

The Changing Status of Ekiti Traditional Rulers in Colonial Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Before the advent of the British rule, the Ekiti people had a well organized and structured kingship system that totally brought order and harmony to various communities. The Kings, known as *Obas*, were graded according to population of towns and, more importantly, historical importance. The Kings, that is the paramount ones, had the power of life and death which made people venerate their positions; or treated with reverence. They had total control over their people and were responsible for all socio-cultural, political, economic and military experiences of their people. However, the British colonial rule came and totally disorganized the kingship systems, desecrating, to a large extent, the spiritual powers of the Kings and usurped their powers; making them subservient to District Officers, in this regard, the Kings become mere rubber stamps, with the status greatly reduced, though while still repeating their positions and given full powers that were, however, not challenging to British rule.

INTRODUCTION

According to P. C. Lloyd, "Anthropological studies of African kingdoms have tended to portray a static picture of their political and administrative structures, only too rarely is an attempt made to describe their development".¹ The pre-colonial Ekiti's administrative set up easily makes one reject this notion since, rather than being static, it underwent gradual changes which endured till the mid eighteenth century during the Europeans onslaught on African culture. In this regard, it is necessary to examine the place of the Oba, the traditional rulers or kings, Ekiti's colonial socio-political structures. This is to make one see the changes that took place over a time, under the Ekiti dynamic monarchical system.

It is good to also note that, contrary to the images of primitivity presented by euro-centric views, evidences abound that show that the Ekiti people had well ordered and organized patterns of political organization, before colonization, and upon which the Europeans or colonial adventuress even built their indirect system of administration.

Before the advent of the Europeans, the Ekiti kingdoms, and most African kingdoms, did not have any negative ethnic consciousness or group agitation, since, according to history, all the eighteen crowned heads who founded the Ekiti kingdom migrated from Ile-Ife. The following were the kings of the kingdoms founded by migrants from Ile-Ife²: The Ewi of ado, the Deji of Akure, Arinjale of Ise, Olojoake of Okemesi, Ore of Otun and Ata of Aiyede. Others were the Oloye of Oye, Ologotun of Ogotun, Olojudo of Iddo, Ajero of Ijero, Ogoga of Ikere, Alara of Ara, Alaye of Efon, Elemure of Emure, Onisan of Isan, Onitaji of Itaji, Owa of Obo and the Elekole of Ikole. Some authorities however belief that there were only sixteen kingdoms.

The discrepancies might have been due to the problem of tussle for leadership which started during the colonial era, since each Oba wanted to have his own autonomy that would give him the right of supreme rulership at the period.³ Be that as it may, the Ekiti kingdom was increased into twenty kingdoms at the inceptions of colonial rule for administrative convenience. The kings were also placed into categories of A,B and C. Category A kings were regarded as paramount rulers. This drastically changed the Obaship relationship to one another as the Ekiti Obas as was discussed above formally regarded themselves as brothers. In order to understand the changing status of the Ekiti traditional rulers in colonial Nigeria, it is necessary to start by examining the people's past experiences and the position of the Ekiti's traditional rulers in the pre-colonial era.

The Traditional System and Socio-Political Organization in Ekiti

Though, there were many different kingdoms, operated well organized systems of government all over their territory, and these were very effective and efficient organization that orderly administered the society. Various Obas of the kingdoms shared the same spiritual and mutual understanding and never succumbed to the undue supremacy of other Obas. There were equality, mutual understanding, political cohesion and unity among them. This political situation in the colonial period ran contrary to Paula Brown's assertion that one political system dominated the whole of Yorubaland.⁴ For example, the difference is that after the collapse of the Oyo empire, the political leadership of the Alafin greatly reduced. Thus, the allegiance of the Yoruba kingdoms to a particular king was reduced. Thus, towards the eve of the British colonial administration, each kingdom in Yorubaland enjoyed relative independence. In order to preserve this political independence, the Ekiti, Ijesha and

Igbomina joined a confederacy in 1887 called the Ekiti Parapo War. The Ekiti Oba wanted to preserve and maintain the status quo so that there would be no Oba in the whole of Yoruba land who would become so powerful and dictatorial that he would lord it over the other monarchs.

The example equality was very evident in the pre-colonial Ekiti. The Ekiti kingdom was divided into a number of conglomerate of towns called Olu-Ilu, with each having central power. Under the *Olu-Ilu*, there were the subordinate towns called *Ereko*, governed traditionally by subordinate kings or Bale. At the centres, the Obas were both the de jure and de facto paramount rulers in their respective kingdoms. As a result, all the eighteen kingdoms mentioned earlier had their paramount rulership in the pre-colonial Ekiti. Each Oba was venerated as a god in his domain.

