

Harnessing Israelite and Yoruba Traditional Eldership Systems and Responsibilities for Moral Transformation in Nigeria

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Abstract

There has been, in recent times, a considerable upsurge of moral laxity in Nigeria. It is not an exaggeration to say that moral rectitude is now becoming an elusive principle among Nigerian youths. Unfortunately, this dangerous trend is traceable to the deplorable behaviour of today's adults whose attitude and social orientation amount to wanton disregard or abandonment of traditional norms and practices. The actions of many adults today display a preference for liberal and popular culture, especially those reflective of the pervasive individualism and technological excesses of the post-modern Western world. The deeds and manners of many adults today are frequently sacrilegious, aside from other anomalies associated with their lack of cultural consciousness, discipline, self-control, and a sense of responsibility and fairness. Today's adults, generally speaking, appear to be bequeathing an immoral, misleading, and abysmally unstable foundation to Nigerian youths. Towards the reversal of the above undesirable trend, this paper examines the axiological nature of Israelites' and Yoruba traditional moral systems and the altruistic philosophies of their systems of social organisation overseen by elders. In the two traditions, every elderly person was expected to possess the attributes or qualities of a true elder. Besides the virtues and endowment of wisdom and experience acquired along the journey of life, the restraint and wisdom of elders were relied upon to help, guide, control or curtail the exuberance of youths, thereby making the latter to imbibe and display socially acceptable character. This paper explores the implications of harnessing Israelite and traditional Yoruba eldership systems and responsibilities for moral transformation in Nigeria. Using historical-critical method, the paper recommends that moral laxity nowadays should be addressed from eldership perspectives; it should not be blamed on the youths but on the present generation of elders, since the youths are largely offshoots of the cultural and social systems handed down to them by elders.

Keywords: Israelite, Yoruba, Nigeria, traditional, eldership, responsibilities, moral transformation

INTRODUCTION

The most inestimable and incomparable asset in humanity is moral rectitude; though generally disdained, it is rewarding, here on earth and at the eschaton. Morality is a virtue, an uncommon blessing, the beauty of any community, and

a pivot on which all other communal values and obligations are placed. Thus, in the ancient world, moral value inculcation was considered compulsory as it served as effective and pragmatic way by which the elders imparted time-honoured norms, ideas and virtues to the younger members of the community. This traditional enterprise, which is indispensable to the stability of the society, has remained a most neglected practice in Nigerian today. The neglect is now visible as it is reflected in the chaotic nature of the Nigerian society and in its rampant corrupt practices. And the bane of this unfortunate situation is that the present generation of elders has been unduly influenced by the self-centred and consumerist nature of the contemporary political system. Hence, our elderly elites are not enthusiastic about moral value inculcation, but only emphasise academic qualification. In fact, mindful of the consequences of this modern system, Shrivastava (2017) affirmed that ‘Education without value is not only useless but also very harmful.’

Today, moral value inculcation, as observed in the ancient traditions, is imperatively required. This paper’s scope, in contextualising the role of elders as corrective instruments in human society, is the traditional Yoruba society of south-western Nigeria and the ancient/biblical society of the Israelites. Our study of ancient eldership perspectives, and their chronological and sapiential dimensions, will be conducted within the context of traditional Yoruba and Jewish settings, in spite of both traditions’ customary and institutional differences.

ELDERSHIP AND REPONSIBILITIES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

