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CONTENTS

1. Isiaka, M., Salawu, B. & Mohammed, A. H.- Masculinity, Police Culture and Women Representation in the Police Force in Kaduna State, Nigeria	1-14
2. Ajibade, L.T., Ajewole, O. D., & Ojo, I. A.- Geographical Analysis of Electric Power Generating Set (EPGS) Usage in Ilorin Metropolis, Nigeria	15-24
3. Akaba, J., Idub, B. S., & Odudu, S. – Work Casualization and Organisational Commitment in the Service Industry in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria	25-38
4. Gadzama, I. U., Abubakar, M. B. & Mudiare, P. U. E – Women Empowerment through Small –Scale Businesses in Nigeria	39-48
5. Solomon, I. I. & Aliu, Fatima O. - An x-ray of core issues in Governance, Corruption and Development in Nigeria	49-62
6. Afolayan, G. P, Tunde, A. M. and Adeniyi, E. E.- An Assessment of the Challenges and Prospects of Infrastructure Provision in Kwara State, Nigeria.	63-70
7. Abdulbaqi, S. S. & Adegoke, R. O. - Gender Roles and Attitudes in the Workplace: Assessment of Human Attributes and Gender Differentiation in the Media Houses	71-84
8. Adebiyi, O.M., Ishaq, A. A. & Abubakar, A.- Participatory Democracy in Pre-colonial Nigeria: The Old Oyo Empire in Retrospect.	85-98
9. Mohammed, M. N.- Factors Influencing the Utilisation of Maternal Health Care Services among Women in Urban and Rural Local Government Areas of Kano State, Nigeria	99-110
10. Ebomoyi, I. & Igbinedion, S. S. – Creating Developmental State Institutions in Nigeria: Lessons from East-Asian States	111-126
11. Yusuf, N., Abdulbaqi, Z. A. & Aliyu, T. – Trade Unionism as a Catalyst for Organizational Development in Nigeria.	127-134
12. Olaniyi, O. S., Idachaba, E. U., Shamushdeen, A. & Akinlotan, R. - Globalization and Nigeria's Political Development.	135-150
13. Ugiagbe, E. O. & Edegbe, U.B.- Powerlessness, Learned-Helplessness and Gender Inequality Discourse in Nigeria	151-164
14. Abubakar, G. F. & Isah, A., Impact of Climatic Variables on Human Morbidity and Mortality due to Malaria in Argungu, Kebbi State	165-174
15. Omede, J., Ngwube, A. & Okoroafor, O. Assessment of the African Union's Response to the 2013 Military Coup in Egypt	175-186

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN PRE-COLONIAL NIGERIA: THE OLD OYO EMPIRE IN RETROSPECT

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Abstract

Prior to the end of the twentieth century, democracy was the most sought after system of governance. The commencement of the present millennium also signaled the consolidation of the establishment of democratic practice in authoritarian polities. Today, only few countries have not embraced democratic rule. States which do not practice democracy in contemporary times are regarded as pariah states. However, the western proponents of democracy are of the opinion that the difficulty to establish democracy in Africa can be attributed to the level of development of respective African states. These western scholars portray Africa as strangers to democracy. While it may be asserted that African countries may encounter occasional setbacks in their democratisation process, they have made remarkable success. It is also important to note that while it is incontestable that the notion of modern democracy is a product of western idea, it can equally be argued that democratic practices is not completely alien to Africa. A retrospective analysis of pre-colonial African political structure will reveal that traditional African societies are not devoid of what may be regarded as the practice of democracy. These indigenous societies had political practices which bear semblance with what is obtained today. Using the pre-colonial Old Oyo Empire as a point of reference and a careful investigation of relevant secondary data and multi-disciplinary approach, the paper argued that what can be described as democratic practices actually existed in the Empire. The paper however, concludes that these democratic practices were abolished by the advent of colonial rule.

Keywords: Checks and balances; Colonial rule; Participatory democracy; Separation of powers

Introduction

It is often misconstrued that democracy in Africa is absolutely a Western idea, strange and repugnant to African tradition, customs and norms. While it is undeniable that contemporary democratic practice in Africa is borrowed from Western democratic idea, it is equally important to note that democratic values and norms existed in African indigenous pre-colonial political systems. However, the advent of colonialism in Africa destroyed African traditional political settings thereby, eradicating all forms of democratic ethos and practice. Discourses on democracy and democratisation in Africa according to Nwauwa (2012:2) are usually presented in the West as if they are entirely new notions and practices to Africans. The idea of democracy itself is viewed almost exclusively as a Western concept of which African Societies now stand desperately in need of. The presumption has been that democratic values and practices are alien to the African continent, with the West standing as the cultural bearers and defenders of democratic principles (Nwauwa, 2012:2).

