



Traditional Rulers and Contemporary Political Development in Yorubaland: 1960 – 1983

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Abstract

Epochal event such as colonial rule in the history of Nigeria, like other areas actually affected the politics of the period, which include the changing role and status of the traditional rulers. Expectedly, these changes however, did not stop with the end of colonialism. The traditional institutions continue to experience dwindling changes in their role and status in the post independence era and even up till now. An era in which traditional rulers became political non-activist making them to be mere appendages of politicians or of parliamentary enactments. This paper therefore examines the changes in the role and status of traditional rulers in Yorubaland after colonial rule and also beams a searchlight on their relevance in contemporary political development in Yorubaland in particular and Nigeria in general.

Keywords: Colonialism; Decolonization; Enactments; Independence; Parliamentary; Sovereignty.

1. Introduction

The imposition of colonial rule on Yorubaland undoubtedly altered the hitherto traditional political system. The traditional political institutions under this new dispensation i.e. colonialism suffered a departure from the previous arrangement. These were as a result of the administrative policies initiated by the British government. [Atanda \(1970\)](#), posited that the imposition of peace on warring Yoruba states and the establishment of the British Residency which would keep an eye on their activities.

In the period of the de-colonialization, traditional institutions were further weakened by their involvement in partisan politics. During this period, the traditional rulers were further confused about what specific role to play. This dilemma was further entrenched by the emergence of political parties and their activities. These parties started competing bitterly for the control of Western region. Thus, for quick and effective impact of the political parties at the grassroots, each party relentlessly strove to secure the support of the Chiefs.

Independence no doubt also changed the status of the traditional rulers. [Bello-Imam \(1984\)](#), submitted that this is a period when traditional rulers become mere appendages of politicians or of parliamentary enactments. This situation further exposed the traditional rulers to an agonizing dilemma. As should be noted, this period was an era of successive civilian and military regimes in Nigeria. These regimes had their different ideas of what duties they wanted to assign to the traditional rulers in Nigeria. With the Military coming to power in 1966 and the suspension of partisan politics, traditional rulers were virtually removed from governing their people at the state level. Thus, Military intervention in politics in Nigeria ushered in period of gradual reduction of the participatory role of traditional rulers in local matters.

In an attempt to modify the roles of traditional rulers in the governance of their people, there was the local government reforms of 1976 which for the first time in the history of Nigeria were centrally conceived and implemented. This reform, according to [Falola \(1984\)](#), spelt out a non-executive function for the traditional rulers.

The 1979 constitution however, did not improve on the former position of traditional chiefs. It prescribed no executive role for them in the political system and it also insulated them from partisan politics thereby depriving them of any serious political power. This was the situation in which traditional institutions found themselves and which still persists up till today.

In spite of the general contemptuous treatment of the traditional rulers, there is no doubt about their relevance in modern governance in Nigeria. The traditional rulers could provide the necessary link between the past and the present in the most objective and rational way. They are also useful in championing developmental projects in their communities. Since they are closer to the people, they no doubt know the problems faced by them and therefore table them before the government. Consequently, government will be aware of such problems and proffer solution to them.

1.1. The Colonial Situation and the Changing Role of Traditional Institution

As stated earlier, imposition of colonial rule in Yoruba land greatly affects the status quo as regards political independence hitherto enjoyed by the traditional rulers. For instance, consequent upon the 1893 agreement signed in Ibadan on 15th August, Ibadan came under British colonial rule and its effects on the role of Baale and his traditional chiefs were great ([Atanda, 1970](#)). The effects were brought about by certain administrative policies embarked upon by the British colonial government. For instance, the imposition of peace on warring Yoruba states, the institution of British residency; and later the judicial Agreement of 1904 and the policy of Indirect rule.

The imposition of peace in 1893 meant an end to Ibadan sovereignty and it greatly altered the circumstances surrounding Ibadan politics as regards the role of the Baale and his chiefs. It also meant an end to the Yoruba civil wars. With these, one could conclude that colonialism was epochal in the history of the Yoruba people as in other parts of Africa as it affected all the spheres of life of the colonized (Ajayi, 1970).

No doubt, the authority of the traditional rulers and title holders was limited by the presence of the colonial power in that they are no longer independent. In the words of Aborisade (1985), "most of the Obas were in the eyes of the colonial regime, if not of their people 'Chiefs' not 'Kings'". The pre-colonial rulers in a nutshell had many of the limitations to their authority removed by the colonial regime.

In Ekiti land, the system of indirect rule utilized by the British for perpetuation of their role spanned through 1919 to 1951. In the implementation of the Native Administration Ordinance of 1916, each of the Ekiti kingdoms, then in the division was gazetted as a District with the Oba as the sole Native Administrator. In 1920, direct taxation was introduced and later in the same year, the Ekiti Confederation Council or Ekiti parapo was re-inaugurated with only the Ekiti Obas as members.

