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# THE CONCEPT OF ELITISM IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA THOUGHT

Olufunke Adeboye

## Introduction

The idea of social stratification is a thread that runs through every human society and this is what underlies the concept of elitism. Yoruba traditional thought, in as much as it addressed all spheres of life and activities of the people had something to say about elitism. This would thus imply that the idea of social elites is not peculiar to Western thought. However, because the traditional Yoruba society was predominantly an oral culture, its social thought was represented, not in a body of writing, but in the day to day practices of the people, their lore, belief systems and the manner in which they ordered their society. And it is to these we will turn in this paper in order to get at the ideas of the Yoruba on elitism.

Due to the obvious problems that could be encountered in attempting to analyse the minds of each of the Yoruba sub-groups on the subject under discussion in a paper of this size, I have chosen the Oyo-Yoruba as a case study. Thus while the ideas of the Oyo-Yoruba are taken to represent those of other Yoruba groups, one does not deny the existence of a number of variations and exceptions here and there.

Once more word about the title of this paper. The adjective, 'traditional' as used here is to show that the Yoruba thought being examined was that which existed before the colonial period, a direct product of the people's heritage modified from day to day by local circumstances but not totally void of 'alien' influence.

For the purpose of analysis, this paper has been divided into five segments. The first attempts a definition of the concept of elitism; the second looks at the background history of Oyo, the third examines the Oyo concept of elitism in pre-nineteenth century times while the fourth analyses nineteenth-century changes in the Oyo definition of elitism. The last part is the conclusion.

The idea behind this whole exercise is to indicate the dynamics of social differentiation among the Yoruba.

## ELITISM DEFINED

The very idea of discussing elitism or the elite in a preliterate, non-westernized society may seem paradoxical to some who have equated elitism with westernization. This is because most of the time when the term 'elite' is mentioned in the African context, what easily comes to the mind of many people is a picture of the Western educated individuals in such a society. But in a general sense, the concept of elitism portrays a social situation in which some individuals enjoy more esteem than others in the society. In other words, the concept revolves round differences in individuals' statures.

Scholars have given several definitions of the term 'elite'. According to Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, the early users of the term in western sociology, elite is the minority which rules over the rest of the society by virtue of its high status<sup>1</sup>. Thoenes echoes this idea of the predominance of the elite by defining it as a group of individuals which exercises authority over others<sup>2</sup>. Abner Cohen sees the elite as a group of individuals occupying commanding positions in the society<sup>3</sup>, and for Keller<sup>4</sup>, the elite is made up of pre-eminent individuals in different fields in the society. To Nadel, Bottomore, Smythe and Smythe<sup>5</sup>, the elite comprises the superior people in any given society.

A common thread which runs through all these definitions is the fact that the term 'elite' is applicable to a group of individuals who have attained the highest ranking in society and as such are looked upon as leaders by the rest of the society. In the words of Nadel, the elite is that stratum of the population "which for whatever reasons can claim a position of superiority and hence a corresponding measure of influence over the fate of the community"<sup>6</sup>. Superiority and influence are thus the hallmarks of the elite. Influence here is taken to be the power to affect other people's character, beliefs or actions through example, fear and admiration. It is different from authority in the sense that the latter refers to power exercised within the framework of formal governmental structures. In other words, authority used in this context is power conferred or exercised by a formal backing of the governmental apparatus.



-- The elite may also be said to constitute a social class. But 'class' is used here not in the Marxist sense in which classes are interpreted as economic or political interest groups which are logically opposed to one another. Rather, classes in this context are seen as status groups, arranged in a hierarchical continuum in the society<sup>7</sup>.

In Yoruba communities, individuals of high status were the 'big people' *eniyan nla* or 'important people' *eniyan pataki*. In Oyo, they were also called *eekan ilu*<sup>8</sup>. *Eekan* means 'pegs' while 'ilu' means 'town'. As the *eekan ilu* the elite thus constituted the pegs on which matters hung in the society. In other words, the elite is composed of eminent personalities in the society. These individuals occupied the higher strata of the society while the lower strata were made up of the non-elite. Members of the society determined the yardsticks for measuring statuses, and a look at the yardsticks of the Oyo-Yoruba would give us an idea of the type of individuals who qualified for elite status. Before going into that, we shall pause here to examine the background history of Oyo as most of the ideas of the Oyo-Yoruba about elitism were products of their history and cultural heritage.

