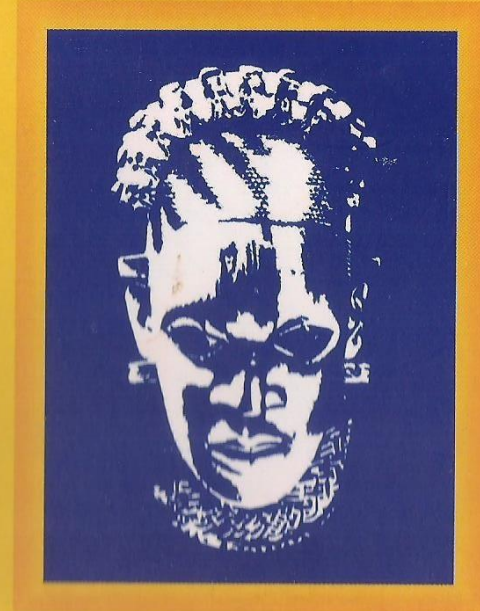


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TRADITIONAL RULERS AND THE CRISIS OF RELEVANCE IN A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE: A CASE OF THE IGBOMINA IN KWARA STATE

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Abstract

Order in society is grounded in power and so it is a natural phenomenon that in every society, there is bound to be some people in the leadership and others in the followership. Again, in every society and its institutions, there are always the elements of continuity and change. This paper examines the changing roles of traditional rulers in Igbomina, Eastern Yorubaland. It is ironically and lamentably worrisome to note that the once absolute and multi-tasking monarchies, who were indispensable reference points in their domains, have in contemporary times turned clamourers for recognition and relevance in the governance of the country. So, the problems and prospects of the traditional rulers' roles were examined. The paper concludes that since the citizens who are central to democracy sustainability are greatly influenced by the traditional institutions, the Federal government should, as a matter of seriousness, delegate a formidable constitutional role to the royal fathers rather than relegate them to the background. This research fuses the investigative approaches of a range of disciplines including revision of copious literatures on metaphysics, religion, culture; reliance on archaeological sources, archival materials and oral interviews. It is hoped that the study would contribute to the growing literature of the African Cultural Studies.

Introduction

It is globally held that God made the universe and the rulership of it belongs solely to Him. In other words, the consideration of the creation of the world reveals that the government of universe is theocratic. However, while God is the Supreme Ruler, those others that hold the helms of affairs (i.e. divinities,¹ kings, spiritualists) are only functionaries in the theocratic government of the world. Generally again, the nature of African

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society tends to be orderly in its presentation. In every society, institutions ranging from traditional, political, economic, religious to legal are established to help point out the rights of individual members of a particular community; preserve the customs, traditions and cultural heritage of the people; regulate relationships within a community; and manage conflicts and violence arising among or between members of the community by the instrumentality of laws and customs of the people. This fact makes Casely-Hayford opine that "*Before even the British came into relations with our people, we were a developed people, having our own institutions, having our own ideas of government.*"²

Traditional institution has existed for ages and has no doubt, over the years, helped to provide order, peace and protection for its members. Societies must have rules in order that all members of the community can live peacefully and happily together. Traditional institution, therefore, refers to the indigenous political system or arrangement whereby leaders with proven track of records are nominated, appointed and installed in accordance with the provisions of their native customs.³ Traditional institutions in Nigeria have gone through thick and thin in the country's political history from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial eras. This is why Adeniran argues that "From the pre-colonial era, the traditional institutions have been strengthened and weakened, elevated and humiliated, empowered and disempowered by emergent political/ruling class".⁴

Every Nigerian society is stratified as evident in the hierarchical system of governance— from the earthly king to the commoners or slaves, all with their distinctive and significant roles. Traditional institutions are headed by Emirs, *Obis*, *Nzes*, *Qbas*, *Olus*, *Mais*, *Aku-Uka*, *Amanyabos* and *Obongs*, according to the ethnic group to which they belong. These rulers, with the help of less subordinate chiefs (*igbimo ilu*) in Yorubaland, make decisions on matters affecting the community for onward execution by other designated groups of citizens under their designated leaders. This of course is a typical reflection of the Igbomina.

The Igbomina: A Sketch

The focus of this study is on the traditional ruler in Yorubaland with specific references drawn from the Yoruba sub-group, the Igbomina. The word Igbomina can be used to refer to the people in question, their

land and the language (*Mooye/Mosan/Mohan* variations) they speak. Scholars have made descriptive remarks as follows: "the Igbomina is one of the major ethnic groupings found in Eastern Yorubaland"⁵; "the powerful Igbona or Igbomina predominate in the area to the south and east of Ilorin town"⁶; "the Igbomina formed at least, three-quarters of the inhabitants of Ilorin Province, occupying a large area extending as far back as Ila-Orangun in Oyo Province... They are pure Yoruba"⁷; "Ila is the most southerly town of this area to the north of the Ijesha and the Ekiti, and east from Oyo live the Igbomina (alternatively, *Igbona*).

