

## Pre-Colonial Nigeria and the European's Fallacy

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### Abstract

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In order to achieve colonialism and political subjugation by the Europeans in Nigeria, the British lead government represented mainly by trade companies set about to proselytize the people to a new politics and ruler ship. To achieve this, the companies started detrimental campaigns both within and outside the territory. These campaigns were aimed at the political institution of the local people. The support of the government back in Europe was key, thus it became paramount that these colonial sentimentalists "black-tagged" the political institutions of the various kingdoms. The various advocates of colonialism preached the benefits of a complete annexation, claiming the people had no sensible political administration. The rulers of the various kingdoms in Nigeria, were tagged tyrannical, British haters, murders and slave traders. While their ways of life were labeled backward and barbaric. Their institutions of judiciary or check and balances were not reckoned with. European writers joined in the campaign and before long the British started a systematic military and diplomatic take over. Of utmost importance was the deliberate act of the European writers and traders to slur the political institution of the people. These paper, thus set about to straighten out the facts using examples of a few kingdoms in Nigeria's pre-colonial times.

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### 1. Introduction

The continent of Africa, like other continents in the world, have been the stage upon which the drama of human development and cultural differentiations has been played since the beginning of known history.

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Yet until very recently, the history of the great continent, its diverse cultural patterns and even the potential of the people, have been the subject of monumental distortions, decision and amusement among European intellectual community (Uya, 1974). Prior to the twentieth century, the myth that "Africans are people without a history", dominated the historiography of the Europeans, which according to Thomas Hodgkin (1960) was, because Europeans who visited West Africa were not competent, and reported nothing more than the contemporary state of societies which they encountered. Professor S.O. Arifalo submitted that the historiographical assumption behind this attitude was founded on the late nineteenth century belief about history, that the only truly valid source of history was the written document and the societies which had no writing had no history.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, scholars like Professor A.P. Newton, Harry Johnston, Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper and the likes went on to make iniquitous statement about African history.

Contrarily to their opinion, early Nigerian scholars like Kenneth Dike, J.F Ade-Ajayi, and Obaro Ikime est. devoted their time, energy and resources to debunking those horrid notions of the Europeans. The likes of Kenneth Dike used his Ph.D. thesis, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, to exemplify the political system of the Niger/Delta region of Nigeria. Not only were they (early Nigerian historians) also able to demonstrate the beautiful culture the people of Nigeria possessed they were also able to account for their organized political systems and social structures.

With the insertion of colonialism and the western types of governments in Africa and Nigeria specifically, the political systems of the people were tagged retrograded and topsy-turvy. The people were said not to have possessed any sensible system of administration, apart from the ruler ship of bully kings, who possessed all powers, regarded as deities, does what they will and were beyond check. For the Europeans, colonialism was a getaway for the people and a deliverance from tyrant kings.

From this backdrop the paper seeks to examine structures that existed in the pre-colonial political systems of the kingdoms and states of Nigeria. The focus would be to debunk the claims that tyrants' ruler ship or dictatorial systems were in operative among the people of Nigeria before the coming of the Europeans.

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<sup>2</sup>A lecture presented by late Prof. Arifalo S.O.; *Historical Consciousness among Traditional African Societies* (Second Monsignor Oguntuyi Memorial Lecture).

The history of the country (Nigeria) has featured many waves of human travels from across the Sahara, which has never been a complete hurdle between the lands to the north and south of the desert. Archaeological evidences from various parts of Nigeria suggest that parts of the country have been settled by man since the Paleolithic or Stone Age period. According to the 1952/53 census, there were more than 200 distinct ethnic groups in Nigeria (now there are over 450), most of who have distinct customs, traditions and languages. The large and dominant groups include the Yoruba (at the time of census was 10 million), the Igbo (7 million), the Hausa (16 million), and the Fulani (5 million). Other prominent but less numerous groups include the Edo, the Ibibio of the Cross Rivers state, the Tiv of the Benue valley, the Nupe of the middle Niger valley, and the Kanuri of the Lake Chad basin. The large concentration of the smallest ethnic groups in the Middle Belt where there are more than 180 different groups is a significant feature of the distribution of ethnic groups in Nigeria (Udo, 1980).

