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Enduring Cultural Legacy: Historicizing the Socio-cultural and Political Affairs in Isawo Community, Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

There is no doubt that socio-cultural and traditional institutions in various parts of Nigeria have remained enduring legacies of our cultures. These ancient pre-colonial socio-cultural and political heritages have also contributed towards peaceful coexistence and intergroup relations among various ethnic groups in Isawo Community, Lagos State. Despite these however, the significance of the socio-cultural and political traditions in Isawo community have received little or no scholarly attention in the existing literature on Lagos. It is against this background that this article examines the trajectory of socio-cultural and political cultures of Isawo community as well as their bearing on peaceful intergroup relations, which have been neglected on the historiography of Lagos. Building on the existing literature, the article presents a fresh perspective on the significance of the socio-cultural and political cultures of Isawo. Using descriptive and analytical style, the paper adopts distinctive historical methodology to qualitatively interrogate these aforementioned issues. It asserts that these pre-colonial socio-cultural and political legacies are important mechanisms for promoting enduring peace and cooperation.

Introduction

Indeed, one can hardly understand the history of an area without having a good knowledge of its geography. Isawo community is located in the western part of Ikorodu, Lagos. It is bounded in the north by Owotu and to the south by a collection of small Isawo villages, namely Ibamu, Onikin, Tapa and Abule-Oba, all of which serve as demarcation between Isawo and her neighbours to the south. The southern neighbours of Isawo include Igbo-Olomu, Mawere and Amodisu. Majority of the peoples of these communities are Yoruba. The totality of the way of life of the different settlers has deeply influenced the socio-cultural affairs of Isawo community.

Like most concepts in the humanities and social sciences, culture does not enjoy a universally acceptable definition as so many scholars, intellectuals and generalists have defined the term based on their intellectual orientations. Nevertheless, culture can be defined as the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment (Asiwaju, 22). It can also be defined as the way of life of members of a society; the collection of ideas and habits, which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation. Culture is equally a design for living held by members of a particular society.

Culture is therefore a complex phenomenon, which include but not limited to art, knowledge, beliefs, morals, customs, philosophy, economic, social, political just to mention but a few. Culture is broadly divided into two categories: the material and non-material cultures. The material culture refers to all that man produces through science and technology while the non-material culture denotes value system, morals, and religious beliefs among others. It is within the understanding of the non-material culture that the socio-cultural and political affairs of Isawo community are examined in the subsequent section.

Socio-Cultural and Political Affairs

In spite of the long history of cooperation and peaceful coexistence among the distinctive ethnic groups that inhabit Isawo from the earliest times, it is important to state that no particular culture of any of the ethnic groups, which have been able to dominate others in the community. Consequently, cultural co-operation has emerged in the community rather than cultural assimilation. More so, the retention by the various groups of their cultural practices has not prevented inter-group marriages among the different settlers. In fact, inter-group marriage is one important factor that has strengthened inter-relations among the various groups in the community.

Apart from inter-group marriage, the distinctiveness of the cultures of the various groups in the community is also reflected in the way and manner the people dressed. Although the Yoruba, Ijaw and Isoko people, usually dress in Yoruba attires, the Igbo and Hausa are easily identified by their different dresses too (Faluyi,70-71.). While the Igbo men are famous for their red caps, the Hausa men are easily recognized by their *agbada*. In fact, the ethnic group to which an individual belongs is quickly recognized by the mode of his or her dressing. This is a clear reflection of cultural conservation of inter-

group relations within the community. Notwithstanding, Isawo has some of the enduring norms that shape socio-religious and political cultural practices in the community. The next section examines these cultural practices.

Religious Beliefs

It is a common knowledge that African peoples generally believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, although conception on how to approach him differs from group to group. (Osuntokun 126-128) noted that the various Yoruba sub-groups in Lagos State are united in the idea of one Supreme Being, which they refer to as *Olodumare*, *Olorun* or *Oluwa* with whom they relate through a pantheon of lesser gods called *Orisa*. This observation is also true of the various groups that settled in Isawo. The different groups in the community subscribe to different religious beliefs, which also have enormous impact on every aspect of the community's life. In addition to the traditional African religion that is represented by a number of socio-cultural religious cults, such as the *Egungun*, *Oro*, and *Arigbodo*, Islam and Christianity also had some adherents in the community and its environs. In fact, Isawo people are divided among these religions.

