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19th Century Afro-European Relations and Consequentials on the Nigerian Psyche

Abstract

Afro – European relations predated the nineteenth century. However, European activities in Nigeria in the 19th century increased and consequently, resulted in Nigeria's Colonization in the 20th century. This paper delves into these relations, especially the resultant colonization and the consequences these relations has had on the psyche and behavioural tendencies of present day Nigerians.

Introduction

The first contact with the Europeans on the Nigeria coast was purely for economic transactions in slave-trade, these were exchanged for European manufactured goods. The trade in slave trade that thrived between the periods 16th – 18th century was not to be pronounced illegal until the early part of the nineteenth century. By the 19th century, there was the increasing rate of Afro-European relations especially as more Europeans came calling for other purposes other than trade in slave trade. Some were Christian missionaries who were filled with the spirit of evangelism in them. Others aimed at civilizing the people.

By the 19th century, Europeans were unquestionably superior to Africans technologically. By renouncing the slave trade, they also felt they were morally superior (Fyfe, 1974). This feeling of superiority was further heightened by the publications of those day. In 1752, the Swedish botanist, Karl Linnaeus had published his classification of plants and almost everything became categorized and classified from then on. Theories were advanced that the varieties of man belonged to different species just like plants and the theory gained ground that negroes were of the inferior species, especially by Dr. Robert Knox in 1850 who declared that man was divided irrevocably into races, each with its own fixed and unalterable characteristics, physically and psychologically. He thus explained all human history and behaviours in terms of the interactions of these races. Thus, Negroes were not only inferior intellectually but they were equally inferior in every other way. This became pronounced moreso in a society where anything painted black took on the form of the devil or evil, and white was regarded as good and angelic. Thus, the nearer a man's skin is to white the better for the man.

By 1880, the large European presence in Nigeria was largely confined to the coast. Twenty years later, the history of West Africa had changed and almost everywhere had been shared among the European superpowers and claimants. It was to mark the beginning of new orientations in the African politics and social dispensations.

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The psyche is the essence of man, it is like the mover of man that directs and acts on man's behaviours. Different environmental factors acts as effects on human beings and their behaviour. This paper examines the 19th century Afro-European relations and the effects on the Nigerian nation.

The Afro-European Relations And Their Effects On The Nigeria Politics

Though the relations between the coastal people of Africa and European was strictly business for the major part of the 19th century, the turn of events in the late 19th century and early 20th century must have taken the people and some of the traditional rulers by surprise. Though the monarchs must have developed some little trust in the European traders, they must have equally been very wary of them for even as late as 1854, one of them, Al-Hajj Umar still warned that the European had better not have ulterior motive other than trade. In a letter he wrote to the French Government, he claimed the whites were only traders. Said he: "I don't wish them to erect permanent establishments or send warships in the river" (Hargreaves, 1974), when the superpowers were to finally take over the Nigerian area, the little resistance like these of Jaja of Opobo were cleverly silenced. Thus, the British took over Lagos, the Yoruba Kingdom, the East, the North and took government of the Niger area from Sir Goidie and 1914, the conquered areas were amalgamated and given a new name, Nigeria-the Niger area. There from began a new imperialism and the existence of what is today known as Nigeria. With the amalgamation of Nigeria, was also the introduction of the British form of one central government over Nigeria. However, little or nothing could be done to the political structure of the Emirs and Obis that were already in existence before the British take-over. Since it was convenient to rule through the local political structures, no damage was done to them, in as far as the local chiefs did not try any mischief. Thus from the period of amalgamation to the independence period in 1960, the new form of political system came to stay, courtesy of the British. This was to be the beginning of the Niger-area problem. Though the British were in a hurry to leave and handover power to an indigenous ruler, they did not seem to have foreseen the problems the new nation was to have. From the first year of independence, the new nation was to grapple with the problems that were bound to surface. For one, the new nation was a making of convenience and the new leaders that arose from the different tribal units had not seen themselves as one but had equally made a pact of convenience for independence sake.

After independence, their lack of unity became exposed. Unifying the nation and propelling the nation forward became a difficult task for them. Rather, personal conflicts which could not be differentiated from national conflicts reared their heads. The crises led to the January Coup of 1966 and from then on, it had been coups upon coups in Nigeria. till 1999. In almost 35 years of independence, the Military, who are supposed to be defenders of the nation and not rulers, have had more years of ruling the people than civil leaders. Yet, the few occasions that saw civil leaders on the seat of power out of sheer accident of history has exposed not only the leaders' own inadequacies but also the followers' shortcomings. These inadequacies are manifested in the unstable polity of the nation.

While democracy thrives in Britain because of the level of literacy of the people and the political enlightenment there of one's rights which empowers one

politically to demand for such rights, the people in the new Nigeria at independence consisted majority of illiterates not versed in the know-how of democracy or empowered politically or literate-wise to demand for such rights. Moreover, recourse to local rulers was useless for , apart from the paraphelia of office, they are left redundant and their relevance in terms of power of office is not known to the people or to themselves. They still derive their glory today from the glory they enjoyed in the past. Thus while they are regarded as leaders by their people, it is not unusual to find the “new leaders” telling them their place or ‘cutting their wings’ when it suits them. Some are dethroned and enthroned as it suits the ‘powers’ that be. They seem useful only when there is civil unrest, and the governor or the head of state tells them to “appeal” to “their people”.

