

INTERROGATING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA (NIGERIA) POLITICAL INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

This work attempt to interrogate the traditional Yoruba political system in other to find out whether there were any traces of democratic governance in their institutions. Effort had been made by various scholars and researchers in various area of human endeavor to discredit traditional African political institutions in a way that arouse the emotion of many other scholars to look into at least one of this institutions, interrogate their doings through the pre-colonial era and see whether or not there are any traces of democratic governance in their institutions. The paper is theoretical in nature basically; it draws its argument from secondary data including textbooks, journals, articles, and publications. The work concludes that traditional Yoruba institutions had some rubrics upon which a modern democratic structure can be built.

KEYWORDS: *Africa, Democratic, Institution, Interrogate, Political, Traditional, Yoruba*

INTRODUCTION

There is the belief among the western scholars that the traditional African societies had no system of administration: that is no law, no order, no government, and no civilization. (Fatile and Adejumo, 2009). But this claims is bias because the traditional African societies had a well-organized system of administration where the public order was provided and maintained; laws were made and implemented, were inter-communal and inter-tribal conflicts were settled. This clearly shows that the view of western scholars was erroneous because traditional African society has been a significant feature of the people and commanded a large degree of loyalty and respect among them.

African traditional institutions were people-oriented, just as democracy does. Democracy has been defined by President Abraham Lincoln's in his Gettysburg Address as "the government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Salami 2004: 315-328). This expression "of the people" points to the power of citizens to choose those to rule and to ensure that they are governed in conformity with the general good of the society. In the same way, the expression "of the people" suggests that democracy is a system of government whose constitutional rules, principles, and procedures are set up by the people themselves. In this sense, democracy enables people to participate in decision making concerning their lives, community, and society (Gyekye 1997: 133-134). Therefore this understanding of democracy stresses the notion of the people which place democracy as a system that gives institutional expression to the will of the people just as the traditional African societies give institutional expression to the will of their people.

Yoruba Traditional Political Institution

The traditional institution simply refers to the indigenous political arrangements whereby leaders with proven track records are appointed and installed in line with their native laws and custom to act as custodian of their people's norms, cultures, and practices. A traditional ruler is a person who has been appointed to and occupies the throne of an area by virtue of his ancestry in accordance with the established tradition. Traditional leadership is an ancient institution prevalent across the entire African continent. In Nigeria, the monarchs were referred to in various names and appellations such as the Oba, Emir, Obi, amongst others. So highly revered because they possess elaborate religious and political powers, and regarded as representatives of God, the Supreme Being on earth.

In the pre-colonial era of Nigeria, traditional rulers wield effective powers in their domains. They derived their legislative, executive and judicial functions from age-long tradition of their people which were recognized and revered over time (Najeem A.L.1989).

In Nigeria, among the Yoruba's in the South Western part of Nigeria, traditional rulers were regarded as representatives of the gods of the land, and custodians of the people history and culture. The "Yoruba" refers to a group of cultures linked by a common language. The Yoruba are a group that inhabits the southwestern part of Nigeria – bounded by the Niger River – the eastern parts of Benin Republic (formerly Dahomey), and the western part of Togo. Yoruba traced their origin and kingship to Oduduwa who is generally ascribed to be their ancestral dynasty and the ancestor of their numerous crowned kings (Obayemi A1976).

In theory, the offices of traditional rulers in traditional Yoruba institutions were permanent and hereditary. In practice, however, they have numerous advisers who aid them in arriving at a consensus on all matters. (Ifemsia C.C.1978)³ This is because most communities established elaborate procedures to curtail autocracy and abuse of powers (Agbese P.O.2014). Analyzing the restraints and checks and balances imposed on the powers of pre-colonial traditional rulers, Davies A.E. reiterates:

Traditional authority in pre-colonial Nigeria whether in the monarchical, associational Or concillar type was as good, revered and effective as the authority of the Kings in Europe and other places that had an organized governmental system. Traditional rulers were in theory and in practice *defacto* and *dejure* governors of their domain. They were not dependent on any higher body to exercise their authority. They were not however, absolute rulers as some writers have portrayed them. Rather, their authority and political behavior were limited by institutional restraints conventions and customs. (Davies A.E,1990)

Hence creating governance through representative and participatory democracy featured in all the facets of the traditional Yoruba social, cultural and political organization. For example, in Oyo, the *Alafin* was elected from a number of royal candidates by a King-making body called the *Oyomesi* which consists of seven councilors of society [also done in other paramount Yoruba traditional societies] (Osae 1980: 97). And in Ile-Ife, the *Ooni* also emerged from among members

of the ruling houses while the King-makers, with the directive from the *Ifa* oracle, chose whoever should emerge as the *Ooni*, and in cases of succession and ascension, Yoruba traditional culture employed the assistance of *Ifa* oracle to aid the Kingmakers in the determining who in the society would become the King. The point here is that in each Yoruba traditional town, there are some families already marked as the royal lineages from which contestants to the stool would emerge.

