

# **The Changing Conception of Elderhood in Ibadan, 1830 – 2000<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the changes in the local conception of elderhood and the deployment of the idiom of age in Ibadan. It identifies the factors responsible for the changes: namely, militarism and patronage (in the nineteenth century), Western education, individual affluence, colonial and post-colonial state power (in the twentieth century). It argues that not only did these factors circumscribe ‘elderly authority’ and status, they also served as metaphors of seniority, which enabled individuals and groups utilising them to appropriate for themselves some degree of respect hitherto considered the prerogative of ‘elders’. The idiom of age thus became a mechanism for naturalizing power. The paper concludes that despite several modifications and challenges, this idiom has remained relevant not only in interpreting and structuring power relationships, but also as a weapon, which is often used negatively in political contests in contemporary Yoruba, and by extension, Nigerian politics.

*Keywords:* Age, generation, elderhood, Ibadan, status.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ibadan is the second largest city in Nigeria and the most populous indigenous city in West Africa. A product of the nineteenth century, Ibadan was not a typical ‘traditional’ Yoruba community. This was on account of its relatively young age vis-à-vis older Yoruba communities and the fact that some of what was considered normative in other Yoruba towns were defiantly set aside in Ibadan, which evolved as a military state in the nineteenth century. In developing its own ‘culture’, Ibadan selected what suited it from the general Yoruba repertoire and added other elements that were peculiar to it in the nineteenth century. The result of this was a socio-political crossbreeding of ideas and institutions in Ibadan. This, perhaps, is best illustrated by the literal and idiomatic deployment of the Yoruba conception of elderhood in Ibadan.

This paper argues that age was used in Ibadan as an idiom to naturalize power, which was presented as the prerogative of ‘elders’, however they were defined. Meanwhile, the social and material bases of that power kept shifting

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with time. These shifts were largely determined by a myriad of factors such as: militarism and patronage in the nineteenth century; western education and commercial wealth in the twentieth century; and also by colonial and post-colonial state structures. Again, the various understandings of 'elderhood' generated during the period of study did not necessarily succeed one another, but sometimes existed simultaneously, in potential tension that was often actualized in contests over authority. Thus, it is not absolute age that is analyzed here, but the ability to influence and control others from a position of superior status while using the idiom of age to maximum effect.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first presents a general cultural background of the idea of elderhood as old age, its major attributes and relationship vis-à-vis other social juniors. The second part, which is the nucleus of the paper, examines how seniority /age functioned as a paradigm in intra-communal power relations in Ibadan, highlighting the interface between it and military might, Western education and wealth. A remarkable effect of this idiomatic deployment of age is the way it 'neutralizes' the historical basis of politics. This has made it amenable to the designs of modern, Yoruba politicians, who are eager for power but lack (or perhaps possess tenuous) historical claims to it. The credentials of such "new men" are thus recast in the metaphor of 'elderhood'.

## 1. GENERAL CULTURAL BACKGROUND

In nineteenth-century Ibadan, elders were locally referred to as *agba*, but the term also had another connotation. It referred to an assemblage of ancestral forces, witches and wizards, and other spiritual agents that ruled the Yoruba universe, and whose powers far exceeded those of ordinary mortals. Such spiritual powers were collectively acknowledged in traditional Yoruba discourses as '*awon agba*' (the elders- plural form). This paper is however concerned with the general usage of '*agba*' as elders although there was also a sense in which the two interpretations intersected; older people were closest to the ancestral world, and during periods of tension within the community, they were more likely to be accused of witchcraft and sorcery than younger folks, especially where they had outlived their contemporaries (Peel, 2002: 151; cf. Van der Geest, 2002: 437–463). Elderhood is translated here as '*ipo agba*'. It is presented in this paper, primarily as a state of being rather than as a formal position, although as we shall later see, elderhood was sometimes coterminous with formal positions in the history of Ibadan. The image of the elder fostered in local discourses is that of the 'father' or 'mother', and this is largely responsible for the patronising attitude they exhibited towards the youth and other 'juniors'.

Ibadan society, like other Yoruba societies, was ordered, to a large extent, by seniority at the lineage level. This did not only depend on chronological age, but also on individual positioning within the kinship structure. According to this

kinship arrangement, males and females born within a particular lineage occupied a senior and more privileged position as *omo ile* than women who married into the lineage as *iyawo ile*.<sup>2</sup> This positioning had nothing to do with chronological age. A wife thus had to show respect not only to older members of her husband's family, but also to those younger than herself. She was not to address them by their names, but find pet names for them. This was gradually modified in the twentieth century due to the influence of western education especially as it was discovered that such an arrangement allowed for a lot of abuse against the person of the wife from her 'junior' in-laws. Again, the increasing popularity of the nuclear family in modern times has made such arrangements superfluous. Nevertheless, the extended family remains as the institution that legitimised the claim to authority, not only of older people, but also of lineage juniors who emphasised their position as *omo ile*.