A multiplication of divisible factors combine to make democracy and stable governance which are aiding developed nations to make giants strides in various fields, a herculean task, not only in Nigeria, but in other parts of Africa in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Afro-European Relations And The New Social Dispensation

Before colonization and subsequent erosion of African values, mores and way of life, there were certain things the different tribal groups in Nigeria held in high esteem. These include the communal feelings in the extended family set-up, morals, respect for elders, and their esteem of their womenfolk. Unlike what is erroneously portrayed today that women were second class citizens. In the past , women were powerful and had their relevance in the political set-up. In Yorubaland, the women were represented in the village council by the Iyalode and if there was to be any decision taken that did not go down well with women, they protested. In fact, some kings were known not to have taken the women’s opinion lightly, because they knew what it could mean; abdication from the throne. This the women in some traditional set-ups of Nigeria still take it upon themselves to do. Some Iyalodes like Efunsetan of Ibadan were so powerful that they were feared even more than the king. In places like Ile-Oluji, Ondo State, there was Oba Okunrin (Male King) and Oba Obinrin (Female King). These kings ruled simultaneously until a time in history when it was agreed that the male king should rule solely but at his death, the female king, otherwise known as regent should rule until the appointment of another king.

Even in Ile-Ife, which is regarded as the cradle of Yoruba people, a female king ruled at a point in history. She was know as Obaluwo. And her reign witnessed various innovations, which include the tiles in the palace ground, remnants of which still remains to date in Ile-Ife (Sofola, 1992). Among the people of Ijebuland, there was the Erelu in the Osugbo council of governors.

Among the Edos of the eleven dynasties of Ogiso era, female manaechs emerged. They were Ogiso Emose and Ogiso Orhorho (Sofola, 1992). Among the Igbos, Okunjo (1989) enunciated that there was the male section of the community and the female, regarded as the mother of the community and was charged with concern for the females in the community. There used also to be the Umu-Ada and Out Inyemedi, the institution of daughters and institution of wives respectively. With these institutions, the females felt protected. Some powerful women could if they were childless ‘marry’ and any child born out of the marriage bore the

woman's father's name and were not discriminated upon because it was a legitimate thing.

In the Degema society, the Uga system of marriage existed. Thus a man and a woman could decide to live together as friends and have children. Such marriages were considered legitimate, and the children would belong to the wife's family. They had rights in their father house too though with more in their mothers' (Gabriel, 1994). These orientations were unlike what was happening in Europe where the goal of the early leaders of the feminist movement was to secure the vote for women and to change the laws affecting marriage so that women could have equal rights to properties and to their own children, or where the women are supposed to find complete self-fulfillment in exclusive devotion to marriage and parenthood (Jangeward and Scoot, 1976).

In times of war, women made themselves relevant. Moremi of Ife risked her life as the Iyaloja, to save the devastated Ile-Ife people. Emotan of Benin risked her life as a spy to save the kingdom when the throne of Benin was threatened. Queen Amina of Zaria had to seize power and through her military prowess instilled fear in other kingdoms, Iyalode Tiubu chose to die in exile to protest the signing away of Lagos independence which she had opposed vehemently (Sofola, 1992). It was because of the respect enjoyed by women in the east that made the Aba women believe that the colonial masters could not hurt them. This erroneous belief was based on the respect given to women in the past., they were therefore shocked when the British soldiers fired and killed some of them during the 1929 Aba riot (Gailey, 1991).

At old age, women could be priestess. The woman existed in her own right and not as an appendage of the man because she is a wife or mother. And that is why even in vocabulary make-up, most tribes did not coin female words as an appendage of the male, as is the case in the European culture. In Igbo, male and female words are coined from the word child-Nwa-Oke (male) and Nwa-nyi (female). Whereas what the European have is an appendage of the female to the male base female, woman and man could be used to refer to both sexes.

The coming of the white man saw the marginalization of women in almost every sphere of activity, and almost everything was seen from the male viewpoint as was the case in Europe. Even in the imported western education, a distinction had to be made between subjects appropriate to females. Invariably, this affected appropriate professions. In the new orientation, the female is bombarded with damaging self-image on her psyche. Even in wise-sayings and proverbs, there is a world of difference in the portrayal of females, between the European and the African narrative . For example, while the European would say "behind every successful man, there is a woman, the Nigerian would rather say that "the strength of a man is in his woman and that" a soldier with a mother does not die at the war front" (Sofola, 1992).

In the textbooks, the media and in every aspect of the hidden curriculum, the same theme goes. Thus, the stereotypic view about sex roles which the European had in their own culture, at colonization was also imported and then began a new form of imperialism on the female psyche.

Communalism feelings no longer exist, socially too, the social thread that bond the people, especially at the extended family, has been eroded away by the western individualistic orientation that has emerged. Thus what plagues the nation today include effects of individualistic tendencies. Family members hardly know one-another, the feelings of neighborliness hardly exist for one's fellow, or that feeling that one should be one's neighbours keeper. There is no longer the sense of security among the people, many suffer from psychological stress over issues which would have been aided by the help of the extended family members or neighbours, old aged people and the handicapped are left uncatered for, because of the new orientations and structures in the western world like old age institutions or social securing policies that cater for these group of people have not been evolved in this part of the world. The traditional mores and morals of the people and the cultural heritage of the people, have been eroded away and what seem to be embraced by the people are negative influences from abroad. We do not attempt to keep our own positive values and add to positive influences from abroad.

Summary And Conclusion

For any individual or group of individuals, to move from the point of weakness and operate from the point of strength, it is necessary to be in grip of a deep understanding of history and how it affects and influences on people. In Nigeria, it is necessary that individualism be reduced, women given a chance in the new dispensation and factors that can bring unity among the different groups fostered while those that can divide the people are discouraged. There are different nations comprising of many tribes like Nigeria that have been able to achieve cohesion Attempts have been made in this paper to reveal the consequences and impacts of 19th century Afro-European relations on Nigeria and to show why some problems exist today. For the country to move forward, it is necessary to evolve structures that would make this possible. Only the Nigerian leaders can chart this and the earlier this is done, the better for Nigeria to move forward.

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