It was further argued that this mindset considers Africans as incapable of democratic thoughts and hence, they should be infused with the “civilized” notion of Western democracy. What has been consistently ignored is that democratic values and processes have been indigenous to Africa as they were to the ancient Greeks (Nwauwa, 2012:2). African traditional political practices, cultures and organisation testifies to this assertion. Even though the concept of democracy which is now a system of governance sought by most nations of the world was borrowed from the Greeks, democratic ethos, values and norms cannot be described as been exclusively that of the Greeks or Western ideology. The major objective of this paper is to demonstrate the fact that democratic practices are not alien to Africa. This is done by exploring democratic values and practices of the old Oyo Empire which forms part of what is today known as Nigeria. While it is an acknowledgeable fact that other traditional political systems with similar democratic practices existed, the choice of the Oyo Empire cannot be unconnected to the fact that it provides us with democratic tenets and practices which bears semblance with those of the contemporary Democratic principles. The paper is structured into four segments. The first part gives a general introductory background to the study. The second part contains a conceptual exposition of the term participatory democracy and a historical antecedent of the old Oyo Empire. The third segment dwells on the political structure of the old Oyo Empire and a discussion of the democratic practices and ethos of the empire. The last part describes democratic practices and ethos of the empire as a model for contemporary Nigerian politics and gives conclusion.

Participatory Democracy: A Conceptual Discourse

Democracy as a concept is familiar to most students of politics but it is a concept still misunderstood and misused at a time when dictators, single-party regimes and military coup leaders alike assert popular support by claiming the mantle of democracy. Despite continuing challenges democracy continues to evolve and flourish throughout the world. The term democracy is now the universally accepted answer to such questions as how should a political community arrive at collective decisions? In other words, who should rule? What should be the principle guiding government function and what are the institutional arrangements required for this purpose (Srinivasan, 2011:107). Among the 193 countries worldwide that are recognised by the United Nations, 123 are said to be democratic (United Nations Organisation, 2015). Given its popular appeal, democracy has become an abused concept such that military juntas and dictators alike claim to be democrats.

The term democracy comes from the Greek words: ‘demos’ which mean people and ‘kratos’ which means to rule or govern. Based on this, democracy can literally be referred to as the government of the majority” (Becker and Raveloson, 2008:4). Democracy can also be described as a system of government based on political equality. This implies that consent is required of all the individuals who form part of the political community. It is informed by the belief that all people are equally capable of and are stakeholders making collective decisions that shape their lives (Srinivasan, 2011:108). In a democracy, no one person’s opinion or interests is of more value than the other, hence the principle of “one man, one vote”. It is based on the idea of equal moral worth of all individuals and against the exclusion of anyone from the political process (Srinivasan,

2011:108). However, Schumpeter (1942) argued that the hallmark of modern day democracy is elections. He is of the opinion that the significant distinguishing feature of the political systems of the United States and Western Europe from any other political system that had previously existed was that important government offices are filled by "competition" by the peoples' votes. According to him, democratic method is that method of institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for peoples' votes (Schumpeter, 1942:269). To buttress Schumpeter's definition Przeworski et. al. (2000) offered a dichotomous measure of democracy. To them, democracy is the political system in which key government offices are filled through contested elections. The definition, has two components. i.e. "Key government office" which they explained as the executive and the legislature and "contested" which means that more than one party have same probability of winning office through election.

Schumpeter's minimalist conception of democracy has however not gone unchallenged. Notable critics of the minimalist view include Dahl (1971:4) who introduced the concept of polyarchy. He presented two criticisms of the Minimalist view. First, he contended that regimes vary in "the extent of public contestation". Secondly, he argued that the contestation dimension alone is not sufficient to define democracy (Dahl, 1971:4). According to Dahl (1971:1), the basic attributes of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of it's citizens, referred to as political equals. For there to be "responsiveness," it is assumed that three conditions pre-requisites. These include: the ability of citizens to formulate preferences, the ability of citizens to signify preferences by individual or collective action and to have those preferences weighed equally (Dahl, 1971:2). He, however, added that for the three conditions of democracy to be met there are seven guarantee that are required through the institutions of the state. These include freedom to form organisations, freedom of expression, the right to vote, citizen's eligibility for public offices, the right of political leaders to compete for votes, alternative source of information and free and fair elections.

In 2004, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution which lays out the "essential elements of democracy". The resolution was endorsed by 172 states with 15 abstentions (including Libya and the United Arab Emirates), no state however, voted against the resolution. It therefore, represents and consolidates an international consensus on what democracy means and how it should function (Meyer-Resende, 2011:6). The essential elements according to the resolution include the following. The separation and balance of power, independence of the judiciary, a pluralist system of political parties and organisations, the rule of law, accountability and transparency and freedom of the media (Meyer-Resende, 2011:6). These elements are required of any regime which claims to be democratic. When these elements are not present, a system cannot be adjudged to be democratic.

