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# Theocratic System of Administration in Ekiti Society before Oduduwa: A Discourse in Ekiti-Yoruba Indigenous Political Culture

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The concern of this paper is to discuss change and continuity in the traditional political system of the Ekiti Yoruba and to explain how the indigenous political system of administration, which continues at the community level, can contribute to national cohesion and citizenship. It doing so, it interrogates the indigenous political system of Ekiti before Oduduwa which, to the best of our knowledge, has not received any scholarly attention despite its importance. The paper relied on historical methodologies consisting of primary and secondary sources to elicit and interpret its data. The primary source comprised participant observation and oral interviews with indigenous chief priests and prophets in Ekiti societies; secondary sources were extant studies and documents like texts and journal articles. The paper explains the impact of indigenous social institutions in building enduring social ties among group(s) within the Ekiti community and which have continued to complement the administrative structure of government of Ekiti community, including the contemporary system of governance. The adoption of the system and structure, which is organic and an inclusive system, because of its bottom-up approach system and structure, facilitated social commitment and participation of citizens in the administration of their communities. The system has remained significant in the social and political*

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*administration of Ekiti society, which is complementary to modern administrative system and can be helpful in the contemporary political system.*

**Keywords:** *original, customs, sovereignty, management and development.*

## INTRODUCTION

Change is ubiquitous and, since traditions are created and modified to suit emerging social and political trends, the subject of change and continuity has enjoyed a significant place in the study of history, primarily to discuss and evaluate how, why and what leads to change in tradition, and the extent of change in historical developments. Change, in the context of this study, presupposes the change from the theocratic system of leadership and administration to monarchism, which is currently dominant in Yoruba society in general and thus, anticipates five cultural principles that are fundamental to change like aligning with a new position, acting differently, adapting to situations, and adopting and adapting new techniques. Notably, theocracy is embedded in the concept that leaders are divinely chosen while they are believed to be divinely guided by the Almighty God (*Olodumare*). Monarchism, although presuming the sovereignty of God, unlike in theocracy where government decisions are subject to divine guidance, monarchism could be the absolute rule of one person or constitutional monarchism whereby powers are constitutionally shared. The theocratic system in the pre-Oduduwa era, as this paper will show, is a shared indigenous model of government in which absolute power is vested in the citizens. It is a bottom-up approach to governance wherein citizens meet regularly in groups to make decisions and allocate responsibilities to individual members who report back to the group.

A study by Ulli Beier (1968) on Yoruba society before Oduduwa provided the framework for this study on theocracy with the indigenous political administrative system associated with *Orisa*, and, more importantly, the conception of *Orisa* worship and the philosophy and culture connected with it among the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria. Beier's position suggests that the Yoruba people in southwest Nigeria did not practise monarchism at the early stage of their development; rather, they embraced theocratic ideologies by practicing a system of government in which the people believed that authority and sovereignty emanated from *Olodumare* (the almighty God) and that He rules through the priest and *Orisa* (divinities), who were believed to

be representatives of *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being. Beier also clarified that monarchism was guided by Oduduwa, who was a migrant in Yoruba society. Although he was given the position of the progenitor of the race, probably because he introduced the beaded crown, the point is that Oduduwa migrated from the Middle East along with his father, Lamurudu and travelled until he settled in Ile-Ife (Fabunmi 1980). Studies have revealed that he was accommodated by the Obatala government which he later dethroned to become the leader of the ancient town, and his followers replicated the feat throughout Yoruba society. Akinjogbin and Ayandele identified two versions of Yoruba origin which are directly linked to Oduduwa as fundamental to traditional system of administration of Yoruba societies, which impinges the historical trajectory of the indigenous system of government and administration of the Yoruba and contradicts the historical tradition in Ile-Ife which suggests that Oduduwa belonged to the third group of immigrants to Ile-Ife. He has always been remembered for the takeover of government during the reign of Obatala, another probable migrant, through an annual re-enactment ceremony (Akinjogbin and Ayandele 1980: 123). Archaeological evidence quoted by Oke Kolawole dates the beginning of Oduduwa hegemony between the mid-tenth and mid-eleventh centuries (Oke 1979: 19). The foregoing, particularly, the introduction of the beaded crown, must have encouraged the Yoruba to arrogate prominence to Oduduwa in their history, while scholars of Yoruba history, who have also followed this line of tradition, include Ulli Beier and Olomola, whose studies provided an historical gap for the present study. Beier's position on the Yoruba initial system of administration, and the introduction of the crown by Oduduwa requires a more historical explanation and interrogation, since people were living in the area presently occupied by the Yoruba before Oduduwa hegemony, which Akinjogbin and Ayandele (1980: 122) suggest were either assimilated or driven out by the invading Oduduwa group around the tenth and eleventh centuries. Furthermore, Isola Olomola (1994: 42–57) points out that monarchism pioneered dynastic rule in Yorubaland and started in Ekiti society around the eleventh century. Beier's and Olomola's studies left a gap of more than 1,000 years in Yoruba historical development that needs to be addressed in historical scholarship, which this study hopes to discuss in the indigenous theocratic system of government before the eleventh century, which has basically continued as the indigenous political culture of the eastern Yoruba society, particularly Ekiti-Yoruba, with changes which could be accommodated in the present political system and ideology.

Akinjogbin and Ayandele (1980: 121–143), in explaining the historical relevance of the eleventh century to the style of kingship in Yoruba history, noted that the Oduduwa group that was a migrant group, assimilated the aboriginals due to the political sophistication of the Oduduwa group and that the group's intervention led to the introduction of the beaded crown which indicates monarchism. They explained that the overwhelming influence of the invader's culture created an array of social and cultural challenges within the various social groups that make up the present Yoruba society. The question is: 'Did the earlier tradition align with the emerging Oduduwa tradition, or did it act at variance with it?' Additionally, did it adjust to the new system, adopt it or adapt it for continuity? This paper argues that the scholarly explanation tends to lack the analysis of change and continuity that would have provided sufficient historical explanations of the extent of change in the initial political culture of the indigenous Yoruba people which was a historical development that needs proper interrogation to understand the past, including the dynamics that produced the structural changes of the present.

