

A traditional waste of space and money

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Date : April 9, 2015



I think the time for traditional rulers is over, done, someone should put a fork in it.

They serve no useful purpose in any society striving to be democratic and meritocratic. Their uselessness was brought home in this (s)election season.

I tried to avoid commenting on the hoopla caused by the inflammatory rant by Rilwan Akiolu, the Oba of Lagos, because silence can really be the best answer to a fool. But his comments are an illustration of the wider issue about traditional rulers being a complete waste.

Akiolu told a gathering of people that claim they are "Eze Ndigbo" in Lagos: "On Saturday [polling day for the governorship], if anyone of you goes against Ambode, who I picked, that is your end. If it does not happen within seven days, just know that I am a kind person and it is not my father who gave birth to me.

“By the grace of God, I am the owner of Lagos for the time being. This is an undivided chair. The palace belongs to the dead and those coming in the future. On Saturday, if anyone of you, I swear in the name of God, goes against my wish that Ambode will be the next governor of Lagos State, the person is going to die inside this water [Lagos Lagoon].

“For the Igbo and others in Lagos, they should go where the Oba of Lagos heads to. When they were coming to the state, they did not come with all their houses. But now, they have properties in the state. So they must do my bidding. And that is the bidding of the ancestors of Lagos and God.

“I am not ready to beg you. Nobody knew how I picked Ambode. Jimi is my blood relation and I told him that he could never be governor in Lagos for now. The future belongs to God. I am not begging anybody, but what you people cannot do in Onitsha, Aba or anywhere you cannot do it here.”

Watch the king-sized rant here:

In an attempt at damage control after these comments were slammed by most reasonable people, the Oba's palace issued a clarification that was only marginally less dumb: “Oba Akiolu on his part acknowledged the enviable performance of Governor Fashola and his contribution to the growth of investments in Lagos. He gave the assurance that he is not disturbed or angry with South-East and South-South votes for President Jonathan as perceived by the Eze Ndigbos. The Obas thereafter called on the Igbos chiefs to show appreciation to Lagos State by supporting his candidate Mr. Ambode for continuity of excellence as they have earlier promised.”

The first thing wrong with these shenanigans is that those self-appointed “Eze Ndigbo” should have no claim to speak for anyone but themselves and their pockets. The concept of anyone claiming to be “eze” (king) of Igbo people is completely alien to most traditional Igbo communities. Most pre-colonial Igbo societies were republican and had no kings. The growth in the traditional ruler “business”, the opportunities for self-enrichment and need to feed over-bloated egos have led to this trend of chancers popping up all over the place as “Eze Ndigbo”.

So if Akiolu had his thinking cap instead of his dunce cap on, he wouldn't have been addressing these people in the first place.

Secondly, the notion of free choice in a democracy must have passed him by, possibly fed by reluctance, in the name of “culture”, to let go of a past in which the king's word was law. When thoughtlessness mixes with egomania, a refusal to modernise and a bunch of charlatans with an eye for a quick buck, you'd get a heady potion of backwardness of the type that rears its ugly head on too numerous occasions in our country.

The same Akiolu that was trying to force APC candidate Ambode down the throats of his audience reportedly supported the PDP's Goodluck Jonathan in the presidential (s)election.

The fact that Goodluck lost to the APC's Muhammadu Buhari may have something to do with Akiolu's current position.

Goodluck was rumoured to have "rained dollars" on traditional rulers in south-western Nigeria, with "senior" obas like Akiolu being bribed with up to \$1m. This didn't work as the APC won in all states in the region apart from Ekiti under governor Ayo Fayose, who had perfected the use of "stomach infrastructure" (bags of rice, etc) to get out the vote.

Goodluck spending so much money on traditional rulers and still losing demonstrates that they have outlived their usefulness and are just a waste of money.

The job of a traditional ruler in Nigeria is now nothing more than a money-spinner. In the 1990s the traditional ruler in my hometown was flogging chieftaincy titles for 25,000 naira. I wonder how much they go for now, taking account of inflation and the drop in the value of the naira. The Ooni of Ife was on the tyrant Sani Abacha's payroll. Several traditional rulers in the Niger Delta have embezzled funds from oil companies meant for "community development". The Lagos State government in 2008 reportedly spent 200m naira on cars for traditional rulers. The greedy behaviour of most traditional rulers has undermined their authority and eroded the respect their people have for them.

Some have argued that traditional leeches are custodians of our culture, but museums can do that job. Others claim that the English still have a monarchy and it brings in tourist revenue. But the French beheaded their royalty and more tourists go to France than England.

While not advocating an ISIS-style beheading of our traditional rulers, Nigeria will be a better place if we at least cut off their public funding and put it to better use, like improving our schools, hospitals and public services.