

Research article

CHIEFTAINCY INSTITUTION IN IWHURUOHA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract.

Colonial incursion into Africa precipitated some cultural disservice in the continent. In its unregulated drive for profit, it disarticulated pre-colonial social institutions and made sure that the Chiefs work in accordance with the values of its externalized political economy. This obviously led to a situation of development of underdevelopment. In Nigeria, one of the visible legacies of colonialism, particularly in Iwhuruoha Ethnic Nationality of River State is the Chieftaincy institution. It grew out of colonial capitalism into the hinterlands. They were given a warrant to collect taxes and maintain law and order within their jurisdiction . This was the essence of Indirect Rule as enunciated by Lord Lugard. The Chiefs so appointed were supervised by the colonial District Officer(D.O), through the Colonial State. More than five decades after independence, this institution has become the source of perennial crises in Iwhuruoha. The paper seeks to examine the role of Chieftaincy institution in Iwhuruoha, problems and prospects. This is a qualitative research and data collection was based on Primary and Secondary sources. While the primary sources include interviews and discussions, the secondary sources include a review of existing literature, archival materials and official gazettes. It was discovered that Chieftaincy institution has become a veritable channel for political prominence in Iwhuruoha, instead of service to the community. We, therefore, suggest that Chieftaincy institutions should be insulated from partisan politics, and concentrate on the promotion, preservation and protection of the cultural heritage of Iwhuruoha people.

Keywords; Chieftaincy, Community, Colonialism , Development, Underdevelopment

Introductory Remarks

It would be inappropriate to have an objective discourse about Nigeria (Africa) without a recourse to the dislocative and destructive impact of colonialist-imperialism on pre-colonial social formations. Colonial expansion was precipitated by the contradictions arising from the European political economy, especially after the industrial revolution. Williams (1994), Rodney (2009) and Ake (2002) have demonstrated the devastating effect of colonial incursion into Africa. In fact, Williams (1994) and Inikori (2002) in their monumental works asserted that, the trans-Atlantic slave trade provided the financial stimulus for the European industrial revolution.

In the process of achieving the manifest destiny of western countries, every aspect of African essence was savagely treated and derogatively condemned. From the optic of Western imperialism, Africa belongs to the pre-logic era, with a history encumbered with malicious myths (Nkrumah, 2009:62). Populated by mysterious tribes engaged in frightful orgies... (Awoonor, 1975:3), and with a culture adjudged to be mere museum pieces, arrested and fossilized in time (Prah, 2009:17). As the continent was mindlessly subjected to the incubus of racial prejudice, an ideological alibi and moral foundation was established to intervene, and extend the benefit of modernity to the backward countries. This lies the claim that Africa is the white man's burden. Indeed, all the legal, economic, political and administrative measures initiated by colonialism was to prepare the area for an untrammelled appropriation of raw materials. The result of these colonial measures as Ake (2002:38) pointed out, is that African colonies became incoherent, incapable of auto-centric growth and dependent. The effects of all these was that the escape route of the African economy from primary production was blocked. This is the foundation of the development of underdevelopment in most Third World countries (Frank, 1975). By the 1960s, when majority of African countries attained political independence, it was pellucid that Africa has been programmed to fail, with distorted and disarticulated structures and a marginal location and role in the global order (Ihonybere, 2011:5). One of the institutions through which colonial values and capitalist ethic was entrenched in Iwhuruoha is the chieftaincy institution. It served as a veritable point through which colonial law and order was maintained for maximum acceptance of colonial etiquette. This paper seeks to examine the emergence of chieftaincy institution in Iwhuruoha, its problems and prospects.

The Pre-Colonial Epoch

Nigeria is made up of a mosaic of ethnic nationalities. These nationalities have their folklores, mores, languages, social consciousness, and spirituality encapsulated in their cultural heritage. All these enhanced their identity and reproduction of social life. The level of civilization and social sophistication was dependent on the level of improvement of the means of production. Lawal (2011: 35) asserted that:

Their knowledge was not acquired from books, they were urbane in their way and endowed with great common sense. Their minds were enriched by a kind of 'quiet wisdom and rare experience which they acquired in the course of unbroken contact with nature'.

