On The Subject Of Kings And Queens:
"Traditional" African Leadership And The Diasporal Imagination

AL-YASHA ILHAAM WILLIAMS[1]

Then you will die indeed, Chila Kintasi! Your own mouth pronounced judgment. Die and deliver the land from the abominations of drunkenness and gluttony. (She used a bunch of soft feather [sic] attached on a bamboo stick on the Fon [King]. The Fon begins to reel until he collapses.) Die! Chila Kintasi. Die, Fon! So that we may think. The people need your death to think. Die! Die! Die!… The only men left in the land are the women. And they do not want any more Fons….

—Kwengong, from Bole Butake's play *And Palm Wine Will Flow*

The 'historical conditions' must of course not be imagined (nor will they be so constructed) as mysterious Powers (in the background); on the contrary, they are created and maintained by men (and will in due course be altered by them): it is the actions taking place before us that allow us to see what they are.

—Bertolt Brecht, from "A Short Organum for the Theater"

INTRODUCTION

These two excerpts show that the role of leadership is a highly contested and tenuous space. Cameroonian playwright Bole Butake's *And Palm Wine Will Flow* presents a dramatic representation of women who challenge a corrupt leadership and rethink the distribution of authority, while German playwright Bertolt Brecht's essay "A Short Organum for the Theater" suggests that power in societal institutions is maintained or changed by its citizens.

Drawing illustrations from Cameroon's history especially its colonization by Germany, the following discussion of "kings and queens" explores some of the conventions (of what I interchangeably call) "traditional", "pre-colonial" and/or "hereditary" African leadership and authority systems and its influence on the construction of a Diasporal "imagination". I use the term "traditional" not to invoke a philosophical binary with "modern" or "modernism" but to denote indigenous forms of African cultural group identity formation and nation-state governance that predate substantial European colonial influence, which is to say, pre- late 18th and early 20th century. This is then contrasted with the "modern" African nation-state which retains vestiges of European colonialism in land redistribution, amalgamated cultural/linguistic groupings and, as I argue, political structure. For example, on this account, the cultural groupings and leadership of the "traditional" nation-state of Yoruba had a different arrangement than the "modern" nation-state of Nigeria, which fuses Yoruba with other "traditional" nation-states by retaining British land delineations and governmental procedures.

Al-Yasha Williams is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Spelman College.

My argument is inspired by Benedict Anderson's analysis of nationalism that suggests that "imagination" plays a role in any conception of leadership, identity, boundary or ideology that delineates a nation and that literature is often instrumental in creating these notions of group identity.[2] I use the term imagination to argue that the emphasis on regal power typifying African American conceptions of traditional African leadership and society are not based entirely on historical or archeological facts about African nations.

The Diasporal imagination has been constructed by contrasting the contemporary poverty and political upheaval faced by many contemporary African nations, such that the stable, rich, respected and powerful kingdoms of old seem to represent the best of times. I argue that, specifically, the concept of "kings and queens" is based on a largely romantic nostalgia that, for the purposes of recovering a lost African identity and dignity, ultimately serves no valuable end for Africans in the Diaspora. I will also propose that the democratic aspects of traditional leadership and authority systems were instrumental in mediating the autocracy of the kingdom but were deeply undermined by colonialism, but are now diminished in contemporary understandings of traditional governance in the Diaspora.

DIASPORAL IMAGINATION

In the African Diaspora, literary forms such as slave narratives, rap songs, cultural theologies and sociological research often posit hierarchical leadership as redemption of African heritage. The perception of dynastic Kemet as the world's greatest civilization, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I as a messianic figure or the extensive chiefdoms of the Asante and Yoruba as representative of traditional African culture reverberates in Afrocentric scholarly discourse and in religious communities on New World soil.