It is a truism that every society, for its own safeguard and prosperity, needs a well-ordered and recognised leadership. This arrangement is actually seen in every civilised society, and even among barbarous people. In Israel, as among all other ancient peoples, there are groups of men who are known as the elders that are representing their people in various capacities. These elders are not only persons of advanced age, but also men of distinct social grade. The Hebrew word *Zaqen* (‘elder’ or ‘old man’) is equivalent to *Sibum* in Akkadian, *Senator* in Latin, *Geron* in Greek and *Sheikh* in Arabic languages. The elders, in ancient Israel, were the consulting body of the city, nation or king considered as ‘the wise’ (Ezk. 7:26; Jer. 18:18). There were three distinct categories of men in ancient Israel, designated in the Old Testament as ‘elders’. The first category of elders mentioned in the biblical texts, as Willis Timothy observed, is ‘the elders of Israel’, sometimes said to have consisted of seventy men (Exd. 24:1; Num. 11:16), which was a representative body for the Sanhendrin sometimes after the Babylonian exile. The second category of elders is a group of administrative advisers in the royal court called ‘elders of the king’s house’ or simply ‘the elders’ (2Sam. 12:17; Gen. 24:2; 50:7; 1Kings 12:6 - 15). This body faded away after the fall of Jerusalem, but its memory

was preserved in some apocalyptic literatures (2 Enoch 4; Rev. 4:4, 10; 19:4). The third category of elders is the elders of cities who were the institutional ancestors to the elders Paul described in Timothy and Titus.

However, as a social institution, there are various types of elders mentioned under the above stated categories. These include:

- elders of people (Israel, Judah, Moab, Midian, Egypt – Num. 22:4, 7; Gen 50:7)
- elders of an area (Gilead – Judges 11:5-11)
- elders of tribe (each tribe of Israel – Deut. 31: 28)
- elders of the Diaspora (in Babylonian exile – Jer. 29:1)
- elders of the priest – 2 Kings 19:2; Jer. 19:1
- elders of the city – Deut. 19:12; Josh. 20:4-5; Judges 8:14 -16; Ruth 4: 1-12
- elders of the house (palace) – 2 Sam. 12:17

The most prominent of all these groups of elders are the elders of the people (or country) and the elders of the city.

Elders of the City

In ancient Israel, these elders represented their fellow citizens in the local matters. Their functions are best exemplified by the laws of Deuteronomy. They were involved in several cases that dealt with protection of the family and local patriarchal interests.

Qualifications of a City Elder

The following are the qualifications of a city elder:

(1) He is a senior member of a large extended family. The basic family unit is not the nuclear family (husband-wife-children) in this context, but the ‘extended family’ or ‘minimal lineage’. An extended family consists of the oldest surviving member of a family and all his descendants. A minimal lineage consists of one or more extended family, descended from a common ancestor who lived a few generations prior to the families currently living. Such a group may consist of 20 -200 persons. In spite of this size, the minimal lineage often functions as we would expect a nuclear family to function. Members share common economic, emotional, moral and legal responsibilities. When one member is in need, the whole family helps; suffers, the whole family

hurts; sins, the whole family is shamed; is physically threatened, the whole family defends; or is accused of wrong deeds, the whole family equally bears the consequences. So, in Israel, elders arise from the ranks of senior members of the various extended families within these lineages. This qualification (family identity) gives such elders a significant constituency, and also a voice in the entire community.

(2) He is wealthy, but also generous and hospitable. This character demonstrates to his family and the broader community that he has the interest of the community, not just his personal interest, at heart.

(3) His character exemplifies the standards of ethic and morality which the community esteems most highly. A person who is hot-headed or unsociable or that displayed undue favourism would not be selected.

(4) He is well versed in his people's 'secret knowledge' (religious practices, customs, and history). His older age, numerous life experiences, and accumulated wisdom enable him to serve effectively.

(5) He is known in the community for his oratorical skills, especially his skill of persuasion. This knowledge and the oratorical skills will enable him to truly represent his group effectively.