The challenge posed by the kings' desire to prove the antiquity of their crowns and the validity of their rights to bead crowns presently continues to dwarf the understanding of the fundamentals in social and cultural conceptions of tradition and customs that underpin the origins and traditions of king-making among different Yoruba social groups can be linked to this research trajectory. The need to question what has changed, what has continued and how it can be advantageous, becomes imperative. Indeed, most Ekiti-Yoruba communities depend on the indigenous system of administration, which has continued to attract significant commitment from the citizens, encourage social cohesion and development. Hence, there is a need to examine how the current administrative system can benefit from the indigenous system of administration to enhance citizenship and national cohesion. These are the gaps in Yoruba kingship culture and traditions in general and Ekiti kingship culture which this paper seeks to fill with humanistic scholarship. The paper employs historical methods of data collection which comprises primary and secondary sources to elicit data. Basically, the paper relies on oral tradition, hegemonic ceremonies, ritual performances and festivals to explicate 'theocracy' as the indigenous system in Ekiti during the period under study, since there were no written documents to validate the claims and what can be gleaned from oral traditions have shown some reliability, particularly in reconstructing

the history of non-literate societies. Other primary sources included oral interviews, participant observation and archival documents while secondary sources included books and other relevant written materials which were analysed qualitatively. It is an attempt to document the indigenous political culture of the Ekiti people, prior to the hegemony of the crown and, by extension, the transformation from the indigenous system of administration to monarchism, that eventually became the cultural norm in contemporary Ekiti society.

From the foregoing, this paper purposely examines two fundamental principles of government in relation to established practice in Ekiti society. Firstly, the paper examined the nature and source of authority, and, secondly, the scope and limits of the obligations that such authority imposes on its subjects. This is done with regard to the structure of social and political institutions within Ekiti society, which are almost absent in other sub-Yoruba groups. In support of this view, Asabia (1963: 23–27) noted that there is no coherent account of the institution of kingship among the Yoruba in general, while he also believed that the *Oba* occupies a position of dual authority as the political head and chief priest, given that rulership and divinity often go together, since ‘among the Yorubas worship and the ordinary day-to-day activities are closely connected.’ The present paper takes this point further as it presents a clear understanding of the dynamics that shape the institution of kingship, contrary to Asabia's position, and declares that worship was the basis of indigenous rulership in Ekiti society until the introduction of the (crown) monarchical system of government around the eleventh century. Similarly noteworthy is the fact that the indigenous system was a product of the Ekiti environment and was developed in an attempt to protect itself, which is fundamental to any political authority. It is, therefore, important at this juncture to examine the geographical environment that shaped the people's perspective on governance and administrative system coupled with the peopling of Ekiti society within the framework of the study in order to place the discourse in its proper context.

### **GEOGRAPHY, ENVIRONMENT AND PEOPLING OF THE EKITI SOCIETY**

*Ekiti* is a word derived from *okiti* which denotes ‘hill’. It is a toponym for an area of undulating hills and valleys, rich in numerous streams and rivers and covered in a thick layer of forest. Ekiti society covers the area presently known administratively as Ekiti State and Ekiti Local Gov-

ernment Area of Kwara State. It is a vast area that begins in the Oke-Ora hill around Ife, in the west and ends in the Akoko Hills near Ikare in the east. It is bounded in the south where the forest and the mangrove vegetation extends from the Atlantic coast meet, and in the north, at the outskirts of Ilesa, where the forest thins out into woodland, following a regular line until it reaches Otun in the east, and reaches Osi, Obbo-Ile, Eruku, and Obbo-Ayegunle after which it becomes woodland and savanna with low table land that does not merit the toponym Ekiti. This area forms the very heart of the forest zone in Nigeria. The dense forest, the hills, the entangling climbers and creepers that weave the entire jungle into a kind of spider's web of snares and nooses have always been inimical to the outsiders unaccustomed to the locality of the forest dwellers. This is probably the reason the Ekiti people have long been pampered by nature, protected and isolated from external aggression, outlandish cultural traits and the inflow of things that can radically alter the indigenous values and modes of thought of the people.

The result was the development of local customs and traditions by the Ekiti people, incorporating the Ekiti language in line with the sociologist's view that human physical form and cultural traits can be determined by the environment (Oke 1979: 44); the environment must also have shaped their cultural views and ideology in politics, their expression in festivals and religion among others. Studies in Ekiti, for instance, reveal that the yam culture of the people originated from the environment and played significant roles in their social system (Onipede: 2017). The cultivation of the land by slash-and-burn, the making of the heaps for planting yam seedlings, and all the rituals and festivals associated with the office of the *Olori-ebi* or *Aoro*, as the case may be during the New Yam festival, are products of an environment in which the people nurture yam to maturity.

This study is in align with Kevin Macdonald's (2003) position that people who form part of the forest dwellers have been naturally protected from outside influences for a considerable period of time and as a result have developed and maintained a different social system which is fairly distinguishable as would be revealed in this study.

The period during which man first appeared in Ekiti remains obscure. What is known, however, is that until the eighth century, Ekiti consisted of aboriginal groups scattered in farm settlements. The ancestors of Ekiti must have inhabited the place for more than 50,000 years before Oduduwa, according to the suggestion of scholars on the peopling of the West African rain forest that human migration reached the

Soan River about 200,000 years ago. Their argument was that some of the migrants were attracted to the West African rainforest for two main reasons. Firstly, the region was rich in fruits and small game, including ripe fruits and domesticated animals and, more importantly, the availability of yam, which could be stored for months both in and out of the soil.