## BACKGROUND HISTORY OF OYO

The Oyo-Yoruba occupied a large kingdom which reached its peak in terms of size, prosperity and stability in the first half of the eighteenth century. Thereafter, the empire began to witness a lot of cracks in its socio-political edifice, and by the third decade of the nineteenth century it had fallen<sup>9</sup>. During the hey-day of the empire it was headed by a monarch called the *Alafin* assisted by quarter chiefs called the *Oyomesi*, a host of palace officials, and other government functionaries. The Oyo society was largely an agrarian one although trade and crafts also played important roles in the economy.

While birth played an important role in the determination of a person's social status in Oyo, individual achievement was equally important as well shall see in this paper.

The collapse of Oyo in the nineteenth century saw the migration of people from the centre of the Oyo empire to the southern parts<sup>10</sup>. The capital, Katunga, also had to be evacuated and a new one was founded at Ago-Oja<sup>11</sup>. This period also saw the loss of most of Oyo's dependencies. A new society was started at Ago-Oja where Alafin Atiba sought to revive the ancient glories of the Oyo kingdom. Consequently, Ago-Oja became Ago-d'Oyo and later simplified to Oyo<sup>12</sup>. What is important here in nineteenth-century Oyo history is not so much the founding of the new Oyo, but the creation of a new society which it entailed and the new opportunities it offered for individual advancement.

## THE OYO CONCEPT OF ELITISM: The Pre-Nineteenth Century Scene

In Oyo, just as in any other Yoruba community, the position of the elite depended on public recognition. An individual was not considered 'important' or 'big' unless he was publicly acknowledged by people, i.e. the other members of his community. This public recognition constituted having *eniyan* (or *eeyan*). These 'people' were his admirers and well-wishers. This idea of having people is indicated in the saying:

Mo l'owo, mo leeyan  
ki lotun ku ti nko ni?

I have money and people  
what else have I not got?

and in the following song:

Eniyan l'aso mi  
Eniyan l'aso mi  
Bi mo ba ti r'eni mi  
Inu mi a dun, ara mi a ya gaga  
Eniyan l'aso mi<sup>13</sup>.

I am clothed with people  
I am clothed with people  
When I see my own people  
I am glad and in high spirits  
I am clothed with people



In other words, it was the society, made up of many *eniyen* that determined who was important and who was not. The Oyo society thus rewarded with high status roles which they considered important and very relevant.

This public recognition or acknowledgement which conferred elite status on individuals could be gained through several ways. In the first place, holders of chieftaincy titles and other important office in the society were regarded as being very important. These were individuals who exercised some formal influence or authority over the rest of the society. To this class belonged the king called *Alafin* and some members of the royal family; the members of the council of Chiefs called *Oyomesi*; some important palace chiefs and officials, and some religious chiefs. The occupation of an important political office thus bestowed a high degree of eminence and social recognition on the incumbent.

The *Alafin*, as part of the elite class, was not just an important man, he topped the class of big men. He was also in the class of the gods which made him:

Alase ekeji orisa

Ruler and companion of the gods

This divine aspect of the king further lifted him out of the ordinary; and if we would take peculiarity as the mark of greatness, then he was indeed the unique 'head of the elite'. He was in a class of his own within the elite. Any notable achievement on the part of the *Alafin* further proved and boosted his status. *Alafin Abiodun*, for instance, restored the primacy of the throne in an allegedly peaceful and prosperous reign which also saw the end of *Gaa*, the over mighty *Bashorun* who had constituted a terror to previous *Alafin*<sup>14</sup>. The tranquillity and prosperity which characterized *Abiodun's* reign are reflected in the following song.