One of the most fundamental changes that occurred during the colonial era was excessive power enjoyed by the traditional rulers and title holders over their subjects and subordinates (Omotoso and Dahunsi, 2015). It is therefore not surprising that in the years up to 1948 the Obas exercised powerful influences on their subjects, Chiefs, subordinate villages and other traditional institutions. The British government only gave few selected kings more power not for their benefit but for the administrative convenience of colonial regime. Consequently, especially in the 1920s, the Obas were in all respects sole native authorities. The Oba according to Akintoye (1970), was responsible for the collection of taxes; for a number of minor public works; the granting of timber concessions; signing of permits for timber felling and also received and dealt with all official correspondence for the district.

There were changes also as regards the role of traditional rulers in economic sphere as direct taxation was introduced to replace age-long traditional tributes and gifts to the Oba, his Baale and Chiefs in 1920 following the assessment conducted in the districts in 1919. As a corollary, the Oba began to receive salary calculated as a percentage of all the taxes collected in his Kingdom. Besides the Oba, only few Chiefs and Baale who served in the council received small fees for their services as parts of the judiciary.

Akintoye (1970), added that there were changes in the unit of judiciary when hitherto existing courts in Yoruba land were abolished and replaced with the Native Court system. The first set of Courts was established as early as 1915 and by 1930, there was a Native Authority Court for each district. The Oba was the president of the Native Authority Court while other members were drawn from the top Chiefs of the Central town and the Baale of the subordinate towns and villages.

1.2. The Traditional Rulers in the Period of Decolonization

In Nigeria, the era of decolonization or nationalist struggle preceded the granting of full independence in 1960. Generally during this period, traditional institutions were further weakened by their involvement in partisan politics. This political involvement was encouraged by the newly-formed parties who were anxious to demonstrate their popularity at the grassroots. It was however, not so easy in the circumstance because the chiefs were confused about what specific role to play. But the emergent political leaders strove very hard to win their support.

Though the British administration was reluctant to concede political sovereignty because of what they called "lack of maturity of the nationalist leaders", they transferred their control over local government to responsible government in Western Nigeria in 1952 with the passing of local government law by an elected legislature (Akpan, 1967). Under this new arrangement, local councils were created. The important point to note in the change is that instead of an Oba being vested with authority, the local government was designated as the 'Authority'. Under this new system, district councils were established with the Chairman of any district being picked from among the elected members.

Falola (1984), further submitted that in essence, the Oba was retained as the nominal president against his former role of the 'executive head' of the erstwhile Native Authority. In addition, Akintoye (1970), maintained that each district council was administered by elected councilors and traditional rulers. According to him, while the Oba remained the ceremonial head of the council, chairmanship was held by an elected educated elite.

Another factor which tremendously changed the status of the traditional institution was the activities of the national politicians and their political parties. Two political parties; the Action Group (A.G.) which is the ruling party headed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (N.C.N.C.) in opposition, started competing bitterly for the control of Western region. For quick and effective impact of the political parties at the grassroots, each party relentlessly strove to secure support of the Chiefs. In quick succession, the Obas became patrons of local branches of political parties. Those of them who were pro-active were rewarded with political offices. The politicians took advantage of the creation of the House of Chiefs to win the Oba's support. Thus, the Obas were promised membership of the House of Chiefs.

As the decolonization period advanced, more laws were enacted. In order to tie the chiefs to the apron string of the party in government, the A.G. government in 1959 passed the Chief Law (cap. 19) of Western region. Under this law, the Governor-in-council has the power to depose or suspend any erring chief whether appointed before or after the law. The Governor-in-council could also delegate the Native Authority to carry out this order.

1.3. Traditional Rulers in the Post-Independence Era

The post-independence period witnessed a lot of changes which had some significance on the role and status of traditional rulers in Yoruba land. It was a period of successive civilian and military regimes in Nigeria. These

regimes had their different ideas of what duties they wanted to assign to the traditional rulers in Nigeria. Between 1960 and 1966, the western region had a House of Chiefs, which had been provided for in the constitution. This house enjoyed some legislative powers with the House of Assembly. The membership of the House of Chiefs was made up of some paramount traditional rulers. Although most of these traditional rulers were still ceremonial presidents of their local councils, their membership of the House of Chiefs and the legislative powers which the house enjoyed gave them an increased role as they could now have a say in governmental issues at a level which transcended the local scene (Bello-Imam, 1984).

Undoubtedly, political development at this time usually interfered with the functions of the traditional rulers. For example, until 1962, while the power structure at the regional centre remained stable, the traditional rulers in general were saved from the worst that was possible in the situation by the fact that the majority of the Yorubas supported the party in power, thus making it easy for the Oba too to be friends of the same party. Things however, changed with the emergence of new leadership.

The crisis of 1962 brought a new party; the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) into power in Western region, which made the position of the Yoruba Obas very perilous as the vast majority of their people continued to support the Action Group. The Obas were therefore torn between their people and the wishes of the new regional leadership. Mostly, the Obas were threatened with dire penalties and people also usually displayed in a most fragrant manner their intention to enforce their will on them. With this, the traditional rulers were exposed to an agonizing dilemma. According to Akintoye (1970), "in most cases, the Oba withdrew into their palaces". On the other hand however, the citizens continued to expect the traditional rulers to perform their political roles as the 'father of all' irrespective of their political leanings. This was the situation until the military coup d'état of January 15, 1966 with its attendant consequences (Gutferidge, 1967).