Older people were expected to possess wisdom, tact and maturity accumulated through experience over the years. These were collectively called *ogbon agba* (elderly wisdom). Records of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in nineteenth-century Ibadan show that elderly converts enjoyed relative prestige within its small Christian community. On numerous occasions, together with the native pastors, they acted as spokespersons for the group before the political authorities of the town.<sup>3</sup> One remarkable thing about how the Ibadan, and indeed the Yoruba conceive of elderhood – *ipo agba* – is that it was also regarded as *oke agba* (the summit of elderhood). This idea of elderhood as a summit, with younger people at the base implied an age hierarchy and unequal access to valued social roles and social rewards (Foner, 1984, xiii). It also presupposed the prospect of mobility: young people, with some effort beyond age could therefore anticipate their own 'ascent' to *oke agba*. Thus, *oke agba* was not only applied to old age, but also to other forms of seniority such as formal positions of authority within or outside the lineage.

Old age was also metaphorically represented as the twilight (*ojo ale*) of a person's life. In contrast, *owuro* (morning) is regarded as the time of youth. Several Yoruba sayings therefore admonished the youth not to waste their *owuro* through idleness but work hard so they could relax and reap the fruits of their labour later in their *ojo ale*. Societal expectations from elders might be briefly summarised as follows. Elders were to ensure that the social equilibrium was not disturbed both at the lineage and communal levels. They were also to mediate between the past and present as a way of keeping the society wholesome. These expectations were expressed in the following proverbs:

*Agba ki i wa l'oja, ki ori omo tuntun wo*

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<sup>2</sup> This issue of Yoruba kinship positioning is one of the themes explored in Oyewunmi (1997).

<sup>3</sup> CMS Archives, University of Birmingham, CA2/075/26, Rev Daniel Olubi's Journals, entry for November 11, 1870. The distribution of political power in nineteenth-century Ibadan was, however, not based on age, but on military might.

(An elder cannot be present in the market while the head of an infant [on the mother's back] hangs in the wrong way).

*Agba ko si ni ilu, ilu baje,*

*Baale ile ku, ile di ahoro.* (Ellis, 1894)

(Absence of elders in a town creates crisis,

Without a functional head, a lineage becomes desolate).

The respect enjoyed by elders and the social recognition they had did not imply that the youth were considered irrelevant. At the level of discourse, the Yoruba ideal was that there should be mutual respect and cooperation between the elders and the youth. This was reinforced by the following sayings:

*Owo omode ko to pepe, ti agbalagba ko wo keregbe*

*Ise ti ewe ba be agba, ki o ma se ko o*

*Gbogbo wa ni a ni'se a jo nbe ara wa*

(The hand of the young does not reach the high shelf,

That of the elder does not go into the gourd.

The work that a child begs an elder to do let him not refuse to do it

We all stand to benefit from mutual cooperation)

*Omode gbon, agba gbon, la fi da ile Ife.*

(The wisdom of the youth was as important as that of elders in the establishment of Ile-Ife)

However, in reality, the philosophy behind these proverbs was seldom followed. Within the lineage, elders largely acted as if they had a monopoly of wisdom. Thus, their views were rarely to be challenged, and dissenting opinions from the youth were condescendingly treated as impulsive behaviour or as outright affront and disrespect, which sometimes attracted heavy sanctions depending on how 'young' the 'offender' was, and on his past 'record of offence'. But with time, several historical factors came up in addition to existing cultural sanctions to limit elderly authority in Ibadan just as elsewhere in Yorubaland.

The cultural aspect had to do with the fact that elders had to live up to societal expectations. At the level of the lineage, an elder had to be discreet, responsible, and fulfil family and social obligations. Any elder that was found wanting in these areas gradually lost his social respect, even within his family. Thus the Yoruba say:

*'Agba to je ajeiwehin, yoo ru igba re dele'*

(The elder who shirks his responsibilities should not count on his juniors' respect)

Secondly, and more historically, state power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries constituted another limit to older people's authority. To retain their respect, these elders have learnt to circumspectly handle matters of allegiance to civil authorities, and especially during the heat of party-politics in mid-twentieth century. They have also learnt to defer to the functionaries of government even

when such individuals were younger men and women. This is part of what the Yoruba call '*mimo iwon ara eni*' (knowing one's limits).

## 2. THE IDIOM OF AGE IN INTRA-COMMUNAL POWER RELATIONS

Socio-political structuration and the distribution of power and privileges within Ibadan were, to a large extent, based on considerations of seniority. This seniority, however, was not strictly based on chronological age differential, but on rank, military might (in the nineteenth century), western education (in the twentieth century) and economic status. In many cases, age thus became an idiom used to masquerade other forms of power relationship (Cf. Aguilar, 1998: 6). This situation also accents the fact that modes of power are not exclusive and monolithic, rather, different strands intertwine to produce what is considered normative in local discourses. The following discussion examines how military might; Western education and wealth were used as stepping-stones into elderhood in Ibadan.

