

History, Roles and the Challenges of the Institution of Aku Uka in Nation Building in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The institution of Aku Uka is one of the traditional political systems mandated with the power of steering Kwararafa Confederate State (which later metamorphosed into Jukun Kingdom) from the pre-colonial period to date. The Jukun of Kwararafa and the Aku as their head now live in some scattered settlements along the middle reaches of River Benue with headquarters at Wukari. Although, they are not very numerous today, they played considerable roles in the history of central and northern Nigeria in the past, and exercised lasting influences on many of their neighbours. The Aku Uka, like any other traditional ruler, was the major actor or bedrock of nation building. Even with the advent of British Colonial administration, his institution remained one of the major actors playing very fundamental and indispensable roles in nation building. Nevertheless, there are some challenges confronting the institution. In spite of the British colonization and subsequent creation of states and local government areas, the Aku still maintained his influence and authority in the Middle Belt region. Thus, the main concern of this paper is to explore into an in-depth historical analysis on the origin and history of Aku Uka, the roles it plays in nation building and some of the challenges confronting the institution in the 21st Century. The methodology used in carrying out the research was mainly based on the critical consultation and evaluation of primary and secondary sources.

Key words: *Aku Uka, Nation Building, Challenges, Sangari.*

Introduction

To analyze fully the history, roles, and challenges of the institution of Aku Uka in nation building, it is imperative to review historical background or foundation of Kwararafa Confederate State or Jukun Kingdom, that is, the state upon which the institution was built. In any study of political history, there is no way one can talk about the head or king without exploring the history of the kingdom. Therefore, the king only exercises his role or influence where there is a state or kingdom. In other words, a king only exists and exercise his power within the territorial sphere of his influence. Thus, no king, no state and vice versa. However, it is worthy to note that, in spite of the British colonization of Nigeria and the segmentation of states into sub-units, our traditional rulers (Aku Uka, Sultan, Alafin, etc) still play important roles in promoting unity and peace in nation building.

One striking feature of Kwararafa Confederate State is that it was heterogeneous which encompasses multi-ethnic nationalities not just a homogenous Jukun/Abakwariga kingdom as it is today (Meek, 1931, p 10). Although, with some exaggerations, during the precolonial period, C.K. Meek and other colonial officers over pampered the territorial size of the Kingdom. Meek asserts that;

... the people established a far-flung empire encompassing the whole of the south-eastern region of Nigeria from the Cross River to the Igala Kingdom on the lower Niger and most of the Northcentral part of the country, including Zaria and Bauchi. The empire, the capital of which is given variously as Kororofa or Kwararafa, Bepi or Apa, is considered to have extended at one time or another from the twelfth meridian to the Niger, south to the Cross River and north to the borders of Borno and the varying limits of the Central Hausa State (Fari, 2003, p 14).

The aim of this paper is first to review the case of a Jukun Kingdom, also referred to as Kwararafa vis-à-vis the evolution of Akuship. Secondly, to explain in detail the roles or functions played and still being played by the Aku Uka in the nation building process. And finally, to critically examine some of the challenges confronting Aku Uka in nation building.

The Process of State Formation and the Emergence of Kwararafa Kingdom

In writing on the history of state formation in Central Sudan, distinguished scholars of international repute like Professors Fage and Oliver, Professor Abdullahi Smith as well as Yusuf Bala Usman, debunked with some proofs and evidence that state formation process in Africa were not the handcraft of foreign invaders. But rather, it was indigenous efforts (Ajayi and Crowder, 1971, p 152). We all know the stories which were told of the heroes who came from afar to settle in the land of Africa and became its rulers and whose descendants continued as the dynasts of Hausaland, Borno, and Yorubaland, particularly for perhaps as much as a thousand years. Here, Professor Smith is referring to Abu Yazid (Bayajida) in the legends on the origin of Hausa, Sayf bin Yazid (the founder of Syfawa Dynasty) and Oduduwa all claimed to have migrated from the East (Smith, 1987, p. 22). These scholars made serious criticisms against the Hamitic Hypothesis on the origins of a tradition of the origin of such alien leaders (Mamman, 1980, p 97).

