



Review Article

GERONTOCRACY IN RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL NIGERIAN SOCIETIES: A TOOL FOR LAND MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Gerontocracy is a system of government in which the eldest members of the kindred leads and makes decision on behalf of the kindred or clan in primordial societies particularly in Africa. One of the areas in which the leadership of the elders is most sought is in the area of land acquisition. Until recently no one gets access to land without the collective consent of the elders' council. However with the enactment of the land use decree in Nigeria, government agencies and multinational companies have sought access to vast areas of family land without passing through the elders, but instead using the provisions of the land use decree, obtaining certificates of occupancy of land belonging to family men and women. This article seeks to re-assess the more dependable role played by the elders in the past which helped to stabilize the land economy in Nigeria in view of the present confusion created in this area by the activities of unscrupulous land speculators and misinformed bureaucrats. It recommends that the land use decree should be modified to incorporate the system of gerontocracy whereby no one gains access to property belonging to others without the due and informed consent of the owners of such property.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a gerontocratic culture which governs stewardship, land ownership and use among many Nigerian communities especially among Ogba and Ekpeye. Meanwhile, gerontocracy has at the back of it a sense of an orderly rule by the elders. It has transcended the limits of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods, and has impacted on stewardship, land ownership and use in cultural, economic, legal and political ways. Another term for describing gerontocracy is "rule of and respect for the most elderly" and it has the "giraffe principle" of equity and justice underlying it (Ehusani 1991:91; Amadiume 1987:22; Amadi 1982:94). A fitting introduction to the anecdote below will be a thorough understanding of what gerontocracy - a rule by elders - mean in a context in which all land is seen as belonging to God, and the people as having received it from Him as a heritage. It is a heritage of stewardship which is impacted by the "giraffe principle" in both land tenure and land use practices (Amadi 1982:59).

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Simply put, it is a principle that revolves around the most elderly in traditional Nigerian ethnic communities (Sofola 1973:50). A definition of the "giraffe principle" as one in which the gerontocratic culture revolves, is to be attempted in the present section (Ehusani 1991:91). It is instructive to note that a gerontocratic culture binds various Nigerian communities together. In applying the same to Nigerian culture in general, Ehusani (1991:93) stated: "The status (of gerontocracy) is acquired progressively and not fully until old age, during the final phase of existence". Or as stated by Sofola (1973:50):

"The cardinal virtue of the typical African is a wholesome human relations among people; respect for elders; community fellow feeling, and hospitality".

Gerontocratic stewardship in Nigerian cultures

In Ogba and Ekpeye the culture of gerontocratic stewardship is a shared one with neighbouring cultures in especially among the two dominant Nigerian communities – the Igbo and Yoruba. This was alluded to in chapter two as part of African scholarly views. Ogba and Ekpeye share the gerontocratic culture with other Nigerian communities even in the Niger Delta.

An understanding of the workings of gerontocracy can give us a better appreciation of what generally has been a Nigerian perspective to stewardship, land ownership and use managed through gerontocratic structures over the generations (Jean-Marc Ela 1991:263). Although Ogba and Ekpeye are geographically situated in the Niger Delta, they have affinity with the Igbo and Yoruba as their “remote”¹ eastern and western neighbours respectively. Interestingly, through the institution of gerontocracy, various Nigerian ethnic groups - small or large, have come together to make or forge a new national identity. This identity is one in which the older members of the community or group leads. In these cultures gerontocracy is synonymous with patriarchy, but sometimes older women do exercise influence directly or indirectly. However, certain features mark out a gerontocratic culture, namely, it is patriarchal in matters of government and law-making, patrilineal in matters of inheritance and stewardship of land, as well as patrilocal in matters of marriage and domiciliation. These points need no elaboration as they are self-evident in most African cultures. Perhaps we need to mention that there is an interface between religion and gerontocracy in these cultures which has been captured in the words of John Mbiti (1996:174-180): “To the African this is a deeply religious universe, whether it is viewed in terms of time or space, and human life is a religious experience in that universe.”