### 2.1 THE PATRONAGE SYSTEM OF THE MILITARY ELITE

In nineteenth-century Ibadan, the military elite ascribed an 'elderly' status to itself as the protector of the community. This was institutionalised through an elaborate patronage system of *babaogun* (war patron) whereby a distinguished military chief became a leader and 'father' of hundreds of people who were his followers and who gave him their allegiance. Falola (1984: 194) further describes the system thus:

It was compulsory for everybody to have a *babaogun*, who must be obeyed. The people must give part of their produce to the *babaogun*, and must follow him to war when called upon to do so. They also constituted his labour force when he wanted to build or repair his compound, clear or construct roads or do any important task.

In this way, the entire population was placed under the protective custody of the military chiefs, who defended them against external aggression and represented their interest in the town council. This patronage system was so entrenched in Ibadan by the middle of the nineteenth century that, when the Rev. David Hinderer and his missionary party arrived in 1853, they were immediately placed under a *babaogun*, namely, Chief Abayomi, the *Ajia Balogun* who was to watch over their interests. Although, Hinderer was spared many of the intricacies and military demands of the patronage system, he benefited from the assistance and protection of his *babaogun* (Adeboye, 1996: 205).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Ibadan military political structure continued to evolve, as successive military leaders frequently modified it. It was not until the twentieth century that it eventually attained some degree of stability. One notable feature of this political structure as from the mid-nineteenth century was the distinction between the civil and military chieftaincy lines.<sup>4</sup> This civil line, locally known as the *Egbe Agba* (Company of Elders), was headed by the *Baale*, and was charged with the day-to-day administration of the town.<sup>5</sup> The *Baale* was usually a war veteran, but sometimes, the chiefs under him were still active warriors. Again, the fluidity in the system could also be seen in the fact that succession to the *Baaleship* for a long time was not from the *Baale* line but from the *Balogun* (military) line (Morgan, [Part I] n.d.: 105). It was only in the twentieth century that the idea of alternate succession became a fixed principle because the absence of wars had now made the *Baaleship* attractive to (and has in fact become the ultimate goal of) all the chiefs in the two principal lines.

From the above explanation, it thus appears that in the nineteenth century, young and ambitious elements within the Ibadan military had their eyes on the battlefield and all the booty, glory and wealth they could get from it. The braver ones were rewarded with military titles, which further boosted their status and political ranking at home. On the other hand, the retired warriors were put in charge of civil administration. In fact, it fell within the general logic of warfare that it was (and still is) an activity for the young, virile and energetic, rather than the aged, infirm and weak. Real power, in terms of crucial decision-making was however in the hands of the military chiefs who ultimately overshadowed their civil counterparts. Occasionally, a few of the military chiefs who succeeded to the *Baaleship* retained their military titles if they considered such to be more prestigious than that of *Baale*. The cases of *Bashorun Ogunmola* and *Aare Latoosa* illustrate this.<sup>6</sup> But these were probably middle-aged men who continued to lead military offensives, in addition to being town heads. In cases like these, older chiefs in the *Baale* line looked after the town in their absence. There were even cases of *Baloguns* who refused to succeed to the *Baaleship* and subsequently passed the offer to the chief next in rank to them because they still anticipated more years of personal military service and its attendant glory and booty (Morgan, [Part I] n.d.: 106; Watson, 2003: 21–23).

In the final analysis, nineteenth century Ibadan politics could be described as a complex and intricate web of diverse elements. To isolate the ideology of age as the only defining feature of political relationships would amount to an oversimplification of the issues at play. Samuel Johnson (1921), I.B. Akinyele

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<sup>4</sup> The military lines were the *Seriki* and *Balogun* lines. Of these two, the *Balogun* line was more prominent.

<sup>5</sup> National Archives, Ibadan (hereafter NAI) Iba.Div. 1/1 File 18Vol.XII: *Seriki* Chiefs to the Senior District Officer, 4 Oct. 1948.

<sup>6</sup> These two titles: *Bashorun* and *Aare-Ona-Kakanfo* were Oyo titles bestowed on the incumbents by the *Alafin* of Oyo.

(1981) and Kemi Morgan (Part I, n.d.) present in their respective works similar accounts of competition, strife, intrigues and crisis in Ibadan politics, which were based not just on generational or horizontal cleavages but also on vertical rivalries among ‘peers’; on gender-related issues and other forms of political manoeuvrings.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2 THE AGED CHIEFS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The twentieth century, however, presents a picture in which the rulers of Ibadan – the *Baale* (later *Olubadan*) and senior chiefs – turned out to be aged individuals. This was not due to a direct policy of gerontocracy, but to the institutionalisation of a succession system where individual chiefs succeeded alternately to the headship of the town via automatic promotions in the two principal lines: the *Baale* line and the *Balogun* line. The two other lines in the system: the *Seriki* (male) and *Iyalode* (female) lines could not succeed to the headship of the town. But the titles there were graded, just like in the two principal lines, from the most junior to the most senior. This arrangement had several implications for the ordering of power relationships within the formal structures of the traditional political system, which was now overlaid by the Native Authority system of the colonial regime.

First, there was an acute sense of seniority and by extension ‘juniority’ among the chiefs. This was because the most senior positions carried other privileges such as membership of the Native Council, which entailed a salary, judgeship of the Native Courts, and other perquisites of office.<sup>8</sup> Therefore anybody jumped over in the chieftaincy promotion exercise became deeply aggrieved.<sup>9</sup> Both male and female chiefs jealously guarded their titles and

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<sup>7</sup> For example, see the rivalry between two young military chiefs: *Seriki* Iyapo and *Osi Balogun* Ilori described in Johnson (1921: 394-395).