As with the Ekiti and other Yoruba groups too, their environment straddles the forest and the savannah"⁸; "the southeast of Ilorin Province was extremely hilly, with precipitous rocks while tin had also been found in the extreme southeast of the province"⁹; "the Igbomina area was said to have included Ilofa, Ekan, Odo-Owa, Osi, Oshin, and Obo whose people are no more particularly keen in joining their Igbomina brethren"¹⁰; "before the Fulani invasion, the Igbomina were said to have occupied some 900 square miles between the south-west boundary of the province, to the Yagba District on the East, and a few miles of Ilorin town on the North"¹¹. Except for the Igbomina in Ila and Ifedayo Local Government Areas, Osun State, all other Igbomina sub-units are natively located in Ifelodun, Irepodun and Isin L.G.A.s of Kwara State. Although the Igbomina predominantly consists of the communities in the above named places, they are found in almost every part of Nigeria and overseas. The Igbomina in the Diaspora, like other Yoruba counterparts, are also found in Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba and other places in the Caribbean.¹² The common language of the people is called Yoruba and they have a common ancestry called Oduduwa.¹³

Oba's 'Mythical' Appellations and Beliefs

The cohesive factor of a society within the human community is crystalized in the presence of the king (an *Oba*) and its chiefs. The king is not only a secular ruler with a specific title describing him as the Lord or owner of his town such as the Orangun of Ila or Oniwo of Iwoland but also derivatively a divine ruler, hedged by a divinity of his own. Beyond being mythically sacred or seen as a direct descendant of the original founder of his town, the *Oba* is a man whom the myths describe usually as one of the

sons of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba people. The *Oba* is ordained by the community's spiritual/natural authorities, acceptable by the community as a role model (*awo kose*); unquestionable (*kabiyesi*);¹⁴ next in rank to the divinities (*alase igba ekeji orisa*); father of all human and spirits in his domain (*Oba ba le ile, Oba ba le oko, Oba la le ona, Oba ba lori ohun gbogbo: lori oso, aje ati oloogun*); the chief custodian of the people's history, culture and all spheres of life; personification of the kingdom and a symbol of reincarnation of the ancestors of the community, etc. His words were orders (*ase l'Oba npa, Oba kii daba*) and actions; divine and sacred. As a fountain of honour, he could bestow titles and riches on people and withdraw same.

An *Oba* is traditionally identified with symbols and paraphernalia of office such as -the crown (*ade*), the neck and hand beads (*egba ileke/akun*), a staff (*opa ase*), a royal stool (*apeere/ite*), etc. For instance, it is generally held among the Yoruba that the authority of the king or his sceptre comes from God, through the arch-divinity (*Obatala/Orisa-nla*). It is this sceptre that reminds him from time to time that he cannot serve his own capricious will and must continuously rule with the divine sanctions. The sceptre through which he rules his people makes the people to be law abiding and regulates the actions of the king lest he becomes a tyrant. He is therefore the personification of the town without which there would be no community. It was an observable fact generally among the Yoruba that they do not have much familiarity with their rulers – kings, chiefs, heads of compound and elders. They relate with their leaders through intermediaries such as the *emese, ilari*, or some other palace officials. Hence, the saying, "*iro l'angbo, oju ko to Alaafin*" meaning, we only hear from, we do not see the *Alaafin*. He was rarely seen in public because of his sacred status. Whenever he had to go out, his face was usually covered by a mask forming a part of the crown. This implied that only high-ranking members of the society might have the privilege to see the king throughout their life time. Also worthy of note is the perpetuity of the *Oba* on the throne until he joins his ancestors. This justifies the concept of "*bi oba kan o ku, oba mii kii je*" or "*Oba o lee pe meji lori ite*" (No new king emerges until the previous enters the vault).

Traditional Ruler: Definition and Roles

Time and circumstances have influenced the definition of a traditional ruler (interchangeably used as *Oba* or king) by different authors. In the pre-colonial context, a traditional ruler is

a person who by virtue of his ancestral position occupies the throne or stool of an area and who has been appointed to it in accordance with the customs and traditions of the area and whose throne has been in existence before the advent of the British in Nigeria.¹⁵

From a contemporary perspective, "a traditional ruler is the traditional head of an ethnic unit or clan, the holder of the highest traditional title recognized by the government of the state."¹⁶ While the former defines a traditional ruler as the paramount authority or natural ruler in any given community or one with absolute executive, legislative and judicial powers; the latter supports the appointment of new traditional rulers to any deserving units or clans by the government. It is premised on these that the customary roles of traditional rulers are highlighted as follows:

- i. Traditional institutions decide cases where traditional laws and practices, including traditional marriages, have been broken.
- ii. They often maintain law and order through the priests, secret societies and age groups.
- iii. They settle land disputes and sometimes share out community work.
- iv. They help to collect taxes and rates through appeals to members of their various societies.
- v. They help to explain government policies to the people in the language they understand.

Pre-Colonial Traditional Institution of the Igbomina

Prior to the advent of the Europeans, the different ethnic groups in Nigeria had evolved various systems of political administration based on the peculiarities of their ethnic nationalities. Indeed, pre-colonial traditional rulers held sway not only as the recognized political heads in their domains but also as the (all-round) custodians of the people's history, culture, religions and economy. Juxtaposing the socio-political structure in Igbominaland with the prerequisites for the selection of a traditional ruler, it is necessary to highlight the following issues and facts:

1). Though the various Igbomina units varied in size and in complexity, the basic socio-political system followed a similar pattern with occasional local variations and peculiarities. Every individual belonged to several overlapping groups, which provided the terms of reference for his daily life. The smallest unit of organization was the family, usually the extended type (*agbo ile*) headed by the compound head (*baale*). He represented the family in public gatherings and maintained law and order as well as checked the excesses of his people. An agglomeration of patrilineally related families was known as lineage (*ebi*) headed by the lineage head (*olori ebi*), usually the eldest male member. The community (*ilu*), depending on the size, was usually a federation of two or more lineages.¹⁷ Until present, consanguinity and affinity are the two basic types of kinship among the Igbomina.

