

The Relevance of Traditional Belief System among the Fakkawa of Zuru Emirate

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Abstract

Fakai kingdom is located in the western part of Zuru Emirate in Nigeria. The peoples of the kingdom though historically varied, are collectively referred to as Fakkawa and their language as Fakkanci. Before the 19th century, the predominant religion in the area of Fakai Kingdom was traditional in which people believed in what is called Magiro. This system of belief was said to have developed from the recognition and reverence given to the spirit of the ancestors. This explains the reason why Magiro is also addressed as Baba (Father). Although the adherents of Magiro belief do not invite people of other tribes to it, the belief was said to have spread to other areas because of peoples' migration and intergroup relations. This paper, therefore, examines the influence of traditional belief on the social, economic and political aspects of the society of Fakai kingdom. It was found that the Magiro doctrine was not merely a belief system as some individuals come to believe, rather, it is also a political institution established for the maintenance of law and order in society. The belief also influenced the social and economic undertakings of its adherents.

Keywords: Traditional belief, Magiro, Fakkawa.

Introduction

The earliest centre of *Magiro* rites was said to be in Kwatarkoshi (now in Zamfara State), from where it spread to other parts of Hausaland and then to communities of the middle Niger Region.¹ This view however was contested as the belief was much more entrenched among the communities of the middle Niger such as the Dakarkari, Kambari, Achipawa, Gwari and Kamuku, among others found in the vicinity of the River *ka* and valley of the rivers; Niger and Benue.² In fact, in these areas, belief in *Magiro* was more entrenched in their social, economic and political environment. Moreover, these communities perceived that religion was hereditary and therefore *Magiro* doctrine was distinctively handed down to them from their ancestors. Consequently, to the followers of *Magiro* doctrine, religion is peculiar and therefore each society should strictly adhere to what their ancestors handed down to them. The *Magiro* belief system was therefore not a universal religion and this explains the reason why its adherents do not invite people different from their tribesmen to participate in its convention.

Before the end of the 19th century, in Fakai Kingdom, each settlement had its shrine where *Magiro* rites were observed. In the hilltop settlements where the communities lived based on kinship, each clan maintained its shrine. In this case, it could be said that the belief facilitated the bond of kinship among people who claim to have the same ancestor while alienating the progeny of another ancestor. *Magiro* shrine served as an important centre for people's gathering, receiving of counseling and adjudication of disputes. Therefore, the *Magiro* doctrine had an impact on communal relations, played judicial roles and also influenced the economic activities of its adherents. The focus of this paper is to explain the influence of *Magiro* traditional belief on the social, economic and political undertakings of its adherents in Fakai Kingdom.

The Belief and Political Functions

In most African societies, traditional beliefs played a political role as well. This was so because of the need for not only reverence to the mode of the belief but also to obtain peoples' loyalty to the throne.³ This relationship between belief and royal authority could be seen in the history of some empires in which some rulers brazenly claimed divinity so as to legitimize their authority. Traditional belief systems were consequently organized in such a way that rulers and cult leaders enjoyed some special privileges. This indicates the existence of a relation between traditional belief and political authority. Therefore, in the *Magiro* belief, hierarchy existed among his followers. *Magiro* was assumed to be supernatural.⁴ The *Gumburkobo*, also known as *Sarkin Zaure* serves as an intermediary between *Magiro* and his followers. He was selected by council of elders who serve next to *Magiro* in the hierarchy. The *Gumburkobo* was thus held in high esteem for his role as the custodian of the shrine. The rites he fulfills before his selection also contribute to making him venerable; he had to be an elderly man, be able to confide secrets and should be free from immoral acts such as theft and adultery.⁵ The council, which was responsible for the appointment of *Gumburkobo*, comprises elders of high repute in the community. They highly confide the secrets of the reality of the belief among

themselves. Beside the role of selecting the *Gumburkobo*, the council of elders also serves as a consultative body to *Gumburkobo*. They, therefore, constitute the major decision-making body. Youth, in their dual roles, occupied a central position in the sustenance of the belief. Some among the youth serve as spies within the community who confide the people's daily affairs to *Gumburkobo*. It is through the activities of this group that *Magiro* would claim to have foreseen the people's affairs at their usual gathering which contributes to making him mythical. The other section consisted of strong and energetic youth who ensure compliance with religious credence and maintenance of law and order. They, therefore, formed an executive arm of the rite. Age grade was an important determinant of relations among such communal societies. This really represents a hierarchical order that facilitates the accomplishment of some of the tenets of the belief.