These communities or nationalities as the case may be, were under a system that abhorred exploitation of man by man. In fact, it was a political setting where natural law reigned supreme. But with improvement of means of production, it became easy for a few to privatize the commonwealth, and subject the majority to their whims. The point here is that with a social change in the communal mode of production, a new mode emerged with antagonistic social relations. Its sustenance was based on 'blood and fire' with a slogan that espoused might is right. It must be stated that this process signaled the dawn of social inequality, hierarchical administration and gender inequality. The rise of the Sokoto Caliphate energized by the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio in 1803, the Oyo, Benin and even Asante empires reflected the ascendancy of the slave mode of production. Perbi (2007:23) noted that as these empires began to be formed, slavery became an integral part of the state's political, social and economic organization. Particularly in Asante, the society became so dependent on slave labour that the smooth running of the state and society was inextricably bound up with the institution of slavery. Slavery as an institution became part and parcel of Asante social and political life (Perbi, 2007:23). The social changes that produced the empires were not evenly spread. This was the situation in the then Eastern Nigeria, particularly in Iwuruoha. Political rulership was based on the principle of republicanism with a high dose of gerontocracy.

This is a situation where all the families that make up the community would present their most senior elder to form a Council of Elders or Council of Ohna. Members of Ohna or Owbor holders must not have any cultural blemish or skewed circumstances of birth or born out of wedlock. This is extremely important because they constitute the epitome of the community's cultural purity. They liaise between the living and the dead through their libations, supplications and pronouncements. In the consciousness of their people, they are almost overboard because of their tenacious attachment and respect for the customs and traditions that legitimized their position. It is believed that any of them that acts contrary to the customs would not escape heavy punishment. Below the Owbor holders is the Rumuriya and the youth group. Each of these groups have their specific duty assigned to them by the community. As the youth are saddled with the responsibility of maintaining the cleanliness of the community, ensure discipline and carry out any instructions given to them by the elders, Rumuriya, which embrace the married and unmarried women of a community constitute a vital organ in the governing process.

Their indispensable role during burials, supplication for good life and peace making, and adjudication of matters cannot be overemphasized. Most significant is 'Olimgbamgba'. This entails walking round the community with sticks and water whenever the community is threatened with extreme conflict or when strange things are happening in the community.. It is believed that this form of spiritual cleansing has the capacity to instill fear on belligerents, deviants, and restore the needed peace and unity. This is because to disrespect Rumuriya is tantamount to disrespect to the ancestors which may attract grave consequences. The recreational activities such as egelege (wrestling) and dances - owuama, eri ndudu, eregbu and rite of passage like 'Ogba Ukwu' (age grade initiation ceremony), all combine to strengthen the core values, identity, taboos, ethics, folklores and social bond in Eli Iwuruoha. Okpara (2011:89) noted that:

Folklores refer to the body of traditional beliefs, customs and expressions, handed down from generation to generation largely by word of mouth and circulating mainly outside the formal means of communication and institution.

The ‘heroification’ of some feats and historical figures through folklores and wise sayings predominantly used during festive periods as in Captain Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* (1966), greatly cement the bond of unity and oneness. Hence, ‘Iwuruoha bu Otu’ (Iwhuruoha is one). The numerous checks are meant to balance the social equilibrium and make sure that every person has a niche in community governance. This is the spirit of Ubuntu which is anchored on cooperation, willingness to share and collectivity. Those people who presided over the affairs of the community were known as the traditional rulers. Their legitimacy is traceable to the culture which they have sworn an oath to promote, preserve and protect. Their socio-political clout is legitimized by custom and tradition, and succession is predominantly by inheritance (Vaughan, 2004:118). The Ibrahim Dasuki Committee on the Review of Local Government Administration defined a traditional ruler as the person who by virtue of his ancestry, occupies the throne or stool of an area who has been appointed to it in accordance with the custom and tradition of the area and has suzerainty over the people of the area (Vaughan, 2004:17). An interesting aspect of this definition is that traditional rulers are not elected, but appointed in accordance with the customs and traditions of the people. Appointment is strictly a cultural phenomenon, devoid of any unwholesome exogenous influence. Such traditional rulers owe their existence and powers to the people. As Babawale, Alao and Adesoji (2010:116) pointed out:

Traditional rules were the trustees of their various communities as well as the symbol of collective aspirations in their quest for societal emancipation before the advent of European colonial masters.