2). The community (*ilu*) was the basic political unit. At the centre of each Igbomina community was a crowned king who had the right to wear a beaded crown with fringes (*ade*) or an uncrowned ruler (*Baale*) who wore coronet (*akoro*) or beadless caps, depending on the traditional political status of such community. The life-tenure office of the *Oba* was rotational but hereditary within a lineage or group of lineages/compounds. For example, the stool of the Olusin of Isanlu-Isin was alternated among the Agbaje, Ajiwaye (Ile Ariyo), and the Eje descendants in Isanlu Isin; among four of the nine compounds in Iwo (Ile Elemure, Ile Nla, Odo Ora and Ile Oye); among the ruling houses of Odo Ala (Aleiyaloisin) and Oke Omo (Arojojoye) in Afin; Ile Olusin, Odo-Ijara and Oke-gunsin ruling houses in Ijara-Isin; Qranmiyan, Ikumasa and Olujori ruling houses in Irapa¹⁸; the Oyan/Olupo, Jiduala/Oke Apata/Adesi, Ikota/Obiri/Onire/Edidi and Okela/Ija Osi groups of families in Idera; etc.

3). Though each *Oba/Baale* exercised considerable power in his domain, he was not an autocrat. His power to reward, arrest, punish or even "behead" his subjects was exercised with caution and discretion. Surrounded by elaborate ceremonies, subjected to many rules and ritual restraints and secluded in his palace, he could not rule his people alone. He was advised, assisted and checked by the *Igbimo* or *Ilu* (council of chiefs). This informed the common expression, *Oba lo lase, ijoye lo nilu* (command is of the king; chiefs decide and ratify communal issues). This is in line with Afolayan's position that "It was this 'delicate balance of

power' that prevented the Yoruba monarchies from developing into the absolutist and authoritarian political system characteristic of their neighbours such as Benin and Dahomey.¹⁹

4). There was no indication that the Igbomina grew to become a nation or united into one political whole in the pre-colonial era with distinct provincial administrations. Neither was there any Igbomina state that was strong enough to impose its authority and rule over the whole of Igbomina nor any that could be regarded as the 'paramount ruler' (Onigbomina of Igbominaland). Rather, almost all traditional settlements enjoyed complete autonomy. Except some with *Baale* status (i.e. Agbele, Sagbe, Apa Ola, Sabaja,) or titles such as the *Orangun* of Ila, *Elese* of Igbaja, *Olusin* of Isanlu, *Olu* of Kudu Owode, *Olupo* of Ajase-Ipo, *Oluganna* of Ganmo, *Olupako* of Share, etc, each *Qba* had a specific title – describing him as the Lord or owner of the town (such as the *Olomu* of Omupo, *Olomu* of Omu-Aran, *Alaran* of Arandun, *Alala* of Alla, *Onigbin* of Oke-Onigbin, *Eledidi* of Edidi, *Oloreke* of Oreke-Okegbo, *Onipetu* of Ipetu-Igbomina, *Onijan* of Ijan Otun, *Elesie* of Esie, *Olowu* of Owu, *Oloba* of Qba, *Eledidi* of Edidi, *Eleku* of Odo-Eku, etc.).

5). However, a miniature central government was noticeable in some places such as Isinland,²⁰ a sub-unit of Igbomina. Oral evidence reveals that during this period, there were two paramount rulers in the Isin national government, viz the *Olusin of Isin* (now Isanlu-Isin) and the *Esinkin Olusin*, the warhead at Owu-Isin. Traditions say that, prior to the 1830s, the *Olusin* (though in theory) had absolute power over life and death and, like the *Alaafin* of Oyo, had the attributes of *Iku baba yeye alase ekeji orisa* (death, the almighty ruler, and companion of gods). Even though the *Olusin* himself was paying tribute to *Alaafin* of Oyo, being his cultural head, he equally had firm control over Isinland, because he sanctioned the appointment of rulers of the other Isin towns. There was also the joint celebration of his yearly *Agbaasin* festival and the collective farming and harvesting done for him.²¹ Hence, the *Olusin* was looked upon as the national leader in Isinland²² and the adjourning settlements. From the foregoing, the central administration in Isinland rested on this hierarchy: the *Qba* (*Olusin* of Isinland); the *Esinkin Olusin* (*Olu Ogun* of Isinland) stationed at Owu; the various village heads that constituted the central council of chiefs. They collectively held periodic meetings on matters

pertaining to politics, security, economy, culture, technology and other developmental issues in Isinland. For example, the boundary disputes between Ijara and Oke-Oyi, Edidi and Oke-Oyi, etc were tabled several times before the Isin Council of (Head) Chiefs presided over by the *Olusin* of Isanlu.

6). The confederate system, involving association of autonomous sub-kingdoms among some communities such as the *Ekun Medogun Oro* (fifteen provinces of Oro), the *Aran* (*Aran-Qrin*, *Omu-Aran* and *Arandun*), etc., also existed. The communities of Iwoland (*Iwo*, *Iwo-Oke-Aba*, *Iwo-Odu-Qre*) for instance, formed a confederacy agreeing (till 1968) that each should succeed the title and lands on the death of the ruling community. A similar confederate, rotational system of the *Asoju-Olusin* existed among Isanlu-Isin, Ijara Isin and Iji-Isin respectively.²³ Such arrangements of rotational *Qbaship* soon faded away, making the village administration the most common.

7). The Village administration was the most popular. In this case, was that which the political authority of the ruling *Qba* did not go beyond his domain and (in which case), his stool was rotated among the ruling families.

