdì* for few months to learn all these before been enthroned. The Yorubá traditional ruler was the focus of political authority and the rallying point for social, cultural, economic and diplomatic activities; hence his description as representatives of the gods and ancestors (Albert et al., 1995).

Due to the enormous responsibilities of the traditional rulers in Yorubaland, *Báálè* of various communities were allowed to settle cases within their communities, such as theft, battery, housewives rivalry, misunderstanding between husbands and wives. At times, there were cases that the *Baalè* could not settle; such cases were brought to the notice of the *Oba* and his council of chiefs for intervention. Whatever decision taken by the *Oba* and his chiefs was considered as final. They managed affairs, administered justice and resolved any inter-compound tension. Since there was no written laws as said earlier, the people relied so much on the wealth of experience of the *Oba* and his chiefs passed on to them through stories, myths, legend, folklore, rituals, or songs from generation to generation, and formed part of the general social structure which in turn bred order, development, peace and stability in these localities (Olaniran & Arigu, 2013). Though, the presence of this administrative structure does not suggest that there were no conflict at every level. But, cases were quickly settled as they were brought to them to restore order; this is because of the strong belief that traditional rulers were seen as the living representatives of their ancestors whose power and authority are derived from Supreme Being or God (Albert et al., 1995).

Settlement of matters in the traditional society was based on the vibrancy of Yoruba legal culture

which makes it very lively and enduring. Though it is a general belief that conflict is inevitable as long as man lives, but in the traditional societies, there were measures put in place to make sure that peace is restored as soon as possible (Olaoba, 2008). On many occasions, proverbs, words of wisdom and experience were used to resolve conflict. References were made to past occurrences to drive home their points. This is apposite to the Yoruba saying that *Àgbà kù wà lójà, kí orí ọmọ tuntun wọ*. An elder should not be in the market-place and allow a child's head to bend. *Obas* in Yorùbáland are so versed and versatile in the usage and application of Yorùbá proverbs. They made use of the principle of fair hearing (*audi autem pathem*) their watch words in the settlement of cases brought before them (Aiyedun & Ordor, 2016). This is why Yoruba people say *A kì í fá orí lẹhìn olóri* and *Agbọ ejọ ẹnìkan dá, àgbà òsìkà*. No one gives verdict to a case in absentia and wicked and iniquitous is that one who hears the evidence of one party to a case. The reign of the *Ọba* was always a referential phase in the history of his domain just as his achievements were a measure of his success and contribution to society. Yorùbá people use words of caution on any member of the society who tries to exhibit any behavior that is antithetical to peace and harmony in the community by taking such an individual through memory lane with the wise saying: *Ọba tó jẹ tí ilú tòrò, orúkọ rẹ kò ní parẹ, èyí tó jẹ tí ilú bà jẹ, orúkọ rẹ nàà kò ní parẹ*. (King that reigns and there is peace in the community will be remembered for ever and the one who reigns and there is problem in the community, his name will also be remembered). Most traditional rulers were always conscious of this reality that his reign would be dispassionately observed, assessed, scrutinized and put in the memories of his people while alive or dead. The wise saying is not even limited to the king, but whoever is placed in the position of authority (Achebe, 2017). Such people are expected therefore to live with moral consciousness of this fact and also live above board by providing functional leadership on all matters brought before them and in their day-to-day administrative duties.

Traditional Rulers and Their Status in the Post-Colonial Period

There is now a total departure from what we understood to be the role of traditional rulers in the pre-colonial period and what we are experiencing in modern day Nigeria as it applies to community development and maintenance of peace and harmony. Since the introduction of local government reforms of 1976, the roles of traditional rulers have been taken over by the local government and this is expressly stated in the reform. Though, it stated that it is not the intention of government to destroy the organic unity of the traditional institutions (Reed, 1982). But, in actual fact, this is not the case as traditional rulers are now at the mercy of local government chairmen for their salary and all other entitlements. This goes with the saying that he that plays the piper dictates the tune. The role of traditional rulers has been undergoing changes in the contemporary society.