For the people of the forest belt the largest known peoples are the Yoruba and the Edo who live in the southwest or western states of Nigeria and the Igbo, Ibibio and Ekoi peoples of the southeast or eastern states of Nigeria. It is important to note that the Yoruba were never united under a common government, rather consisted of several powerful states such as Ife, Oyo, and Egba etc. As with most Nigerian peoples, the extended family is the basic social unit of the Yoruba. More than the Yoruba, the Edo have a stronger sense of political unity that was under the central authority of the Oba. East of the lower Niger valley, the two major ethnic groups inhabiting the forest belt are Igbo and the Ibibio each of whom is divided into several sub-groups. Neither of these groups was ever organized into a large state or kingdom similar to those of the Yoruba and Edo. Rather the largest political unit was the village group (Udo, op.cit).

The grassland or savanna peoples of Nigeria fall into two geographical groups namely, the Middle Belt peoples and the peoples of the far north. The two largest and most prominent of Middle Belt grassland peoples are the Tiv of the Benue Valley in the east and; the Nupe of the Middle Niger Valley in the west. The Tiv are probably the most extreme of the so-called stateless societies of Nigeria, while Nupe had an integrated political organization which was similar in some ways to the Yoruba system. In the more open grassland areas of the Nigerian Sudan, the most numerous politically dominant groups are the Hausa, the Fulani and the Kanuri.

The Hausa states though were not unified, practiced a centralized system, even till the Fulani jihad of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Kanuri also practiced a similar system but under a central authority (Udo, 1980).

The paper will examine the political systems of pre-colonial Nigerian states sighting examples of structures, kingdoms and empires that practiced leadership by consent and debunks the European theories of a backward and tyranny state. For clarification, the paper will be divided into: introduction, the evolution of socio-political organization in Nigeria, body; where the paper will examine the kingdoms of the north in one segment and the kingdoms of the south in another, lastly the conclusion.

## **2. The Evolution of Socio-Political Organisation in Nigeria**

As Professor J.A. Atanda (2006) submitted, no one can say exactly how and when socio-political organizations began in Nigeria. According to him the family was the primary unit of socio-political organization. He traced the genesis of political systems in Nigeria from the emergence of the nuclear family as the primary socio-political unit with members bound together by strong kinship tie, to the extension and aggregation of family units into lineages, to the extension of lineages into clans and the aggregation of lineages into villages while villages expand into an overall authority of a state. He went on to divide the concept of ruler ship into two: centralized and non-centralized. He augured that the different states and kingdoms in Nigeria operated at one time or the other either of the two concepts of ruler ship.

Non-centralized states existed virtually in most parts of the Nigerian region from early times, but many of these transformed to centralized states before 1900. A basic feature of the political system of the non-centralized state was that authority was dispersed, no single individual served as the symbol or personification of authority. Emphasis was placed more on collective leadership. The areas where non-centralized states most endured were central Igbo, the Tiv, the Idoma and many people's inhabiting the plateau region in the central part of Nigeria and the western and eastern Niger Delta as well.

Centralized states existed in many parts of Nigeria up to 1900; typical examples were in Kanem-Bornu, Hausa land, Jukun land, Nupe land, Yoruba land and Edo land.

A basic feature was that authority was centralized, unlike in the non-centralized states, each centralized state had an individual who was the symbol of authority. Indeed he was the personification of the state. As Atanda puts it, though these kingdoms were centralized, the people however prevented tyranny, through the use of an advisory council and the use of taboos (Atanda, 2006). The paper will illustrate the nature of power structure in Nigeria using examples of kingdoms in the north of Nigeria as well as in the south of Nigeria.

## 2.1 The Kingdoms of the North of Nigeria

Contrarily, many people's opinion that all of the north operated a centralized and dictatorial system, there were decentralized states as well as centralized states. Even the centralized states did not in all totality exhibit tyrannical tendencies; rather there are examples to show that most of the kingdoms in the north of Nigeria were leadership by consent.