Functions of City Elders

There are fifteen clear references in the Old Testament to the roles and functions of City elders of the Israelites: Deut. 19:12; 21:8; 21:19-20; 22:15-19; 25: 5- 10; 27:1; Josh. 20: 4-5; Judges 8:14-16; 11:5-11; Ruth 4: 1-12; 1 Sam. 11:3; 16:4; 1Kings 21: 8-12; Ezra 10:14; Prov. 32:23. From these texts, it is evident that the city elders can serves in the following capacities:

- (i) blood redemption – Deut. 19:12-13; Num. 35:16-17; Josh. 20:1-5.
- (ii) expiation of murder by an unknown culprit – Deut. 21:1-9
- (iii) punish rebellious or disobedient sons – Deut. 21:18-21
- (iv) inflict penalty for adultery or defamation of a virgin – Deut. 22:13-21
- (v) address non-compliance with the levirate marriage law – Deut. 25:5-10
- (vi) involve in land transactions – Ruth 4:1-12
- (vii) function as representatives of their respective communities – 1Sam. 16:4-5
- (viii) responsible for law enforcement – Deut. 27:1.

In the first responsibility, the elders tend to appease the murdered person's family by delivering the slayer into its hand. In the second instance, the elders see to it that their town atones for a homicide committed within its borders. In the next two instances, the elders protect the family against a rebellious son and against defamation. In the fourth and fifth instances, the elders are concerned with preventing the extinctions of the family in the town. The last two instances centre on the elders representing their people in the community. No professional judgement is necessary in all the cases; elders presided over a case whose consequences are clear. The same applied to Ruth 4:2ff, where the elders only confirmed the act of levirate.

However, 'the judges' in the law of Deuteronomy have functions that are different from those of the elders. The judges act in connection with disputes (Deut. 17:8ff) that can not be solved by the local patriarchal representatives, but need a higher and more objective judicial authority. Disputes and controversies involve thorough investigation (Deut. 19: 18) which can be made only by qualified and professional people. These judges are nominated (Deut. 16:19) in contradistinction to the elders, whose dignity is as a rule hereditary. In only one case in Deuteronomy do the elders act together with the Judges: the case of unknown murder (Deut. 21: 1ff). The elders of the town nearest the spot where the corpse was found have to perform the expiation rite on behalf of their town.

There is little evidence that the structure and functions of Israelites city elders changed much over the centuries. The most significant change came when they were exiled to Assyria and Babylon, and during the subsequent Diaspora. Then, many Jews were transplanted to non-Jewish 'district' or 'quarters' where leading men of the Jewish community served as elders, with the community's religious life now revolving around the synagogue. Though the form of the societal structures of the cities in which they came to dwell were sometimes quite different from those of their past, the people still maintained old customs and beliefs in their new environment.

The Elders of the People or Country

In the city-state, as it existed in Canaan, the elders of the city were identical with the elders of the state. However, in Israel, both before and during the time of monarchy, the elders of the town and those of the people, country and congregation operated separately. Matters that concern the entire confederation or the nation were brought to the elders of the people; and after the division of the kingdom, they were brought to the elders of Israel and Judah, whereas the elders of the town dealt only with the local provincial problems. It is not known how the elders of the country were appointed, but it is possible that they were recruited from the city elders. One might argue that the monarchy had

deprived the elders of their power and authority, but this was not the case. Even as a powerful king, Ahab had to consult ‘the elders of the land’ before proclaiming war (1Kings 20:7). It is unnecessary to dedicate extensive discussion to the important roles that the elders of Israel and Judah played at the time of David (2Sam. 3: 17; 5:3; 17:4, 15). The elders cooperated with Elisha against the king (2 Kings 6: 32), and the elders of the land interfered in the trial of Jeremiah (Jer. 27:17). The ‘people of the land’ or the ‘people of Judah’ who took action when the dynasty was at stake seem to be identical with the elders of Judah.

Functions of the Elders of the People

- They are to represent the people in the sacred covenant and in the proclamation of the law (Ex. 19:7; 24:1, 9; Deut. 27:1; 29:9; 31:9; Josh 8:33; 24:1; cf 2 Kings 23:1)
- They are to appoint a leaders or king 1Sam. 8:4; Judges 11: 4-11
- They are to proclaim war Josh. 8:10; 2 Sam. 17:4-15; cf 1 Kings 20:7
- They are to conduct political negotiations and make agreements Exd. 3:16, 18:29; Num. 16:25; 2Sam. 3:17; 5:3
- They are to perform sacred ceremonies Exd. 12: 21; 18:12; Lev. 9:1; 1Sam. 4:3; 1Kings 8:1, 3; 1Chron. 16:25
- They are to act in times of national crisis Exd. 17:5-7; Josh.7:6; 1Sam. 4:3; 21:16