Democracy exists in two major variants. These are the direct participatory democracy and liberal democracy. The most celebrated form of direct participatory democracy was the one practiced in the Athenian city-state of ancient Greece during the 4th and 5th centuries BC. The Athenians pride themselves on the happy versatility of citizens and their activity to perform all tasks of governance i.e. enacting, implementing and adjudicating laws. They met in open assemblies to debate and deliberate on all

matters and shared ministerial and judicial offices. All major decisions were made by the assembly to which all citizens belong. However, due to the emergence of the nation-state system, the eradication of slavery introduction of universal adult suffrage, modernisation, increase in population and the inability of Greek businessmen to attend assembly meetings regularly, direct democracy became difficult to practice. As a concept, participatory democracy is a process of collective decision making that combines element of both direct and representative democracy. Aragonés & Sanchez-Pages (2008:1) opined that under this arrangement, the electorate can monitor politicians simply by comparing citizens' proposals with policies actually implemented. Consequently, they believed that the discretion of politicians is severely constrained (Aragonés & Sanchez-Pages, 2001:1). Citizens' participation in the democratic process according to Koryakov & Sisk (2003:25) performs numerous functions in developing a strong system of local self-governance. It is described as a pivotal way of building awareness of the importance of local structures and a means of understanding the concerns and desires of the community (Koryakov & Sisk, 2003: 25). They went further to analyse the various forms by which citizens can participate in the democratic process. These include the following:

- Information gathering and sharing-this flows in two ways: top-down and bottom up. The top-down approach is generally the information flow from local authorities to the citizens. The bottom-up approach aims to provide channels for citizens and civic groups to give feedback to local authorities voice their concerns or request particular information.
- Consultation: This feature structures and events that aim to consult the constituencies affected systematically, together or separately, on matters that affect them.
- Policy formulation and decision making: here authority over the final definition and resolution of issues on ground resides with the participants around the table. The policy formulation process often involves regulatory bodies at the local level and decisions making is generally in the domain of administrative institution and its chief executive.
- Joint implantation:- This approach results in a greater sense of ownership of the process and its results for all the participants and often supplies local authorities with much needed resources both human and financial for the implementation of community projects (Koryakov & Sisk, 2003:25).

The Old Oyo Empire in Historical Perspective

The old Oyo Empire occupies a significant position in Yoruba traditional political history and historical narration. The old Oyo Empire was a large West African Empire founded in approximately 1300CE (Falola and Doormont, 1999: 301). The Old Oyo Empire began as Oyo town and rose to prominence through wealth gained from trade with both its African neighbours as well as European nations such as Spain and Portugal. Because of its wealth, particularly of military skills the Oyo Empire was the most politically important Yoruba state from the mid-seventeenth to eighteenth century, exercising control not only over Yoruba States but also over the Fon Kingdom of Dahomey (Falola and Doormont, 1999: 301). The legendary origin of the Oyo Empire resides with Oranmiyan, the last son of Oduduwa. Oduduwa the son of Lamurudu, a

Participatory Democracy in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: The Old Oyo Empire in Retrospect

native of Arabian Peninsula was the progenitor of the Yoruba race. He left East and travelled thousands of miles to the West before he finally settled at Ile-Ife. He had seven sons and many daughters. His sons were very strong and they displayed bravery. Their bravery adventures led to the creation of several Yoruba kingdoms including the Oyo Empire (Falola and Doormont, 1999: 301). Oranmiyan was a powerful and knowledgeable individual whose military strength had no equal. It was acclaimed that Oranmiyan had promised his brother to launch an attack on their northern neighbours who had earlier insulted their father. However, on their way to battle, misunderstanding ensued which consequently led to their disunity (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:290). This reduced the strength and force of Oranmiyan, consequently, their aim was not accomplished. They wandered the Southern sphere until he got to Bussa where he met with some local chiefs who gave him a warm reception. Through these Chiefs, Oranmiyan was able to locate the spot which served as the genesis of the old Oyo Empire (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:291). Consequently, Oranmiyan became the first king of Oyo Empire. The reign of Oranmiyan as the Alaafin (King or Ruler) signified a new epoch in Yoruba historical antecedent as it gave rise to the transfer of political power from Ile-Ife to Oyo, making Oyo the political headquarters of the Yoruba lineage.

However, using horses to create cavalry forces, Oyo conquered much of Yoruba land in the 17th century and expanded its empire to its greatest extent, between 1730 and 1748, they forced the powerful state of Dahomey to the West of Yoruba land to become their tributary. Oyo also took control of the South Coast between Whydan and Badagry and expanded trade with the Europeans (Lee and Roy, 1998).