At the arrival of *Magiro* at his shrine, a particular sound is usually heard, an indication of his presence. As a mark of reverence, people would be seen coming to the shrine, chanting and praising *Magiro*. *Magiro* would not appear as his adherents of the belief would be allowed to approach the entrance of the shrine. Also, he would not raise his voice to the public. Thereafter, through an interpreter who usually stood at the entrance, *Magiro* provides advice of various sorts to his audience.⁶ With the influence of spies who reported to him what happened within the community, *Magiro* would claim to know what happened in his absence, which influenced people to assume that he was supernatural. Through an interpreter, cases were also adjudicated by him such as theft, murder, adultery and debts.

Magiro also served as a medium for the settling of marital conflicts and quarrels such as inter-communal arguments, land disputes and witchcraft among others. Those convicted were usually fined in various items particularly chicken, dogs, and kolanuts. With the power to adjudicate the dispute and impose fine on convicts, *Magiro* is not merely a mode of belief but also a political institution. The institution was highly confidential to women and this gives an explanation that it was in order to keep women subservient to their husbands, and children to be obedient to their parents. The fact that *Magiro* was influential could be appreciated during the colonial period in which people resented the exploitative colonial policies. The people of Birnin Tudu, a village in Fakai Kingdom, protested against the payment of colonial taxes which they found highly exploitative. The colonialists were unable to contain the protest unless they returned to *Gumburkobo* where they implored him to declare that such taxation was with the approval of the shrine.⁷ Only through a such intervention that people subscribed to colonial taxation. This indicates that colonial officials also realized the importance attached by adherents of *Magiro* to such a belief system. This belief, as we are going to see below, also influenced other societal traditions such as the economy, burials, and festivals.

The Belief, the Economy and some forms of Social Values

Agriculture was of high importance in Fakai kingdom. In fact, it was the predominant occupation of the people of the area even in the period when most of the settlements were established on the hilltops. Consequently, among the festivities in the area, the most important-Uhola- is associated with agriculture. This is not surprising since agriculture has been the most important source of livelihood and significantly influenced migration, demographic changes and distribution of settlements in the region.

The essential purpose of *Uhola* was to show appreciation for the successful agricultural season. Festivities then took place during the harvest period as it marks that people would relax to enjoy the fruit of their labour. The *Uhola* festival was normally organised by *Gumbukobo* in which he took the proposal to the Chief. The date is announced when the consensus is reached. Then people would start to prepare such as the purchase of new clothes and goats to be slaughtered. *Uhola* was highly performed among the Dakarkari and it persists to the present time, but among the Fakkkawa, it also marks an important event for celebration, though it is waning. The *Uhola* festival facilitates intergroup relations as people from various villages come together to witness the singing, dancing and wrestling competition. It was thus a period of delight and friendship.

Wrestling contest is a means of fascination and pride. Winners were awarded *gotha*, a Y shaped piece of wood that a winner keeps at home and a bell which should be held wherever he goes in order to testify to the people about his status. People regarded a champion wrestler as great man. Therefore, besides *gotha* and bell, a famous wrestler could obtain any valuable item as gift for his bravery. This explains the reason why Mkak Fark, who ruled a chieftaincy of Birnin tudu in the early twentieth century, was given a wife at Rikoto, a village to the north of Zuru town. This was because, during his youthful age, Mkak went to Rikoto and won a wrestling contest. The importance attached to wrestling endeared peoples of various backgrounds to its performance, irrespective of differences in occupation, wealth or traditional titles. Something impressive is that the wrestling was usually organised as inter-village contests. This without doubt facilitated intergroup relations and also contributed to the integration of early Hausa migrants who also participated in the contest. On the death of a champion wrestler, his grave is decorated with the *gotha* he won in the contest. Similarly, the burials of adherents of traditional belief were also attached to the traditional mode of belief and this also depends on the one's pursuit of livelihood during his lifetime.

