

TRADITIONAL RULERS AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION IN ESAN LAND.

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ABSTRACT: Culture refers to the totality of the pattern of behavior of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people. For instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, buildings and aesthetics, religious as well as philosophical beliefs. In Esan of Edo State, the preservation of this culture has been saddled on the traditional rulers, who are the custodian of the people's culture. The work reveals precisely that traditional rulers are the major agents in transforming the attitude of the rural people provided they are answerable to a titled ruler vested with the authority of governing the affairs of the locality. The work further discovered that in Esan besides preservation of the people's culture the traditional rulers are also the custodian of totems and also help to maintain law and order. The writers observed that these traditional institutions are being neglected in the contemporary time constituting a lot of issues. Thus the literature discovered that respect for this traditional legacy will result to peace and harmony in the society. To achieve the object of this treatise the work adopts the historical, evaluative, and analytical research methodology. The work recommends that the traditional rulers in Esan should be given more constitutional power to be more effective in their duties

KEY WORDS: Agent, Traditional Ruler, Culture, Preservation and Custodian

I. INTRODUCTION

It is true that culture is universal and that each local or regional manifestation of it is unique. This element of uniqueness in every culture is often described as cultural variation, and this is true in regards to the culture of Esan people in Edo State. The cultures of traditional African societies, together with their value systems and beliefs are close, even though they vary slightly from one another. These slight variations only exist when we compare an African culture with others.¹ They also assert that African cultures differ vastly from the cultures of other regions or continents. And we believe there is no need to over – labour this point since there are sufficient similarities to justify our usage of the term “African culture”. Here we would be sure to find a world of differences and diversity in beliefs, values and culture generally. Using Nigerian culture for instance, it is said that, “Nigerians always behave differently from the French, or Chinese, or Americans or Hottentots, because Nigerian beliefs, values and total thinking are different from those of the French, Chinese, Americans or the Hottentots”.² There has been change in the role of traditional rules in Esan as it applies to community development, since the introduction of local government reforms of 1976 in the said reforms, leadership roles were clearly expressed, which states that it is not the intention of government to destroy the organic unity of the traditional institutions. The traditional emirate and chiefdom will remain, although their function will be changed to accord with the present day circumstances.³

Although the paramount chief was undone by colonial rule, traditional rulers have served as important adjuncts in the administration of post – colonial government in both Nigeria and Africa. This in effect streamlined the procedure for the selection, recognition and roles of traditional rulers, therefore, formed the constitutional framework for traditional democracy, by a community selection of an acceptable ruler. There were the warrant chiefs during the indirect rule system, and the then colonial government recognized local chiefs, who performed as

native court judges. The first class chiefs were recognized in the middle belt of Nigeria during the colonial era. All these sets of traditional ruler contributed in no small measure, to the upliftment of community development. The role of traditional rulers has been undergoing change as the democratic dispensation within the country develops. It has therefore become necessary that they redefine their role as heads of their polities within the framework of developmental efforts by the central government and its adjuncts; as well as, non – governmental organizations.⁴

A quick glance at my dictionary showed that “ traditional” meant something done or respected according to custom from generation to generation. While “ruler” meant a person or something with power or influence over others or over certain things. It also meant a person with power to govern or with over other people or things. This definition would cover a very wide spectrum of things and situations but the subject coming at the time of the Constitution making exercise. When we talk about the modern time traditional rulers which is not yet with us, and to propound ideas and views on the future performance of existing institutions, we are inevitably compelled to review the performances and relevance, or lack of it, of such institutions in the present century, for, as we have seen, tradition move from generation to generation. In view of the above, the modernization helps the traditional rulers to introduce new ideas for community development such as being democratic in their decision making giving room for e people to participate in the community affairs. Traditional rulers of modern times perform vital roles in their domain like embarking on awareness campaign or the sensitization of their community populace on HIV/AIDS epidemic, the construction of classroom blocks and providing learning materials in school to help develop education system, provision of medical facilities and so on.⁵

II. THE GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF ESAN

Esan is located in the centre of Edo State and they form the Central Senatorial District of the State. It is bounded in the North East by Ivbiosokun and Etsako, on the West by uhunmwonde Local Government Area, on the South by Western Ibo and on the East by River Niger⁶. Esan is made up of five Local Government Areas which are; Esan South East, Esan West, Esan North, Esan Central and Igueben.

