

Traditional Socio-Political Structures in Nigeria

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Pre-colonial Nigeria was in the past the home of a variety of ethnic groups, the most important of which were the Hausa, Fulani, Nupe and Tiv in the north; Yoruba, Annang, Edo, Ibibio, Ibo, Ijo, Itsekiri and Urhobo in the south. These groups had evolved, throughout different epochs, a variety of political systems which were basically linked to their system of beliefs¹. Prior to the fifteenth century, there were four main political entities viz the Kanem-Bornu Empire, near Lake Chad², their neighbouring Hausa States to the east³, and the loosely-organised Ibo communities, near the mouth of the Niger. Subsequent changes modified slightly this traditional organisation by integrating the Kanem-Bornu Empire and the Hausa States to give birth to the Fulani Empire. The three entities (*Fulani Empire, Yoruba Kingdoms and the Ibo Tribes*) displayed differences in the kind of political organisation which could be ranked from a highly centralised system to a decentralised one⁴. The present paper tries to identify this organisation, delineating at the same time the reasons behind such a difference. The latter could be clearly understood through the analysis, in each system apart, of the position and the prerogatives of the ruler, central and provincial

administrations, and finally the organisation of the army.

1./ The Fulani Empire:

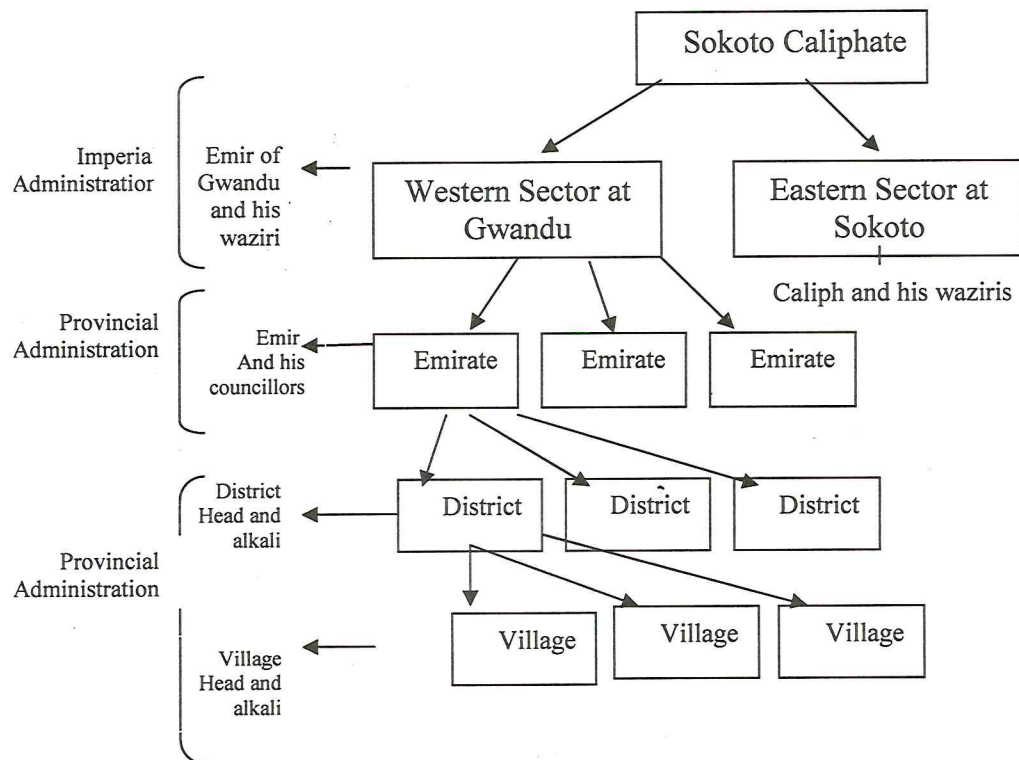
The Fulani Empire dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century following a rebellion by the Fulani people against the Hausa rulers. The former were cattle nomads who, by the fifteenth century, had settled in Hausaland in search of good pasturelands⁵. They intermingled with the Hausa, raising themselves to an important intellectual and religious elite. By 1804 the decay of the religious faith of the Hausa rulers and their corruption led a Fulani scholar, called Othman Dan Fodio, to wage with his followers a holy war against them. Four years later, the Fulani forces were able to win and seized consequently political power from the Hausa. They brought the independent Hausa States under a single government, taking over at the same time their system of rule which was based on a well-organised fiscal system, a code of land tenure, a system of delegated administration and a trained judiciary.