On some accounts, it would seem integral to the reconstruction of African identity to recreate systems of hierarchical governance. The importance of royalty and status of various forms can be found, for example, in a press announcement of the Ausar Auset Society for the 25th Anniversary King's Day Ceremony. The announcement describes the invited guests as "Kings, Queen Mothers, diplomats, members of the entertainment world, business community and a host of international community leaders from around the African Diasporan World…."[3]

Similar ideas of reclaiming and teaching lost African royal heritage and culture can be found, for example, in the Yoruba faith-based Oyotunji Village in South Carolina. This New World Yoruba community is led by Oba Oseijeman Ofuntola Adefunmi, who claims leadership through initiation to the priesthood of Obatala, Ifa, and receipt of the "sword of the state" by the reigning Ooni of Ife His Majesty Okunade Sijuwade Olubuse II. The community replicates a hierarchy of kings, queens, chiefs and priests with the sanction of the contemporary Yoruba leadership in Nigeria. According to Adefunmi, "the emphasis is on the resurrection of Afrikan culture and traditions…. We have devoted ourselves to the rehabilitation of the Afrikan American people who had suffered most grievously during the Slave Trade…."[4]

The Diasporal interest in "kings and queens" builds upon the idea that the denied legacy of royalty is among the many injustices of the transatlantic slave trade. The precept that chattel slavery usurped the rightful dominion of would-be kings and queens is among the earliest African American literary themes. For example, in the 1789 narrative of Olaudah Equiano, the "kidnapped prince" employs tenacity and wit to become educated and worldly while in bondage,

and later writing and publishing his life story.[5] While Equiano argues that slavery is completely unjust, it is clear that it is his inherent sense of place that gives him the will and ability to overcome his imposed degradation. In this and other slave narratives the middle passage and continuous dispersal of African American families during slavery results in a "social death" due to the destruction of traditional lineages and familial structures, thus creating an environment of emotional tension.[6]

The destruction of kinship groups and the lineages inscribed therein has remained a popular theme in African American literature, often reflected in arguments and discourses of leadership, the family and/or work and gender roles. Many discussions of poverty and youth violence revisit the destruction of the family unit and point to a lack of a powerful father figure or patriarch as a leading concern. Reprising these themes in hip hop, a discourse especially concerned with wealth, power and domination, many songs and personas are built around the rise to power of a king(pin) from poverty and oppression. A recent rap song by Nas ascribes both the strength and frustration of African American manhood as the result of the "blood of a slave" coursing through the "heart of a king."[7]

TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY

It's no surprise that kingly authority would be posited as the ideal for a scattered and oppressed people. It would seem to provide Diasporal culture with a foundation toward the establishment of its cohesive identity and connection to Africa. But a philosophical analysis, by Godfrey Tangwa ,of the political structure and stability of pre-colonial African kingdoms, some relatively large such as Ghana, Songhai, Benin, Bornu, and Sokoto, and others relatively small such as Nso', Bafut, Kom reveals a combination of leadership strategies, including the important role of democratic processes in traditional governance. [8] Tangwa for example, argues that traditional African leadership and authority systems might be understood somewhat paradoxically as the "harmonious marriage between autocratic dictatorship and popular democracy." Specific formal practices (which vary between cultures) positioned the citizenry is to authorize, critique and sanction the ascension of their ruler, his/her continued reign and the selection and ascension of his/her successor. [9]

These procedures are also described by Michael Tabuwe Aletum as "the exercise of democracy in traditional institutions… [through] checks and balances" imposed by citizenry participation in the transition and maintenance of leadership. [10] As an example he describes the Bafut kingdom, of Bamenda, Cameroon, where "when the new ruler has been installed, he is presented to the Bafut population for 'stoning."[11] The ceremonial stoning may consist of tiny, harmless pebbles in the case of an approved and respected new leader, or of large, injurious rocks hurled so as to maim, chase off or kill the undesired incumbent. In either case it reminds the new ruler what could happen if his rule became illegitimate. However, if the leader survived the coronation, dethronement after the fact was unlikely. Robert and Pat Ritzenthaler note that "[t]he stoning indicates that this is the last chance the people have to treat as mortal the man they are elevating to the chieftainship. From this time onward he becomes a king and a god."[12]

The choice of a leader was politically charged and if contestation arose, many traditional African cultures employed ritual checks and balances for resolving conflicts, especially those relating to succession issues. Some offices had categorical requirements of gender or age that narrowed the competition. In some cases certain responsibilities fell to the eldest male or youngest female, or

choices could be be made between several people of approximately the same age. A prescribed inheritance pattern that connected certain classes or families is sometimes required. For example, Tangwa describes a particular strategy where the leader is chosen from a committee comprised of distinct gender and class representatives.[13]

There were also checks and balances among traditional administrators. While some top offices were lifetime appointments, other titles were graded whereby one could enter the kingdom in one administrative capacity but might hope, with time and good assessments, to be promoted. Chieftaincies could be graded according to status and population size as first, second, and third class, for example. These grades were also politically important and dependent on their level of rank and popularity, chiefs could have lesser or greater influence on community life and resources.[14]

