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## ORO CULT: THE TRADITIONAL WAY OF POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION, JUDICIARY SYSTEM AND RELIGIOUS CLEANSING AMONG THE PRE-COLONIAL YORUBA NATIVES OF NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Cultism served as an important mechanism through which political, Judiciary and religious lives of African societies were actualized before their contacts with colonial masters. This article X-rayed the Oro Cult among the Yoruba natives of the south – western part of Nigeria in actualization of the objectives of political administration, Judiciary system and religious cleansing among these people. Prompted by relevant archival sources and existing literature, the article examined the composition of the membership of Oro Cult, the festival and other ceremonies attached to the cult, the political function of the cult, the Judiciary power to investigate and punish offenders and the religious function of the cult in cleansing of individuals and communities from evils. The article recommends intensive research into the pre-colonial political systems, judiciary systems, religious lives and the economic lives of the Africans, south of the Saharan.

**Keywords:** Oro Cult, Festival, Religious Cleansing, Political Administration, Judiciary System, Yoruba Natives.

### INTRODUCTION

Oro is an important cult among the Yoruba natives of the western part of Nigeria. In the pre-colonial era, the Oro Cult members controlled the administration of the land (Daramola and Jeje, 1975). During this period, the initiated people were considered unpopular and were not accorded respect in the society. This was the reason why the kings and high chiefs must be initiated to prevent losing their respects (Daramola and Jeje, 1975).

Daramola and Jeje (1975) argued that Oro is a god of the ancestral spirits among the Yoruba natives. They are dead spirits which Wander about the air and which must be appeased by certain sacrifices (Haliburton, 1920). According to Internet Scared Text Achieve (2011), Oro means fierceness, tempest, or provocation and has personified executive power. Hence, people were

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initiated to be promoted to high places and to hold position of authority among the people . Oro is a source of power and authority among the Yoruba natives (Daramola and Jeje, 1975).

Oro cult is a very prominent institution. It is an institution which performs political, judiciary and religious functions among the natives. It is used for social purposes, and to preserve order in private and community life (Internet scared Text Achieve, 2011). This article , therefore, will examine the political and administrative functions, the judiciary functions and religious functions of Oro Cult as an important social institution among the Yoruba natives of western part of Nigeria.

#### **METHOD**

Like the work of Okafo (2006), analyses of relevant archival sources and existing literature are the two main procedures that guided the research efforts leading to this paper.

Qualitative method was used in this paper. Qualitative research relies largely on the interpretive and critical approaches to Social Sciences. Qualitative data give researchers rich information about social processes in specific settings. Such data are soft data in the forms of impressions, words, sentences, photos, symbols, and so forth (Neuman 2003). Soft data in the form of photos were used and were subjected to content analysis in this work.

Historical method was equally employed. Historical Events Research is the research of past events that does not follow processes for some long period of time (that is basically cross sectional). This is historical event research rather than historical process research. The investigation of past events may be motivated by the belief that they had a critical impact on subsequent developments or because they provide opportunities for testing the implications of a general theory (Schutt, 2004). Some historical events were mentioned to support the main contents of this article.

#### **ORO CULT AND ITS MEMBERSHIP COMPOSITION**

Oro cult is not a common ancestral organization that anybody can join in Yoruba land. It is an institution which draws prominent members of the society. Notable among the members were the kings, chiefs, the rich and other prominent personalities from all works of life (Daramola and Jeje, 1975). Many important social figures among the Awori , Egba and Ijebu people of the Yoruba land belong to the cult (Daramola and Jeje, 1975).

Oro cult itself is a sub cult within the Ogboni cult among the Yoruba natives. Ogboni cult, in the pre-colonial times performed legislative, executive, and judicial functions throughout the Yoruba land (Simola, 1999). Ogboni cult was so powerful to the extent that they acted as a check on the arbitrariness of any Alaafin who misused his power. The members of the cult had the power to dethrone any erring king. Oro cult is an offshoot of ogboni cult. A member of ogboni cult (male) must definitely be a member of oro cult.

However, when women were allowed to be members of ogboni cult, they were not eligible to be members of oro cult (Simola, 1999). Women were not allowed to behold the divinity of Oro. Hence, Oro cult is made of notable social figures (kings, chiefs, rich and the other popular social figures) that were only male in Yoruba land. Common men cannot be given the memberships and uninitiated cannot join. It is ancestral organization which is not open to the common men of the Society.

#### **ORO FESTIVAL IN YORUBA LAND**

The end of the harvest season is the time for the Oro festival. This is around August or September of every year (Yoruba Alliance, 2012) .Oro festival is conducted, most especially during the yam festival when food was in high supply (Daramola and Jeje, 1975). In preparation for Oro

festival, all families in the town would cook different kinds of foods, and prepare lavish dishes to entertain one another and to give as sacrifice to Oro god (Yoruba Alliance, 2012). Among the Ijebu natives of Yoruba land, Oro festival precedes the Agemo festival which is another important festival among these people (Ijebu Descendants Association, n.d) Oro festival is an equivalent of Ugie – Oro festival among the Edo natives in Nigeria (Nevandomsky, 1993).

