

Pre-Colonial Security System in Akungba-Akoko, South-West Nigeria

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Abstract

There is no doubt that security has always remained one of the major pillars on which the development of any human society is built. In fact, it is doubtful if any society has prospered in the absence of security. This is because it is only under a secured atmosphere that all machinery of development can perform effectively and bring about the desired goals. Even in pre-colonial Yorubaland, the people recognised the significance of security to their well-being and as such, they had in place various mechanisms aimed at the maintenance and sustenance of their security. It is on this basis that this paper identifies and examines the main features of internal security system of Akungba-Akoko prior to colonialism. It is observed and argued that a major reason why the system was effective was the fact that it was built around the existing socio-political structure of the society, which closely involved the people and made them to see themselves as major stakeholders. The study is pursued through the historical methodologies of narration and critical analysis of data, while the concept of African socialism is used as the framework for analysis. The paper, therefore, concludes that there are lessons in the pre-colonial security arrangements that the contemporary Nigerian society can lean from and which may go a long way to address some of its existing security challenges.

Keywords: Nigeria, Yorubaland, Akungba-Akoko, Security, African Socialism and Development

Introduction

The centrality of security to the progress of human society, big or small, cannot be over emphasised since it is only when human beings are secured that they are more likely to come up with great ideas and engage material resources in their disposal towards the development of their society. Even in the contemporary times, security remains one of the most important national interests of all members of committee of nations. This partly explains why these nations have continued to spend heavily on the maintenance of their security. In fact, on several occasions nations have justified their actions and inactions as security measures. For instance, the United States of America has severally justified its decision not to inform the Pakistani government before invading the latter's territory in the incident that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden 2011 as informed by its security interest.¹ Despite the fact that a UN principle says that member nations should respect the territorial jurisdiction of one another,² nations have continuously violated this principle all in the name of national or international security.

The ability to understand the significance of security to development has never been restricted to a race or an era. In other words, human beings, irrespective of their racial background and time of existence, have always understood the importance of security to their progress. Akungba-Akoko people were also conscious of the importance of security to their development and as such evolved a system aimed at ensuring and sustaining it. The Akungba are Yoruba people found presently in the Akoko South-West of Ondo State, South-western Nigeria. The community is located between Longitude 5'44' east and Latitude 7'28' north of the Equator.³ It is about an hour drive from Akure, the state capital and about five hours drive to Lagos, the 'commercial capital' of Nigeria. Akungba-Akoko is the host community to the Adekunle Ajasin University.

However, it important to clearly state that the scope of our discourse is restricted to the maintenance of internal security of the pre-colonial community. In other words, the work does not cover the personal efforts of individuals to protect their households. It also does not cover the security measures against external aggressions. In fact our findings have, shown that pre-colonial Akungba-Akoko never suffered any notable external security attacks, if there was any at all.⁴ Even in the late 19th century when many Akoko communities suffered direct attacks as a result of the prolonged inter-state wars in Yorubaland, Akungba-Akoko was never attacked directly.⁵

Data for the study were largely collected from oral sources, though not limited to them. This is due to the fact that Akungba-Akoko, like many communities in Africa did not acquire early enough the art of documentation of their history through writing. Furthermore, the pre-colonial past of Akungba-Akoko, like the whole of Akoko region, has been largely neglected by historians and other researchers. Consequently, there is paucity of literature on the history of the community. Thus, oral sources remain one of the best means to reconstruct the history of the people mainly because it was one of the most popular methods used by the people to preserve their past. This explains why the significance of oral sources to the study of Africa's past cannot be overemphasised. Jan Vasina seemed to have recognised this fact when he argued that in "those parts of the world inhabited by people without writing, oral tradition forms the main available

source for a reconstruction of the past, and even among peoples who have writing, many historical sources, including the most ancient ones, are based on oral traditions".⁶

