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## GOVERNANCE AND THE YORUBA NATION: THE PLACE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE PEOPLE

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### ABSTRACT

*In the days of yore, the traditional Rulers played the role of upholding the values of the people and also the concern with the affairs of administering their domain. Their roles were not absolutely independent or collaboration with the local authorities to identify the needs of their communities and be involved in the design of policy and service delivery. This paper examines and compares the place of traditional Rulers in the administration of people during the pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial era and modern day's traditional rulers. The paper also examines the role of traditional rulers on the social, cultural and political developments in Yoruba land. This study relies on historical and textual analysis through a survey approach.*

**KEYWORDS:** Governance, Yoruba Nation, Traditional Rulers, and Development.

### INTRODUCTION

The word traditional ruler entails the reigned of a monarchy or a title ruler vested with the authority to rule over people in the affairs of their life. The place of traditional Rulers in the administration of people in Yoruba nation has been changed since the introduction of local government reforms of 1979, in the said reforms, leadership roles were clearly expressed which states that it is not the intention of government to destroys the organic unity of the traditional institutions.

There were the warrant chiefs during the indirect rule system and then the colonial government recognized local chiefs who performed as a native court judges. The first class chiefs were recognized in the middle belt of Nigeria during the colonial era. All these sets of traditional Rulers contributed in no small measure to the upliftment of community development (Ojo, 1976).

### THE HISTORY AND TRADITIONS OF THE YORUBA PEOPLE

The Yoruba people occupy the South-Western part of Nigeria, they account for about 20% of the population of the country. They are believed historically to have

migrated from the Middle-Eastern part of the world during the medieval period. They are a religious group of people who are mainly Christians, Muslims or of Traditional beliefs. The Yoruba people are mainly involved in the financial, press and educational sectors of the country.

The Yoruba people have different stories about their origin, but they all relate to the same ancestor "Oduduwa", one story has it that he migrated from what is known as Mecca because of his belief in deities, which caused him to expelled from his abode, and then came to settle in Ile-Ife and start a dynasty, which was further expanded by his seven sons. Another school of thought has it that he was an ordinary Yoruba man who came to power by overthrowing the existing ruling class.

The other story has it that Oduduwa (the father of the Yoruba) was sent by God from heaven to create the earth and the Human race. He descended from heaven accompanied by his lieutenants and landed at Ile-Ife, where he proceeded with his mission. The chain with which he landed onto earth is still said to exist in the shrine; though it is said to be hidden from profane eyes.

According to this account, Ile-Ife is not only the cradle of the Yoruba people but also of mankind. He descended with a handful of sand and a cock in his hands, he spread the sand over the earth, which was covered with water, and the cock spread the sand all over the earth and created land. These set of Yorubas believe they had been occupying their homeland since the time of creation.

The Yoruba people had their own form of religion before the advent of Christianity and Islam, they believed in their own deities, which changed with each geographical location. There are many deities such as Sango (god of thunder), Ogun (god of iron), Soponna (god of smallpox), Yemoja and so many other gods. These are believed to be intermediaries between God (Olodumare) and man.

The Yoruba people take their culture seriously; greetings form an important part of daily life. While greetings are exchanged, it is important for the people to smile; and when asked about the wellbeing of someone, time is given to respond as this is considered to be polite. The Yorubas greet their elders with a lot of respect, the boys prostrate to greet their elders, while their female counterparts greet by kneeling on one or two knees depending on the tribe.

These people also have a very rich cultural background; there are different forms of dance, arts, music, dressing and philosophy. Proverbs and adages form an important part of everyday language, and are used extensively in all forms of communication. Music is also very important, and can be used as a form of communication. The talking drum is often as a means of communicating in old times and is still used presently.

The Yoruba dressing is usually made up of brightly coloured dresses with hats and shoes matching in colour. The females dress up mainly with a head tie known as "Gele", and a long wrapper with a short-armed top (Iro and Buba). The males normally wear a long-dress in the form of a shirt almost touching the knees or even the ankles; a matching trouser (Buba and Soro) often accompanies this and a hat.