The Ekiti's tradition of treating their Oba with reverence was due to some cosmological, cultural and ancestral beliefs that were common to all African societies and the Yoruba group in particular.⁵ By tradition, when an Oba was going to be installed, it was believed that he was already endowed with spiritual powers by the supernatural forces. He was also to be the father of all in his kingdom and should neither be seen in public nor be called by his personal name. At his ascension to the throne, it was believed that he had "eaten what ordinary human being could not eat; that is, "Je Oba",⁶ meaning that the king had eaten the flesh of a king. However, this should not be taken to mean that the Obas in the pre-colonial Ekiti were cannibals. The real meaning shows that a lot of installation rituals by his people had put him next to the gods who were to start operating through him.

However, the Oba in Ekiti was only a constitutional monarchy, unlike the case in the North where the Emirs held the power of life and death over their subjects. The Ekiti Obas were the representative of the gods and all their authority were held in trust for the people. They were expected to rule with kindness, benevolence and wisdom for people's welfare. In practice, an Ekiti Oba was not a brutal dictators; rather, his activities were usually put under checks and balances by the chiefs who acted as his lieutenants within the prescribed traditions.

In Ekiti, the next highest authorities to the Oba were the chiefs and military lords. The principal chiefs were expected to sit in council with the Oba daily.⁷ The council used to meet in the Oba's palace called *Akodi*, a special hall or a meeting room. The principal chiefs were expected to sit in council with the Oba and deliberate on how to run his kingdom. Infact, they represented the highest legislators, judicial and executive authorities of the land. The war chiefs were chosen from Elegbe or societal group under the Olori-Ologun (The Supreme War Commander). In 1890, because of the determination to preserve their independence Ekiti had military commanders who were men of great valours.⁸ In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ekiti fought in many wars like the Ekiti parapo, Ado, Kiriji, Fulani/Tapa and Ikere wars, among others.⁹ These wars produced heroes like the Aruku of obo, Esubiye of Aiyede, Fajemibola of Ilupeju, Adeloju of Ado, Oloidi of Igede and Ogedengbe of Ilesha. The war heroes, usually called Jagunjagun or Ologun, many of them military commanders, were well respected in the towns for their courage and power to preserve the independence. Of various Ekiti towns; more so when the Ekiti people were proud to be town dwellers; a mark of civilization.

The lineage called Agbo-ile was composed of a group who lived in a large compound with several court yards which also accommodated some slaves and strangers. Every member of *Idile* or household had a head known as *olori Idile* who was always the eldest male.¹⁰ He was in charge of the land belonging to the family and held regular meetings with family members in order to discuss important matters with them. He was usually generous in preaching morality and giving financial support to the family members. The Agbo-ile was also a political association that made their views known through the head, Olori-Idile, to the Ward chiefs. The ward chiefs were also administrative heads who collected tribute and saw to collective labour. The chiefs settled disputes within the ward while criminal cases were referred to the Oba. According to P. C. Llyod, all cases of homicide were referred to the Oba and chiefs.¹¹

In Ekiti, the Egbe, meaning associations, were both political and administrative force in the pre-colonial Ekiti. Associations were organized for the socio-economic survival of members and the development of the kingdom. There were two types of Egbe: the professional and social groups. The social groups belonged to the Town Unions, while the professional groups covered working guilds and traders who were usually known for and identified by their trade commodities. For example, there were Guild of Sculptors (Agbegilere), Guild of Hunters (Egbe Olode) and Guild of Cloth Sellers (Egbe Alaso). The chairman of each guild was called *Baba Egbe*, while the Vice Chairman was called *Atele*. They made regular visits to members of during bereavement or during happy occasions. Trade and social activities were promoted through general contribution called *esusu*.

The Associational group in Ekiti kingdom worked according to their age grade. For example, the age-grade between 12 and 19 years, the youngest, who were responsible for only weeding and sweeping public places. The next set, those between 20 and 30 years, were supposed to fight in wars and work on roof thatching. They also took part in other cooperative activities for members or for the community. Very importantly, there was strong attachment or solidarity among the age groups which also prepared them for leadership roles. Weekly or monthly meetings usually take place among them to discuss their problems and give moral and financial support to one another. The guilds also performed judicial functions in cases of debt payment and immoral

actions or poor work performance. All these activities performed by each category of organization made the society very dynamic and progressive by the end of 19th century.

However, as already mentioned, there were also strong solidarity and love among the Ekiti Obas and this made it possible for them to always fight against external aggression. This was why it was possible for Ekiti to engage in Ekiti Parapo War against Ibadan that wanted to capture and subjugate Ekiti territories. The Ekiti people had to rally round to form a united force against the Ibadan. That is, in 1878, the Ekiti confederacy was formed by the Ekiti, Ijesha and Igbomina against the Ibadan military exploits. The Yoruba wars had adverse effect on the Ekiti who, according to A.O. Oguntuyi were peace loving people, interested in their farm work. However, various political and colonial experiences eventually made the Europeans penetrate the hinter land of Ekiti, thereby changing the socio-political traditions of the people.