The process of erosion which has set into this interface between religion and gerontocracy in Africa is evident in the writings of African scholars (Ehusani 1991:91-92)². The writing underscores the point that coming to grips with transcendental values such as respect for elders, the demonstration of care and concern for women, children and human well being in general, the practice of hospitality and above all living in communalism is becoming an issue in theological reflections in Nigeria, due to external fissiparous influences”³.

A perspective of gerontocratic values reinforces this sense of community in Nigeria albeit Africa, and can be seen in a brief recapitulation of what it means to the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria in particular. This can then be understood better when it is narrowed down in a similar discussion about Ogba and Ekpeye with a special elaboration of the already mentioned “giraffe principle”.

The Igbo

In addition to what we have learned about the Igbo in the previous chapter, Amadiume (1987:22) points out that, among the Igbo the elderly males allocate land for use at the nuclear family levels, but the actual control of the usufruct of the land economy is in the hands of the women. In other words, Igbo economy was marked by “a clear sexual division of labour and an associated gender division of crops” (Amadiume 1987:22).

¹ Ogba and Ekpeye are “remote” neighbors of the Igbo and Yoruba in the sense of geographical distance, though not in a cultural sense. There are other ethnic groups which separate Ogba and Ekpeye directly from the Igbo and Yoruba on the east and west. This includes the Ikwere and Etche / Awarra on the east and the Ijo, Edo and Etsako on the west. See A. Ahiamadu 2000 *Reading and Writing Ogba – Spelling and Survey Guide*. Port Harcourt: Outreach press, p.1-3, 19-24.

² See for instance Chinua Achebe 1994 *Things Fall Apart – the Centre Cannot Hold*. London: Heinemann, which is a classic book written from a Nigerian perspective to show how colonialism negatively impacted on African traditional values and institutions leading to social and cultural fission.

³ See G.O.Ehusani 1991 *An Afro-Christian Vision (OZOVEHE) Towards A Humanized World*, New York: Lanham, p.77-120.

In the same way, the elders among the Igbo of Nigeria for instance, are considered the stewards, custodians, if not guardians of the land. For one thing the land is a living entity created by God and capable of detecting whatever wrongs are committed on it by its inhabitants. It is also capable of yielding abundant benefits to those inhabitants who carefully observe its ethos (Onyeocha 2006:63-80). Stewardship consists in a careful observance of the mores and ethos of the land. Offences committed against nature are generally regarded as offences committed against the land, and by implication against the ancestors as well as against the elders.

Such offences infringe upon the stewardship role of the elders or gerontocrats and are tantamount to “*imeru ala*” (defiling the land). You will recall the two levels of laws governing land ownership and use among the Igbo – the visible and spiritual, with the former deriving from humans for the protection of interpersonal relationships on the one hand, and on the other preserving the humans – nature partnership (Ikengah-Metuh 1987:114). The latter of course are laws which ensure that people respond to the requirements to worship God in a spiritual line made up of the ancestors, deities, spirits and the Supreme Deity (Obi 2006:115-116). It is instructive to note that Christianity came into Igbo-land more than one century ago and undoubtedly have influenced Igbo customs and ethos, and so their resonance with Deuteronomistic ethics is not in any doubt (Nkwoka 2001:326-335).

The Yoruba

Moreover, these customs and ethos also have a horizontal resonance with customs and ethos in neighbouring African communities such as among the Yoruba in the fact that the oldest members rule. The Yoruba cosmogony is imbued with the idea of a gerontocracy which has at its centre the concept of creation that is not necessarily *ex nihilo*. In order for the earth and seas to be created, the compliance of elements such as the calabash, the ash and the chameleon to the will of the Creator was necessary. Thus, the earth and seas were formed through the intervention of these elements on the orders of the Creator who already had made the heavens for his own habitation. In Yoruba mythology there was a watery mash below, which *Olodumare* decided to turn into solid earth (Aderibigbe 1999:330), and which he bequeathed to the first gerontocrat – *Oduduwa!* Thus, the Yoruba generally tell of *Oduduwa* – the progenitor of the ethnic Yoruba - who was eventually commissioned to populate the earth and who still rules through the oldest members of the ethnic Yoruba, using *Obas*, chiefs and elders in a gerontocracy (Aderibigbe 1999:330). Therefore, land among the Yorubas is the heritage which the Deity bestowed on ancestors, the present generation, and unborn members of the family (Yakubu 1985:262). The myth that *Oduduwa* the progenitor of the Yoruba people employed the chameleon in creating the earth and humans, has left its mark upon the Yoruba who still regard the chameleon as a totemic symbol.⁴ Generally, the concept of creation *ex nihilo* is not a very well established one among the Yoruba, Igbo or Ogba for that matter outside of Judeo-Christian circles. However, the concept of a Creator and his creation is a well grounded belief among the Yoruba, Igbo, Ogba and Ekpeye.