<sup>8</sup> On one hand, the definition of a senior chief gradually came to be given in terms of membership of the Native Authority Council, and as this was revised several times a lot of confusion and crisis was generated in the political system. On the other hand, by 1938 there seemed to be a fairly stable idea of who the senior chiefs were. Dickinson’s Intelligence Report in 1938 lists the *Balogun*, *Otun Balogun*, *Otun Baale*, *Osi Balogun*, *Osi Baale*, *Ashipa Balogun*, *Ashipa Baale*, *Ekerin Balogun* and *Ekerin Baale* as the senior chiefs (apart from the *Baale*). The 1946 Succession Declaration of the Ibadan Native Authority added the *Seriki* to the list. By 1951, H.L.M. Butcher confirmed that the 1946 list was still being operated. By 1990, the *Iyalode* had been added to the list.

N.A.I. Iba.Prof. 3/4: E.N.C. Dickinson, ‘Intelligence Report on Ibadan Town’, 1938; CE/B17. H.L.M. Butcher, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Allegations of Misconduct Made Against Chief Salami Agbaje, the Otun Balogun of Ibadan and Allegations of Inefficiency and Maladministration on the Part of the Ibadan and District Native Authority (Lagos: Government Printers, 1951); Interview with Chief Ladimeji, Secretary to the Olubadan’s Advisory Council on April 12, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Colonial records are replete with petitions of complaints of such promotion denials. For example, see N.A.I. Iba.Div. 1/1 File 1050/2 Vol.2: Ladoyibo, *Ikolaba Baale* to District

ensured that their opportunities for automatic promotions were not jeopardised by charges of disrespect to the senior chiefs. Closely related to this is the fact that any vacancy created in the senior ranks was of great interests to all the chiefs holding more junior titles as this would afford them an opportunity for promotion. This, to a large extent, explains the perpetual intrigues among the chiefs and also had antecedents in their pre-colonial struggles and rivalries.

The position of the *Baale (Olubadan)* vis-à-vis the other senior chiefs also deserves some attention here. The other chiefs saw the headchief as a *primus inter pares*. The colonial administrators acknowledged this relationship, by consequently designating the first colonial council in Ibadan established under the Native Councils Ordinance as the *Baale-in-Council* and not *Baale-and-Council* as found in other Yoruba communities ruled by the more traditional *obas* such as the *Ooni* of Ife or the *Alafin* of Oyo. This designation was to emphasise collective responsibility, which had been a feature of the nineteenth-century Ibadan council.

Again, the alternate succession system and the fact that there were so many candidates on the two major lines prolonged the time it took an average aspirant to succeed to the headship of the town.<sup>10</sup> The *Baale* and other senior chiefs were therefore very aged and feeble individuals. Apart from the fact that many of these seniors did not last long, they were also too old to be effective.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, this became a matter of great concern not just to the younger elements outside the chieftaincy hierarchy and the colonial officers, but also to the chiefs themselves. Writing to the District Officer in April 1935, the *Baale-in-council* made the following observations concerning some of the chiefs they were recommending for promotion:

Some of those promoted in this list are useless: the Chief Lafalu now promoted to be Maye is one of the old and useless chiefs, but it is his turn by this system of successive promotions. We are compelled to omit one Oyedele, the Agbakin Baale for he is very old and partially blind, he is allowed to retain his present title. Oniwinde, the Areago Baale is another one, for over eighteen months he could not attend the Council on account of old age, and several others.

We are pressing this point because in future we shall be compelled by reasons stated above to alter this system of successive promotions and make appointments according to merit and usefulness thereby giving chance to wise and progressive men to come to the front.<sup>12</sup>

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Officer, Feb.9, 1933; Iba.Div. 1/1 File 18Vol.XIV: Moriamo Abake, *Osi Iyalode* to Senior District Officer, October 6, 1955; and (in the same file as above) *Seriki* Chiefs to the Resident, Ibadan Province, April 13, 1955.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1930s, there were twenty chiefs each on the *Baale (Olubadan)* and *Balogun* lines. By 1990 they had increased to twenty-three on each line.

<sup>11</sup> For example, three *Olubadans*: Fagbinrin, Oyetunde and Akintunde ruled in quick succession between 1946 and 1948.

<sup>12</sup> N.A.I. Iba.Div. 1/1 File 1050/2 Vol.3: *Baale-in-Council* to the District Officer, Ibadan, April 3, 1935.

This has however, not been carried out, and up till date, the same succession system that produces aged rulers is still operated. In fact, by 1941, Ibadan senior chiefs (Olubadan-in-council) suddenly turned round to uphold the integrity of the succession system by lauding it as ‘democratic and traditional’, and that it was not to be tampered with. This was in the face of repeated complaints from several youth organizations in the town, which proposed a comprehensive reform of the succession system.<sup>13</sup> Colonial officers were also disenchanted with the system. In 1951, H.L.M. Butcher wrote: ‘... a town like Ibadan requires something better than a Native Authority headed by the oldest men irrespective of their physical and mental ability’.<sup>14</sup> And if this was seen as an issue in the colonial period, it is even more so now, forty-six years after independence, when Ibadan has grown to become a mega-city.