The Yoruba people occupy the states Lagos, Ondo, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, and some parts of Kwara and Edo states respectively. They have a general language called "Yoruba" (Yooba) which is the form that is taught in schools in the South-Western zone of Nigeria. There are other dialects of the language from different places such as Ondo, Ijebu, Isale-Eko, Oyo and Ekiti to mention a few.

Some of the most prominent works of the Yoruba people are in the field of art, where the works that came out of there compete favourably with that of Ancient Greece and Rome. The brilliant terracotta and bronze designs, most of these works date back to the Eleventh century AD. Regardless of their origin, the Yoruba people of Nigeria have proved themselves to be a people of a dynamic culture and tradition.

## THE PRE-COLONIAL TRADITIONAL ADMINISTRATION

Before the advent of the Europeans, societies in Africa had evolved various system of political administrations based on the peculiarities of these ethnic nationalities. These institutions had full executive, legislative and judicial powers in their different domains and exerted sovereign control over their people.

According to Oloko (1976), the traditional ruler under the Benin kingdom was at the head of a well-organized system of government. As the sole authority he was the legislature, executive and the judiciary. Traditional institution during the pre-colonial era was quite clear, since law and order were maintained through a normative system that was part of the general social structure though the system was not sophisticated, the machinery of government was organized enough to manage affairs, resolve tension and administered justice in the society. Also, the institution was controlled by certain unwritten laws which ensure the security of the institution. This implies that, traditional rulers had positive impact on the evolution of political, economic and social institutions in which they had dominant control.

According to Igwe Stephen Ngene Ede-Njoku (2002), the political institutions of the pre-colonial societies included the paramount chiefs, the council of elders, age grade and religious organizations. The Ibos at the pre-colonial period did not have a single political authority; even though they were a contingent. Since the Ibos shunned the idea of having a single leader at that time, they operated a lineage system as a basis for political organization.

This political system was fashioned in such a way that a man could only lead members of his lineage hence, there were many influential and powerful men, their influence was limited to hamlet, clan and village and at most the area in which they lived.

In every village, hamlet or clan, there was always a village head who emerged by virtue of age and who in collaboration of other elders settled disputes in that particular village. If the disputes involved another village the elders, led by the eldest from both village came together and resolved the disputes, especially those bothering on elopement and land, which was common at that time.

## THE COLONIAL TRADITIONAL ADMINISTRATION

In the colonial era, the British system of colonial administration employed the system of indirect rule. Indirect rule was a British system of ruling her colonies with the use of local chiefs or other approved intermediaries and traditional laws and customs with British officials merely supervising the administration. Indirect rule used the existing traditional system of administration and it recognized the status of traditional rulers who served as the priest of indirect rule (Barr. Abdullahi, 2007).

The advent of colonial rule 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.

According to Aidelokhai (2008), traditional rulers before the advent of colonial rule in Nigeria were the political, cultural, economic and social administrators and lords of their various domains. The status of traditional rulers changed with the advent of colonial rule as the colonialist who imposed their power on traditional rulers usurped their sovereign authority. This development was meant to enable the colonialist perfect their exploitation through the use of traditional rulers.

Crowder (1978) asserts that chieftaincy institutions were maintained and used by the colonialist for colonial interest. The indirect rule in Northern Nigeria attests to this phenomenon. Arguing further, Crowder believes that whether they had fulfilled the entire traditional pre-requisite for assumption of office, which would have allowed them rule in pre-colonial days, their right to rule depended on the colonial authorities.

Afigbo (1972) asserts that the British instituted Native Courts and installed chiefs by warrant that controlled them. This was because the British believed that African people had to be governed by chiefs, therefore maintaining the organic unity of the Nigerian society. In effect many warrant chiefs solely constituted colonially backed usurpers of power and had little legitimacy beyond the fact of being installed by colonial state. Nevertheless, they had power and used it for their own gain. Their main source of power was the control of Native Courts and labors for example; for colonial road and water way construction (Ofonagoro, 1982). Enugu warrant chief Onyeama was described as an "African god" by his grandson (Onyeama, 1982). He controlled the flows of labor to the emerging coal mining industry and established himself as a powerful ruler combining wealth, terror and magical power over his people.