The elders held their meetings near the city gate (Deut. 21:19; 22:15; 25:7; Ruth 4: 1ff; Lam. 5:14), and more precisely, in the square located next to the gate (Job 29:7-8). In the desert, the assemblies were held ‘at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting’. The place of the assembly had also been called ‘the threshing floor’ (1 Kings 22:10 NIV) because of its smooth, stamped surface and its circular shape.

NATURE AND ROLES OF ELDERS IN YORUBA CONTEXT

There are vast number of considerable parallels between Israelite cultural tradition and that of the Yoruba people. These puzzling, but exciting, affinities had been presupposed and taken for granted by the contemporary readers of the bible. The similarities between Israelites cultural heritage and that of the Yoruba are acknowledged from the perspectives of religion, economics, politics, history, aesthetic, ethic, military and kingship. Thus, the Yoruba indigenous understanding of eldership and its chronological and sapiental roles is uniquely similar to that of the Israelites.

Eldership among the Yoruba People

The Yoruba word *agba*, which is translated as ‘elder’ is socially and philosophically interpreted from three ends: the ontological-supernatural, the chronological and mental-ethical evaluative. The ontological-supernatural explains the existence of certain people in the Yoruba community who are believed to possess supernatural power and are supersensible, capable of identifying what happens in the metaphysical realm. Adebayo described them as an assemblage of ancestral forces, witches and wizards and other spiritual agents that ruled the Yoruba universe, and whose powers exceeded those of ordinary mortals. These people are referred to as *agba* among the Yoruba, regardless of their chronological age. Because of their extraordinary nature, they could be consulted for solution in times of difficulties. When there is problem, especially the one that defies all natural solutions, one could be encouraged thus: *To awon agba lo* (Go and consult the elders). Besides, in order to live a secured and a successful life, one could be advised thus: *Fi ori moa won agba leyin* (Walk closely with the elders). In the Yoruba thought system, offending these kinds of *agba* could greatly be consequential and therefore, people are often warned that: *Ma se te aso agba mole* (Don’t step on elder’s garment), meaning that one should not take such *agba* for granted. Being aware of the danger of offending these *agba*, the Yoruba people always say a prayer that: *O ko ni se awon agba* (May you not offend the elders). A young person that is found in this category will be addressed as *agba omo* (an elderly). This means a child that is possessed, having diabolic power. Also, *agba omo* can be used to refer to a young person, with highly mental and ethical abilities. However, this is different from *Omo Odo Agba* (a child of elders).

The second usage of the word *agba* has chronological implication. When the Yoruba people say: *Oju agba to jin o ni ohun to ri* (The sunken eye of an elder must have seen something), emphasis is on chronological age. Other Yoruba proverbs in reference to chronological age include: *B’omode ba laso bi agba, ko lakisia bi agba* (If a child has as many clothes as the elders, he cannot have as much rags); *Owo omode o to pepe t, ’agbalagbao wo keregbe* (The child’s hand does not reach up to the shelf while that of the elder does not enter into the gourd); *Agba to je ajeeweyin ni yoo ru igba re dele* (An elder that fails to leave the left-over (of meal) for the child will himself pack the empty plates), etc. This implies that the Yoruba people use the word *agba* for older people in the society. Similar Yoruba nomenclatures for *agba* are: *agbalagba* (elder), *arugbo* (aged person) and *abewu* (gray-haired).

The third usage of the word *agba* has to do with mental-ethical assessment. This explains the *agba* (elder) who are respected individual, identified by age and other natural qualities, which mark them out of their families,

communities, nations, religions and the world. These are the true elders and are given highest status in the community because they are respected because their lives are in the best tradition of the community. These *agba* are considered indispensable in the Yoruba societies; in line with this observation, some scholars have made a distinction between the ‘elders’ and the ‘older’ person, arguing for the possibility of being an older person but not truly being an elder. This position seems tenable and quite fascinating as it happens even in this contemporary time.

