

THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: THE PRE-COLONIAL ANTECEDENT

Dr. Victor Osaro Edo
Department of History
University of Ibadan
Ibadan, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, in its simplest term, is a system of government where the common interest of the majority is accommodated and articulated. A democratic system works within a political system that recognizes and acknowledges the majority interest. A political system is an orderly arrangement of institutions and machineries by which people rule, while a pattern of political organization is how people rule themselves over a long established period. Although a political system has a fixed pattern, it is dynamic, and not static. Such was the nature of most political systems in pre-colonial Nigerian states and societies.

At first glance, most of these states, either mega-states or mini-states, looked totalitarian. Some of the forest kingdoms, for example the Oyo Empire, had developed into centralized states with monarchies. While the Hausa states, had emirates which were all under the sovereignty of the post-Jihad Sokoto Caliphate. A closer look will reveal that these were not totalitarian entities. There might also be views that the other non-centralized states (or societies) were less intelligent than their empire-building and state-forming neighbors, but again, a closer look will reveal that their political systems had some much more direct manifestations of democracy. Whatever kind of government these states had, all the operations of their structures and institutions were democratic. These encompass the law and policy making processes, decision taking, judicial process and so on.

DEMOCRACY IN NON CENTRALIZED STATES AND SOCIETIES

Most non-centralized states are found among the people of the Niger Benue confluence area (present day Middle Belt), Eastern Delta (parts of present day Delta states and the Niger Delta area) as well as Igboland in Eastern Nigeria. The non-centralized state is the most basic system in any state. The states that passed on to evolve as centralized states were once non-centralized (no matter how expansive they later became). Direct democracy was very evident in these states. This was because authority was dispersed and not concentrated in the hands of any dominant personality. Their distinct feature was what appeared to be a commonwealth of clans. These clans were groups of families who could trace their origin to a common source. A typical example of this would be the one found among the Idoma speaking people of the Niger Benue,

where several families related by the male line made up a sub lineage called *Ipooma* (those of one birth).¹ Several related *Ipooma*² constituted a still wider lineage called *Ipoopu* (those of one playground),³ which was a vital political unit of Idoma life. At this level, they had a chief, the status of which was attained by seniority. They had no royal families. Thus, the oldest man of the *Ipooma* was known as the *Adaalekwu*⁴ (the father of the dead), he was considered the 'owner' of the ancestral cult. At the next level, which was the highest, two or more *Ipoopu* could come together to form a clan known as *Ipaaje* (Land).⁵ At this level, it will be possible to have several *Adaalekwu*. Here, the over all chief was known as *Olaaje* (owner of the land).⁶ Assuming office between the several *Adaalekwu* would not be rotational from lineage to lineage. Neither the *Adaalekwu* nor *Olaaje* had any absolute authority. Decision making was a joint venture. This had to be with the representation from all interest groups. In this regard, age sets, semi-secret societies, etc., had adequate representation.

The people of the Delta province, like their Igbo neighbors, also had a highly developed non-centralized political system. Apart from the Aboh and Itsekiri who had centralized states, theirs were 'fragmented societies', like the Ukwuani, Urhobo, Isoko and Ijo. Like the Igbo's *Ama ala*, these people also had their council of elders, namely, *Ndokwa* (Ukwuani), *Ekpako* (Urhobo and Isoko) and *Okosuwei* (Ijo).⁷ The basic unit of social and political organization was the village group, which is a group of people who traced a common descent from the male line. The council of elders attended to governance and welfare. They usually met to discuss together with some 'officials'.⁸ They had a spokesman called *Otota* (Urhobo Isoko), *Ugo* (Ukwuani) and *Ogulasuwei* (Ijo). He would be one of the elders in the village, but chosen for personal qualities, like good oratorical skills, rather than seniority.⁹ These states were 'democratic than most democracies'.¹⁰ The council of elders was 'extremely representative'.¹¹ Practically, every extended family had a representation in it. They usually met to take decisions. This means that before decisions were taken, every family's interests were considered. However, when serious issues came up that were not deemed part of 'ordinary' business and governance stuff, the council may opt to convene an open meeting of the entire village, where everyone was expected to participate, including women and children.¹²

This mechanism gave everyone the chance to know what was going on and contribute towards the collective decision making. This was direct democracy. The execution of decisions was by the age sets. The youngest age set covered the 0-15 years old bracket, which was expected to perform such tasks as clearing the village paths and sweeping public squares. The next age set covered the 16-40 years old bracket, which was expected to serve as the labor corps and perform such tasks as erecting buildings, constructing roads and markets. The next age set covered the 41-55 years old bracket, which was expected to supervise the tasks of the younger age sets and settle minor disputes. In this sense, the 41-55 age set took off some of the workload of the last age set, which is composed of the council of elders.¹³

These different age sets had meetings to discuss matters affecting the group. They passed on their feelings to the elders through their designated spokesmen.¹⁴ The elders in council had judicial, executive and legislative authorities. The judicial process was very

open. Cases were heard openly and anyone was free to come and watch the proceedings.¹⁵ The above political processes ensured that no one group or individual could manipulate to its/his own advantage the affairs of the village.