Secondly, in the Palaeolithic nomadic nature, the West African forest provided a kind of protection against gorillas and other carnivorous that prefer the woodland and savannah, as they still do in East Africa. In fact, Pfeiffer believes that the ancestors West Africans, including Ekiti, arrived in their present territory some 60,000 or more years ago. Some scholars have argued differently that 'the base of dispersal or diffusion is never starved of its share' and that humans in the West African forest zone, including Ekiti (Oke 1979: 42), as in other forest areas, used crude implements such as microlith blades and sticks to rip open the stomachs of animals, pointing to the sickle-like implement still used as a hunter's knife in Ekiti. This development, according to them, must have encouraged the family model of settlements and reliance on yam as a staple food. Oke explained that the Ekiti people could therefore have emerged and peopled the area from the time the yam was successfully domesticated. In his view, the intimacy between the people and the yam is so old that the people cannot remember a time when there was no yam.

The antiquity of the yam among the forest dwellers of West Africa is attested to by the widespread of the New Yam Festival among the people. From the Agni of the Ivory Coast, the Fanti, Ga, Krobo, Ashanti and Ewe of Ghana, the Fon and Holli of the Republic of Benin, the Igbo, Edo and Yoruba of Nigeria, the New Yam Festival is celebrated with a series of ritual performances from August to September, depending on the priest-king who sets the date when the yam can be dug up, eaten publicly or sold in the market. Ucko and Dimbleby (1970: 56), corroborating ethnographic and archaeological evidence in the region, indicate that, at the time of the arrival of the Europeans, there was no evidence of a staple food crop other than yam in the yam zone of West Africa. They further noted that by the time the Europeans arrived in the fifteenth century, there were dense populations organised into urbanised societies existed in southern Nigeria. This, in effect, shows that the yam-growing technology stimulated the growth of organised societies.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF FARM SETTLEMENT AND THE EMERGENCE OF THEOCRACY IN EKITI SOCIETIES**

The term *theocracy* was coined by Josephus (Coulter *et al.* 2007) to describe the national polity of a state claiming to be governed by *Olodumare* (God) or *gods*. It is derived from *theokratein*, a combination of two Greek words, *Theos* (God) and *kratein* (rule); *theokratein* refers to theocracy, which is the rule of God (Coulter *et al.* 2007). It is a political philosophy in which the basis of sovereignty is God, whose will is regarded as supreme. It is a form of government that acknowledges God alone as the supreme political authority, whether or not a human ruler like a king or an aristocratic body such as priests represents him. The belief that God rules a nation is historically ancient. All cultures throughout history have believed that *Olodumare* (God) rules human affairs. For instance, the gods of the ancient Orient were believed to be directly involved in the political affairs of their people or adherents. A kind of henotheistic theocracy arose among the Moabites, who believed they were ruled by Chemos, the Ammorites by Milcom and the Canaanites by El. Later the same concept was exploited among the Jews and Arabs, who saw Yahweh and Allah respectively as the only King worthy of worship (Coulter *et al.* 2007). In ancient India, the priesthood attained some independence from the king. When presenting a king, the priest would say, 'Here is your king, not ours, for our king is the god soma,' suggesting the Supreme Being. This explains why the ancient kings used religion as an engine to further the purpose of the state. Ennatum of Lagas (*c.* 2800 BC) secured his conquest of Kis by declaring himself the 'beloved spouse' of that community's highly-venerated goddess.

In contemporary times, theocracy is best exemplified among the Hebrews. It was probably among the Jews that the ancestry of prophets and priests was documented to explain how priesthood preceded kingship. The fundamental point was the idea that the Israelites were the 'sons of God,' and this led to their belief that Yahweh was their special God, who also cared so much about their predicament to become personally involved in their day-to-day life. This view gave legitimacy to the prophets who ruled Israel before the kings, wielding both legislative and judicial powers which in their view lay in the hands of Yahweh. Human leaders like Moses, Joshua and the judges who followed them were merely 'men of God' who mediated between God and the people. Under God's guidance, these men determined when the people should travel and when they should camp, when to



make war and when to keep the peace. As theocratic representatives, they had to fight the battles initiated by Yahweh and promote their nation. While it was incumbent upon the human vicegerents of God to fight in Yahweh's name, destroy his enemies and carry out major reforms in the state, they were still subject to and accountable to him for divine direction. In fact, the activities of the judges and kings were under constant scrutiny by the priests. Great priests like Samuel, Nathan and Abijah relentlessly pursued the monarchs to remind them that Yahweh was their judge, Yahweh was their ruler, and Yahweh was their king and their saviour.<sup>1</sup>

From the foregoing, this study views theocracy as the exercise of social and political power by the clergy or priests of a particular religion. Thus, as in Israel among the Hebrews, including the Oriental societies and elsewhere in the world, many African societies, including Ekiti, before the advent of Islam and Christianity, were theocratic with the priest and prophets enjoying social and political privileges. In Ekiti societies, the priests had judicial, political and social functions and were regarded as representatives of the ancestors, the gods and ultimately *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being. This ideology, also informed the concept of the king as the vice-regent of gods, so that the *Oba* of Benin, the *Alaafin* of Oyo, the *Ooni* of Ife and the *Ata* of Igala, once crowned, were considered to possess the same divine qualities as their deities. In this case, the priest has continued to act as the 'head of mini-state,' the custodian of the lineage, religion and heritage. The exception is that, with the introduction of mega-states, serious matters were transferred to the crown, which wielded colossal power over matters of life and death in accordance with the wishes of the gods, unlike in the past when matters of life and death were the prerogative of the gods. So much authority revolved around the king, who, though human, tended to be worshiped by his subjects. For the same consideration, he was surrounded round by all kinds of taboos and excuses, and as a representative of the gods, his mistakes were often overlooked.

Notably, there has been no historical instance of a 'pure' theocracy, because the perfect theocracy would have been God Himself occupying the throne among human beings. But since God cannot directly or physically manage the affairs of men, he had to use men called prophets or priests to further His course on earth; thus, a typical feature of theocracy, common to all societies, was the institution of priests and prophets to oversee the natural constitution that governs the day-to-day processes of human life. Subsequently, the priest in Ekiti is imbued with divina-

tion powers since he inherited the family divinity that must be consulted daily. The Torah of the Jews, the dharma of the Indians, the Sharia of the Arabs, the Mandate of Heaven of the Chinese were all said to be of divine origin and beyond challenge.

