AFRICAN TRADITIONAL DEMOCRACY

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Abstract
African traditional political systems have often been described as either monarchical or aristocratic. Hardly is there any reference to democracy. In fact, many European and African political thinkers see democracy as a system of government that began in Greece and was imported through Europe to Africa. Contrary to these opinions, this piece, using the phenomenological and analytical methods of inquiry, argues that democracy is a cherished African value, which existed in pre-colonial Africa as a pattern of African administration. It avers that democracy was already in Africa before the encounter of Africa with the West, and thus, that Africa is not a passive recipient of democracy. In this study, the Yoruba and Igbo democratic models were employed.
Keywords: African, Democracy, Traditional, Igbo, Yoruba, Political, Heritage, Cultural.

Introduction

A cursory glance at the historical evolution of political systems reveals that over the years, a couple of political organizations have emerged distinguished by the different kinds of constitutions that define responsibilities and privileges. Among these is Monarchy, a system of government in which the King is considered an excellent man who surpasses all citizens with knowledge and virtue; there is also Aristocracy, a government by a few men of virtue; from Aristocracy has emerged Polity, a government by the middle class, moderately rich and of good behaviour. We also have Oligarchy, a government by unscrupulous rich men who have no regard for the poor. Different from these political systems is democracy. However, when African traditional political systems are discussed, they are often described as monarchical or aristocratic as in the case of the Western part of Nigeria, or republican as the Eastern part of Nigeria has been classified. This is a perspective that is evident in Arogbofa (2007) who argued that these traditional political systems Africa had no place for democracy. European and African political thinkers see democracy as a system of government that began in Greece and was imported from Europe to Africa. This piece argues contrary to the opinion of Arogbofa and his 'likeminds' that

democracy is a cherished African value, which existed in pre-colonial Africa as a pattern of African administration. It further argues that democracy was already in Africa before the encounter of Africa with the West, and thus, that Africa is not a passive recipient of democracy. To substantiate this thought, the political systems of administration obtainable among the traditional Yoruba, particularly, the Oyo Empire, and Igbo of Eastern Nigeria would be studied for the unveiling of the democratic structures of the Yoruba and Igbo political-cultural heritage. However, what is democracy?

Understanding Democracy
The word democracy comes from two Greek words: *demos* which means people and *kratein* which means to rule. Put together in Greek, it means the power of the people. It is in this regard that Lincoln (cited by Salami 2004) described democracy as "the government of the people, by the people and for the people under the rule of law" (p. 316). In the contention of Gyekye (1997) and Busia (1975), the concept "the people" points to the power of the people to choose who to rule them in accordance with the general good of the society, and that they set up, by themselves, the constitutional rules, principles and procedures of governance. Carter (1978) described democracy as a system that is altered by time and experience, always changing, infinite in its variety, sometimes it is turbulent, however, still valuable since it has been tested by adversity. As a political structure, Salami (2006) avers that democracy emphasizes the sharing of power among people of various categories. For Brecht (1959), it emphasizes that values should not be forced upon any people against their will, and stipulates liberty, separation of power and the sovereignty of the people. Thus, Sabine (1973) avers that it must involve mutual concession and compromise as a way of arriving at decisions. From these perspectives, Chidili (2012) avers that three salient points are noticeable from the definition of democracy:

   a. that democratic government is not monotypic but diverse in nature;
   b. that even in its diversity, it is changing;
   c. it is strictly based on the rule of law.

From these noticeable points, Chidili concludes that the mutability of the capacity of democracy provides elbowroom for it to be an adaptable system of governance that can exist anywhere in the world, including Africa.

The Yoruba Traditional Political Organization

The Yoruba traditional political organization that would be under consideration in this section is the Oyo Empire. As a kingdom, it reached its heights in the 18th century, however, was founded in the 14th century about 1300 BC by Oduduwa who settled in Ille Ife during the 14th century. According to Smith (1969), Ife was considered the religious center of the world and the site where human beings were first created. Before his arrival, Ayittey (2006 and 2012) avers that there were already about 13 semi-autonomous settlements in Ille Ife who had organized themselves into a loose confederacy. When Oduduwa came, he subjugated them and imposed his authority over them. As of the time, it was the largest empire in Yoruba land to exist and the most important and authoritative of all the early Yoruba principalities. Because of the wealth of military skill, the authority of the Oyo Empire was felt beyond the Yoruba states to as far as the Fon of the then Dahomey Kingdom. By the 19th century, the Oyo Empire began to collapse as a result of administrative disagreements among the leaders. Gradually the provinces began to revolt as the centre lost its ability to govern. By 1888 it had collapsed and became a Protectorate of Great Britain.

a. **The Alaafin:** In the Oyo Empire, the *Alaafin* was the sole voice of authority, however, with limitations. Before the *Alaafin* can take any valid decision, he must consult with the *Oyomesi*. He had a large amount of ritual restrictions which limited his authority. For instance, he was not allowed to leave the palace except during important festivals. This made it easy for those who were vying for his position to take over power. The *Alaafin* was also a spiritual leader who was regarded as a representative from the spirit world. He was, therefore, required to devote himself to the worship of *Orisa*. Within the place, he worked together with the *Ona Efa*, the Empire's Chief Justice, the *Otun Efa*, the Priest of *Shango* Shrine, and *Osi Efa*, the minister of Finance.