It is within this prism that those entrusted with the leadership of the community were called ‘Nde we Eli’ (owners of the land) and not ‘Nye we Eli’ (Owner of the land). Nde we Eli manifested the Ubuntu philosophy of collective ownership of communal property. To privatize communal property under this milieu is punishable by death or banishment. In other words, being an Owbor holder or Nye Ohna does not confer such a person special advantage to engage in unilateral privatization of property. Unfortunately, the penetration of colonialism overturned this traditional system, and hoisted on its ruins an alien institution which facilitated the realization of imperial objectives.

Emergence of Chieftaincy Institution

Chieftaincy institution in Nigeria is one of the lingering legacies of imperial rule. It was part of the interventionist actions of the colonial state to extend the frontiers of colonial administration to the hinter lands. Britain was given what became Nigeria during the Berlin conference of 1884-1885 because of its foothold in Lagos. The bombardment of the city on December 25, 1851 and subsequent annexation in 1861, made Britain establish effective occupation of the place. The aftermath of the Berlin Conference was the Berlin Act of 1885. The Act provided that any European power with dominant interest in any African territory could be accepted as the administrative power of that territory provided that it could show that its administration was a reality (Ikejiani and Ikejiani, 1986:59).

The legal foundation for British administration in Nigeria was laid by the Brussels Act of 1890, Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1843 and the Consolidating Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890. The Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1843 empowered the crown to exercise any jurisdiction which it has or may come to have, in a foreign country in as ample manner as if the jurisdiction has been gained by the conquest or cession of territory. The Consolidating Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890 covered administration as well as justice and all the inhabitants of the protectorate – colonial protectorate and the protected states (Okafor, 1981:2).

From the Selbourne Committee of 1898 to the formation of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) by Lord Frederick Lugard in 1887, British imperial domination and values were formerly entrenched by 1899, the Royal Charter granted the Royal Niger Company (RNC) was revoked. Okolo (1987:16) asserted that out of the £300,000 which Taubman Goldie demanded for the revocation, the company was paid over £865,000 for her various losses plus half of the mineral royalties which the government would receive from Nigeria for the next ninety-nine years. On January 1, 1900 Lord Lugard became the High Commissioner of the newly created Northern Protectorate. It was the Nikki expedition supervised by Lord Lugard that brought the Northern region within the confine of British influence. In administering this vast territory, Lugard was confronted with four main problems:

- (1) The paucity of British administrative officers that would directly administer the protectorate.
- (2) Even if the officials were available, it would have overstretched British Treasury to cover their expenses considering the weak financial base of the region.
- (3) The environment was unsuitable for the habitation of white officials, mainly because of diseases like malaria.
- (4) To avoid dangerous revolts and ensure the cooperation of the people.

The resolution of these problems led to the introduction of Indirect Rule System. The philosophical base of the system can be located in Lugard's *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* and Cameroon's *The Principles of Native Administration and their Application* (1934). Its legal framework was made possible by the Native Court Proclamation of 1900, 1901, 1903, 1906 and 1914. Native Authority Ordinance No. 43 of 1933, 1914 and the Native Revenue Ordinance of 1916. These legislations legalized the authority of traditional rulers to maintain law and order and collect taxes.

According to Whitaker (1970:16):

Our aim is to rule through the existing chiefs to enlist them on our side in the work and progress of good government (our) is that we may make of these born rulers... types of British officials working for the good of their subjects in accordance with the ideals of the British Empire.

Indirect Rule was a product of administrative convenience to uphold the British ideals.

It was a system of administration which leaves in existence the administrative machinery which had been created by the natives themselves, which recognizes

the existence of Emirs, chiefs and native councils, native courts of justice (Okafor, 1981:40).

The system made the rulers an essentially political and administrative institution or more precisely a source or a channel of authority and command (Crowder and Ikime, 1970:23). The term Indirect Rule tends to blur the enormity of their imperial manipulation. Perhaps, this was why Ekekwe (1986:27) noted that the difference between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ rule should not be overemphasized. Both served the same purpose: to consolidate and legitimize the colonial state. The rulers were under the supervision of the Resident and the District Officer (D.O) in a hierarchical order. The system witnessed a huge success in Northern Nigeria because of the existing hierarchical political governance. Western region had a hierarchical administration but with some inbuilt checks. The Oyo Mesi under the Basorun made sure the Alafin ruled according to traditional dictates. This was why the system which enlarged the powers of Alafin beyond traditional boundary received protest of monumental dimension. Since the Eastern region did not have a semblance of hierarchical administration, some chiefs were appointed and given a Warrant to perform their duty. Hence, Warrant Chiefs. This is the basis of chieftaincy stools in Eli Iwhuruoha. The procedure of appointment was based on the judgment, observation and assessment of the D.O. In fact, there was no definable criteria for appointing those who would represent the people. Crowder (1968:226) noted that:

The warrants were sometimes given to people in return for services rendered to the Government and there was inevitably a tendency to appoint persons of intelligence with some understanding of European ways, so that the most pushing men tended to gain warrants although they may have had no hereditary or customary status.