With the military coming to power in 1966 and the subsequent suspension of partisan politics, traditional rulers were virtually removed from governing their people at the state level. This military intervention in politics of Nigeria ushered in period of gradual reduction of the participatory role of traditional rulers in local matters. Bitiyong (1989), maintained that the traditional rulers remained advisers to the councils and social hub of their various communities. In an attempt to modernize, the various state governments embarked on the re-organization of their local government systems and by extension on the modification of the roles of traditional rulers in the governance of their people. This was brought about by the local government reforms of 1976, which for the first time in the history of Nigeria were centrally conceived and implemented. The emergent local government system separated traditional rulers from elected Councilors. This reform, according to Falola (1984), spelt out a non-executive function for the traditional rulers.

Another step taken by the military to further threaten and define the power of traditional rulers was the land use decree of 1st April, 1978 which made land a public property and vested its control on the state and federal government. According to Falola, this robbed the Oba and Chiefs of the power to sell or give away land in their domain. By 1979, when the military government retreated to the barracks, the paramountcy of the traditional rulers in local government affairs had greatly diminished (Bitiyong, 1989).

The 1979 presidential constitution under which the defunct second republic operated did not improve on the previous arrangement. In fact, it succeeded at insulating traditional rulers from partisan politics with the implication of depriving them of any potent political power. Falola (1984), quoted section 3 or part II of the 3rd schedule of the constitution which provided for a state council of chiefs which would advise the governor on 'customary law or cultural affairs, inter-communal relations and chieftaincy matters'. This unwholesome arrangement was heavily criticized by the traditional rulers and sympathizers as one of them explained:

The traditional ruler is ineffective for he is inhibited by the presence of his Governor in two respects: He may express opinion at variance with that of his Governor and the executive is not likely to take kindly to that, or against his better judgment; he would try to be in line with his Governor in which case the traditional ruler cannot be expressing his honest opinion. So, to me, including rulers in the National Council of State is really not giving them any worthwhile role commensurate with their status (Falola, 1984).

On the other extreme, their strongest opponents consistently maintained that traditional rulers should be permanently devoid of any political power at the three levels of government in Nigeria. They argued that they should be satisfied with their social and religious roles in their various communities. Dangling between these two schools of thoughts is the 'equi-distance' school which believed that the roles of these rulers should be reformed vis-à-vis the governance of Nigeria to meet changing conditions. In the submission of Ayorinde (2016), he said it was at this polemic crossroads that the military again rudely intruded into Nigerian polity on 31st December, 1983.

Despite the general contemptuous treatment of the traditional rulers however, their relevance in modern governance in Nigeria is incontrovertible and this fact was recognized by some administration. Bello-Imam (1984), cited the example of Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi, the first military head of state held a major conference with the representatives of the traditional rulers in Ibadan on June 28, 1966. One of the reasons for holding such a meeting was to explain fully the political programmes of the new administration with a view to enlisting the support of the traditional rulers. The new military government sought for the cooperation of traditional rulers for some reasons, which the military believed that after the elimination of the politicians, the traditional rulers were to be brought in to act as advisers and the channel of communication with the masses of the country. Secondly, the political inexperience of the military gave them the impression that the traditional rulers could provide the necessary link between the past and the present in the most objective and rational way.

The traditional rulers usually use their offices to lobby the government of the day in granting their demands. In Yoruba land, State Council of Traditional rulers usually performed this function. According to Ayorinde (2016), it is

important for them to support any government of the day and this help in the development of their domain. They therefore use their closeness to lobby the government by constant visits to the Governor, Deputy Governor and the Local Government Chairman in their area of jurisdiction. They also lobby their indigenes at the corridor of power to actualize their demands.

In addition, the traditional rulers acted as agents of peace-making in the society. In the administration of justice, the Obas and Chiefs settle disputes such as land and chieftaincy disputes. According to Olaoba (2002), the Chiefs still settle disputes among families and whoever that is not satisfied with the judgment given by the Chiefs can appeal to the Oba and the issue would be settled through the various Obas-in-Council.

2. Conclusion

This study has traced the continued dwindling role and status of traditional rulers in Yorubaland in particular and Nigeria in general to the colonial incursion into the politics of Nigeria. This was a period which Coleman (1986), refers to traditional rulers as 'mere puppets or imperialist stooges'. A period in which traditional rulers in Yorubaland started to receive orders from the District Officers contrary to their former role of giving orders in their domain.

The study, further examined the continued changes in the role of traditional rulers after independence. During this era, traditional rulers in Yorubaland were rendered "politically impotent" by various regimes in the country. In a nutshell, there was a total paralysis of the role of traditional rulers in the governance of their people both at the local, state and federal level. Consequently, traditional rulers have accepted their fate as 'political non-activist' and their role vis-à-vis politics of Nigeria still remained largely advisory.

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