Traditional worshipers in Isawo are known to worship at the shrines in their private homes as do most of the Muslims. The Christians do likewise in their homes, especially during weekdays. This is because there are few churches and mosques where the people could gather to worship and pray during the official worship hours. The nearest mosque for the Muslims is located in the neighbouring community of Owotu. In fact, most of the Muslims in Isawo usually go to Owotu every Friday for Jumat service and during major celebration of Islamic festivals, such as Eid el-Kabir and Eid el-Fitre. However, a few travel as far as Ikorodu and other parts of Lagos to celebrate with friends and families (Sonuga 20-22). It is important to stress that most of the Muslims in Isawo are mainly of the Yoruba and Hausa ethnic groups (oral interview with Bada., 2016).

More so, the Christians community in Isawo is made up of people mainly of the Yoruba, Isoko, Ijaw, and Uhrobo ethnic groups. Similar to the experience of their Muslim counterpart, there are few churches where the Christian could worship on Sundays (oral interview with Bakari 2016). Most families worship either at home or in the neighbouring Owotu community, which is more developed than

Isawo and where most of the well-known churches today are to be found. Consequently, on Sundays, most of the Christians in Isawo worship in Owotu, while some go as far as Ikorodu or to other parts of Lagos for the Sunday worship service particularly during the Easter and Christmas.

Apart from the adherent of these foreign faiths, Islam and Christianity, there are also a substantial number of people in Isawo who prefer the traditional African religion, majority of whom are Yoruba with minor followership among the Ijaw, Isoko, Uhrobo and Hausa people. Interestingly, a good number of the traditional worshipers maintain some degree of attachment to the foreign faiths. For instance, there are those who combine either Islam or Christianity with traditional religious practices. Syncretic as this may be, it no doubt reflects the interwoven nature of the conception of the Supreme Being among the various groups that make up the community (Gbadamosi and Junaid 115). This understanding has promoted tolerance among settlers of the community without any record of religious conflict. It is important to stress here that there are also people in the community, although few in number, who are agnostic and profess no religion.

Isawo also has some traditional religions and cults with so many devotees. Some of the known traditional cults and deities in Isawo community include, Egungun, Arigbodo, Oro and other too many to mention. The Arigbodo traditional cult is more popular among the Aboki Bada family while Egungun and Oro cults are the most popular ones among the people and usually celebrated with designated festivals (oral interview with Afolabi, 2016). As a result, virtually all the people in the community, including Christians and Muslims, troop out to watch the performances and celebrations of these cults during festivals. What is more, some of the pronouncements of the cults are considered binding on everyone in the community regardless of their religious affiliation. Some of these cults are discussed subsequently.

The Oro Cultural Festival

The Oro traditional cult is considered one of the most important and revered cults among the Yoruba-speaking peoples of southwestern Nigeria (Adedeji 20-23). L.C. Dioka (237), in his work, *Lagos and Its Environs*, listed Oro as a National festival in Yorubaland with Yoruba origin. Oro cult is held sacred and was introduced to Isawo by Aboki Bada and Lawani. To date, it is feared more than any other cult in the community. The Oro usually comes out when there is a threat to security or peace in the community, and during designated time for the

Oro festival (oral interview with Olalekan, 2016). During this period, the men of the Oro cult would emerge from the chamber with a flat smoothly carved short bamboo or metal tied to a strong whirled to make a fearsome sound that keep people indoors and frightened (oral interview with Ariakele,). The Oro usually comes out at night and rarely in daytime depending on the situation. It is a taboo for women to see the Oro whether at night or in daytime. As a rule, no woman is allowed to come out of her home to see the Oro or even peep at the Oro. The violation of this convention attracts instant death irrespective of the position of the woman in the community (oral interview with Babatope, 2016).

Under normal circumstances, the Oro comes out at midnight and retire by the dawn. During this period the movement of all persons is restricted. In Isawo, and indeed all the communities in Ikorodu and Lagos, compliance with the stay at home during the Oro period is total, regardless of the people's beliefs (oral interview with Olalekan,2016). In other words, whether you are a Christian, Muslim or even belonging to another traditional cult, compliance with the restrictions of the Oro period is not negotiable. To the Christians in Isawo, compliance to such restrictions is Biblical, quoting Mark 25: 17. "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what belong to God" Hence, obeying such command, to them, is wise. The people of Isawo are quite familiar with the Oro, hence, there are no reports of anyone in the community and its environs known to have violated the Oro principles, including foreigners. In fact, it is generally believed that the Oro brings peace, security and economic prosperity to the land.

