

## Chieftaincy Institution and Traditional Taboo in South-Western Nigeria: Review Article

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**Abstract:** The chieftaincy institution has come under severe criticism in Nigeria in recent times owing to the institution's ambiguous role in modern times (be it under the military or civilian dispensations). During the military regime, the institution was alleged to have co-habited with the military in running the government behind the curtain. In the civilian dispensation (both in the past and now), some of them were accused of partisan politics to the ridiculous extent of election rigging. Therefore, this study focuses on the chieftaincy institution and traditional taboo in South-western Nigeria, that is, how the chieftaincy institution employed traditional taboo to maintain peace, law and order in Yoruba speaking South-Western Nigeria in the past. This study relied on materials derived from oral testimonies received from traditional rulers, chiefs, elders, and some other custodian of culture of the people. Relevant information from available literatures on taboo provided the background to the study. This study is approached from a socio-historical perspective and the method employed is analytical of source materials. It is the opinion of this study that taboo which was one of the mechanisms used by the chieftaincy institution to maintain peace, law and order in the past; can still be relevant today.

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**Key words:** Chieftaincy institution, traditional taboo, civilian dispensations, Nigeria

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### INTRODUCTION

Crime and criminality have been associated with the people from time immemorial. Different people have adopted different strategies to contend with crime depending on their nature and extent. One thing is certain; a nation with a high incidence of crime cannot grow or develop. Hence, traditional taboo formed one of the mechanisms used to achieve peace and tranquility among the Yoruba speaking people of South-Western Nigeria. Before the advent of modern civilization, the normal norms of the people encouraged a need to fight crime using taboo. This was one major instrument of keeping peace between traditional rulers and their subjects and between men and their neighbours.

The word taboo means 'eewo' in Yorubaland, that is, that which is not worthwhile, not worth saying and so not worth eating and forbidden (Awolalu *et al.*, 1976). The action or conduct of one man within the community can affect other members for good or evil. In order to prevent man from becoming rebellious and thus endangering the welfare of the society, there are set patterns or codes of behaviour for individuals and the community as a whole. There are standards or norms to be observed. These norms or code of conduct can be seen as moral values and such things which are forbidden must not be done (Fabarebo, 2001). In other words, taboo is prohibited action and the breaking of it is followed by supernatural penalty.

It is equally important to mention while considering taboos, that covenant comes into focus when one enters into agreement with a divinity; such covenants usually have its sanctions and demands. One has to obey all the regulations of the cult and observe its taboo. Each divinity

usually has certain things, which are taboo to him. Among the Yoruba, all the worshipers of *Orisa Nla*, the arch divinity, must not drink palm wine because *Orisa Nla*, the arch-divinity, forbids it Fabarebo (2001).

In Yorubaland, taboo was one of the veritable instruments used in combating corruption within the chieftaincy institution or in unveiling indecency in office. However, actions of people are prevented, such as unacceptable ones, that are, against societal norms and values.

### DISCUSSION

Chieftaincy institution or kingship was of great importance to the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. Indeed, the institution was regarded as sacrosanct. The king (*Oba*) was the Chief executive and he has absolute control over the supreme organ of state, which comprised the High Chiefs known as *Oyomesi* in Oyo, *Iwarefa* in Ondo, *Iarefa* in Ekiti, to mention a few. The *Oba* derived his power from the tradition of kingship and the control of certain material resources obtained from tributary towns and villages under his jurisdiction. An *Oba* in Yorubaland is regarded as the source of honour of his town and has absolute control of all lands, as well as a role to play in the worship of deities.

Sacred kingship was the focal point of most of the Yoruba traditional structure from the earliest times. Kings (*Obas*) were rulers by every standard because they derived their executive, legislative and judicial functions from traditions long rooted, recognized and revered by their people. This could result in anger and punishment from the gods (Arifalo *et al.*, 2005) not conceived by their



subject as divine beings whose authority was not to be questioned, on this basis, the Yoruba conceive of and address their king as “*Oba alase ekeji orisa*” (King, the ruler and companion of gods). He is also addressed “*Kabiesi*” Arifalo *et al.* (2001) one whose authority cannot be queried.