L'aye Olugbon

A da 'borun meje,

E o wa fiwe ran wa.

L'aye Aresa,

A da 'borun mefa

E o wa fiwe ran wa.

L'aye Aremu (*Abiodun*),

A ra koko, a ra aran,

A ra epinrin baba aso

A fole lo pe 'le yi o dun<sup>15</sup>.

In *Olugbon's* reign

We acquired seven flowing robes

Is that not commendable?

In *Aresa's* reign,

We acquired six flowing robes

Is that not commendable?

In *Aremu's* (*Abiodun*) reign,

We bought cocoyam as well as velvet,

We also bought *Epinrin*<sup>16</sup> the father of clothes

Only the lazy did not prosper in such circumstance.

Office holders in Oyo also fell into this elite class. They were in several categories. There were the seven members of the *Oyomesi*, viz: *Bashorun* (the prime minister), *Samu*, *Agbakin*, *Alapinni*, *Akiniku*, *Asipa* and *Lagunna*<sup>17</sup>. The title of each of these individuals was hereditary in that it was the exclusive preserve of particular families though it did not necessarily pass from father to son. The *Alafin* used his royal prerogative to choose any member of the family to succeed to the title. The *Oyomesi* advised the king on state matters and each of them had specific duties to perform.

There were some notable princes who performed specific state duties. Such men included the *Onasokun*, *Ona-aka* and *Omo-ola* who were the official 'fathers' (advisers) of the king. Also in this category was the *Baba Iyaji* who was the official 'elder brother' of the *Alafin*<sup>19</sup>. But the most important of all the princes was the *Aremo*, the eldest son of the *Alafin* (crown prince). He shared many of the king's powers and privileges, holding a large court, sharing market dues with the *Alafin* and was lord of many towns and villages<sup>20</sup>. A



custom was inaugurated in the sixteenth century that the *Aremo* should die with the king as a way of ensuring that he would support rather than rival his father's rule. Although this practice was later abolished by *Alafin Atiba* in the nineteenth century, the *Aremo* in the pre-nineteenth century period knew his life would terminate on his father's death and so he more or less reigned like the king<sup>21</sup>.

Some principal palace officials also enjoyed a high status in Oyo. These were the *Iwarefa* and some of the leading *Ilari*. Three of the *Iwarefa* (eunuchs) were appointed to very high ranks. They were the *Ona Efa Otun-Efa* and the *Osi-Efa*. Each of them performed important administrative functions<sup>22</sup>. The *Ilari* were titled slaves who also performed important administrative roles.

Another category of chiefs comprised individuals in charge of special duties in the town. An example was the *Eni-Oja* who was in charge of the king's market<sup>23</sup>. This chief was a female and she enjoyed all perquisites accruing from the market. There were other market officials like the *Olosi* and *Aroja* who were directly responsible to the *Eni-Oja*.

There were other women chiefs in the Oyo society, some of whom were religious chiefs while others performed important duties in the palace. The *Iyakere*, for example, was in charge of the king's treasures. According to Johnson, she was the female that wielded the most power in the palace. She played a prominent role in the coronation of the *Alafin*<sup>25</sup> and was also in charge of some provincial towns such as *Iseyin* and *Ogbomoso*.

Other important women in the town were the *Iya-lagbon* and the *Iya-Oba*. The *Iya-lagbon* exercised a great influence and controlled a portion of the city. Sometimes she also acted as the official mother of the crown prince (*Aremo*). The *Iya-Oba* was the king's official mother<sup>26</sup>. There was also the title of *Iyalode*. Although it would seem that the office did not enjoy much prestige in the Oyo metropolis in pre-nineteenth century times, it was certainly a principal one among the provinces of Oyo and in other Yoruba states<sup>27</sup>. The *Iyalode* was head of all the women and the title was bestowed upon the most distinguished woman in town. She had her own lieutenants such as *Otun*, *Osi*, *Ekerin*, etc. She represented the women in the council of chiefs and her compound housed female prisoners.