The Egungun Festival

The Egungun (masquerade) is yet another cult in Isawo. It is as old as the community. The Oro cult, like the Egungun has its origin tied to the Yoruba. Members of the Egungun traditional cult are quite many since children of five or six years old are considered old enough to be initiated into the cult (oral interview with Abiola, 2016). Unlike the Oro traditional cult, the Egungun cult allows the participation of women even as members, although its mysteries are kept from the knowledge of women. It then explains why the Egungun cult has more members than the Oro cult since there is no gender restriction to its membership; development that has fostered cooperation and unity among settlers of Isawo.

The Egungun festival is celebrated openly not only in Isawo and its environs, but also in the entire Ikorodu and other Lagos communities. There is no particular dress code for the Masquerade. Its costume could be of different colours with the feathers of different kinds of bird and the skins of different kinds of animal attached to it. The body of the masquerade is entirely covered from head to toe and thus makes it impossible for the public to know who exactly is inside the costume, usually referred to as *eku* in Yoruba parlance (Parrinder 55). The masquerade could see through the opening of the mesh of raffia or cloth covering its face and speaks in an unclear tone usually regarded as that of the spirit world. In Isawo, the Egungun is celebrated by traditional worshippers who believe in its mystical power, but the general populace appreciates the Egungun more for the entertainment it offers. This differentiates the egungun from the fearsome Oro.

During the Egungun festival period, the masquerade moves from one end of the community to the other with its worshippers and followers clad in different kinds of garments reflecting the mood of the festival. On the eve of the festival, sacrifices are usually offered to the Egungun; the blood of fowls and some other animals killed for the sacrifice is poured out on the graves of the community ancestors (oral interview with Olalekan). In fact, it is generally believed that the sacrifices would appease the spirits of their loved ones in the grave to bring blessings in the daily endeavours of their brothers and sisters that are still alive. The homes of the Baale and the Asiwaju of Isawo land are usually the starting point of the Egungun festival where the masquerade and its followers dance to entertain those in the Baale's compound (oral interview with Bayegun, 2016). The leaders of other traditional cults in the community are also paid homage during the Egungun festival. At times, well-meaning individuals in the community give money to the masquerade as a sign of their appreciation of the cultural festivity.

The Arigbodo Traditional Cult

The Arigbodo traditional cult is another important cult in Isawo. It is as old as Isawo itself. The cult was introduced to Isawo by Aboki Bada, the founder of the community and his loyal servant, Lawani (oral interview with Olalekan, 2016). The cult is a known part of the Gunse-Ose compound in Ikorodu from where Aboki Bada is said to have migrated. The Arigbodo cult is very profound in magic and charms and its shrine in Isawo is highly revered for the security of all in the community.

Inhabitants believe that the existence of Isawo as a community cannot be divorced from the remarkable contributions of the Arigbodo cult members. The oral traditional of Isawo indicates that Ise-awo (meaning the works of cult members), the name by which the community was first called before its corruption to Isawo was in appreciation of the exploit of the Arigbodo cult members who helped Aboki Bada in land dispute with the *Awori*. Thereafter, the cult became one of the most important traditional institutions in Isawo. However, there has been no major festival designated to celebrate the cult as others earlier discussed. This has been attributed to the fact that members of the institution want the mysteries of the cult to be unknown to non-members of the Aboki Bada and the Lawani families. Thus, it is more of a family cult. From the foregoing discussion, one can conclude that the three most popular religions in Nigeria are present in the community. Without doubt, religion is a major cultural factor in the life of the community.

The Baaleship Political Institution

The most enduring traditional political institution in Isawo is the Baaleship. It is usually assigned to founders or owners of the community. According to oral sources, the appointment of the Baale in Isawo is rooted in monarchical system. This means that the son of the incumbent Baale is the Baale designate after the demise of his father. However, after the death of the Baale, an acting Baale takes over temporarily for a period of one week during which necessary arrangement would have been put in place for the son of the deceased Baale to accede to his father's position (Ajetunmobi 37-28). He subsequently takes charge of the political administration of the community from the period of his appointment.

In a situation, whereby the Baale fails to provide a son to succeed him after his death, his brother automatically becomes the Baale. However, if the son of the Baale declines the position for personal reasons or unavailable to assume the position, the Baale's brother would step into the position to avoid creating a vacuum in the administration of the community (Ajetunmobi and Junaid 86-88). In Isawo however, it is not known that any of the Baales had failed to provide an heir to succeed them. However, since humans cannot determine what would happen to them in the future, these provisions and guidelines were therefore put in place in order to avoid possible

problems in future that could disrupt the political administration of the community. Also, these provisions of Isawo's unwritten constitution helped to avoid an interregnum in the administration of the community.