The advent of colonial administrators ushered in a transformation in the role of traditional rulers. This change was necessitated by the desire to realize the objectives of colonialism, which were to exploit the natural resources of Nigeria to meet the industrial needs of the capitalist metro poles. Traditional rulers were therefore used to serve these objectives and ever since then, it has been a tale of rulers losing their powers over their subjects. The *Obas* and the chiefs were used as intermediaries during the colonial administration. They were mere representatives. Even with the coming to power of the military administrators at the different times, the situation remains the same. The military heads of state like Generals Yakubu Gowon, Ramat Muritala Muhammed, Olúségun Ọbásanjó, Muhammed

Buhari, Ibrahim Badamasi Babaginda (IBB), Sanni Abacha and Abdulsalam Abubakar had different attitudes toward traditional leadership in Nigeria and their role in nation building. General Babaginda led military administration had mixed perception toward traditional institution. During his administration, the governor of the defunct Gongola state, Colonel Yohana Madaki, deposed some traditional rulers such as Emir of Muri, Alhaji Umar Abba Tukur, and this really had serious effect on traditional institution across the nation as many governors removed traditional rulers at will as long as they discovered that they were not in their support.

The military junta used the traditional rulers to mobilize people. This was the case during the inglorious one million man march for the former military head of state, Sanni Abacha, in his bid to become the civilian president of the country. The interest specifically in this paper is to see how the exalted status of Yorùbá traditional ruler has become a stool where corruption, recklessness and unbridled disregard for the tradition and custom of the land have taken the centre stage in both administrative and political history of the country. A typical example of this was when governor Isiaq Abíólá Ajímòbi won the governorship election for the second term. The ideal thing in an ideal cultural society where custom and tradition are being respected is for the governor to make a ‘thank you’ visit to all the *Obas* in their various towns. At least, he made a tour round the communities when he was seeking his re-election. But, the unfortunate thing was that about 24 kings across Òyó state were led by the *Alààfin* of Òyó, *Oba Làmídì Adéyemí II*, to pay a congratulatory visit to the governor at his home in Ibadan. This is nothing but a major dishonor and disrepute to the historic, cultural, traditional and esteemed thrones of the *Obas* - this is because the homage receivers suddenly turned to homage payers.

The Status of Traditional Rulers in the Modern Day Yorùbá Society

This paper will not be complete if it fails to address the status of traditional rulers in the contemporary Yorùbáland society. This is very important because of the various opinions that have diverged across the country on the current status of traditional rulers to see whether or not traditional rulers still maintain the dignity, respect and honor accorded them in the past. There are those who were persuaded that the traditional rulers have lost their respect and honor as many of them have abandoned their stools to become political jobbers. That instead of them to be contented with their respective primary calling of focusing their attention on how to improve the lots of those in their domains through purposeful leadership, they hobnob with politicians and political office holders. This is more obvious as many of the *Kábíyèsí* are finding it very difficult to manage internal crises successfully in their respective domains. There are those with the belief that Nigeria’s political climate was rather too rough and that traditional rulers are needed to clear the debris because they are the custodians of culture and traditions, and because of their closeness to their subjects, they are in a better position to advise political office holders on the need to do it right.

Traditional institution has taken a new turn today as traditional rulers now canvass for support for political office seekers because of the enormity of the control they exert on the local society. Some traditional rulers drum support for politicians in order to win elections. Campaigns begin and end in the palaces of traditional rulers, who by being a symbol of respect, could cause the political machinery to swing in a particular direction. Recent experience in Nigerian politics and most especially in Yorùbá land would confirm that politicians use the traditional rulers as godfathers and as channels through

which they could get the votes and support of the electorates. Many Yorùbá *Obas* now publicly declare support for a particular political aspirant against the other and this has brought disaffection and political bickering among politicians and members of various communities (Olukoya, 2018; Mogbede, 2017). Political negotiations and horse trading by traditional rulers have become the order of the day. They now heartlessly pursue material and pecuniary benefits for themselves, and this is why they drum support for those they think will benefit them when they are eventually appointed, selected or elected as the case may be. On the contrary, since they are regarded as *Oba tó bá lóri ohun gbogbo*, (a king that reigns over everything belongs to everybody), traditional rulers, by virtue of their office, ought to remain objective, politically neutral and live above board.

Factors Militating against the Relevance of Traditional Rulers in Yorùbáland

There is no gainsaying denying the fact that the traditional institutions particularly in Yorùbáland have been relegated to the background in modern political system in Nigeria. The statement by Abba Mahmood in an opinion piece published in the Leadership newspaper titled: *Traditional Rulers and Contemporary Challenges* corroborates this fact:

Traditional rulers used to have a constitutional role. The 1960 and 1963 constitutions created a Council of Chiefs for them in the regions and some of them were even regional governors. The 1979 Constitution gave them representation in the National Council of State. The current 1999 Constitution did not even mention the traditional institution. Is this not enough indicator of their plight and dwindling prestige? (Mahmood, 2007)

They are considered today as materials to be used and dumped and pick up at any time they are needed. This is quite unfortunate. They are more important to the political class during electioneering. They have, in recent times, been subjected to public ridicule and untold embarrassment by those at the corridors of power. This did not just occur as politicians cannot be totally blamed for this ugly development, as Yoruba people will say, *wón ti fi ogbe ori won fún kòlòkòlò jẹ*, meaning that they have given out their respect, honor and dignity. Though, the institution has not given way totally to complete irrelevance in the democratic structure of the modern Nigeria.