One major thing to note is that Ekiti theocracy is based on lineage, which comprises groups of descendants anchored to a principal who is the first lineal relative. Among the Yoruba in general and the Ekiti in particular, the first father is the ancestor of all members of the anchoring lines; that is, *ebi*. The descendants strive to maintain the bloodlines by way of survival; they retain the name, attributes and characteristics of the first father on whose authority the priest survives. This allows the power of the lineage to coerce unity and oneness, and to influence the social and political life of the *ebi*, which stems from the loyalty to the ancestors of the lineage. Evidently, the *ebi* system was a means of promoting the culture of continuity and maintaining the family. For instance, *ebi* was intended to provide a sense of descent from one eponymous father and reinforced by socialisation, often through the annual worship of a family deity by the whole lineage, living in a common habitation or part of a town. Submission to the authority of the priest or *olori-ebi*, the father figure of the family, whose decision is honoured in arbitration, including the obligation to care for children, elderly family members, funeral rules, lineage names purposely used for identification, including *oriki-orile*, have remained major features supporting theocracy in Ekiti. As noted earlier, each lineage settled on land considered as belonging to their ancestors and as such the divine authority, which the priest is believed to have received from the ancestors and the deity, legitimises his power to rule his children, and is often renewed during family festivals and rituals.

The foregoing informed the sacredness of the priesthood institution in pre-Oduduwa Ekiti, since the priest was seen as a representative of the ancestors, the divinities and as the vice-gerent of *Olodumare*. Owa *Oloyin-bi-Oyinbo* of Ilesa confirmed this ideology when he noted that 'our crowns are given to us by *Olodumare*,'<sup>2</sup> suggesting that the priests are spirits with their sovereignty from God to rule the universe with ritual sanctions that must be obeyed. In traditional Yoruba societies, and particularly in Ekiti, Orunmila dictates the natural principles and daily procedures of people's lives through *Ifa* divination. Ade Obayemi (1985: 255) noted that at the time of state formation in Yorubaland, there was no political cooperation between the 'mini-states' (the settlements), which were predominantly peasant,

and that the relationship was based on both matrilineal (*Omiye*) and patrilineal (*Ebi*) systems that emerged from a clan, lineage, village group or town (Obayemi 1985: 257). Obayemi's assertion is an agreement with Atanda, Ajisafe and Olurode that the lineages and clans form the initial settlement in what is now generalised as Yorubaland of which Ekiti is a subgroup. Akintoye's position is that the initial settlements in eastern Yoruba, that is, Ekiti areas, were *Egure* (farm settlement or hamlet).

Atanda (1973) identified five major sequences of development within the farm settlements as follows:

- 1) the emergence of family units as socio-political units;
- 2) the aggregation of family units into lineages, each lineage being bound together by kingship ties;
- 3) the aggregation of lineages into villages or village groups, with each lineage retaining a considerable degree of autonomy within the village and group of villages, and this autonomy being temporarily compromised, if at all, only in crisis time;
- 4) the aggregation of villages or village groups into mini (small) states, with considerable and constant reduction in the autonomy of the lineage or village in favor of the state;
- 5) the amalgamation or expansion of mini-state into mega (large) states, with lineage/village/mini-state autonomy subordinated to the overall interests of the mega-state, which became the supreme body.

In addition to the evolutionary stages identified by Atanda, Ajisafe (1924), quoted by Lai Olurode and Olusanya (1994: 62), further outlined the leadership structure by explaining that farm settlements were primarily at the level of the family unit with the head of the family as the *Baale*. According to him:

Every *bale* (head of a compound house) is responsible to the authorities for the conduct of the inmates of his compound. He must be respected and obeyed by the inmates of his house. He must be conversant with all the secrets in the compound. He has the power to judge and decide cases affecting his own inmates, provided such cases are not connected with an outsider or with the authority. He may punish any of the inmates who are guilty of misconduct. He is also bound to protect and help his inmates against ill or unfair treatment, but more importantly he served as the family priest (Olurode 1994: 62).

These scholars noted the emergence of organised societies with the family as the base and the leadership headed by the *baale*; however, with the aggregation of family units into the village, the *Oloja* emerged who assumed a considerable degree of authority over several lineages and performed his functions in the context of a community, usually a confederation of quarters made up of family lineages, with the head of the lineage serving as the quarter chief. Like all others chiefs, he is appointed by divination, a process of consultation with *Olodumare*. He becomes the head of the clan/lineage, responsible to the ancestors, the tutelary deity of the family, while at the same time mediating as chief priest between his people and *Olodumare*. The role of *Baale* and priest most probably began between the second and first millennium BC and has continued, albeit with some structural changes, to create a new form; thus, most Ekiti towns operate a 'federal system' which is a collection of families and settlements that have enabled the two structures of leadership (Muinoz 1981: 22). The first structure is determined by cognatic affinity and runs in line with the *ebi* social system which is basically patriarchal but fundamentally theocratic. As noted above, it is represented by the *Oloja* and has remained theocratic in both structure and nature. The *Oloja* is the head of several family units, which Atanda identified as the fifth stage of development. The *Oloja* is well pronounced in Ado, Ikole, Ijero, Ikere, Oye and Omuo-Ekiti among others; these were the aboriginal leaders of the town, and they still parade their separate palaces, and are separate from other chieftains by the title of *Alafun* – a process of spiritual initiation into the cults of the ancestors and the gods. *Alafun*, in Ekiti, dialect means priesthood chieftaincy. The *Alafun* is revered by the people as *ebo-afin*, being the *Aoro* (family priest). Some of them have been elevated to the status of *Oba* by the contemporary government. The process of selecting an *Alafun* symbolises the purity of the position or the divine status of the priest-kingship. Sociologically, the theocratic system is organised in a patriarchal order, with *Ubarisa* or *Olodumare/Edumare* representing the creator and father of all beings; the *Aoro*, as the family priest, the head of the lineage or the clan, represents the ancestor and the link with the gods and as such the priest-king makes sacrifices through his ancestors to the gods and to *Olodumare*, hence, the reverence *ebo-afin* – may your sacrifice be accepted.