The Fulani jihad had then given birth to the Fulani Empire which succeeded eventually to extend its rule over a large area both to the east and south. There were, however, areas which didn't come under the control of the Fulani, namely the state of Bornu, the pagan tribes of the Central Plateau and the Benue Valley⁶. Indeed the success of this jihad was mainly due to religious motives. In fact, Islam gave the rebels a strong zeal to combat the corrupt Hausa. Crowder states other reasons viz. the light cavalry of the Hausa and their long experience of fighting⁷.

The Fulani Empire (1804-1830), or as sometimes known as the Sokoto Caliphate, reflected a high degree of centralisation. The Caliph was the head of the Mohammedan state, the sole political leader and the final judge. He was entitled with the appointment and deposition of Emirs, provincial rulers, and had complete control over the lands under his jurisdiction. In this respect, he owed his people service and obedience as long as they upheld the tenets of Islam. The Caliph derived his power from Muslim faith and Maliki law. He was assisted in his functions by an advisory council called "Magalisar Sarki" but he did not feel himself bound to follow their advice unless they expressed his own views ⁸. The Caliph was then a great authority holder who was endowed with large executive powers.

The Sokoto Caliphate, up to its conquest by the British, was divided into two administrative sectors: the western sector was administered by Abdulahi, brother of Fodio with headquarters at Gwandu and the eastern sector was put under Bello, son of Fodio with headquarters at Sokoto. The two sectors comprised a number of Emirates, administered each by an Emir and his councillors. Though the Emirs enjoyed a considerable rate of autonomy, they had to recognise the central power. In fact, they owed the Caliph both political and religious allegiance. Besides, the waziri (councillors of the Caliph of Sokoto and Gwandu) constantly toured the Emirates to assess tribute, settle disputes and control administrative affairs. Local rule in each Emirate was exercised through district heads and village headmen in addition to the trained Muslim judges, known as Alkali. Each Alkali sat with a number of clerks, called mallams, to administer

Muslim law. Diagram below displays both of provincial and local administrations.



The Sokoto Caliphate was indeed able to lay its hegemony over a wide area, including, though with less efficiency the pagan tribes. Though its sovereignty was shorter in comparison with other West African empires such as the Ghana Empire (700-1200), it possessed nonetheless an efficient standing body which enabled it to withstand attacks from the Emirates of Kebbi, Gobir, Zamfara and Nupe, where Fulani administration was not effectively established on the inhabitants, requiring usually intervention from Gwandu and Sokoto forces⁹. Yet in spite of this, the Sokoto Caliphate created a large and secure area where trade flourished. The imposition, later, of British

colonial rule over this territory had undoubtedly ended the supremacy of the Sokoto Caliphate but the British had nonetheless recognised the high degree of organisation of the Fulani when contrasted with that of the Yoruba.

2./ The Yoruba Kingdoms:

The Yoruba States emerged between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries¹⁰. The first state, Ife Ife, was founded by Oduduwa who had migrated with the Yoruba from Egypt. Later his sons dispersed into the neighbouring lands to found their own states, the most important of which were Oyo and Benin. By the eighteenth century, Oyo had succeeded to bring under its rule a large area of Yorubaland, bounded on the north by the Niger, on the south by the mangrove swamps, on the east by Benin and on the west by modern Togo¹¹. Similarly, Benin had, at its height, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, expanded from Idah to Lagos.

The Yoruba States had, like the Sokoto Caliphate, developed a centralised system of government, though with considerable differences. The Yoruba ruler, or Alafin, was the head of all Yorubaland. He was recognised as Ekeji Orisa, that is companion of gods, owner of land and lord of life¹². He was believed to have magic religious powers which enabled him to communicate with the spirits of the dead in order to ensure the prosperity and health of his people¹³. He was the proprietor of tribal land, controlling both its allocation to the cultivators and the distribution of food to the people in case of famine. His sources of authority were derived from familial legitimacy and religious rituals. His authority,