⁴ E.B.Idowu (1996: 10-16) gives a slightly different version of the Yoruba creation mythology. See also Oduyoye, M (1998:6-8) in which *Obatala* and *Oduduwa* mated and populated the whole earth.

It has been noted that the reason behind the practice of gerontocracy in Nigerian cultures is the fact that the oldest members of the community are regarded as representatives not only of the ancestors, but also of God in the management of land and natural resources which belonged to God (Ehusani 1991:212). Such management is meant to result in the general wellbeing not only of the living and the yet to be born, but also in the honour and veneration of God through the ancestors (Ashohoto and Ngewa 2006:11).

Stewardship heritage and the “giraffe principle”

The preceding discussion of the Igbo and Yoruba practice of gerontocracy has been quite brief. Literature tells us that, in those cultures one’s status in society is determined by age as the previous chapter showed. Hence, the stewardship of land, its ownership and use is ascribed to God, to the ancestors, to the living elders and kindred, and lastly to the unborn generations. As the practice of gerontocracy is true of most Nigerian communities, it is even truer of Ogba and Ekpeye. The practice of gerontocracy is deeply rooted on a principle which I prefer to call the “giraffe principle” and which has influenced their general understanding of stewardship, land ownership and use. This is also reflected in their migratory history. Ogba and Ekpeye trace their origin to one ancestor, Akalaka, who migrated south to the Niger Delta from the famous monarchical Bini Kingdom during the 15th century (Ewoh 1952:13).

The belief and values of Ogba and Ekpeye clearly demonstrates their perception of the place occupied by humans as those living under divine precepts and postulates (Ehusani 1991:89). They believe that *Chukwuabiana* owns the land and that he also punishes those who ignore the “giraffe principle,” which is deeply embedded in their consciousness and governs their general outlook on life. We shall discuss this presently. The “giraffe principle” is at the heart of a gerontocratic culture among Ogba and Ekpeye. It is the principle around which the cosmic order revolves and it facilitates an equitable use of land, of nature and all its abundant resources (Amadiume 1987:22). In the “giraffe principle” is contained the role of human’s to use natural resources discretely and responsibly with a view to prudent management and a systematic preservation of such resources for the present and future generation. Trees, games, crops, fishery resources etc. all require a prudent and judicious use in order to avoid the disappearance of species.⁵ At the core of the “giraffe principle” is the veneration of the Deity, and an expression of gratitude for granting the land to the living, through the ancestors and for making the land a blessing and the source of survival. A general name for the Deity among Ogba and Ekpeye is *Chukwuabiana*. He lives in the world beyond the blue sky *elu-igwe nwa abiana*, and his rule reaches down to the depths “*tumiro*” of the earth. He is the one who allows humans and other creatures to use the produce from the land. As a mark of veneration, the people should not use the land in a ravaging way, but in ways in which the actual purpose of *Chukwuabiana*, the ancestors and of future generations are practically realised.

⁵ The author grew up more or less in a pristine culture in which the land and wet lands meant everything for the survival of the various communities of the Niger Delta. The Ogba and Ekpeye for instance taught their children how to cut trees selectively, how to harness diary products of wild birds judiciously, and how not to disturb the “soldier” and “tailor” ants in their ceaseless march from one end of the land to the other depending on the changing seasons. It was taboo to catch a bird in the bush where it was laying eggs or to return home with all the eggs so laid.

Therefore, the general belief is that anyone who does not harness the natural resources of the land, including its vegetation and the lower creatures that move on it in an acceptable way within the community and in line with good sense is not only undermining the stewardship role of the elders, but also frustrating the ancestors, the future generation and thereby incurring the displeasure of the Deity (Ahiamadu 2005:70-72).