Anthropologically, traditional Yoruba society could be said to be monarchical, yet the monarch does not enjoy a sole authority of the society, and while the King occupied the highest seat of the society, there existed an elaborate organization of palace officials and or chiefs. Hence the affairs of society were transacted by the King in full consultation with the chiefs and other palace officials which can conveniently be classified as the council of society.

The *Oba* also represents the head of the political organization of traditional Yoruba society which gives political, juridical, and executive power he can exercise in council with other chiefs and officials. The traditional Yoruba society accorded the *Oba* a considerable amount of respect, which almost equals veneration, although his powers are not meant to be absolute due to a hierarchy of power relations in the management of the society. Hence this hierarchy of power relations tilted in favor of the *Oba* but it did not translate to an unchecked power, thus the power arrangement in traditional Yoruba political setting was such that it provided checks and balances with a structure that gave power to some bodies of persons to exercise on behalf of others with a second structure to provide institutions with the power to check the possible excesses by those who wielded power based in a social and political fabric meant to encourage inter-institutional checks and balances to moderate social and political power relationships in the society.

In the *Oyo* Kingdom for instance, while the *Alafin* (the *Oba*) wielded much power that approached veneration, the institution of the *Oyo-mesi* was also there to check his use and possible abuse of power. *Alafin* was the supreme judge of the *Oyo* Empire; his court was the final court of appeal, and he was also the fountain of honors and the head of his people in the inseparable spheres of administration of law and justice (Stride: 298). On the other hand, the *Alafin* was elected by the *Oyo-mesi*, the King-making body consisting of seven councilors of society. Apart from the role as Kingmakers, the *Oyo-mesi* also had the power to moderate the power and the influence of *Alafin*. And thus *Alafin* had to govern with caution and a respect for the subjects who invariably held him with veneration, and when an *Alafin* displeased his people, the *Oyo-mesi*, under the leadership of Basorun, would present him with an empty calabash or parrot's eggs as a sign that he must commit suicide (although the *Alafin* could not be deposed, he could be compelled to commit suicide). And likewise, the *Oyo-mesi* does not enjoy an absolute power or influence, and while the *Oyo-mesi* may wield political influence, the *Ogboni* represented the popular opinion backed by the authority of religion, and therefore the view of the *Oyo-mesi* could be moderated by the *Ogboni*. Yet, the Basorun as the head of *Oyo-mesi* was also in a position to influence the political decisions of both *Oyo-mesi* and the *Ogboni* (Stride: 299-300). And most interestingly, there are checks and balances to the power of the *Alafin* and the *Oyo-mesi*, and thus no one is arrogated absolute power.

Another democratic feature traceable to the traditional Yoruba society was that the rules set for a choice of leaders and governance were clearly recognized by the rulers and the ruled, and at least, the rulers and the subjects knew that at the departure of an *Oba*, were already set with respect to who ascended the throne, with a modality for choosing some rites. Thus each traditional Yoruba Kingdom had a settled system of ascension after the demise of an *Oba*, already known to the citizens and the potential contestants for the royal stool. Second, it was democratic to the extent that the rules were strictly

followed, which made it impossible for anyone to impose himself on the society as it ensured that to become an *Oba*, both the spiritual and material criteria were observed. And in this case, the field was open to all eligible candidates who were assumed to have equal access to the throne, demonstrating to the citizens that they had a voice in determining who would ascend to the throne, and thus became a ruler.

Traditional Yoruba societies' are open and inclusive. In the traditional Yoruba system generally, evidence abounds to show a heritage of transparent and accountable governance. Traditional African societies place a high premium on accountable governance to the extent that leaders are not only answerable for their actions but in the past were also made to explain natural events such as famine, epidemics, floods, and droughts, for which many were forced to go into voluntary exile or asked to die. (Ak1991:34).Furthermore, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1987:135-136) pointed out that the structure of an African states (Yoruba) implies that kings and chiefs rule by consent and that ruler's subjects are as fully aware of the duties he owes to them, as they are of the duties they owe to him and are able to exert pressure to make him discharge these duties. Also, indicators of a wide spectrum of inclusiveness are observable in the decision-making process of traditional political systems. It is a common believe among the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria that their social misconducts can invoke the wrath of their progenitors. This has served to check and regulate social behaviors among the Yoruba. Many of such examples of democratic values and orientations characterize political and social life in traditional African societies.