The polemic is that the *Baale* (*Aoro*), as a priest, mediates between his family and the almighty God through ritual roles. In the

words of Oke, ‘the anchorage of Ekiti theocracy is the personality of the *Aoro* which constitutes a unique cultural feature that marks Ekiti apart from other Yoruba people’ (Oke 1979: 55), although it appears that Ile-Ife had a similar design before Oduduwa appeared on the scene (Beier 1968). This was the foundation of theocratic rule in Ekiti society primarily at the stage of state formation, that is, in farm settlements, when relationship was more based on the family system and predominantly defined by the peasantry.

Thus, priest-kingship, and by extension theocracy was a development that was centred on the head of the lineage; that is, *Olori-ebi*, many of whom later became *Oloja* in the aggregation of farm settlements (mini-state) prior to the emergence of the mega-state and the introduction of monarchism. It is noteworthy that theocracy still prevails in Ekiti because headship was and still is conferred through the process of divination. In other words, *Ifa* and *Orunmila* dictate the rules and procedures for appointing the head of the clan or the mini-state. All in all, Ekiti theocracy arose first as a means by which the Ekiti people domesticated yam, and then as a way of deifying the natural phenomenon that seemed to play significant roles in their lives.

### **CHANGE AND CONTINUITY OF THE THEOCRATIC TRADITION IN EKITI SOCIETY**

Political changes in Ekiti societies were largely determined by the impact and process of transformation of the mini-states into kingdoms before the eleventh century. It was not uniform, as several of the agrarian settlements/mini-states tried to maintain the status quo and somehow resisted transformations, probably to defend and preserve their culture and independence. Thus, in the mini-states that abhorred transformation, authority resided in the priest even as late as the early twenty-first century, and even transformations did take place, they were adopted and co-opted as part of the new social and political structure. Somehow, the inability of the mini-states to transform can be attributed to the intermingling of cultures that several village groups or clans continued to claim independence. Some actually transformed into mega-states as classic kingdoms with all the characteristics of a centralised state. These new mega-states like Ikole, Ado, Oye, Ara, Ogotun, and Ijero among others were headed by monarchs who also superintended over some mini-states. In the course of this development, new dynasties emerged that aligned with the original culture of the natives and were assimilated into the emerging political culture.

In other places, where the conquerors were challenged, they adjusted by adapting to the original culture.

Oral interview, corroborated by archival sources, reveals the overwhelming influence of existing traditions on the immigrants, particularly from the eighth century on warriors from Ile-Ife who claimed the authority to wear the beaded crown. This led to direct and indirect cultural diffusion,<sup>3</sup> between the two groups. In some settlements, the natives adopted the crown, but in others it was forcibly imposed, resulting in the emergence of two lines of leadership and changes in the name of the settlement. In Ikere, for instance, the *Ogoga*, with the support of the Benin army, became the political head of the kingdom, while the *Olukere* continued as the priesthood of the town. In this way, the priesthood tradition continued, but the administration was transformed into monarchism, and the priest continued to perform rituals and festivals in his domain, but could not rule his people politically. Ade Obayemi (1985: 255–322), Oguntuyi (1979), Olomola (1994: 42–57), Mabogunje (1962), Akintoye (1971) and Lloyd (1972) explained that the changes began around the eighth century and continue to date.<sup>4</sup>

It is remarkable that some of the changes took a violent turn with the overthrow of existing rulers; for instance, the *Arinjale* overthrew the *Oluse* of Ise, the *Ologotun* ousted *Alarun* of Arun, *Oluwagbon* of Igbon, *Olusodu* of Isodu (Obayemi 1985: 219), *Ajero* destroyed Ouku to establish his dynasty (*Ibid.*). In fact, *Awamaro* violently took over from *Elesun* of Ulesun to establish the *Ewi* dynasty (Beier 1968). In Oye, the *Oloye* adapted the culture of the settlers who adopted him as their ruler, with the exception of Obalese who, in recent times, began a new relationship with Oloye. Oral interview from Oye revealed that Ejiio societies, headed by *Apota*, were the *Ilu* and had the final decisions on the issues affecting the town. The polemic is that in Ikere, Ado, Ikole, Oye and Ijero, among other Ekiti kingdoms, there were significant changes in the indigenous administrative; unlike when the priest was the leader and ruler, the *Oba* took over the reins from the priest-king, who subsequently became kingmakers in some cases, but retained his priesthood position. In addition, the informants explained that unlike in the past, incessant intervention in the selection of lineage chiefs was somewhat impossible because *ifa* decided who would become the king; unlike when the appointment of a chief was only be known to the king. Under theocracy, the king was never involved in the selection of a lineage chief. Although *Ifa* divination

continued to enjoy consultation as part of the selection process, it was revised to accommodate emerging trends, particularly the appointment of chiefs by the constituted authority. In all these settlements, theocracy has continued to exist at the lineage level without the traditional aura and pomp associated with the office, except at rituals and festival times.

