

Some Institutional Response to Culture Contact

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The impact of Western culture on Africa has often been thought of as a process in which old institutions are destroyed and replaced by new ones. This is, of course, an over-simplification generally used for analytical purposes. In actuality these traditional institutions are not destroyed, in the sense that they cease to exist. Rather, they undergo changes in scope and function. It is my purpose to examine here three traditional Yoruba political institutions and analyze the changes that have taken place under the establishment of British rule.

The term "Yoruba" does not refer to a single, relatively homogeneous society. The Yoruba are divided into several provinces, chiefdoms, districts and semi-autonomous villages, all of which show a measure of cultural divergence one from the other.

Forde (7) distinguishes twenty-three different Yoruba chiefdoms all of which were monarchies. However, the Yoruba monarchy was not absolute; there were always a number of checks on its powers. By the same token, no other political body ever had complete political control either.

The degree of differentiation among the various Yoruba "tribes" is greatest in the sphere of political structure (9, p. 368). This is especially true of the institutions that functioned as a check on monarchical power. The largest division is between those Yoruba groups in which age sets were the major check on the king and those in which secret associations were the major check.

I have chosen those groups with secret associations as the major check as the focus of this paper because the position of these institutions in the traditional Yoruba political system is relatively clear, where the position of age sets is not.

Of the twenty-three different chiefdoms, significant amounts of data exist on eight. Of these eight, four have secret associations as the primary counter balance to the chief. The following discussion of both the traditional system and the changes that have occurred is based on a composite of these four sub-groups: Yoruba proper (Oyo, Ibadan and Ilorin), Egba, Ife and Ijebu.

The Traditional System

There are three major Yoruba secret associations: Egungun, Oro and Ogboni. Of these, in the traditional system Egungun is only slightly involved in the political structure; Ogboni is almost totally involved and Oro is peripherally involved, especially through its connections with Ogboni.

In general Ogboni is considered to be primarily a political organization with the following duties: to elect and install kings or chiefs, to legislate, to hear and judge cases and generally "to help the king in the proper government of the country" (1, p. 90).

Aside from these general functions, there is at least one report that Ogboni was also involved in problems of formal social control in that it executed criminals (12, p. 117). However, this is probably a mistake stemming from a confusion of Ogboni and Oro. The ties between the two were relatively strong and there was even an overlapping membership to some extent (6, pp. 68-71).

Oro is the second of the secret associations that were traditionally involved in political activities. Primarily Oro is a religious association whose major function is to represent the ancestors. Oro represents the ancestors as a collective unit (11, p. 141).

Oro's ties with the ancestors provide a supernatural sanction for its non-religious activities. Most of these center in the area of formal social control. That is, Oro is reported as performing specific, expected, institutionalized acts that function to control, punish or correct deviant behavior. For the most part, Oro's social control functions lay in the execution or other punishment of criminals and witches (11, p. 141). Oro is able to punish only those who had been condemned by Ogboni.

It is clear that Oro is associated with Ogboni and its political functions. However, this association probably stems from the fact that Oro, a religious association, by acting as executioner lends supernatural sanction and support to the decisions and actions of Ogboni. There is no evidence of Oro acting as an independent political agent.

The third association, Egungun, had, at the most, a minor role in the traditional political system. However, it has been reported to have taken both an interesting and important place in the modern political scene.

Like Oro, Egungun is primarily a religious association drawing on a relationship to the ancestors. However, where Oro represents a collectivity of ancestors, Egungun members represent individual ancestors, though not specifically known ones, who have come back to life to dance and parade through town and to make known their will (6, pp. 76-81).

Besides its religious activities, Bascom (2) reports a minor part in the political system. This is confined mainly to the area of social control and consists largely of what might be termed a "show of strength" on the part of the ancestors. Apparently, this show serves to reinforce the belief in the concern of the ancestors and the power they can wield if displeased. It also seems that at one time this was more than a show of potential power; that is, Egungun actually punished those who had displeased the ancestors who they personified (12, pp. 105-119; 5).

The Traditional Institutions Today

In discussions of the present-day roles of traditional political institutions Oro disappears. Its punishment functions have been taken over by a regularly constituted police force. There is one report that the Native Authorities, as recognized by the British generally maintain the provincial police forces (8, p. 125). However, the extent to which these overlap in membership with Oro is unknown and, given Oro's super-

natural base, probably non-existent. Also the extent of Oro's survival as a religious institution representing the collective will of the ancestors is unknown.

