

# The Democratic Structure of Yoruba Political-Cultural Heritage

by

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## Introduction

Looking through the pre-colonial epoch in Yoruba political and cultural history, one can see some elements of democracy featured in pre-colonial and traditional Yoruba social and political organization. And while it may be true that some tension exists between the monarchic nature of society and its democratic features, it remains that the social and political organization of traditional Yoruba society demonstrated some democratic values, and thus traditional was established on what can be called a participatory democracy.

## Democratic Values

Democracy emphasizes that power should be shared among people of different categories, and that sharing of power must also be acknowledged by those who hold power directly and those whose ownership of power is by mere inference. For the Athenians, democracy involves rotation in office, and the filling of offices by lot and enlargement of governing bodies (Sabine 1973: 28). Hence democracy emphasizes that values should not be forced upon any people against their will, and stipulates liberty, the separation of power, majority rule, and the sovereignty of the people (Brecht 1959). Furthermore, the ethics of democracy, according to Sabine, regard mutual concession and compromise as ways of reaching agreements, which over all were more satisfactory than any that could be reached by the dominance of one interest of one party over all the others (Sabine 1973: 844).

And conversely in this position, democracy does not conceive a 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.

Larry Diamond and some other scholars on the subject emphasize the point that democracy involves contests among individuals and organized groups for all positions in government (Diamond 1988: xvi). These contests for positions in government should be done at regular intervals without the use of force or any threat of force as democracy works to emphasize civil and political liberties. Viewed this way, democracy recognizes the differences in human interests and put structures in place to provide the means for the genuine meeting of the minds, and considers 'politics' as the area of negotiation and political institutions as agencies to make possible the interchanges of opinion and understanding on which successful negotiation depends. Thus democracy gives primacy to political and moral values of equality, reciprocity, and respect for the views of others.

According to Salim A. Salim, democratization involves free and unfettered exercise of fundamental freedoms of \_\_expression, association, and political choice. It also involves the ability of all citizens to participate in the process of governance (Salim 1990: 29, Mieder 2003: 259-301). This spirit of democracy is expressed in President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address according to which democracy is "the government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Salami 2004: 315-328, Held 1998: 1-10).

This expression "of the people" points to the power of citizens to choose those to rule and to ensure that they are governed in conformity with the general good of the society. In the same way, the expression "of the people" suggests that democracy is a system of government whose constitutional rules, principles, and procedures are set up by the people themselves. In this sense, democracy enables people to participate in decision-making concerning their lives, community, and society (Gyekye 1997: 133-134, Busia 1975: 453-455). Therefore this understanding of democracy stresses the notion of the people which place democracy as a system that gives institutional expression to the will of the people reflected in the American Declaration of Independence set July 4, 1776 which says "... governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed" that recognizes the inalienable right and power of the governed to remove any government that no longer serves the general good of the community with the emphasis on the idea of representation wherein every citizen will be assured of representation in the scene of power.

The upshot of this reasoning is that democracy conceives politics as the area of negotiation and it treats political institutions as instruments to enhance the interchanges of opinion and understanding as bases for successful negotiation (Sabine 1973: 845), and thus place emphasizes on the political and moral values of equality and reciprocity.

### **The Democratic Content of Yoruba Politico-Cultural Heritage**

In this context we can now turn to the evolutionary nature of democracy (leadership choice, checks and balances, Kingdom structure, and cultural heritage) via the constant changes and development in its conceptualization, and the key topic on the demonstration of democratic values in traditional Yoruba social and political society established on what can be called a participatory democracy as it employed different models of involving citizens in governance which allows for representation of diverse interests. Hence creating governance through representative and participatory democracy featured in all the facets of the traditional Yoruba social, cultural and political organization.

For example, in traditional Yoruba society, the leader of an *Ilu* (town or society) is the *Oba*, the leaders of smaller villages are *Baale*, while the leaders of compounds are called *Olori Ile*. The choice of who governs at these various levels is done through democratic means. The choice of the *Baale* and the *Olori Ile* is mostly based on age and prominence in the ancestral tree of the village or compound, and each has a number of royal families among which the *Oba* is chosen.