Traditional rulers' relevance, one can still say, is more felt at the grassroots than in the urban centers due to the fact that they are closer to their people, unlike in the cities where the political class has almost taken over the control of administration. The researcher can safely say therefore that there are many factors responsible for this drastic decline in their relevance. One of the factors militating against their relevance is that some of their roles have been taken over by the court. In the past, the traditional rulers had significant executive, legislative and judicial powers over their people. They ensured that disputes among the members in their various communities were settled amicably. The Yoruba wise saying has it that *Ahón àti eyin n jà, ká jà ká pari rẹ niyì ọmọlúàbí*, meaning that the tongue and teeth often come in conflict; to quarrel and get reconciled is a mark of responsibility. Restoration of harmony is what is paramount in the traditional society. They made sure that warring parties go back home happily (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014). But, today, this revered institution is going into oblivion because of the cases of partiality, bias and lack of trust leveled against many of the traditional rulers by the members of the public.

Also, in this democratic period, most politicians and political office holders do not give deserved

respect to traditional rulers in their various communities. Their appointment, presentation of the staff of office and promotion are performed constitutionally by the governor of the state. With this, the governor can decide to do and undo, and the reason for such action is due to the fact that traditional rulers are actively involved in politics thereby defecating the traditional customs and values. Many have also thrown integrity into the wind. As the craving for money is the beginning of wisdom for them, chieftaincy titles are now given to the highest bidder. Merit is being sacrificed at the altar of unbridled corruption. Hardly now is anybody taking into cognizance the character, family background and the pedigree policies of those to be honored with a chieftaincy title as long as he or she has the money to spend for the community. The exalted stool of the traditional rulers has also been bedevilled with in-fighting and *obaship* tussles.

Many communities, because of unwarranted tussle for *obaship*, have brought unending acrimony among their people. There are cases of small communities having two to three kings as a result of endless and baseless in-fighting and power tussle. Many politicians use these disagreements to launch their political campaigns in these affected communities (Nworah, 2007). Another reason for the dwindling trend in the prestige of traditional rulers in Yorubaland is as a result of tension between them and the political class. The royal fathers are considered as weak and in-experienced in political matters who should be concerned about their domains. They claim that the political class has left them behind in the scheme of things particularly with regard to the well-being of their people and the development of their communities.

The political class perceives them as clog in the wheel of progress. We have instances of such clashes and misunderstanding between governors of states and traditional rulers. Examples of this is the misunderstanding between the late *Oba* Samuel Odùlanà Odùgádé of Ibadan and former governor of Oyo state, Chief Adébáyò Àlàó Akálà, over the removal of Onídó of Ìdó, *Oba* Benjamin Ìsòlá Oròbíyí II, by the council of chiefs and recent rift between the current Olúbàdàn of Ibadan, *Oba* Sálíù Àkànmú Adétúnjí, and the incumbent governor of Oyo state, Senator Isiaq Abíólá Ajímòbi, over the appointment and installation of over twenty kings without following due process and without any approval from Olúbàdàn as declared by the court of competent jurisdiction in Oyo state (Olunloyo, 2017).

Social malaise has also caused the traditional institution in Yorùbáland to suffer loss of relevance (Nworah, 2007). The moral decadence among the youths in the society and lack of respect for elders and traditional institutions has really affected the exalted position of the traditional rulers. There have been cases of youths in various communities demonstrating against the action of some traditional rulers. They see the action of their traditional rulers as draconic and dictatorial in nature. This happens most especially when a traditional ruler is bias and takes side on matters where objectivity and openness are expected.

The last straw that broke the Carmel's back as it relates to the roles of traditional rulers is the unabated conflict of interest between local government authorities and traditional rulers, and a need to clarify who should do what in local community matters. There have been cases of local government chairmen trying to punish traditional rulers for not obeying their command or do their bidding. The traditional rulers are not left out in the unstable economy situation in the country which has further eroded their influence. We know of a fact that few of the traditional rulers were rich before ascending the throne of their forebears. But, we still have in the majority those who depend only on salary from their local council which is grossly inadequate to cater for their immediate families let alone the communities under them. This has really affected their influence and authority. A situation where some traditional

rulers request financial assistance from individuals in the community and even from politicians say much about the institution they represent.