The Changing Status of the Ekiti Traditional Rulers

In 1893, the British had intervened in the Ekiti Parapo War by disbanding it, thereby usurping the role of Ekiti traditional government. A.O.C Scott and his Hausa forces had to settle at Akure permanently to have a firm grip of Ekiti territories.¹² Therefore, the Obas in Ekiti were made to sign treaties of peace by surrendering their dominions. These peace treaties changed the people's traditional system of government. And for the first time, the Obas began to travel outside their domains against people's traditions. Whereas, according to tradition, the Obas were not to be seen anyhow in public, except during ceremonial occasions.

In Ekiti, during the colonial era, the introduction of police force and native authority began to reduce the Oba's authority, and some Obas gruded this situation. But those Obas who refused to comply with some colonial directives were sanctioned or fined. For example, the Oba of Ijan was fined £10.00 (now ₦20.00) for refusing to obey the colonial administrator.¹³ N.A.C weir, the first Traveling Commissioner had to instruct the Obas to be obedient to the British who had already taken over the reins of power in Ekiti. And the Ekiti Oba who wanted to preserve the status quo were either punished by demotion or fined.¹⁴

In 1899, major W.R. Reeve Tuchker formed the North Eastern District at Oke-Imo now in oyo state where the Ekiti council of Obas, formed under the Relative Authority, was to be meeting him regularly. One of such meetings that took place on June 21, 1900. Ekiti was eventually divided into twenty kingdoms, and each of these had a paramount king, while the kings were also ranked.¹⁵

The Ewi of Ado, for example, was placed third in order of precedence, while Osi was placed under Ado. However, the ranking of kings was challenged by many Obas, particularly because of the reduction in status and their territories by "the white people who were not ready to understand the historical or cultural affinity of the people".¹⁶ In fact, some of the territories that were formerly in Ekiti were merged with people who had no historical affiliations with them. For example, Obo and Omuo-Oke were put under the Northern territory. It was not until after the colonial rule that Omuo-Oke was transferred to Ekiti.

From 1893 to 1914, the Native Authority system was practiced and during this period, the Obaship position was enhanced as they were allowed to collect fines and taxes. In addition, "the kings gave authority to people to sign permits for timber fellings"¹⁷ During the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates on January 1st, 1914, Ekiti was placed under the Ijebu province, with the Headquarters of Ekiti Division in Ado Ekiti with Mr. G.H. Humphrey the first District Officer who was replaced by Mr. A.W. Livingstone in February 1914.¹⁸

Many changes were brought about by the colonial rule through the indirect system of government. At first, the Obas were the sole Native Authority in their domains. But, what happened to the remaining chiefs? According to S. A. Akintoye, "only the few top chiefs were included in the council".¹⁹

By 1948, the power of Obas had changed considerably, and this situation also affected the roles of chiefs over villages and social institutions. There was also the misconception by the Divisional Officers that the Obas in Ekiti were autocrats. This action produced had repercussions on the relationships between the Obas. For example, a larger percentage of the chiefs were left out of the new political structure. As a result, many chieftaincy positions were vacant for a long period because many eligible candidates for the titles were frustrated with the new system of government. It is necessary, however, to examine the effect of this situation on Obaship position.

Colonial Administration and the Obaship Position

After the re-organization of the sole Native Authority, the economic power of the traditional Obas in Ekiti were reduced as traditional tributes and gifts to the Obas, his chiefs and Bales were outlawed. Instead, the colonial government introduced taxation; which was not forthcoming because most people evaded taxation by running away from homes, hiding in their farms. People naturally fashioned their methods of evading taxes and the periods to stay away from towns and villages to avoid tax collectors. It should be noted that the salary of an Oba was based on the percentage of all the taxes collected in his kingdom.

This meant that apart from the reduction of the Oba's power, his regular source of income and his economic value were also reduced. However, after some time, the status of some paramount Obas were enhanced after the 1930 Intelligence Report had been written on all the Ekiti Districts.²⁰ This enabled the Obas to be gazetted as the Obas in council but some Obas and chiefs were poorly paid, in spite of their sitting allowances which were also too small. As a result of this, many Obas hardly maintain their extended families. This was unlike the position in the North where the Native Authorities made the Emirs very financially buoyant because of the efficient nature of their tax collection.