Furthermore, when there is a vacant stool, candidates for Obaship would emerge from the royal families, and when they emerged, they are all treated as equal candidates to the stool, hence subject to the same rules and treatment, with the final choice of an *Oba* done by the Kingmakers in consultation with the *Ifa* oracle. For example, in Oyo, the *Alafin* was elected from a number of royal candidates by a King-making body called the *Oyomesi* which consists of seven councillors of society [also done in other paramount Yoruba traditional societies] (Osae 1980: 97). And in Ile-Ife, the primordial or spiritual capital of the Yoruba, the *Ooni* also emerged from among members of the ruling houses while the King-makers, with the directive from the *Ifa* oracle, chose whoever should emerge as the *Ooni*, and in cases of succession and ascension, Yoruba traditional culture employed the assistance of *Ifa* oracle to aid the Kingmakers in the determining who on society would become the King.

The point here is that in each Yoruba traditional *Ilu* (town or Kingdom), there are some families already marked as the royal lineages from which contestants to the stool would emerge. When those who are considered eligible or who consider themselves eligible for the contest emerge, they would all be subject to the same and equal exercise by the Kingmakers who are the society officials in charge of such society duties under the guidance of *Ifa* oracle through a mediation by the *Ifa* Priest who is also an important spiritual officer in the society. The importance of this is that ascension to throne was done according to some laid down rules agreed upon by people in the Kingdom. Furthermore, the rules were applied equally without any differential treatment.

Pertinent to this account is that every member of the *Ilu* (Kingdom) is aware from the beginning that when a vacant stool is to be filled, contestants should come from the acknowledged royal lineages. In addition, among the aspirants from royal lineages, the one whose choice is supported by the King-makers in conjunction with the recommendation of the *Ifa* oracle finally becomes the *Oba* (King). Thus, *ab initio*, the rules are carefully set and the citizens are aware of the rules as they affect them, and there is no doubt that the choice of a leader was politically charged, and thus when contestation arises, Yoruba traditional culture employed ritual checks and balances for resolving conflicts relating to issues of succession (Al-Yasha 2003: 1).

### **Political Organization in Traditional Yoruba Society**

In traditional Yoruba society, the leader of an *Ilu* (town or society) is the *Oba*, the leaders of smaller villages are *Baale*, while the leader of compounds are called *Olori Ile*, and the political and administrative organization of the society was headed by a King and divided into towns and regions with each major town and settlement headed by a King in council with other administrators.

Anthropologically, traditional Yoruba society could be said to be monarchical, yet the monarch does not enjoy a sole authority of the society, and while the King occupied the highest seat of the society, there existed an elaborate organization of palace officials and or chiefs. Hence the affairs of society were transacted by the King in full consultation with the chiefs and other palace officials which can conveniently be classified as the council of society. This, in most cases included civil chiefs, the military chiefs, the ward chiefs and heads of compounds and extended families. And for administrative ease, a town, apart from the central society power, can be divided into wards, which comprise several households and extended families.

As mentioned above, the head of traditional Yoruba monarchy was the King who wielded the executive power which no doubt varied one set-up to the other, yet his power was not without in-built checks, as he in most cases, enjoyed a respect and veneration from the citizenry (in most cases, the King presided directly over the council of society). And in some of the small Ijebu Kingdoms and the sectional Egba Kingdoms with strong Ogboni societies, the executive transacted all the business while the King merely submitting business to be transacted (Fadipe 1970: 25). Nevertheless, the functions of the King as the head of the council of society include the protection of the general interest of members of the society which calls for overseeing the general health of the society and her citizens, including the internal security of members, issues of peace and war, and the administration of justice, with the King as the last court of appeal for the whole Kingdom, and also concerned with the conduct of the relationship with other regional Kingdoms and societies (Fadipe 1970: 206).

Apart from the central administration of traditional Yoruba society by the *Oba*-in-council, there is the local governance by the ward chiefs, with head of compounds as well as the military chiefs, and family heads responsible for the administration of parts of the society and within the territories of the society who performed juridical or executive functions within their territories echoing traditional Yoruba social organization as it replicated at the ward and compound levels with activities of the *Oba*-in-council (Fadipe 1970: 207).