Before we explore the basis of the argument against the Hamitic Hypothesis, let us understand briefly what is all about the Hamitic Hypothesis according to its proponent, Charles Gabriel Seligman in his book, *The Races of Africa*, published in 1930. Charles Gabriel Seligman FRS (24 December 1873 - 19 September 1940) was a British physician and ethnologist. He was the proponent of the Hamitic Hypothesis, according to which, some civilizations of Africa were thought to have been founded by Caucasoid, Hamitic people (Seligman, 1930, p. 10). Seligman

is most remembered for his detailed ethnographical work, which recognizes four major distinct races of the African continent: Bushmanoid (Bushman), Pygmies, Negroids, and Caucasoid (Hamites). The Hotentots, Seligman maintains, are a mixture of Bushmanoids, Negroids and Hamites. As a staunch proponent of the Hamitic Theory, in his work, Seligman asserts that Hamitic Caucasoid North and Northeast Africans were responsible for introducing non-Semitic Afro-Asiatic languages (Berber-Cushitic-Egyptian) into Africa, as well as significant cultural developments. In his book, Seligman states his belief that:

Apart from relatively late sematic influence ... the civilization of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history is the record of these peoples and of their interactions with the two other African stocks, the Negro and Bushmen. Whether this influence was extended by highly civilized Egyptians or by such wider pastoralists one represented at the present day by the Beja and Semali ... the incoming Hamites were pastoral "Europeans" arriving wave after wave - better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroids (Seligman, 1930, p.30).

From the above analysis of the Seligman hypothesis, it has been established that, Hamites originated from North Africa, Egypt in particular, and that they are responsible for all African civilizations, a claim discredited by Oliver, Fage, Smith and Bala Usman. My subsequent finding will further support the views of the aforementioned scholars.

In one of the works of Bala Usman, entitled "*Abdullahi Smith and State Formation in the Central Sudan*", he discussed at length in what he described as the "Sudanic State" of Fage and Oliver. In his article, he made the following submission:

In the book, *A Short History of Africa*, written by Professor Roland Oliver and Professor John Fage. They treat at some length what they call, "The Sudanic Civilization" whose central feature they say is "the Sudanic State" ... stretching right across sub-Saharan Africa from the Red Sea to the mouth of the Senegal, and right down to the Central highland spine of Bantu Africa from the Nile sources to Southern Rhodesia, we find the axis of what we call the Sudanic Civilization. The central feature of this civilization was the incorporation of the various African peoples convened into states whose institutions were so similar that they must have derived from a common source. At the head of such states, there were kings to whom divine honours were paid and to whom divine powers were attributed (Mamman, 1980, p. 99).

Furthermore, even before and after the publication of this book by Oliver and Fage, there had been numerous publications debating the outlook presented here, which does not originate with Fage and Oliver, but which gets back to the nineteenth-century European intellectual racism

and has come to be known as the Hamitic Hypothesis (Usman, 1980, p. 112). The most concrete, precise and almost surgical of the criticisms of the application of the Hamitic Hypothesis to West Africa known to us is the one by Abdullahi Smith as noted above. It also incorporates an alternative interpretation placing the internal dynamics of economic, social and cultural changes at the center of process of state formation in Central Sudan and reducing, drastically, the significance of the “Hamitic”, “Egyptian”, “Caucasian”, “Arabian”, or any external factor (Usman, 1980, p. 101).