At the beginning of colonial rule, The traditional courts were set up by the District Officers for administrative convenience. The Obas were allowed to set up a Council of Oba, collecting some resources from their own traditional courts. This experience increased the image of the Obas or made their positions more prestigious. Thus, the Council of Oba became more important because of the judicial powers given to them by courts. The seasonal courts were introduced by the British in Ado, but British officers were indirectly controlling these courts. But the implication of this was that, as already explained, the ordinance that created Grades A and B courts upgraded some Obas and demoted others. It is by considering what took place in these courts that one can critically understand the changing role of the Oba. The new positions of the Oba in the colonial era encouraged power struggle among the Obas for supremacy since the colonial administrator had destroyed their longstanding unity and love through the policy of divide and rule or indirect rule. It can be correctly said therefore that the indirect rule was meant to be a way keeping the Obas divided so that colonialism could achieve their objectives.

As a result of this development, there were agitations from different kingdoms in Ekiti for independent kingdoms. At the period, if a kingdom did not have a paramount ruler or did not have an independent status, it would be impossible of any Oba or king to wear the beaded crown, meaning that he would not get reasonable benefit from government. He must also be paying homage to other senior Obas. This was the situation that created crises in Ekiti as seen in the formerly independent Ido, Osi, Igbara Odo and Ilawe. The Obas of these towns protested but the colonial administrator refused to consider their petition so as not to encourage other towns to ask for independent.²¹ The position at the time can be compared to the politics of State and Local Government creation in modern times when many people desperately request for States and Local Governments. According to the Annual Report in Ekiti Division, this period was saturated with various demands for Oba's upgrading and independence for towns.²²

No doubt, the degrading of many kings made them lose their power to appoint new Bales lesser Obas in the subordinate towns. To do this, approval must be got from the colonial administrator. Evidently, the status of the traditional Obas was being drastically reduced since these traditional rulers began to lose their traditional sovereignty to the British imperialists. This brought lack of political cohesion and unity among different sub-ethnic cultural groups, not only in Ekiti, Nigeria, but also in Africa.

However, in 1938 there was the re-inauguration of the confederation of Ekiti council and legal right was granted to the Grade A or paramount rulers. The Ekiti people's reaction to the Native system became unpopular as they took their cases to the kings to adjudicate for them, but in most cases the Divisional Officers usually saw this as illegal. The chiefs and Bales, minor kings, were no more able to receive gifts as was the practice before the advent of the Europeans.

In 1940, a new political consciousness was growing among the educated elites because many Ekiti sons and daughters were among the Africans who had attended the Fourah Bay college in Sierra Leone. Many Ekiti students had also obtained degrees in the British and American Universities. The educated elites naturally developed a political ideology that challenged, very instrumentally, the abhorrent British administrative and general political policies.

These new Ekiti educated elites along with those in other Yoruba divisions, drastically influenced the changing role of the Oba in Ekiti in particular and the Western Region in general. With this development, the Ekiti educated elites became a powerful force in the newly established District councils which were founded in the West in 1952.²³ This development began to prepare the ground for democracy at the local level.

However, the Western Region Local Government Law gave a maximum of one quarter of the council membership to the traditional rulers. But the real person in charge of the District was the District Officer called D.O. who also took directives from the Provincial Resident in Akure.²⁴ Unfortunately, this administrative set-up made the Obas a mere rubber stamp. The new administrative position could be compared to the situation in the traditional set up when government of each kingdom revolved around the Oba. And eventually, the Oba's position dwindled with the introduction of political parties in Ekiti. The Western Region had two conflicting parties: the Action Group (AG) and the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP).

The NNDP was in coalition with the National Council of Nigerian and Cameroon (NCNC). Meanwhile, the Oba's institution became politicized and invariably any Oba who refused to identified with any of these parties was regarded as being partisan and therefore suspended or deposed if he refused to accept the popular

party in power or what was regarded as people's party. Many Ekiti Obas, thus, found themselves in an uncomfortable political dilemma. No Oba was allowed to be on the fence. The positions of the Obas were demystified. Contrary to the position before colonial rule, the traditional rulers were the undisputed head of their kingdoms before the British colonial administration super-imposed their British political system in form of indirect rule for the sake of administrative convenience. The positions of the Obas were no more sacrosanct but seriously secularized, thereby disorganizing the highly workable traditional kingship system of Ekiti. The colonial government was unable to preserve the organic unity and traditionally well structured governance of the Ekiti traditional rulers.

CONCLUSION

It would be erroneous and misleading, as believed by some early Europeans and Anthropologists, that the African society was static and resistant to change; the position that has however been challenged by W. Rodney who has also affirmed that no society was stagnant.²⁵ Every society no matter how simple or complex has contributed its own part to the socio-political order and organization through the above discussed traditional system of government. In Ekiti, like in other places in Nigeria, through imperialism and colonialism, the British usurped the powers of the traditional rulers, the Obas, and entrenched their own alien government, thereby changing the status of the traditional rulers that were dynamically venerated by the traditional Ekiti people before colonization.

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