For the Jukun, as C. k. Meek wrote, "the Jukun system of government is in theory at least, of a highly despotic character. The king is supreme. His decisions have a divine authority, and there is no appeal" (Atanda, 2006). However to prevent tyranny, the Jukun people though believed in the divinity of kings safe guarded themselves in a variety of ways. The king was judged by results. If harvests were good the people were prepared to put up with a moderate amount of tyranny, but if harvest were bad the people demands for his death. More so the 'Aku' as the king is called is surrounded by many taboos, which served as repudiation on his authority (opening a calabash in the presence of the Aku, an example of such taboos). Also the king is compelled to give due consideration to the advice of his councilors, who form a particular caste which is the embodiment of the Jukun tradition. The head of the councilor is the 'Abo Achuwu' who serves a checkmate to the excesses of the 'Aku'. The Abo can decide, if angry with the king to absent himself from the daily royal duties which is a form of repudiation and embarrassment to the 'Aku'. As a result of the sacredness of the king, he is not permitted to communicate with the people personally, thus the people go through numerous chiefs who could decide which and which information the king should know about. These practices seriously placed the Aku at disadvantage. Thus the Aku though in theory is supreme but in reality is well checked a such he cannot be totally regarded as a despotic leader, rather the system can be seen as a leadership by consent.

In like manner, the Kanem-Bornu prior to the jihad, practiced a “democratic” political system. John E. Lavers (1985) wrote about a confederation like that of the Tuareg that the Kanem Bu practiced. The leadership was under a supreme chief whose authority was limited, his power based on persuasion rather than coercion. He also mentioned the presence of noble and vassal clans (*derdai*) in Tibesti who had limited powers. Even with the consequent development of the small settlement into an empire, the Mai as the king was called was never a dictator, rather there were structures put in place to check his excesses. One of such is the introduction of Islam into Kanem-Bornu. With the introduction of Islam there was the abandonment of divinity associated with the king. John E. Lavers (*op.cit*) further explained that the holders of the posts of Kaigama and Yerima served as checks on the activities of the Mai. Also was the post of the MainaKaigamabe which was held by a slave. This enables some level of checks as a result of the status (a slave) of the holder of the commander of the army.

For Nupeland, since the time of Tsaode, the people practiced a centralized system under the ruler ship of the Etsu. Nevertheless the Etsu was surrounded by series of checks and balances in forms of officials that made him accountable to the people. First were the palace officials who saw to the daily needs of the Etsu and his family, including the personal security of the incumbent. There were also civil officials, whose duties affected the day to day affairs of the state, military officials whose duty was the defense of the kingdoms against external aggression and the persecution of war. Lastly, were the religious officials, comprising priests of the major cults such as; the Ndaduma, Ketsa and Gunnu, which had considerable influence on the lives of the Nupe people. The Etsu was compelled to work hand in hand with the priests who were seeing to the welfare of the people. Thus any fall out with the priest will lead to the fall of such Etsu. In the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century the land fell into the hands of the Fulbe. With this change in government, the structure of the government also changed. Though the Etsu was retained, the powers of the Etsu were drastically reduced. Government was made up of three major types of office holders; the Sarakizi, who were comprised of the ‘order of the Town elders’ and the ‘order of warriors’, the scholarly groups called the EnaManzi and the third class of officials, the EnaWuzi (order of slaves). And as Sa’adAbubakar (1985) submitted the Etsu government following the takeover by the Fulbe, was constrained to abide by the injunctions as stipulated by the Sharia and the Quran. The actions of those in power had to be supported not by the exigencies of the moment but by the Islamic laws as interpreted by the intelligentsia.

The duties of the ruler and his lieutenants, as well as the responsibilities of subjects were clearly stipulated. The Emir (Etsu) and his officials were not law makers but law interpreters and enforcers.