There is no hindrance placed in the way of those – company or government – who come to acquire land in the area for industrial or developmental purposes because in the final analysis the people accept their role as being that of stewards of that which ultimately belongs to God. Therefore, no acquisition fees are charged beyond the customary token fees. However, Ogba and Ekpeye in the Niger Delta see the land as belonging to God, and therefore do not give away or sell land to anyone, no matter how wealthy, on a permanent basis. By the same token no individuals or groups – not even the elders or gerontocrats - have absolute right to dispose of land at will. The consent of all the units making up the kindred must be sought before land can be put to any particular use either at the individual or communal level (Amadi 1982:41). In their communities both the Ogba and Ekpeye people have retained the essential characteristics of a well-developed gerontocracy – keeping the “giraffe principle” in mind. Their common progeny in a kinship system in which stewardship, land ownership and use is by virtue of their history, primarily based on the triad principles of win-win, compensatory use, and good neighbourliness. These principles are as important to the males as to the females, to the young as to the elderly, to patriarchal as to matriarchal context. In the exercise of the “giraffe principle,” women as co-members of this gerontocratic system of rule, often plays a very significant, but unobtrusive role (Sam 1979:21). This unobtrusive role of females will be discussed in the focus group discussions which follow below.

The “giraffe principle” in proverbs and anecdote

The following proverbs and anecdotal tale describes the “giraffe principle” around which a gerontocratic culture revolves, and which helps us understand the focus group discussions and personal interviews given in the subsequent section. It also helps us to see how colonialism has impacted on the erosion of these values. This proverbs and anecdote is but a “tip of the iceberg” in the world-view of Ogba and Ekpeye, and has been taken from their oral tradition. To the best of my knowledge they have never been written and are being used in this section from oral sources encountered during our field research in Nigeria. It is important to see in this anecdote the underlying philosophical world in which people’s thinking has been shaped, especially when it comes to stewardship and use of land. Also when it comes to sharing the benefits accruing from a land given by God and which they in turn offered to multinational companies for oil exploration, hoping that the win-win principle, the principle of compensatory utilisation of land, and the principle of good neighbourliness would apply. The non-application of these principles in the stewardship of land by both the oil companies and government has created a situation of restiveness and frustration among the people, as the focus group discussions and the personal interviews would later show. Interestingly, as has been pointed out in the next section, the whole colonial enterprise facilitated the erosion of the systems of gerontocratic rule based on the “giraffe principle”.

It was replaced with the “elite rule” based on a “lion share” or “win-loose” principle. At the back of these few proverbs and anecdotes from the Ogba and Ekpeye culture can be seen an illustration of the “best practice”⁶ level in the exercise of stewardship, land ownership and use in responsible and accountable way. We now turn to the proverbs and anecdote.

Three Proverbs translated from Ogba

There are three Ogba proverbs and the third one goes with an anecdote.

First: “*Enyim kwu wa enye gbadebe ya, gbadebe hne bu ibu.*”
“The Tortoise says he who ignores it, ignores a great gift.”

Second: “*Agha ka anu Eni bu agha ka ignra bu Eni.*”
“The fight for an Elephant meat must equal the fight of an Elephant.”

Third: “*K’odi enye mirna enye Igolo ba wani ya okwu ornu.*”
“No one knows in whose farm land the giraffe will emerge.”

Comment on Proverbs translated from Ogba

The proverbs convey a single meaning which can be understood as three inter-related ideas. First, great gifts or things can only be ignored to ones detriment. Second, great purposes are usually achieved through efforts that are equally great. Third, no one knows in whose court (literally – farm land) wealth may suddenly emerge! Opportunities and gifts should never be taken lightly. Wealth could arise from or upon anyone by chance, if not by choice.

