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THE CONCEPT OF ELITISM IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA THOUGHT

Olufunke Adeboye

Introduction

The idea of social stratification is a thread that runs through every human society and this is what underlies the concept of elitism. Yoruba traditional thought, in as much as it addressed all spheres of life and activities of the people had something to say about elitism. This would thus imply that the idea of social elites is not peculiar to Western thought. However, because the traditional Yoruba society was predominantly an oral culture, its social thought was represented, not in a body of writing, but in the day to day practices of the people, their lore, belief systems and the manner in which they ordered their society. And it is to these we will turn in this paper in order to get at the ideas of the Yoruba on elitism.

Due to the obvious problems that could be encountered in attempting to analyse the minds of each of the Yoruba sub-groups on the subject under discussion in a paper of this size, I have chosen the Oyo-Yoruba as a case study. Thus while the ideas of the Oyo-Yoruba are taken to represent those of other Yoruba groups, one does not deny the existence of a number of variations and exceptions here and there.

Once more word about the title of this paper. The adjective, 'traditional' as used here is to show that the Yoruba thought being examined was that which existed before the colonial period, a direct product of the people's heritage modified from day to day by local circumstances but not totally void of 'alien' influence.

For the purpose of analysis, this paper has been divided into five segments. The first attempts a definition of the concept of elitism; the second looks at the background history of Oyo, the third examines the Oyo concept of elitism in pre-nineteenth century times while the fourth analyses nineteenth-century changes in the Oyo definition of elitism. The last part is the conclusion.

The idea behind this whole exercise is to indicate the dynamics of social differentiation among the Yoruba.

ELITISM DEFINED

The very idea of discussing elitism or the elite in a preliterate, non-westernized society may seem paradoxical to some who have equated elitism with westernization. This is because most of the time when the term 'elite' is mentioned in the African context, what easily comes to the mind of many people is a picture of the Western educated individuals in such a society. But in a general sense, the concept of elitism portrays a social situation in which some individuals enjoy more esteem than others in the society. In other words, the concept revolves round differences in individuals statures.

Scholars have given several definitions of the term 'elite'. According to Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, the early users of the term in western sociology, elite is the minority which rules over the rest of the society by virtue of its high status¹. Thoenes echoes this idea of the predominance of the elite by defining it as a group of individuals which exercises authority over others². Abner Cohen sees the elite as a group of individuals occupying commanding positions in the society³, and for Keller⁴, the elite is made up of pre-eminent individuals in different fields in the society. To Nadel, Bottomore, Smythe and Smythe⁵, the elite comprises the superior people in any given society.

A common thread which runs through all these definitions is the fact that the term 'elite' is applicable to a group of individuals who have attained the highest ranking in society and as such are looked upon as leaders by the rest of the society. In the words of Nadel, the elite is that stratum of the population "which for whatever reasons can claim a position of superiority and hence a corresponding measure of influence over the fate of the community"⁶. Superiority and influence are thus the hallmarks of the elite. Influence here is taken to be the power to affect other people's character, beliefs or actions through example, fear and admiration. It is different from authority in the sense that the latter refers to power exercised within the framework of formal governmental structures. In other words, authority used in this context is power conferred or exercised by a formal backing of the governmental apparatus.

-- The elite may also be said to constitute a social class. But 'class' is used here not in the Marxist sense in which classes are interpreted as economic or political interest groups which are logically opposed to one another. Rather, classes in this context are seen as status groups, arranged in a hierarchical continuum in the society⁷.

In Yoruba communities, individuals of high status were the 'big people' *eniyan nla* or 'important people' *eniyan pataki*. In Oyo, they were also called *eekan ilu*⁸. *Eekan* means 'pegs' while 'ilu' means 'town'. As the *eekan ilu* the elite thus constituted the pegs on which matters hung in the society. In other words, the elite is composed of eminent personalities in the society. These individuals occupied the higher strata of the society while the lower strata were made up of the non-elite. Members of the society determined the yardsticks for measuring statuses, and a look at the yardsticks of the Oyo-Yoruba would give us an idea of the type of individuals who qualified for elite status. Before going into that, we shall pause here to examine the background history of Oyo as most of the ideas of the Oyo-Yoruba about elitism were products of their history and cultural heritage.

BACKGROUND HISTORY OF OYO

The Oyo-Yoruba occupied a large kingdom which reached its peak in terms of size, prosperity and stability in the first half of the eighteenth century. Thereafter, the empire began to witness a lot of cracks in its socio-political edifice, and by the third decade of the nineteenth century it had fallen⁹. During the hey-day of the empire it was headed by a monarch called the *Alafin* assisted by quarter chiefs called the *Oyomesi*, a host of palace officials, and other government functionaries. The Oyo society was largely an agrarian one although trade and crafts also played important roles in the economy.

While birth played an important role in the determination of a person's social status in Oyo, individual achievement was equally important as well shall see in this paper.

The collapse of Oyo in the nineteenth century saw the migration of people from the centre of the Oyo empire to the southern parts¹⁰. The capital, Katunga, also had to be evacuated and a new one was founded at Ago-Oja¹¹. This period also saw the loss of most of Oyo's dependencies. A new society was started at Ago-Oja where Alafin Atiba sought to revive the ancient glories of the Oyo kingdom. Consequently, Ago-Oja became Ago-d'Oyo and later simplified to Oyo¹². What is important here in nineteenth-century Oyo history is not so much the founding of the new Oyo, but the creation of a new society which it entailed and the new opportunities it offered for individual advancement.

THE OYO CONCEPT OF ELITISM: The Pre-Nineteenth Century Scene

In Oyo, just as in any other Yoruba community, the position of the elite depended on public recognition. An individual was not considered 'important' or 'big' unless he was publicly acknowledged by people, i.e. the other members of his community. This public recognition constituted having *eniyan* (or *eeyan*). These 'people' were his admirers and well-wishers. This idea of having people is indicated in the saying:

Mo l'owo, mo leeyan
ki lotun ku ti nko ni?

I have money and people
what else have I not got?

and in the following song:

Eniyan l'aso mi
Eniyan l'aso mi
Bi mo ba ti r'eni mi
Inu mi a dun, ara mi a ya gaga
Eniyan l'aso mi¹³.

I am clothed with people
I am clothed with people
When I see my own people
I am glad and in high spirits
I am clothed with people