Oro is a symbolic god. It is a thin strip of fashioned bamboo wood (see fig 1 for a sample) which produces voice by whirling. The fashioned bamboo wood is about 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches broad about 12 inches long, tapering at both ends, which is fastened to stick by long string. It is an instrument known to English boys as the “bull roarer” (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2011). The cutting and fashioning of the bamboo tree is done in a secret place away from the public gaze of the women. It may be done in a nearby forest or a compound hall (see figure 2) far away from the women and children.

During the Oro festival, women are not supposed to go out of their homes during the hours when Oro is in town. Cases have been reported of women who died from beholding Oro. Oro emblem must not be seen by women (Abisoye, n.d). According to Ayeleru (2011), the usage of vulgar words during Oro festival is permitted culturally and it is not offensive to hear such vulgar words during this festival.

Apart from Oro festival is Oro feast. This is done during new yam festival. During Oro feast, all the members of Oro cult will assemble in Oro forest to wine and dine (Daramola and Jeje, 1975). Tree withering ceremony is another common ceremony among the Oro cult members. This ceremony is a demonstration of magical power on a chosen ceremonial tree. During this ceremony, magical power is used on the chosen tree, such tree whiter overnight, losing all its branches and leaves (Daramola and Jeje, 1975).

Oro ceremony can also be conducted at the burial of a deceased member. This is an important rite of passage among the cult members. During this rite of passage ceremony, Oro emblem (whirling voice from fashioned bamboo tree) will be brought to the burial ceremony of such deceased member (Daramola and Jeje, 1975). Another similar ceremony is IPADE (necromancies ceremony). During this ceremony, the spirit of the departed member may be consulted for a clarification of contending issues, especially among the deceased family members or the Oro cult members (Daramola and Jeje, 1975).

In recent days, Oro festival has become a serious contending issue in Yoruba Society between the Oro cult members and adherents of other religions (Christianity and Islam). Jacob (2012) cited an example of ethnic clash between Yoruba and Hausa in Shagamu and Lagos in July 1999. These clashes were caused by observance of the rituals of traditional Oro festival by Yoruba people. However, in some communities, the Oro hours have been successfully negotiated, considering other people’s religions, civil, and commercial obligations. Oro may come out only at night hours, so that men and women can go about their normal duties during day (Abisoye, n d).

#### **ORO CULT AND POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION AMONG YORUBA NATIVES**

In the pre-colonial time of Yoruba natives, active legislative, executive, and judicial functions were performed by the civil chiefs, the Ogboni. Within the Ogboni was the Oro, a secret ancestral organization which was actual vested with the power to exercise the civil and political administration (Simola, 1999). In African societies, kings or men of high title wield considerable authority and influence, yet tyranny was forestalled by the active involvement of the people in the social and political administration of the land (Elechi, 2006). Oro cult exercised a check on the excessiveness of any traditional king in Yoruba land. Ogboni society, society which consists of Oro

cult was known to have taken active roles in checking and balancing political power in the old Oyo Kingdom.

Many instances of this can be historically cited in this article. Ogboni Society (within this society is Oro cult), played very active roles in the dethronement and elimination of tyrant kings of old Oyo empire like: Odarawu, Kanran, Jayin, Ayibi and Osinyago. (Okunola and Ojo, 2012). For instance, a powerful Oro rite and sacrifice called IWI had to be done before Alaafin Jayin could be eliminated. He committed suicide before the rite and sacrifices were brought to the palace. Alaafin Jayin, a King of the ancient Oyo Empire was an arrogant ruler who killed his subjects without provocation. On one occasion, he had his son murdered due to the latter's growing popularity (Adagunodo, n.d.)

Furthermore, Alaafins Labisi, Awonbioju, Agboluaje and Majeogbe were forcefully dethroned and forced to commit suicide through the active role of the cult (Okunola and Ojo, 2012). Osugbo (a selected group members from Oro cult) played active roles in the political administration of pre-colonial Egba land (Abeokuta) in the western part of Nigeria. These people were powerful and they took active roles in the political administration of this land. The cult played significant roles in the emancipation of Egba land from the control of old Oyo kingdom. The cult members were politically active, not within Egba province alone but throughout Yoruba land (Daramola and Jeje, 1975). The cult also played important roles in palace organization throughout the Yoruba land (Nevadromsky, 1993). Hence, Oro served some political purposes, to preserve order in the community at large (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2011).