Oranmiyan was succeeded by Oba Ajaka Oba. Ajaka's reign as the Alaafin did not last as he was removed as the Oba due to his lack of Yoruba military virtue and the excessive independence granted to his Chiefs. Stemming from this, Sango became the Alaafin. The reign of Sango as the Alaafin brought pride and prestige to the Empire. Sango was a very strong ruler who was soon turned to a god, paving way for the re-emergence of Ajaka as the Alaafin. The second reign of Ajaka as the Alaafin was warlike and strong (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:291). The power of Oyo began to grow by the second half of the century, when Alaafin Orompoto began using the wealth derived from trade to establish a cavalry force and to maintain a trained army. In addition to the military expansion, the Oyo Empire expanded based on its convenient trade location and ability to manipulate the markets. Located south of the Middle Niger river, Oyo Empire occupied a prime position from which it controlled the prominent West African trade routes to Hausa land, Gao, Timbuktu and Jenne and dominated those areas with significant amounts of Oyo textiles that was always a precious commodity, as well as with iron gold (Falola and Doormont, 1999: 301).

In the eighteenth century during the reign of Alaafin Abiodun, Bashrun Gaa, the head of the Oyo Mesi i.e. the kingmakers became so powerful and notorious to the extent that successive Alaafin were afraid of him. He became too despotic that successive Alaafin were either killed or forced to commit suicide by him. His notoriety, however, reached a saturation point when he murdered Abgonyin, the only child of Alaafin Abiodun. The whole Empire turned against Bashorun Gaa and went to war against him. Eventually he was overpowered and killed (www.yorupedia.com). After overcoming his opponent, Alaafin Abiodun pursued a policy of economic development based on coastal

trade with European merchants. The consequent increase in the empire's wealth generated conflicts among the political leaders. Some of the political leaders were of the opinion that the wealth should be used for territorial expansion, others believed that the wealth should be used to increase the Empire's revenue. This culminated into a bitter civil war and a weakening of the already neglected military. This further weakened the empire (Falola and Doormont, 1999: 302).

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, rivalries began to develop between the Alaafin and Afonja who was the military commander of the provincial army. Afonja in his quest for power incited Hausa slave to rise up against their masters and joined his military forces. Armed with his army of slaves, Afonja waged series of wars against the northern sections of Oyo. These attacks led by Afonja resulted in chaos and political instability in the Empire. This signified the beginning of the fall of the Empire (Law, 1977:245). It was recorded that in the hope of securing support of Yoruba, Muslims and volunteers from the Hausa-Fulani North, Afonja lured Alim al-Salih an itinerant Fulani scholar of Islam to his side. The recruitment of Alim al-Salih furthered the cause of Afonja even after he was killed by the Fulani recruits. This eventually led to the razing of Oyo-Ile by the Islamic Fulani Empire in 1835. After the destruction of Oyo Ile, the capital was moved to Agod' Ajo this was accompanied with a shift of Yoruba power to Ibadan, a settlement of war commanders. Oyo never regained its prominence and became a protectorate of Great Britain in 1888 (Law, 1977:245).

Political Structure of the Old Oyo Empire

The old Oyo Empire had one of the most politically organised systems of political administration in the country's pre-colonial era. Apart from the fact that the empire was powerful and influential, it had a well structured political system. The political and administrative structure of the Empire was based on an organised system of separation of powers and the principle of checks and balances. Though the traditional political system was a centralised and a monarchical system headed by an Oba (Alaafin), the monarch never wielded absolute powers. The composition of the political structure is as follows:

Alaafin (Oba): The Alaafin was the political head of the empire. He combined both political and spiritual powers but not in absolute terms. While the Oba occupied the highest cadre on the political structure, there existed an elaborate organisation of palace officials and chiefs (Salami, 2006:70). It was further asserted that the affairs of the society were transacted by the king in full consultation with the chiefs and other palace officials which can conveniently be classified as the Alaafin and council of society. This included civil chiefs, the military chiefs, the ward chiefs and heads of compounds and extended families (Salami, 2006:70). As the head of government, the Oba was politically supreme and as the Chief executive, he wielded considerable powers, he could arrest, punish or reward any of his subjects (Olaniyan, 1985:43). It is argued however, that, in practice, the Oba was not an absolute ruler (despite the enormous powers he wielded). His powers were checked in a number of ways and most importantly, he did not rule solely. He ruled in conjunction with a council of chiefs (Olaniyan, 1985:43). The duties of the Alaafin to sub-states were as considerable as those owed to him by the sub-rulers, such that the "essential basis of the empire was mutual self interest" (Stride and Ifeka,

