

The Influence of Christianity on Ekiti Political Development 1893-1917: An Historical Survey

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Abstract: The concern of this publication is to look into the influence of Christianity on Ekiti political development from 1893-1917 from the historical point of view. The study tried to x-ray the advent of Christianity in Ekitiland. It explains the political structure of the people of Ekiti before Christianity came to Ekitiland. In the study, the role of the paramount rulers in the political administration in pre-Christian era was emphasised. Arms of pre-Christian Ekiti political structure were also examined. Arms of pre-Christian era were, Elegbes, the Egbeguns, village heads, community heads and family. The duty of these arms is mention in the study. The impact of Christianity on the political structure in Ekitiland be given attention to. The study also, spells out the political powers of the paramount rulers before the advent of Christianity. The strategies used by the missionaries in winning the soul of the people of Ekitiland in the pre-Christian era were discussed. The study will discuss the development of the post Christian Ekiti political administration and the positive and negative role played by Christianity. Conclusively, the publication had discussed the pre-Christian political system in Ekiti. It has also, treated the major political organs together with other arms of pre-Christian rule in Ekitiland.

Key words: Ekiti, christianity, rulers, politics, administration, missionaries

INTRODUCTION

Christianity was establishment in Yoruba part of Nigeria in the 19th century including Ekitiland (Akomolafe, 1974). Although, a lot had been written on the introduction of Christianity in Nigeria, little is known about the political development and the church in Ekitiland. This study is an attempt to bring into limelight the account of the role played by the church in the political development of the people of Ekitiland. It also explains the pre-Christian development in Ekitiland.

Christianity came to Ekitiland in 1893 (Akomolafe, 1974) and got to some part of Ekitiland within a short period of time, by 1993, it had reached a stage where many denominations have their hierarchies (Bishops, Chairmen, Superintendents and even senior Apostles, etc.) living in Ekitiland. It was also, a period of political and social development not only in Ekiti, but also in Nigeria as a whole (Adebiyi, 2003). This period also, marked the end of a bitter and prolonged inter-ethnic warfare, when nearly everybody was interested in peaceful living and co-existence. It was a period, when the message of the prince of peace came and the people in the urban and rural areas of Ekitiland accepted it with all its components from Europe. An example is western education through which, Christianity spread so fast in both rural and urban areas of Ekitiland (Adebiyi, 2003).

Before 1893, the people of Ekitiland were not a Christian community. They were used to the practiser of indigenous religion. They have their belief in the existence of the Supreme Being called Abasira and Olodumare (the almighty God). There was also the belief in the existence and power of the ancestors. Belief in reincarnation, predestination, medicine, witchcraft, rituals and sacrifice formed integral part of the religion.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

Politics is defined in the *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* as the science or art of government: it deals with public affairs. It is also, connected with power or status. It is also, the activities involved in getting and using power in public life and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society (Hornby, 1979). Before the advent of Christianity in the Ekiti political set-up was constituted as to be discussed:

Unlike in some other areas of Yorubaland, where a paramount ruler may rule a whole sub-group, such as the Awujale of Ijebuland, the Alake of Egbaland and Owa-Obokun of Ijesaland, Ekiti had never been ruled by a single paramount ruler. In Ekiti alone, there were sixteen recognized paramount rulers. Most of the paramount rulers had no jurisdiction except a few of them, like the Ajero of Ijero, the Olojudo of Ido Faboro, the Ewi of

Ado-Ekiti, the Oore of Otun and Elekole of Ikole- Ekiti. But when, external forces threatened them with invasion, they put their resources together to fight the common enemy. An example was the Ekiti parapo or Kiriji war 1877-1886. Therefore, the paramount rulers began to meet regularly starting from 1900 and they were known as confederation of Ekiti kingdom (Oguntuyi, 1979).

THE ROLE OF THE PARAMOUNT RULERS IN POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION

The paramount rulers in Ekitiland were equals, as none was under the jurisdiction of the other. The Obas had the same status since, they had the same beaded crowns. There was no political grading, but they knew how they settled and the position of individuals from Ile-Ife, since they all claim to be the sons of Oduduwa, except the Oore of Otun-Ekiti. The Oore was said to have traced his descent to the sea god, Olokun. He claimed to have met Oduduwa at the shore and cured him of his blindness. He gave water to the sons of Odududwa hence, he was called Oloore, which was gradually changed Oore-benefactor (Diocese, 1991). No wonder Revd. Samuel Johnson mentioned Oore of Otun-as the first paramount ruler in Ekiti (Diocese, 1991). He also, graded Ekiti Obas into two categories. He grades four of them as supreme paramount rulers, while he graded the remaining twelve as minor paramount rulers.