III. THE OCCUPTION OF THE ESAN PEOPLE

The Esan people are divinely blessed with fertile soil, thick forest and clement weather. Therefore, Esan is an agricultural country, everybody, man and woman being simple farmer whose main food crops are yams, corn or maize, cocoyam, cassava and the popular Ekpoma rice. Others are, pepper, groundnut, melon, bananas with plantain as subsidiary crops usually planted by women in their husband’s farm⁷.

The Esan people as highly industrious people, they do not only rely on food crops. They also grow economic crops such as cotton, rubber and cocoa.

The soil is also very much accommodative to palm trees. As a result many of her people are oil millers, palm wine tappers and producers of palm kernel. They enjoy good harvest almost in every season. Besides, the Esan people are successful traders and businessmen and women. Okojie writing about Uromi people in Esan observes,

But for Uromi who are tireless traders one would have been correct to say that the only trade in Esan until recently was limited to the sale and buying of local food stuff in the markets⁸.

Moreover, cloth weaving and blacksmithing are also other business areas of the Esan people. To crown them all, Esan people are successful people in all works of life. Some are erudite scholars, teachers, doctors, politicians, Fashion designers and so on.

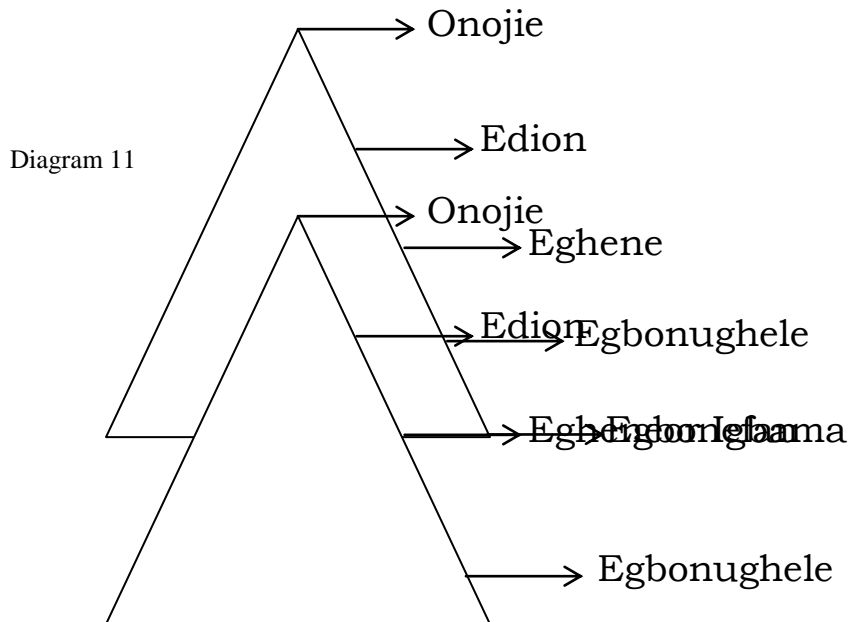
IV. THE SOCIAL STRATIFICATION OF THE ESAN PEOPLE

Social stratification among the traditional social setting is often referred to as age grades or sets. R.E. Bradbury defines age grade as “a village wide system of stratification for all men”. It must be noted that at any point in time, the made members are divided into different age set (otu)⁹. The age grade exists and has its proper footing among the Esan people.