In spite of the subordination to the British overloads, it could be argued that, the powers of traditional rulers were not eroded. Rather, the positions of rulers were strengthened. The Emir for example exercised stronger participatory roles in administration. This was because more powers of coercion were accorded to the Native Courts and the British treated Emirs with caution. The rulers also exercised executive powers as sole Native Authorities which determined the pace and direction of local administration subject to British guidance and needs.

The above description of the role of traditional rulers in Nigeria during the colonial period shows that, change occurred and traditional rulers assumed a new status. They were co-opted to perform roles that were completely opposed to the wishes and aspiration of the colonized societies.

## THE POST-COLONIAL TRADITIONAL ADMINISTRATION

The role and status of traditional rulers in post independent Nigeria varied though with different administrations, they could be said to have remained agents for the perpetuation of our neo-colonial status, thereby upsetting the ongoing process of development in the country.

Nwankwo (1992) stated that chiefs are custodians of the land and they held the land in trust for the people. They served as a link between rural people and the government. They assist the government in political education and socialization of the rural people. They acted as the custodians of the traditional religion, arts and culture of the people. They explained the customs and tried to preserve it.

In view of the political administration, traditional rulers have been given limited authority to settle minor disputes. In this regard also Axel (1998) asserts that traditional rulers try to make peace within the community and with neighboring communities. To Axel traditional rulers act as instrument of state control at the local level.

Oloko (1976) maintained that the traditional rulers were responsible for nation building tasks such as the maintenance of the main road linking their areas, the supply of man-power for the kingdom's army, the upkeep of the royal capital and collection of taxes and tributes due at various times. In the socio-cultural aspect he continued that in their role as the patrons of the creative and expressive arts of their people, traditional rulers took active steps to encourage the work of talented African carvers, sculptors, potters and so on.

Nwankwo (1992) identifies some relevant roles played by traditional rulers in Nigeria during pre-colonial, colonial and even modern times. He states that traditional rulers perform amongst others the role of making or contributing to law making and judgment, adjudication in disputes in their communities. They also maintain peace, order and security.

## MODERN DAYS TRADITIONAL RULERS

A quick glance at my dictionary showed that "traditional" meant something done or respected according to custom from generation to generation. While "ruler" meant a person or something with power or influence over others or over certain things. It also meant a person with power to govern or with over other people or things. This definition would cover a very wide spectrum of things and situations but the subject coming at the time of the Constitution making exercise, I guessed it would be prudent to approach it from the political, social, and cultural angle.

When we talk about the modern time traditional rulers which is not yet with us, and to propound ideas and views on the future performance of existing institutions, we are inevitably compelled to review the performances and relevance, or lack of it, of such institutions in the present century, for, as we have seen, tradition moves from generation to generation. I



therefore believe that for the role of traditional rulers in the modern time traditional rulers to be portrayed

In view of the above, the modernization helps the traditional rulers to introduce new ideas for community development such as being democratic in their decision making giving room for the people to participate in the community affairs.

Traditional rulers of modern times perform vital roles in their domain like embarking on awareness campaign or the sensitization of their community populace on HIV/AIDS epidemic, the construction of classroom blocks and providing learning materials in school to help develop education system, provision of medical facilities and the building of the community health centre.

The strength of modernization theory is argued on the basis that, the sociological imagination is more important than controlling the risk found in contemporary societies; and fulfills the potential for improving people lives. Despite its strength the modernization theory has its weakness. It lacks a theory of culture. In reality there are difference in culture between a varieties of groups in modern societies, significantly, it also affect how people experience social life and behavior.

According to Parson (1964) for any social system which the community is part to survive, there are three basic functional pre-requisites: Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration. These can be seen as problems that communities must solve if they are to survive and progress.

**Adaptation:** This refers to the relationship between the traditional rulers and their communities. In order to survive, traditional institution must have some degree of control over the community.

**Goal Attainment:** This refers to the need for all communities to set goals towards which socio-economic activities are directed procedures for establishing goals and deciding on priorities between goals are institutionalized.

**Integration:** This has to do with primary adjustment of conflict in the community. It is concerned with the co-ordination and mutual adjustment of the community members. Legal norms define and standardize relations between individual and institutions and to reduce the potential for conflict. But when conflict does arise, it is settled by the traditional rulers and does not lead to the disintegration of the community and its development in general.