Noble status in pre-colonial African society thus often depended upon both, the fact of birth and some form of community approval. To use a familiar philosophical turn of phrase, both are necessary and neither is sufficient in isolation. Other ritual acts and elements, such as ceremonial objects with an established protocol for usage (for example, stools, palaces, caps, cups, etc.) could not be wielded at the King's whim. The ritual objects were psychologically invested with ancestral power thus inhibiting their abuse. Aletum notes again, "[I]f the transfer of power in the above societies [did] not follow the customs and traditions dictated by the ancestors, the usurper after sitting on the ancestral stool suffer[ed] a serious mishap such as sterility, madness or even death. This also [was] true for a rightful chief going against the decision taken by the people while at the same time drinking from the ancestral cup to which he swore allegiance to the people."[15]

The reign of a particular king, however loved or despised, was never more significant than the endurance of the kingdom itself. Iterating Brutus's declaration of loving Rome more than a wayward Caesar, Tangwa observes that when the ruler was perceived to be a political liability, "[i]n some traditional African Kingdoms the King/Queen could even be quietly executed or asked to voluntarily drink poison if his/her continued reign was considered dangerous for the survival and/or well-being of the Kingdom."[16] Auxiliary authorities, often of a highly respected religious and/or elder status (for e.g., the Queen-Mother, traditional councils, healers, shamans and secret societies) bestowed and/or removed kingship and continually advised the King in roles that mediated the autocracy of the kingdom;

> For while the King or Queen generally appeared very powerful (especially from outside) and his/her word could frequently condemn anyone to death, s/he was, nevertheless, subject to very strict control, not only by means of taboos but from institutions and personalities of very high moral authority and integrity whose main preoccupation was protection and safeguarding of the Kingdom as distinguished from the King, the interests of the ordinary person, the land, the ancestors and the unborn.[17]

The distinction between the role of kings and queens before, during and after colonialism is important and goes toward the broader issue of the appeal of kingly authority in the Diaspora imagination. In a philosophically-motivated account of African cultural identity giving specific attention to "traditional" and "modern" conceptions of authority in Ghana, Kwame Anthony Appiah has contended that the subordination of Asantehene to colonial authority was not as

extreme as the colonial experience might have suggested.[18] Appiah further demonstrates the persistence of African traditional authority during and after colonialism.

Appiah also contends that in some cases what might appear as the persistence of the King's authority *despite* colonialism might be a result *of* colonialism, such that colonialism tipped the scale of autocracy and democracy in favor of the King.[19] The democratic aspects of traditional leadership was weakened by the colonial process, and kings and queens did not generally allow the lay citizen's interests to take priority in the national response to colonial invasion. Thus, if the King did not suffer much diminishment during colonialism (according to Appiah), a number of his subjects clearly did.

Tangwa argues that in contrast to the balance of authority and democracy exhibited in traditional African leadership, "[i]t is the various colonial administrations which introduced pure dictatorships, that is, dictatorships without any checks and balances, in Africa…."[20] As a case in point, Tangwa analyses the conditions that led to the surrender of the Nso' to German colonial occupation. In a story that seems relatively typical, an existing rivalry with the Bamum Kingdom (historically, "ancestral brothers of the Nso'") was intensified and exploited by the Germans to their advantage, such that Bamum allies participated in the German attack and won a victory over the Nso' that Germany's prior intimidation tactics alone had not produced.[21] Captain Houptmann Glauning received notice of surrender from the Fon of Nso', Sëëm II, on June 6, 1906, marking the formal transition in the region from traditional to colonial rule, at which point many citizens of the Nso' state were conscripted for plantation work and ivory poaching. Sëëm II died not long after, but under his successors the Nso' kingdom continued to operate alongside German colonial authority. Paul Mzeka's history of the Nso' kingdom notes that during this time, Nso' leadership took a notably different form. While exercising less control of the nation's resources, the Fon, paradoxically, ruled with more brutal intensity than before. "Pre-German survivors in Nso' insist that coercive use of authority in certain areas of Nso' culture was imitated from the German colonial administration, which used physical force as an instrument of administration."[22]

"Physical force" as the means by which African leaders exerted their authority was apparently exceptional before colonialism. Potentially highly exploitative practices such as polygamy and taxation were possible because of citizen deference to kingly authority and via specific ceremonial procedures and limitations. Little coercion was needed in the average case. But new authoritarian demands, such as the widespread seizure and redistribution of land and forced manual labor with minimal compensation, were apparently different matters.