In the age setting organization in the village, we have the executive which is made up if chiefs (Ekhamonlen) and village elders (Edion). The chief is usually from the descendant of the founder of the village. Today, the executive authority is mainly in the hands of Edion (elders) in different Idumu (quarter)¹⁰. This stratification differs from one community to the other among the Esan ethnic group. It should be noted that if the chief is not the head elder (OdionUhionmon)¹¹, he is usually the third elder in the community according to Esan custom¹². therefore, age group in some part of Esan is grouped into four (4), while at the other part three (3). The four areas include (i) Edion; (ii) Igbama; (iii) Egbonughele and (iv) Egbonefan. This four setting system is practiced at Ubiaja, Ewatto and Ewohimi to mention but a few. On the other hand, the three grouping system include; (i)

Edion; (ii) Ighene or Igbama, and (iii) Egbonughele. This system of stratification is prominent among the Uromi, Ekpoma and Ewu to mention but a few. This age grade stratification is referred to as “Otu” (age set) among the Esan people. Initiation to each set is associated with some rituals in the Olden days, but now modernity has taken its cause.

The diagrams below help one to explain clearly the positions of the different Otu among the Esan people
Diagram 1



For detail discussion we shall briefly examine each age group so as to create room for better understanding. They are as follow;

V. KING AND CHIEFS

The king is the supreme ruler of the village or town. He is the head of the community. Although the chief is grouped among the elders (Edion), he is a distinct person with specific function. A chief is usually from the descendant of the founder of the village or town. Nevertheless, there are some titled chiefs who were so made by the king (Onojie). Chieftaincy position is hereditary to subsequent heirs¹³, the Ojie’s position, is similar to the status of the ruling Judges in Isreal while Ekhamonlen Chiefs represents the king to rule clans and families. Judges and chiefs are believed to be chosen by God to rule the nation of Israel¹⁴. In the same vein, African people believe that chiefs are earthly divinities hence Kayode writes

In the order of reverence accorded to living people, kings and chiefs rank the highest. All over the world, the custom of selecting someone as the head of a community; or state; or of a nation is a constant one. At least in the African traditional communities, Kings and chiefs are accorded due respect and are believed to be “second to the divinities”¹⁵.

The kings are the owner of everything in the communities but they reach their communities through the chiefs. Though they are both (kings and chiefs) rulers, the kings reigns supreme. In some cases, they are bankers, also they form the judicial arm of government. No wonder, E.G. Parrinder rightly observes: “it is not surprising therefore to find in many parts of Africa, the king or chief is regarded as a religious awe”¹⁶.

2.3.2 ELDERS (EDION)

The term Edion is used to mean the senior age grade of the village or town and its members from the village council as well as that of the town. The leader of this **Otu** is referred to as the Odionwele. The Odionwele of each village is recognized as the native authority of the village¹⁷. The Edion carry **Okpo**, a curved stick to symbolize authority. They also use it to supports their movement. The Okpo carries certain religious meaning. Swearing to the Okpo is the highest sanction for deviants or people who disagree on certain matters, the Okpo of the Edion represents the past ancestral spirits. The OdionEgbele is the divine representative.

The highest set of Edion is four most senior elders. The council is made up of seven members of elders. The additional three are included to replace in case of absence due to death or otherwise¹⁸.

MIDDLE AGE GROUP (IGHENE OR EGBAMA)

This is the second group among the Esan people. They are the middle age setting-Otu. In the case of any death of elder (Odion) the next Ighene is selected to fill the gap. The main function of Ighene or Egbama is burial of corpses, maintenance of farm roads since it is a taboo for Edion to see a corpse, the Ighene bury it and make report to the elders who would come to perform necessary burial rites. In some communities, Edion do not attend the burial ceremony of Ighene and Egbonughele. But the Ighene or Egbama are free to attend to any burial. The Egbama at times form the legislative arm of the community. They also oversee matters of community dance. They organize the Egbonughele to make sure that social activities are carried out effectively.

EGBONUGHELE AND EGBONEFAN (STREET SWEEPERS)

This Otu are the street sweepers as their name is coined. Their major function is to carry out sanitary activities in the community. Okojie classifies the Egbonughele as the carriers of waters and hewers of wood for the village. Their most popular duty is that of clearing and cleaning of the village (square) and this is done every five day¹⁹.

