

TRADITIONAL RULERS AND NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

Segun N. Odesola

Abstract

Traditional rulership is fast losing its sacredness and seems to be degenerating to the unenviable point of being a political anachronism and an economic burden. The decay in the fate of traditional rulership is true in Nigeria well as other African countries and it possibly reflects the feeling that, perhaps, man has had enough of traditional monarchs whose history is not always the brightest part of their image. Few will therefore bemoan the end of traditional monarchs if their office can be superceded by a few and more relevant *but not necessarily less corrupt* political structure. On the other hand, some still say that traditional rulers are not simply political heads they are the mystical and religious heads, the divine symbol of their peoples' health and welfare that observers should endeavour to appreciate indigenous sophistication, originality and complexity of the system of governance, justice and local administration and that few cases of historically ascertained despots were not and should not be taken as the general pattern of African traditional rulership.

Background

There have been many attempts by scholars, administrators and members of the public at large, to examine the usefulness or relevance of traditional rulers in modern African societies. Conferences and symposia have been held to examine various aspects of traditional rulers' roles in government — especially in local administration. However, there has been no consensus of opinion on what specific functions or roles should be attached to the offices of the traditional rulers. In an attempt to have a systematic examination of this institution, most studies have adopted periodisation of the phases of involvement of these rulers in the government of their peoples. The most common phases used were: pre-colonial, colonial, post to the present day.

In the pre-colonial phase, the traditional rulers reached the height of their glory and in most places, their words were laws. The advent of the colonial masters and the accompanying new system of administration diminished considerably the role, influence and authority of the traditional rulers. Since the end of the colonial rule in most African states, a lot of uncertainties have beclouded the institution of traditional rulership. The various roles that these rulers play during the different phases have attracted both favourable and opprobrious comments. We are not interested in a restatement of those over-discussed roles but we believe that the arguments of two dominant schools of thought on the relevance of traditional rulership in modern government can still bear some repetition.

First, the abolitionist school claims that the traditional rulers are no more relevant to modern government. In their source of legitimacy is traditional authority whereas modern governmental systems are based on legal authority and democratic principles. Traditional authority is seen to be incompatible with democratic government. Traditional rulership therefore seems to be irrelevant. Others say that traditional rulers have outlived their cultural usefulness, as such, the institution should be allowed to rest in peace. Furthermore, traditional rulers are not equipped to resolve or be instrumental in resolving violent conflict, yet conflict resolution is at the heart of politics. To the extent that traditional rulers not relevant to the crucial function of politics i.e. conflict resolution claimed, the ruling class which assumes the task of allocation of scarce resources are not likely to have any use for the traditional rulers (Sambo, 1987:402). Some people say that with modern training, the police force can better handle the function of the traditional ruler while others say traditional rulers are economic waste in local government administration. They allowed unbridled exploitation of the subjects and as such it was unjust (Oyewo, 1985:236). Thus, those in the abolitionist school would earnestly preach an immediate end of the institution which, as it were, had outlived its cultural, socio-political and economic usefulness. We would comment on these views later but for now let us examine the case of the traditions who would rather preserve the institution which they hold in high esteem.

The traditionalists believe that the traditional ruler or king is not man-made but that those who answer to that position is God anointed and therefore not be brushed aside relegated or disrespected. (Sambo, 1987:397). The Holy Bible (First Peter, Chapter 2 verse 17) and the Holy Quran (Chapter 2

Verse 247 - English version) endorsed the sacredness of the traditional rulers' positions. Their office is the link between human rule and spiritual government. "They are ... sacred rulers, the shadow or reflection of God's rule in the universe ... and symbolize the link between God and man" (Mbiti, 1969:182-187).

Proponents of this school believe that there is a dire need not only to retain the traditional rulership in modern government, but also to enhance their involvement in governance - possibly to their pre-colonial positions. This is borne out of the fear that the traditional rulers have been under since independence; The traditional rulers are important relics of our traditional political system and the embodiment of our culture, and to preserve our cultural heritage, we must preserve our traditional institutions, we cannot gallantly look forward while we tend to forget our past. The Oba of Benin (1982) quoted Winston Churchill as saying:

I must confess myself to be a great admirer of tradition. The longer you look back, the farther you can look forward. This is not a philosophical or political argument - any occultist will tell you this is true. The wider the span, the longer the continuity, the greater the sense of duty in the individual men and women.