Participatory Democracy in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: The Old Oyo Empire in Retrospect

1971:298). Both tributary kings and provincial governors i.e. of metropolitan Oyo had the duty of collecting tribute due to Oyo and for contributing contingents of troops under local generalship to the imperial army during times of major war. All sub-rulers had to pay tribute to the Alaafin. The acknowledgement of the duty of allegiance was renewed yearly by compulsory attendance at important religious ceremonies. The most important of these ceremonies was the Bere festival which was celebrated to mark public approval of successful rule by an Alaafin and which was expected to bring peace in Yoruba land for three years. It was the duty of the Alaafin to protect tributary states from external aggression. In addition to this, he had the responsibility of settling quarrels between or among his sub-rulers and their peoples (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:298). The import of these is that he was the Chief Judge and his court was supreme. To buttress these, Fadipe (1970:206) observed that the functions of the king as the head of the council of society include the protection of the general interest of members of the society which includes taking charge of the general health conditions of the entire society, this also included internal security of members, issues of peace and war and administration of justice with the king as the last court of appeal for the entire empire and also take charge of the conduct of relationship with other regional kingdoms and societies (Fadipe, 1970:206).

Ascendancy to the throne of the Alaafin was one of the major issues which is purely exclusive to the Oyo mesi. At the early stage of the empire, it was a tradition that the Aremo succeeds the Alaafin at his death. The Aremo is the first son of the Alaafin. However, this tradition was abolished after it was discovered that some ambitious Aremos murdered the Alaafin in order for them to satisfy their inordinate ambition of becoming the Oba. Consequently, it was decreed that anyone to be considered for the throne of the Alaafin must be a direct descendant of Oranmiyan, the founder of the Old Oyo Empire. As mentioned earlier, the enthronement of the Alaafin resides absolutely with the "Oyo Mesi," a supreme council of the empire. This council consisted of seven members and were known and regarded as the kingmakers. In enthroning an individual to the status of Alaafin, the Council of Chiefs consulted the oracle so as to discover the candidate that is approved by the gods. Once the oracle picks its choice, the new Alaafin is regarded as the Oba that was ordained by the gods. The new Alaafin then ascends the throne through religious and political ceremonies which include the performance of some rituals. According to Stride and Ifeka (1971:298), once these rituals have been concluded, he would no longer be regarded as an ordinary mortal, he would henceforth be regarded as "Alase Ekeji orisa" i.e. one who decides everything, a companion of the gods and a semi-divine beyond the reach of ordinary mortals.

Oyo Mesi: this was a supreme council of the state and who are seven in number and are collectively regarded as the kingmakers. This group is regarded as the representative of the people, through them the people chose their Obas. The group have as their leader the Bashorun who ratifies the nomination. Other members of the council according to hierarchy are: Agbakin, Samu, Alapini, Laguna, Akiniku and Asipa (Olaitan, 2009:8). It was further demonstrated that the title of each is hereditary in the same family but not necessarily from father to son. They represented the voice of the people and the responsibility of protecting the interest of the empire rest with them. Each member of this council has a state duty to perform at the court every morning and afternoon. They had a special deputy attached to them whom they send to the Alaafin when they are

unavoidably absent. They are required however, to attend court in person the first day of the (Yoruba) week for the Sango worship and to partake of the sacrificial feast (Olaitan, 2009:9). The Bashorun also known as the Oshorun was in charge of religious premonitions held annually to determine whether or not the Alaafin retained the approval of the gods. This is what Smith (1969:45) referred to as an "annual performance review" or "spiritual vote of confidence". It was further posited that the Bashorun was in a position to influence important decisions of the Oyo Mesi. Smith (1969:45) observed that in a period in the 18th century, the Bashorun wielded more authority than the Alaafin. He explained this as being due to the fact that the Alaafin could be divorced from politics by adhering strictly to religious taboos that secluded him from his subjects whereas the Bashorun was always at the centre of power (Smith, 1969:45). The position of the Bashorun has been described as being akin to that of the modern prime minister.

Ogboni: The Ogboni was a very powerful secret society composed of freemen noted for their age, wisdom and importance in religious and political affairs. The Ogboni was concerned with the worship of the earth and was apparently responsible for adjudicating any matter relating to the spilling of blood (newworldencyclopedia.org). The leader of the group has unfettered access to the Alaafin on matters that has to do with the religious aspect of the empire. The Ogboni group performed judicial functions but its primary aim was to preserve the Ifa Oracle which could accept or reject the Bashorun's decision to command the Alaafin to commit suicide (Boahen and Webster, 1970:90). To buttress the indispensability of the Ogboni cult group to the Empire, Stride and Ifeka (1971:300) opined that "whereas the Oyo Mesi represented the great politicians, the Ogboni was the voice of popular opinion backed by the authority of religion." It was further stressed that although, the members of the Oyo Mesi were ex-officio members of Ogboni, they were not its senior members even though their informed opinions must have commanded respect (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:300). Armed with religious and occult powers, the Ogboni cult group served as important constitutional checks on the authority of the Alaafin and that of the Oyo Mesi. The Ogboni cult represented the voice of the people. Therefore, important decisions or policies especially those relating to the dethroning of an Alaafin who is no longer popular among his people could not be taken without the consent of the Ogboni.