Conclusion

It can be seen that in several parts of Nigeria recognition is generally given to the institution of gerontocracy as being the pivot around which stewardship, land ownership and land use has all along been based. In consideration of the anecdotes and proverbs from Ogba it reflects an aspect that can at least fit into the philosophical category of a Nigerian perspective. Our understanding of stewardship, land ownership and use can be enhanced once the principles of equity, justice and righteousness is embedded in the quest for sustainable economic investments and social harmony in the Niger Delta, especially among the Ogba and Ekpeye. In pre-colonial times ethnic communities such as the Ogba and Ekpeye were ruled by gerontocratic structures which always observed a “giraffe principle” in order to foster a just and equitable society. Traces

of this principle still survive among various Nigerian communities, particularly among the Ogba and Ekpeye as the proverbs and anecdotes suggest. Apparently, gerontocratic structures are being eroded by several factors such as dual legal systems and land policy which tend to move stewardship, land ownership and use from the realm of the natural rights to that of civil rights. It is also being eroded at various levels of government which usurp the role of elders and community leaders on issues of land acquisition and “ownership”.

However, gerontocracy seems to be resilient still. For instance, it has been difficult to implement the government’s land decree or any such laws due to the fact that such “unilateral” laws run counter to the underlying societal substructure of a gerontocratic culture. This means that the cooperation of the most senior citizens and elders in the various communities of the Niger Delta has to be sought before certain policies could be implemented, or even introduced. This is an important indicator that traces of gerontocratic influences are still extant in Nigeria.

Be that as it may, in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times the Nigerian perspectives to stewardship, land ownership and use has primarily followed certain principles such as: Firstly, land belongs ultimately to the Deity⁷ and has been passed on to the present users through the ancestors. Secondly, the past, present and future generations collectively are stakeholders of any land tenure or use, and their interests have to be protected and even promoted wherever and whenever matters of land ownership and use are considered. Thirdly, it is the responsibility of those who own and use land to do so in a sustainable and responsible manner so that the lives and well being of inhabitants of the land for past, present and future generations are not jeopardised⁸.

A critical look at the responses of both the focus group and interview discussions show a level of uniform opinion, particularly in respect of long standing traditions of gerontocratic stewardship, land ownership and use. Moreover, the “giraffe principle” implies that stakeholders in the oil sector have to ensure that the benefits derivable from the oil resources are beneficial to the occupants of the land from which the oil has been drilled. In both focus groups and personal interviews, suggestions were made which entail a re-investment of the profits of oil in developmental agriculture and local industries. It is also stated that it makes for sustainable development, restored environmental and ecological integrity. Unfortunately, the principle of justice and equity does not usually govern the attitude and activities of business companies such as Total in spite of the fact that it is the principle governing both Ogba and Ekpeye elders’ worldview and which facilitated the lease of vast land areas to Total. In the next chapter a brief interpretive survey of Old Testament views on Genesis 1:26-28 will be given in consonance with a prevailing Nigerian perspective using a post-colonial hermeneutical approach to the

⁶ Under the cover of “best practice” Total’s development priorities have often been designed in partnership with specific government officials without necessarily being of value to those for whose benefits the CSR initiatives were ostensibly undertaken. Accountability in that case has suffered an abuse at the hands of a MNC. They do all corporate transactions within the developing world at the expense of their host communities, and even without the consent of their host governments under the cover of best CSR practice. Hence such abuses have not only been felt at the economic level, but also at the social, cultural, ecological, environmental and theological levels. For a discussion of Corporate Social Responsibility and what is considered a “best practice” level see J.G. Frynas 2005 “The false development promise of Corporate Social Responsibility: evidence from multi-national oil companies” in *International Affairs* Vol.81/3, p.581-598.

⁷ In most Niger Delta communities a multiplicity of ancestral deities exist but they all owe allegiance to one supreme God, hence monotheistic values governing land use and ownership is evident as one moves from one community to the other. See J. Hattingh 1998 “*Shell International and the Ogoni People of Nigeria: Toward a better understanding of Environmental Justice in Africa*” Paper presented at the Unit for Environmental Ethics, Department of Philosophy, University of Stellenbosch, pp. 27

⁸ A popular belief among Nigerians is reflected in the statement credited to a Yoruba chief while testifying before the West African Land Committee in the 1930s: “Land belongs to a vast family of which many are dead, a few are living and countless numbers are still unborn.” (See Yakubu 1985:6-8).

interpretation of our *pericope*. Subsequent chapters in this discussion will also be building on a Nigerian perspective which in my opinion can be integrated to the Old Testament standards to provide a theological and ethical basis for a stewardship, land ownership and land use that is responsible and accountable.

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