As noted above, the theocracy is a cultural trait of the Ekiti, and an observable expression of the ideas and thoughts they have used to cope with their environment. The system dictates their folk ways and provided a solution to their day-to-day life. It arose first as a means of protecting their staple food, the farm and later the environment, basically at the kinship level with a deep level of social and political loyalties. The *Aoro* (chief-priest) is the living father of the lineage and possesses divine authority as the intermediary between the distant ancestor and his living offspring. It is the priest who, through *Ifa* divination and ecstatic revelations, announced and proclaimed a set of rules and rituals dictated by *Olodumare*, which became taboo-sanctioned social values. He has divine authority to rule as the representative of *Olodumare*. As such, he enjoyed so many privileges that no other citizen enjoyed until the arrival of the crown in the eighth century. For instance, the fresh water for his use was fetched early in the morning by the young women of his household before anyone visited the stream; in fact, a town-crier walked ahead of the water-pot carriers every day to announce their arrival. The water-pot carriers wore no clothes to avoid bringing dirt into the water intended for the priest. His house was a symbol of sanctuary and no one pursued any criminal or person to this place; hence, the proverb '*eni sawo ile Aoro deni aa ta ka si,*' which means that whoever runs into the house of *Aoro* for safety becomes a person you can only snap your fingers at. It used to be a taboo that attracts serious penalty to pursue someone into a priest's house. Because he is a holy figure and a representative of *Olodumare* and the gods, subjects keep a certain distance when speaking to him and actually speak to him in obeisance. He does not enter an unclean house or walk on unswept ground, which is called *Ile-Ikasin* – unkept ground. This indicates that his surroundings must be very clean, since he is a holy being; he hardly goes out to work on the farm or to visit people. The priest is not greeted like any other person; he is greeted, '*ebo afin*' (may the sacrifice be pure or accepted), which indicates the function of the priest.

The priest's crown is not fringed; rather, he has beads and brass ornaments with which he decorates himself. Robert Thompson (1970:

227) asserted that Yoruba gods long ago chose beaded strands as emblems, suggesting godhead which was in consonance with oral tradition that associated the possession of beads with Orunmila, the divination deity. Robert Thompson further explained that the prerogative of beaded objects is limited to those who represent the gods and with whom the gods communicate, such as kings, priests, diviners and native doctors. Indeed, the oral tradition associated with *Iwa*, the first wife of *Orunmila*, the chief diviner, explained that beads were the exclusive property of the priesthood of which *Orunmila* was the progenitor. In fact, *Odu-Iwa* in the Ifa tradition explains how *Iwa*<sup>5</sup> distributed beads among his children, notably Alara, Ajero and Owarangun, the first group of rulers in Ekiti before the arrival of Oduduwa and the beaded crown. It, thus, suggests that bead was used by the priest-king as a symbol of authority before the establishment of several settlements, including Efon-Alaaye, Oyo, Ilesa, Abeokuta, and Iperu Remo, which later became centres of bead embroidery. The bead signifies power sustained by divine sanction (Thompson 1970: 229).

In summary, the theocracy has continued at the lineage level, overseeing social and political affairs within the mega-towns. The priest-king presides over cases ranging from land disputes, marital problems, and minor offences while major cases are referred to the king's courts and the police. He also deals with matters of petty theft and internal security. He also has considerable influence at the lineage level, overseeing rituals as guardian of the lineage heritage. This has encouraged government intervention with significant changes in the roles of the priest-king, enabling them to undertake functional roles in the administration of their towns.<sup>6</sup> Overall, with the introduction of the crown, monarchism rather than theocracy became the norm, and this has altered the indigenous administrative system and structure of Ekiti towns and villages. It divided the administrative structure, created dynastic rule and limited the role and duties of the priest; nonetheless, the institution of the priesthood continued with its ideas of uniting lineages and contributing to the social and political development of its people through the age-grade system. The age-grade system is the grouping of all members of a given community into a class on the basis of age, with the intention of keeping the community politically, economically and socio-culturally intact. The age-grade institution is under the *Oloja* (lineage priest), who is also assisted in his court by the eldest age grade, known in Ekiti society as *Egbe-Agba*.

The age-grade system and structure continues to play an important role in the administration and management of the towns; it has main-



tained peace among groups and communities. The age-grade system provided a mechanism for internal security, environmental and general maintenance of the towns, playing a complementary role in the general administration of the communities. They also perform judicial functions within their age group because they are the first court in order of crisis intervention at community level and would appeal to the higher grade if unable to resolve a case. It could also go to the Council of Chiefs for adjudication if the case could not be handled by the supposed age group.

### **THEOCRACY: INDIGENOUS SYSTEM OF ADMINISTRATION, NATIONAL COHESION AND CITIZENSHIP**

Citizenship in the context of this study means the direct participation of citizens in governance, and it is about the duties and responsibilities of citizens towards the development of the state. While it is the duty and responsibility of the government to set clear policies that will drive the development of the state, the citizens have a responsibility to the state to ensure that government policies are functional. In fact, the challenge of development in Nigeria could be linked to 'citizenship,' with the belief that government is a separate entity and does not really need the direct support of the people in policy formulation and implementation; however, where there are no serious interactions and engagement with the citizens, governance and development tend to suffer. Evidence from the field in Ekiti reveals that the indigenous system is structured in such a way that social and political interactions between the 'priests' and members of their communities, segmented into age grades, have remained fundamental to community sustainability and, if engaged, could strengthen the process of governance in Nigeria.

Indeed, the World Bank Learning Group in 1995 linked citizen participation to development, affirming that 'participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them.' The age-grade system, which is the bedrock of theocracy and indigenous system of administration, is essentially used to entrench social and political obligations, duties and responsibilities of citizens for the development of the community. In addition, at every level of age grade, members are educated to build a cohesive community as a process of initiation and orientation to what is expected of them in terms

of responsibility. Fadipe (1970: 1–20) affirmed that the age grade begin before puberty, and the membership is compulsory, and strictly based on age. It is both sociological and philosophical in content and dimension. It is a system of social cohesion aimed at annexing the energies of different age groups and mobilizing them for developmental objectives and social harmony of the community (Adeyemi-Suenu 2016: 166).

The age-grade system is, therefore, deployed rigorously to influence social and political decisions at the grassroots level. It is a process of self-development, beginning with the articulation of community needs and priorities, and being accountable to the people. Age-grading processes socialize and associate individuals with group(s) within a community and are therefore primary to social and political cohesion and integration.