An effective way of serving as a check on the powers of the Alaafin and Oyo Mesi by the Ogboni was the "Oro". Oro is a secret ancestral organisation which is saddled with the responsibility of carrying out religious activities. This organisation which exists within the Ogboni group was known to have served as important checks on political powers of both the Alaafin and the Oyo Mesi (Akanji and Dada, 2012:22). They went further to demonstrate the efficacy and potency of this organisation by documenting instances when the Oro was used to dethrone tyrant kings. These include Odarami, Kanran, Jayin, Ayibi and Osinyago (Okunola and Ojo, 2012 cited in Akanji and Dada, 2012:22). The Ogboni Institution has been described as the connecting link between the religious and the political. The prominence of the group has been related to the fact that they control the political life of their community and that they possess the power of the sanctions of the gods (Idowu, 2005:185).

Esho: The Esho consist of distinguished army personnel. The Esho are seventy in number and are nominated by the council of Chiefs and Confirmed by the Alaafin

Participatory Democracy in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: The Old Oyo Empire in Retrospect

(Smith, 1989:56). They were recruited purely on their military capabilities and skills and they have as their head the Are-Ona-Kakanfo. He was a war general and he personally commanded the army and gave them instructions during periods of war. Custom demands that these military men be posted as governors to the provinces and vassal states. The Are-Ona Kakanfo who is the army general is placed at the border of the empire to forestall external aggression and to prevent him from toppling the government. He was not allowed by custom to enter the centre of the Empire. This is because some strong members of the Esho could become very powerful and independent of the Alaafin and which can lead to the secession of the territory they handle from the Empire. A vivid example of this was the revolt instigated by Afonja who was the Are-Ona-Kakanfo of the empire residing in Ilorin, the border town for the kingdom to the north. Membership of Esho was purely based on the possession of military capabilities and superior skills. It is non-hereditary, for this reason, members of the Esho exert great influence on the activities of the Alaafin, Oyo Mesi and the Ogboni cult. These powers were however, limited so far they owe allegiance to the Alaafin. The Are-Ona-Kakanfo, according to custom, was not expected to lose a war. In the event of losing, custom demands that he goes into exile or he commits suicide.

Democratic Practice and Ethos of the Old Oyo Empire

The system of government practiced by the old Oyo Empire was based on a loose monarchical structure. The political structure was headed by the Alaafin. The Alaafin was regarded as a representative of the spiritual world and was regarded as the "Alase Ikeji Orisa" that is the commander and the second in command to the gods. Other accolade used in describing him included the word "ka bi yesi" that is, no one could question his authority. All these however, suggests that the Kabiyesi i.e. the Alaafin has absolute powers and therefore, may rule absolutely. This however, existed in theory. In practical and realistic terms the Alaafin wielded no absolute powers. The process of choosing an Alaafin was done by the Chief-in -Council (Oyo Mesi) who represented the people. It suffices to say therefore, that the Alaafin existed for the sake of the community and his people. According to Olaitan (2010:7), the close link which existed between the Oba, the society and the people can be understood through the working of the institution of the Obaship where the Oba, though regarded as the representatives of the gods and therefore, having a supernatural essence and power, was expected to manifest the power only in relation to the people". The import of this is that the Alaafin cannot afford to become despotic because he derived his status and power from the people through their representatives. It can however, be ascertained that the mere fact that the Oba is chosen by the people meant that the people themselves served as a veritable institutional check on the powers and activities of the Alaafin.

The Alaafin while representing the sole voice of authority of the Empire was unable to wield absolute powers. His authority and activities were checked by the various political institutions which make up the political structure of the empire. The political relationship which existed among the Alaafin and the other political institutions i.e. the Oyo Mesi and Ogboni shows that there is obvious separation and check of powers among them. This prevented power from being concentrated in the hands of the Alaafin and the

other political institutions. In the words of Ali (1999), this doctrine of separation of powers practiced by the then Oyo Empire was premised on the Yoruba adage which says:

- i. Agbajowo lafi nsoya, ajeje owokan kogberu dori
- ii. Aki je meji laba Alade eni to jesu ko ni mumi
- iii. Enikan kii je awade, igi kan kole da igbo se.