The thrust of the argument of the traditionalist or retentionist school is on this cultural-philosophical existence of the institution of traditional rulers. We want to emphasize that no economic value can be placed on this. The argument will be advanced further in the next section with a little detailed attention on the institution of Obaship in Yoruba land.

Yoruba Obas (Kings) as a Case Study

A general assessment of the role of traditional rulers in democratic system of government in modern day Nigeria has done a lot to obliterate the peculiar significance of these rulers in particular areas. Traditional rulers are not equally powerful throughout the whole country. In terms of their degree of prominence, influence and positive valuation, Nigeria can be divided into three analytical regions - the North, West and East with the amount of prominence highest in the North and lowest in the East. "Therefore, no one rigid uniform policy can be applied to the proper place of traditional rulers under the constitution (Egwurube, 1985:230). Because of these fundamental differences in the importance of traditional rulers and the peculiar cultural traits that are similar to a very large extent among the Yorubas, we hope that a focus on the institution of Obaship in Yorubaland will lend itself to a more valid generalization.

At-the head of every monarchical state was the King. He was regarded with a respect approaching veneration. Popular maxims regarding him call him Oba alase ekeji Orisa that is, the king, the commander and wielder of authority next to the Orisa - the supernatural object of worship. The Oba is sometimes even referred to as an Orisa in his own right. His person certainly was and still is regarded as sacred, but a large part of his sacred character must be due to the fact that the Orisa (both high and low) were in their origin, human beings who distinguished themselves in one way or another and who, after their death, become the object of worship, in some cases, by all Yoruba people (Fadipe, 1970:206).

There are elaborate religious rituals surrounding the creation of a king to pass on to him in direct continuity with his earliest predecessor what is believed to be the source of authority - the traditional authority. As in the case of nearly every orisa worshipped by the Yoruba, additional measures were taken to impact to the new king on his installation, special magical powers as a means of reinforcing the attitude of awe toward him by the people. This is presenting the situation as it is and not an unnecessary romance with the institution of Obaship. Obaship is of vital importance to the Yoruba and this is seen in its existence throughout Yoruba land with rituals of installation and paraphernalia of office following remarkably similar patterns. Fadipe (1970:206) quoted Lloyd as 'saying "the Alafin was a sacred king, his status being very similar to other Yoruba oba". The person of the king-was considered sacred and no one dared to raise his hand against him or make an attempt on his life. What is more, while those skilled in *ogun* (magic) were ready to place their services at his disposal for making him both offensive and defensive charms, it was believed to be dangerous, particularly for a commoner to make charms against a king.

In spite of his sacrosanct character, the functions of Yoruba king were entirely secular. Apart from his ultimate interest in ensuring the health, prosperity and public safety of his people, the functions of the king included the conduct of foreign affairs and administration of justice. Granted that most of these traditional roles of the Oba have been taken over by modern organs of government, a

vast majority of the people (about 70% of the total population) still lead their daily lives in rural area under the aegis of traditional laws and customs administered by the Oba or his representatives.

The foregoing is an attempt to position the Oba in Yoruba social context. By cross-cultural examination, one can say generally that political power in traditional African societies inhered in ritual leaders, the economically gifted. It was not usual to have all these attributes in a single man, hence most African societies tended to have pluralistic power bases even in apparently centralized and autocratic kingdoms Nadel (1947) says that among the Nupe of Nigeria, titles below the Etsu (King) were mainly acquired through personal achievements as each of such titles denoted special slate duties requiring special abilities or training. To be an Emir in a Fulani kingdom, one needed to have been born into the traditional aristocracy (*Sarakuman* or *asctli*) established mainly through Jihadist conquest. However, the Emir required a retinue of other administrators and soldiers to be able to effectively administer, defend and possibly expand his emirate (Nadel, 1947).