b. **The *Oyomesi*:** The *Oyomesi* consists of a council of the heads of the seven non-royal wards of the city of Oyo, though sometimes six in number. They guided the king's decisions in many issues, such as military action, religious festivals etc., and had the responsibility of checking the excessive exercise powers of the *Alaafin*. The leader of the *Oyomesi* was called *Bashorun,* the authority he controlled rivaled that of the *Alaafin*. He was the Commander-in-Chief of the army of the Empire and presided at religious festivals, thus giving him a religious and militaristic edge over the *Alaafin*. One of the most important religious celebrations of the Empire was the

Orun, and during this ceremony, the *Bashorun* had the power to depose the *Alaafin* by causing him to commit suicide. Usually the *Bashorun* would present the *Alaafin* with a calabash which signifies that the *Oyomesi* and the ancestors have lost confidence in him. During battles, the position of the *Bashorun* became higher and more important than that of the *Alaafin*; he sat in a stool that stood higher than that of the *Alaafin*.

c. **The *Ogboni*:** the *Ogboni* is another important political structure in the then Oyo Empire, and in fact the second council in the Oyo Empire that helped in checks and balances of authority. The council was composed of the representative of the various lineages, and was headed by the *Olowu*. They had the primary responsibility of checking the excessive powers of the *Bashorun*. Before a person can be appointed as a *Bashorun,* the *Ogboni* must issue their approval.

d. ***Are-Ona-Kakanfo*:** This was the military commander of the Empire who was never expected to lose any war. If he loses a war, he had the options of either committing suicide or going on exile. He was responsible to the *Alaafin* and *Bashorun.* He was appointed by the *Alaafin*, however, promoted by the Oyomesi.

e. **The *Aremo*:** The *Aremo* was the crown prince. While the *Alaafin* remained in the palace as the king of the palace, the *Aremo*, who is the first son of the king was for the general public. The *Aremo* could move out of the palace as he had no ritual restrictions on his movements. During the early stages of the empire, when an *Alaafin* died, the *Aremo* took over, however, it was later discovered that some *Aremo* killed their father in order to ascend the throne. A law was therefore, made that when an *Alaafin* dies, the *Aremo* should commit suicide.

f. **The *Babalawo*:** The *Babalawo* was the spiritual guide of the *Alaafin.* Although he was not required to be part of the council, he was very often consulted to provide spiritual advice. His relevance is based on the belief that he was in direct communication with the spirits, and thus, his advice is considered a divine knowledge.

The Oyo Empire survived on this political system until its collapse and the advent of Europeans.

The Igbo Traditional Political Organization

Two theories have emerged in response to the question of the origin of the Igbo. There is, the 'Northern Centre Theory' which, according to Onwuejeogwu (1987) posits that the Igbos migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermatic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the 'Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland'. According to Isichei (1976), the early migrations of the proto-Igbo originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions. According to

Shaw (1969), Afigbo (1981), Anozie (2002) and Chikwendu (2002), the dispersal of the Igbos from the Igbo heartland dates back to the time between 2555 BC and 800 AD. Whatever theory is adopted, Ajaegbo (2014) avers that as the Igbos dispersed and permanent settlements developed, communal living led to the emergence of economic, social and political institutions. From these settlements emerged leaders who became centres of authority, as social groups developed, effective administrative systems emerged to regulate social relations. This was founded on egalitarian and democratic structures.

The political organization was constituted by different levels of autonomous democratic governments which exercised political, social and economic control over the lives of the people. These autonomous democratic governments include the Nuclear Family, the Patrilineage (Umunna), the Maximal Lineage and the Village-Group Assembly.

a. **The Nuclear Family** was the bedrock of social and political organization, referred to as *ezi na uno*. It consisted of a man, his wives, his married and unmarried sons, unmarried daughters and the servants or slaves, if any. The Father was the leader of the household and was in possession of the family *ofo,* which is the symbol of authority, justice, law and uprightness. The Father was responsible for directing the affairs of the family, however, it was done in consultation with his senior sons and wives.

b. **The Patrilineage or Extended Family** is the next unit of political organization after the nuclear family, which is referred to as the *Umunna*. It is composed of a number of families that have a common eponymous father. Uchendu (1965) defines the *Ununna* as "a territorial kin-based unit

which subdivides into compounds *(ezi obi)*" (p. 40). The head of this political unit was the oldest male member of the extended family also known as the *di-okpara* and had the *ofo* of the extended family in his possession. This according to Ogbukagu (1997) is based on the gerontocratic nature of the Igbo system of governance, even though Isichei (1976) avers that the important place given to elders does not mean that all elders have equal rights to speak. According to Opone (2012), the leader is usually a grandfather or great grandfather. In the contention of Olisa (2002) and Nwosu (2002), the *di-okpara* presided over meetings, sacrifices, issues of inheritance, settlement of dispute among members of the extended family, marriage, allocation of lands and the representation of the family with other extended families. In decision making, the *di-okpara* worked in consultation with the other heads of the extended family who constituted the extended family assembly. Decisions were arrived at through dialogue, consensus *(nkwekolita)*, compromise, cooperation and consultation *(Igba Izu)*.