### 2.3 EDUCATED MEN AS ELDERS

This brings us to the issue of the entry of western educated elements into the Native Authority structure in the colonial period. In 1914, a group of educated men formed an association called the *Egbe Agba-O-Tan* (Elders-Still-Exist Society) in Ibadan (Adeboye, 2004: 197–234). These men were, however not elders. Their claim to an elderly status was an idiom. They saw their acquisition of western education as constituting sufficient grounds for them to claim the same kind of respect accorded the aged traditional chiefs (Ibid: 200) In other words, *Egbe* members used their modern skills to negotiate viable positions for themselves in the local political set-up by insisting that their education conferred on them the right to participate in local governance (Cf. Aguilar, 1998: 19–20). In pressing their demand, they adopted a pacific approach. Rather than antagonise the chiefs, they cooperated with them, offered them advice, attempted to mediate in their disputes and pressurised British colonial officers for a more responsive local administration.

The most active members of the *Egbe* on the Ibadan local scene were Rev. A.B. Akinyele, I.B. Akinyele, Akinpelu Obisesan, J.A. Okuseinde, and, to some extent, Salami Agbaje.<sup>15</sup> These were respected leaders of thought. Under the auspices of the *Egbe* they championed causes that affected the populace. However, their desire to be formally recognised as part of the local ruling elite took a long time to materialise. Meanwhile, the *Egbe* through the activities of its

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<sup>13</sup> N.A.I. Iba.Div. 1/1 File 1836: Resolution of Combined Society of Ibadan Youths to the Resident and District Officer, January, 1941; *Olubadan-in-Council* to the Senior District Officer, Ibadan, February 20, 1941.

<sup>14</sup> N.A.I. CE/B17: Butcher, ‘Report of Commission of Inquiry’, p.57.

<sup>15</sup> The *Egbe* also had a pan-Yoruba project, which was actually its initial focus, but it later became more localized with Ibadan members taking the centre-stage in its activities (Adeboye, 2004: 213-217).

individual members indirectly fostered other newer groups such as the Ilupeju Society and the Ibadan Progressive Union (IPU) in the 1920s and 1930s. *Egbe* members played leadership roles in these new groups and were able to mobilise younger educated elements with whom they pressed for their inclusion within the decision-making body of the traditional elite (Adeboye, 2004: 216). This was the background to the eventual nomination in 1933 of I.B. Akinyele and J.O. Aboderin (both *Egbe* members) under the auspices of the IPU as Councillors into the Native Authority. At the end of their tenure, both men were 'rewarded' with junior chieftaincy titles.<sup>16</sup> It was from this junior title that I.B. Akinyele rose to become the *Olubadan* in 1955. Salami Agbaje also served as Councillor in 1936 and was equally given a chieftaincy title (Adeboye, 2001: 1–15).

The incorporation of these educated men into the traditional elite structure is significant in several respects. First, it shows that men with no background of chieftaincy began to obtain access to the ruling elite circle. They came in via the ticket of western education, which *Egbe* members interpreted as an alternative stepping-stone into *ipo agba* (elderhood). Secondly, by giving titles to these educated men, the older chiefs felt more at ease dealing with them as 'educated chiefs' than as 'educated commoners'. Their sense of tradition and prestige was thus appeased. The chieftaincy titles, though junior in rank, in some sense, provided additional leverage necessary to put the educated men at 'par' with the chiefs in the traditional council. This incorporation also meant that the educated elements could not offer a dissenting voice to the older chiefs since they now belonged in the same camp.

The advent of party politics and the entrenchment of the electoral system in Ibadan as from the 1950s further led to the ascendancy of educated men in municipal government, which was gradually taken out of the hands of the aged chiefs by the Western Region Local Government Law of 1952, and the nationwide Local Government Reforms of 1976. Traditional rulers all over Nigeria were thus pushed to the margin of local government, their roles being only advisory. This erosion of traditional political authority and function has transferred the spotlight to the new functionaries of government at the local, state and national levels. While the authority of these new office-holders, who were mostly young men, was derived from the electorate, its exercise has continued to limit the traditional authority of the chiefs. The result is that the term '*ipo agba*' equally describes modern political offices, which command the obedience of all, including those who are chronologically older than the incumbents. However, for the sake of maintaining social equilibrium and political goodwill, such office-holders tended to defer to the elderly who also reciprocated by according them the respect due their office.

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<sup>16</sup> Rev. A.B. Akinyele, though a clergyman was later given a honorary title as Aare of Ibadan in the 1950s while Akinpelu Obisesan was also made a chief in 1960. Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan (hereafter K.D.L.), Obisesan Papers, Box 53: Diary entry for May 27, 1960.