A Critique of the Abolition School of Thought

At this juncture, one would re-examine the arguments of the abolitionist school and see how irrelevant these could be. First is the claim that the traditional source of authority is incompatible with democratic ethos. In traditional African society, political power was sacred, if not mystical, it symbolized the unity of the people and was held in trust for the people by the king or ruling council. An African ruler is not to his people merely a person who can enforce his will on them. He is the axis of their political relations, the symbol of their unity and exclusiveness and the embodiment of their essential values. Credentials are mystical and are derived from antiquity (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1946:16).

The antiquated and mystical origins of rulership provided grounds for legitimacy. This legitimacy is, for example, clearly lacking in most new states, especially in states with military regimes. Moreover, the people was a potent source of power of the traditional rulers and the notion of popular sovereignty was practised in so many ways. There was democratic decision-making process which involved virtually all adults at various levels. At the village level, these were the fabled "under tree" assemblies where divergent views were expressed and decisions finally taken based on the majority views. In larger political systems, centralized and decentralized alike, the apparatus of decision-making was decentralized at various levels (Osaghae, 1988:6). A typical Yoruba Oba is not an autocrat, he rules generally with the advice and counsel of his chiefs. The Ifa oracle, *Ogboni* cult which could be likened to the Roman senate, palace women and war chiefs all wielded power especially in critical matters of war and peace. The king as the head of his council serves as the court of first instance and also as the last court of appeal for his kingdom. The existence of checks and balances forestalls the reign of tyrants as such tyrants may be "*forced to go to sleep*" (suicide). "In principle, writes Biobaku, "the *Ogboni* stood between the sacred chief and his subjects, preventing the one from becoming despotic and ensuring proper subordination of the other". In segmented societies like those of the Ibos, title holders have a lot of respect, influence and power. They moderated conflicts, led public opinion and checked the exercise of political power. Their voice, dissent and protests were taken seriously. Closely related to title was association, some associations were those of titled societies and where such existed, the men of title or members of titled associations or societies possessed more influence on the governance of the people. Lord Hailey observed:

It is rare to find in British Colonial Africa any instance in which the indigenous form of rule, previously in force could be described as autocratic, and there are not many cases in which it could be described as authoritarian (Hailey, 1963).

The point we want to emphasize here is that it is bad history or bad civics to claim that African traditional system of governance was anti-democracy or autocratic, rather, the system did not support or encourage despotic rulership. Whatever despotism that existed might have been aberrations. Therefore, to base the call for eradication of the institution of traditional rulership on this premise is malicious. As a matter of fact Nigeria's flirting with the so-called modern political structure either under the civilians or military has not shown that these regimes are less corrupt or even more democratic than the traditional set-up.

Furthermore, the allegation that the traditional rulers are now culturally useless might be seen as a result of shallow reflections on what culture is. Since the time of Edward Taylor, culture has been described as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, costume and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. In a broad sense, culture refers to

the whole range of human activities which are learned and not instinctive, and which are transmitted from generation to generation through various learning processes (Beatie, 1964:20). With a very risky exception of the family, there is no other institution that can accomplish this socializing role of culture in the society as the institution of traditional rulership. African culture is an enduring one and as such, modernization, which brought about our exposure to colonial rule has really not eaten deep into our cultural values as imagined by the so-called radicals or modernists. For example, it has been argued that the few decades of European rule in Africa were just a brief interlude when examined against the millennia of Africa's history. The European colonization might be seen as a major turning point in Africa's destiny, inaugurating change which were fundamental and irreversible. However, its importance might have been exaggerated - because the impact of the colonial rule on African culture is shallow. Mazrui and Tidy (1984) claim that "the impact is shallow because African culture is deep... and also due to its own contradictory unevenness". In the face of the contradiction, the impact of the West may now turn out to be more short-lived than many expected. Either African culture may reclaim its own and help Africa retreat to its ancestral authenticity, or Africa may struggle to find a third way. At present, the scenario of the third way is more plausible than the scenario of Africa's retreat to its ancestry, but neither possibility can be ruled out. In any case, whichever way Africa is taking towards cultural emancipation in Eurocentric world culture, the role of traditional rulers cannot be overemphasized.