Selection of a Traditional Ruler (King) and Traditional All-round Functions

General factors influencing the selection of a king include(d) the following:

a) The Divine Factor- Since man has little or no influence on who is born into a royal family or as a commoner, the first traditional prerequisite to contesting for or occupying the royal stool is being born into royalty. God-factor, therefore, informs the vernacular expression *Olurun nii fi Qba je*, *Olurun nii ro Qba loye* (God enthrones and dethrones a king). The choice of an *Qba* is thus generally restricted to certain families/lineages within the qualified compounds. Whereas it is possible in some Yoruba societies to meritoriously move from one social class to another; the only class to which free movement is exclusively restricted, in most communities, is the traditional rulership class. Except for offices exclusively designated to women, only men are traditionally allowed to rule or exercise authorities. Johnson attests that:

The government of Yoruba Proper is an absolute monarchy; the King is more dreaded than even the gods. The office is hereditary in the same family, but not necessarily from father to son. The King is usually elected by a body of noblemen..."²⁴

b) *Ifa* Corpus: In Yorubaland at large, further shortlisting or the process of king-making is spelt out by *Ifa* Oracle. Nwabueze corroborates this "*The basis of kingly power in the centralized African societies consists essentially in 'ritual specialism' associated with the guardianship of ancestral charters...Ritual and politics...marched hand in hand.*"²⁵ This helped to ensure that the right candidate from among the numerous contestants was chosen. This act was beyond the human influence and lobbying, and probably informed the popular belief that "*ori ade kii sunta*" (a prospective king cannot be lost, not even in the foreign land).

c) Human Factor/Influence: There were certain qualifications or criteria to be customarily met or satisfied in order to perfectly fit in as the choice of the gods (*Alale*). Similarly, even though lobbying, favourism or any act of selfish maneuvering by the kingmakers was minimized, the place of personal qualities, psychological and physical soundness of the candidate mattered. It was considered a taboo to finally select a hunchback, blind, deaf, albino, dwarf, imbecile, bastard, criminal or stranger as a king.²⁶

Following his coronation, he (king) became the administrative (executive and judicial) head of the entire community. Igbominaland in the **period under review** did not differentiate between the executive and the judiciary. The same body that performed the administrative role at the family, quarters, and village level was also vested with judicial powers for conflicts resolution. Some basic features of the Igbomina judicial system were that people got tried by those who knew them very well and punishment was very severe for criminal offences. Such serious crimes were regarded as crime against the whole land. Only few cases were sent to the *Oba's* court. The immutable laws of the village that could not be fine-tuned were well known to all and sundry. The village council was the fulcrum of judicial activities. Village elders took political and judicial decisions in public where everybody could watch and they received informal training in the judicial process. The verdicts of the elders were final and where any party refused the verdicts of the elders, he could be

banished. The *Oba* was the last speaker on any issue with the binding final decision in his court, the last court of appeal. He settled quarrels within, presided and deliberated on village affairs and imposed fines on the guilty. This judicial appeal process is summed up thus:

The administrative structure was hierarchical. At the lowest level of government was the compound head who settled cases within his compound. The next level was that of the lineage where the *Olori* settled intra-lineage cases involving compounds within his own lineage. The ward or quarter head had to oversee inter-lineage affairs within his quarter of the town. Cases cutting across wards as well as criminal offences or others beyond the power of the ward such as murder or treason fell within the jurisdiction of the *Oba's* court which, as the supreme court of the state alone could impose capital punishment. Appeals went in turn from the court of the *Baale* to that of *Olori ebi* thence to that of *Olori itun* or *adugbo* (ward) before terminating in the *Oba's* court, the highest court of appeal.²⁷

Also as the supreme head of his people, the *Oba*, in another capacity, though not a priest, was considered the ritual/spiritual head or protector of his people. At every annual ceremony for instance, he was expected to receive royal-ancestral blessings from the hills and water spirits guarding the town for onward conveyance to the chiefs and the entire community. Besides, he was to provide sacrifices to a host of lesser deities; ensure the proper performance of such rituals as a guarantee for prosperity as well as do the needful to ascertain all-round peaceful reign (*ki ilu o tuba, ko tuse*). For instance, the traditional Igbomina society believed in town spirits which were supposed to meet in or around the market places, and as the religious head of the town, the *Oba* was the only one qualified to lead in the worship of the market god. Choosing the location of a new market site was done at random, but oracular decisions eventually provided a psychic satisfaction for the people. The importance of psychic factor in the location of traditional markets is conspicuous in the consistent opposition to relocation of some markets (e.g. Ganmo Oke-Ila, Idofian, Ajase, Omu-Aran, Aran-Qrin, etc) from their present congested sites. There is a belief that the traditional market god which has been responsible for the commercial success in the market is unfavourable to such move. In times of economic setbacks, the traders would attribute these to the annoyance or dissatisfaction of the market god, and the solution would be

offering of propitiation by the associated chief. As a representative of the market gods, the chiefs were indispensable in the successful operation of the markets. Every market had to have a chief but this has since changed as the newly built markets by the local councils are not under the direct supervision of any chief. As the supreme head of his people, the *Oba* and his office were sacred.

Each *Oba* performed both social and religious functions. For example, the *Olusin* of Isanlu (and his council) was expected to lead in the *Agbaasin* festival; the *Oniwo* to lead the *Awoji* festival; the *Orangun* to lead the *Oro/Aworo Ose* festival; the *Eledidi* to lead the *Akoyi* festival; etc. The *Oba* and his chiefs were the richest in Igbominaland as their sources of income were through annual tributes from the people, fines, gifts, spoils of war and presents during their ceremonial functions.

Furthermore, his role as the market head was significant. In the pre-colonial as well as the early colonial times (up till the 1950s), the *Oba* doubled as both the community head and the *Oloja* (head of the markets). He was also the source of authority for the location of and the administrative system that obtained in the traditional markets. Not only did he provide the land on which the market was built, he also performed the rituals believed by the traders to be necessary for the security of, and sales in the markets. The post-colonial era sees the gradual development of modern civil administration based on the city or local council organizations. The *Oba* nevertheless retains some authority over the markets, which may be regarded as informal; although not recognized by the government, it is acknowledged by the traders.²⁸ The traditional market system is therefore supported by two parallel administrative sub-systems: the traditional, centred on the *Oba*, and the modern, exemplified by the Local Government Councils. The former exercising what can be described as *de facto* authority and the latter wielding *de jure* power.