These mean that no man is an Island to himself (Ali, 1999). According to Salami (2006:71), "the hierarchy of power relations is tilted in favour of the Alaafin, but did not translate to an unchecked power". He therefore, stressed that the power arrangement in the Empire was such that it provided checks and balance with a structure that gave power to a body of persons to exercise power on behalf of others with a second structure to provide institutions with the power to check possible excesses of those who wielded power based on a social and political fabric meant to encourage inter-institutional checks and balances to moderate social and political power relationships in the society (Salami; 2006:71).

An important political institution which served as an effective check on the powers of the Alaafin was the Oyo Mesi. The Alaafin before taking any decision was required to consult the Oyo mesi first. They guided the king in different political and religious issues which include military actions and religious festivals (newworldencyclopedia.org). In the event of becoming despotic or the Alaafin displeasing his people, the Oyo Mesi under the leadership of the Bashorun, could force the Alaafin to commit suicide. This is done through providing the Alaafin with an empty calabash. Even though, based on tradition the Oba cannot be dethroned he could be forced to commit suicide. Smith (1969), maintained that the first recorded rejection and suicide seems to be that of Alaafin Ayibi. The Oyo Mesi acquires the power to force the Alaafin to commit suicide during the "Orun" festival. The Bashorun, the head of the Oyo Mesi, who served as the Commander-in-Chief of the army, initiate many religious festivals, most importantly, the "Orun" festival. In a different parlance, the powers of the Alaafin are also checked by the large amount of ritual restrictions that accompanied the title. For example, the Alaafin could not leave the palace, during important festivals. This curtailed his ability to implement his authority outside the palace walls (newworldencyclopedia.org).

While the Oyo Mesi served as important institutional check for preventing the King from becoming tyrannical, the Oyo Mesi itself did not exercise absolute powers. The council could not act in arbitral manner. Some of the most important decisions of the Oyo Mesi are subjected to approval of the Ogboni cult group who represented the will and opinion of the people. The Ogboni represented the popular opinion backed by the authority of religion and therefore, the views of the Oyo Mesi could be moderated (Salami, 2006:72). Similarly the Alaafin had a special and influential representative in the Ogboni, the Oluwo also prevented any arbitral attempt by the Bashorun to reject an Alaafin (Buah, 1978). The Ogboni in turn, occupying a very significant position in the political structure do not exercise its power arbitrarily. The powers of the group were also limited. They are controlled by the people through public opinion and general will. The complex system of separation of powers and checks and balances which characterised the political setting of the empire arrogated no political institution of absolute power, therefore, preventing arbitral rule. As powerful as the Alaafin was he could not afford to

Participatory Democracy in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: The Old Oyo Empire in Retrospect

go against the wish of the people who are represented by the Council of Chiefs. Likewise the Oyo Mesi, through its leader, Bashorun, could not exercise power at its whims and caprices. The same thing can be said of the Ogboni group.

The executive, legislative and judicial functions were performed by the Oba, Oyomesi and the Ogboni group. The Alaafin served as the head of the executive. The main executive roles were performed by the Council of Chiefs. The Oba in conjunction with his council of Chiefs makes laws for the advancement of socio-economic and political wellbeing of the people of the kingdom of the society. The judiciary consisted of the Oba with his Chiefs with the Oba as the head. The Alaafin served as the final court and with the Oyo Mesi applied sanctions on offenders that are found guilty. Offences which carry capital punishment are tried in the Oba's palace. The age-grade is saddled with the task of implementing executive policies and court decisions.

The Old Oyo Empire's Democratic Practices and Ethos: Model for Contemporary Nigerian Democracy

Even though the essential features of the Western idea of democracy such as periodic multiparty elections, party system, rule of law, independent judiciary free press etc. were conspicuously absent in the Old Oyo Empire, other basic features existed, most importantly, the doctrine of separation of powers and the principle of checks and balances. The system of government practiced by the Old Oyo Empire has some certain features closely related to the presidential system practiced in contemporary Nigeria. Even though the membership of each branch of government was fused, there was the application of the principles of checks and balances in its totality. As noted by Ali (1999), any system of government that is ~~fringed~~ ^{tinged} on the rule of law and democracy especially the presidential system of government as practiced in Nigeria must consist of three arms of government, namely, the executive, legislature and judiciary. The principle of separation of powers is one of the most significant elements of governance in representative democracy. In emphasising the importance of the principle of separation of powers, Nwabueze (1980:10) maintained that: concentration of governmental powers in the hands of one individual is the very definition of dictatorship and absolute power by its very nature is arbitrary, capricious and despotic.

