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Pre-Colonial Political System in Ebira-land

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Abstract

This paper attempts a reconstruction of the Ebira Political Administration before the arrival of the colonialist into the political scene of the Ebira people. The Ebira political system, before the advent of colonialism practice a decentralized system of administration characterized by a nuclei clan and age grade system thereby resenting any form of unified central authority that is capable of wielding general control over the clans and age-grade. The Ebira people, unlike what is Eminent today, have a different political and administrative setting during the pre-colonial era. Before the colonial construct and manipulations of Ebira political system, the Ebira practiced a purely indigenous system of local self-rule anchored on the clan and age-grade system that has become a well-entrenched and popularly accepted pattern of governing the people in their different settlement patterns. The head of the clan was the oldest male member, though his political power was remarkably nominal, having authority mainly over his immediate family. The clan head represented the economic interest properties in trust for the clan. This paper, also, seek to examine the rationale behind the forced change in the political arrangements of the Ebira people against the existing status-quo observed then, its economic and social implication on the people of Ebira land. The central objectives of this paper are to unravel the real intentions of the colonialist sudden meddling and impedance of the Ebira polity and the aftermath of this foray.

Introduction

There are varied and conflicting accounts about the origins of the Ebira Tao, also known as Ebira Ehi people what was however, never been in dispute was the fact that the Ebira along with their jukun brothers originally migrated from Egypt and the Sudan region. Attempt to trace the actual origin of the people have not been easy. The early works in

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this direction are full of conflicting claims and contradictions. What is however certain among scholars is that the various ethnic groups of the Ebira race were said to have migrated at various times before the first World War, about (c. 1500), to their present settlement which are respectively located in the states of Adamawa, Yobe, Taraba and Gondola among the jukuns, Plateau among the Nassarawas, Benue among the Igala-extraction of Itobe and Ajaokuta, Kwara and Kogi among the dominant Ebira Ebira Tao and Ebira koto people of Okene, Ajaokuta, Adavi, Okehi, Koton Karfe and Ilokoja Local government areas and Edo among the Igbiras in present-day Edo state of Nigeria.¹

The pre-colonial Ebira community was essentially segmentary. It consisted of five principal clans among several others namely, Okengwe, Eika, Okehi, Adavi and Ihima. The respective priests (head) of these clans were known as Ohindase, Adeika, Ohiomahi, Asema and Obobanyi.² Each clan was self-governing and did not regard any other as superior to it. Significantly, the the clan was the main unit of political organization. The post of the clan head was normally conferred on the oldest living male member of the clan. His religious duties and disciplinary powers were however limited to his own family. His political influence was quite small and although, he presided over the meetings of his clan. His judgement was determined largely by the consensus of opinion of the elder. The Ebira polity was designed and had been adhered to, strictly along these tenets before the advent of the British and the subsequent disruption of the existing status-quo.

British administration in Nigeria in the 20th century can best be understood in its political settings. From 1898, the British government sought to establish and maintain a colonial state in Nigeria. This long process involved a number of important measures including the removal of all visible African opposition to the imposition, expansion and consolidation of British central authority over the territory later known as Nigeria. A succession of British officials used coercion and diplomacy in former Northern and Southern Nigeria to reduce African opposition to a minimum. By 1914, Britain has succeeded in making herself a new paramount ruler over most of Nigeria.³

The bid to conquer Ebiraland, like other pre-colonial independent states and principalities in what later became the Northern provinces, effectively began in 1860, when the British firm, the National African Company, had become firmly established in the Niger Benue confluence area within the headquarters of Ilokoja. As their well-known stock-in-trade, the British conquest was decisive and brutal. Yet as dramatic as the conquest was pursued, it was typically, inconclusive because the Ebira put up resistance to the intervention in their geo-polity for more than One and half decades, marking it as one of the polities where the British had difficult task in establishing an ubiquitous political control and despotic socio-economic order.⁴

Early Administrative Patterns of the Ebira People

The early administration of the Ebira predated the colonial conquest of Nigeria in 1900. This was as far back as Circa 1500. As a purely indigenous system of local-self-rule, the Administration was anchored on the clan and age-grade system that has become a well-entrenched and popularly accepted pattern of governing the people in their different settlement patterns. The clan and age-grade administrative structure operates in a hierarchical and pyramidal context, with the most senior clan chief or clan head as he is called, at the head of pyramid. This nuclei clan and age-grade system inherently resents any form of unified central authority that wields general control over the motley of clan and age-groups. It was the European conquest of Nigeria in the 1900s that brought these disparate ethnic and clan groups under one central paramount ruler. The resentment of a single central authority manifested and still manifests itself in the Republican life-style and nature of the Ebira as a people wherever they are. Thus, no single clan chief is accepted to be superior to the other by rank. They respect this calendar age differential where-ever they meet for common purpose. This is to say that the typical Ebira man is inherently individualistic and resentful of central authoritarianism. What he loves best is to consolidate his own little clannish empire or mushroom of little republics within a given polity where each unit has its own leader independent of their clan units.⁵