Scholars have argued that westernisation and modernisation in African societies have been accompanied by social disharmony and political disorientation of inter-group relations. Frantz Fanon (1963) and Walter Rodney (1981), among others, have argued that colonialism, which introduced the transformation and westernization, brought disharmony, while others contend that colonialism truncated African developmental culture through the introduction of Western culture that became a hindrance to home-grown development, particularly the inability of African elites to develop a new developmental paradigm that will encourage and encapsulate African cultural values. These included the need for a political ideology that will resolve the challenges of cohesion and citizenship geared towards socio-national identity and national development remains critical. In fact, so much has been written about the indigenous system of administration represented by the traditional institutions that the intellectual dilemma is no longer who needs traditional institutions or indigenous system of administration; even, the technological development and social exposure that have relegated the institution to the background, the pace of change, especially the transformation that has relegated these institutions, have led many to conclude that the current economic, social and political challenges do not have any relationship with the past (Olurode and Olusanya 2005). However, our position is what change the institution can make in social and political development, given their influence as the custodian of culture within the sphere of the Yoruba value system. The evidence from the challenge of citizenship and national unity clearly shows that the past (indigenous system of administration) still

represents the most incisive and pervasive structural explanation of the crisis confronting Nigeria in general and the Yoruba society in particular. The problem of cohesion or integration, social and cultural identity and citizenship is more critical now than ever.

Conceptually, tradition is about self, community and nationality. It evokes an image of the past and it is associated with identity as part of the historical process, a sense of culture that socialises the members in such a way as to keep them continually looking back. The polemic is, therefore: what can we benefit from the traditional (indigenous) administrative system? What is the relevance or significance of traditional values and culture to contemporary political culture in resolving the current crisis of governance and development in Nigeria? Opinions may differ on the relevance of the past to the present challenges; however, the relevance could be understood from the important role it played in the pre-colonial development and their antecedents during the colonial period, which actually laid the foundation for the formal system of government in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. In fact, this can be established from the relative security and administrative point of view, especially where in Nigeria, indigenous institutions and values have always played a significant role as a rallying point for social and political order and development. The indigenous administrative structures were the arrow-heads of government and custodians of culture in the pre-colonial and even colonial periods. They actually helped to midwife the colonial domination and actively participated in governance during the colonial period. Considering their impact on the administration of colonial Nigeria, this paper advances the search for cohesion, citizenship and developments on the need to take cognisance of social and cultural values significant to the political administration of Ekiti traditional society, which has continued with structural changes but more benevolent to social cohesion and citizenship participation.

From the foregoing, the paper proposes a decentralisation approach to include indigenous administrative structures at the local government level to address social development and increase participation necessary to process developmental projects and programmes through inclusive governance, bearing in mind that culture is not static but dynamic, and that perfection may not probably be achieved, especially in organisations or institutions under the control of mortal man. It is the view of this paper that the traditional system of administration still possesses some features that could mitigate the challenges of co-

hesion and citizenship, just as modern governance has significant principles and rules that, if harnessed and synergised with traditional values of governance, will bring about the much needed change and progress in the country. For instance, the inauguration of traditional councils in 1900 broke the tradition of separate authorities and institutions of governance and, it centralised the various institutions of governance found within the different ethnic groups. The council of kings (chiefs), therefore, became an appendage of the colonial government, complementing colonial efforts as an institution of the native authority in the native administrative districts and overseeing their administration as complementary to the colonial authorities. The traditional council was empowered to act as a government institution in all realms, with executive, legislative and judicial powers. As a matter of fact, these councils were an official institution of government at the local level and played significant roles in government from 1900 to 1955. The council made decisions on taxation, the building of schools and road networks, settled legal cases within the native authority system and mediated in security matters. Governor MacGregor (Allison 1952: 101) stated that the 'District Officers should understand that we can rule this country only through the chiefs...' His view was also supported by the Governor Fredrick Lugard's policy of indirect rule, whereby, the role of the institution in colonial administration and, even afterwards, in the post-colonial Nigeria, has remained remarkable, particularly in maintaining peace and harmonious relations within the different regions that constitute modern Nigeria. The institutions have, in certain cases, been fundamental to social and political development apart from being the rallying point for governance at critical periods.

In addition, the challenge of security within the *Egba* Province in 1900 made the *Alake of Egba* and council propose the establishment of a regular police force during a visit to Governor MacGregor in 1903. This request led to the emergence of the *Egba* Police in 1905, by Order-in-Council of the *Egba* United Government. This later crystallised into the NAPF (Rotimi 2003: 62). The *Egba* Police consisted of hunters' guilds who were constitutionally empowered to arrest and even shoot. However, the measure proved so effective that armed robbery was curtailed and the peace and security of the people, their lives and property were safeguarded. Hence, in 1914, after the amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria, the *Egba* police was incorporated into the new Western Nigeria to form the *Egba* Native Admin-

istration Police. Atanda elaborately noted the administration of Ibadan, Ila, Oyo, Ilesa, Ife and Ekiti by the monarchs (Rotimi 2003: 64).

Furthermore, the colonial authority, headed by Governor McCallum from 1900, also promoted the importance of traditional institutions in the administration of culturally saturated societies. Governor McCullum introduced the Native Council Ordinance in 1901 to embrace the kings for administrative efficiency. A major function of the administrative councils under the monarchs was to maintain law and order. The Council also made rules for the administration of justice, road building, trade and liquor licensing, agriculture and sanitation. Notably, the kings became active in various civic responsibilities. The *Elekole* of Ikole-Ekiti, Oba Adeleye I, was physically present at the construction of roads within his administrative districts, apart from providing men as labourers for the work, and so also were other kings in their respective jurisdictions.