During a familiarization tour of D.O. Telford Conkrene in Ola nu Ada, he met two people who were fighting. The proximate cause of the fight was who would represent the two communities.. After many attempts to separate them had failed, Mr. Welemele Ihunwo succeeded in stopping the fight which had attracted the attention of everybody including Amachree Iyalla (Wiyalla) D.O’s interpreter from Kalabari. Impressed by Mr. Ihunwo’s bravado, the D.O. appointed him a Warrant Chief in charge of Ola nu Ada (Rumuola and Rumuadaorlu). This is the genesis of Ihunwo Cham Stool in Rumuola. By the 1940s, there were eight courts in Eli Iwhuruoha. While seven were courts of first instance, the eighth court had an appellate jurisdiction. The seven courts later came to represent the administrative centers in Iwhuruoha. According to a letter written by the Resident, Owerri Division titled “Reorganization of the Courts in Ikwerre Clan”, he noted that:

With reference to my letter of No. OW:87/1930/S.I/41 of 9th February, 1940 and previous correspondence, I forward herewith the letters of nomination for 112 persons recommended by you and suitable to be native Court and Ikwerre Appeal Court which comprise the seven group or courts of the Ikwerre Clan.

I am to request that you forward for amendment of quorum, warrants of constitution in respect of the following courts which are involved.

The courts referred to in the Resident’s letter are stated below (see table 1)

Table 1: **Reorganization of Ikwerre Clan Courts, 1940**

S/N	Group	Members
1.	Emuohua	12
2.	Elele	12
3.	Obio	12
4.	Akpo Gbu Tolu (Ozuoba)	12
5.	Isiokpo	12
6.	Rumuji	12
7	Aluu-Igwuruta	12
8	Ikwerre Appeal Court (Choba)	28
	Total	112

Source: - National Archive , Enugu 2016

The Appeal Court in Choba was an upgrade of the existing court in 1915. The decision to establish a native Appeal Court must have been prompted by incessant protests, accusation of bias and barefaced corruption in the discharge of their responsibilities. One of the petitions the Resident of Owerri Province received was from Chief Welemele Ihunwo of Rumuola in respect of a land case between them and Rumuomasi. In his reply through the D.O. Ahoada Division of No. OW.1576/44/24, the Senior Resident of Owerri Province agreed to review the case ‘at the first suitable opportunity’. The establishment of Ikwerre Appeal Court saved the senior Resident the burden of reviewing many appeals emanating from the Native Courts. Before the reorganization, Native courts had been established in many parts of Eli Iwhuruoha. However, this depended on need and colonial expediency. This was how the Obio Court was established. Based on intelligent report on Obio/Apara Clans in Ahoada District with Ref. No. 536/66/1930 of September 2, 1930, the Senior Resident of Owerri Province, Mr. William Edgar Hunt, established the Obio Native Court in accordance with the Native Court Ordinance.

The Native Court was of grade C category and had jurisdiction to entertain cases of... theft of farm produce, or livestock by twelve months imprisonment, 24 lashes, or a fine of 20 or equivalent of native law or custom.

Section 5 of the Warrant establishing the court stated that the court shall subject to the limitation imposed by the Native Court Ordinance or hereafter appearing have jurisdiction on:

- (a) All cases of action arising and all offences committed within the districts or towns or villages (and the district surrounding them) set out in the first column of the schedule annexed to this warrant.