Group A: Supreme paramount rulers:

- Oore of Otun
- The Ajero of Ijero
- The Ewi of Ado
- The Elekole of Ikole

Other paramount rulers graded as minor kings:

- The Alara of Aramoko
- The Alaaye of Efon-Alaaye
- The Ajapada of Akure
- The Alagotun of Ogotun
- The Olojudo of Ido-faboro
- The Ata of Ayede
- The Oloja Oke of Igbo-Odo
- The Oloye of Oye
- The Olomuo of Omuo
- The Onire of Ire
- The Arinjale of Ise
- The Onitaji of Itaji (Ajibola, 1952)

Some of the names above have now changed. Ajapada has been changed to Deji of Akure, Alagotun

has been changed to Ologotun while, Oloja Oke of Igbo-Odo has been changed to Ewa Ooye of Oke-Mesi from the list above, it can be seen that there were no consistency in the writing, there was no hierarchy of the kings in Ekitiland. This was because, the information of the writer of the list above found out that there were some Obas in Ekitiland that their names were not mentioned because they were not powerful in Kiriji war. For instance, Olosi of Osi was a headed crown but his name was not mentioned as part of paramount ruler in Ekitiland (Ogundele, 1956). An adage says, if you are not informed, you are deformed, that is the reason, why the information of the writer of the above list is deformed because they were not adequately informed about the kings and kingdoms in Ekiti in the pre-Christian era in Ekitiland. There was never a time, when any paramount ruler in Ekiti agreed to be under the umbrella of the other (Babatola, 2007).

The Ekiti Oba had been ruling their subject because they have the power of life and death in their domain. Adebisi wrote:

The first meeting of the kings of Ekiti was started at Ilesa on the 21st June 1900. The meeting was known as pelupelu. Another meeting was in 1920, where, the government policies were announced to them. At the meeting of 1920, the Obas agreed to introduced some sweeping changes namely: Poll tax known as owo-ile, which was only 6 shillings per head and native courts, where divorce cases could be heard. It was also, at this meeting that the district officer forbade the distraction of palm tree and other economic trees like iroko, ogao and apepe. The discussion resulted in the establishment of forest reserve, which was later on published in the government Gazette (Adebisi, 1972).

From the above explanation of Adebisi on the meeting of the Ekiti kings in 1900, one will know that the traditional or paramount rulers of Ekitiland were the central figures of their towns and villages.

THE EKITI POLITICAL ORGANS DURING THE PRE-CHRISTIAN ERA

Before Christian era in Ekitiland, there were some notable age groups used by the Obas in Ekitiland for enforcing laws on their subjects. The most popular group commonly used by these paramount rulers in Ekiti was the Iwarafa or Iwara mefa. Usually, they used to be either 5 or 6. These group Iwarefas helped the paramount rulers in Ekitiland in their executive work before the advent of Christianity. There were also, militant group that were also

co-responsible for any matter that might be affecting the community. The name of the militant group was called Egbegun. This militant group used to acting as the check and balances between the kings and their subjects. This militant group was also, responsible for the security of the town and village from outside invaders (Olomola, 2005). The Egbegun could deal with any king or chief if he misbehaves. As earlier said, this group were acting as checks and balances for the kings and chiefs in Ekiti traditional administration. With this system of checks and balances among the kings and chiefs, it will not be possible for any king or chief to be ruling their subject autocratically.

Where, there is no law, there is no sin. This was the reason, why there were laws in Ekitiland, but mostly not written, by which the paramount rulers and their subjects were being guided. Therefore, there were various kinds of punishment meted out to any offender in Ekitiland before the advent of Christianity in Ekiti, which was pre-Christian era. The punishments were in categories. These punishments include, fine of bringing kegs of palm wine, a number of yams, bush meat and kolanuts, depending on the weight of the offences committed by the offender (Olomola, 2005). In Ekitiland, any Oba, chief or his subject who violated the norms and cultural values of his community would be taken as an offender.

OTHER ARMS OF PRE-CHRISTIAN EKITI POLITICAL STRUCTURE

This have more effective administration in Ekiti, the following agencies were made use of. These were the age grades, the family heads and the quarter heads. The age grade Egbegun imposed standard of conduct on their members and saw that none of their members either by seeming disrespect to the lawful authorities or any other misdemeanour brought their group into the public ridicule. They see to the proper performance of their share of the common task of clearing of paths and public places.