In some instances any king that fail to dance to the tune of the laydown rules and regulations may be rejected for example, as in the case of Oyo Kingdom, there was check and balances; there was no an absolute monarch or absolute presidents. Constitutionalism is of necessity a version of limited government (Mazrui, 2001). An autocratic king may be rejected; the direct demand may come in the form of political rejection issued to the king. A ruling Alaaafin could be rejected by his chiefs (the Oyomesi) for tyranny, wickedness or as a result of political intrigues or power struggles. This rejection would be communicated to him by the Bashorun (Prime Minister). Rejected kings who valiantly committed suicide were treated honorably and accorded decent and public funerals because they exited bravely without resistance. On the other hand, for a king to insist on living after having been rejected was also considered disgraceful and ignominious. Nobody anticipated such an existence. The only record of this in Oyo traditions is that of Alaaafin Karan, who challenged the right of the Oyomesi to reject him. He was subsequently killed in an insurrection (Johnson1966).

For example, in pre-colonial Ibadan, a rejected chief either had to commit suicide or flee the town. If he neither committed suicide nor fled, he would be attacked, his family destroyed, his compound leveled to ruins, and his dead body treated like that of a common criminal (Adeboye O.2013). In most cases, they went on exile but those chiefs that chose death meant that they considered it to be a better option than exile. It is therefore clear that what was at stake was more than the individual honor. These chiefs were interested in maintaining their own personal dignity as well as the name of their family/lineage. To them, it was better to die than face ignominy.

John Iliffe, in his discussion of honor among the Yoruba in the nineteenth century rightly observes the prevalence of military notions of honor (John Iliffe, 2005:78). The issue of honor is not limited to the military but also the life of the individual as well as the life of highly placed individual in the society. For example, anybody found wanting may be requested to commit suicide that is to teach any earing individual a lesson. If he happened to be the king the decision remained the same which also served as a lesson to any aspiring individual that orderliness remained paramount in the

society. A king or Chief or any individual found guilty of the punishable offense may be asked to commit suicide. Who so ever obey the sanction may buy honor for himself and his family. This issue of honor also extended to the youth. This development was a function of the incessant wars and military conflicts that characterized the Yoruba region within that century; it also had an antecedent in the philosophy of the Eso in eighteenth-century Old Oyo. The Eso were the seventy officers that commanded the Oyo military force. Robin Law (1977:78) calls them ‘seventy junior war chiefs, who acted as subordinate commanders of the army under the Oyomesi’. Their concept of honor in war is reflected in the following saying:

Ohunmeji lo ye EsoEsoja, o le ogunEsoja, o kusiogun

(One of two things befits an Eso. The Eso must fight and conquer (or)

The Eso must fight and perish (in war)

EsokiigbaofalehinAfi bi bagb’ogbeniwajugangan

(An Eso must never be shot in the back His wounds must

always be right in front) (Johnson, 1998:22).

These Eso principles of honor became crystallized in the nineteenth-century period of intense warfare in Yoruba land. The idea was that an honorable military commander must not survive defeat (John Iliffe,2005:78). Nowhere was this ethos of military honor demonstrated as in Ibadan, founded in 1829 as a war camp and from there metamorphosed into a powerful military state.

However, another democratic tendency is also noticeable here, we discovered that; ethnographic accounts and oral histories have shown that internal dynamics of communities were often less egalitarian because there are interpersonal stratifications in cases such as land ownership, class differences which usually affect the role the individual could play in community affairs, most especially between ordinary peoples and the royal courts. It should be noted that social stratifications do not occur in a fixed pattern, which makes it erroneous to define any society as either communitarian or individualistic, because communality and individuality do coexist at the different level in Yoruba societies. There is evidence to show that, the ideal of individual rights was not new to traditional African societies. In the same way, sociological studies of rural communities in Europe and America, that are well associated with individuality and liberalism shows that “collectivist orientations are traceable and still discernable in the ways of life of such communities’ members”(Van, D.B.2004). In another way, we discovered that the west is concerned with individualism and Africa’s concerned with collectively are both extremes of the same continuums. Iyer Lisa (1996) has this to say on his analysis of BuchEmecheta’s women characters;

All culture expect conformity within a given framework,
and ‘individualism’ or ‘individuation’ is tolerated or in
some cases glorified only when it falls within the parameter
considered acceptable to and supportive of the operative
ideology. The prevalent notion that western culture glorifies

individualism is by and large a fallacy, since it encourages only aspects of individualism which perpetuate the dominant belief system, such as economic individualism, while in general taking a hostile stance toward manifestations of individualism which seems to threaten the status quo (Iyer, L. 1996:124).

