

Tenacity of Gerontocracy in Nigeria: An Example of the Esan People in Edo State

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ABSTRACT Gerontocracy as a rule of the elders remains tenacious in many parts of Nigeria. In Esanland, a core group in Edo State, the manifestation of the rule of the elders is particularly strong at the village level. Usually, all respected elders as the custodians of the norms and values of the people while at the same time they were seen as the immediate next to the ancestors. Despite the vicissitudes of modernity on the status of the elders, gerontocracy lingers on as the norms in which elders exercised control as a cohesive force for their villages and communities. This is evident in the elders right to first choice, their family roles especially as the stabilizers of family ties and their being considered as next to the ancestors.

INTRODUCTION

Esan is an Edo word, the name and land of a people who live about eighty kilometers North East of Benin City. By this factor of proximity and the fact that they share a basic cultural substratum, they are regarded as neighbours to the Bini (Bradbury, 1973: p. 48). Esan is located at Longitude 60°5' and Latitude 60°5'. It has boundaries on the North West with Owan and Etsako on the North-East; on the South-West with Orhionwon and Ika, while on the South and South-East with Aniocha and Oshimili, all areas that were controlled by ancient Benin especially from the 15th century (Patridge, 1967: p.9). Esan grew initially as farming settlements, which were peopled from the Savannah north. These nuclear settlements expanded by internal growth and through recorded migrations from Benin about five centuries ago. Such migrations into the area were believed to have even occurred earlier and was led by banished princes or chiefs, criminals etc. who had deserted Benin City for the uninhabited forests lands "long before 1460, that is Ewuare's time (Oba of Benin) either through the selfishness and atrocities of some of the Obas, or following the catastrophic civil wars over succession...." (Okojie, 1960: p.35). Recorded migrations out of Benin City took place during Oba Ewuare's reign in the 15th century when the Oba lost his two sons and enacted some harsh laws including forbidding the citizens from

cooking, washing or having sexual intercourse for three years. It was the resentment of people against the new life-style in Benin City that made people to migrate into the forest (Okojie, 1960: p.32). The Oba waged war against the culprits but failed. Oba Ewuare's bellicose nature according to Jacob Egharevba (1968) led the Oba into conquering 201 towns and villages, some of them in Esan. But for many of the scattered settlements in the Esan forests, the Oba had to use diplomacy to bring them under Benin hegemony. He invited Esan leaders or their representatives to Benin for a truce. He dangled attractively before them an attachment to Benin City. He was ready to recognize and honour his visitors with the title of Onojie; meaning king. There is no record of those who might have received the invitation but ignored it. They have disappeared from history, for the future Esan rested on those who went to Benin and took the title of Onojie.

The decision among Esan leaders to go or not to go to Benin was not easily taken. Many of the leaders dreaded Oba Ewuare but did not want a fresh wave of military attacks of the area. Instead, Benin promised military support for the Onojie to enforce authority over insubordinate subjects (Eweka, 1992: pp. 83-84).

Only three of the leaders actually went to Benin in person. All three were apparently men who had nothing to fear from the Oba due to various reasons. The first was Ekpereijie, the son of Oba

Ohen's daughter and a sister to Oba Ewuare. She had been given to Amilele the leader of Irrua. Relations between Irrua and Benin must have been cordial. The second was Alan of Ewohimi, the son of Ikimi who had left Benin prior to the reign of Oba Ewuare and as such was not considered as one of those who fled the city by the Oba. The third was Ijebomen who left Benin for Ekpoma after the Oba had granted him leave (Eweka, 1992: p.169, 174).

In contrast to those mentioned above, the chief of Ohordua, Okhirare, "had especially offended the Oba and would not risk his neck, so he sent his heir Odua" to Benin (Eweka, 1992: p.272). His brother and leader of Emu also sent his son rather than risk his life. Three other Esan leaders dispatched brothers as their representatives to the meeting in Benin. Ede "felt he was only less than the Oba by degrees" and as such refused to honour the call. He then sent his junior brother to listen to what the Oba had to say. The leader of Ubgoha, also asked his junior brother to go on his behalf. The leader of Uromi sent his junior brother to find out what the Oba had to say.

Ewuare concealed his anger at the impertinent leaders in Esan. He was a smart diplomat. During the meeting, he told the visitors how they had migrated from Benin. He enthroned the Benin court traditions in Esan. The name ESANFUA, meaning those who fled from Benin City into the jungle became a pejorative connotation from where the word Esan was derived. The Oba bestowed the title of Onojie on those that were present at the meeting. Instantly, the Oba made them rulers of their communities and subservient only to the Oba and above all, this noble title was not transferable to father, brother or master, and once an Onojie, always an Onojie until death (Okojie, 1960: p.37).