### **Democratic Checks and Balances in Traditional Yoruba Society**

In line with our earlier observation, the *Oba* also represents the head of the political organization of traditional Yoruba society which gives political, juridical, and executive power he can exercise in council with other chiefs and officials. The traditional Yoruba society accorded the *Oba* a considerable amount respect, which almost equals veneration, although his powers are not meant to be absolute due to a hierarchy of power relations in the management of the society. Hence this hierarchy of power relations tilted in favour of the *Oba* but it did not translate to an un-checked power, thus the power arrangement in traditional Yoruba political setting was such that it provided checks and balances with a structure that gave power to some bodies of persons to exercise on behalf of others with a second structure to provide institutions with the power to check the possible excesses by those who wielded power based in a social and political fabric meant to encourage inter-institutional checks and balances to moderate social and political power relationships in the society.

In *Oyo* Kingdom for instance, while the *Alafin* (the *Oba*) wielded much power that approached veneration, the institution of the *Oyo-mesi* was also there to check his use and possible abuse of power. *Alafin* was the supreme judge of the *Oyo* Empire; his court was the final court of appeal, and he was also the fountain of honours and the head of his people in the inseparable spheres of administration of law and justice (Stride: 298). On the other hand, the *Alafin* was elected by the *Oyo-mesi*, the King-making body consisting of seven councillors of society. Apart from the role as Kingmakers, the *Oyo-mesi* also had power to moderate the power and the influence of *Alafin*. And thus *Alafin* had to govern with caution and a respect for the subjects who invariably held him with veneration, and when an *Alafin* displeased his people, the *Oyo-mesi*, under the leadership of Basorun, would present him with an empty calabash or parrot's eggs as a sign that he must commit suicide (although the *Alafin* could not be deposed, he could be compelled to commit suicide).

And likewise, the *Oyo-mesi* does not enjoy an absolute power or influence, and while the *Oyo-mesi* may wield political influence, the *Ogboni* represented the popular opinion backed by the authority of religion, and therefore the view of the *Oyo-mesi* could be moderated by the *Ogboni*. Yet, the Basorun as the head of *Oyo-mesi* was also in a position to influence the political decisions of both *Oyo-mesi* and the *Ogboni* (Stride: 299-300). And most interestingly, there are checks and balances to the power of the *Alafin* and the *Oyo-mesi*, and thus no one is arrogated absolute power.

In another example, in the *Ijebu* and *Egbo* Kingdom there was also a similar mechanism providing checks and balances among the various organs of government. Hence, occupying the position of *Oyo-mesi* is the *Osugbo* (the name for *Ogboni* among the *Ijebu* and *Egbo* Kingdoms) with the *Oba* (King) who also enjoyed a high level of respect and power comparable to the *Alafin*. Respectively, the *Osugbo* was the council of society in the *Ijebu* and the *Egbo* Kingdoms, and at its periodical sessions the "*Osugbo* assumed successively administrative, legislative and judicial roles... [wherein]...it discharged all the business of society without the King being necessarily in attendance." (Fadipe 1970: 245). However, the King as the head of government referred all business to the *Osugbo*, and in turn, the *Osugbo* had to report to the King on all the business transacted, juxtaposing the *Oba* (King) who was considered sufficiently powerful to veto and override the decisions of his *Osugbo*, yet like the *Alafin*, he did not enjoy absolute power.

Following this further, in Ile-Ife, the spiritual headquarter of the Yoruba, the *Ooni* was highly respected and regarded as a powerful being only second to *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being, yet as the head of the Kingdom, he did not rule alone, also governed in council with the traditional chiefs; those on the right hand side who represented the princely interests and those on the left hand side, representing religious and spiritual interests. And notwithstanding, the *Ooni* had the *Obalufe*, his second in command in terms of power. And apart from the central governance of Ife Kingdom, there are also heads of compounds comprises of several extended families (several compounds and villages made up the Kingdom) who had important political roles to play in social and political life, although subject to some measures of control from the *Ooni*-in-council (and although the *Ooni* enjoyed power, influence, and respect, he didn't enjoy an absolute power), and in case an *Ooni* engaged in any misrule, there were some mechanisms in place to control the excesses. For example, an *Ooni* could be asked to open the beaded crown called "Are", and should that happened, it would signify the need for the *Ooni* to commit suicide.