All actions or criminal charges brought against a person ordinarily resident in such area, although the cause of action or any part thereof, may have arisen or the offence may have been committed outside such area. Membership of this court consisted of people from the two clans and ‘other persons the Resident shall from time to

time appoint'. Rumuokwuta sent five people to this court. One of them was Eze Zacheaus Akani Biri, Eze Evu i. It is from this court that chieftaincy institution in the aforementioned clans can be traced. The court was inaugurated on February 9, 1931. The positions of the chiefs were boosted by the provision of House of Chiefs in the North and Western regions in the Richard's constitution of 1947. But attempts to make similar provision in the Eastern region during the 1950 Constitutional Review in Ibadan were rebuffed by some people. They contended that the power of the Princes and the power of the people are never 'concurrent and equal'... today, we are out to abolish feudalism, not to reform it (Ekekwe, 1986:62). But from the 1950s to the post-colonial era, chieftaincy institution witnessed some monumental changes. Appointment and deposition of chiefs became the prerogative of the nascent ruling class. This was through laws that replaced the colonial ordinance. This development also laid the foundation for the political twilight of the Chiefs. The Eastern Region Local government Ordinance No. 16 of 1950 replaced the Native Authority Ordinance No. 43 of 1933. The Local Government Ordinance democratized local government administration. Membership was made up of elected councilors with appointed chiefs in advisory capacity. It was on this basis that the Obio Urban Country Council was created on April 24, 1964. The council had 24 members with five chiefs. While the chairman was J. W. Wachukwu, Chief J. W. Eke was the President. The chiefs did not participate in voting on any issue. The Ikwerre Country Council was located at Choba and was later transferred to Isiokpo. This development incorporated Akpor to Obio County Council in 1964. In 1959, the Eastern region established a Regional House of Chiefs.

The establishment of a House of Chiefs in the Eastern Region led to the appointment of Chief Joseph Wobo as a second class chief representing Port Harcourt Division (Eastern Nigeria Notice No. 21 and Eastern Nigeria Gazette No. 3, vol. II, January 11, 1962) in 1962. Chief Wobo was succeeded by Chief Isaiah Wobo. In the same vein, Chief Jackson Mpi was appointed a first class chief representing Port Harcourt Province, and he later became the Chairman, Eastern Regional House of Chiefs. By the late 1950s, the Customary Court was also recognized to conform with the new political tide. This was through the Customary Court Law No. 21 of 1956. This legislation created Customary Courts in place of Native Courts with literate judges (Vaughan, 2004:310). The creation of Rivers State on May 27, 1967 through Decree 14 of 1967 made it imperative for the reorganization and appointment of chiefs. This was the genesis of the chieftaincy laws in the state. Some of them include: The Chieftaincy Edict No. 5 of 1978 as amended by Edict No. 2 of 1979; The Edict of Rivers State Council of Chiefs No. 25 of 1985 as amended; the 1976 Classification of Chiefs Committee headed by Prof. T. Tamuno, and the 1988 Committee on the Reclassification of Chieftaincy Stools in Rivers State.

According to the 1985 Edict, a chief means the holder of a traditional title recognized by the government and who was selected by his people according to their tradition and usages with implications of the exercise of customary authority over such people in a town or community (Babawale et al, 2010:403). Although the Edict focused on government recognized Chiefs, but they must be selected by their people in accordance with their traditional norms. It also marked the eclipse of the era of the Warrant Chiefs with enormous powers of tax collection, providers of conscripted labour and judicial responsibilities. These legislations have made it possible for many chieftaincy stools

to be created in Rivers State. Today, there are more than five first class chiefs, many second class and third class chiefs in Eli Iwhuruoha.

Problems and Prospects

Chieftaincy institution under the warrant system, and in the post-colonial state has received some criticisms which have greatly affected its performance and acceptance by the people. In a broad sense the institution is seen to be autocratic and cannot find a niche in a democratic dispensation. Its inherent autocracy has made it unsuitable for an effective tool to promote modernization. More important is the fact that the institution is male-dominated, has the capacity to solidify gender inequality and institutionalize some cultural practices that inhibit the socio-political transformation of women (Babawale et al, 2010:133). While some of the problems stated above may be questionable, but they provide us a window to examine some of the salient problems associated with chieftaincy institution in Eli Iwuruoha. For the purpose of clarity, the problems can be summarized in this manner:

- (1) Political bastardization
- (2) Emergence of autocracy
- (3) Unbridled materialistic sensibilities

Let us examine each of these problems briefly.

Political Bastardization

We noted that with the institution of Indirect Rule, traditional rulers were appointed by the government mostly in accordance with their culture. This process continued after political independence. Even when some chiefs decided to be recalcitrant by taking actions which were not in consonance with the spirit of their culture, the people revolted. The 1929 'Ogwu Nderiya' (women protest) and the Iseyi protest in 1916 are cases in point. But today, chieftaincy in Iwhuruoha has been greatly perverted by the virus of partisan politics. As chieftaincy title has become a status symbol and confers dignity, the scramble to get it has become fierce such that its ground of legitimacy and established succession process are perverted and spitefully distorted to satisfy the demands of political expediency. Some people have even started canvassing for a process of electing traditional rulers just to conform to modern reality. This is a clear signal to jettison our age-long cultural norms just to satisfy an agenda, which obviously must be selfish and contrary to collective aspirations. Could this not be an invitation to a dead end?