Theoretical Framework for Analysis

The theoretical framework for analysis adopted for this work is African socialism. Several attempts have been made by scholars in the past to define African socialism. While some attempt to discuss it in view of the propagandas of African leaders in the 1960s, others tried to view it from the perspective of Marxist socialism. Consequently, these two schools of thoughts have been denied the opportunity of appropriately understanding the meaning of African socialism. It should be noted that most African countries got their independence from foreign dominations in the 1960s. Eventually, many African leaders, who wanted to win the political patronage of their people, adopted and coloured their manifestos with the slogan, 'African socialism'. Popular among these African leaders were Kwame Nkruma of Ghana, J.K. Nyerere of Tanzania, Tom Mboya of Kenya, Obafemi Awolowo of Nigeria, etc.⁷ Later events and actions of many of these leaders, however, suggested that they had little or no touch with African socialism.

Also, African socialism and Marxist socialism are two parallel lines both in meaning and features. In the first instance, Marxist socialism developed in Europe and was alien to Africa; however, African socialism developed in Africa and formed the basis for the society existence and survival, at least before the influx of Westernisation.⁸ Secondly, while Marxist socialism involves struggle among the socio-political classes of the society, African socialism is otherwise built on the co-operation of such existing socio-political classes in the society.⁹ Thus while the proletarians are viewed in Marxist socialism as the revolutionaries that will subdue the capitalists, the absence of real working class and massive inequalities in traditional African societies, also made class struggle missing in African socialism. It is this feature of collective social responsibility that significantly differentiates African socialism from Marxist socialism.

In fact, understanding African socialism substantially rests on ones understanding of the principle of collective responsibility or mutual social responsibility. According to G.C.M Mutiso and S.W. Roho for instance:

Mutual social responsibility is an extension of the African family spirit...It implies a mutual responsibility by society and its members to do their very best for each other with the full knowledge and understanding that if society prospers its members will share in the prosperity and that the society cannot prosper without the full co-operation of its members.¹⁰

It can be deduced from the foregoing that, African socialism suggests that the society is for all men and all men for the society. In other words, African socialism implies that that since it is through the society that members live and attain their different aspirations (politically, economically and socio-culturally), all members, young and old, have it as a duty to work for the progress of the society. Although there are constituted political authorities with the mandate to use all available resources at their disposal to steer the affairs of the society and ensure peace,

stability and development, however, the level of success that will be attained by these authorities is largely subjected to the amount of the support they receive from the society at large.

Subsequently in the context of African socialism, the extent to which a particular society is developed is a product of the willingness of its members to work together for the progress of such a society. Thus if the society prospers, the prosperity should be accredited to all its members, not only to its political class or elite. The underline factor here is that no society can prosper without the willingness, effort and cooperation of its members. This is why in many African traditional societies there were established socialisation structures such as the age grade system aimed at inculcating in the younger generations the societal values and acceptable behaviour. These are usually driven towards ensuring development both in the present and future.

Ultimately, members of the society see one another as related by blood, though there are many family units, and the community as a physical binding force. All the families and their members are seen as products of offspring of their ancestors. Thus, members are expected to perform their responsibilities towards the uplift of the society without being compelled to do so. They simply acknowledge and are willing to perform their duties because of the belief and conviction that whatever one does to the society is reversibly to oneself.

Security Strategy in Pre-colonial Akungba-Akoko

Pre-colonial security system of Akungba-Akoko can best be described as ‘communal strategy’ because it involved the sharing of responsibilities by the members along the socio-political structure that existed in the society. This was in line with the mutual or collective responsibilities of African socialism explained above. In the absence of state owned or sponsored security institutions such as the police or army, what evolved was a system where every member was a stakeholder in the management of the security of the land. Since it was culturally mandatory for any member of the society at any point to belong to at least a socio-political group, the responsibilities of individual member of the society were, therefore, built around such a group. It should be noted that the day-to-day administration of the community rested on these groups, most prominent being the *Alala* (the monarch), *Ijoye Adugbo* (quarter or divisional chiefs), age grades (*egbe olorijori*) and professional guilds such as the hunters (*ode*), etc. Consequently, the people were not only conscious of their security but also committed to the efforts aimed at its maintenance.

The Alale as the Chief Security Officer of the Land

At the apex of the community administration and security strategy was the *Alale*, meaning the king or owner of the land. Although theoretically, the monarch had absolute power, in the real sense, he did not enjoy any absolutism because there were a body of traditions in place meant to check his excesses. For example, his chiefs and the people could boycott his palace or disobey his orders to protest his arbitral use of power.¹¹ The *Alale*, therefore, ruled through the advice and assistance of a council known as *Igbimo Ilu* or *Ajo* (Town Council).¹² Many members of *Igbimo*

Ilu were quarter chiefs (*Olori Adugbo*), who represented the authorities of the *Alale* in their domains.¹³ As the king, he was automatically the chief security officer or the commander-in-chief and as such, the last command on security matters resided in his office. Therefore, he was responsible for the coordination of other bodies within the system and his office was the last destination of all intelligence/security reports.¹⁴ Thus, he was expected to act appropriately, depending on the nature of the reports brought to him. For instance, in cases of crimes such as murder, he would initiate all investigation machineries to uncover the crimes and bring the culprits to book. And in cases of intending crimes or security threat, he would exploit all means to avert them.¹⁵ The ability of an *Alale* to thwart a security threat before its actualisation was crucial to his popularity and reign because the public viewed and ranked his tenure as good or bad largely on the level of security and prosperity they enjoyed during his reign.¹⁶ For instance, the reign of *Alale* Ajigbale in the early 19th century has been celebrated as a good period in the history of Akungba-Akoko mainly because it was highly peaceful and prosperous compared to the tenures of his predecessors.¹⁷

Intelligent reports usually came to the palace from the quarter chiefs. Reports could also come from other relevant groups, or even an individual in the society, depending on the exigency of the matter involved.¹⁸ Even though he was the chief security officer, he knew he could not do the job alone. He strongly needed the support of his chiefs and even the community to succeed. As a tradition, the king had regular meetings with the *Ijoye Adugbo (Igbimo Ilu)* and occasionally with the other socio-political groups and the whole community (*Ajo Ilu*) on security and other matters crucial to the development of the community. These offered him the opportunity to be up-to-date on security situation in the community and also such occasions were used to discuss and strategise on the best means of ensuring the security of the community.¹⁹

Thus, it can be deduced from the foregoing that the role of the *Alale*, was more of coordination and decision-making. This can be related with the roles of a modern chief security of a country. It should, however, be noted that, the most sensitive part of any security plan is decision-making since any decision is cable of making or marring the society irrespective of the quantity and quality of the available human and material resources. The fall of Napoleon, for instance, has been traced to his ability to make bad decisions, chiefly among them being the Moscow Campaign. Having expended huge human and material resources to raise an army of 600,000 soldiers, with contingents got form across Europe, he deployed all of them to Moscow with the hope that Russia would be quickly defeated. The Russians, however, did avoid major military engagements with France as they did not desert their villages, but also destroyed their building, crops and livestock. Subsequently, in the midst of starvation and cold, the almighty French soldiers became easy prey for the Russian soldiers who had adopted the guerrilla warfare. And by the end of the Campaign, he had lost about 580,000 men and recovered from this disaster.²⁰ Thus while Napoleon's decision destroyed him, the decision of the Russian leadership, largely represented by Alexander, to avoid major confrontations with France seriously paid off.

The Security Roles of the Quarter Chiefs

The responsibilities of the *Ijoye Adugbo*, who were next to the *Alale* on the hierarchy of authority, were restricted considerably to the maintenance of internal law and order in their quarters. Akungba-Akoko in pre-colonial times had seven main quarters: Ibaka, Okusa, Ilale, Akua, Igbelu, Akunmi and Okele. While Ibaka was administered by *Olubaka*, Okusa by *Olokusa*, Ilale by *Alagure*, Akua by *Alakua*, Akunmi by *Alakunmi*, Okele by *Olori*, and Igbelu was administered by *Alakun* the most referred among the chiefs and next in authority to the *Alale*.²¹