Generally speaking, the Ife Kingdom enjoyed some measure of universal franchise whereas there was no serious discrimination against women with in regards to the institution of *Obaship*, and in fact it was once governed by a female *Ooni* named Luwo Gbagida during the 17<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hence Akinjogbin's record (1980) shows that between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries she required the Ife people to adopt clean habits and worked them so hard that she was forced to vacate the stool. And afterwards, the populous of Ife decided to not entertain the idea of another female *Ooni* (Akinjogbin 1980: 124-126). Hence, she was enthroned as *Ooni*, which involved select administrative procedures by the Kingmakers under the guidance of the Ifa oracle, and thus whoever emerged out of the contestants from the ruling houses would pass through rigorous rituals which under normal circumstances were meant to instil humility and other leadership qualities in the candidate. And I another case, a descendant of Lajamisan was deposed and banished to Ife Odan ostensibly for reigning for an extended time and possibly simple cruelty (Ife history reports that he was deposed for cruelty, while the Ife Odan account maintains that he was deposed for extending his reigned (Akinjogbin 1980: 126), again demonstrating that people of Ife reserved the power to change the *Ooni* if they were dissatisfied.

Thus as we continue to look through the accounts of some prominent political Kingdoms in traditional Yoruba history, we discover that consultation or command went from the *Oba* through the chiefs to the citizenry, an arrangement that promoted systematic checks and balances where each person stood in a defined and generally recognized relationship to others. And in addition, the power of the *Oba* was also limited by Eewo wherein '... the eewo..... were recounted to him during the ceremonies of his core-society and these eewo varied from Kingdom to Kingdom, the eewo were designed to curb despotism on the part of the King and his immediate family, to promote harmony among the different elements in the town...and to ensure the orderly existence of the people (Akinjogbin 1980: 131)'. Hence in this context, both the King and the citizens have their eewo, which they must observe, and for each eewo there are penalties because the violation of an eewo could spell perdition and woe for the entire Kingdom. Consequently, according to Akinjogbin '... a King who violated an eewo could lose his throne and therefore his life.... A chief who violated his eewo could lose his title..... The rulers of a Kingdom would ensure that no town violated its eewo for it was believed that such a violation could cause the destruction of the town (Akinjogbin 1980: 131)'. And in short, for the overall development of the society, community, or Kingdom, it was the responsibility of the King through the citizenry to abide by the recommendation of the *eewo* who would ordinarily stand as a relevant spiritual or religious symbol to carry social and political values regulating the balance of power since the spiritual posture of eewo gave it power to perform social and political regulatory roles that thus represent a complementary in the maintenance of checks and balances. In short, there were some means for maintaining the authority and power of the *Oba* without creating a despot with limitless power to allow the system an arrogated power for to the ruler and simultaneously providing a mechanism for preventing hegemonic excesses.

### **Democracy in Yoruba Traditional Politico-Cultural Heritage**

In reviewing traditional Yoruba social, cultural and political settings, one can easily assume the presence of some features of democracy. Using Tangwa's view, one can arguably propose that Yoruba traditional society was a reconciliation of the "autocratic dictatorship and popular democracy" as traditional Yoruba Kingdoms exhibited a balance of authority and democracy (Tangwa 1998: 2). Thus many of the important features of democracy can be located within the traditional Yoruba social, cultural and political arrangement. For example, while rulers were often referred to as *Alase ekeji Orisa*, (holders of authority, the second-in command to the supernatural being), some features were in place to diffuse the absoluteness presupposed in reference to the ruler, hence again there were checks with the structure to balance the power equation on exhibit.

It is thus incontrovertible that the method of choice of leaders carries some democratic outlook. The process for choosing leaders portends some lesson in humilities to the ruler. The humility is required to educate the would-be ruler on the condition of living of the masses. While the rulers were custodians of the power of the Kingdom, they would also remember the experiences of becoming rulers. They would remember how among others like them they were singled out for the offices they held. Beyond this, individuals were chosen among their equals through some rituals, which again furthered training in the art of democratic governance.