## 2.4 ELDERS BY WEALTH

There was also the use of wealth and affluence to attain an elderly status. This was particularly the case in the twentieth century (because in the preceding century, the military elite had overshadowed all other social classes). Moreover, the rise of the cocoa trade in the twentieth century also led to the rise of a new class of ‘men of money’ – *olowo*. This is best illustrated by the careers of Sanusi Adebisi and Salami Agbaje, who used wealth as a stepping-stone into *ipo agba*.

Sanusi Adebisi was the son of one Adesina, a weaver, who migrated from Offa to Ibadan in the late nineteenth century. Adebisi was first apprenticed to his father, then went into farming and later veered off on his own into the business world. At a point, he was a buying agent for Miller Brothers, and subsequently became a produce buyer in his own right (Adeboye, 1996: 285). He gradually began to amass wealth for himself. He became a major distributor for the United African Company (UAC) and he acquired several shops at Gbagi (the central business district in Ibadan). He also had a large cocoa plantation at Mamu village, on the way to Ijebu-Ode. By the 1920s, he was already the head of his lineage, as *Mogaji* Lanipekun.<sup>17</sup> By this time too, his wealth, which was anchored, among other things, on his agricultural investments, the cocoa business; and his commercial ‘partnership’ with the Miller Brothers were so widely acknowledged by the local populace that a verse of his *oriki* (appellations) says:<sup>18</sup>

*Alaimokan mokan nii so pe Oke Mapo*  
*L’owo o ‘Debisi ti nwa,*  
*Owo Adebisi nbe ni Mamu*  
*Owo Akanji nbe ni Miller ti o lee parun,*  
*Baba Gbadegesin (Adeboye, 1996: 286).*

It is only the ignorant that says it is from Mapo Hill  
(administrative centre)  
That ‘Debisi derives his wealth  
Adebisi’s money is at Mamu  
Akanji’s investments at Miller’s is indestructible  
Father of Gbadegesin.

What made Adebisi’s economic status and wealth to be so greatly acknowledged locally were his conspicuous consumption and benefaction to others in the community. The diaries of Akinpelu Obisesan, a contemporary of Adebisi, are replete with cases of these.<sup>19</sup> In fact; Obisesan himself was a frequent

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<sup>17</sup> The *Mogaji* was (and still is) the Ibadan title for lineage head. Adebisi’s lineage was known as Ile Lanipekun (Lanipekun’s lineage), hence his designation as *Mogaji* Lanipekun.

<sup>18</sup> For more details on Yoruba *oriki*: their characteristics and interpretation see Barber (1991).

<sup>19</sup> For instance, Obisesan had this to say about Adebisi: “...a man in certain respect that circumstance has made to become object of worship to we his peers...” K.D.L. Obisesan

beneficiary of Adebisi's benevolence. And within the community, several verses of *oriki* and songs were composed to further eulogise Adebisi (Adeboye, 2003: 281–304).

Adebisi's wealth made room for him to operate within the public arena in Ibadan. He associated freely with, and was in fact courted by the Christian educated elite, though he did not join their formal organizations (the *Egbe Agba-O-Tan* and the IPU). He was always present, and was accorded much respect, at various public functions. During the tension between Ibadan and Oyo over the deposition of Baale Situ in 1925, Adebisi, together with Agbaje acted as power brokers between the Ibadan chiefs and the Alafin of Oyo.<sup>20</sup> And there was no doubt, given Obisesan's observations, that at some point he enjoyed the respect of the senior chiefs.<sup>21</sup> It was thus not surprising, even to colonial officials, when Adebisi was made a chief in 1926, because he already had 'much influence' owing to his wealth and charisma.<sup>22</sup> The chieftaincy title was thus an official acknowledgement of the influence that he already had. Before he became a chief he was already playing out the role of an 'elder' and was actually acknowledged as such by the community despite his relatively young age. This smooth rise was not without any tension. Problem arose when Adebisi was appointed as President of the new Lands Court in 1936 and some senior chiefs petitioned that he should be removed.<sup>23</sup> It was during this crisis that Adebisi died.

Salami Agbaje similarly rose to prominence in Ibadan through his economic successes. He started his commercial career in the timber trade and was later involved in the cocoa business, importation and distribution of European goods, transport business, and in industrial production (Adeboye, 1996: 290). Like Adebisi, Agbaje had no background of affluence. He had migrated to Ibadan in the opening years of the twentieth century, and promptly proceeded to build up his economic fortunes. He quickly earned the respect of the colonial authorities, which considered him as being very 'progressive'.<sup>24</sup> In 1930, he was nominated as a member of the Legislative Council (to represent Oyo Province). It was thus with confidence that Agbaje began to lobby for a title in 1933, but he was rebuffed by the senior chiefs because he had his eyes on the *Otun Baale* title that

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Papers, Box 55: Diary entry for November 12, 1923. Again, he observed an event which Adebisi attended: "...Adebisi and his company made Oluokun quarters to shake-dressed gorgeously all and their chief (Adebisi) in a rich damask of 60/- a yard... Present and chop (sic) given to them by Akande and his people (the hosts) to cost about sixty to seventy pounds". Box 47: Diary entry for June 10, 1928.