Until the 1950s, the market place was the hub of economic activities in Nigerian communities, be it urban or rural. In order to promote the economic well-being of the community, the *Oba* was closely involved in the development of the markets. The main market was sited near the *Oba's* palace (*Oja Oba*) as mostly obtainable till date. In the days of unadvanced communication channels, the *Oba* could reach all his subjects through the markets. Hence, the *Oba*, as the *Oloja* (head of the markets),

had a central role to play in terms of land and land use, rituals for economic and social security and market administration.

Colonial Legacies

Fajana and Anjorin rightly posit that "*Colonialism involved many serious abuses. Among others, it meant the conquest and subjugation of the traditional rulers by foreigners. In West Africa, British and French officials became the new masters in place of the old traditional rulers.*"²⁹ The status of traditional rulers changed with the advent of colonial rule. However, traditional institution provided a structure for the colonial masters to work on. The British system of colonial administration incorporated the system of *indirect rule*, where an imperial power administered a foreign population by ruling through the traditional leaders and indigenous institutions.

The fall of Lagos in 1851, which was the first assault on an African power on the coast of what later became Nigeria, marked an important watershed in the British occupation of Yorubaland. The success encouraged similar actions elsewhere such as in Ijebu in 1892, Oyo in 1895, etc.³⁰ The year 1903 marked the official subjugation of Nigeria by the British imperialist when there was a shift of power control from the Fulani ruling class to the British Colonial officers in the Northern part of Nigeria.

With this development, the administration of Yorubaland, like other parts of Nigeria, operated under a British superstructure which had the Governor-General at the zenith of authority; the Lieutenant-Governor of Southern Nigeria; the Residents of Provinces; District Officers, Assistant District Officers and the indigenous leaders at the bottom of the ladder.³¹ By implication, rather than serve as custodians and upholders of the values of their respective domains, the traditional rulers forcibly served the whims and caprices of the colonial administration. The direct and non-negotiable loyalty to the British was a must for retention of office. The seizure of power, with consequent change in the role of traditional rulers, was necessitated by the desire to realize the colonial objectives aimed at exploiting the mineral resources in Nigeria in order to meet the industrial needs of the capitalists. During this time, the following facts must be noted:

1. The colonial government, with the indirect rule system, cleverly used the royal fathers (the central figures around which the system revolved) so as to be able to reach the grassroots in their colonies.³²

2. The final right to rule depended on the colonial authorities even if such traditional ruler had fulfilled all the traditional prerequisites for assumption of office as obtainable in the pre-colonial years.

3. In spite of the subordination to the British overlords, it could be argued that the powers of the traditional rulers were not eroded. Rather, the positions of the paramount rulers with centralized structures as typified by the *Alaafins* in Oyo, *Obas* in Benin, *Oonis* in Ife, Emirs in the Northern and North Central regions, etc were strengthened because more powers of coercion were accorded to the Native Courts. These Emirs and *Obas* were treated with caution. The positions, privileges and influence enjoyed by these traditional rulers depended largely on the prevailing political situations and the side of the divide on which they were. While some were highly favoured such as the Emir of Ilorin, most Igbomina rulers suffered terrible fate in different degrees. Thus, Ilorin hegemony and overrule over the Igbomina continued during the colonial era and beyond.³³

4. Traditional rulers assumed a new status in the colonial period; they were co-opted to perform roles that were completely opposed to the popular wishes and aspirations of their people. While their institution into the Sole Native Authority increased the prestige of the paramount kings with other attendant benefits, they ended up becoming puppets and administrative agents in the hands of the colonialists.

5. Lumped-up factors leading to the usurpation of traditional rulers' authorities or present status include: the introduction of a Federal Constitution in 1954 which ended the indirect rule and replaced it with new systems of local government; the coming of the military into Nigerian politics in 1966 which ushered in a gradual reduction in their participatory roles in local government administration; the 1976 local government reforms; the 1979 Constitution which excluded the traditional rulers from active participation in political affairs, undermining personal conduct of some rulers, etc.³⁴

Aspects of Change in the Roles of Traditional Rulers

Definitely, some beliefs and practices surrounding the royal stool have continued and would continue to survive the test of time. To mention but a few, they include: the viable economic and enduring socio-political institutions in every society (overlapping groups providing the frames of reference for daily life); hereditary/rotational *Obaship* stool; life-long rulership; paraphernalia of office; prostrating before the king, etc.

In terms of administrative and constitutional roles, traditional rulers have been relegated to the background in modern political system. Sequel to Nigeria's democratic political structure and constitutional provision, their supreme powers have diminished from the initial executive, judicial and religious functions to a mere advisory status as custodians of culture and traditions, and ceremonial rulers. With the Western-type democratic government comprised of the Federal, State and Local structures, new administrative setup emerged to statutorily control or regulate political, economic, religious and socio-cultural activities. The outcry for "once more" relevance is attested to by Omotoye among others thus:

A debate on the relevance of Traditional Institution is an ongoing discussion at all levels in Nigeria today. The traditional rulers are calling for recognition and relevance in the governance and administration of the country. The 1979 Constitution did not give any relevance or role to the traditional rulers in Nigeria. They are only regarded as advisers to the people in government.³⁵

Ever since, they are to give advice to government on customary affairs; collaborate with the law enforcement agencies for the maintenance of public order and security within their territories; resolve conflicts (land/boundary) where necessary; intermediate, mobilize and sensitize the grassroots on the policies and programmes of government; and serve as agents of nation building task such as the maintenance of roads, supply of man-power, collection of developmental dues, etc. In reality, the modern governmental structures has evidently overshadowed their paramount relevance and influence in the following notable areas:

From the point of view of judicial/constitutional provision, since independence, separation of power as contained in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has weeded out the customary power of the

king from being an absolute ruler who can corrupt absolutely. Controversies (except for land dispute or jostle for posts) rarely get to the *olori ebi* (lineage) today, let alone the *Oba's* palace. Even though a traditional ruler can still mediate (in family or boundary disputes) and remains the last speaker in any communal issue, his verdict may be jettisoned or challenged, as the binding final decision is no longer his palace, but the court of law (Customary, High, Appeal, and Supreme courts). This development negates the idea of his court being the highest, his authority being unquestionable and his judgment irrevocable (*ka bi e si*). Abreast of the principles of government, specifically the constitution, rule of law, fundamental human rights, public administration and so on, the authority of the king can be constitutionally challenged or himself charged to court where found wanting. Recent happenings in some un-disclosed towns outside Igbominaland show that the *Oba* can be deposed or jailed like any other person by statutory laws if found guilty of any offence.

Aside the constitutional relegation of traditional institution, it is necessary to also note that even on issues of marital dispute, chieftaincy rivalry or land trespass, Igbomina Muslims and Christians tend to tilt towards the teachings of their new religions, to as much as possible disallow the third party's interference by settling them amicably out of court. It is after all these fail they reluctantly refer such issues to court. Justice in Islam, for instance, is administered in the name of Allah Who Himself is the Just (*Al-Adl*) while the human beings are witnesses of Allah. Oloyede describes the *Sharia* as the "legal system that could effectively maintain happy Muslim family by providing satisfactory solutions to matrimonial affairs of the Muslims".³⁶ This reluctance in going to court is due to the people's belief in the fact that *aiti kootu de ka tun soṛe* (cordiality is difficult after a court case) and possibility of delay or denial of justice.

Religious wise, traditional rulers today are comparatively surrounded by less elaborate ceremonies, ritual restraints (never to see a corpse nor his mother, inheriting late *Oba's* wives, the '*abobaku*' practice, etc) and palace seclusion. Each Igbomina *Oba* now performs more of social and community administration than religious functions in his community. In spite of the fact that, in many instances, Africans sought to set up independent churches, the Christian Church has always been a major

instrument for cultural penetration and cultural dominance. As against being the fathers of all (the spiritual heads), ministers of God, in their different titles, take responsibility as mere spiritual leaders. In another development, among other things, the influence of alien religions (Islam and Christianity) along-side Arabian and western civilizations had led several traditional rulers away from traditions and customs to their utter loss of power, respect and relevance. Concerned with this new dimension, Omotoye opines that:

It is observed that apart from the interest of traditional rulers in governance, some Obas who are Christians (Evangelical Obas) have shown interest in evangelism and preaching of the gospel. A similar trend is found among traditional rulers who are Muslims in Yorubaland...The new dimension is against the tradition and culture of the Yoruba people because Obas are to protect and preserve the traditional culture of the people...Some traditional rulers who claim to be 'born again' call the traditional practitioners 'idol worshippers'. Some even tried as much as prohibiting the celebration of festivals and demolishing age-long shrines. They have forgotten that "gbogbo odun ni odun Oba (every festival is the concern of the king), however, where an Oba disallows the celebration of traditional festivals, it may lead to disunity and misunderstanding in such a community."³⁷

Worthy of note in this contradiction is the fact that the alien religions for a long time denied traditional title holders membership. Even now, some disguise their traditional titles as honorary as a means of escaping taking part in any activity that borders on traditional ceremonies and sacrifices. They only participate in formal meetings on decision-making.³⁸ To this end, it is suggested that any would be *Oba* should be properly educated about the concept of God and the role expected of a king as the *father of all* and not a sectional or biased leader in the name of religion or modern politics. As long as the traditional rulers are not interested in protecting the customs and traditions of their people, the future of Yoruba values are in danger of extinction.

Still on religion both the Holy Qur'an and the Holy Bible teach obedience, respect and honour unto whom it is due as God ordained; teachings in Islam and Christianity also reveal that God doesn't discriminate spiritual (He looks within and sees all saints as equals before Him) and is indeed not a respecter of anybody. Both the Muslim and

Christian traditional rulers themselves profess and acknowledge God as the only Supreme King: the King of kings, the Lord of lords, King both on earth and in heaven, King above all kings, or "*Qba tin f'oba je tin gba idobale oba* (meaning Supreme King that enthrones earthly kings and receives the prostration/supplication of earthly kings).

New criteria for selection of an *Qba* have emerged. Equally important is the role of Western education and foreign civilizations in producing Africans who service the capitalist system and subscribe to its values.³⁹ It is trendily evident today that beyond the traditional requirements of candidates aspiring for *Obaship* position as obtainable in the pre-colonial setting, certain new requirements seem to have been introduced. These include: educational qualifications⁴⁰; personality and personal achievements; present or past status in government or private sectors (records) as well as the extent of fame, wealth, health status, religion, and government's approval. For instance, both the local and state governments play a prominent role in the approval of a community's traditional ruler and presentation of staff of office. In some cases, he who blows the pipe dictates the tune. Hence, nomination, installation and promotion of traditional leaders have been subjected to varying degrees of compromises and manipulations by the political powers-that-be for the purpose of political cum economic 'give' and 'take'.