Like the king, the chiefs also met regularly with the major stakeholders (most important being the minor chiefs, *olori ebi* (family heads), headers and youth leaders) in their domains, discussing and planning on security and other development related matters. They relied on these people in taking decisions.²² There was also a general meeting of all residents of a quarter (*Ajo Adugbo*). This came up occasionally and it was a period to deliberate on issues of concern including security.²³ Serious crimes, such as murder and so on were to be transferred to the palace of the *Alale*.²⁴ These people could be likened to the contemporary divisional or district police officer, with the power to use the resources under their control to ensure safety of life and property in the localities. Although, they enjoyed a level of autonomy, they had to report to the king virtually on all of their official actions, even those issues considered to be within the jurisdiction of their authorities²⁵. This was to ensure transparency and accountability and to avoid abuse of power by any of these quarter chiefs. By and large, the roles of these people could be summarised as coordination of efforts relating to the maintenance of law and order within their territorial jurisdictions.

The Security Roles of the Age-Grades

As a major basis for cultural socialisation and transformation, age grade system was very important to the development of Akungba-Akoko. It was under this structure that everybody was involved since one must belong to an age grade at any point in life. For the males, there existed four age grades or *egbe*: *Agbagba Ilu* (the elders) from age sixty and above; *Okunrin Ilu* (men), between ages fifty and forty; *Odo Ilu* (the youth), between ages thirty and fifteen and *Omoweere* (the boys), from fifteen downward.²⁶ The females were divided into two age grades: *Adelebo* (the married women) and *Omoedan* (the unmarried).²⁷ Age and sex were the main prerequisites for membership into any of the *egbe*. Generally, each age grade was to keep a close eye on its members and through its leadership counselled and advised them on the acceptable practices. They were also informed them about the possible punishments for different offences as a way of deterring them from committing crimes. At their regular meetings, in different quarters, they discussed several developmental issues including security related matters and brain stormed on how best to ensure the security of the community.²⁸

However, the most significant age grade within the context of this discussion was the *Odo Ilu*. One of the areas where their impact was well-felt was in the maintenance of law and order in the streets (*adugbo*) or markets (*oja*), etc.²⁹ Markets in pre-colonial Akungba involved mainly women because men were expected to be engaged in more energy-required economic activities

such as farming and hunting.³⁰ Each quarter, except Igbelu and Okele had its market; *Oja Eleyewo*, belonging to (Ibaka), *Oja Atiba* (king's market) at Ilale Quarter and *Oja Okusa*, belonging to Okusa Quarter were the most prominent.³¹ The market usually came up every five days rotationally. The *Odo Ilu* were empowered to arrest anybody or a group of person that wanted to disrupt the peace in the areas mentioned above. For example, for the sacred nature of markets, it was forbidden to fight in the market and on the streets. The *Odo* in such locations had the responsibility to end the fight, arrest offenders and hand them over to the appropriate authority for sanctions. The punishment for this form of public disturbance was usually a fine of a goat.³² Thus, the youth had no power to pass judgement on the offenders. They can best be viewed as the community police officers, though without a formal training. The *Agbagba*, therefore, performed the role of advising the youth. The implication of this is that the youth were steadily built into taking up responsibilities and leadership positions in the community.