The Festivals and Funerals

The funerals of followers of traditional belief are conducted with the performance of several rites such as festivals, mainly *Bikin Mutuwa* and *Makoki*.⁸ But even among the followers, some are astonished and found it somehow mythical as to why a funeral which is a cause of sorrow would also involve festivities; dancing and singing. Various drums were used in festivals but the most widely used is what is called *kimba*.

Funerals are of importance to the community of the kingdom. In fact, some people tend to do certain things in life simply because they wanted to have a glorified funeral- such as to be a great wrestler, a brave hunter, or a prosperous farmer. Therefore, courage and economic accomplishments are relevant not only during a person's lifetime but also after it. The festival at death surpassed that of birth. It was thus not surprising to see how the people of the area generally were accustomed to agriculture. They were also hard-working which was attested by migrants in the pre-colonial period and by colonialists during the colonial periods. Their fondness for hard work and courage undoubtedly influenced their ability to challenge colonial incursion and their participation in the World Wars and subsequent military engagement in post-independent Nigeria.

As indicated above, the funerals involved festivals in which the predominant drum used was kimba. However, *ganga* could be used but for the wealthy individual who was able to conduct *nomtusryab* when he was alive. In *nomtusryab*, a wealthy individual organised a feast, to which people, from various places, would be invited. But cow had to be slaughtered in which dried beef would be shared among the community before and during the festival. Drummers would come and the celebrant would have his special singing. Upon his death, therefore, *ganga* could be used to celebrate his funeral.

Besides the use of *ganga*, a wealthy individual could also have *kalangu* at his funeral. The wealthy individual here refers to a person who could be able to engage in either trade or farming or a person who possessed a flock of animals. Then as a proposal for *kalangu*, a person had to organize a feast during his lifetime in which *kalangu* could be used at the feast. But permission for it had to be obtained from a ruler and a certain amount of money had to be presented, as custom demands. People would then be invited when permission was granted. The goat would be slaughtered and distributed, while drumming and singing. The celebrant, in his new attire, danced together with his friends. His relatives and other friends would then distribute money in the field.

Therefore, an individual's occupation which is an important factor for a person's survival and to some extent, his identity, is relevant in funerals. This explains why a farmer had his drumming which is different from that of a hunter. But a farmer had to organize *etkanga* for such privilege. In *etkanga*, a farmer had to cultivate much Guinea corn, enough for him to feed his family and then would supply some portion to the king. Meanwhile, a farmer had to notify the king of his mission, so that a granary would be prepared in the king's house. The king normally granted permission for *etkanga* after the winnowed grain was taken to his granary. On the day of the festival, food would be prepared and then shared among friends and relatives, while dancing and singing continued from morning till night. Among the hunters too, there were differences in drumming, depending on the type of animals one hunted during his lifetime, as there was celebration in successful hunting expeditions whereby drums were also used. But the drumbeat for success in the hunting of, for instance, antelope was different from that of say, a buffalo.

The Decline of Magiro Doctrine

The traditional belief, though, contains certain rites that bind its adherents together, could not vigorously face the challenges of the late twentieth century. One of the internal problems faced by such institutions was that youth became inquisitive about why the elders seriously confide the secret of the institutions to themselves. Who was this *Magiro* and from where he came? The youth also resented the pattern of a verdict that was usually done in public which involved castigation, torture and sometimes, condemnation. The system was therefore perceived as autocratic and the elders as cultists. The fallacy of the belief became apparent when it was discovered that *Magiro* was not in any way a supernatural, a rationale behind the clandestine state of the system. Moreover, the institution, as it did not have established types of machinery for teaching and preaching, could thus not have a sound base for survival especially as adherents of such belief do not invite other communities.

