

A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF SOCIO-POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION IN AKURE REGION UP TO THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

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Abstract

The paper examines the political transformation of Akure region from the earliest times to the present. The paper traces these stages of political development in order to demonstrate features associated with each stage. It argues further that pre-colonial Akure region, like other Yoruba regions, had a workable political system headed by a monarch. However, the Native Authority Ordinance of 1916, which brought about the establishment of the Native Courts and British judicial administration in the region led to the decline in the political power of the traditional institution. Even after independence, the traditional political institution has continually been subjugated. The work relies on both oral and written sources, which were critically examined. The paper, therefore, argues that even with its present political status in the contemporary Nigerian politics, the traditional political institution is still relevant to the development of the society.

Keywords: Akure, Political, Social, Traditional and Authority

Introduction

The paper reviews the political administration of Akure region from the earliest time to the present and examines the implication of the dynamics between the two periods may have for the future. Thus, assessment of the indigenous political administration, which was prevalent before the incursion of the colonial administration, the political administration during the colonial rule and the present political administration in the region are examined herein. However, Akure, in this context, comprises the present Akure North, Akure South, and Ifedore Local Government Areas of Ondo State, Nigeria. This paper is divided into four

major sections. The first section examines the political administration of the people prior to colonialism, while the second section assesses the colonial form of administration and the impact it had on the political development of the people. The third section examines the political transformation of Akure since independence, while the last section forms the findings and conclusion of the work.

1.0 Pre-colonial Socio-Political Administration of Akure

A monarchical system of government, under the leadership of the *Deji*, operated in pre-colonial Akure. The *Deji* was selected like any other king in Yorubaland. The office of the *Deji* was hereditary, but not necessarily from father to son or daughter. The *Deji* was regarded as a divine king and in practice believed to have absolute powers. He could sentence offenders to death or banishment, etc. He could take over anybody's wife. His attribute was *Oba, alaseekejiorisa* (King, the ruler and companion of the gods). He was known as *alayeluwa* (the lord of the earth and life). He was addressed as *kabiesi*, an expression which is the contraction of the sentence, *kabi yin kosi* (there is no questioning of your authority). In short, in theory, the *oba* had the power of life and death over his subjects and was not accountable to them for any of his actions. In practice, however, the *Deji* was not an absolute ruler. It is true that as the executive head of the government, he exercised considerable powers particularly over the common people. For instance, he could arrest, punish and even behead them without trial. However, he exercised this power sparingly and with justification. In any case, he did not rule alone. He was assisted by a council of chiefs, the most important among them being *the Iare, the Ikomo, the Ejua, the Ogbe and the Owose*. The *Deji's* court tried and settled all cases, be it civil or criminal. In this court, capital punishment in form of death sentence could be imposed. The traditional police, which was responsible for the execution of the decisions made by the authorities, was headed by one of the *Deji's* chiefs, *Omolaare*. The appointment and removal of chiefs and village heads were done by the *Deji* based on the advice of relevant authorities (elders, chiefs, etc).

The *Iare* chiefs were the elder statesmen and used to act as the chief advisers to the *Deji*. The first six of these chiefs - *Olisa, Odopetu, Elemo, Aro, Ojumu and Asae*, popularly known as the *Iarafamefa*, were the representatives of their different quarters making up Akure. The chiefs in general owed their position not to the favour of the king but to their noble birth. They had powers to declare war and make peace and were generally responsible for civil administration of their subjects. This administration responsibility covered a wide range of

activities such as collection of taxes or tributes, supervision of public works and administration of justice.

Villages under the political suzerainty of Akure in the 19th century were about one hundred and thirty. These villages varied in size. These villages were not allowed to approach the *Deji* directly because of the discrimination that existed between the metropolitan citizens and the citizens of the satellites whom they usually referred to as *asira-oko* (rural people). Nevertheless, all the village heads under the political jurisdiction of the *Deji* carried him along in the administration of their different villages. The chiefs and village heads made laws not only for the maintenance of order in their domains, but also for regulation of economic activities of the villages. They deliberated on cases brought before them either from the villages or their quarters. Since the *Deji* and the *Iare* constituted the supreme court of the kingdom, major cases were dealt with centrally in the *Deji's* court. Cases of theft, adultery or rape were reported by the head of the family to the head of the village. Rarely were matters reported directly to the head of the village without them going through the head of the family.

Women also took active part in pre-colonial administration of the kingdom. There were three important groups of women chiefs, apart from *Olori* (Royal wives), who participated in the administration of the kingdom. One of these groups was the *Apate*, headed by *Eyelobirin* (women leader). They were the only group of women who were granted the special privilege to carry *are* (board or tray) upon which the flesh of wild animals was cut for sale at the market place. They were not butchers. Members of this group had to keep the king and the chief well-informed about the day-to-day happenings in the market. They had to enforce the closure of the market place as required by tradition from time to time. The second group of female chiefs was *Ukoju* (the meeting of eyes), which consisted of the daughters of Akure traditional chiefs. The third group of female chiefs was the *Esare* group (the selected). This group consisted of all the daughters of the past kings and their own daughters.