It is the duty of family heads to settle all minor disputes among members of their families. Any family head ensure that any fines imposed on members of his family were paid, although he was not held responsible for any offence committed by them. Similar functions were performed by the quarter heads in his own quarter. Many of the age group heads and the quarter heads being invariably elderly men belong the Ogboni (Fasanmi, 1999). All the above listed organs of Ekiti government worked together in peace and harmony.

As a matter of fact the whole system of Ekiti government ensured that the wellbeing of the community did not depend on the arms of any chief because

everybody felt the sense of belonging and that no one individual possessed too great power. It all looked like as, if all system used was well. The evidence is taking from the writing of Bishop Phillip in Ekitiland, it read thus:

Despite the fact that Ekiti paramount chiefs have equal powers yet their subjects have respect for them. The kings authority was so respected that their orders was final before the late 1893 and the time proceeding it (Olawale, 1975).

That the pre-Christian Ekiti political administration had been discussed above, the impact of Christianity on the political structure in Ekitiland would now be given attention to. It is important to note that Christianity (one of the major world's religion) covered up in European culture was introduced to Ekitiland by some Ekiti indigene in Diaspora. Hence, the introduction of Christianity to Ekitiland as a result of evangelical expansion in 1893, brought some divisions on one hand to Ekiti political administration, on the other hand, it brought unity and modernization. How Christianity contributed positively and negatively to Ekiti political administration would be given consideration in the write-up.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE POLITICAL POWERS OF THE PARAMOUNT RULERS IN EKITILAND

When, Christianity came to Ekitiland, one of the early strategies used by the missionaries was to go through the paramount rulers in order to have effective evangelistic breakthrough. Once, the missionaries found the paramount rulers responsive to the gospel, they first preach the gospel to and later these paramount rulers were converted. In fact some early Ekiti kings for example Oba Ewi of Ado-Ekiti, Oba Aladesanmi Anirare and Oba Ajero of Ijero, Oba Eyeowa who were responsive to Christianity and to early missionaries, gave the missionaries their inflicting political and royal support to establish Christianity. They gave missionaries land to churches, schools and mission houses (Cathedral, 1912).

They also, encouraged their subjects and traditional chiefs to allow Christianity to thrive. At the incept of, there was a cordial relationship between some of the paramount rulers and the missionaries but later the missionaries started to step on the toes of the paramount rulers by preaching against their traditions and worship. This had some social impact on the tradition of Ekitiland.

On this premise, the political powers of the paramount rulers became reduced and taking because Ekiti kings were deprived of executing arbitrary powers such as District officers (Dos) 1893 evangelical development in Ekiti had a very great influence on the political structure

of the Ekiti people. As the missionary got access to Ekitiland, they made use of the Ekiti natives who had been converted earlier in Lagos, Abeokuta and in Ibadan to further the research of evangelization among their own kiths and kins. Such early Christian converts were no longer participating in traditional and political rites. The political control of Ekiti people now fell on the colonial administrators, who had come in the train of these missionaries. Christianity became a political deliverer. Christianity put a stop to intertribal wars and anti-social behaviours like human sacrifices and kidnapping connected with traditional religious practices were stopped. Traditional politics was also influenced by modern civilization and teaching of Christianity.

For this opportunity, a large number of the common people rushed into Christianity with the hope of having security of life and property. The influence of the missionaries on government guaranteed protection for new converts from the hostility of traditionalists. The converts usually claimed more protection from acts of oppression by their paramount rulers. The converts held on to the notion that Christianity confers many advantages as well, absolving them from the legitimate tribal functions, such as clearing of roads and other communal labor. The Christian converts in Ekiti became, as it were a different group of their own, refusing to acknowledge the authority of the chiefs, paramount rulers and all the pre-Christian political administration. They considered themselves superior to their kings. Consequently, they looked into their pastors to protect them against the consequences of the breaking of their own tribal laws, a protected the missionaries were only too ready and eager to give. This missionary assistance weakened the political powers of the paramount rulers the age group, the quarterly head and the family heads. This opportunity was granted to Ekiti Christian converts by the administrator because, most of the men were trained in the mission school and employed as a result of the recommendations given by the missionaries. This attitude indirectly affected the political administration of the Ekiti especially, when most government posts were held by products of the mission schools.

Since, the introduction of Christianity in Ekitiland, the church leaders especially pastors or ministers play the role of liaison officers between Ekiti subjects, who were their church members and the government functionaries. At that time, the colonial government in Nigeria was British. Since, the relationship between the missionaries and some paramount rulers in Ekiti was cordial and the rapport between government functionaries and missionaries in Ekiti were very good. They became

partners in progress politically and religiously. Administration of justice was taken over from the Ekiti traditional judiciary the (Elegbes and Ologuns). For example, quarrels are taken to law courts and not to the paramount rulers for settlement. Customary law courts were set up. The missionaries expected the officials in law courts to give judgement in favour of their neophytes as a matter of course.