In the pre-colonial times, the administration of all the clan heads constituting a community in Ebiraland lay in the hands of the elders, influential individuals and the chief priest (Ohinoyi).⁶ The group of elders consisted of the clan heads, kindred heads and other people whose age, maturity and wisdom commended themselves to the other elders. The composition of this group was more-or-less constant because whenever the representative of a clan died, his place was taken by another member of the same clan. For this reason, the group could, in fact, be termed the council of elders. Its meeting normally took place in the market place or any other central open place⁷ as was the case with the Igbo in the pre-colonial period. In the same vein, Habibu A. Sani argues that in those early days of the ancestors, whenever there was a problem to be collectively solved or a special occasion to be celebrated, the clan heads and age-group leaders usually put their heads together at a family meeting where possible solutions were debated and agreed.⁸ An influential individual (Onoru) might be any man (apart from the Chief Priest) who, because of personal attainments in wealth, war, physical or magical power had won the respect of others and could become famous not only in his own clan group, but throughout Ebiraland.⁹

However, he had no political authority in other clan groups. By virtue of his position in society, he normally succeeded in imposing his will upon others or in getting the meeting of the council of elders to respect his views. He could therefore be regarded as the *de facto* head or co-ordinator of the council of elders. In many respects, the Onoru's word was law because the people feared going against him as he could deal with them severely through the use of physical force or otherwise. In fact, this was the main, apart from the council of elders, around whom political authority revolved. The meeting of elders could hardly take a decision whenever he was absent, because it was realized that were, he to be opposed to it, he could obstruct its execution.¹⁰ The philosophy and practice was that might was right, and so it was in practice.

The office of the chief priest was rotated, from clan to clan or from kindred to kindred. The chief priest was the overall religious head of the Ebara community and the

position was occupied on a rotational basis among the five major clans that formed the community. It was the responsibility of the clan whose turn it was to provide an incumbent. On this ground, one can talk of central leadership in Ebiraland, which had the responsibility of coordinating the affairs of the council of elders in the pre-colonial period. The function of the office was basically religious. The chief priest saw to the well-being of the society. He made sure that peace was maintained in the land and settled quarrels among the clans whenever the need arose.

Politically, he was usually responsible for calling the meetings of the council of elders to discuss and decide on any pressing problem(s) in the interest of the community. The office of the chief priest did not normally go to the oldest man, but to a middle-aged man, though maturity was a considering factor.¹¹ Two or more candidates might compete or be earmarked for the position, but it was up to the meeting of the council of elders of the clan to decide who was the most suitable.¹² Knowledge of the priesthood and the various rituals as well as divination, by the would-be or prospective candidate, were of advantage. The people who had the final say in the selection process and determined who was chosen were the diviners.¹³ If they all agreed that the proposed man had divine support, all was well. Nobody would be made chief priest against the decision of the diviners and hardly would any individual ever dare to assume the office without divine support. Having been selected, the failure to perform his duties or the occurrence of calamities during a priestly tenure of office could mean death for him and it would mean a bad reputation for his clan, which sometimes led to its being excluded from holding the chieftaincy.¹⁴

The duties of the Chief Priest, therefore, were primarily religious; to keep the land or the country good. He presided over all public religious occasions and fertility cult ceremonies and was closely identified with the crops. The supervision and the timing of the annual nocturnal ancestral worship festival was one of his most important duties because it was believed that unless the festival was celebrated at the correct time, calamity would follow.¹⁵

Therefore, the chief priest performed religious, political and economic functions and was the mobilizing force

until the colonial period, when a new kind of political leadership, to bring all Ebiraland communities under a central authority was fashioned out by the British colonialist through their policy or method of divide and rule.

Traditional Order and Governance

Although much of what has been said above include the question of traditional order and governance, yet there are some points that needs specific or further consideration below:

Hierarchical Traditional Society

Before the British advent there was a recognized hierarchy in Ebiraland society. The people's way of life was rooted in their religion. At the centre of every home compound, as had been in the case of Benue region, was *ete ohuoje* an earth stone shrine through which *Ohi-Ohuoje* (compound head) along with his male relations, maintained spiritual contact with his ancestors through sacrifices.