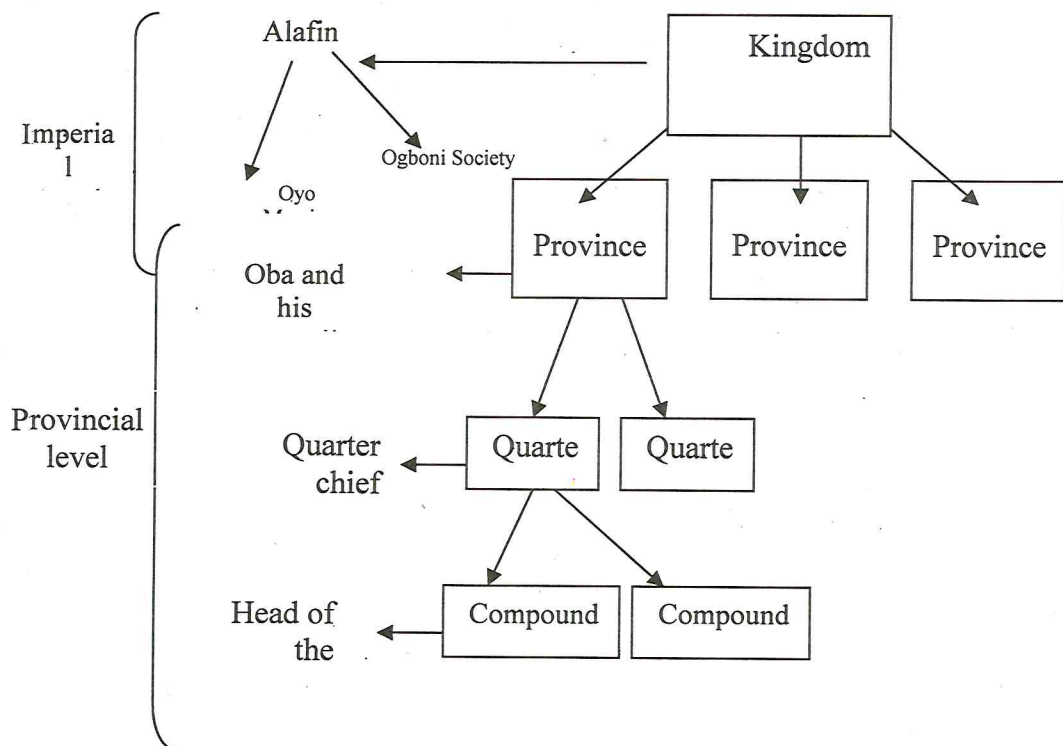
however, wasn't as absolute as that of the Caliph. All his decisions were much more dependent on the agreement of his councillors who undertook the state's acts on his behalf, giving him the status of a constitutional monarch¹⁴. Besides, there were checks on the Alafin's power represented by two bodies. The first was the Oyo Messi, a council of seven members led by the Basorun. Whenever they suspected the Alafin of by-passing his authority, they forced him to commit suicide. The second was a secret society, known as the Ogboni Society, which checked the authority not only of the Alafin but also that of the Oyo Messi¹⁵. The decision concerning for instance the rejection of the Alafin could only be validated if approved by the Ogboni¹⁶.

Notwithstanding these checks on the power of the Alafin, he was indeed strongly venerated by the people. This was probably due to superstitious beliefs. Jean Bruyas describes the attitude of the Yoruba when they encounter their king as follows:

*'When these kind people meet the king, they never look at him face to face but they squat on their backs, with their hands in front of their face. They don't raise their eyes until the king orders them to, and when they get away they don't turn their back, but creep backwards with the same veneration'*¹⁷

This image shows that the Yoruba ruler was a sort of a "fetish"¹⁸. In fact, he seldom stepped out of his palace, and if anyone saw him by accident he was to die because it was believed that he had committed a sin.

The Oyo Kingdom comprised a number of provinces whose degree of autonomy differed from that of the Emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate. They were indeed subjected to the Alafin whose seat of government was in Oyo, but only nominally. In other words, they recognised the authority of the Alafin by paying tribute to the Ajele, representatives of the Alafin in the provinces, and in return they benefited from the protection of the Oyo army. Each province or town was ruled by an Oba who was chosen from the lineage of the founder of the town by the other lineages. The latter, together with other bodies, supplied chiefs to form a council exercising control on the power of the Oba. At the local level, the operative unit for administrative purposes was the quarter under the responsibility of a quarter-chief. The quarter was formed of a group of compounds which were based on the extended family or lineage. Each compound might include a population varying between 20 and 2,000 but with an average of between 100 and 200 ¹⁹. The quarter-chief, who was usually a descendent of one of the oldest families, exercised both social and jurisdictional functions. The diagram below portrays the administration both in the imperial and the provincial levels.