From the above analysis, what is important to note is that the state formation process in Sudan seemed to have had nothing to do with foreign invaders. For instance, it has been established by Smith that, the Magumi ethnic group, who founded the state of Kanem-Borno were black and were the original inhabitants of Central Sudan (Usman and Alkali, 1983, p. 14). Apart from this, it is widely accepted that one of the major consequences of the Jihad movement led by Shehu Usman Dan Fodio (1804 - 1809) was the creation of a political community larger than any that had existed in Borno and other parts of the Central Sudan. The process of its emergence involved the suppression, in various ways, of over two dozen polities, many of which had developed, over several centuries, a great degree of coherence and stability (Usman, 1979, p. 34). This indicates that there had been various political states that were formed by indigenous inhabitants of Central Sudan before the creation of Sokoto Caliphate. And more importantly, Kwararafa Confederate State was one of them. Therefore, the formation of Kwararafa must be connected with human and natural resources that had been in existence within the Gongola Hawal and Benue Valley.

Having seen the basis of the process of state formation with particular reference to Kwararafa Confederate State, now, let us look at the Kwararafa kingdom before proceeding to the evolution of Akuship. There were several factors that contributed greatly to the emergence of Kwararafa kingdom. Some of these factors are political, economic, and military as well as religion (Wunuken, 2019). The strategic location of the area also played a vital role in the evolution of the kingdom. Its location in a regional and interregional commercial center also contributed immensely to its emergence. These economic advantages helped the Jukun and non-Jukun to acquire horses from Hausaland with which they formed a highly efficient Calvary to spread their political and religious influence over non-Jukun groups and rebuilt their institutions (Dogo, 1982, p. 75).

Apart from military and economic factors, natural resources and its related occupations like farming, fishing, and hunting also contributed to the formation of Kwararafa kingdom. For instance, it was from amongst the professional hunters that military leaders were chosen. It has been established that Gidi-Gidi and Katakpa were famous hunters (Sunday Trust, 2007, p. 28). Gidi-Gidi and Katakpa were the ones who earned the credit for the formation of Pindiga and Wukari respectively, that is, the first and second capitals of the kingdom. It suffices to say that,

hunters contributed both economically and militarily to the emergence of the state of Kwararafa. As earlier noted, one conspicuous feature of Kwararafa Confederacy was its multi-ethnic nationalities. It was in view of this fact that Professor Erim O. Erim argues:

There are positive indications that Kwararafa embraced a multi-ethnic society and while the name has been principally associated with the Jukun, it seems unlikely that they were either the founders of the Confederacy or its rulers until relatively recent times. From the available, if admittedly slim evidence, Kwararafa was probably founded by the Abakwariga, a name usually associated with non-Muslim Hausa. It has occasionally been referred to as one of the Hausa states and researches have tended to support the traditions(Erim, 1981, p. 17).

Apart from human and natural resources, the Jukun religion and the emergence of Aku Uka also contributed to the formation of Kwararafa kingdom. Their religion, *Ayaku*, played one of the major roles in the unification of the various Jukun and non-Jukun groups in the Benue Valley. As we shall see, the monarchy evolved into what is known as “Divine Kinship”, by which the ruler was regarded as the representative of God on earth(Kasimu, 1987, p. 33).

Kwararafa was a multiethnic state and/or confederacy centered along the Benue River valley in what is today referred to as the “Middle Belt” region. It was southwest of the Borno Empire and south of the Hausa states. It rose to prominence before 1500. It is believed that Kwararafa was a confederate state led by Jukun and Abakwariga as argued above by Professor Erim.