<sup>20</sup> K.D.L. Obisesan Papers, Box 55: Diary entry for June 28, 1925.

<sup>21</sup> K.D.L. Obisesan Papers, Box 55: Diary entry for October 12, 1921

<sup>22</sup> N.A.I. Oyo Prof. 4/11/59/23: Dew to District Officer, H.L. Ward-Price, November 14, 1926. By the time Adebisi got his second chieftaincy promotion as *Maye Baale* in 1929, Obisesan had this to say about him: "This Adebisi at a young age has been able to do what any young man has never done at Ibadan since its founding as a city". K.D.L. Obisesan Papers, Box 47: Diary entry for August 16, 1929.

<sup>23</sup> For details of the crisis see Ogunbiyi and Reichmuth (1997: 109-135)

<sup>24</sup> N.A.I. CSO 26/06027: Annual Report, 1921, Oyo Province, p.9, p.62.

was considered far too senior for him, especially in a system where people took turns to climb the chieftaincy ladder (Adeboye, 1996: 300). It was at this point that Agbaje fell back on his close association with the local Christian elite. Through the Councillorship scheme initiated by the *Egbe/IPU*, Agbaje was nominated into the Native Authority Council in 1936. His access to council affairs exposed him more to the chiefs and vice-versa, such that before the end of the same year, he was given the chieftaincy title of *Ikolaba Balogun* (Ibid: 301). He thus entered the chieftaincy hierarchy at the twelfth senior title of the *Balogun* line, jumping over eight junior chiefs. And in October of the same year, he was appointed president of a Native Court. Given the relative seniority of Agbaje's new title, and the fact that he also got a judgeship with it, all in the same year, Agbaje's political elevation surpassed those of the previous 'educated chiefs', and was even more spectacular than that of Adebisi (though Adebisi had risen higher in the hierarchy by 1936, having been there since 1926), especially given the fact that Agbaje was neither a lineage head nor a member of any of the chiefly lineages.

The point being made in the two cases of Salami Agbaje and Adebisi Giwa cited above is that these two men used their wealth to attain social recognition couched in the idiom of seniority and age. It was this social influence that was in turn confirmed by the chieftaincy titles they got. Social acknowledgement was thus crucial in the rise of these two men. Adebisi appreciated this and, more than Salami Agbaje (who later got into trouble with the community for his alleged 'selfishness') further enhanced his own image by subscribing to the traditional demand of generosity from the 'big-man' in form of the distribution of largesse (Adeboye, 1996: 302–309). The result of this was that Adebisi became more popular than Agbaje among the local folks who were always contrasting the latter's 'generosity' with the former's 'stinginess' as the following song illustrates:

*Adebisi ni mo ri si*  
*Adebisi ni mo ri si*  
*No je dodo ni 'le e Salami*  
*Adebisi ni mo ri si* (Adesina, 2000: 455).

I admire Adebisi  
I admire Adebisi  
Ordinary plantain snack, I never tasted in Salami's house  
I admire Adebisi

In 1949, when he was almost at the peak of his political career, Agbaje suffered a setback when an agitation which lasted till 1951 erupted against him. He was accused of 'selfishness', 'ambition', 'avarice' and a host of other 'vices', all in a bid to stop his further rise in the chieftaincy hierarchy. He was eventually cleared of all these charges in 1951 by the Commission of Inquiry set up to investigate the crisis. He died two years after this (Adeboye, 2001: 1–15).

The significance of money in the rise of men to *ipo agba* has continued unabated in post-colonial Ibadan, as in other Yoruba communities. Today, local people in Ibadan still reminisce about Agbaje and Adebisi as stereotypes of the ‘selfish rich’ and the ‘generous rich’ against which they compare the ‘modern rich’ such as Arisekola Alao, Mufutau Lanahun and Yekinni Adejo. Unfortunately, the identification of many of the ‘modern rich’ with past military dictators in Nigeria (Generals Babangida [1985–1993] and Abacha [1993–1998]) who were generally perceived as pursuing politics of Northern hegemony, which effectively excluded Southerners, especially the Yoruba; has made them to be very unpopular locally (Agbaje, 2002: 3–26). In fact, such men have repeatedly suffered as victims of youth violence during periods of national or local crises precipitated by varying political and socio-economic issues. This implies that the social respect generated by the financial successes of the ‘modern rich’ has been mitigated by their unpopular political alliances. This rise of ‘new men’ in local politics is not peculiar to Ibadan. It has interesting parallels in other parts of Africa. Mitzi Goheen’s (1988, 1992) studies on Cameroon also show how local ‘big men’ used their wealth and government connections to acquire land (as a symbol of traditional authority) and later titles and traditional offices.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. CONCLUSION

This essay has demonstrated that age could be used as an idiom to naturalize power as being the preserve of ‘elders’. In this sense, elderhood is not just a terminal state of existence but a category that is imbued with power and authority, and which enjoys tremendous prestige. This has been analysed here by ‘using the symbolic idiom (of age) to effect, and giving it an immediacy that conveys power’ (Cf. Spencer, 1990: 8).