Using the three functional perspective, traditional rulers are part of the society who have some functions to perform and contribute to the maintenance of the society (i.e their communities) such function include the contribution of their quota in the maintenance of the internal peace and security in their domain which is the only way development can take place in the community. They help in revenue generation and community tax assessment, determination of religious matters and settlement of conflict arising thereof; they also contribute in community development

efforts of their respective communities like building of health centre, town halls, market shop, post office, electricity, construction of road networks, bridges and culverts e.t.c

The functionalist perspective has to be subjected to considerable criticism. Critics argued that the type of explanation states that the parts of the system exist because of their beneficial consequences for the system as a whole. The main objection to this type of reasoning is that it treats an effect as a cause. Therefore the assertion that traditional rulers embark on development projects in their domain is an attestation of consensus value and institution is a misplace one.

Finally, despite the widespread criticism, it should not be rejected out of hand, the assumption that society should be seen as an integral whole, that its part are interdependent, that social institution exist and the social structure directs human behavior.

### **THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS ON THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

The role of the traditional rulers in the development of any given society cannot be disputed. Some national issues have been agitating my mind, and one of them concerns the constitutional roles that are envisaged for our traditional Nigeria order, peace and good government which remain the responsibilities of our royal fathers. It is against this background that this research is being carried out to examine some of the roles of traditional rulers in the overall development and governance of Yoruba nation.

The traditional institution has been thoroughly humiliated over the years, the main reason is that it is a conquered institution in most cases. Some of the conquests by the colonialists were followed with heavy primitive expedition. The cases of the once mighty Benin kingdom and Sokoto caliphate brought down about a country ago are prime examples. The colonialists introduced the policy of removing traditional rulers from civic and political relevance by importing the policy of their home country.

The imposition of ceremonial roles on traditional rulers in Nigeria which Yoruba are not in isolation and their strict prohibition from participation in partisan politics were necessary for the prosecution of colonial rule and even the military era that followed shortly after independence. It is now becoming very clear that the nation is losing valuable manpower by pretending that traditional rulers are expendable in the administration of our democratic polity, this is the truth. Let us forget about intra-racial and inter-ethnic wars of the time that was not peculiar to us. Even the European countries were not free from these similar debates. Today the power shift occasioned by western system of government has deprived our traditional rulers of their primordial roles.

Nnanna noted that the dethronement of traditional rulers was followed up with the denial of their right to benefit from social tributes that helped make their ancestors wealthy on the throne. Their fortunes dipped even further with the dawn of indigenes rule.

Today the rulers play little or no active role in revenue generation through taxation. In order to survive, traditional institutions gradually become strong elements in the campaign organizations of ruling politicians in spite of their prohibition from partisan politics. Most of them have resorted to the award of chieftaincy titles as a means of survival and the temptation to give out these titles to all manner of people with money is always there.

We can restore the dignity of our traditional institution by defining some constitutional roles for the royal fathers. In this vein, they will be given tasks and they will receive rewards in form of regular income (not prehend or tokenistic stipends).

In recognition of the roles which a traditional ruler is expected to play in the administration of their local communities, the colonial government introduced the system of indirect rule which made the Nigeria traditional chiefs the central figure around which the system of administration of local community revolved. Highlighted the following as the roles assigned to traditional rulers under the customary laws of different ethnic group in Nigeria which Yoruba is one. They are:

- Preservation of public peace
- Settlement of disputes among their subjects
- Assisting in the collection of taxes and
- Acting as the custodian of their subjects and community customs and traditions.

As the custodians of customary laws, while carrying out their customary functions, the traditional rulers must ensure that the discharge of such traditional functions is done in such a way that will not be in breach of the constitution or any statutory provision or in a way repugnant to morality, common law, equity, natural justice of good conscience.

Other roles of traditional rulers include amongst others are the following.

- Presiding over the meetings of elders and minor chieftains in their domains.
- Conferment of traditional chieftaincy title on qualified indigenes according to the customary law.
- Conferment of honorary chieftaincy titles on deserving indigenes and non-indigenes of their community.
- Encouragement of economic development in the areas within their domains.