Another democratic feature traceable to the traditional Yoruba society was that the rules set for a choice of leaders and governance were clearly recognized by the rulers and the ruled, and at least, the rulers and the subjects knew that at the departure of an *Oba*, were already set with respect to who ascended the throne, with a modality for choosing some rites. Thus each traditional Yoruba Kingdom had a settled system of ascension after the demise of an *Oba*, already known to the citizens and the potential contestants for the royal stool. Second, it was democratic to the extent that the rules were strictly followed, which made it impossible for anyone to impose himself on the society as it ensured that to become an *Oba*, both the spiritual and material criteria were observed. And in this case, the field was open to all eligible candidates who were assumed to have equal access to the throne, demonstrating to the citizens that they had a voice in determining who would ascend to the throne, and thus became a ruler.

The above political organization of the traditional Yoruba Kingdoms thus without a doubt, portrays a participatory democracy. It accommodated the participation of both the rulers and the ruled; although the *Oba* was the supreme commander, every cadre of the society was in various ways included in the operating the Kingdom to the point that the activities of the *Oba*-in-council at the societal level were replicated at the ward and compound levels to indeed establish a participatory democratic process in traditional Yoruba society. And moreover, the democratic tenets of freedom of expression, separation of power, and checks and balances are embedded in various forms in the Yoruba traditional settings. Hence, apart from the separation of power and checks and balances, citizens also could enjoy the license to express their opinion of the *Oba* and the rulers through songs and other forms of symbolism during various festivals. For example, during *Edi* festival in Ife, there are various songs and traditional poetry to either praise or pass insult onto the ruling *Oba*, thus, expressing the feelings of the people thus providing opportunities for citizens to make their feelings known to those who govern, forming part of the democratic instruments for regulatory purposes.

These examples of traditional Yoruba society can thus allow one to infer the presence of some prominent features of democracy and begin to ask '...are these features as described in the Yoruba traditional social and political arrangements sufficient to infer any form of democracy no matter how low in sophistication compared to what now obtains?' Hence the answer to this question cannot be expected to be straightforward because even if traditional Yoruba society was democratic in structure, it is definitely not the same as the current form of democracy; and even those regarded as symbols of democracy today were not always intact, but rather in an evolving stage of true democracy. Thus of interest here is the question of whether traditional Yoruba society had some rubrics upon which a modern democratic structure can be built.

In re-tracing our steps we may repeat the question whether the features of the traditional Yoruba society are sufficient to warrant an ascription of democratic arrangement, and can we rightly or justifiably claim that the traditional Yoruba pattern of societal arrangement was actually democratic when we know that its system of governance was monarchical although at the surface it was the rule of an individual, yet under deeper scrutiny it revealed an inclusive participatory permissiveness to produce a democratic structure.

Conqueringly in this context we know that the constitutions of the traditional Yoruba Kingdoms were carefully balanced to allow distributive power among the *Oba*, the categories of chiefs, the spiritual and political office holders, as well as, representatives of different age and professional groups with historical evidence. For example, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the increase in the power of *Alafin* and the desire to curtail it by the *Oyo-mesi* led to serious tension which led to the continual demand by the *Oyo-mesi* for the abdication of *Alafin* and a later additional demand for the death of the *Aremo* (the crown prince) of *Alafin*, ending in the killing of some palace chiefs considered loyalists or associates of the abdicated monarch (Akinjogbin 1980: 137).

At a point, the tension was so high that some monarch had to resort to tactics of filling such strategic positions with their friends and loyalists to make it impossible for them to be rid of their power and office. For example, an *Alafin* in the 1730s used his constitutional power to appoint Jambu, his friend, as Basorun, although it did not work out well as the monarch had expected (Akinjogbin 1980: 137). In fact, the demand for abdication became so rampant that, while some monarchs took their rejections mildly and committed suicide; some others fought back and had to be met with greater force to be dislodged (Johnson 1956: 168-177). Thus this raises the question of the sustainability of the traditional democratic structure of the society, and whether the democratic structure of traditional Yoruba society would have survived even if it was not truncated by the advent of colonialism.

In conclusion, it suffices to claim that the monarchic democracy of the traditional Yoruba society was full of tension and to some extent lacked an adequate structure to moderate or resolve the tension generated by the measure to balance the power equation, and although the system ascribed central and executive power to the *Oba.*, the roles of the institutions meant to check the excesses were sometimes weak in the face of the powerful and immensely influential Oba superstructure within Yoruba traditional society.

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