A major problem which the adherents of the abolitionist school have is the confusion of modernization with westernisation in their bid for decolonization. We share Mazrui's claim that retraditionalisation of African culture can in fact take modernizing forms, especially if it becomes an aspect of decolonising the neo-colonial African States. Mazrui emphasized that

Retraditionalisation does not mean returning Africa to what it was before the Europeans came. In hard assessment, it would be suicidal for Africa to attempt such a backward leap. But a move towards renewed respect (or indigenous way and the conquest of cultural self contempt may be the minimal conditions for cultural decolonization in Africa (Mazrui and Tidy, 1984:298-299).

The majority of those who call for the abolition of the institution of traditional rulers were westernized elites who have been culturally alienated and have fallen victims of nee-colonialism. These people needed to be "born again" by returning to their sources. These culturally alienated elites must repossess the culture of the villages in order to achieve identification with the masses, understand their needs and problems and mobilize them for social and economic development. No doubt there is a need for cultural reappraisal in Africa, but this we can begin in a microcosmic form by a reassessment of the institution of traditional rulers instead of calling its abolition.

Traditional Rulers and the Fourth Republic

An attempt has been made to reappraise the cultural values of the traditional rulers with a focus on the Yoruba Obas. We have made the point that, contrary to the beliefs of the abolitionists, the traditional rulers who are a vital link between Africa's past and present play important roles in the socio political set-up of their various communities. Before now, there had been varying degree of responsibility given to the traditional rulers. For example, the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Schedule Three, Part II, Section B) provided for a Council of Chiefs in each state

with powers to advise on customary law or cultural affairs, intercommunal relations, chieftaincy matters and the maintenance of public order within the state.

The traditional rulers are very important in dealing with all matters relevant to governance at the grass root level. This importance was recognised by the Political Bureau which recommended that their role should be confined to the local government areas *where they have relevance*. The Federal government accepted the recommendation.

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1989, provided for the establishment of the Traditional Council whose functions, among others, include advising the local government council concerned on proposed development plans and in collecting of taxes as may be required, advising on religious matters where appropriate and promoting and advising on arts and culture. The advice of traditional rulers becomes very important especially now that the politics of religion is taking a very dangerous dimension. Since the 1989 constitution is an outgrowth of the Constituent Assembly's deliberations, one can say that the Constitutional provisions on traditional rulers represent the Assembly's position. This fourth republic in Nigeria could still benefit greatly from the traditional

rulers if serious considerations are given the following suggestions.

The Positive Roles of Traditional Rulers

These rulers are in very good positions to serve as catalysts of growth at the grassroots level, a great majority (about 70%) Nigerians live in rural areas. Given the love and respect which they command among their people, agricultural development programmes introduced through them are likely to gain higher acceptance. At least 60% of the total Nigerian population depend on agriculture to eke out a living. In fact, kings still play prominent roles in the settlement of land dispute, the Land Use Decree (1978) notwithstanding. A study by Atte(1986) in Okun area of Kwara State showed that the Obas are indispensable in the area of land administration, land in most rural areas of Yorubaland is tied to a complex of interrelated spiritual, social and cultural habits which cannot be broken easily by a single proclamation or act. In spite of the Land Use Decree (1978), the traditional land tenure system has continued to prevail in most rural areas and the Obas' court is the repository of knowledge about the whole domain. The Oba and his chroniclers know the exact boundaries of lineage land and who owns what. Whenever land is required for public use, the Oba in council may compulsorily acquire an area of land and compensation may be paid for crops, economic trees and other structures on the piece of land.

The traditional rulers regulate the system of social control over land ... Even though the traditional ruler may not have direct land rights, he is the head of the spiritual organization which guide attitudes to land. He is the priest of that spiritual entity called 'land' and therefore had tremendous influence on its exploitation (Atte, 1986).