The welfare and stability of the Yoruba Kingdoms were due to an efficiently-organised army. In Oyo the head of the army was a titled slave, known as Are-Ona-Kakanfo²⁰. He was responsible to the Alafin whereas the army was raised by the Oyo Messi. The Kakanfo had to deplore all his strength to win. If he was defeated, he was then to commit suicide. This explains the reason behind the success of the Oyo army. There was no doubt that this rigid rule enabled the army to expand over the neighbouring lands. It is relevant here to add that the Yoruba army, unlike the Fulani military body, was not only conceived for protection purposes but also for the provision of slaves²¹.

By the nineteenth century, the Yoruba States started to decline owing to pressures from the north and west. The Fulani warriors with their expansion design had succeeded to conquer some northern areas, while from the west there was the pressure of Dahomey with its women warriors. The slave trade activities had also undermined the cohesion of the Yoruba Kingdoms plunging them into a constant state of war, which finally ended with the intervention of the British.

3./ The Ibo Tribes:

In the east of the Yoruba States lived the Ibo Tribes which didn't evolve centralised states such as those of the Fulani or the Yoruba. This was probably due to natural conditions like forests which partly inhibited communication and made therefore the establishment of large systems a difficult task ²². The Ibo-speaking peoples and their neighbours to the east had virtually loose political structures. The largest unit recognising a single authority was that of a village. The authority, though of a little character, was divided among the kinship heads and members of the title-holding societies. The chief, who was the senior ward head, was simply a ritual functionary, leaving political leadership to persons of prestige, notably those who held titles. Generally, the acquisition of a title required the possession of a given quantity of yams and a certain number of wives and children ²³. When compared with the Caliph or the Alafin, it could be said that the Ibo chief had no substantial powers, but this did not prevent him from having a certain influence, owing essentially to a wide belief in ancestor-worship and witchcraft.

The Ibo villages presented the same characteristics with those of the Yoruba. Each village was divided into wards or quarters, headed each by the ward head. The quarters were further subdivided into compounds, including each, one or two patrilineages. Other units such as the age sets had also flourished in the Ibo communities. Age sets were associations of people born in the same year with their own leader. They were entrusted with certain tasks such as the seizing of criminals, the collection of fines as well as the clearing of the bush paths or the building of a village-meeting place²⁴.

It was usually difficult for the decentralised Ibo communities to raise a large and standing army. This had a strong bearing on the movements of people which were fraught with danger²⁵. Yet the Ibo people had their own group of men for the defence of the community. It is pertinent, however, to remark here that the Ibo warriors, though not lacking in physical strength, could not be compared with the Fulani or Yoruba armies which had each a light cavalry.

The three socio-political structures examined above help draw certain conclusions. First, while the Northern Emirates and to a lesser extent the Yoruba States symbolised unity, the loosely-organised Ibo Tribes favoured the development of individual feeling. Besides, the scale of political organisation evolved in these three political entities was highly influenced by the system of beliefs. The Fulani Empire reflected the example of a centralised system where Islamic law framed the political life of the Caliphate. Again in the Yoruba States animism and ancestor-worship had

encouraged the rise of a kingdom whose ruler was sacredly venerated but with no executive power. Finally, the political structure evolved by the Ibo people was directly associated with ancestor-worship and witchcraft.

Apart from the religious motives, other factors had certainly had their impact on these different organisations. The case of external contact with other communities as a result for instance of emigration, trade or conquest was an outstanding factor in determining the kind of the political system. The Fulani Empire was an example par excellence of the impact engendered by the interaction between the Hausa and the Fulani. By contrast, the isolation of the Ibo, owing to the thick forest, was an important element in shaping their system of rule. The period from the fifteenth century onwards marked the inauguration of a new phase of external contact between these traditional political structures and a new type of peoples, the Europeans who had a completely different system of beliefs and values, and most of all a relatively developed technology. This contact was undoubtedly to initiate other changes and to affect these societies in a different way.