In our introduction, we noted that the territorial size was exaggerated by C.K. Meek. Nevertheless, contrary to the above assertion and claim, what emerged from our findings is that, instead of a Kwararafa empire of the size that has been claimed, there were at best only Jukun Kingdoms which, by a stretch of the imagination, may be regarded as one polity. Secondly, that there was only Jukun sphere of influence, which judging by the diffusion of Jukun religious and cultural traits and claims about the sending of gifts to Kwararafa and vassalage to same, encompassed the area from Nassarawa (Awe and Akyakura) in the northwest to Kano in the northeast and from Katsina-Ala in the southeast to some parts of Idoma in the southwest(Fari, 2003, p. 14). Today, over a dozen ethnic groups, scattered over a wide area of northern and central Nigeria, claim ancestral linkages with Kwararafa. This could mean that Kwararafa was a confederacy. At the core of this were the Hausa speaking Kutumbawa/Abakwariga. As well as the Alago, Kalam, Gwana, Pindiga, Kona, Kundi, and Jukun and their related groups(Abubakar, 2019, p. 57). The identification of Jukun with Kwararafa has been questioned largely because the term, *Kwararafa*, has no definite meaning in Jukun. The weight of evidence seems to indicate that *Kwararafa* was a generic term used by the Islamic peoples of the Central Sudan to refer to non-Muslim peoples from the south (Ikime, 1980, p. 165).

Having analyzed the process of state formation vis-à-vis the establishment of Kwararafa kingdom with defined frontier or boundary and, with capitals at Santolo, Pindiga, Bepi/Kwararafa and finally Wukari or Uka, now let's look at the evolution of Akuship. However, before we plunge into the evolution of Akuship, four essential things must be borne in mind about the history of Kwararafa state. First, its history was in phases that was why the capital was located in four designated places. Secondly, it was a heterogeneous or multiethnic state encompassing multiethnic nationalities dominated or centered by Jukun and Abakwariga (Abubakar, 2019, p. 60).

The third essential feature was that it was economically viable in terms of trade and natural resources. This is in view of the fact that it was active in both Sahara and Atlantic trades. With their control of the salt supply of the Benue Valley, they traded this essential but scarce commodity for horses to build up their army, as well as for slaves in order to gain access to European commodities on the coast. Calabar on the Atlantic coast became known as the Port of Kwararafa or Abakpa (Webster and Apollos, 1993, p. 2). The fourth and final essential feature is that the far-flung confederacy had become the homogenous Jukun kingdom of Wukari. Kwararafa, under the Jukun ceased to be a warrior state, extant accounts portray the new state as a pacifist and religious one, made up of a collection of unwarlike people solely and strictly devoted to the maintenance of their innumerable religious cults and the veneration of their sacred king (Aku Uka), a people whose prestige and continuing legitimacy depends on their successful performance of their main ritual function, which was to guarantee good harvest and good health and security for their people (Kamari, 2019).

The Evolution of Akuship

Right from the foundation of Kwararafa Confederacy during the first phase which began with its establishment, around the year 1000 at Santolo, on the southern bank of the Hadeja River, east of Lake Chad to its final transformation into a homogenous Jukun kingdom, the title of their king at the apex of the administration is *Ku* or *Aku*, depending on the dialect. For example, at Wukari it is *Aku*, at Mavu it is *Aku*, at Pindiga it is *Kuru*, at Abinsi it is *Ku*, at Dampar it is *Nke*, whereas in other places like Wuse, Wase, Tunga and Awei, the title is *Akunke* (Muhammad, 2019).

Thus, we have *Aku* of Ukari or *Aku Uka*, *Kuru* of Pindiga, *Akunke* or *Nke* of Dampar, Mavu, Wase, Wuse, and Awei, to mention only a few (Alhassan, 2019). Nevertheless, in spite of these dialectical differences, the headquarters of Jukun in the whole nation today is located at present-day Wukari in Taraba State, that is why the central king of Jukun in the whole county is referred to as *Aku Uka*. The word *Aku* or *Ku* simply means king, while *Uka* means the greatest Jukun settlement, from which the name *Uka* or *Ukari* was derived. *Aku* is regarded as a divine king among the Jukun. The name *Aku* simply means one who is above all. The Jukun regarded

the *Aku* as the mediator between them and God. To the Jukun, *Aku Uka* is only next to God. He was and still is looked upon as a supreme being and is believed to possess the power of life and death. He is the only one who can “speak” to God about any problem concerning his subjects (Meek, 1931, p. 16). In all matters or cases brought before his court, his decisions are final.