The action or inaction of traditional rulers has meant a lot in stopping or fuelling various communal strife, especially in the oil producing Niger Delta Area of the country. But for the timely intervention of the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Maccido, and some notable northern Emirs, the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) in northern Nigeria could have witnessed a total collapse this year (2004). Health officers can therefore harness the support of traditional rulers to facilitate successful health care delivery services. Involving them is educative since it enables everybody concerned to get the real experience of thinking, discussing, deciding and implementing their own decisions which invariably may lead to rediscovery on the part of self and the community:

Since organized community effort is very crucial to public health, efforts and every attempt should be made to solicit for support and co operation of traditional leaders because of their tremendous influence in organising people (Ajao, 1985:326).

In a similar view, traditional rulers could be very useful in the area of social mobilisation. In actual fact, during the past few years, they have been used in various campaigns of the government programmes such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE), the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), War Against Indiscipline (WAI) and even currently in the programme of the National Orientation Agency (NOA). Traditional rulers like the Ooni of Ife, the Oba of Benin, Emir of florin, among others, are looked upon by their subjects as embodiment of their respective cultures, traditions and social values and they definitely can wield immense influence in the area of social mobilisation. The 1989 Constitution (Promulgation decree) provides that the traditional council shall assist in the mobilisation of human and material resources towards self-reliance, community development and welfare within the area. This complement directly, the purpose for which NOA has been set-up. And, in fact, all successive Nigerian governments (both military and civilian) had used traditional rulers either as agents of political socialisation or as tools for legitimisation of their existence and their hold on power. Ibrahim Babangida's regime was no exception considering the roles played by the traditional rulers in resolving the May 1978 (anti-government) students' crisis. In October 1989, Babangida demonstrated a rare respect for the office of traditional rulers when he released from detention the popular Lagos Lawyer, Gani Fawehinmi to the Ooni of Ife. Reacting to his release, Gani Fawehinmi said the "traditional rulers could not be divorced from the socio-political and cultural activities of the society" (*Daily Sketch* (1990). Ibadan, Nigeria).

While it could be argued that traditional rulers have sometime in the past been objects or agents of political manipulation or election rigging, it is indisputable that traditional rulers have been part and parcel of the political process and if the political process has led to intense corruption,

nepotism and general political intolerance on the part of the political parties which either controlled the center or the regions or both, traditional rulers could not be exempted from this general malaise -just like neither the military nor the academic could be exempted from the societal decay. Efforts to bring about a general improvement in the society will therefore necessarily include the traditional rulers. Also, we ask the traditional rulers to stay away from partisan politics and yet they are cuddled to boost the electoral fortunes of the politicians. Some intending politicians spend fortunes to acquire or purchase chieftaincy titles which will hopefully increase their political support. Even the westernised educated elites will engage the services of traditional rulers to settle private scores or land disputes in their villages or home towns, only to get back to the cities to call for the heads of these benefactors. If the governments and the elites solicit the support of traditional rulers as occasions demand, it is hypocrisy nearing self-deceit or outright dishonesty to say that they (traditional rulers) will not be relevant in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Whatever one thinks about the traditional rulers, many still enjoy the support of their subjects. The reaction of Kano people in 1982 when the government threatened to remove the Sarkin Kano can be remembered. There was also another episode in Gongola in 1982 when the government attempted to create many chiefs of equal status in an attempt to dilute the influence of the Lamido. The community of Adamawa, particularly Yola, reacted violently. Similarly, it is inconceivable that any government, civilian or military, will toy with the prominent position of the Sultan of Sokoto who is both a cultural and religious head of the Sokoto Emirate.

Contrary to the allegation that traditional rulers are economic parasites on the society, they are actually in positions to enhance the economic progress of their domains because of the enormous personal wealth they control. Apart from direct personal investments, these Obas can serve as loan guarantors for small holder farmers in their domain because they have an in-depth knowledge of the people and they can use traditional sanctions in loan recovery. This will particularly complement the Federal Government's current effort at boosting the activities of the Agricultural Credit Corporation and the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (NEEDS). This way, traditional rulers can be economic boosters for their communities and they can effectively serve good purpose in rural development. Also, efforts at combating the wave of armed robbery in the country could be more rewarding if traditional rulers are made chairmen of their local community security committees.