Where Oba Ewuare had enthroned a proxy except in Ewohimi, Irrua and Ekpoma, strife and hatred followed as the new leaders began to assert authority and control over the elders. Thus the Oba wielded the numerous villages into large political entities that hitherto became known as chiefdoms ruled by the Onojie. R.E. Bradbury explains that "The Chiefdom might consist of one or several villages loosely knitted" (1973: p.48).

GERONTOCRACY IN ESAN

Defined as a rule of elders, gerontocracy was a form of social organization in which a group of

old men or a council of elders dominate decisions by exercising some form of control (Webster, 1990: p.514). In Esan, elders exercised a general control over the people. The laws that governed Esan communities were based on the customs and traditions of the people, which the elders were the main repositories of power (Okojie, 1960: p.76). The belief and utmost confidence in the elder as the head was a natural inclination that began with the family. The home Ukuwa was not an isolated unit but part of an extended family. Each home consisted of a man, his wife/wives, children, junior brother, his yet unmarried sisters and any other persons within, either as a mother or servant provided he or she was within the circle. A combination of such homes represented the extended family. The head of the extended family unit was called Omijiogbe. As the junior brother's own families and multiplied it so it was easy to see this man's position as head of the family increase in importance (Okojie, 1960: p.50). Being the head he was the spokesman for the unit and was in charge of the ancestral shrine (David .O. Umobuarie, 1976: p.45). The day-to-day administration of the family lay on the shoulders of the head of family. He was in fact in a position to control not just the religious but the political activities of the family, thereby ensuring maximum security of all members. He was also regarded as the person at the helm of affairs and "the orbit around which all other things revolved" (Okojie, p.50). In the event of any disagreement in the family, he was seen as the arbiter and he reserved the right to punish any erring member. However, in the event of any conflict between members of the family a protective position for his family by soliciting for peace or asking for compensation was required. But in cases where it was difficult to arrive at a compromise with an out-going or out-group, the matter was then referred to the highest person in the gerontocratic ladder. This was the Odionwele or eldest of the elders.

The head of the family Omijiogbe also participated in the religious life of members of his lineage. For example, he was the go-between or the mediator through whom the members of the family appealed to their ancestors. Consequently it was his direct responsibility to control the family shrine, pray to the ancestors for peace and forgiveness of wrongdoing as well as for prosperity. It was to this end that the Esan people believe that the living descendants of the ancestors must as a matter of fact, pay due respect

to the ancestors to prevent any form of disaster and attract to themselves some good fortunes or blessing (Ukhun, 1997: p.39).

Many lineages that were contiguous formed the Idumu or quarter. The leader of the eldest lineage was seen as the head or leader of the quarter. One important thing about this organisation was that members usually had a claim to common descent or blood relation hence inter-marriages were not allowed. Many Idumu or quarter usually came together to form the village. The most elderly of the elders by age was usually made to assume office as the Odionwele when the old Odionwele died.

The organisation of each village rested on the division of the male population into age sets namely Egbonughele (Sweepers) regarded as the youngest male members of the society. Igene (Scavengers) were the next in the age ladder while the Edion were made up of the eldest male in the society. Gerontocracy worked well in villages and not in the cities or urban centers with people of diverse interests or background. Usually the head of the village was the Odionwele who presided over its affairs. The Odionwele was regarded as the pivot around whom all activities revolved. He presided over all meetings and took decisions with his executives. The post of the Odionwele needs to be qualified because if a stranger settled in a village and became the eldest member he would still not be Odionwele. An Odionwele's family members must have existed long enough in the village to lose all the identities of a stranger.

The Odionwele with three most elderly Edion formed the most elderly four or the EDIONENE. The Edion had messengers known as UKO-EDION. It was the messenger's sole responsibility to summon all the Edion in the village whenever there was an issue to be discussed. The choice of who became an UKO-EDION was essentially the prerogative of the Odionwele who considered the quality, honesty, wisdom and out-spokenness of the individual. Usually, meetings which concerned the well being of the community were held at the village square called, Okoughele. The elders formed the village council that dealt with serious crimes of all sorts and they possessed walking sticks called OKPO that were used for support whenever they walked from their homes. Such walking sticks constituted the effigies that could be counted to have a glimpse of the number of Odionwele that have lived in the village (Olumense, 1997: pp. 45 – 49).

Apart from the administrative function of the elders, they also arbitrated religious issues. For instance, the Odionwele was not the chief priest of the village but the custodian of the ancestral shrine. Every year before the new yam festival or at any other ceremony to the gods of the land he would pray to the ancestors on behalf of the village. The religious aspect of village life rested on both the chief priest and the Odionwele. In fact, he was the custodian of the village land which he held in trust for the living members of his village, the dead and the yet unborn. Before any new settler acquired land the Odionwele must give approval (Oral Interview: Abhulimen, 2002).

The Igene – grade was next to the Edion. They were usually not called for public duties unless such duties were beyond the competence of the lower grade. Like the elders, they held meetings from time to time to discuss issues of common importance. The military and physical defense of the village usually rested on the group. Its members headed such major works as house – building or roofing and were really the dare – devils of the village community. They were usually called upon when there was a serious matter like fire outbreak, burglary or theft. They also assisted in burying the dead and helped the junior age grades in the digging and clearing of ponds. The leader of the Igene age grade controlled the affairs of the Igene and effected discipline among its members. This was done through the imposition of fines Oko on any erring member of the group (Okojie, 1960: p.76).

The Egbonughele or street sweepers were the last in the age group. Their known jobs were mostly the sweeping of streets, clearing of marked places, farm paths, streams etc. The most common was the sweeping of the village square UGHELE that was usually done once in every 4 days. They were responsible for a major part of communal labour in the village and they only got help from the Igene when the task was too heavy for them alone. This was usually in a form of an appeal to the Edion who then requested the Igene for required assistance by the Egbonughele sweepers.

The leader of the sweepers maintained discipline within the age grade and made sure all in the age-grade obeyed the rules and regulations of the group. As the head, he reserved the right to punish any member who violated the rules of the grade. Such offences included failure to participate in the sweeping of the village square on market days, fighting in the square, and failure

to attend to assigned tasks at the agreed time or date. Like the scavengers or age grade the punishment was usually in form of a fine that was either paid in cowries or by confiscating any possession of the offender in lieu of cash. Money or items so acquired was divided among members of grade in the order of seniority. (Oral Interview: Ebhodaghe, 2000). The leader of the sweepers was expected to take the biggest share of any cash or any item collected at a time followed by the next three people in age known as Egbonughele - nene.

The expansion of Esan communities from villages into chiefdoms under Enijie did not negate the rule of the elders. The Odionwele continued to exercise his right to rule at the village level by virtue of him being the oldest member of the community. In the same way other male members of the community were potential successors to the stool of the Odionwele. The belief of the people about their elders being closer to the ancestors greatly aided the principles of gerontocracy to the extent that despite colonial rule it remained a pattern of governance at the village level even till today.

The belief in the ancestors enhanced the belief in the continuity of life after death and in the unbroken intercourse between the "living dead" and the living members of the family. As the living father provides for and protects his children, so the departed father was expected to continue with a greater spirit in the world beyond. This means that in reality; the survivors are never cut off from protection and guidance of their deceased relations who have trodden the path of life which the living now tread. Ancestors have their feet planted in both the world of the living and that of the spirits. They therefore know more than the living and are consequently accorded great respect for that (Bolaji Idowu, 1973: p.179). Also, as the deceased possessed powers of omniscience, to influence, help or molest the living, ancestors represented an order of intermediaries who related prayers to God (Smith, 1950: p.10). Pronouncements by elders were regarded as law. The belief in the wrath of the ancestors, and the elders who follow them as the most senior members of the living enhanced the tenacity of gerontocracy in Esan. Elders were experienced through age and knowledge over time. This belief is strongly rooted in the popular saying that "what an old man sees while sitting down, a young man can not see even while standing" (Okoduwa, 2003).

Over time, the practice of gerontocracy remains tenable to the structure of a changing society. For example, with the development of a political super structure following the establishment of the rule of the Onojie over loosely knitted villages, the rule of elders remained as bedrock of administration in the villages. The Onojie as the ruler of the corporate entity derived his position by right of being the first son in the royal lineage. He enhanced or reduced his acceptance and popularity by his sensitivity of conscience, greed or avarice. On the other hand the Odionwele acquired his position by being the eldest male in his village.

By the colonial period, the rule of the Onojie over the chiefdom became more consolidated with the British colonial policy of indirect rule. According to Temple, Indirect rule was a system of administration, which enabled British officials on the spot to rule their colonial people through their native authorities (Temple, 1968: p.30). Consequently, the Onojie remained as the head of native justice and the final court of appeal at the level of the Chiefdom while the Odionwele and his elders continued to administer life in the villages (Aveling et al., 1923). However, a representative of the Onojie who was called the Okhaemon was usually sent to each village to monitor activities of the Odionwele and his people.

Although there is the view today that old age does not represent intelligence especially with the growing influence of western knowledge and education, elders and their age-old institutions still remain a significant part of village administration. This factor therefore represents part of the reason for the tenacity of gerontocracy in Esanland.

CONCLUSION

Generally it must be said that unless the individual move from the village setting to the modern town, he is guided and still lives within a set of principles that is based on gerontocracy. The general belief in life after death reinforces the belief in the ancestors who were elders that once lived and died but lived on as spirits. Thus gerontocracy was not just a system of government but a norm – a way of life of a people and their socio-cultural setting. Unless this is destroyed, gerontocracy will linger on as a form village administration in Esan.

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