In Kano emirate, for instance, the Native Authority Police was charged with the maintenance of law and order from 1925 to 1968 (Chiranchi 2003: 253–279). Pre-colonial policing in Kano was modernised to serve the colonial administrative system. The *Dongari*, who performed policing function for the emirs in the pre-colonial period, became incorporated into the new colonial administration and made responsible for the maintenance of law and order in their respective emirate councils (Chiranchi 2003: 257). The British authority after the conquest of Nigeria, particularly from the 1920s, ordered that whatever organisation the African rulers already had for maintaining law and order in each locality should be developed and turned into efficient local police forces, accountable not to the central authority but to the local authorities. In the police reforms of 1907 and 1908, the *Dongari*, on the basis of their record in policing, became the approved administrative police, and the only force to police Muslim communities. The reform provided uniforms for the first time, but they were not allowed to carry firearms (Chiranchi 2003: 260). In 1909, the Acting Resident of Kano province, Mr R. G. Mathew (2003: 257), noted that ‘the native police *Dongari* are working remarkably well. There is no difficulty at all in effecting an arrest in any part of the division’ (Chiranchi 2003: 259). Similarly, his Bauchi counterpart stated: ‘the Bauchi and Gombe Emirates are divided into districts, each with its own resident district *Dongari*.’

In addition, the warrior guilds in Okaland were important in curbing security challenges in colonial Okaland, in the Akoko area of

the present-day Ondo State. The guild system is a traditional structure of law enforcement agency among the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria. The warrior guilds cut across all the classes of people and groups in Yoruba society, and included hunters, young people, depending on their age, since each age group has a role to play in security and military services as time may demand. Ogunode (2012: 9) noted the role of the hunters' guild (*egbe-ode*) and the warriors' association (*egbe-ologun*) in maintaining security in Okaland from 1895–1910. The traditional function of the *egbe-ode* and *egbe-ologun* is basically the policing and the enforcement of native laws and customs under the strict supervision of the monarchs. The effectiveness and efficiency of the colonial government in addressing the problem of security and development was through the traditional apparatus of engaging the indigenous administrative structure, which has continued in Ekiti communities, among others.

The polemic is about mainstreaming and upscaling the participation of primary stakeholders to ensure success and sustainability (Gavento and Valderrama 1999: 1–2). This may represent a change in the meaning and process of governance or the condition of rule or order and a new way of the governing society; but the aim is good governance, which is about making government more responsible, open, inclusive and accountable to the demands and needs of the populace. Decentralising the structure of government, and allowing the traditional structures to complement other structures of government will therefore increase interaction between citizens and government, create productive public services and deepen democracy. In other words, complementing the roles of government, by making the theocratic organs significant agents of administration in the local government structure will further the quest for citizenship and cohesion; they could preside over minor cases, as has been the case through the age grades, and palace courts, which currently meet three times a week in most communities, and preside as judges in the native courts (although in some cases their actions may be subject to the control of the judicial officers, particularly in the case of appeals). This is in addition to the palace courts, where cases are adjudicated on the basis of customary laws with little or no legal implications. The palace courts have continued to hold sway<sup>7</sup> largely because people believe in the traditional system of authority and peace-building rather than the modern system which is more bureaucratic, time-consuming and can take years before judgment is pronounced and justice is done. Oral interviews from Eki-

ti suggest that people are more comfortable with the traditional system of adjudication than the modern court system, which can break good neighbourliness, based on the diction that ‘we cannot be friends after returning from court.’

Furthermore, in the area of social and cultural jurisdiction, they can complement to monitor government programmes that have social and cultural implications for marriage and land that is subject to cultural rules. As noted above, the indigenous authorities were primarily divided into committees of age grades, each with a definite responsibility. For instance, the indigenous authority had various committees that met on a weekly basis (initially nine days) to discuss issues of security, and social development, while urgent issues that could affect their communities were addressed before they jeopardised peace, as in the cases of land demarcation and road maintenance, which were discussed in consultation with the local government authorities, while other priority targets were identified by the people.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This study explains that traditions are created and modified to suit emerging social and political trends; hence, it discusses and evaluates the indigenous system of administration as a political culture necessary to engender social cohesion and improve citizenship in Nigeria. It explains how the invention and development of a theocratic system of administration, headed by the priest at the lineage level, continued to midwife community cohesion and growing citizenship in Ekiti from about the first century to the eleventh century, and even into the present, when the crown has become an important instrument of office in Yoruba society. The paper explains that the priests, with the support of community members, oversaw social and political affairs until the eighth century, when new immigrants began to pour into the region, changing the ideology of governance. The new immigrants came with the beaded crown from Ile-Ife, claiming the authority to rule through cultural diffusion. Specifically, it enables some forms of adaptation to aligning with a new position, adjustment to new situations and adaptation of new techniques, which inform that certain rules and practices changed for new ones to continue, although in some cases, there were no significant changes or interruptions. More importantly, the indigenous administrative structure, as a bottom-up approach to governance, was able to address social issues before they degenerated into serious problems, thus allowing for an organic loyalty that grew through the age-grade system to the community within the mega-state level and,

by extension, the national level if adopted to complement the existing government structure.

The system has remained significant in the social and political administration of Ekiti society as a complement to monarchism and the contemporary political system. The contention is that indigenous political values and social system remain a panacea for the rebirth of leadership and citizenship in all Nigerian societies, and arguably the need to forge a strong link between the indigenous social system that is home-grown, and a Westernised system is required for national cohesion, development and purposeful governance in Nigeria.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is noted in the Revised Standard Bible. Isaiah. Chapter 33. Verse 22.

<sup>2</sup> Owa Oloyin-bi-oyinbo made this assertion against the backdrop of the activities of Ajele and Basorun Ibadan in Ekitiland. Specifically, the statement was directed at the Basorun Ibadan who was accused of usurping the crown of the Ekiti king's crown.

<sup>3</sup> Cultural diffusion is what sociologists call transcultural diffusion; it is how different parts of a culture are adopted by other cultures.

<sup>4</sup> Available records from the Ekiti State Ministry of Local Government in 2009 revealed about 50 communities claiming independent settlement and tracing their ancestry/lineage to the pre-Oduduwa/crown period.

<sup>5</sup> Iwa is Orunmila's first wife and has several children. His eldest, according to Ifa tradition, is Alara, Ajero, Owarangun and Aseyin.

<sup>6</sup> The priest has been incorporated into the town council or council of chiefs and receives monthly allowances from the government.

<sup>7</sup> The author of this article witnessed the palace courts in Ado, Oye, Ikere and Ise-Ekiti in 2012, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., three times a week.

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