However, it should be noted that in the traditional Yoruba understanding of *agba*, every older person was expected to possess the attributive qualities of true elder. To the Yoruba people, wisdom, knowledge, perspective, discernment, insight and intellectual capabilities are the domains of aged people. Failure to display these qualities is considered abnormal, ridiculous and unwelcomed. That is why such a person will not be respected in the community, and can be ridiculously referred to as *Adagba-ma-gbon* (though aged but not wise), *Adagba-ma-danu* (though aged but matured), *Adagba-ma-kuro-larobo* (though aged but not childish), etc.

The Roles of the Yoruba Elders

Elders, among the Yoruba, are taken to be indispensable and the absence of their wisdom and roles can lead to total moral decay and non-adherence to law and order in the society. Hence, it is said that: *Agba ko si Ilu baje, bale ile ku ile daharo* (Without elderly people, communities and villages will collapse). In the Yoruba society, elders are seen as corrective instruments, as it is said among them that: *Agba kii wa loja ki ori omo titun o wo* (The elder in a market place would not allow a baby’s neck (at the back of the mother) to be wrongly placed). It is also said that: *Bi owo bar u omode loju, a si fun agba ka* (If a child is confused in the act of counting money, he will give it to the elder to count).

In the Yoruba world-view, the virtues and endowment of strength wisdom and experiences attached to the elders, especially the old person, are meant to help, support, guide or control the youths in a way that their exuberance will be judiciously curtailed and acceptable character be extolled through them in the society.

The sapiential roles of elders in traditional Yoruba communities are explicitly stated by Olayinka Ajomale (2007). Traditionally, according to him:

- The elderly persons head the family and the extended clan that dominates the Yoruba communities.
- They represent their families in any Council of Elders’ meetings where

decisions are taken to regulate and promote the general interest of citizens and to manage the affairs of their communities.

- The elders in the society carry out traditional responsibilities of guardians of the ancestral values; they are chief custodians of society's treasures and upholders of history, cultural values, customs, folklores, and wisdom.
- The elders settle disputes and conflicts arising from members of the family, based on their position, knowledge, skill, vision, experience and wisdom.
- They are considered to be custodians of justice and political institutions through which the society's orderliness and progress is sustained.
- Besides, older persons in traditional Yoruba societies have remained traditional orthodox medical and health service delivery agents, especially in the areas where primary health care is non-existent.

From the foregoing, it can be observed that, among the Yoruba people, elders are responsible for continually contemplating the good and the right things to do in the community. In line with their eldership status, they are not or should not be driven by personal desires, gains or individual rewards. They cannot be seduced, tempted or influenced; they eschew favourism, personal desires or selfish interest. In fact, this eldership status places them above any form of manipulation. Their singular goal is to guide and guarantee the corporate good and collective advancement of their communities. The judgement and decisions of elders are always consistent with the community's cultural integrity and directed towards truth and justice. In fact, just like in the Jewish culture (Prov. 15: 9-10), to have elders live with you, and for you to have available their daily guidance, is considered a great blessing and advantage. Being in the presence of an elder is even considered an honour.

ELDERSHIP AND MORALITY IN NIGERIA

The discerning mind will critically be disposed to concede to the fact that many social vices ascribed to the youths today, such as lying, fraud, extortion, sexual assault, cultism, fighting, killings, and other atrocities, are behavioural traits of contemporary adults. This bane of moral laxity in Nigerian societies has been noted by Paul Richard (2020) when he posited that 'Unfortunately, many of the role models of young people are setting bad examples.'