Migrations, particularly of the Hausa community into our area of study and region of the middle Niger was the most important factor in the decline of traditions among the community of Fakai Kingdom.⁹ The arrival of Hausa migrants after the jihad was an important landmark in the decline of traditions. A number of them were Muslim traders and scholars who came with the mission of, not only trading but also preaching the Islamic religion. Many traditionalists thus accepted Islam. As Islam always goes with education, Islamic schools became abound in most of the villages where traditional belief was previously observed.

Colonialism also contributed to the decline of traditional beliefs. The colonial policies of encouraging resettlement of people from hilltops to plain settlements, where cash crops could be cultivated, facilitated interaction between adherents of traditional belief and other communities that include Muslims and Christians. Through interaction, most of the traditionalists accepted Islam. Also, it was among the traditionalists that the United Missionary Society and Roman Catholic Mission obtained some converts who came to the area in the 1930s and 1940s respectively.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can understand that the traditional mode of belief in Fakai Kingdom was organised in such a way that it guides other forms of societal traditions and values. The institution of *Magiro* serves as an avenue for the settlement of disputes, maintenance of law and order and as a forum for discussion on matters of common interest. However, the traditional belief has been waning nowadays since most of its fallacies are becoming apparent that *Magiro* was not in any way supernatural. Also, the traditionalists do not invite others to their religion and as such could not obtain converts. The coming of Islam and the spread of Islamic education serve as important developments in which people become much more aware of what religion entails. Therefore, because of the influences of Islam, Christianity, urbanization, the influx of migrant communities and intermarriages with its consequences of assimilation and integration, the traditional belief which emphasize ethnic affiliation,

reverence to ancestors and docility to traditions, could no longer be sustainable. This, therefore, was responsible for the fact that only very few shrines exist in a few villages of Fakai Kingdom which are also patronized only by very few individuals of the aged category, whereas most of the shrines have now turned into relics, useful in historical reconstructions.

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Endnotes

- ¹. Y.B. Usman, *The Transformation of Katsina 1440-1883*, Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1981, pp. 83-84
- ² See S.P. Umaru, “Incorporation and Resistance: A Study of Relation between *Alela* and Sokoto Caliphate to the British Occupation c. 1804-1990”, *M.A. Dissertation*, Department of History, Ahmadu University, Zaria, 1992, p. 56
- ³See F. Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, London, Profile Books, 2011, p. 315
- ⁴ Magiro was discovered to be a human being, not a supernatural. He was selected by the council of elders who confide the secret of the institution among themselves. See A. Bako, “Transition and Changes in Religions and Belief Systems in Zuru Emirate” in A.R Augie and S.U Lawal, (eds), *Studies in the History of the People of Zuru Emirate*, Enugu, Fourth Dimension, 1990, pp. 111-130
- ⁵See Y. A. Abdullahi, “A History of *Kasar Fakai* from the 1850s t-1996”, *M.A Dissertation*, Department of History, Usmanu Dan Fodio University, Sokoto, 2014, p. 62
- ⁶H.D Gunn and F.P Connant, *Peoples of the Middle Niger Region*, London, International African Institute, 1960, p. 47
- ⁷ See S. P. Umaru, “Incorporation and Resistance...”
- ⁸*Bikin Mutuwa* is a festivity conducted as part of funerals. It usually takes place on the night of a person’s death. *Makoki* is also a funeral festivity. It is conducted usually a year after a person’s death. It is done particularly for old people. There is more dancing and singing during *Makoki* than at *Bikin Mutuwa*, and more festivity upon the death of the aged than that of youth. Usually, for young, only *Bikin Mutuwa* takes place.
- ⁹. However, the pre-19th century migration of the Hausa community into *Fakai Kingdom* and *Zuru* area generally did not significantly affect the *Magiro* traditions. This was because, most of the pre-jihad migrants were assimilated into the community they found in the area, owing predominantly, to intermarriages. It was also because, before the Jihad of 1804, some Hausa people also engage in syncretism. Consequently, they could easily be assimilated into the non-Hausa community.

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