In times past, the orders of the *Oba* were probably enforceable, for he was a sacred *Oba* who had performed rites which endowed him with special power to interpret the laws of his people. If the chiefs felt the *Oba* was exceeding his constitutional powers or governing badly, they had no legal redress but could refuse to co-operate with him or, as the ultimate political sanction, ask him to die and if he refused, they murdered him Lloyd (1962). This practice was common in Oyo.

In most Yoruba communities, the office of the king was hereditary in the family, but not necessarily from father to son or daughter. This practice was significantly different from what operate in Benin, where royal succession was by primogeniture Bradbury (1973). In other words, the *Edaiken* (heir apparent) automatically succeeded his father. In Ijebu, the principle of ‘*abidagba*’ was practiced; whereby a prince born on the throne is the only eligible person to the throne (Atanda, 2007).

In Akure, for example, three months after the demise of the king, the council of chiefs would meet under the leadership of the *Olisa* at Idiagba quarters to select a new king. All the titled men and women in the town were invited. Any interested citizens could be in attendance as observers. At the meeting, the *Iwaramefa* (Estate of Six) would proceed to consider the names of eligible candidates nominated by the royal families. Eligible candidates must have been born after their father had ascended the throne. It is pertinent to note that that the reigning king in Akure, *Oba Oluwadare Adepoju*, Osupa III’s father was never a king, although he is from the *Osupa* ruling house. This ruling house and the *Ojijogun* ruling house were recognized as the two ruling houses in Akure, and the chieftaincy is on rotational basis.

Be that as it may, the mother of eligible candidates must be *oloris*; that is, recognised wives of the king. Candidates must be of sound mind and character. They must have reached the age of maturity. It must be pointed out that a man born of the same mother as the late king could not succeed him Arifalo (2008). The *Ifa* oracle seemed to have a decisive role to play in the selection of kings in Yorubaland, this is to forestall calamity on the people. It is the belief of the people that the *Ifa* oracle through its priest will select the most suitable candidate for the throne. It was therefore a taboo for a king to emerge without consulting the *Ifa* oracle. Any king that emerges without the consent of any *Ifa* priest/oracle would have his tenure saddle with lawlessness, injustice and lack of peace in the society. This was not resistible.

After the selection, the installation ceremonies follow and this brought about a big change, the new *Oba* was believed to be given the specially preserved heart of his predecessor to eat, thereby not only gaining the sagacity

of a complete dynasty of the previous kings but manifesting, that there was one king spirit and father of his people, so he has now become transformed into a complete new being, the new king, from that moment became capable of calling upon the perennial prudence of his fore fathers, while conducting the affairs of his divine office. This was a common practice among the Yoruba communities, but this is gradually giving way due to civilization and Christianity (Adedoyin, 2008).

Kings in Yorubaland were regarded as the divine representatives of the gods on earth. They were raised to highest pedestal which a human being could attain in this world. They were often credited with various kinds of supernatural powers, including that of clairvoyance. They were regarded as the most powerful, the most knowing and the wisest of men. The privileges and rights of the king were derived from his position as the father of his people. Absolute obedience was due to the king from his people as well as profound respect. The king was seen as a semi-god because of stages that he had passed through during the ceremonies of coronation. In Oyo, a king elect must be taken to *Ipebi*, where the dos and don’ts will be spelt out to him. To do the contrary will amount to taboo. He had to be maintained and kept prosperous. The prestige of people, their wealth and prosperity had to be reflected in him. Yoruba kings were objects of veneration and worship; they were sacred (Johnson, 1997). The sacredness of the king must have arisen from the fact that most of the *Orisas* were originally human beings, who distinguished themselves by great and remarkable deeds and who after their death, became objects veneration *Sango, Ogun Oya, Obatala* etc. belong to this group.

Only kings created and conferred chieftaincy titles in Yorubaland. Their authority, with their council of chiefs, extended to all affairs including administration of the town, the fixture and arrangement of the major festivals. They expected their chiefs of various quarters in the capital and of the outlying districts; their chiefs of various quarters in the capital and of the outlying districts to keep them informed of any important incidents which took place in their areas and adhered strictly to traditional taboo of the land, so that peace and tranquility will be achieved (Adetoyinbo, 2008).