The central government has had therefore to assert its pre-eminence by bringing all traditional rulers, big and small, under its controlling power, using various methods of control. Government recognition is now in all cases superimposed upon the customary procedures for the selection and installation of traditional rulers, as a further requirement before a traditional ruler, selected and installed in accordance with customary law, can lawfully function as such. It is made a criminal offence to function without government recognition. And, recognition, when granted, can be withdrawn whenever government "considers it to be in the public interest."⁴¹

Observably evident in modern politics are political maneuvers, selfish romance with or subjections to the whim and caprice of the incumbent party or government as against the voice the people. *Qbas* were in the olden days more revered and of less personal misconduct than in the present. Though an *Qba* is still in principle regarded as the supreme head

of his people and his office and person sacred, ironically in reality, every Igbomina *Qba*, irrespective of the status (1st, 2nd, 3rd class), is answerable to and checked by the Local/State and Federal government authorities, policies and laws. Unfortunately, traditional rulers can be summoned by the government get bribed or somehow threatened to be demoted. They could have their staffs of office seized for non-compliance with certain obnoxious policies of the incumbent government or a particular party.⁴² This interference renders the ancient belief of *Qba's* absolute power over all subjects invalid (*Qba ba lori ohun gbogbo, lori, oso, aje ati oloogun* (The king is supreme over all – the wizards, witches and ritualists). With this development, traditional rulers have indeed lost enormous traditional constitutional sovereignty as they cannot really be practically described or regarded as the '*alayeluwa, iku baba yeye, alase igba ekeji orisa* (death, the almighty ruler and companion of gods) while they now profess to be either Muslims or Christians. (or as "*ari oba fin ni oba npa* (one who has the power to seize, reward, arrest, punish or even "behead" his subjects; or any of the loved ones allowed to die with him (*abobaku*); etc.).

Lamentably, a few number of them are today political merchants/canvassers, 'public servants' or tools in the hands of political office holders simply because they want to be graded and for those already graded, because they want their official cars changed to bigger ones.⁴³ Hussain expresses the same worry thus:

Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, some traditional leaders and royal fathers from the east, south, west and north of the country have abandoned decorum, self-respect, caution and the interests of their people by quickly aligning themselves with one political party or another for personal gains. It is wrong for any member of the traditional institution to declare support to a politician, but it is a disaster when such an endorsement is made by a royal father who should see himself more as a father to all the contestants.⁴⁴

Similarly, the personality of a person or community leader has a role to play in the discharge of his secular or sacrosanct functions. In an attempt to determine whether traditional rulers still retain their semi-god powers, autonomy, public respect and all-round functions like they were originally, post-colonial realities reveal that royal stools in Nigeria at large have comparatively been objects of public ridicule in the hands of political

office holders and sometimes in the hands of their subjects. Worst still, unlike the pre-colonial time, when an *Qba* lived within his domain and yet was hardly seen in the public, some of the contemporary traditional rulers who are customarily expected to oversee the day-to-day activities in their respective domains, do so by proxy as they do not reside within their respective jurisdiction. They have their personal houses, businesses or jobs (as civil servants) in the capital cities or elsewhere. Nangoli, flashing back to a more glorious past, attests to this thus:

Those were the days of proud kings, emperors and chiefs ruling over flourishing kingdoms and empires!...Each kingdom or empire was governed by laws that were for all intent and purposes, products of African culture. Each law embraced every aspect of the African culture and was reinforced according to the custom of that kingdom or empire. Emphasis was placed on rehabilitation of offenders and forgiving those whose shortcomings resulted from genuine need...The rulers at this time were the practical purposes dictators but the benevolent kind. Their power, though absolute, had nonetheless to reflect the wishes of their subjects.⁴⁵

Gone are the days when most matters took place either in the king's palace or the market square (as he was called the *Oloja*) which was usually close-by to the palace. Today, except for coronation of *Qba* in Council, courtesies, installation of new chiefs, most important social/public gatherings hold in town halls, open fields, while religious programmes are held in the churches, mosques, schools and other designated places to suit the purpose. Though traditional rulers now receive salaries from both state and local governments as well as gifts from individuals, they might not necessarily be the richest in town as they used to be. This is against the initial practice of sourcing their wealth from annual tributes from the people, fines, tolls, gifts, proceeds of their big farms (because of their access to large labour from their many slaves), profits from trade, and spoils of war and presents during their ceremonial functions. The practice whereby a newly installed king inherits the property, wives and slaves of his predecessors in order to build on their wealth has ceased following the advent of the alien religions. The waning role of the *Qba* as the market head still boils down to the influence of the alien religions as all Igbomina

traditional rulers are today either Muslims or Christians, who are guided by both customs and their new religious principles. Opeloye confirms:

Participation in the traditional religions and festivals always involves undergoing intensive rituals which are often not compatible with the tenets of the revealed religions. Those who are mostly involved in this are the traditional rulers and chiefs. Most of the Obas in Yorubaland as well as their Chiefs are either Muslims or Christians, yet they are active practitioners of indigenous Religion. This they usually want to justify by their claim to be father of all and custodians of indigenous tradition. It is equally found among the Yoruba instances when traditional taboos (eewo) are given reverence even when they contradict Islamic and Christian tenets. Syncretism is usually the problem of someone who lives in a tradition that is not indigenous to him.⁴⁶

Though all the *Qbas* are *Qba Alade* (crowned kings), many of them prefer or inter-use the wearing of turban and beaded crown or skull caps (*sabaca*) as a result of both Islamic and Christian civilizations.

It will however be in the collective interest of all if the Federal government fulfills her promise(s) to the agitating traditional rulers. One of such promises that readily comes to mind was made by Senator David Mark, Nigeria's Senate President in the 7th Republic. He was once quoted by one of the national dailies as saying, "we will continue to assist our traditional rulers who are responsible for unity and peace in order to further strengthen their roles. We shall find specific roles for them in the constitution when we finally review the 1999 constitution."⁴⁷

Therefore, in an attempt towards the consolidation and sustainability of grassroots and national development, this paper strongly suggests as follows:

- That the constitution should stipulate clearly what the roles of the traditional rulers are.⁴⁸
- Direct involvement of the *Qba* and his traditional council in political and other juicy appointments in order to forestall imposition of political nominees and appointees who have no positive records of community service in their localities.
- That the battle of insecurity and all sorts of ill-practices can be more diplomatically and efficiently won via 'carrot and stick approach' as

well as via traditional approach than modern (i.e. military or legal). To this end, the exploration of synergy between the traditional approach and government security measures can efficiently guarantee maintenance of public order.