The next place of authority was ***Iregba*** (lineage temple) covering the affairs of a group of personality related kindred or clans with one immediate ancestor. In a matter cutting across different compounds, the affairs of the groups were settled at the temple if efforts to do so outside the presence of the ancestors had failed. Otherwise, issues were settled by meetings of clan heads under the guidance of priests-chief as representative of the ancestors of the group.

At the head of all the lineage temples was the Ebiraland ancestral Temple as established by Ododo and Obaji. It was the highest place of authority where spiritual contact was maintained with Ebiraland Tao ancestors whose relics was used in the establishment of the temple to settle matters cutting across lineage temples or cover the affairs of the entire Ebiraland. It was from this temple that laws covering Ebiraland emanated¹⁶

Gerontocracy

The oldest male in the clan was the head of the clan and he presided over the affairs of his clan. In a serious matter cutting across clans in a clan group, the clan heads constituted the council of Elders along with any powerful

individual with role to play therein. The convener (normally the priest-chief) would call on the elders in turn to speak in order of clan (rather than individual) seniority. It did not matter whether the most senior clan had just a few surviving members while the junior ones had millions of members. It was not for fun that God allowed one man (symbolized by his clan) to see the light of this world before the other.

Should the matter be so serious to defy solution, appeal or reference could go to the ancestral temple covering the group. Any decision taken there through divination and experience of elders as officiating priests would be regarded as 'final' when conveyed. If a matter should affect the interest of Ebiraland as a whole or the interest of clan groups with separate temples and it still defied solution, appeal or reference would go to Ododo-Obaji temple (The highest temple) for determination.

If a disputing party was too impatient to follow peaceful settlement procedure and declared war, the other would accept the challenge and battle with take place according to the rules of the game. Any war conducted was normally on clan to clan rather than on clan group basis. Causes normally related to land, adultery or murder. A notorious murderer or criminal might be handed over by his clan to another party to die a compensation death to avert war. Compensation might also be accepted to avert war in case of adultery.¹⁷

Traditional Seniority Criteria

In African tradition, the most senior member takes custody of any institutionalized cult or relaxing the family, clan or group's ancestor. This was a hallowed custom. In Ebiraland, the most revered cult, governing the life of entire Ebiraland was ancestral worship, the religion or way of life of the people in those days. Laws and modes of behaviour were fashioned on ancestral authority through the ancestral temple. The fountain-head of all ancestral Temple in Eika-Okehi. It was the presided over by the most senior 'sons' Ododo and Obaji. Also, in the area of festivities, festivals were staged in turns in a sort of waves from the hugest spiritual center of Eika-Okehi to others. The order of performance was set by the two eldest sons (Ododo and Obaji) to whom homage

was paid by masquerades throughout Ebiraland. Ebira tradition thus provides the criteria for ascertaining seniority in any group. The answer to the question of who takes precedence in ancestral affair governing the life of a group is the answer to the question of who is the most senior in that group.¹⁸

Priest-Chiefs

Priest-Chiefs in Ebiraland were the representatives of the ancestors of the clan or clan groups for which they stood. This was why those to assume the office were defied for the position by passing through the process of death and funeral ceremonies (rites of passage). That was why also there were strict rules governing their appointment: candidates should be full-born; should be of ripe age; should be mentally sound and physically whole (free from deformities); should be morally upright (keeping to taboos and avoiding abominations); should not have applied for sought of the post in any way; both parents should not be alive; etc; and suitability should be confirmed through divination.¹⁹

Table 1: Examples of Clan Families in Ebira Land

Okene	Ezi Avada and Okovi
Okengwe	Ezi Okovi and Agada
Eganyi.	Ezi Ogu-Onoko (Ezi toto), Ezi Ede

Adavi LGA:

Ezi Upopuvete (Eldest)
Ezi Uka
Ezi Adeika
Ezi Uhuwami
Ezi Aniku

Okehi LGA:

Eika Amibobo, Ehaga, Ezi, Anchi, Ezi avasa, Ezi Aniyewe,
Ezi Egiri, Ezi Avi,
Ihima. Ezi Emani, Ezi Ure, Ezi Ogu²⁰

Note: Only some of the major clan families and groups have been mentioned here.