Another influence, which Christianity had on Ekiti traditional political administration was the arrogant disrespect to tradition and disobedience shown by Ekiti Christian converts to the paramount rulers. Christian converts claimed immunity from the customary modes of paying respect to kings, chiefs and elders in religious grounds. The traditional rulers interpreted the disobedience of Christian converts to traditional regulations as unfortunate on one hand. On the other hand, there was a strong feeling among the Christians that whatever, the traditional rulers and (unbelievers) did against them was done against the British government as well.

The converts being Christians were closer to the British government than the unbelievers. What brought more divisions in Ekiti traditional political set up was the fact that Christians influenced education through modern civilization. The more Christian influence on education and modern civilization, the more reluctant the traditional governments of the people were to assume full control on the people. The influence of this Christian converts were not all that bad influence altogether. The advantage of this was that it later became clear that considerable progress was made in suppressing the hostility of the natives against themselves and the white men. And through the missionaries, the British government was extended to Ekitiland although most of these missionaries were black men and women (Adebite, 1968).

With the above exposition on the influence of Christianity on the pre-Christian Ekiti traditional political administration, the relevance attached to the institution of Obaship started to loose some recognition because many new converts preferred Christian oriented colonial political rule to their traditional rule. Nucleus family and compound administration became irrelevant since members of the same family can sue themselves to law courts instead of settling their cases within their family folk or compound. This is the influence of colonial rule supported by Christians. The positions of family heads and compound heads remain useless and redundant. 1893-1917 is the period covered by this study. This period was very important in the political growth of the people of Ekitiland.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POST CHRISTIAN EKITI POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION AND THE POSITIVE ROLE PLAYED BY CHRISTIANITY

Christianity help greatly to develop the Ekiti political administration by preaching against some atrocities, which were practiced within the political administration, such atrocities that Christianity put stop to, including offering human beings as sacrifice during traditional festivals, putting a stop to slavery and slave trade, limiting hostility practiced within the secret cults, such as Ogboni cult, Oro cult, which were political organs of administration in Ekitiland. A check was put on arbitrary killing (Peel, 1964) by some traditional rulers, when it became obvious that Christian converts would report such precarious callous and were inhuman practice to law enforcement agencies and culprits were seriously dealt with. In the light of the above, Christianity helps to promote fundamental human rights and prevents "primitive" dispensation of justice.

Education and modern civilization came into Ekiti society in the wheel of Christianity (Laitin, 1986). Formal education received by many Christian converts in Ekiti helped to remove ignorance among the youth and encourage Ekiti youth to preach against the continuity of such barbaric political system. Many of Ekiti youths, who could have been initiated into secret cult refused to assume such position because of their education which Christianity had imparted on them. Therefore, when members of the Ekiti political councils were dying one after the other, Christianity almost made it impossible for the councils to replaced the deceased. This attitude helped to promote the promotion of Ekiti pre-Christian political administration and order.

During the Ekiti pre-Christian political administration, traditional rules and regulations were strictly kept because of the fear of the unquestionable powers of life and death possessed by the king or the political organs. At that time there was no room for any accused person to gain his acquaintance from any accusation in any traditional court more so when, the king had condemned such an accused person. With the introduction of Christianity through which, new political system based on British political administration was established, every citizen of Ekitiland has equal right under the civil law (Laitin, 1986). As at now, the powers of the paramount rulers, the village heads, the community heads, the family, the quarter heads and the Elegbes were still strictly recognized on traditional rites for example during the installation of a new king and celebration of traditional festivals like Oro and Egigun festivals to mention a few.

The powers exercised by such political organs are only allowed within the control of the present day government. If any of the traditional officers break any of the constitutional laws governing the local government or state government such an officer would be made to face the wrath of the law. In a nutshell, Christianity through formal education and western civilization had revolutionised the pre-Christian Ekiti political order in the interest of the people.

CONCLUSION

This study had discussed the pre-Christian political system in Ekiti. It also treated the major political organs together with other arms of pre-Christian rule in Ekitiland. The impact of Christianity on the Ekiti political system was discussed. In the study it was also discussed that Christianity took a prominent role in the development of Ekiti political administration. We may finally conclude therefore that Christianity, western civilization and colonial rule had influenced the traditional Ekiti political administration positively and negatively.

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