Also for the purpose of security of lives and property, Akure had some groups of people that performed the role of security agents and their main duty was apprehension of criminals. One of these groups was *Erinse*, headed by Chief *Ologbosere*. This group of people acted as policemen, soldiers and prison officers. The head of the police wing was Chief *Omoolaare*. If anybody erred in the village, his case must be reported to the *Deji*, who would then order the *Erinse* to go and arrest the culprit. The *Erinse* only had to present the *Deji's* staff of office as the arrest warrant. On being detained, the offender would face a preliminary investigation by the *Ikomo*, who would treat the matter summarily or refer the

decision to the village heads and *Iare*. The people also executed the judgement of the *Deji*. Akure also had an army that was also responsible for maintaining and enforcing law and order. This group was fully engaged in the inter-state wars which ravaged Yorubaland during in the 19th century. *Odo* was the commander-in-chief of the Akure army before *Sao* supplanted him during the reign of *DejiGbogi*(1648 and 1674). The hunters also performed the role of security agents by warding off dangerous animals and external aggressors. It was also their duty to arrest and prosecute lawbreakers at the quarter levels and hand them over to the quarter chiefs. Age group, which was made up of youths, among others, also constituted themselves into formidable security units through which they maintained law and order.

In pre-colonial Akure, there were prison yards called *Igbon* (the house of wisdom). There were three types: the first one, *IgbonAkure* was under the supervision of *Ologbosere*; the second, also known as *IgbonAkure*, was under the supervision of *Olusogan*, while the third, *IgbonDeji* was under the watch of *Cheif Saraku*. Accused persons were to be remanded here until their cases were heard or decided upon.

Religion also played a crucial role in the political administration of pre-colonial Akure. Akure indigenous traditional religion was and still is based on the belief in the supreme deity. The people also believed in divinities, ancestral spirits, moral, orders and life hereafter. The divinities that were common among Akure and her neighbours were *Ogun* (god of iron) and *Egungun* (masquerades). *Ogun* as one of the traditional gods was believed to have been charged with the supervision of matters relating to war or other exploits demanding the use of iron. Hence, *Ogun* is the blacksmithing god. Dogs were usually used as sequence to *Ogun*. As stated above, *Egungun* was also a common element of religion among pre-colonial Akure people. They were of different shapes and colours. It was and still the belief of Akure people that masquerades represented the spirits of the departed ancestors and relatives and that the worshippers could pray through them and their prayer would be answered. However, it is important to know that the number of adherents of traditional religion in Akure has reduced drastically due to the advent of foreign religions like Christianity and Islam coupled with Western civilization and modernization.

Thus it can be deduced that though pre-colonial administration of Akure revolved largely around the personality and leadership quality of the *Deji*. However, the success of the king largely depended on his ability to relate well and coordinate his assisting chiefs, the professional bodies like the hunters and religion. His role was more or less that of a coordinator, he was not absolute as he was guided by a body of taboos, a violation of any that could lead to dethronement or a more grievous penalty.

2.0 Akure under Colonial Rule

British contact with Akure, like other parts of Yorubaland, could be traced back to the activities of the British traders and Christian missionaries in the 19th century. On the eve of the British administration in Akure, precisely in 1897, a detachment of Hausa Constabulary was stationed in Akure under Lieutenant A.O.C Scott. Eight officers were in charge of the detachment until it was withdrawn in March 1900, as a result of the formation of the North Eastern District of the Lagos Government in 1899 in which Akure was placed. In June, 1901, the Akure District was transferred to the Eastern Division with Headquarters at Ondo. The administration of Yorubaland, like other parts of Nigeria, operated under a British superstructure, which had the Governor of Nigeria at the zenith of authority. Next in hierarchy was the Lieutenant General of Southern Nigeria, who was closely followed by the Resident of Provinces. Each Resident also had a number of District Officers under his control while the District Officers were, in turn, assisted by Assistant District Officers.

Basically, Yorubaland was divided into six administrative districts and each district was under the supervision of a British Travelling Commissioner assisted by a detachment of colonial police. The Central District had its headquarters at Ibadan and comprised Ibadan, Oyo and Ife areas. The present day Egbado Division was also constituted into the Western District and the headquarters were at Badagry, Imeko, and Ilaro. Ilesa and Ado-Ekiti also in turn served as administrative headquarters of the North-Eastern District, while Ode-Ondo served as the headquarters of the Eastern District constituted by Akure, Owo, Idanre, Ondo and Okitipupa.

The Native Authority Ordinance of No. 14 of 1916 formally constituted Native Authorities in Akure and other Western Provinces. However, after major changes in the British Colonial Administration in Nigeria, the Akure District was merged with the newly constituted Ekiti Division and Akure was made the headquarters of the then newly created Ondo Province. Thus, Akure District continued to be governed as part of Ekiti Division until April, 1946, when it was separated after a fiercer struggle. It is generally accepted that Oba Afunbiwo Adesida (1897-1957) was the architect of Akure socio-political development during this period. His legendary, accommodating disposition, liberalism and generosity with land were responsible for the phenomenal development of Akure. Government agencies and missionary bodies had no problem acquiring land for their projects. These factors largely made Akure the preference when the headquarters of the defunct Ondo Province and the headquarters of the Catholic Diocese of Ondo, established in 1943, were to be chosen.