It should also be noted that apart from the Igala and Nupe that later formed centralized states under the *Ayagba* and *Tsoede* respectively, Hausaland (north of the Niger Benue confluence) actually had unconsolidated groupings before the Fulani Jihad. Such were the Nungu and Warji.¹⁶ Here, the village formed an independent unit. The tribe (ethnic group) as a whole had no recognized organ of government. It was a group system of government. The village group was autonomous and not responsible to any higher authority. Policies were formed and decisions made at this level. As a result of the smallness in size, it was participatory and individual autocracy was rare. No one person wielded centralized power. Heads of these groups met for informal conferences and only formed temporary alliances in the face of their common enemy, the Fulani and Shuwa nomads.¹⁷

DEMOCRACY IN CENTRALIZED STATES

Centralized states were monarchic political systems, which were usually large and expansive empires. Except for the lower Niger Delta region (Kalabari, Efik, Ibibio), most parts of the country had examples of mega-states (including the Niger Benue states of Nupe and Igala). The distinct feature of government here was the presence of a paramount ruler. All powers were arrogated to the king who was esteemed as a semi-god. The reason for this was not farfetched, as most traditions of origin are mythical. They wove some mystery and magic around their founder who was usually the forefather of the king. He was second to the gods. According to the Yoruba, his appellation was '*Kabiyesi*' (No one queries your authority), and *Alase, Ekeji Orisa* (The ruler and companion of the gods).¹⁸ These naturally depicted the picture of an absolute ruler and a totalitarian system.

This was, however, not the case in practice. Continuing with the example of Yorubaland, a king could not afford to be autocratic. In fact, he could not be autocratic, in the first place, as a number of checks and balances were in place. A brief explanation of the political structures will help clarify how democracy operated within such structures. Our typical example for this would be the Oyo empire.

The *Oba* ruled in conjunction with a council of state as *Igbimo*. It was a nucleus of the most senior chiefs. In Oyo, they consisted of the *Oyomesi*, *Ogboni* and *Esho*. In Ife, they were the *Iwarefa*, *Modewa* and *Isoro*, while each of the Egba kingdoms in the Egba confederacy had the *Ogboni*, *Olorogun* and *Ipampa*.¹⁹ These were political and religious entities, in contrast with Oyo's *Esho* being military in nature. The *Oyomesi*, drawn from seven lineages, were actually the kingmakers and it devolved on their leaders, the *Bashorun*, to tell a tyrannical *Alaafin* of the people's rejection. Quite apart from this, there were also religious taboos imposed on the *Oba* to guard against tyranny.²⁰ The empire consisted of the central state and smaller towns, which served as local

governments. Their systems of government were similar to the empire, but on a smaller scale.

The real democratic process was evidenced in the representation of interests, in the judicial and in the legislative processes. The chiefs were representatives of their people. They would go back home to brief them on proceedings, usually through the family/compound heads known as *Baale*. It was through this same channel that the people often expressed their wishes, from family head to chiefs and or to the *Igbimo*.²¹ When the chiefs were chosen by cults or age groups (as in Ijebu, Egba, and Ekitiland), they represented the interest of such bodies.²² Thus, if the *Oba* became despotic, they used this same medium to show their grievances. This also ensured that decisions taken at the *Igbimo* level had actually the inputs from the masses.

Similar to this was the legislative, or law making, process. The *Oba* and *Igbimo* made laws for the town. Laws in pre-colonial Yorubaland were human law.²³ Issues needing legislation were brought before the *Igbimo* and debated upon.²⁴ Both the *Igbimo* and the *Oba* would arrive at a consensus. It should be noted that the wishes of the people could not be waived as their representatives were the ones making the laws. The fact that religious priests imposed taboos on the *Oba* did not mean that oracular declaration formed part of the regular laws.²⁵ The formulation of such laws was not just the task of the *Oba* and *Igbimo*, but of the chiefs of the various towns.