The Egbonefan are path sweepers whose function is to sweep minor paths. They are not yet qualified in age to join their elderly counter parts to sweep the major village square. Their function is similar to that of Egbonughele but it is a bit lesser²⁰.

There is no elaborate rite performed to join the members of this group. Men join as soon as they are strong enough to work and at least attain the age of sixteen to eighteen years. In some communities such like Uromi, those to be initiated come to the Odion Egbonughele with a strong street broom, kolanut and white clay chalk. He is prayed for and immediately he is assigned his portion. In some community, portion is not assigned, it is general sweeping.

It is also the duty of the Egbonughele to dig graves for burial, tie shades and participate in communal dance. For instance, Igbabonelimin is mainly super headed by the Egbonughele. The Ighene or Egbama only participate in the drumming and singing aspects. Therefore this Otu (Egbonughele) is the most active part of the age-grades since it is comprised of youths.

Odion Egbonughele enjoys so much privilege. He enjoys more than the Odion Ighene. Nevertheless it is the Ighene that supervises the Egbonughele.

THE ROLE OF TRAITIONAL RULER IN THE PRESERVATION OF AFRICAN CULTURE IN ESAN.

A quick glance at my dictionary showed that "traditional" meant something done or respected according to custom from generation to generation. While "ruler" meant a person or something with power or influence over others or over certain things. It also meant a person with power to govern or with over other people or things. This definition would cover a very wide spectrum of things and situations but the subject coming at the time of the Constitution making exercise. When we talk about the modern time traditional rulers which is not yet with us, and to propound ideas and views on the future performance of existing institution, we are inevitably compelled to review the performances and relevance, or lack of it, of such institutions in the present century, for, as we have seen, tradition moves from generation to generation. In view of the above, the modernization helps the traditional rulers to introduce new ideas for community development such as being democratic in their decision making giving room for the people to participate in the community affairs.²¹

Traditional rulers are more concerned with the co – ordination and mutual adjustment of the community members. Legal norms define and standardize relations between individual and institutions and so reduce the potential for conflict. But when conflict does arise, it is settled by the traditional rulers and does not lead to the disintegration of the community and its development in general.

Using the three functional perspective, traditional rulers are part of the society who have some functions to perform and contribute to the maintenance of the society (i. e. their communities) such function include the contribution of their quota in the maintenance of the internal peace and security in their domain which is the only way development can take place in the community. They help in revenue generation and community tax assessment, determination of religious matters and settlement of conflict arising thereof; they also contribute in community development efforts of their respective communities like building of health centre, town halls, market shop, post office, electricity, construction of road networks, bridges and culverts e. t. c.²²

The functionalist perspective has to be subjected to considerate criticism. Critics argued that the type of explanation states that the parts of the system exist because of their beneficial consequences for the system as a whole. The main objection to this type of reasoning is that it treats an effect as a cause. Therefore the assertion that traditional embark on development projects in their domain is an attestation of consensus value and institution is a misplace one.

Finally, despite the widespread criticism, it should not be rejected out of hand, the assumption that society should be seen as an integral whole, that its parts are interdependent, that social institutions exist and the social structure directs human behavior. However, these approaches to community development are considered relevant in evaluating the role of traditional rulers in particular in Esan North local government area which is our main focus. In other words, it presents traditional rulers as a structure within a given system which has functions to perform in the transformation and development process within local government environment as well as in a large society.²³

Traditional Ruler As Custodian of Culture in Esan

From the point of view of the definition of a traditional ruler, as defined by the government, their functions have diminished from having legislative, judicial and executive powers in its day to day affairs to a mere advisory status and as custodians of culture and tradition at the local government and to some extent at state levels. The people however still have high regard and respect for the traditional rulers. The handover of authority they earned previously still lingers on to the extent that their views and instructions are being obeyed and respected with total loyalty without questions. It is believed up till today that they are sacred and extra ordinary Institutions. It is on that belief and recognition that government programs and policies are accepted by the communities when routed through traditional rulers.