Advent of British and Break down of Traditional Order

In the 1890s the British Colony in Lokoja was still very much under threat by the Bids forces that had established themselves in Janna as a point of departure for their economic imperialism and slave raiding. After abortive communications on various issues, the British Royal Niger Company constabulary stormed Janna in 1897 in their push toward Bida (and eventual overthrow of the caliphate) with the declared aim of stopping the slave trade, which actually was part of their scheme in European scramble for Africa. The s'Nupe' forces were pursued to Bida; the town was captured and the palace was occupied following the Emir's flight. Thus, lokoja was destined to be the first headquarters of Northern Nigeria while Ebiraland was to become a district under Kabba Division and later a Division in Kabba province as colonial territorial administration got reorganised.²¹

It is clear from the preceding sections that the Ebira Tao were well organised in time of settlement, peace, and that there was a traditional hierarchy in the society. The arrival of British was said to have been foretold at the annual divination exercise. The diviners warned that the expected invaders were white beings akin to spirits whom people would not be able to drive back by war. The invaders came as expected and there was no concerted effort for an all-out war with them. This was not a question of the diviners having prepared grounds of psychological defeat and military knock-out. As history shows, there was no way, Ebiraland could have remained an undefeated island in the area conquered by the white man and designated as Nigeria.²²

The British took over authority from a traditional order whose system they did not understand. In place of gerontocracy operated on ancestral spiritual authority, they introduced a new pattern run purely on secular lines with military backing. In the circumstances, cases previously decided on basis of 'truth' as confirmed by divination were won on the strength of lying, professional witnessing, amount of fee offered and size of bribe taken. Hired witnesses can now come to court and give rehearsed false testimony without fear of spiritual consequences or society's reaction. Judgement

was given on the strength of the evidence before the court even when the judge knew personally that the evidence was false. The era of trading in falsehood had arrived. Other illicit activities of the Whiteman's agent further compounded the situation.²³

To the traditionalist, the world had turned topsy-turvy. Their secular education trained children as opponents of their society. The educated youths got posted to various villages as teachers, police, court clerks, etc. They could now marry women outside their family compounds. Women felt free to divorce their husbands in favour of new suitors and courts became like market places for divorce seekers. School girls could now move beyond mothers' watchful eyes. By the 1950s two beautiful young Ebira women were in the open sex trade and the way was paved for some Ebira girls to cheapen themselves outside Ebiraland. The old compound walls had broken down and Islam was not strong enough to completely take control. There was also the problem of falsehood which came with the British administration, the British engaged in propaganda that before their arrival there was no central authority in Ebiraland and that they found a segmentary society in which the various members operated as independent warring groups, this arose out of a policy to justify their invasion and manner of administration.²⁴

Colonial Chieftaincy and Governance

The method used by colonial authorities was to appoint locals as agents or Chris from amongst the people and use them to carry out their orders until the administration of the entire Ebiraland became centralized with the creation of Ebira division. The first Whiteman's chief in Ebiraland was Owudah Adidi of Eika a war hero who engaged in commerce with the Nupe warriors after peace settlement with Ebiraland. He was in kabba when British (Royal Niger Company) forces stormed that town. Owudah turned friendly to the victorious forces and returned home as whiteman's chief agent. Ambitious individuals wishing to contact the British went to Owudah Adidi.²⁵

The Evolution Central Administration in Ebiraland

The political organization in Ebiraland did not meet the aspirations of the British administrators; hence there was the need for a central leader to whom authority could be delegated by the British colonial power. The Ebira were therefore forced to look for an influential person to take charge of the affairs of the area under the British administration. This was the beginning of real central administration in a society that was hitherto non-centralised. The influential individual and the chief priest would not fit into the kind of central leadership required by the indirect rule system as neither of them was ready to submit to the control of the British authorities. Reference is made below to the role of Agidi, an influential individual, who stood against British occupation of Ebiraland. However, the British created one and imposed him on the Ebira as we shall demonstrate below.

Meanwhile, the evolution of central administration in Ebiraland, which resulted in the emergence of a monarchical institution, was not without some difficulties. First, was the task of turning a non-centralized society into a unitary administration. Second, was how to get a unifying leader acceptable to all. Third, was whether any clan was ready to surrender its independence to another. Nonetheless, the Ebira people were used to coming together in the face of crisis. Thus, in moments of war, they came together as a united front to ward off the incursion of the enemy. Indeed, the Ebira people had built strong confidence in their warfare and 'superior' weapons – bows and arrows. The invasion of Ebira country by the Nupe (1865-1900) did not make them doubt their military superiority.²⁶ The Nupe invaders were successfully resisted by the Ebira under a leader who later became Attah Omadivi. The Nupe invasion was organized in the form of raids for slaves. But the Ebira people were soon to realize that their warfare and their 'superior' weapons could not defend them against the British in 1902. In 1895, an outstation was placed at Kabba by the Royal Niger Company and a fort was built there by Captain Turner, an officer attached to the Niger Constabulary.²⁷