The emergence of *Aku Uka*, *Ku* or *Nke* is a contesting issue between and among some scholars writing on Jukun. For example, Professor Sa’ad Abubakar, one of the distinguished scholars on the history of Jukun in the Benue Valley made some important statements about the origin of *Aku*. His first view was that the *Akuship* emerged at Wukari and spread its influence over the Middle Benue region (Ikime, 1980, p. 170). Then later again, he changed his position, for instance, in 1986, he maintains that:

The government of the Jukun of Wukari was indeed an elaborate and highly complex body. It was hierarchical with the gods at the apex, the *Aku* or *Ku* and the sacerdotal class under them. It was a system that developed over centuries, and not just quite recently (Abubakar, 1986, p. 1).

The evolution of *Akuship* started along with the evolution of *Sangari* of Abakwariga since the first phase of Kwararafa Confederate State. It is essential to note that, there is no nation or ethnic group on earth, no matter its numerical strength or size without a leader. Therefore, the evolution of *Akuship* or *Sangari* is politically a natural phenomenon. B.Z. Abubakar asserts that:

The Hausa or Abakwariga Malams became fully involved in the affairs of the Kwararafa court to the extent that certain functions, which they perform, later became essential, especially in the installation ceremony of *Aku*. Moreso, a few of the daily rituals of the court were traditionally considered necessary for the prosperity of *Aku* and Jukun nation as a whole, and it became reserved for *Sangari* and Abakwariga people only. *Sangari* became a recognized institution or functionary in the administration of all Jukun settlements throughout the phases of Kwararafa history. *Sangari* was said to be responsible for the prompt collection of taxes in order to economically sustain the kingdom (Abubakar, 2019, p. 179).

The most important thing to be noted here is that both *Aku* and *Sangari* served and are still serving as promoters of peace and unity among the heterogeneous people of Kwararafa, they ensure law and order, as well as its economic sustainability. This is what is meant by nation-building in precolonial, colonial and post-colonial periods.

The Roles of Aku Uka in Nation Building

As noted above, the evolution of leadership in any given state or nation is politically a natural phenomenon. No nation or any given human society and or ethnic group no matter its numerical strength or size is without a leader. Therefore, no society or nation without a leader can survive. The essence of having a political leader are to ensure law and order, promote peace and unity with equity and justice among its heterogeneous subjects, as well as to economically diversify ways or means of revenue in order to sustain the state or nation. Intrinsically, the roles of Aku Uka in nation building is not far away from what has been stated here. In other words, like any traditional institution, Aku Uka's was and still part and parcel of nation builders in Nigeria. As seen above, during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, he was able to unify and integrate the people of Kwararafa or Jukun Kingdom in spite of its territorial size and multi-ethnic composition.

Nationbuilding is all about constructing or structuring a national identity using the power and machinery of the state or kingdom. The primary objective of nation building is the unification of the heterogeneous people within the kingdom so that it remains politically stable and economically viable in the long run (Deutsch and Felt, 1966, p. 7). As we shall see, among the challenges confronting Aku Uka and his sub-kings, ethnoreligious and political rivalries were and are still serious threats to nation building. However, in spite of all these fundamental challenges, Aku still contributes greatly to nation building. This is because the traditional institution has that legitimate authority and his subjects still respect him. We are all living witnesses the Aku and his sub-kings played very fundamental roles to restore peace and ensure law and order during the crises in 1992/1993, 2000/2001 as well as the recent Jukun-Tiv crisis, (Wunuken, 2019). The Aku Uka's popularity among his subjects earned him credit and respect, that was why, during the crisis, he came out personally and ordered his people to put down their arms and remain calm.