Naturally, traditional rulers have a huge role to play as custodians of the culture and tradition of their people. This position confers on them some unique authority to help mould public opinion on strategic issues.

Many communities have found themselves in difficulties as a result of their inability to choose a traditional ruler. It is generally believed that traditional rulers because of their close affinity to their people determine, to a large extent, how things are done in their communities. It is for this reason that the government has always found it more reasonable to use them to discharge certain functions.²⁴

In Nigeria, almost every state has a traditional rulers' council which duty is to assemble the traditional rulers in a state to meet from time to time to reach important decisions which they pass on to government for implementation if found worthy. Through this medium government passes useful information across to them for dissemination to their respective communities.

Traditional Rulers Preserves Laws and Order

The role and status of traditional rulers in the preservation of law and order varied though with different administrations, they could be said to have remained agents for the perpetuation of our neo – colonial status, thereby upsetting the ongoing process of development in the country. The traditional rulers are custodians of the land and they hold the land in trust for the people. They serve as a link between that rural people and the government. They assist the government in political education and socialization of the rural people. In Esan, The traditional rulers acted as the custodians of the traditional religion, arts and culture of the people. They explained the customs and tried to preserve it. In view of the political administration, traditional rulers have limited authority to settle minor disputes/ in this regard also the traditional rulers try to make peace within the community and with neighboring communities.²⁵

Traditional Rulers Preserves Totems

The traditional ruler also stands as the sacred custodian of Totems in Esan. A totem is a spirit being, sacred object, or symbol that serves as an emblem of a group of people, such as a family, clan, lineage, or tribe. Totems protect against taboos such as incest among like totems. The concept of using totems demonstrated the close relationship between humans, animals and the lived environment. Anthropologists believe that totem use was a universal phenomenon among early societies.

Traditional Rulers as Custodian of Traditional Archaic

The traditional ruler is also the custodian of all traditional and historical materials (artifacts) that belongs to a clan and people. He preserves this materials for future purpose as such that the younger generation and the ones yet to come will have an evidence to show and know about their past. This is one of the sacred duties of traditional ruler according to Asukwo et al²⁶

VI. Conclusion

This study is aimed at finding out the role and prospects of traditional rulers in the preservation of African culture, focusing on Uromi. This study reveals precisely that traditional rulers are the major agents in transforming the attitude of the rural people provided they are answerable to a titled ruler vested with the authority of governing the affairs of the people. Based on the findings, the researcher has come to conclusion that traditional rulers have made a positive impact in community development to a degree. There has been change in the role of traditional rulers in Esan as it applies to community development, since the introduction of local government reforms of 1976 in the said reforms, leadership roles were clearly expressed, which states that it is not the intention of government to

destroy the organic unity of the traditional institutions. The traditional emirate and chiefdom remains, although their functions have changed in accord with the present day circumstance.

From the study, it is found that traditional rulers have succeeded in boosting community development through the provision of boreholes, rural roads, formation of co – operative societies, setting up of markets, construction of culverts, construction of earth dams, mobilizing people for health programmes and resolving disputes within their domain. It was discovered that poor road network, illiteracy and financial constraints were obstacles to community development. This scenario presented lack of access to long distance communities with non – passable roads, lack of understanding of projects initiated due to illiteracy as result of low participation of community members in most projects initiated by traditional rulers. Furthermore traditional rulers are more concerned with the co – ordination and mutual adjustment of the community members. Legal norms define and standardize relations between individual and institutions and so reduce the potential for conflict. But when conflict does arise, it is settled by the traditional rulers and does not lead to the disintegration of the community and its development in general. Needless to mention here that in Esan the role of the traditional ruler in the region cannot be over emphasizes in ensuring that the culture of the people is not only preserved but lives on.

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