Bibliographical notes

1. On this matter Lanciné Sylla says: 'c'est le mythe, c'est la religion avant la géographie qui détermine le groupement et le système politique'. Lanciné Sylla 'Réflexions sur la Typologie Classique des Systèmes Politiques Africains' in Annales Universitaires D'Abidjan, série D, Tome 10, 1977, p 73

2.The Kanem-Bornu Empire was originally a cluster of independent states which later developed a more centralised organisation. The first state arose around the ninth century, both east and west of Lake Chad. By the eleventh century the Kanem-Bornu States embraced Islam as their official religion, facilitating thus the contact between Western Sudan and North Africa. John.G.Jackson, Introduction to African Civilisations, Carol Publishing Group Edition, 1990, p 218-219

3.The Hausa States emerged around the tenth century. There were seven Hausa States namely: Biram, Divia, Gobir, Kano, Katsina, Rano and Zaria. These states lived independently of each other, but they co-operated between themselves for common objectives. The nucleus of each state was a city or a town in which the seat of government was located. The Hausa States embraced Islam after 1400. Their contact with Muslim States such as Songhay and Kanem brought new ideas and practices in the region. Ibid, p 220-221

4. At this level, it is important to define these terms. The first is used to describe systems which recognise a single authority, whereas the second denotes a system where authority is of a very limited character. According to Jean. Lamphear, the term centralised refers to states with political authority vested in the hands of hereditary rulers, while the term decentralized refers to communities where political power is regulated by interactions between kinship groups, or is maintained by a congregation of elders whose status is determined by their rank in an age-set system. John Lamphear, 'Aspects of Early African History', in Phyllis.M.Martin& Patrick.O.Omeara, Africa, Indiana University Press, 1986, p 72

5.B.G.Martin traces back the migration of the Fulani to the eighteenth century. B.G.Martin, 'The Spread of Islam in Africa', in Phyllis, op cit, p 94

6. Thomas Hodgkin, 'Background to Nigerian Nationalism Why is the North Different?' in West Africa, 1951, October, p 821
7. Michael Crowder, The Story of Nigeria, London, 1978, p 174
8. Peter.K.Tibenderana, 'The Irony of Indirect Rule in Sokoto Emirate, Nigeria' in African Studies Review, V 31, N1, 1988, p 70
9. M.Crowder , op cit, p 174
10. Paul Fordham, Geography of African Affairs, England, 1965, p 111
11. M.Crowder, op cit, p 39
12. Ibid, p 41
13. He was supposed to secure easily the help of ancestors in order to stop such calamities as floods and famine.
14. Okoi A rkpo, 'Self-Government and the Tribal Outlook' in West Africa, June, 1951, p 556
15. Describing a secret society, Simon & Phobe Ottenberg state that it is '...usually a men's group...it often involves complicated initiation procedures and constitutes a major force in training for adulthood. It may help to maintain social order within a community by enforcing the rules of correct behaviour among the population', Simon & Ottenberg, 'Social Groupings', in Mc Ewan Peter, Robert Sutcliff, The Study of Africa, London, 1968, p 36.
16. In Benin there were also two checks on the Oba: the Uzama, or hereditary kingmakers and the town chiefs. M.Crowder, op cit, p 46.
17. Jean Bruyas 'La Royauté en Afrique Noire', quoted in Lumbala Biduaya 'L'Organisation du Pouvoir Traditionnel Africain', in Le Mois en Afrique, N 245-246, Paris, 1986, p 122.
18. Obafemi Awolowo 'The Native Administrations of Nigeria', in West Africa, July, 1945, p 361.
19. Josef Gugler & William Flanagan, Urbanisation and Social Change in West Africa, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p 23.
20. M.Crowder, op cit, p 41.
21. The Benin State constantly waged wars to compensate for the losses resulting from the human sacrifices made to honour the Gods and the spirits. For ample details see James D.Graham, 'The Slave Trade Depopulation and Human Sacrifice in Benin History', in Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines, V (v) ,N 18, Paris, p 317-332.

22. The Ibo country was a zone of dense tropical forest. On the impact of natural conditions, Lanciné Sylla says: 'des montagnes hostiles ou des forêts non propices au groupement des hommes n'abritent que des poignées d'hommes n'ayant pas besoin d'une structure étatique complexe et centralisée pour vivre politiquement', Lanciné Sylla, op. cit. p 76.
23. H.Kan.Offonry, 'The strength of Ibo Clan Feeling', in West Africa, June, 1951, p 489.
24. W.M Hailey, An African Survey, revised edition, London, 1957, p 34.
25. Ibid, p 453