### **THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS ON THE CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF YORUBA LAND**

Our culture would appear to be present in two manifestations, which though basically conflicting, yet manage somehow to exist side by side. Kolade identified these two manifestations of culture as “primordial and constitutional” Our primordial culture is that which existed even before society became conscious of its corporate existence, this forming the context within which the people came to relate to one another from the start of their co-existence. Within the primordial culture, standards of inter-relationship have evolved from the perceived need to respect each other’s interest and rights

in order to enjoy peace rather than experience consistent tension and conflict. In its primordial state, culture has built up traditions of communal collaboration where people agree on broad forms of coordination and willingly commit themselves to pattern of relationship.

The distinct feature of this structure is that participants willingly come together after discovering that it is in their best interest to act in concert. This willing participation becomes the basis for regulating inter and intra-group behavior. For example, it promotes situation in which members of Yoruba band together by agreement on particular days to embark on community development project such as construction of new rural/feeder roads or local bridges using nothing but the resources and efforts freely donated by individuals according to their capacity.

On the other hand, constitutional culture has come about because the process of modernization created formal structures of political relationship and governance by which society could be relatively easily administered. Our experience of colonial governance created situations in which it became fashionable to concentrate resources in the hands of “district officers” who dispensed resources to village communities from central sources. Thus development came to be regarded as something that should come from government at the centre-federal, state or local rather than something growing out of the real needs of the community and the readiness of its members to make a joint positive contribution. The indigenous community was taught to express expectations rather than continue to be maximally productive through self effort.

Modernization has added another role to the aforementioned traditional roles. This is the role of traditional rulers as representative of their communities either as the plaintiffs, being on behalf of their communities or as the defendants defending actions on behalf of their communities. This role emanates as a result of the prime position occupied by the traditional chieftains among the members of the community.

Traditional rulers indeed in Yoruba land and other parts of the country were trusted with the responsibilities of managing community land. The management of community land by traditional rulers also includes the right to allocate land to strangers or new immigrants who decide to settle in the community after attaining certain criteria to that effect.

Describing the traditional chieftaincy holders role as the manager and protector of communal land, late Dr. Elias, in his book Nigeria land law states “the chief as trusted or protector can allocate land as well as revoke its grants can receive tribute or rent and eject from the land for good cause and has a right of reversion as juridical embodiment of the community. He represents his own community in dealing with another community or with the other third parties

## THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS ON POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

The importance of chieftaincy institution in the administration of Nigeria was accorded due recognition by the colonial rulers of the country. It was as the result of the recognition of the importance of the institution that prompted the British government to include certain prominent paramount traditional rulers in the enlarged executive council and an advisory and deliberative body known as the Nigerian council in 1914. The importance of the institution was never lost sight of the composition of the legislative bodies established for Nigeria under the Richard constitution of 1914. Under Richard's constitution a house of chiefs was established for the western and the northern regions. In addition the two regions had their traditional chiefs as nominated unofficial members to the legislative council. Subsequent constitutions from 1957 down recognized the unique position and importance of chieftaincy institution.

Kusamotu noted, that "in recognition of the importance of chieftaincy institution in Nigeria, the inclusion of a traditional chief from each state of the federation, in the members of council of state created for the country under and by virtue of the provisions of section 140 of the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria, 1979 is guaranteed. The constitutional provisions which state the mode of appointing a chief to the council of state read: One person from each state shall as respects for that state be appointed by the council of chiefs of the state among themselves".

As a member of council of state, a traditional chief's duty and those of other members of the council are advisory. At the state level the constitution also allowed each state of the federation to establish state council of chiefs, the constitutional duties and powers of a state council of chief are stated in third schedule part of 1979 constitution. The council shall have power to advice the governor on any matter relating to customary law or cultural affairs, inter-communal relation and chieftaincy matters.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the place of traditional rulers in the administration of people during the Pre-colonial, Colonial, Post colonial and modern days were look into. The paper also observed the various roles of traditional rulers on the social, cultural and political developments in Yoruba land. The study revealed precisely that traditional rulers are the major agents in transforming the attitude of the rural people provided they are answerable to a titled ruler vested with the authority of governing the affairs of the people.

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