The early British settlers in Akure and Nigeria in general recognised the importance of the establishment of law and order if they would succeed in colonising Nigeria. And for law and order to be accepted by the people, they felt that there was the need not only to preserve the existing political and judicial institutions, as much as possible but also that the people should participate in the administration of justice. Hence Native Courts were established with the view of enabling the indigenous people to participate in the administration of justice and for the preservation and enforcement of their customs and laws. Thus, under the British colonial administration, customary courts were set up to replace the highest traditional court (the *Deji's* court). Membership of the Native Court consisted of those persons that government had come to regard as chiefs. And by the second decade of the twentieth century, District Officers were often engaged in preventing the *Oba* and chiefs from holding private courts in their own respective palaces and compounds. Their aim was to prevent fines from being imposed and punishments from being inflicted in these courts.

The implication of this was the relegation of the kingship institution to the second stage of newly created political hierarchy created. Thus, the office *Deji*, as was the case elsewhere in Nigeria, which had been the last authority prior to colonial intrusion would have to consult the British official and seek their approval before it could embark on any public duties. Invariably, the *Deji* now had himself instructed, coordinated and directed by alien authority. Consequently, the statement, *alasekejiorisa*, became a mere expression in remembrance of pre-colonial kingship institution as the real political power in the land had been transferred from the *Deji* to the British officials, who he was now answerable to.

It is pertinent to note that in the mid-nineteenth century, the British had conquered the different parts of the present Nigeria, though at different times, and established control and authority over them. As time went on, British colonial rule, with its attendant alienation and subjugation of the indigenous people, resulted in agitation for self-government. Consequently, on October 1, 1960, Nigeria became independence from British colonial rule and was administered at the centre by the Federal Government and three regional governments- the East, West and North. In 1963, the Midwest Region was carved out of the Western Region, making Nigeria a federation of four political regions. This was the situation until January 1966 when the military interrupted the First Republic was interrupted.

3.0 Socio-Political Administration of Akure since 1976

Akure remained the Provincial Headquarters of Ondo Province, since it was created 1915, until February 1976. On February 3, 1976 Akure was made the capital of the newly

created Ondo State of Nigeria. The state was carved out of the defunct Western State and covered the total area of the former Ondo Province. Since then Akure has tripled as the traditional headquarter of Akure kingdom, capital of Akure South Local Government and sit of the government of Ondo State. From the foregoing, it is evident that the significance of Akure in the political development of the region and Ondo State cannot be overemphasised. Be that as it may, since the region has now been balkanised into three local government areas: Akure North, Akure South and Ifedore. In nearby future, more local governments may be created from the region and this may snowball into more recognised kings that will join the catalogue of the kings already on ground namely: The *Deji* of Akureland, the *Alara* of Ilara-Mokin, *Owa* of Igbara-Oke, *Olujare* of Ijare, *Adapogun* of Ipogun, *Olojoda* of Oda, *Okiti* of Iju, *Ogbolu* of Itaogbolu, *Oloba* of Oba-Ile, *Alayede* of Ayede-Ogbese, *Akota* of Ikota, *Osolo* of Isolo, *Aralepo* of Isinkan, *Akapinsa* of Ipinisa, *Onibule* of Ibule, among others.

It is important to note that right from the British incursion up to the present, traditional rulers in the region and elsewhere in Nigeria have been accorded little political powers in the administration of their people. The relegation of the traditional political institution that was started by the colonial authorities was continued and has been sustained ever since. This has the implication of driving government far away from the people. Thus, the prospects of good governance in the region, strongly rely on the collaborating efforts of the three tiers of government- the Federal, the State and the Local Governments- and the traditional institution. This will promote peace and tranquillity which are basic ingredients for development. This will also prevent political crisis such as that of August 16, 1983 from repeating itself. In the crisis, many Akure sons were killed. Among them were Chief Olaiya Fabamigbe, Honourable Tunde Agunbiade and Chief Agbayewa (the *Sasere* of Akure).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to appraise the political transformation of Akure up to the contemporary period. Thus, pre-colonial politics of Akure was chaired by the *Deji*, assisted by a council of chiefs and other traditional title holders such as the *Baale*, who were responsible for the day-to-day management of subordinate towns and villages. During the colonial rule, the Native Authority Ordinance of No.14 of 1916 formally constituted Native Authorities in Akure and other parts of Nigeria. This eroded some of the powers of the traditional political institution, although they still played an important role in the administration of their people during this period. After independence in 1960, Akure became the capital of Akure Local Government areas as earlier mentioned. This was before the major town (Akure) in the region

became the capital of Ondo State. It is therefore the opinion of this paper that the present political culture in Nigeria, which had relegated the traditional political structure, has created a gulf between the people and the government. As a remedy and means of preventing political crisis which has become a common thing in Nigeria, it is recommended that traditional ruler should be entrenched in the constitution of the country to compliment the functions of the local and state governments.

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