The judicial process was also democratic and manipulation was difficult. This was because each town was divided into wards (*adugbo*), then with each *adugbo*, there were compounds (*agbo ile*).²⁶ The lowest court was the court of the *Baale* (head of the compound). It was an informal court for settling disputes among members of the compound. It charged no fees and imposed no fines. It also helped in apprehending culprits of serious crimes.²⁷ Right of appeal may also go from there to the ward head.²⁸

The next level was the ward court presided over by the ward head (*Ijoye*). This court tried all civil cases of persons belonging to different compounds within his ward. This court imposed punishment, mostly fines. This court also conducted preliminary investigations into criminal cases, which would later be tried by the *Oba's* court.²⁹ The *Oba's* court was the highest judicial body and court of appeal. All civil and criminal cases came there and only this could impose capital punishment. Punishments could be flogging for theft or death for murder.³⁰ Apart from these transparent and participatory processes, the final resort was to reject an *Oba*. Such rejection was a formal announcement by the *Bashorun*, which required the *Oba* to commit suicide. It could be a general insurrection of the people as organized by the chiefs.³¹

Similarly, the Benin kingdom had the same monarchical system. The *Oba* had three orders of chiefs. The first was the *Uzama n'ihiron*. Like the *Oyomesi*, they were seven in number. Each presided over a village with a court and palace association. Theirs was a mini version of the court of the *Oba*.³² The *Oba* could not be autocratic since this order of chiefs administered villages within the empire and they did so with a great measure of independence. The next order was the *Eghaevon Ore* (town chiefs). They

lived in one half of the town (*Ore*).³³ The third order was the *Eghaevo n'Ogbe* (palace chiefs). They were senior officers of the *Oba's* household. They operated in the second half of the town, which also happened to be the palace (*Ogbe*). These three orders of title holders exerted pressure on the *Oba* so that he would not be tyrannical.

Democracy usually was evident when important state matters were discussed. Then, a full council meeting was called, which would include other minor ranks of titleholders. The *Oba* would put forth his intentions. Each group would meet separately, discuss and come back to express their views.³⁴ There was also a counter balancing of powers. The *Eghaevo n'Ogbe* worked with the *Oba* and was susceptible to royal manipulation. On the other hand, the *Eghaevo n'Ore* worked outside the palace. Chances of manipulating them were slim and so they seemed to form the opposition. Thus, they are akin to modern day democracies.³⁵ Hausaland formed a somewhat similar system. The *Birni* (settlements) started becoming states by the end of the 13th century.³⁶ Kings emerged, but power sharing was between the royal and ordinary families. The king's concession of some powers from the 'king's men' to the 'commoners' was a balancing act because the nobles could sometimes threaten his position. Therefore, they developed a 'constitutional monarchy.' There was further division of the society (in all of these states) into different groups and classes. By the 18th century, there were four main divisions of Hausa society: the members of the royal lineages, freemen, special group of 'king's men', and the un-freemen. On the last cadre too were the educated freemen (mallams). They were religious leaders barred from holding political offices.³⁷ The king had a lot of personal powers, but could only act and take decision on the advice of his senior chiefs and officials.³⁸

Conclusion

From the above, it is safe to conclude that states, kingdoms and empires in pre-colonial Nigeria operated on democratic political systems. This is contrary to the superficial understanding, especially of non-historians, that pre-colonial Nigerian states were totalitarian. Modern day democracies should reflect on these and see what they can learn from the history of such states in pre-colonial Nigeria.

Endnotes

¹Robert G. Armstrong, "The Idoma Speaking Peoples," in D. Forde, Ed, *Peoples of the Niger Benue Confluence: Ethnographic Survey of Africa* (London: International African Institute, 1955), 94.

²*Ibid.*, 94.

³*Ibid.*, 94.

⁴*Ibid.*, 94.

⁵*Ibid.*, 94.

⁶*Ibid.*, 94.

⁷O. Ikime, "The Peoples and Kingdoms of the Delta Province," in O. Ikime, Ed, *Ground Work of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980, 96.

⁸*Ibid.*, 97

⁹*Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 99.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 99.

¹²*Ibid.*, 99.

¹³*Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁶C. K. Meek, *The Northern Tribes of Nigeria*, Volume 1. London: Oxford University Press, 1925, 248.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁸J. A. Atanda, "Government of Yorubaland in the Pre-colonial Period," in *Tarikh*, Volume 4, Number 2, 1973, 3.

¹⁹J. A. Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1980, 20.

²⁰Atanda, "Government of Yorubaland in the Pre-colonial Period," p. 5; Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History*, 21.

²¹*Ibid.*, 21.

²²*Ibid.*, 21.

²³Atanda, "Government of Yorubaland in the Pre-colonial Period," 5.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 5.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 5; Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History*, 22.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 22; Atanda, "Government of Yorubaland," 6.

²⁸D. Forde, Ed, *The Yoruba Speaking Peoples of South Western Nigeria: Ethnographic Survey of Africa, Western Africa*, Part IV. London: International African Institute, 1951, 24.

²⁹Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History*, p. 22; Atanda, "Government of Yorubaland," 6.

³⁰Forde, 24.

³¹Atanda, "Government of Yorubaland," 4.

³²R. E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo Speaking Peoples of South West Nigeria: Ethnographic Survey of Africa, Western Africa*, Part XIII. London: International African Institute, 1957, 35.

³³*Ibid.*, 36.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 44.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 44.

³⁶B. Davidson, *West Africa Before the Colonial Era: A History to 1850*. London and New York, 1998, 71.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 76.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 76.

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