Other reasons that have led to the decline in respect and prestige of *Obas* in Yorùbáland include a situation where *Obas* who are expected to be the custodians of values, morality and norms are found wanted. For instance, it was widely reported in May 2010 that the *Dèjì* of Àkúrẹ̀, *Oba Adépòjù Adésinà*, beat his wife, Olori Bòlánílé. The woman eventually died in July. The woman before her death claimed that the king poured poisonous concoction on her. Another reported case was that of *Oba Alọwá* of Ilọwa in Òsun state and *Oba Bùkòlá Alli* who allegedly raped a corps member at Òsogbo on Friday, March 25, 2011. All these attitudes by the *Obas* in Yorùbáland have really affected them and their exalted positions in the society.

The Way Forward

At this juncture, there is an urgent need for something to be done to the dwindling status and prestige of our traditional rulers headlong. The dilemma here therefore is how to find the best way forward in order not to endanger the ancient institutions with their well established structure the traditional rulers represent, which is that of acting as custodians of native customs, culture and tradition of their immediate communities. Since no society can progress without well-defined cultural norms and values that regulate the activities of its people, traditional rulers who are the custodians of these norms and values are to be conscious of this fact and make sure that their communities are at peace.

The traditional rulers have been neglected in the scheme of things in Nigeria. The experience in Nigeria of Boko Haram, the Niger Delta militants, Oòdùà People's Congress, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and others would have been a thing of the past if traditional rulers were carried along and empowered because of their closeness to their people. All these nomenclatures would have been nipped in the bud and confined to the dustbin of history during their infancy stages. But, the unfortunate thing is that most traditional rulers are mere figure heads and rubber stamps, they are likened to a dog that can bark but cannot bite, as they do not have any financial support from the government except the ones received from sons and daughters in their various communities to ensure the security of lives and property within their domains. Those in government should explore the wealth of experience of these traditional rulers in order to intercede for the common man due to the close affinity they have to the people as most of them are educated, enlightened and well-travelled. For them to be honored and respected, traditional rulers should concentrate more on the discharge of the duties imposed on them by local traditions. Traditional rulers should be held in high esteem and should not be dragged into politics. Any political involvement by traditional rulers may lead to the erosion of whatever credibility and respect they command among their people. They should leave the politicians to deal with all their 'dirty business of politics'. A traditional ruler that pitches his or her tent with a particular political party will not earn any respect from the people. The welfare package of traditional rulers should not be turned to a political matter; rather, it should be incorporated and accommodated in yearly budget cycles. That way, the institution will regain its lost glory of dignity and respect.

The government of the day at every level should engage traditional rulers more in local government affairs as this will preserve the dignity of the institution rather than begging for money from politicians. The royal fathers will be very useful in the area of tackling security challenges facing the country today,

as we all know that one of the teething problems that has really affected the sustainability of Nigeria is insecurity which is a byproduct of poverty and thugery. The security apparatus and strategies for tackling security challenges in the country should be re-structured in such a way that traditional rulers should be made to handle issues pertaining to security at the grassroots.

The wealth of experience of traditional rulers can still be tapped when they are incorporated into alternative dispute resolution mechanism (ADR) being championed in the law courts today. Many disputes can be resolved by traditional rulers where disagreeing parties come to an agreement short of litigation. Since the aim of alternative dispute resolution is reconciliation, traditional rulers are well positioned to drive this successfully and thereby reducing the congestion of cases in court. In reality, alternative dispute resolution has over the years been anchored by traditional institution, but it can still be strengthened and taken away from rudimentary level as any far-reaching and binding decisions on their subjects will have the backing of the law. Traditional rulers must also be wary of the temptation of bias, bribery, intimidation, harassment or influence in order for them not to depart from their sacred oath of office and the path of honor and rectitude.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been achieved. We have tried to take a critical look at the status of Yoruba *Oba* in the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods. We also examined the various factors that necessitated the downward trend in the prestige, honor and respect accorded the traditional institution today.

This paper therefore concludes that in order to have a well-balanced political structure that will tackle the various teething problems being faced in Nigeria, traditional rulers' position and status should not be relegated to the background and that traditional rulers should also do more by making themselves relevant through a holistic approach to issues. They should also focus more on how to develop their domains and stir clear of muddy water of politics in order to avoid indelible stains on their personality and integrity.

If all the recommendations above are followed strictly, the status, prestige and honor associated with traditional rulers in the past will be restored. This will serve as an impetus in complementing the efforts of the government in tackling various problems facing the country.

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