Finally and more importantly, we share Osaghae's (1988) thought that in the conception and resolution of the central political problem of power, there is a lot to learn from traditional thought. Power, traditionally, was not personalized; the ruler did not rule or enforce his personal will. Power was conceived in sacred terms and could only be held in trust. Today, the conception of political power is directly opposed to this. Leaders personalize power, based on force and violence. Even where elections are held, there is no unifying bond between the political rulers and the ruled. Thus, leaders are not seen as symbols of unity and integrity and the notion of collective good as the first requirement of power barely exists. This anomalous conception of power contributes significantly to political instability and the legitimacy crisis for which African states have become notorious. The traditional emphasis on leader-led unity of purpose has a lot to offer in the resolution of these problems.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has shown very clearly that successive regimes and constitutions have recognised the very important roles the traditional rulers play in the society, therefore there is no need to make further pretensions about their relevance. The 1989 Constitution enhanced the position of the traditional rulers in the relevant provisions. The manifestos of the two political parties established by Babangida's government also recognised the importance of these rulers. The National Republican Convention (NRC) promised to seek advice from the council of chiefs on traditional and cultural matters as and when necessary and also use the institution to maintain peace, harmony and good relation among all citizen: the Social Democratic Party (SDP) promised to ensure the modernisation of traditional institution and put in place policies designed to strengthen and transform the traditional rulers such that they will be better placed than ever before to contribute to the process of change. The dominant political parties and government at federal and state levels today still consult and covet the support of traditional rulers on a variety of issues of national, state, and local importance. This is a very good indication that political calculations in the Fourth Republic may not diminish the importance of the traditional rulers.

References

- Ajao, E.G. (1985). Support and non-support of traditional rulers in community Health care delivery services. In Oladimeji Aborisade (Ed.), *Local Government and the Traditional Rulers in Nigeria*. Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press.
- Atte, O.D. (1986). Towards Agricultural development, the role of traditional rulers and Local Government in land management policy in Nigeria. Adefolun Akinbode, Bryan Stolen and Rex Ugarji (Eds.), *The Roles of Traditional Rulers and Local Government in Nigerian Agriculture*. Ilorin: Nigeria Armti.
- Beatie, John (1964). *Other Cultures*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Biobaku, S.
- O. (Ed). (1973). *Sources of Yoruba History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Biobaku, S. (1952). A Historical Sketch of Egba traditional authorities. *Africa*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, Jan. 1952.
- Daily Sketch*. Ibadan: Nigeria, October 15 1998.
- Egwurube, Joseph (1985). Traditional rulers and Local Government under the 1979 Nigerian Constitution. In O. Aborisade (Ed.). *Local government and the traditional rulers in Nigeria*. Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press.
- Fadipe, N. A. (1970). *The Sociology of the Yoruba*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Fortes, M. and Evans-Pritchard E.E. (Eds.). (1946). *African Political Systems*. London: OUP.
- Hailey, Lord (1963). Native Administration (p. 2) T.O., *Government and Politics in Africa*, London: Asia Publishing House.
- Mazrui, Ali A. and Tidy Michael (1984). *Nationalism and New States in Africa*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Mbiti, John S. (1969). *African Religious and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Nadel, S. F. (1947). *A black Byzantium: The Kingdom of Nupe in Nigeria*. London: O.U.P.
- Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo Erediuwa, CFR, The Oba of Benin (1982). Tradition in Service of Modern Society in the Nigerian Context. Text of the lecture delivered in the distinguished Guest Lecture Series at the Research, University of Benin, Benin.
- Osaghae Eghosa, E. (1986). The passage from the past to the present in African political thought: the question of relevance. Paper presented at the International Conference on African Traditional Thought and Institution held at the University of Ibadan, August.
- Oyewo, A. (1985). Traditional rulers and their roles in Nigeria Government from a legal perspective. Oladimeji Aborisade (Ed.), *Local Government and the traditional rulers in Nigeria*. Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press.
- Sambo, Sina (1987). On the relevance of Traditional rulerships in Government and Administration. S.O. Olugbemi (Ed.), *Alternative Political Futures for Nigeria*. Lagos: Nigeria Political Science Association.