After the appointment of the Baale, he subsequently assumes legislative and judicial role as the Chief Executive in charge of the internal affairs of the community. He is assisted in these roles by the Baale-in-council, a body of important chiefs in the community; laws passed through this process are incontestably applied locally (Fasinro 70). After a law has been passed, the announcer goes round the community to announce to the people, consequent upon which the law becomes binding on all the people of the community. The community Congress is another important element of the Isawo political system. Crucial matters are brought before the Congress and whatever decision reached becomes law.

The judicial role of the Baale is performed with some similarity to his legislative function. He meets with the Baale-in-council to decide cases and settle disputes. However, when any of the parties involved in a dispute does not agree with the decision of the Baale-in-council, the Congress is summoned and the opinion of the Congress consequently determines the final stance of the Baale on the matter, which may be different from the initial position. The Baale, therefore, as the Chief Justice of the community could only make his judgment on the basis of the people's general opinion. In this way and to a very large extent, miscarriage of justice is prevented.

The extent of the Baale's powers in Isawo is almost entirely unlike any known range of power in Yorubaland. Adedeji (1962) for example noted in his article, "Western Nigeria: Its History, Its People and Its Cultures", that the government of the Yoruba is usually a form of constitutional monarchy with the decision of the monarch considered approximately sacrosanct. Where the ruler is not a monarch in Yorubaland, there is usually the Baale, as it was the case in Ibadan before November 1936 when the Baale was raised to the status of an Oba. Corroborating this fact, N.A. Fadipe (1970), in *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, that such a Baale in the political arrangement of the Yoruba, has the powers of a magistrate.

The Baaleship in Isawo is however different in some respect. As pointed out earlier, the Baal must work hand in hand with the Baale-in-council and the elders of the community. In fact, at times, he has to summon a congress to get the perspective of the generality of the people on crucial issues to make a final position given the multi-ethnic

character of the community. This, rather than considered as a sign of weakness, could be regarded as the true democratic way of administration, such that has helped in the unity of Isawo.

The Elders Committee is another important body in Isawo, the function of which is to guide and advise the Baale. The body comprises representatives of the different ethnic groups in Isawo, including those of smaller Isawo villages. These are considered to be trusted individuals with unquestionable characters who could be called upon to settle simple disputes in the community. Matters only pass to the Baale when it has degenerated to a crucial level. These representatives are generally referred to, in local parlance, as the '*majekobaje*'. They play an advisory role in the socio-political administration of Isawo, but an ambitious Baale could circumvent them, meaning that their significance is limited.

The nature and extent of the powers of the Baale, to an extent, is also wide-ranging. As a rule, settlers of smaller Isawo villages must make formal consultation with the Baale before they could engage in any sensitive endeavour in their villages. In fact, these villages, on a regular basis, send their representatives to the Baale to secure his approval before they embark on any major project. This does not however show a sign of oppressive leadership, rather it is a manifestation of co-operation among the various groups in the community and its administrators.

The Baale, apart from the ones earlier mentioned, is also assisted in decision-making by the *Iyalode*, who is the head of the women leaders in the community, and the youth leader, the *Olori Odo* (oral interview with Olaleken). The participation of these representatives in the socio-political administration of the community is important to the progress of the community. It also promotes unity by involving every segment of the community in its administration. This, thus, provides an insight into how a democratic system of administration has evolved over the years in Isawo land; everyone and every group counts.

The question that comes to fore at this point is how can one define this system of administration? To call it a democracy may not be appropriate because the people do not elect the Baale, rather he assumes the position by succession. And to call it a pure monarchical system may not be too correct either since the Baale does not act in absoolutism. What is not in doubt however is that it is a blend of

different political systems occasioned by the mixed character of the community and has, thus, defied an exact definition. In this regard, therefore, the system is better described than defined. Nevertheless, the traditional political system has contributed in no small ways to the peace of the community and that of Lagos State.

Conclusion

This work has so far attempted an analysis of the socio-cultural and political legacies of Isawo community, Lagos in recent times. The essay examined how the different cultural heritages and legacies have contributed towards peaceful coexistence and understanding among the amalgam of people in Isawo. Indeed, the work demonstrates how cultural heritage helps in promoting intergroup relations. As such, there is the need to emphasize the importance of traditional institutions as veritable tools for intergroup relations.

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