There is also the issue of legitimacy and social acknowledgement in elderhood. At the inter-personal level, it has been shown that the extended family was an institution that legitimised the claim to authority among elders, and validated claims of seniority (and by extension of authority) by lineage sons and daughters over the wives of the lineage. However, at the intra-communal level of the socio-political distribution of power and privileges, elderly authority was legitimated by the institutionalisation of the succession system and by an informal process of social acknowledgement. This social acknowledgement is so crucial that an individual without the recognition of others within the same system could not enjoy an elderly position and its concomitant respect.

Furthermore, this essay has uncovered several levels of conflict among different groups. This further lends credence to Nancy Foner’s (1984: ix–xx) thesis of tension created by age inequalities in non-industrial societies. However,

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<sup>25</sup> Other descriptions of neo-traditional chieftaincy could be found in van Nieuwaal and van Dijk (1999), van Nieuwaal (2000), Perrot and Fauvelle-Aymar (2003), and Vaughan (2005).

unlike Foner, the key actors in this study were not all old people. Some were individuals who had ascribed to themselves positions of seniority or elderhood based on qualifications such as kinship positioning, wealth, education and sheer military might. There were thus conflicts between lineage sons/daughters and lineage wives; and, between 'elders by wealth' and the community because of the failure of the latter to culturally redistribute their wealth, or because of unpopular political alliances. Of course, there were conflicts that involved older people, such as those between the aged chiefs and the youth over the inability of the latter to govern effectively due to old age.

A contemporary parallel to these developments is the recent tension between veteran politicians in Yorubaland (many of whom are based in Ibadan) and younger politicians who call themselves the 'new breed'. The issue of contention is that the older group, which is formally organized in several associations, the most vocal of which is the Yoruba Council of Elders (YCE), wants to act as power brokers in modern national politics on behalf of the Yoruba people.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the 'new breed' believes that since most of the present political problems were created when those elders were actively involved in politics, the latter have nothing more to offer. They should therefore exit the scene altogether. The interesting aspect of this current tension is that neither of the groups concerned is monolithic. Supporting the elders are militant youth groups such as the Oodua People's Congress; while on the side of the 'new breed' are some other elders who feel younger men should be given a chance to prove themselves without any interference from older quarters (*Nigerian Tribune*, 21 October 2000).

Another crucial issue thrown up by this paper is the question of how 'old' elders must be before they lose societal respect. The plight of the aged chiefs in Ibadan shows that in the public sphere, at least, old age is not in itself the important thing, the elders must be functional and seen to be adding value to the system in terms of the utility they are generating. Once their competence has diminished, they cannot continue to command the respect of those under them. This issue of competence has been described elsewhere as the 'charismatic aspect of the authority of older people' (Spencer, 1990: 8). The logic of this is primarily utilitarian.

This political use of the idiom of age also applied to women. Although the examples given here relate to men, women such as Wuraola Esan, Hunmoani Alaga and Hunmoani Alade also used education (in the case of Esan) and wealth (the two Hunmoanis) to attain positions of power. And in certain cases involving both men and women, the highly educated could also be wealthy and well connected to Federal and State authorities. All these would stand such individuals in good stead as they aspire to an *ipo agba*.

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<sup>26</sup> The motto of the Yoruba Council of Elders is 'Agba ki i wa ni ilu ki ilu baje' (A town with functioning elders can not degenerate). *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), October 23, 2000. For some of the activities of the YCE see *The Vanguard* (Lagos), November 20, 2001; *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan) March 22, 2001.

Finally, the other side of the coin is that just as it is possible for young men and women to aspire to, and actually attain positions of power by some of the means discussed above, it is also possible for a natural elder to engage in, and sponsor delinquent behaviour that would make him lose respect and reduce him to the level of a 'youth'. Lamidi Adedibu is a case in point. With neither education nor wealth, Adedibu maximized his contacts with those at the very top (Federal authorities) as well as his command of an underground network of political thugs to carry out his self-appointed role as 'kingmaker in Ibadan politics'. His crude and unrefined style of unleashing violence on his opponents through his 'boys', and organizing electoral frauds on behalf of 'his candidates' are unbecoming for a 78-year old 'elder'. His latest victory is the 'impeachment' of the former governor of Oyo State, Rasheed Ladoja, which he 'accomplished' in January 2006, by allegedly threatening and offering 'inducements' to members of the State House of Assembly. Again, that a single man could hold an entire state to ransom speaks volume of the corruption and ineptitude that characterize the Nigerian political terrain. The traditional Yoruba view of elders as builders and wielders of positive influences seems not to make sense to Adedibu. Or should we dismiss him as a political aberration? If Adedibu is indeed the product of a corrupt and inept system, how much longer can these traditional values hold out against the unreformed system? It would be odd for him to mistake the fear that he instils in the hearts of people for respect that is due to his age. Paradoxically, such political manipulations constitute yet another appropriation of the idiom of age. After all, Adedibu regularly employs the 'elderly' rhetoric to justify his meddlesomeness in Ibadan politics. Therefore, age, as demonstrated above, is a potent metaphor in the pursuit of power, positively or negatively, depending on the ambitions of the individuals concerned.

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