As noted above, artificial boundaries during the colonial and post-independence era, reduced the territorial size and sphere of influence of Aku, yet his area still composes of multi-ethnic nationalities with different religious affiliations. Despite all these differences, the Aku is able to mold and unify his people towards a nation building process. This role is in line with the view of a political scientist, Andreas Wimmer, who asserts that:

At a deeper level, nation building and national identity needed to be deliberately constructed by molding different ethnic groups into a nation, especially since many newly established states with colonial practices of divide and rule had resulted in ethnically heterogeneous populations. However, many new states were plagued by tribalism, that is, the rivalry between ethnic groups

within the nation. This sometimes resulted in their near-disintegration, such as the attempt by Biafra to secede from Nigeria between 1967 - 1970(Wimmer, 2018, p. 151).

The above submission by Professor Wimmer is a clear example of the nature of Southern Taraba which was and is still ravaged by persistent though intermittent crises. Aku and the government of Taraba State are still trying their best to ensure peace and political stability reign towards nation building. Moreso, nation building involves the use of propaganda and establishment of major infrastructural facilities for development in order to foster social harmony and economic growth.

Aku Uka and the Challenges of Nation Building

The challenges faced by the Aku Uka in nation building as a matter of reality are manifold and diverse in their nature. These numerous challenges are not only peculiar and or centrally focused to the institution alone, but rather they are generally common phenomena affecting and confronting the people in the area in particular, and the nation in general. B.Z. Abubakar asserts that:

Chiefly among the challenges confronting the institution and the nation in general are ethnicity, religious intolerance, communal clashes, educational challenges, and underrepresentation of some parts of the country in private and public sectors as well as lack of political compromise. Unless and until these challenges are adequately addressed by the executive, judicial and legislative, selfless leaders and politicians as well as traditional title holders, our dream of building a nation is bleak and unrealistic(Abubakar, 2007, p. 137).

Ethnicity, religious politics and/or lack of religious tolerance are serious challenges and they are threats to the effort of the institution in nation building. Ethnicity is a political concept and denotes the expression of ethnic sentiments or ethnic nationalism. It involves the practice of ethnic ideology which enables a group to exploit natural differences in nationality for specific purposes(Abubakar, 2019, p. 2).

Rivalry among the first class chiefs in the state poses another challenge to the institution of Uka Uka from others, such as the Emir of Muri, Gara of Donga, etc. This is characterized by man's nature as to the claim of superiority over one another, especially with respect to the Aku Uka being the chairman of the Taraba State Traditional Council.

Once upon a time, traditional rulers/institutions were the backbone of governance and legislation in Nigeria, but the emergence of constitution, after colonization, rendered the institution to something akin to a toothless bulldog. This is how modernization is categorically challenging the institution of Aku Uka's drive to nation building.

The issue of finance is a serious challenge to all traditional institutions. Funding for the smooth running of the institution comes from the Local Government coffers and thus the saying, 'he who pays the piper, dictates the tune' tilts the balance against such institutions.

According to T. Akinyele:

It is an onward looking chauvinistic attitude towards one's nationality and cultural group with correspondingly suspicious attitude towards others, especially those held to be in competition with one's own ethnic group (Akinyele, 1996, p. 98).

Since the creation of Taraba State on August, 27th 1991, Southern Taraba has never been in peace for over a decade due to its diverse and heterogeneous nature of the people with conflicting ethnic and selfish interests and lack of political and religious compromise which commutatively serves as a serious challenge to unity and development and also a threat to nation building.

Recommendation

Any challenge or problem is accompanied by a solution. Although, some scholars are of the view that, our hope of building a politically stable and economically viable nation is bleak and unachievable. However, this paper has a contrary opinion. The way forward for building a nation involves justice and equity in the allocation and distribution of infrastructural facilities, the assurance of security to all, religious tolerance, political compromise as well as educational orientation for self-reliance and self-discipline.

Conclusion

Kwararafa Confederate State which later transformed into a homogenous Jukun Kingdom, in spite of its internal and external challenges, the Akus were able to unify it politically and sustain it economically. As seen above, the Aku and his sub-kings are still playing important roles in nation building.

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