What we are saying is that the west only make use of those aspects of individualism that are not a threat to the status quo and those that serve as a threat are done away with, since there is always a choice- that is collectivity. So also in Yoruba society the issues of choice also permeate the society, an individual is free to reject any move that serves as the threat to their own status quo. For example; this is well noticeable among the Yorubas. The case of Ibadan in Oyo Empire, the king cannot impose his wishes on his people. Yorubas have a similarity with this, no accredited chief can impose his or her will on the elder of the council, and this council consisted of all the lineage heads of each compound in the community. Member of the council deliberated on matters before them until they reach a consensus. By consensus we mean:

a condition arrived at after a thorough deliberation, in which two or more person or group (s) concerned with decisions.... about which conflict might occur, are in agreement in their belief about what decision should be made and have some feeling of unanimity with each other and with the society as a whole (Sills, E.1986).

The essence of consensus is to transcend the conflicting position in a way that all the parties involved in the dispute "are able to feel that adequate account has been taken of their points of view in any proposed scheme of future action of co-existence" (Ebijuwa, T.2003).

Furthermore, one of the most dominant characteristics of democratic society is individualism, a sociological study of the rural community in Yoruba land show that individualistic orientation is noticeable in their lifestyles. Capitalism or individualism is well associated with the Western world where the idea of democracy comes from. In fact, democracy is synonymous with individualism and individual freedom. In traditional African Yoruba, society individualism is well noticeable. There were cases where community members who found the restrictions placed on them by the collectivity too oppressive and decided to dissociate from or even revolt. For example, Bodunrin remarks that the question of human rights was not totally alien in traditional African societies. In fact he puts it in this way:

The desire for freedom is endemic among human beings. The freedom of the individual is paramount to all types of freedoms. The African psyche is not different that of the rest of mankind. In traditional African, as reflected in

our mythologies and history, there were men, who in defense of their individual freedom stood against society. The myth of Sango, Igbonka Ebira Olofa Ina in Oyo (Nigeria), And Iyalode (a woman) in Ibadan. In history are such examples which abound in our proverbs and in our inheritance laws. Rulers (kings) were not allowed to be absolute rulers in traditional Africa. They were deposed if they trampled upon the rights of their subjects(Cobbarh, J.A.M.1981).

What we are saying is that these factors which gave rise to the need for constitutional guarantees, that led to the growth of the philosophy of human rights in western societies are also applicable and relevant in traditional Yoruba societies.

There is this example in Yoruba society of western Nigeria which creates room for the individual to pursue his or her goals and fulfill his or her aspirations. In other words, the level of development of an individual is determined by an amount of effort put into any activity. This sense of individuality, freedom, and equality is succinctly represented, in the analysis of the myth of Iwa. The Iwa myth run as follows:

.....Iwa was married to Orunmila, the gods of wisdom.

The marriage was, fragile, constantly threat-ched by Orunmila's intolerance, jealousy, and impatience.

In beautiful women, dirty and rebellious, finally packed out of the house and moved in with other suitors, which included many Yoruba kings, before Orunmila cornered her, to no avail, to return to his house. Orunmila lost everything in the search- property, public support and money. Yet the public would not blame Iwa for her insincerity and insubordination. Rather it was Orunmila they blamed for not exercising enough patience in dealing with his wife (Lawuyi, O. B. 1988).

This myth emphasis the notion of freedom and power of women inherent in Yoruba society.

As Iwa myth further implicitly express, for there to be peace and harmony in a given situation, there

must be a sense of appreciation and understanding of the basic qualities of one's partner and of the ability of each person to make a reasoned decision and to be given the opportunity to realize his or her goals(Lawuyi. O. B. 1992).

The importance of the myth of Iwa is not the insincerity of Iwa or the impatience of Orunmila as it indicates, but the social fact that individuals in their capacity as autonomous agents can realize their goals and aspirations. Morso, the arguments reveal that the social structure of traditional Yoruba society operates a liberal policy that encourages and promote the development of individual potentials.

CONCLUSIONS

It is well noticeable as elucidated above that the idea of democratic value was present in traditional Yoruba political institutions but definitely not the same as the current forms of democracy. Even those regarded as the symbol of democracy today are not always intact, but rather in evolving stages of true democracy but credit can still be given to traditional Yoruba society for putting up some rubrics upon which a modern democratic structure can be built. No wonder the colonizer made use of the institution on the ground to administer their colony during the colonial era.

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