Finally, in the north of Nigeria, the Tiv society was one of those societies that exhibited, well-organized administrative political machinery; a decentralized system. The well-organized political structure of the pre-colonial Tiv societies was what prompted Dzugba to assert that the pre-colonial Tiv society was a democratic one (Dzugba, 2007). It is important to note the system of government of the Tiv society was a decentralized one which cannot be divulged from the social structure that was embedded in functional political units. The basic unit of political authority was the 'Ya' that is, the compound, headed by the compound head. Tiv elders according to this arrangement were seen as the embodiments of supreme authority in their respective compound. It is however salient to posit that enormous power enjoyed by the council of elders was designed to checkmate possible ascendancy of the youths who may aspire to get to the top through social and political structures within the society. The rationale behind this was to prevent political dominance of one group over others. It is expediently germane to argue that the political dominance of the council of elders known as Ijirtarmen was not a comprehensive one that suggests that other institutions were subservience to the compound heads. The motive behind this limited power emblem was to ensure the council of elder's never transformed into an autocratic or microscopic few that will determine the political destiny of the entire society. The age grade system like any other Tiv institution possessed significance function and meaning. The age grade was known among the Tiv as Kwagh, the group was theoretically powerful because it occupied a special position within the administrative machinery of the Tiv society. The decentralized nature of the political system ensured power distributed among various family or compound heads and various clans and various groups that make up the political system. It was this practice of power dispersal that made Robin Horton to posit that the Tiv society lacks the principle of power centralization with no individual to demonstrate the capacity of power holder on full times basis (Robin Horton, 1972).

From the examples given above for the north of Nigeria, it is clear that there were in the political system of the peoples structures that checked the excesses of their rulers and their rulers were not dictators as the Europeans made believed.

More so from the examples explained, there are strong evidences to prove that leadership was by consent, kings and councils of elders (were necessary) made decision after consulting the people, and the people had inputs in decisions that concerns them. Never the less it is important to state that the Fulani revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century changed most of the political system of the peoples of the north of Nigeria. With the Jihad, a centralized state was created by the Jihadist that amalgamated most of the states of the north Nigeria and created two large and centralized kingdoms.

## 2.2 Kingdoms of the South of Nigeria

The apparatus for politics in the south of Nigeria was the established socio-political organizations prevailing in the society in our period of study. There was monarch operating in the Yoruba kingdoms, Benin kingdoms, Itsekiri kingdom and Aboh kingdom. Then there was gerontocracy operating in the non-centralized communities of Ukwana, Urhobo, Isoko and western Ijo peoples (Atanda, 1985).

First, the monarchical system was fundamentally a system in which the society was governed by or in the name of one person chosen from one family. In theory the ruler was a supreme power but in reality he was not. To check his extremes he was assisted by what Atanda called an 'institutionalized council of chiefs' (Atanda, op.cit). Such council known as the *Ijoye*, *Igbimo* or *Ilu* in Yoruba kingdoms, *Ojoye* among the Itsekiri, *Uzama* in Benin, really constituted a check on the monarch's power. This was because the chiefs were themselves to large extent spokespersons of other institutions like lineages, age grades sets and aristocratic societies that formed the basics of the society (op.cit). This meant that the council of chiefs represented the people. For the Yoruba, the council of chiefs was grouped in two parallel lines, those on the right who represented the princely wellbeing and those on the left who represented the commoners' wellbeing. The leaders of the two fractions were also part of what Akinjogbin and Ayandele (1980) called the Supreme Council of State; the *Oyomesi*. The Ojoye of the Itsekiri according to Obaro Ikime (1980) could meet exclusive of the presence of the *Olu* (king). And when this happens the senior Ojoye conveys the views of the council to the *Olu*. The socio-political organization was such as to encourage the monarch to rule in the interest of the people as monitored through the chiefs. Chiefs were many and representing various interests; it was the balance of the interest that dictates what type of governmental policy or measure was acceptable in the long run. It is true that in some cases, examples like Oyo and Benin, the monarch and the chiefs on occasions embarked on power struggle for preeminence.



Such struggles had only succeeded in leaning the scale slightly in favour of either the monarch or the chiefs. Ayandele and Akinjogbin (op.cit) explained that the desire of the Oyomesi to restrain the powers of the Alaafin was what led to the quarrel between the two in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. The chiefs became the watch dogs of the peoples' liberty and were able to depose of any oppressive king without questioning the position of the monarch. This struggle according to Alayande and Akinjogbin (op.cit) was for one hundred years.

