

*The Biblical Correlation of Yoruba Sacred Kingship and
the Attainment of Development*

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Introduction

The traditional African community, before the advent of colonisation, was characterised with institutions that were favourable for development. One of such institutions is its political institution. Thinkers such as Ayittey and Njoh are right in their claim that the distortion of the African political system by the nation-state politics, borne out of modernisation, is the reason why African socio-political institutions no longer favour development (Ayittey, 2006; Njoh, 2006).

This article is a study of Yoruba people of (south-western) Nigeria. It examines their traditional political institution for what it offers in terms of development. Since this study is from a Christian theological perspective, we have used the Scripture to measure the strength of the Yoruba political institution. Although, Yoruba political practices has many elements embedded in it such as judiciary, military and so forth, we have narrowed down our discussion in this study to kingship sacredness. The questions that we seek to answer are:

1. What does sacred kingship in Yorubaland entail?
2. In light of the Scripture, what are the implications of Yoruba sacred kingship for development?

At the end of the discussion, we will have painted a picture of how Yoruba sacred kingship correlates with biblical sacred kingship.

Yoruba Definition and Perspective of Development

While the modern-day development practitioners measure development in terms of material resources and social amenities that are available in a society, Yoruba traditional understanding of development is rooted in a proverb that says, *àlàáfíà l'ójù* (peace is supreme). The peace desired by the Yoruba is depicted in their daily prayer, *Kí eku máa ké bíi eku, kí eyẹ máa ké bíi eyẹ*” (That the rat squeaks like a rat, and that the bird chirps like a bird).

Peace in Yorubaland implies cosmic order, and it is fundamental to any other thing desired by humans. It is their ultimate prayer. It is all they desire to see in the community, since all other human needs and aspirations are rooted in it – financial prosperity, long life, physical health communal and individual safety and so forth. Peace is supreme. And this is what development means among the Yoruba people. Development is peace. As such, the terms “peace” and “development” are used interchangeably in this discussion.

The Sacredness of Yoruba Kingship

In the Yoruba community, the success of a king is measured by amount of *àlàáfíà* (peace) that is experienced in the society during his reign. This is the relationship between politics and development among the people. Meanwhile, one thing that stands out in Yoruba politics is the concept of sacred kingship. The sacredness of Yoruba kingship is evident in the saying: “*Kábíyèsí, aláṣẹ èkejì òriṣà*”, which can loosely be translated as “King, the one whose authority is next to that of the gods” or “The power of *Oba* is like that of the gods” (Pemberton III & Afolayan, 1996, p, 1). This saying, by its literary nature, puts a king in a close relationship and proximity with divinity. This implies that sacred status is accorded to him. But foundationally, why is the Yoruba king sacred?

The king is sacred because he is God’s vice-regent, by virtue of his relationship with *Odùduwà*, who is traditionally considered the founder of the Yoruba race and a descendant of *Olódùmarè* (the Supreme Being) (P. C. Lloyd, 1960; Parrinder, 1956, p.115). The sacredness of a king is also borne out of the fact that his choice must be solely by divine guidance; otherwise, his tenure would be marked by the anger of the gods (Pemberton III & Afolayan, 1996, p, 1). The nature of rituals (Apter, 1992, pp. 97 – 116) and spiritual requirements that surround his installation and daily life also makes a Yoruba king a sacred figure.

Biblical Correlation of Yoruba Sacred Kingship and attainment of Development

Drawing the line of correlation between Yoruba and biblical perspectives of development, Yoruba concept of development as peace is found to be scripturally based. God's ultimate intention for his people is *shalom* (peace), (Num. 6: 24 – 26; Jer. 29:11). And it is also a requirement that the Israelite king must ensure *shalom* during his reign, this is why the term “shepherd” is used as one of the important metaphors of Israelite kingship (Eze. 34).

Among the Israelites, like the Yoruba, for a king's reign to enjoy *shalom*, his origin and choice is traced to God, and is adequately prepared for leadership. David and Solomon are the kinds of leaders who led the nation of Israel into desired prosperity. The origin of their kingship is from God. They were chosen according to divine instruction, without any human manipulation, and sacredly prepared for the office (1 Sam 16: 1 – 13; 1 Chro. 22:6 – 19). The reign of a political leader, like Athalia (2 King 11; 2 Chro. 22:10 – 23:21), who manipulated herself into the office was known for chaos. The ill-prepared leader, like Manasseh (2 Kings 21:1 – 18; 2 Chro. 33:1 – 20), led the nation into a ruin, rather than *shalom*.

From the biblical point of view, God intends that kingship be sacred. He wants the origin and selection of the king to be from him. This is when the nation experiences *shalom*. Yoruba's relationship between politics and development is therefore biblically correlated in this regard. God chooses the right king for the society when they leave the choice for him, a king who leads the society into *shalom/alaaafia* – the true meaning of development.

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