When a traditional ruler makes up his mind to identify with a given political camp, such a ruler has not only robbed the sanctity of the stool, but has dichotomized his community. The aftermath is that such a ruler cannot be seen as an impartial vehicle of development, cannot be an instrument of justice and most importantly would not command the respect of his people. This is the genesis of the intractable crisis in most Iwhuruoha communities.

As the crisis expands like a capitalist boa, it envelops the entire community, thereby making a caricature of the adjudicatory power and aura of traditional rulers. The point here is that when the mission and vision of a ruler

conflicts with the collective aspirations of the people, he becomes susceptible to unfettered external influence, forgets his historical responsibilities, and gradually alienates himself from his cultural roots. As he begins to indulge in a replacement syndrome to justify his inertia and adrift, the interlocking familial relationship and customs that bond the community begins to wither away. When these norms are flagrantly disrespected, a veritable channel is created for the intrusion of absolutism. Why not? When the traditional ruler is propped up by a league of veteran politicians who use him for political advantage. It is this seamless relationship between politics and chieftaincy institution that has made many people to disdain and harbor contempt for the institution. John, Ayoade and Agbaje (1989:14) has reminded us that in Africa;

The use of power was for the common good of the society. Society may be generous in investing all powers in a person or institution but this was not expected to lead to absolutism. Custom and the common good contributed neutralizing agents for corrupting tendencies of solute power.

In this scenario where traditional rulers pander to the caprices of political ‘do gooders’ in return for political patronage, the community cannot be that integrated whole that would provide some semblance of social decorum, and institutions that would ensure grassroots development. The point here is that traditional rulers because of their unique position in the society, should not become pawns in the political chess game. They should watch political game cautiously from the sideline and not to swim headlong in its dirty waters. This is because of its obvious cantankerous effect on the development of the people. As politics begins to be the major determinant of traditional influence, those who are favoured by the politics of the day are quick to develop some idiosyncrasies which are autocratic and self-serving. With their crowd of hangers on, they begin to enunciate some values which are inimical to communal spirit. Gradually they begin to build a hierarchical administration which projects them as ‘Nye We Eli’ with authoritative flairs that uphold possessive individualism and personality cult. They disdain our egalitarian values, rationalized on the need to join the modern era.

Therefore, ‘Eze kwule okwukwe lem’, (the Eze’s pronouncement is final). During our interviews with people we discovered that some of the traditional schism in Eli Iwhuruoha emanated from the determined attempt by traditional rulers and their allies to lord it over others or make their pronouncement a diktat. These rulers have forgotten that in Eli Iwhuruoha there was a large dose of egalitarianism, and there was no sharp division of rank, status or even wealth because political office did not confer on the holder power over the community’s surplus or over the loot of war (John, et al, 1989:56). When autocracy becomes the hallmark of any administration, justice will be pained and accountability will witness an eclipse. Having established a hierarchical order, instead of the people being the source of power, and Nde we Eli holding the people’s property in trust, Nye We Eli becomes the fountain of power and literarily the owner of the people. This is the predicament Iwhuruoha has found itself, and it vividly explains why the stool cannot mediate some of the socio-political contradictions that have confronted the Nationality in spite of concerted efforts.

With the bastardization of the stool through politics and the gradual development of autocracy, a proliferation of the stool in Eli Iwhuruoha has become the order of the day. Since chieftaincy title has become a mere status symbol and a mark of arrival, its acquisition is no more related to historical feat or ancestral demand. Considering the fact that adherence to cultural norms no more constitute a condition to be a Chief, this has left it open to the highest bidder. In this situation where expectation and material demand are high, the tendency to engage in unethical conduct cannot be underestimated. Therefore, every opportunity is grasped and fully utilized. This is the genesis of corruption and all kinds of destructive manipulation which are not in conformity with traditional administration. In some communities, the proliferation of chieftaincy stools has become so common that every male child is adjudged to be a chief or Chief-elect.