On 1st January, 1900, Frederick Lugard took over the government of Northern Nigeria from the Royal Niger Company and hoisted the British flag at Lokoja.²⁸ Kabba was formed into a province which included the Akoko, Kukuruku and Ebira countries, and was administered from Lokoja, which was also the headquarters of the protectorate of Northern Nigeria, with Sir William Wallace as its first Resident. In 1902, a small military escort led by Mr. Malcom and Lt. F.F.W. Byng-Hall sent into Ebira country was seen by the Ebira people as an incursion.²⁹ They refused to meet with the British demand for the supply of food, seeing this as a direct insult on their persons. Mr. Malcom and his party, outnumbered, were attacked with arrows by the Ebira and escaped by a night march to Kabba, arriving the next day. The British soldiers used this as *casus belli* and marched on them with fire arms. The Ebira country was subjugated and pacified. The resident in Ebiraland described the result of the expedition as follows: "The Ebira were no doubt severely punished during the expedition and I now find them very afraid of the whiteman."³⁰ With the defeat of the Ebira, the British then imposed their rule on them by politically uniting the various clans by force.

The British Interest in Northern Nigeria on the Eve of their Advent

The British and indeed the European contact with the various groups in Northern Nigeria dates back to the early exploration across the Sahara Desert. Through trading, particularly the trans-Saharan trade, the British became aware of some of the polities of Northern Nigeria. This was in fact a reason for the dispatch of the various expeditions and voyages of exploration. But it was only in the mid-19th century that the British became more interested in developing a close commercial relationship with the Niger-Benue territory where their traders had been operating. By the last quarter of the 19th century, the British firm, the National African Company (NAC), had outflanked other European competitors in the Niger-Benue trade.³¹ In fact, so intense were the rivalry, jealousy and suspicions among the competitive commercial European firms over acquisition of special territorial concessions in Africa that the Berlin West

African Conference was convened to settle issues and to design new rules of acquisition game. The Conference, which took place from November 13th, 1884 to February 20th, 1885 tried to bring some forms of discipline and sanity to a situation that looked as though it might rapidly get out of hand. With no African present, the rules for the partition of West Africa into units that were to become the basis of modern nations were determined. Understandably, geographical adjustment and allocation took into consideration the guidelines that had been set by the activities of European traders, missionaries and administrators in the eighty-old years since the official abolition of slave trade.³² With her firms already established in part of the region, what later becomes Northern Nigeria was assigned to Britain under the terms of the Berlin Conference. Convinced by the prospect of commercial and material gain in the Niger-Benue trade and indeed the entire Northern Nigeria, the British Government began to encourage its trading firm to consolidate its control over the region.³³

Through dubious treaties with some of the indigenous chiefs and community leaders, the company, which had by 1886 metamorphosed into the Royal Niger Company (RNC), obtained a charter to administer the territories claimed. In an apparent attempt to consolidate its hold on the trade of the region, to ward off other European rivals and to foist its civilization on the area, the company commenced military conquest of Northern Nigeria, beginning with the states bordering the Niger-Benue confluence area. This marked the end of the independence of the indigenous communities of the region. By 1900, when Lugard formally took control of British affairs in Northern Nigeria, a large number of polities, especially in the Niger-Benue confluence area, had been incorporated into the British Empire through military highhandedness. These included Ibi, Donga (1885), Bida, Ilorin (1897) and Wase (1898).³⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the Ebira people had well-structured and organised political administrative patterns, a group of non-centralized

communities that was based purely on indigenous system of local self-rule anchored on the clan and age-grade system. But the advent of the British led to the unwanted disruption of the then Ebira political administration. They succeed in bringing together groups of non-centralized communities (clans) under a central leadership. Via forceful means and coercion, they were able to suppress the Ebira natives amidst various resistance put up by them in order to secure their geo-polity. But the Ebiras had to succumb to British occupational forces because of the superior fire power they possessed.

Finally, the British had an agenda to pursue that had explained why the sudden impedance into the geo-polity of Northern Nigeria in general and the Ebira people in particular. They were determined to execute their imperialistic Agenda. They have made up their minds to establish a colonial state in Northern Nigeria, so Ebiraland was a part, a segment which is of importance in the larger region.

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