c. **The Maximal Lineage** is the next biggest socio-political organization after the extended family. This is a referred to as *Idumu* in Igbo, which means quarter. It is made up of a number of extended families who are linked by a common putative ancestor. This major lineage is headed by the oldest male among them. He holds the *ofo* of the major lineage and presided at functions concerning the major lineage and was considered as a sacred person with taboos and rituals accompanying the violation of his authority. In his exercise of authority over the major lineage, Ajaegbo (2014) avers that he worked in consultation with a large assembly comprising of senior household men, titled men, priests, men of honour, intelligence and wealth etc.

d. **The Village-Group Assembly** was the biggest socio-political group referred to as *ogbe* (village). Ajaegbo (2014) observed that it was composed of a number of major lineages who are descended from a common ancestor or different putative ancestors. Onwuejeogwu (1972) refers to the *ogbe* as federation of autonomous settlements, and by Ozimiro (1972) as wards. The assembly was the highest authority with its members being senior males of households, professional hunters, priests, honourable and wealthy men, warriors, titled men, medicine men, etc. The leader of this assembly varied from one village to another, in some it was headed by the

council of elders: a group of wise, knowledgeable, courageous and transparent men, Maquet (1972) refers to their authority as "a collegial authority exercised by the chiefs of the various lineages living in the village" (p. 57). In some, the oldest member of the council of elders referred to as the *diokpa*, and in this case, he becomes the custodian of the *ofo*. The supreme head of the assembly took decisions in consultation with the constituent members of the village assembly. Consultation, consensus and compromise were necessary elements in resolving issues and decision making. The village square (*ama nzuko ora*), usually a common place, was the arena of assembly.

The Democratic Values in African Political-Cultural Heritage

In the political administrations of the Yoruba and Igbo traditional political systems, there were strong systems of checks and balances, and this is consistent with most socio-political structures of ancient Africa. Although the *Alaafins* and the Igbo heads wielded much power, they were not absolute leaders. There was elaborate organization of palace officials or chiefs especially among the Yorubas. For instance, while the *Alaafins* had the *Oyomesi*s to regulate their power, the *Oyomesis* were regulated by the *Ogboni* council who were backed by the authority of religion.

In the Igbo political system, particularly, during decision making, it is not the eldest man that imposes his will upon the people, but decisions are reached through discursions, consultations, dialogue and compromise which might take the shape of imposing the will of the majority on the minority and this reveals the democratic value that does not see the community as a constellation of impersonal forces but rather a complex of human beings and human interests that upholds the ethos of resolving human antagonistic interests through negotiation. According to Wirendu (1995):

> This should not be confused with decision-making on the principle of the supreme right of the majority. In the case under discussion the majority prevails not over, but upon, the minority- they prevail upon them to accept the proposal in question, not just t live with it, which latter is the basic plight of minorities under majoritarian democracy. In a consensus system the voluntary acquiescence of the minority with respect to a given issue would normally be necessary for the adoption of a decision. In the rare case of an intractable division, a majority vote might be used to break the

impasse. But the success of a system must be judged by the rarity of such predicaments in the working of the decision-making bodies of the state. (p. 62).

During decision makings, the perspective of every lineage in the village is represented in the presence and contributions of their representative. It can be compared to the House of Representatives, a structure that provides the space for the genuine meeting of minds for the interchanging of opinion and understanding. Decisions arrived at this council is not enforced through policing, but what Maquet (1992) called 'collective pressure'. At the centre of these African traditional political structures was the rule of law.

The choice of the king or leader in both the Yoruba and Igbo traditional societies, or access to the throne was based on equal opportunities, the aspirants were treated as equal candidates and were subjected to the same rules and treatment. For instance, among the Yorubas, Osae and Nwabara (1980) aver that the candidates for the position of *Alaafin* came from different royal families already marked from which contestants can emerge for the stool for the final choice by the *Oyomesi* and the *Ifa* oracle. This is done according to a laid down rule agreed upon by the people. Even when contestation arises at the end of the choice, Al-Yasha (2003) observes that the choice is not imposed on the people; there were ritual checks and balances to resolve issues of contestation of succession to the throne.

What we find in these traditional democracies, is a balance of autocratic dictatorship and popular democracy. It could be referred to as a participatory democracy. These democratic traditions were however, disrupted, undermined and devastated by the colonial political infrastructure. The strike at African indigenous institutions affected virtually all aspects of the African life. The religio-social formations that ensured democracy, such as the *ozo* title holders, elders, deities, masquerades etc., were disregarded, disorganized and divested of their political roles. When the Colonial authority came, traditional leaders were made warrant chiefs and subjected to the authority and supervision of British political officers. Thus, making them no longer accountable to their people but to the British political officer who appointed them. The result is they betrayed their own people and gradually THINGS FELL APART.

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