While it is a truism that chieftaincy institution in Eli Iwhuruoha is enmeshed in problems of unprecedented dimension, it would amount to throwing away the bad water with the baby. Although chieftaincy institution is bedeviled with profound problems and crisis, it still holds some prospects for better things in the years ahead. Traditional rulers are triggers of development at the grassroots level. With their closeness to the people and promoting and preserving those customary links that bind the people together, the ruler becomes indispensable in popular mobilization and for collective production. As instruments and theatres of transformation, to neglect their existence would be inimical to the whole concept of human development. This is because any policy that does not elicit the cooperation and participation of the greatest number of people will not succeed. More important is the adjudicative functions of the rulers which to a large extent have relatively kept the grassroots stable. It has been observed that most of the rulers do not receive the needed support for their grassroots duties. In a situation where some rulers queue hours on end to see a Local Government Chairman, portend a grave danger to the whole concept of rural development in Nigeria. In some cases only those with the 'right' political connection are given some traditional attention.

The indispensability of traditional rulers made the defunct 1989 constitution to give some political attention to traditional rulers. Section 8 of the aforesaid constitution made provision for the creation of Traditional Rulers Council in the local government by the State House of Assembly. The military from their incursion into politics relied on traditional rulers in the discharge of their political responsibilities. This gave them some legitimacy and leverage to penetrate the society. In fact, they became reliable partners throughout the period of military interregnum in Nigeria. Therefore, those who think this institution should be consigned to the bin of history should rethink. Chieftaincy institution has become a part of Iwhuruoha political transformation and a veritable means of reaching out for political alliance and understanding. As Falola (2002:614) asserted

Traditional rulers are not only the unquestionable leaders of their people but also a unifying force whose nonpartisan role continue to pay great dividends in minimizing hostility and maintaining peace and unity among people with divergent political beliefs. In short, traditional leadership provides the necessary stability in government.

This is why issues concerning them must be viewed with caution.

Conclusion

In this paper, we noted that chieftaincy institution in Eli Iwhuruoha arose from the Indirect Rule system. It was an administrative system which facilitated the penetration of British imperial dominance into the hinterlands. Although, these chiefs were appointed by the colonial state, they owe their legitimacy to the people. Those who acted contrary to the dictates of the popular interest were confronted with mass protest. From the 1950's when the regions got their regional autonomy, laws were made for those literate in western education to be members of traditional institution. With political independence, each state had the power to make laws regarding its chieftaincy institution. Iwhuruoha which is an integral part of Rivers State benefitted from the chieftaincy Edicts in the state. The chiefs so appointed and others now constitute the chieftaincy institution in Iwhuruoha. Regrettably, the institution has been weighed down by what seem to be an insurmountable problem in the 21st century. The dimensions of these problems are so frightening that they have defiled all solutions. The aftermath is that chieftaincy institution has been de-faced, de-robbed, and lost its steam.

Nevertheless, there is hope in the horizon. This can materialize if traditional rulers begin to balance the present reality with historical antecedent. This is because it is the resolution of the two worlds that would fashion a bright future in the years ahead. To abandon one for another is to create a condition for a dead end. We must begin to take pride in our cultural heritage, take responsibility for the development of our environment. Iwhuruoha traditional rulers must as a matter of urgency begin to rejuvenate those core values which made us proud in the eyes of our neighbours. They should symbolize the peoples' collective power and identity of Eli Iwhuruoha. As Babawale, et al. pointed out

History, customs and tradition should be the guide and reference point in any matter that borders on tradition. Traditional rulers must shun partisanship in the discharge of their functions to the people if development is to be achieved at the grassroots.

Those who think that they can use their traditional position to pervert justice and perpetuate grand corruption must be ready to shade off their unjust and despotic tendencies or be ready to face inevitable extinction.

In conclusion, therefore, the 21st century offers us an opportunity to lay the necessary foundation for the much-awaited cultural renaissance in Iwhuruoha. The reality of the time is suggestive of the need to close ranks and place Eli Iwhuruoha on that Olympian height of social progress.

We must decide now whether to make or mar our fortune, or be under the political orbit of a few, whether to mortgage our collective aspirations on the altar of political expediency and slip into the paradox of plenty. I will end this paper by reminding us of the danger of remaining indifferent and lackadaisical in times like this. In an unmistakable term, Fanon (1980) asserted that:

The future would have no pity for those men who, possessing the exceptional privilege of being able to speak words of truth to their oppressors, have taken refuge in an attitude of passivity of mute indifference, and sometimes of cold complicity.

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