In moral development, parents are the first teachers and role models of their children. In the ancient times, it was the duty of parents to bring up their children ethically and in the knowledge of God. From the beginning, children

were taught to believe in personal success, defined in terms of family and community relationship and also in rewards and punishment. They were taught to report to their parents any kind of gesture by others and to show their parents any gift received. The child is also taught to be honest without being a tattletale. Parents also taught their children discipline, self-denial and deferred gratification.

Then, coming to the community at large, children were prepared to seek group survival through acquiring a sense of belonging and loyalty to the group, thereby consolidating what had been taught at family level. Generally, in traditional African education, high premium was placed on character training, which was seen as the pillar of education. Thus, it was an aberration for an adult member to remain unconcerned about matters relating to moral value inculcation, as such could inflict assault on the value of old-age eldership.

Now, in modern societies, adults are less enthusiastic about this. The attendant effect is that the human value of good life with wisdom behind it, which is an African organisational principle inherent in our values, norms, rules, and ontological cosmology that children are to learn from the adults, is now regarded as being archaic. Age-old self-discipline and self-respect are no more there as parents teach their children to lie at home and in the school; to lie to visitors and to their teachers, especially about their age. Today, elders abuse or insult one another, even in the presence of the young people; there is no more mutual respect at home and in the entire community. In school, teachers insult, castigate or use derogatory words on their contemporaries. Some teachers, particularly single Grade II, NCE, or OND ones, appear before their students indecently dressed.

In terms of discipline, adults today are not communally conscious, probably because the liberal and individualistic nature of their upbringing influence de-emphasised regard for cultural values and recognition of traditional authority and ways of life. Thus, their children mirror their parents by growing without solid home-based moral foundation, the absence of which is reflected in their indiscriminate copying of the standards and actions of Western youngsters, some of whom sue their parents - a taboo in African and biblical culture.

Africans, like ancient Israelites, believe in the potency of blessings and the efficacy of curses issued by a parent or elder; the spiritual implication of both cannot be reversed by any court room. That was why in those days, people tried as much as possible to warn their children against disrespecting an elderly person. But many of today's adults are not bothered, as some even poison the tender hearts of their children with sacrilegious statements or acts; and this partially explains why youths today are morally deficient.

One Yoruba proverb says: *Ogede n baje a ni n pon* (A plantain is decaying while we refer to it as ripe). Whatever mentality we choose to cherish, be it modern, liberal, popular or techno-scientific, Nigerians should realise that the fate of any morally deficient society is doom. Nigerian adults should be self-conscious and self-disciplined; they should be fair and firm, and lead morally upright and transparent lives that would make them good role models for the youths.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper addressed the problem of moral decadence in contemporary Nigeria and the possibility of harnessing a solution using Israelite and Yoruba eldership traditions as a template. The work examined the place, qualifications and functions of elders in ancient Israel, with particular reference to their enviable lifestyles at family and communal levels. The paper also explored the Yoruba indigenous understanding of eldership as well as the traditional roles of elders. It focused on the numerous lessons to learn from studying both cultures.

Based on the study, the work recommends that:

- (i) Issues of moral laxity in contemporary societies should be addressed from eldership perspectives. The problem should not be blamed on the youths, but on the present generation of adults since present-day youths are offshoots of present-day adults and the modern social systems they have put in place.
- (ii) The present generation of elders should be self-conscious and self-respecting. Older persons should try as much as possible to live in such a way that will make them positively influence the younger generation.
- (iii) Older persons should enthusiastically cherish moral value inculcation. Character training requires collective efforts; it must not be left for only the parents of the children but every organ of the society, including schools and communal groups, should play their own roles for the overall good of the society.
- (iv) Truly corrective and character-moulding moral discipline, rather than overzealous and wicked corporal punishment that inflicts indelible physical and psychological marks on the children, should be enforced in the home, schools and other areas that cater to the healthy development of the youths.
- (v) Adults should always bear in mind that in spite of the technological achievements of the modern time, the fate of a morally deficient society is doom. One Yoruba proverb says: *Agba ti o kehunso, yoo ketan sare* (An elder who does not issue a shout of warning will run zigzag when problem comes).

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