In theory, kings have the power of life and death over their people and were not answerable to them for any of their actions. In practice, however, Yoruba kings were not that absolute. For example, the *Ewi* of Ado-Ekiti was the chief executive and he had absolute control over the supreme organ of state, which comprised the *Ewi, Ihare, Ijoye* and his *Ihare*. The functions of *Ihare* chiefs were, primary, to advice the *Oba* (EWI). The *Ijoye* were responsible for conveying the decisions of the *Oba* to their own compounds and initiating any necessary action. No member of the royal lineage might hold either type of title (Lloyd, 1962). The king derived his power from the traditional kingship and control of certain material resource obtained from tributary towns and jurisdiction. He was regarded as the source of all honour in the town and absolute control of all lands (Johnson, 1997).



In Ondo, tribute paying village were given to resident chiefs called *Oloja* who received tributes and other services and acted as patrons of such towns Falola *et al.* (1984). The king controlled both the civil and military societies. The arm was under his command. He also controlled trading activities in Ondo like other Yoruba *Obas*. It suffices to say that competition for title does not always generate much conflict in Yorubaland in the past, as obtained today as all chieftaincy honours belonged to the king.

They used their power sparingly and with justification and they did not rule their kingdoms single-handedly. They ruled with their council of chiefs, who were themselves representatives of the different quarters in the town, they were also supported by the *Oloja* or *Baale*. The king could hardly take any decision without consultation with the chiefs.

Although there appeared to be laid down rules of removing kings in some part of Yoruba except Oyo where whenever the *A laafin* (the king) was ultra-tyrannical and unconstitutional and therefore unacceptable to the nation, it was the *Basorun*'s prerogative as the mouth-piece of the people to move the rejection of the king in which case he had no alternative but to take poison and die (Johnson, 1997). In other Yoruba towns, if the behaviour of their kings became unbearable, or his action were regarded as taboo, the chiefs could boycott his palace. They could refuse to hold meetings or attend to any functions with the king. Whenever he summoned them they might refuse to answer his call. If the rebellion of the chiefs did not cause the king to mend his ways, there was likely to be general revolt of the people (Atandare, 1973).

Every community in Yorubaland has its peculiar taboo. The breaking of taboo or doing what is forbidden brings disaster not only on the particular person or chieftaincy institution, but also to the persons around. Thus, the Yoruba saying '*bi ara ile eni ba nje kokoro buruku, bi a koba kilo fun aherehuru re ko ni je ki a sun loru*'; that is, if our neighbour eats bad insects and we don't warn him, his bad breathings will not allow us to sleep (Idowu *et al.*, 1980). The Yoruba believe in the reality of the taboo and not as superstitions. They also believe that the keeping of the taboos give joy, happiness, wealth, comfort and long life (Babatunde, 2005). The Yoruba also believe that violation of the commands of the taboos bring about misfortune and mystery on the person that violate it.

Taboo is what the gods forbids in the religious context. The Yoruba says *Oje eewo*, when a person does what is forbidden (Alade, 1986). They also hold the belief that taboo embraces everything, which can be conceived as sin, unethical or something contravenes to the norms and values of the traditional institution and the society. They convey the message that, in a breach of any of them one has personally offended someone in the course of violating it. Thus, *eewo orisa* means "the divinity abhors" or abomination (Alade, 1986). It is perversion or abomination to the deity or divinity.

It was forbidden to say that a Yoruba king ate, drank, slept, washed, fell ill or died. All things had to be said in proverbs or in metaphors. When any king died, the traditional way of announcing it was, *Oba w'aja* (he had gone up the ceiling), *Erin wo* (the Elephant had fallen), or *Opo ye* (the pillar has given way). The king, like a father, was closely linked with the idea of the preservation of law, peace and order within the kingdom. Whenever the death of the *Oba* was announced, law and order fell into not being obeyed (Arifalo *et al.*, 2001).

Yoruba kings were expected in one way or another to ensure the prosperity and well being of their kingdoms. In other words, the scarcity of food, the failure of the rains, poor harvest, sudden deaths and the outbreak of epidemics were occurrences from which the king could not wash off his hands. They were expected to establish a direct communication or link with relevant powers, either by magical means or by means of religious rites or by both. All these constituted their religious duties; failure to adhere strictly to it is a taboo.