The Security Roles Professionals Guilds

The popular economic activities of pre-colonial Akungba-Akoko people were farming, hunting and trading. There were also artistic professions such as clothe weaving, blacksmithing, etc. Though without well-organised structured, members of these professions usually formed themselves into guilds primarily for the protecting and promoting their interests. However, the guilds of hunters (*Ode*) and diviners (*Awo*) played significant security roles. Although the hunters were generally well-respected persons in the society, especially for their bravery, however, the size and type of animals one killed considerably determined one's status among other hunters. These people were headed by an *Oluode* (chief hunter).³³ For instance, if a corpse was discovered in the farm, the hunters were the preferred set of people to be sent to bring the corpse and find out if the fellow died naturally or was murdered or killed by an animal. They would discover whichever case it was by physically and sometimes spiritually examining the corpse. If the fellow was killed by an animal, the hunters would go in search of the animal and kill it to prevent further attacks. If it was a murder, the authority would have to unravel it by consulting the gods of the land through the spiritualists.³⁴ In another instance, if strangers were spotted at strategic places and considered to constitute security threats to the community, the king would call on the hunters to go in search of the strangers. If arrested, they would be interrogated and necessary actions would be taken, depending on the outcome of the interrogations.³⁵ Furthermore, if a person was missing, it was the hunters that would go into the bush and other relevant places to search for such a person. And in cases of riots, it was the hunters that were expected to quell it, make arrest and handover the arrested persons to the appropriate authorities.³⁶ Also, the hunters lacked the power to pass judgement on any arrested offender, such a person must be brought before the appropriate authorities for trial and sanctions if found guilty. The hunters also served as police the markets and other important public places. Their duties also involved the maintenance of peace and order at important communal festivals, such as *odun eku* (masquerade festivals). Another very important role of the hunters was night patrol. When a suspect is arrested during a night patrol he or she would immediately be handed over to superior authorities for interrogation and further actions.³⁷

Another significant professional guild was that of the *Awo*. These were secret societies with strong spiritual powers and influence. There were different types of secret societies, the *Ogboni*, however seemed to be the most popular and influential. Security wise, they were, perhaps, most relevant in the area of crime investigation. Thus, when reports were made to the appropriate authorities and suspects were identified, investigations were expected to be launched. It was the duty of the *Awo* to use their spiritual powers to uncover all the miseries surrounding the matters being investigated.³⁸ They employed different methods such as making the accused person to swear to an oath or placing curses (*epe*) on the culprits. Although, the efficacy of these spiritual exercises cannot be scientifically proved, it was widely believed that if the accused person was guilty, terrible happenings such as death, curable or incurable diseases, depending on the nature of the crime committed and the deity consulted, would befall him/her.³⁹ It is said that the effect of curses could be generational, which means that even the unborn members of the culprits' families could possibly be afflicted. Similarly, the gods of the land, most import among them being *Oroke*, could be invoked to help unravel a crime. All that was needed was a ritual (*oro*). It is said that *Oroke* and other gods were incorrupt and so, their judgements were never doubted by the people.⁴⁰ Thus, the knowledge that one could hardly commit a crime without being caught reasonably reduced the rate at which crimes were committed. This is not to claim that pre-colonial Akungba-Akoko was crime free, but the efficacy of the system of investigation, hseriously discouraged criminal activities. Of course, no human society is crime free, but effective system of crime detection and judgement delivery will help reduce crime rate in any society.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted a discourse of the pre-colonial ways of maintaining community security in Akungba-Akoko. It is observed that the absence of specially trained institutions saddled with the responsibilities of security management made communal participation the most convenient approach to ensuring peace and securing life and property. As such, duties associated with crime detection, prevention and control were distributed among the socio-political classes in the society. Consequently, what evolved was a situation where there was a strong involvement of the people in the security business of the community. While one recognises the fact that is not realistic in the contemporary society for all the citizens to be employed as security agents, building of public trust in the nation's security system and agencies will go a long in assisting to reduce crime rate and ensure public safety. Events all over the world have demonstrated that no crime has occurred without at least a member of the society having useful information about it or the culprit(s) before, during or after the crime. However, such individuals can only be comfortable enough to divulge their information to the appropriate authorities if only they trust such authorities would protect their lives and make good use of the information. No matter how attractive the prize promised people with leading information on any crime, they may not willingly give information if they do not believe in the abilities of the authorities to make good use of such information and ultimately protect their lives, their families and properties.

Endnotes

¹ Hannah Strange. 'US Raid that Killed bin Laden was an Act of War', says Pakistani Report'. 2013> www.telegraph.co.uk> accessed 19 February, 2015; Abbottabad Commission Report, May 2011.

² Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice.

³ Ehinmowo, A. A. and Eludoyin, O. M. (2010), 'The University as a Nucleus for Growth Pole: Example from Akungba-Akoko, southwest, Nigeria', *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*: 2 (7), p. 150.