Thus in Benin the attempt by the Oba, since the reign of Eware, to increase his power, with regard to that of the Uzama by creating new sets of chiefs, the *Eghaevbo n' Ogbe* and the *Eghaevbo n' Ore*, in due course increased the influence of the chiefly class. In like manner the attempt of the Oyomesi in Oyo to maintain or increase their power vis-a-vis that of the Alaafin did no more than bring the repugnant abnormality of the short-lived tyrannical rule of BasorunGaha. In the end the status quo was restored under Abiodun (Atanda, 1985).

The tendency against absolutism was even more in the gerontocratic system practiced in the non-centralized communities of Ukwani, Urhobo, Itsekiri and western Ijo for two main reasons. First, there was no centralization of power which could provide a suitable base for autocratic rule. The largest unit of government was the village; and the village in which each inhabitant knew virtually every other's person's name, and was probably related to most by family ties, could hardly accommodate institutionalized absolutism. Secondly, ultimate authority even within the small unit of administration was vested not in an individual but in a council of elders, usually heads of wards in the village. It was the council of elders, known as *Ekpako* in Urhobo and Isoko, *Udokua* in Ukwani and Okesuawei in western Ijo and *Amala* in Igbo, which took communal responsibility for the affairs of the village. Although each council had a chairman, usually the eldest of the elders, such chairman did not have a domineering influence in the council. Indeed, it was the spokesman, rather than the chairman, of the council that had greater influence than any other in the village councils of Ukwani, Urhobo, Isoko, western Ijo communities and Igbo. And yet, the spokesman in spite of his role had no base for excessive exercise of power for two reasons. In the first place, he was more or less a co-opted member of the council.

He did not necessarily belong to the age-set of elders and was only chosen because he possessed a superior personality, a good speaking voice and a sound knowledge of the people's laws and customs. In the second place he could only voice out the wishes and decisions of the council.

### 3. Conclusion

From this brief outline, it is irrefutable that both the monarchical (centralized) and the non-centralized systems of government had this in common; that they provided no opportunity for institutionalized absolutism. As Atanda (1985) summarized there were individual functionaries who dared to use the established systems to become absolute, but their attempts only led to instability, as in the case of the Obas' of Benin and BasorunGaha of the Oyo Empire. The major attempt at destabilizing the order that succeeded was the Jihad carried out by Uthman Dan Fodio, which influenced many kingdoms of the north and a few of the south. Another remarkable common feature was that both the centralized and the non-centralized systems as practiced in pre-nineteenth century Nigeria afforded the entire citizenry active participation in politics through their lineages, age-sets and titled societies. They indirectly influenced policies and directly helped in implementing such policies. More so, their views and feeling directly and indirectly mattered very much in the processes by which the acknowledged rulers- monarchs or elders- were designated, maintained or removed if necessary. Akinjogbin and Ayandele (1980) mentioned the roles of the Imole, Osugbo or Ogboni society's in the Oyo Empire, who were not organizations for titled men but mere men of wealth who through their organizations had great influence in the Empire.

Both systems prevented institutionalized absolutism by the accredited rulers; they also made it difficult if not impossible for a parvenu to acquire power, much less absolute power, outside the established institutions of government. All the ingredients of power- military, economic and religious- were difficult to maneuver by an individual outside the institutionalized channels. In most kingdoms there was usually no standing army, similarly, economic and religious weapons of power could not be used to the advantage of a parvenu. Land for agriculture, as well as trade and industry, were usually under the ultimate control of the institutionalized rulers who held it in trust for the community. Also, religious organizations and functionaries could also be expected to cooperate with the institutionalized rulers for the good of the community.

In all, the paper has earlier stated has tried to debunk the notions by the Europeans that Africa had no worth mentioning political system, and that the existing rulers before their coming were dictators who adored in inhuman practices. The few examples showed an organized system and peculiarity to suit each society to the benefit of the people.

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