- Periodic consultation with the traditional rulers to provide viable and workable means of eradicating vices in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Traditional institution remains the oldest surviving socio-cultural cum political institution which has served as the proof for social security, cultural heritage, national cohesion and development. Traditional African social and political institutions, like those of pre-industrial societies all over the world, embody patterns of culture which have evolved over hundreds of years and which represent man's success, or degree of success, in integrating himself into his environment.⁴⁹ The fusion of government, religion and morality in indigenous African societies enabled the stability and harmony of the community to be maintained by means of ritual action of a regular kind performed by the family, village or community. The study goes further to establish that the twentieth century was an era of change and innovation in both the concept and practice of leadership not only in Igbominaland but Africa at large. Traditional rulers got a rude shock because of the baffling and unsettling innovations which colonial rule introduced. Traditional institutions have till date survived the test of time in spite of all travails. Evidently, the trend has changed from traditional rulers being at the centre of authority in the pre-colonial times to performing insignificant functions in modern politics. Bamitale Omole captures it better: "Traditional rulers have been empowered and disempowered at different times; accommodated and excluded depending on the interests at stake; incorporated, manipulated, hoodwinked or humiliated depending on the dispensations, circumstances or even the level or extent of relationship between chieftaincy title holders and leaders of modern government".⁵⁰

In spite of their diminishing functions due to constitutional impediment, the roles and prospect of traditional institution in nation building continue to wax stronger considering their accessibility, responsiveness and long-lasting reign. Traditional festivals, installation

ceremonies, annual celebrations marking the coronation of incumbent traditional rulers, natural features resulting in spiritual and tourist attractions evidently reveal that the traditional political culture has maintained its sway and gained enhancement in splendour and prestige. They do not only preserve cultures and traditions, they effectively settle land and other disputes by customary arbitration; officially welcome visitors coming to the community; represent the community in local and state functions; serve as watchdogs, for they hold the key to the success or failure of security administration in their respective localities since they operate at the grassroots and interact closely with the people or their representatives on regular basis. Traditional institution is the shock absorber and cornerstone on which the various communities rest and depend. It is consequent on their security surveillance, intelligence reports and from all others said and done that traditional rulers ever remain indispensable in shaping the structure of both the traditional and modern politics in Nigeria. The affairs of the village communities continue to attract the interest of all categories of people both while they live in the cities and after they retire and return to the village. In spite of lacking in strong constitutional backing, the undeniable role and uncommon resilience of the traditional institutions, now and later, have been established here.

Notes and References

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18. O.S. Aboyaji, "Change and Continuity in Religious Beliefs and Practices in Igbominaland, C.1850-2000", Ph.D. external defence thesis, Department of History, Unilorin, 2014, p.108.
 19. F. Afolayan, "Kingdoms of the Yoruba: Socio-Political Development...", p.21.
 20. Though other villages later became identified by their different names and titles (i.e. Olowu, Onigbin, Eledidi, etc), they were commonly called Isin because they settled on the land Aina Orimadegun called *Ibi Isinmi* (Land of Rest)
 21. Oral interview: S.I. Awoyale quoted in T.A. Abolarin, "The Socio-Political Organization of Isinland in the 21st Century" (Unpublished B.A. Dissertation, Unilorin, 2004), p.23.
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 23. Isanlu severed from the trio-bond of rotational Obaship. In 2011, a century after Isanlu severed, Ijara-Isin and Iji-Isin broke away from this bond. H.R.H. Omoniyi Banigbe (Atobatele II) installed on 9th July, 1993 ceased to hold the title Olusin of Iji/Ijara Isin but the Olusin of Ijara-Isin while the H.R.M. Oba Samuel Babatunde Aboyaji (Adesunloye II) was installed on 30th December, 2011 as His Royal Highness, The Olusin of Iji Isin. The coronation (*iwuye*) was joyously held on 25th March, 2011.
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36. I.O.Oloyede, *Shariah versus Secularism in Nigeria: Islamic Publications Bureau*, 196, p.1.
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38. J.A. Jolayemi, "Socio-Economic Impact of the Church in National Development in Nigeria" in *JASSO* Vol. 3, No.2, 2005, pp. 38-39.

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NEW YAM FESTIVAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN OKALAND, SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The developmental process of a nation should embrace the growth and progress of that nation. This includes the physical, moral, intellectual, cultural, political and economic well-being of its citizens. In this process of development, cultural festivals, therefore, have significant roles to play. Cultures of various dimensions have always existed in human society with their traditional values and historical dynamism. Individual cultures of the world have constantly ensured their continued existence, through feasts and festivals in a number of ways. The New Yam Festival is annually celebrated among the people of Okaland in Ondo State, South-West, Nigeria to mark the beginning of the harvest season, and to thank the gods for bumper harvest. This festival is generally referred to as Oka-Day celebration and held in August each year. It provides a rare opportunity for integration among the Oka people and their friends to discuss matters affecting the community. The paper, therefore, seeks to present Oka-Day celebration as a viable tool for community and national development among the people of Okaland. Through the adoption of historical approach, the paper argued that New Yam festival has strong political and cultural resources that can be harnessed for national development.

Introduction

Culture has been described as the road map to any societal development and that there can never be any meaningful development in any society that has lost its sense of culture.¹ This Alonge's view was equally buttressed by Babawale's perspective when he observed that: a cursory look at examples of nations making headway by global ratings clearly reveal the culture as the mainstay of their progress. For instance,

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