While the nature of indigenous political practices of the old Oyo Empire was patrilineal, the process of ascendancy to the throne or any other political post was done based on the consent of the community. The consent of the people in the political process was buttressed when Akinosho (2009) reiterated that:

African traditional governance emphasised responsibility and service of the state official. Government was centred on the king and the court, (as well as the council of Chiefs in the case of the Oyo Empire), which granted the rule of law and a just and orderly society, thus enabling the governed to man their conduct in accordance with predictable outcome. There was superiority of communal right over individual rights and power was not vested in one person (Akinosho, 2009).

In addition to this, Kadish and Kadish (1971:907) portrayed African traditional practices as been a perfect example of legal authority when they opined that:

The upholding of communal rights over individual rights is an ideal model of legal authority, in which government by rule takes precedence over government by the will of those vested with official powers, the later being no more than a wheel in the machine and never its ghost, have described the rules of law. The African tradition based its rule of law that allows for the fundamental right of everybody within the community (Kaddish & Kadish, 1971:907).

The political organisation of the Old Oyo Empire serves as a veritable model of governance for contemporary Nigerian State. In the empire the popular will of the people cannot be subverted either by the king or his council of Chiefs. In modern day politics of most if not all African states, one of the basic means through which the citizens maintains and express their will is through periodic, free, fair and credible elections. However, an unfortunate aspect of the electoral process of these African states is that it is fraught with all sorts of electoral vices. Though, elections do not only constitute the principles of democracy, they are important if democracy is to thrive. Therefore, African leaders should endeavour to encourage practice and policies that will institute an unbiased and transparent electoral process. A biased electoral process is inimical to the democratisation process and also responsible for bad governance.

Similarly, the Nigerian Political space should be encompassing. Citizens should be allowed full participation in the decision making process. During the hey days of the Oyo Empire participation in the decision making process was not exclusive to a particular group, the community members through their representative have inputs in the decision making process. To buttress this, Ayitteh (2006) opines that: "in the Old Oyo Empire, one did not have to belong to a political party or family to participate in the process of decision making". (Ayitteh, 2006) further stressed that free participation is the prerequisite for democratic advancement. He found it untenable to harass or assassinate political opponents.

As mentioned earlier, prior to the invasion of the territory today known as Nigeria, the indigenous people practiced systems of government that was dictated by their cultural values and tradition. However, the political and cultural structures were demolished at the inception of colonial rule. This led to the demise of traditional political system and democratic values of these pre-colonial settings. The colonial masters introduced into these settings democratic values that are completely Western and which have no bearing to African tradition and culture. These democratic values according to Olaitan (2010:12) are imposed and uncritically accepted by Nigeria and other African societies. He lamented that democracy is universal in terms of representing the attempt to fully involve people in the governance of their own affairs. To him, how this attempt play out in reality would have to be in relation to realities of the societies concerned, most especially taking into cognisance historical (and cultural) conditions of the of these societies (Olaitan, 2010:12).

The current Nigerian political scene is characterised by insecurity, poverty, unemployment, corruption etc. One may at a point ask what the problem is with the polity. The problem has been attributed to the system of democracy that is being practiced is strange to the society (Achebe, 1966). A way out of this present predicament

Participatory Democracy in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: The Old Oyo Empire in Retrospect

according to Chinua Achebe is to “Nigerianise” democracy to suit our socio-cultural antecedents. He recommended this when he said that:

Since this system of democracy is not satisfying our socio-political yearnings, can we not as Nigerians, be retrospective enough as to rummaging among the past to discover those systems of government that made some Nigerian cultures tick and off course introduce them to modern day politics (Achebe, 1966).

The Nigerian State can get over the present democratic predicament by taking advantage of the democratic qualities of the Old Oyo Empire. In the opinion of Olaitan (2010:12), this can be achieved because while past practices emphasised the place of the people in governance, present practices tend to be abstract and divorced from reality and consequently, do not advance the course of democracy (Olaitan, 2010:12).

Conclusion

Prior to the invasion of Africa by Western colonialist, African societies practiced traditional political systems that was in tandem with their existing cultural and indigenous values. The advent of colonial rule, however, eradicated all indigenous political arrangements. This led to the imposition of ideas that were totally strange to the continent. African traditional political systems were democratic. The Old Oyo Empire adhered strictly to the principle of separation of powers and had mechanisms for checks and balances which prevented the emergence of a totalitarian ruler. The political structure of the Empire was based on the society’s social and cultural setting. It conformed to ethical standards, rule of law, popular participation, equity, human rights and societal order. According to Basil (1992), the political structure of the empire clearly allowed for both the process of change and for checks on the executive which are clearly a mix of the traditional value system. He further recalled that the system operated on the basis of the adage that man dies and leaves a name; hence, integrity, honesty and probity became a standard for public offices or position of leadership while protecting the laws of the land (Basil, 1992).

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