The palace in Yorubaland was a sacred place; this was demonstrated in various restrictions and taboo with which it was treated. An act of immorality in or around the palace was regarded as taboo. For example, no man except the *Oba* could have an affair with a woman on the palace ground. Births and deaths were completely taboo in the palace. The king must not set eyes on anything which was unclean. The main reason is that, the king as a royal person being an important and first citizen, should not deal with anything that is death or stinking except the living. Either touching the walls of or pointing towards the palace was also forbidden. For all practical purposes, the palace was treated as 'a holy of holies' (Atandare, 1973). Any violation of the taboo was met with a sanction.

It was a taboo for anybody to wear the *Oba*'s paraphernalia. In particular, his *Ade* (crown), *Opa Ase* (scepter) and *Bata Ileke* (royal beaded shoe) were objects of veneration and must not be worn by anyone other than the king himself (Atanda, 2007). It was considered improper for the king to mix freely with his subjects, being ordinary mortals.

It was a taboo for people of the same family to marry each other, certainly, it has repercussion. It was an abomination to have fun or sexual dealings with an *Oba*'s wife. The repercussion for that was that such a person will live a miserable life. It was a taboo for a child to beat his parents; severe calamity shall be the repercussion of such (Adetoyinbo, 2008).

It was a taboo for any title holder to do contrary to the oath he took during coronation. Oath taking was part of coronation rites in Yorubaland, it was compulsory that a solemn declaration to a god or a higher authority, one will speak the truth and be loyal to the community and keep to the promise. Oath taking is one of the world's and oldest practice that have stood the test of many epochs and generations (Ilesanmi, 2004), binding people in



conscience, sometimes willingly, sometimes against their will, stultifying them and making them obey sheepishly, the illuminating of each epoch.

Oath taking by traditional institution was done with an emblem of traditional symbols like the iron representing Yoruba god of iron, the wrath of iron, the wrath of God, the thunderbolt symbolizing sango and some other deities. This instilled the fear of violence of the oath of office in the people concerned and invariable resulted in sanitizing the land (Ayantayo, 1999).

It was a taboo for a madman or woman to enter the king's market. The market was seen as an important melting pot for business minded people and not for lunatics. Culturally, the king's market was strategic for the appeasement of gods Afe (2008). If a mad person entered the market, that madness will not respond to medication.

### CONCLUSION

The Yoruba speaking people of South-western Nigeria believed in the reality of the taboo and not as superstitions. They also believed that the keeping of the behests taboo brought peace, joy, happiness, wealth, comfort and long life. They believed that violation of taboo amounted to the violation of the commands of the taboo on individuals bringing about misfortune and misery on the person (s) that violated it. In other words, taboos were used to uphold peace and virtue within the chieftaincy institutions in Yorubaland, while vices were condemned. Taboos were placed to instill fear into people's mind. They had their own consequences on whoever handled them with levity.

However, the chieftaincy institution used this to achieve peace and tranquility among the people in the time past. Violation was not only seen as a crime against the gods and the society, but also against the chieftaincy institution, regarded as the representatives of the gods. The institution was saddled with the responsibility of ensuring peace, orderliness and development of the society.

Equally, taboo was one of the veritable instruments used in combating corruption of any form within the chieftaincy institution or in unveiling indecency in office. Taboo was one of the mechanisms used by the chieftaincy institution to maintain peace, law and order in Yorubaland in the past; this can still be relevant today. In contemporary times, the chieftaincy institution should be given a recognized role in the constitution of the land so that they can perform similar roles that they played in the past as customs and traditions permitted.

Since, the chieftaincy institution is a permanent feature in our body polity and as the closest to the people at the grass root, it is therefore the opinion of this study that the roles of the Obas should be enshrined in the constitution. The constitution should also highlight their limitations. This will compliment the constitutional roles of the law enforcement agencies and the society will be the better for it. This will save the chieftaincy institution from embarrassment and attack from the public since their roles are not well defined. Finally, it will save them from the subservient role they had played in the successive regimes, both military and civilian.

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