Ogboni, on the other hand, still exists in a number of forms in the various kingdoms. Among the Ijebu it still maintains some political functions. The town councils are now elected by the representatives of various associations, among them Ogboni (8, p. 117). This is actually close to the traditional system of selection to the chief's council, except for the fact that different criteria of recruitment were used (age, wealth and prestige). However, the major difference is that the authority sanctioning the operation of the council derives from a non-traditional secular force.

Perhaps the most important change in Ogboni is the development of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity. This association is, like its traditional predecessor, extremely important in politics. However, this importance does not stem, as with Ogboni, from supernatural sanctions (10, p. 26). Rather it stems from the economic, educational and social prestige of its members. Furthermore, the traditional formal powers are gone. Important as it is, there is relatively little information on the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity. What is known is that it is a deliberately created group based on a combination of Freemasonry and traditional Ogboni in an attempt to depaganize its rituals and make them acceptable to Muslims and Christians (4, p. 34).

Finally, there is a recent report of the entrance of Egungun into political life. This apparently stems from a slightly earlier extension of its social control activities to social criticism. In a report of an election campaign in a Yoruba town, Beier notes that periodically Egungun members appeared representing the spirits of the two contending parties, the Action Group and the N.C.N.C., and that the dances and songs of these masqueraders are used as an opportunity to present topical political messages (3, p. 68).

Conclusions

The changes in the traditional political system that have been discussed, all too briefly, here seem to show a particular pattern of institutional responses to a culture contact situation.

It should be noted that most of the changes that have occurred are not demonstrably the result of westernization. Rather, they are the direct result of British administrative policy.

Oro is the association whose political position has been most disturbed. As noted earlier, there are no reports of Oro taking independent political action. The society depended on a mandate handed down by Ogboni. Deprived of this mandate, Oro could no longer function as an executioner.

In the case of Ogboni the changes that have taken place are of a much more subtle sort. Although the British undermined the society's formal powers by setting up an alternative judicial system, the composition of its membership was not affected. This still included the most prestigious men in the city. Gradually Ogboni experienced a change of

focus. Where it was once a primarily political body, it has become primarily a recreational association of people of high status. As a recreational organization one of its primary spheres of activity seems to be as a mutual aid association. In this respect the surviving Ogboni is quite similar to the new Reformed Ogboni Fraternity which, as a combination of traditional Ogboni and Freemasonry, is primarily a recreational and mutual aid association.

A word should also be said about Ogboni's present political role. This seems to be a result of the fact that the society is still an avenue for prestige and attracts individuals of high status and influence. It has become, then, a parapolitical organization much like the Chamber of Commerce in the United States on both a national and local level.

The most surprising aspect of change in the traditional political system is the emergence of Egungun as a political force. It is important to note that Egungun's new political role is unlike any political role in traditional society. This is, of course, in part related to the fact that political parties did not exist in traditional society. However, it is also possible to view this function as the promotion of a particular ideology, in this case a political one. This sort of promotional organization was also traditionally unknown.

One factor stands out in these three different responses to the impact of colonialism. Oro, the association with the most specific traditional political function, lost that function and disappeared from the political scene. On the other hand, Egungun, the association with the most diffuse and perhaps smallest part in the traditional political system not only survived as a political force, but also seems to have emerged as what may well prove to be a strong link between traditional society and the modern political system. Finally, between these poles stands Ogboni, the society with several specific and some diffuse political responsibilities. Here, the association has lost its formal powers, but has maintained its political influence by subordinating a formerly primary role to a formerly secondary role, that of mutual aid society operating for the benefit of its members.

What is suggested by this is that in investigating the impact of western domination and the impact of continued westernization, a continuum ranking the specificity and diffuseness of the functions of various institutions might prove to be a useful research tool. It also suggests the hypothesis that the more specific the political functions of a given institution, the less resistant it is to the impact of an invading political system. This could also be generalized by eliminating the word "political" and by substituting "invading culture" for "invading political system." Also, the connections between Oro and Ogboni suggest that changes in some institutions may be dependent on changes in, or capacity for change in other institutions.

Finally, these conclusions have a bearing on applied anthropology. They suggest that if the emergent nations wish to make use of traditional institutions and turn them toward more "modern" goals and functions, a greater measure of success can be expected if traditional institutions with more generalized functions are utilized, rather than

institutions with highly specific functions. Needless to say, this whole area is in need of extensive further research.

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