Some religious chiefs of both sexes also enjoyed a lot of prestige in the society. These included priests and priestesses of the principal deities such as *Magba* of the *Sango* cult, and *Onalemole*, the chief *Ifa* priest. The *Iyamode* was a *Sango* devotee and high-priestess in charge of the royal mausoleum called *bara*<sup>28</sup>. The *Iya-Naso*, *Iya'le'mole* and *Iya'le Ori* were other examples of principal priestesses. *Ogboni* priests such as the *Oluwo* and *Apena* also enjoyed immense prestige in the Oyo society.

Another group of eminent people in Oyo was that of the warriors. In this group were the *Eso*. These were standing officers of the Oyo army with military titles. The titles were not hereditary but based on merit and individual prowess hence the saying.

Ohun meji lo ye Eso

Eso ja, o le ogun

Eso ja, o ku si ogun<sup>29</sup>.

One of two things befits an Eso

The Eso fought and conquered (or)

The Eso fought and lost his life.

The *Eso* title was held in so great esteem that even children and grandchildren of an *Eso* prided themselves on being offsprings of an *Eso*. "Emi omo Eso" was a common phrase used by descendants of the *Eso* to register their contempt for anything low or mean. The commander of all the *Eso* was the *Are-ona-kakayfo* (field Marshal) and the title was conferred upon the greatest soldier. In fact, the position of the *kakayfo* was so important that he was not allowed to reside in the capital with the *Alafin* lest he began to rival his authority. He was thus to live in any other town in the kingdom<sup>30</sup>.

The acquisition of titles and the assumption of offices were thus very important in the process of social upliftment. Accession to office added to an individual's power. It gave him authority and a recognized position in the society by placing him within the formal structures of government<sup>31</sup> and hierarchy of statuses. It also gave him access to some material advantages such as fees and fines. This undoubtedly must have generated keen competition for titles and offices.



Another way through which individuals gained public recognition as belonging to the elite group was through wealth. This meant that ambitious individuals had considerable scope to build up a position for themselves outside the hierarchy of official titles. Such people were able to amass some wealth individually which stood them in good stead in the contest for public acknowledgement. These were the *Oloro* (men of wealth). What constituted their *Oro* (wealth) was *dukia* (property such as extensive farms, other movable and immovable property, a big household, numerous bonded labourers (*Iwofa*) and slaves (*eru*). The *Iwofa* served the wealthy man as a form of interest on loan which they or their relatives had taken. They worked for the wealthy man until the loan was repaid in full. The *Iwofa* in Oyo were in two categories: the *Kosinko* were young people who lived with the creditor and worked for him until the debt was paid; the *Iyagba* were elderly people who lived in their own houses and worked for the creditor on a regular basis because they had their own farms to work too<sup>32</sup>. The services of an *Iwofa* among other things, thus advanced another man's fortunes.

The sources of wealth for the *Oloro* in the period before the nineteenth century included trade, slave raids, and war booty. The produce from his extensive farms also boosted the *Oloro's* pecuniary image. While wealth in itself could elevate a man to a high status if it was considerable, it was usually more often an essential element in the competition for titles within the town. Much of the wealth of the *Oloro* was also redistributed as largesse among his followers. The more open-handed he was, the more followers he had and the more acclaim he got from them. And since the position of the elite depended on public recognition, the *Oloro* thrived on it.

Apart from title holders and wealthy individuals, there were also some men whose standing was acknowledged by numerous supporters. A person in this category may not necessarily be very affluent. The public recognition he enjoyed could either be as a result of his personality (i.e. bold, fearless, orator, etc.) or his expertise in his job, e.g. a popular and ingenious blacksmith. Such a man was thus important by virtue of the social recognition which he enjoyed. He was a *gbajumo* 'eni ti gba oju mo' (one acknowledged by numerous people). A *gbajumo* may not be very wealthy but a poor man could never become a *gbajumo*. His status might eventually be acknowledged by the formal conferment of title, but this would thus be a product of his importance in the society and not the cause of it.