#### **ORO CULT AND JUDICIARY SYSTEM AMONG YORUBA NATIVES**

As explained earlier on in this paper, Ogboni society wields legislative, executive and Judiciary power (Simola, 1999). However, the judiciary power of oro cult which is a sub-set of Ogboni Society will be actively discussed. Before the colonialists plumed their way into the land unified in 1914 by Lord Fredrick Lugard and later named Nigeria, there had been an effective traditional system of arbitration and crime control in every community. Such system could comprise both formal and informal constraints, which could be in the form of sanctions, speech rights, taboos, customs, or mores. Judicial Institutions were the primary means of achieving such control (Okunola and Ikuomola, 2012).

The important characteristic of native justice system is that it has credibility with the locals. The system's credibility is derived partly from the integrity of the individuals and groups that perform various functions to achieve justice (Okafo, 2006). African judiciary systems focused on restoration and restitution for the victims and their communities (Onwudiwe and West, 2007).

There are common forms of punishments in African Societies (Dalgleish, 2005). Oro cult was vested with power to administer such punishments. Members of the cult had power to investigate civil and criminal cases and had the power to administer punishments accordingly. (Daramola and Jeje, 1975)

Oro cult members had the power to condemn criminals to death. Such criminals were sometimes given to Oro and they were never seen again. In such a case, Oro is said to have devoured the bodies. Sometimes, however, the headless corpses of the criminals were discovered in the forest on the outskirts of the town, but nobody was allowed to bury them (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2011).

Erring Citizens may be exiled by this cult. Wicked and evil people may be excommunicated by them (Daramola and Jeje, 1975), especially the wizards (evil magicians) and the witches. Oro cult explicitly opposed witches. The stereotypes held about witches by these Yoruba natives are similar to those in many other parts of Africa: they are believed to be active at night and to have an

insatiable performance for evil deeds (CSAC, 2012) and like Tigari cult of Ghana, Oro cult acts as ante witchcraft among the Yoruba natives of Nigeria.

Civil cases can be referred to this cult for adjusification. The cult had the power to investigate any civil cases and adjudicate on them accordingly. Whatever the decisions of the cult were irreversible ones. Such judicial adjudications were common during Oba Alake (the first King of Egba Land) and High Chief Nlaado (Daramola and Jeje, 1975). In Summary, Oro cult wielded a very Strong Judiciary power among the Yoruba natives of Western Nigeria.

### **ORO CULT AND RELIGIOUS CLEANSING**

Festival and religion are very difficult to separate in African context. Many festivals have religious connection and undertone while Traditional Religion is often enriched with festivals. In Africa, religion forms the existence of the people, and people's existence is their religion (Awolalu, 1976). One functional responsibility of religion in Africa involves purification and cleansing of evils or abominable deeds. In many parts of Africa, there are deeds of men, animals or birds which are regarded as evil and abominable (Awolalu, 1976). Such evils and abominations can only be removed from individuals and communities through religious rituals. This may be performed by priests and in some societies, by designated cults.

Oro cult members have the power to exorcise individuals that possess evil spirits or bad luck. It may be at the community level too (Daramola and Jeje, 1975). Among the Ijebu people of Yoruba land it is called IGBALU (ridding the community of evil spirit and epidemics (Ijebu Descendants Association, n.d).

The process of cleansing involves rituals and sacrifices which must be paid for by the individuals or the communities as applicable. Those propitiatory sacrifices or rituals are employed to remove sin or pollution from the individuals and the communities.

According to Awolalu (1976), purification can also be performed to clean and remove evils. It involves an outward act which is consequently believed to have a spiritual inner cleansing.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Oro cult is an important cult among the Yoruba natives that cannot be underrated. It is a powerful cult which performs political, judiciary and religious functions among these natives. However, since the time of colonialism, all these functions have been eroded and replaced with modern political and judiciary system and foreign religions. Of course this has led to a deviation from the African cultural self-preservation, self-appreciation and self promotion This is an acute post – colonial social problem about which many well – meaning people are concerned and solutions are being sought (Sofola, 1994). The only few places where traditions customs, and native laws regulate the African lives are the rural communities (Okafo, 2006).

The historical criminology of this continent is under – researched. The same thing is pre – colonial African history, Political system, Judiciary System and Religious Life. This is very much so, especially of Sub – Saharan West Africans which is largely ignored by main stream academia (Dalglish, 2005). Therefore, this article recommends intensive and rigorous research works into the Pre – colonial African histories, political systems, Judiciary systems, religious system and economic lives of these people. The emphasis should be placed on Sub – Saharan West African Countries and the other countries south of the Saharan.

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Figure 1

**A Sample of Oro emblem (a fashioned bamboo tree).**

This emblem, when whirling, produces a fearful voice which keeps away the women and the children from its public gaze. In Yoruba land, it has deeper meaning and super natural power which create fear in the hearths of the women in the society.



Figure 2

**A Compound Hall at Atoba's Compound, Ikire, Osun state, Nigeria.**

This hall is used for ancestral worships, sacred activities (i.e.fashioning of Oro emblem), lineage meetings and other cultural activities.