⁴ Rufus.A.E Orisha (1961), *Itan Isedale ti Akungba-Akoko: Akun Ma Wo No-Ere Ro: Apa Kini*, Lagos: Eniyemo Publishers, p. 15.

⁵ Rufus.A.E Orisha. *Itan Isedale ti Akungba-Akoko*:...p. 4.

⁶ Jan Vansina (1965), *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, Translated by H.M. Wright London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 1.

⁷ Thompson, A. (2000), *An Introduction to African Politics*. London: Rutledge, pp. 38-39.

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¹¹ Olamitoke A, aged 50, interviewed at her residence at Akunmi Quarter, Akungba-Akoko on November 21, 2014.

¹² National Archives Ibadan (NAI), CSO 26/2: 'J.H Beeley's Intelligence Report on Akoko'.

¹³ Sulaimon S., aged 60+, interviewed at his residence at Igbelu Quarter, Akungba-Akoko on February 23, 2013.

¹⁴ Abodunde M., aged 66, interviewed at No. 34, Okedogbon Street, Owo, February 26, 2013.

¹⁵ Asefon A., aged 60+, interviewed at his residence at Ibaka Quarter, Akungba-Akoko on January 05, 2010.

¹⁶ Asefon A., ...

¹⁷ Rufus.A.E Orisha. *Itan Isedale ti Akungba-Akoko*:...

¹⁸ Saliu A., aged 60, interviewed at his residence at Okele Quarter, Akungba-Akoko on November 20, 2014.

¹⁹ Iwasokun N., aged 60+, interviewed at his residence at Ibaka Quarter, Akungba-Akoko on April 20, 2005.

²⁰ Norman Davids (1997), *Europe: A History*, London: Pimlico, pp. 742-747; Herbert L. Peacock (1977), *A History of Modern Europe*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, pp. 70-71; H.A.L Fisher (1961) *A History of Europe*, London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, pp. 861-866.

²¹ Olotu W., aged 63+, interviewed at No. 80, Ibaka Quarter, Akungba-Akoko on March 11, 2014.

²² National Archives Ibadan (NAI), CSO 26/2...

²³ Famoye C., aged 65, interviewed at Plot 52, Gimbia Street, Area 11, Abuja on July 16, 2014.

²⁴ Muniru A., aged 45, interviewed at his residence at Ilale Quarters, Akungba-Akoko on September 23, 2013.

²⁵ Asefon A., ...

²⁶ Olotu W., ...

²⁷ Ologunowa L, aged 69, interviewed at her residence at Akunmi Quarter, Akungba-Akoko, September 22, 2013; Famoye R., aged 58, interviewed at No 80, Ibaka Quarter, Akungba-Akoko on January 02, 2015.

²⁸ Asefon A., ...

²⁹ Famoye C., ...

³⁰ Orungbemija I., aged 70+, interviewed at his residence at OkusaAkure, Akungba-Akoko on December 26, 2012.

³¹ Adepoju K., aged 63, interviewed at his residence at Ilale Quarter, Akungba-Akoko, September 26, December 2013.

³² Ojo O., aged 71, interviewed at No. 20, Okorun Street, Ikare-Akoko, on July 10, 2014.

³³ Agbi O., 70+, interviewed at his residence at Ibaka Quarter, Akungba-Akoko on January 11, 2010.

³⁴ Orunkoyi O., 57, interviewed at No. 20, Okorun Street, Ikare-Akoko, on July 10, 2014.

³⁵ National Archives Ibadan (NAI), CSO 26/2...

³⁶ Adelegan A., interviewed at his residence at Ibere, Akungba-Akoko, 13 February 2014.

³⁷ Adedokun B., interviewed at No 15, palace road, Oke Oka-Akoko, February 16, 2014.

³⁸ Ojo O., ...

³⁹ Origbemisuyi A., interviewed at Olori-Awo Origbemusi Compound at Ibaka Quarter, Akungba-Akoko, April 22, 2012.

⁴⁰ Origbemisuyi A., ...

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