Of all the groups described above<sup>33</sup> office and title holders were the most distinguished. Even popular and wealthy people were not as important as they were. They were ensconced within the formal structures of government and they had tremendous authority over the rest of the society. They were not necessarily the most affluent but they definitely enjoyed a lot of prestige and esteem. Despite their wealth, wealthy people still sought to advance their social position by the acquisition of titles. The *Alafin* (king) and the *Ijoye* (Chiefs) were regarded as the *Alagbara* (the powerful). *Agbara* (power in this sense was not physical might but authority. 'Alagbara' was also used to refer to men and women associated with supernatural powers. They too, were held in high esteem because people believed that they could bail them out of their personal or even communal problems.

Before closing this segment, it is necessary to look at the place of the family group within the hierarchy of statuses in the society and the privileges of high position. In the first place, the status of the elite individual did not cover him alone: it also covered his immediate family members to a certain degree as they needed to distinguish themselves in order to earn individual acclaim. The family group was the primary recruitment ground for supporters by the elite. In other words, while the attainment of high position was an achievement resting largely on the individual, his success depended upon his mobilization of his kith and kin in support of his claims. On the other hand, an individual's social rank was affected by the status of the family or compound into which he was born and by the social position of his relations, friends and associates. In fact some families such as the royal family and those of leading political office holders had an 'elitist' tradition in which the members enjoyed a high status in society and the privileges accruing to it.

This brings us to the issue of privileges of high class. One thing that was common to all 'big' people was the right to make others stand aside for them to pass. Material advantages such as fees and fines also went to some office holders. The royal family enjoyed special privileges such as exemption from communal labour. In addition, their daughters brought in higher bride price than ordinary girls. They also had access to much larger reserves of uncultivated land. The *Oba* had command over the labour of others in the society. There



was also discrimination of privileges as to insignia and symbols of high class. The Royal crown and *Irukere* (horsetail) were used exclusively by the *Oba* while the chiefs wore beads which nobody else was entitled to use, hence the saying.

Ade la fi i m'oba  
Ileke la fi i mo Ijoye

The king is identified by the crown while  
The Chiefs are known by their beads.

Religious Chiefs also had their own exclusive paraphernalia while the *Oloro* were arrayed in costly costumes such as velvet and other imported cloth. This discrimination was also carried over into music. While the ordinary men and women danced to music from the *Bembe* drum, the royals accompanied by important office holders danced to the music of royal drums such as *Koso*, *Dundu*, *Bata* and *Sekere*, and royal bugles such as *Okinkin*, *Igba*, *Kakaki* and *Ekutu* at state ceremonies.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY CHANGES

As discussed earlier, the fall of the Old-Oyo empire in the nineteenth century led to the southward migration of people which eventually resulted in the siting of the new capital of Oyo at Ago-Oja. The Oyo society as it recouped at Ago-Oja incorporated many other groups into its political orbit. What followed was a process of assimilation. Alafin Atiba brought many of the surrounding villages and towns into the new capital. Some of the affected villages were Akeitan, Apaara, Idode, Ajagba, Seke, Gudugbu, Jabata, Ojomgbodu, Aguwo, Opapa and Ijoga<sup>34</sup>.

Having established a new capital, the machinery of government was put into process. Royal life was restored and the pomp and pageantry of the ancient court at Oyo-Ile were relieved though on a much smaller scale because of the reduced fortunes of the kingdom. Meanwhile, social life among the people continued to be characterised by the daily struggle for fame and renown as individuals strove towards self-actualization.

There is, however, one notable feature of nineteenth century Oyo society. The individual communities that were incorporated into new Oyo settled in quarters named after their old villages and they retained their local chiefs (*Baale*) thus maintaining a degree of separateness in the new society<sup>35</sup>. The *Baale* of Seke was made the leader of all the other *Baale* and they were all subject to the *Aremo*<sup>35</sup>. The retention of these *Baale* was useful as an administrative device for it allowed the Alafin to rule the people with minimum friction. But as far as social engineering was concerned, the policy bred parochialism. Each quarter in Oyo had its own set of *eniyan pataki* who were different from those of other quarters. Only a few individuals were 'universally' recognised and these were almost always warriors and people involved in central administration and who had built themselves up so conspicuously that their fame went beyond the confines of their quarters. The nineteenth century elite thus had two bases from where they could recruit followers and receive public acclaim: their immediate locally, viz, their quarter or ward, and the whole town.

The nineteenth century also saw the attachment of increasing importance to the military class of warrior chiefs. This was a natural development from the insecurity of the century. In an age of endemic warfare, warriors enjoyed increasing prestige and by the middle of the century, they tended to overshadow other office-holders in the state. The career of Kurunmi and Oluyole, the non-resident *Are-onakakanfo* and *Bashorun* of Oyo respectively are clear testimonies of this trend<sup>37</sup>.

Oja the founder of Ago-Oja which later metamorphosed into the capital of Oyo, was also a fearless warrior<sup>38</sup>. Apart from defending his community from external aggression, Oja also raided other settlements for booty. All these are reflected in his Oriki which among other things says:

Won ni kini o se, kini o se  
Oja se bee, o te 'lu  
Bo duro l'Aawe, ara Aawe o gbodo r'oko  
Bo duro ni 'Seke, Iseke o gbodo r'odo  
Ara Aawe o m'Oja, won f'elede 'le r'oko  
ki won o to de



Gbogbo re l'omo Aromaradan mu paje  
Ekerin, o ti won geregere  
Alausa, a-ro-d'ogun<sup>39</sup>.

They were asking for his worth  
Oja went and founded a town  
Aawe people dared not go to their farm

When he was there  
Seke people dared not venture to the stream

When he was there  
People underestimated Oja,  
They left him with their livestock and  
made for their farms  
Before they returned,  
The son of Aromaradan had slaughtered them all.  
Ekerin, thou that pushes them headlong  
Alausa who-waits-for battle:

Oja also had warrior chiefs under him like the Aare-Ago, Abogunrin Balogun and Ikolaba, all of whom were valiant men and highly esteemed in the society. After Ago-Oja became the capital of Oyo, some men also rose to prominence through their military exploits and some of such men were in fact given military titles in the state structure in recognition of their valour<sup>40</sup>. This thus provided a veritable bridge used by the socially mobile to cross the line between commoner and elite.

Another important development in the nineteenth century was the idea of quantifying or assessing riches in terms of money or ready cash. This had to do with increased commercial holdings within the century and the European contact. A new category of affluent individuals rose. Those were the *Olowo* (men of money) who had some ready cash at hand. Their own wealth was measured not so much in terms of property, but in terms of the amount of money they had<sup>41</sup>. Money thus became a tool for the acquisition of high status. Without money, an individual was of no importance as reflected in the following sayings,

Owo ko si, eniyan ko sunwon  
When money is absent man loses his esteem

Owo ni ti oun ko ba si ni'ile,  
Ki enikeni ma da'moran lehin oun.

Money says nobody should make any  
decision in its absence

Owo ni i je mo ba o tan  
Osi ni i je tanj mo o

It is money that attracts relatives,  
the name of poverty is  
'who-is-your-relation?'

Despite the emphasis placed on money or ready cash, the *Oloro* was the wealthy man per excellence. Having money was only a stage of wealth.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above that there were ranks within the elite class among the Yoruba. The highest ranks, as we have seen, were occupied by state and religious officials who were individuals with positions within the formal structures of government. Though affluence naturally conferred some high status on individuals, such persons still had plenty of room to manoeuvre in order to gain additional influence and power.



Power over others was thus a factor in the success of *eniyan pataki*. This power could be in terms of influence over others or authority as exercised by important state officials. The ultimate, however, was to become an *Olola* (man of honour). *Ola*<sup>42</sup> presupposed the influence and authority which a man could get if he had *Ipo* (high position). And since *oro* (wealth) was not synonymous with *ipo* in the formal structures of government *ola* therefore became the goal. This desire for *ola* was widespread in the society among all strata as shown in some of the names of the people such as:

- Olawunmi - I desire fame/high status.
- Olaosebikan - Honour does not dwell exclusively in one place
- Olaniyan - Status has its boasts.
- Oladunjoye - Honour is more delightful than a title
- Olanipekun - Elevation does not have a limit etc.

Although *ola* does not dwell exclusively in one place, only a few ambitious individuals ever found their way to the top. While noble birth could give a person an edge over others in the competition for fame and renown, individual enterprise played a much more crucial role. According to Barber<sup>43</sup>, what underlies *ola* was "the notion of recognition, of being acknowledged superior, and of attracting admirers and supporters as a result". In fact, so much importance was attached to the role of followers, admirers and supporters that 'big men' could not do without them. Men of high rank did not walk alone. And as we have demonstrated above, one of the important measures of social status was the number and calibre of the individuals who associated with the 'big man' and particularly who accompanied him when he went about town. Thus in traditional Yoruba thought the concept of elitism was not an individualistic phenomenon. In fact, it operated like a spiral which incorporated other important elements such as the family group, followers, and admirers for it to function effectively.

The bottom line of the elite concept was the belief that the 'big man' had the capacity for solving other people's problems. The wealthy man was respected because people believed that at the last resort he could bail them out from embarrassing poverty. Likewise title holders and governmental functionaries were held in high esteem for their capacity to intervene and intercede on behalf of people in trouble before their colleagues in authority. Other big men also had utilitarian advantages. The notion therefore was that it was glorious to be related to the man of substance and significance as a sort of insurance which might be useful at the last resort.

It is also important to note that women were part of the elite class. The society gave room for women to prove their worth just as the men. And, as it has been demonstrated in this paper, a lot of women played very prominent roles and wielded a lot of influence in the society.

There is, however, one objectionable aspect of the Yoruba conception of elitism. That is the emphasis on material acquisitions and how much the *eniyan pataki* was prepared to lavish on ceremonies and give out as largesse. In fact, this flamboyance and the largesse culture tended to place material values over moral and individual principles. A wealthy man who did not believe in spending lavishly stood the risk of being labelled a miser, and eventually losing his retinue of followers and admirers, and consequently his fame. In order to avoid this, he thus had to do all he could to ensure an adequate supply of wealth which he had to give out 'generously'. On the other hand, a poor man could never win public recognition or acknowledgement because he lacked the material wherewithal with which to even begin to attract and maintain the attention of people.

This attitude reveals an aspect of the sense of values of the Yoruba engrafted into their concept of elitism. This mentality to some degree was carried into the twentieth century where it had to contend against opposite forces such as western ideas of individualism, and the realities of hard times caused by inflation and recession.



## NOTES

1. T. B. Bottmore *Elites and Society*, Penguin, England, 1882
2. P. Thoenes, *The Elite in the Welfare State*, ed. J. A. Banks, trans. J. E. Brrighani Faber & Faber, London, 1966, p. 25.
3. A. Cohen, *The Politics of Elite Culture: Explorations in the Dramaturgy of power in a modern African Society*. University of California Press, California, 1981. p. xvi.
4. S. Keller, 'Elites' in D. L. Sills, ed. *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*. Vol. 5. Macmillan Company & the Free Press, U.S.A., 1968, p. 26.
5. S. F. Nadel, "The Concept of Social Elites" *International Social Science Bulletin*. Vol. VIII, No. 3, 1956, P. 413; Bottmore, *op. cit*, p. 14; H. H. Smythe & M. M. Symthe, *The New Nigerian Elite*. Stanford University Press, California, 1971, p. 4.
6. Nadel, *Op. cit*. p. 413
7. This definition of classes is after L. Warner as cited in E. Krapf - Askari, *Yoruba towns and Cities* Oxford University Press, London, 1969, p. 132.
8. Oral Communication with Deacon Oyedele, retired teacher in his residence at Owode, Oyo. Date 7/11/91. Approximate Age - 60 years.
9. I. A. Akinjogbin & E. A. Ayandele, "Yorubaland Up to 1800" in O. Ikime, ed. *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Heinemann, Ibadan, 1980, p. 134; I. A. Akinjogbin, "The Expansion of Oyo and the rise of Dahomey, 1600 - 1800" in J.F.A. Ajayi & M. Crowder, eds. *History of West Africa*, vol. 1. Longman, Yorubaland, London 1976, 2nd ed. pp. 395 - 401; A. I. Asiwaju, "Dahomey, Yorubaland, Borgu and Benin in the Nineteenth Century" in J.F.A. Ajayi, ed. *Africa in the Nineteenth Century Until the 1880s*, UNESCO, Heinemann & University of California Press, California. 1989. 706.
10. Akinjogbin & Ayandele, *op. cit* p. 283.
11. S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1921. pp. 279 - 280. 12. *bid*. p. 280.
13. This song may be interpreted by some as pointing to family or kinship relationship but it could be applied, and in fact it is very applicable, to the wider social process through which big men recruited supporters. An indication of this is that the song was usually rendered by the talking drum when a big man was being entertained or praised.
14. P.C. Loyd, "Political and Social Structure" in S.O. Biobaku ed; *Sources of Yoruba History* Oxford University Press, London, 1973, p. 213, Johnson, *op. cit* pp. 186-7.
15. As in note 8.
16. *Epinrin* was a form of stripped velvet. It was very expensive and rare, and worn only by the wealthy.
17. M.C. Adeyemi, *Iwe Itan Oyo-Ile ati Oyo Isisiyi-Abi Ago-d'Oyo* Published by the Egbe Agba 'O Tan, Ibadan, 1914. p. 25.
18. Johnson, *op. cit*. p. 70.
19. *Ibid*, p. 68.
20. P. Morton-Williams, "The Yoruba kingdom of Oyo" in D. Forde and P.M. Kaberry, eds. *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford University Press, London: 1967, p. 61.
21. *Ibid*, *loc. cit*
22. Morton-Williams, *op. cit* pp. 62 - 63; Johnson, *op. cit* p. 59.
23. The modern equivalent of this *Eni-Oja* in Yoruba towns is the *Iyaloja* (mother of the market).



24. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 64.
25. *Ibid*, *loc. cit*
26. *Ibid*, pp. 6364.
27. *Ibid*, p. 77.
28. Morton-Williams, *op. cit.* p. 57; Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 43.
29. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 73.
30. *Ibid*, pp. 73 - 74.
31. See K. Barber's similar findings in her research on Okuku in *I could speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the past in a Yoruba Town*. Edinburgh University Press & the International African Institute, London, 1991, p. 194.
32. See not 8.
33. Bascom also did a similar study on Ile-Ife though he identified slightly different social categories and also emphasized individual differences (personal traits) as well as wealth. See W.R. Bascom, "Social Strata, Wealth and individual Differences Among the Yoruba" *American Anthropologist* Vol. 53, 1951, pp. 490-505.
34. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 281
35. B. A. Agiri, "Alafin Atiba, the Reviver of the Oyo empire", *Essays in History*. Vol. 5 Dec. 1986, pp. 23 - 24.
36. *Ibid*, *loc. cit*
37. See T. Falola & D. Oguntomisin, *The Military in Nineteenth Century Yoruba Politics*, Ife University Press, 1984.
38. Agiri, *op. cit.* p. 62.
39. Interview with Pa Ayoola, a descendant of Oja and brother of the Ashipa of Oyo, Chief Amuda Olorunosebi at Ashipa Compound, Oyo.  
Date: 11/11/91.  
Approximate age: 65 years.
40. Agiri, *op. cit.* pp. 65 & 67.
41. Oral Evidence from Deacon Oyedele. See note 8.
42. The *Ola* that is used here is different from *Ola Ola* could be translated as honour while the notion behind *Ola* incorporated success and wealth.
43. Barber, *op. cit.* p. 203.