Over the course of Cameroon's colonial experience, German leaders gradually began influencing the chain of command. Harry Rudin's dissertation on German colonial policy in Cameroon notes that "by decree of 1913 no chief was to be removed from his post and no native was to be appointed chief except with the consent of the governor."[23] This policy and others suggest that traditional governance structures were co-opted, becoming sanctioned by and collaborating with colonists in acquiring power and profits at the expense of an increasingly burdened citizenry. Leading up to the decree, "[i]n 1909 Governor Satz instructed local officials to show proper respect for native chieftains and warned administrators against whipping chieftains or in other ways weakening their authority over tribesmen."[24] In return for "proper respect," the chieftains maintained sufficient local authority to carry out "the responsibility of collecting taxes in the colony when taxation of natives was adopted as a regular policy, their compensation being 5 to

10 percent of the amounts collected."[25] The taxation policy compelled people toward plantations where work conditions yielded little money and an "appalling death rate."[26]

Certainly at this point it becomes important to ask, to what extent did African leadership remain "traditional," as colonial forces seemed to determine leadership positions and domestic authority structures. It also appears that the presence of more vicious (and thus more effective) rulers impressed traditional leaders to emulate their ways and means. Some actively sought out the religion and culture of their colonizers in order to assimilate and partake in the power to which they had been subjugated. One example regarding colonial religion comes from Sultan Njoya of Bamum, who changed his religion from traditional animism to Islam as a result of a nearby Fulani triumph, then to Christianity following the German invasion, then back to Islam after the Treaty of Versailles. One could argue that he consistently followed the animist belief in gods of different names, powers and properties, by choosing the most powerful god of the day, but in the end he declared allegiance to Islam. It is said that the Sultan resented giving up alcohol consumption as a Muslim and polygamy as a Christian, and thus synthesized elements of (or vacillated between) the two monotheistic religions.[27]

It is deeply ironic that Diasporal Imagination would valorize the aspect of traditional leadership that seems in some cases to have been empowered by slavery and colonialism at the expense of democratic processes and the popular citizenry. Most of these contemporary notions of African royalty, reference a conception of African antiquity rather than the actual state of affairs.

At this point in time, the advantages (or prospects) of traditional governance on the continent are varied and dubious for nobles as well as their subjects. In contemporary Cameroon I have seen malnourished Bafut royals in rags, and Queens who perform traditional dances for tourists asking for a second round of tips (as the first round goes to the Fon). As to the visible economic disparity and depravation among the children, each of the Fon's wives is expected to be self-supporting.[28] However, each receives a minimal stipend from the Fon on behalf of her children, but to which she apparently contributes.

In general, these days' advantages of any traditional role probably lie in relation or connection to the ruling party government. Reciprocally, some politicians contend that the chances of being chosen for traditional leadership might be improved if one has held ministerial or other government offices.[29] I would also venture that in general, traditional leaders from areas that have resisted western capitalism, urbanization or territorial encroachment, do not speak colonial languages such as French or English, and/or do not participate in national elections (such as the Baka, the indigene and most economically oppressed group in Cameroon) are less likely to influence the government and their "subjects" may continue to face problems of poverty and neglect.

CONCLUSION

This brief account of traditional African leadership and its contemporary role in the African Diaspora is by no means historically or conceptually exhaustive, nor are examples from Cameroon meant to be completely representative. I mean only to provide enough detail to argue that firstly traditional leadership was not just the authority of "kings and queens," as construed in contemporary Diasporal Imaginations, but was rather composed of queen-mothers and councils, secret societies and mystics, rituals and ceremonies, rules and doctrines, and subject-citizens.

Further I have argued that, hereditary leadership is a problematic model to utilize for the empowerment of Africans of the Diaspora today.

In conclusion, an analysis of power and psychological orientation "towards reconciliation in the motherland" must consider as problematic the "recovery" and reclaiming African authority in the form of hereditary and hierarchical power by emphasizing dynastic cultures, creating hierarchical religious structures or seeking the approval of present-day traditional rulers on the continent.[30] Since most practitioners of African religions in the United States, especially the titled and elder ones, are themselves "first generation" converts, it remains to be seen what will come of their attempts to forge a royal lineage.[31] But, if as I have argued, hereditary authority is socially constructed, then it is necessary to take into critical account the social processes that created and maintain these institutions.

Further, if it is the case that traditional African leadership as such was never without control or accountability to the masses, and that colonialism affected a dictatorial modality that encouraged the exploitation of the masses, popular interest today should reexamine the principles upon which claims to royalty, rule and privileges are supported. This in turn will require a reconsideration of the fascination, in the Diasporal Imagination, with a history of Africa that displays grandeur and power wielded by the few over the many, as well as the questioning of the hierarchies replicated in New World religious practices. On this account, perhaps African redemption is to be found not in the "return to royalty" but to the democracy which makes a respected leadership possible.[32]

NOTES

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[2] Anderson, Benedict, 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso Books.

[3] The Ausar Auset Society is an organization providing spiritual training based on cultural expressions indigenous to Africa. 25th Anniversary King's Day Ceremony, URL http://interchange.org/nsagislist/NL08109812.html

[4] See URL http://www.geocities.com/roots_n_rooted/oyotunji2.html.

[5] Equiano, Olaudah, 1969. First publication in 1789. *[The Interesting Narrative of] The Life of Olaudah Equiano [or Gustavus Vassa, the African.]* With an introduction by Paul Edwards. London: Dawsons.

[6] Patterson, Orlando, 1990. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[7] Nas , 2001 "Stillmatic (the Intro.)" *Stillmatic.* New York: Sony.

[8] Tangwa, Godfrey, 1998. "Democracy and Development in Africa: Putting the Horse Before the Cart." *Road Companion to Democracy and Meritocracy.* Bellingham, WA: Kola Tree Press, p. 2.

[9] Tangwa, p. 2.

[10] Aletum, Tabuwe Michael, 2001. *Political Sociology.* Yaounde, Cameroon: Patoh Publishers, p. 209.

[11] Aletum, p. 209.

[12] Aletum, *op cit*, Ritzenthaler, Robert and Ritzenthaler, Pat, 1964. *Cameroon's Village: An ethnography of the Bafut.* Milwaukee, WI: North American Press, p. 73.

[13] Tangwa, (1998) p. 6. "The King (Fon) of Nso', who by original consensus, was always selected by a committee headed by the leader of one of the strands comprising the Kingdom from among the male offspring of a female of another distinct strand (the *mmntar* or free commoner class) and a male of yet another strand (the acknowledged royal *wonto*' or princes class), had very extensive powers which were, however, considered as held in trust and subject to several putative controls."

[14] Teku Tanyi Teku, Ph.D. candidate in psychology at University of Ibadan, Nigeria, discussion with the author, June 24, 2002.

[15] Aletum, p. 206.

[16] Tangwa, (1998), p. 3.

[17] Tangwa, p.2.

[18] Appiah, K. Anthony, 1993. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture.* London: Oxford University Press.

[19] Tangwa, p. 2.

[20] Tangwa, p. 8.

[21] Tangwa, p. 7.

[22] Tangwa, *op cit.* See Mzeka, N. Paul, 1990. *Four Fons Nso': Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Kingship in the Western Grassfields.* Bamenda, Cameroon: The Spider Publishing Enterprise, p. 77.

[23] Rudin, Harry R., 1938. *Germans in the Cameroons, 1884-1914; a case study in modern imperialism.* New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 213.

[24] Rudin, p. 213.

[25] Rudin, p. 214.

[26] Rudin, p. 327.

[27] From a lecture tour at the Bamum Palace. See also Geary, Christraud M., 1983. *Things of the Palace: a catalogue of the Bamum Palace in Foumban (Cameroon.)* Weisbaden: F. Steiner Verlag.

[28] Teku, interview with author.

[29] This is the current claim of an opposition party leader in Foumban who contends that he is the rightful heir of the Bamum Sultanate and was usurped because the contender was a minister of the ruling party.

[30] Landau, Jennifer and Moore, David Chioni, "Towards Reconciliation in the Motherland: Race, Class, Nationality, Gender and the Complexities of American Student Presence at the University of Ghana, Legon." *Frontiers: the Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* [Fall 2001: 25]

[31] Oba Adefunmi is noted as the first African American to receive the priesthood and *babalawo* ranking in the Lukumi tradition in Cuba and the first to obtain recognition from the Ooni in Nigeria.

[32] Phrase from the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem.