Résumé
A. O. Ojigbo — La résolution des conflits dans le système politique traditionnel des Yoruba. Analyse de ce système fondé sur l'opposition entre lignages royaux et non royaux, et l'attribution, héréditaire ou non, des chefferies et dignités. Rôle des associations rituelles (ogboni) et des facteurs économiques.

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Conflict Resolution
in the Traditional Yoruba Political System

The initial usage of the term “political system” was in reference to the type of governments. However, its meaning later took a different dimension depending, of course, in which context an author used it. Thus, for example, its application to African traditional societies (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940) connoted the whole governmental, political, religious and judicial processes inherent in the case studies discussed in that book. Ever since then the concept of “political system” has taken different turns and twists, but with one common characteristic and, that is, “the use of legitimate physical coercion in societies” (Almond and Powell 1966: 17). David Easton (1953: 130), for example, writes about the allocation of interests and values because of the power of the allocating organ or agency; and Max Weber (Gerth and Mills 1946: 77-78) maintains that the application of legitimate force by the authority is very central to the concept of the political system. To coerce the subunits of the political system so as to conform to a designed goal is, therefore, of extreme importance.

The notion of power is emphasized even more when we introduce the concept of “conflict.” Thus the introduction of the concept of social conflict, which was later applied by political scientists, led to the development of conflict theory, which postulates that conflict, whether obvious or latent, is inherent in any relationship; that conflict results from struggles by individuals or interest groups, and that the product of this competition is political power. Thus a society is spoken of “as politically oriented if and insofar as it aims at exerting influence on the directing authorities of a corporate political group, especially at their appropriation, expropriation, redistribution or allocation of power of government” (Parsons and Smelser 1957: 227). In social conflict, therefore, there is an internal orientation to carry out the wishes of the political machinery against the resistance of the other members of the society by the use of force. Political authority and its unnecessary use could be detrimental to the functions of the society. To ensure maintenance of a stable political and governmental machinery, the society must, therefore, have values that can curb excessive use of force or coercion. To
establish an equilibrated political system, the society must provide for what Almond and Powell (1966: 11) have referred to as “a regulated system of ‘multifunctionality’ (checks and balances), a mixture of functions which, by preventing the aggrandizement of any institution at the expense of the others, maintained the balance of power.” The traditional political system of the Yoruba, though having that definitive legitimatized political coercion has provisions or values that would reduce political conflict to a minimum. The proper functionality of the political and government machinery is thus assured and maintained.

The Yoruba people are located in Yorubaland, which spreads from Lagos State through the Western Region of Nigeria into Ilorin and Kabba provinces in Kwara State. Yorubaland also spreads across the Nigerian border into Dahomey where the Yoruba people are commonly known as Anago. Yorubaland consists of several scores of chieftoms, some of which, such as Oyo, Egbaland, are particularly large, while others are relatively very small. Each kingdom consists of a metropolis and a surrounding territory of villages and towns. The people believe that Ife is their original homeland. Though all the Yoruba people regard the oni (king) of Ife as their traditional head and father, there is no cohesive political machinery uniting all of them since they are in several subgroups such as the Egba, the Oyo Yoruba, the Ijebu and others; and each subtribal group has its own traditional oba or king. Thus we find that apart from the legendary postulate of a common origin, there is no known period in Yoruba history when the people have functioned as a single political entity. The several Yoruba subgroups, besides having their own localized traditional rulers, also have different social structures. Lloyd (1959: 7-32; 1960: 222) has noted that the patrilineal and cognatic descent groups are characteristic of the northern and southern Yoruba subtribal groups respectively. The social differences notwithstanding, there is a common pattern of constitutional functionality of the oba as well as the traditional process of religious legitimization of the kingship. These two constant factors provide us a common denominator to be able to analyse the general mode of conflict resolution in the Yoruba traditional political system, except among such subtribal groups in which we make specific notations.

The institutionalization of British administration and the introduction of alien religious cults, such as Islam and the different factions of Christian missionary activities, have all played an important role in the metamorphosis the traditional institution of chieftaincy or obaship has undergone since the end of the nineteenth century. The governmental and political structures of the traditional administrative machinery have also changed since independence, coupled with the different forces of modernization and the “new ideal” of national integration. With the current wind of change (or is it change of wind?) blowing through Africa, there is the temptation to treat a study of this nature in a contemporary context. This, however, is not our approach here, but rather to make an analytical
study of the type of conflict there was in the traditional Yoruba political system before the advent of a torrent of aggressive modernizing factors and forces, all of which have tended to submerge the past. Even though we will take cognizance of conflict resolutions between the royalty and the general public, the pivotal focus of this study is conflict resolution between the institution of the kingship on the one hand, and the chief-taincy strata on the other.

I. — Social and Political Structure

The social structure of traditional Yoruba society can be divided roughly into two groups: the royal lineage and the non-royal lineage, the latter being the remaining members of the society who, as it were, form the subject group. This latter point of emphasis is so because in the course of the investigation we will show that the latent power of the subjects is so great that the oba himself is really the "subject" of the commoners. The royal lineage consists of both male and female members, all of whom have common patrilineal descent from the first king or oba, who is normally regarded as the founder of the town or subkingdom. The several subkingdoms of the Yoruba people, of course, all trace their descent from Oduduwa, the mythological founder of all Yorubaland. While members of the royal lineage have the unique appellation of omo oba (children of royalty; children of the oba), there is no Yoruba equivalent for members of non-royal households. The term ebi is sometimes applied to non-royal lineages; but it should be emphasized that ebi technically refers to a household or the extended family. For want of a better expression, we will ascribe the ebi terminology to non-royal households in this study, each of which has its own myths of origin such as emigration with a recalcitrant or dissident prince. Or it was common for a prospective oba who lost his bid for the title to a rival to emigrate with his supporters and found a new town or chiefdom. Another common myth of lineage origin is the tracing of the lineage to an ancestor to whom land was alienated by a benevolent oba for services rendered generously and competently.

The several ebi or non-royal lineages that comprise a town are never dependent one on the other, but they all owe a common allegiance to the oba. In some Yoruba kingdoms such as among the Egba of Abeokuta and surrounding towns and villages, there are four royal lineage segments, and kingship rotates from one royal sub-lineage to another. Among the Ado Ewi of the Ado Ekiti Yoruba there are two royal lineage segments and the ascent to the throne is similarly on a rotational basis from one group to the other. These subgroups of royal lineages have a common parity of hierarchial importance as a group, though the king, such as the alake of Abeokuta, during each reign occupies the apical top of the pyramidal social structure. Among some other sub-groups of the
Yoruba, such as in Oyo and Ife, and even as far east as in the Benin Kingdom, the chiefdoms were founded by sons of rulers, and direct lineage ascent can be traced to Odudua; and hence unlike in some other kingdoms where direct lines of lineage descent have been rather blurred. In the former cases, such as with the oni of Ife and the alafin of Oyo, the special relationship to the mythological founder, Odudua, does become extremely prestigious though as Lloyd has noted (1960: 225), "a royal origin of this nature gives the lineage no special political rights."

The political system derives its structure from the social institution of the royal lineage and the several non-royal lineages or ebi that make up the chiefdom. Just as the royal lineage is at a higher social level, so also is it at a higher political escheion. The traditional political and governmental systems of the Yoruba have a pyramidal structure, with an oba (king) at the apical end of the institution, while the lower strata of the system are occupied by the various grades of traditional chiefs, and the rest of the population. The oba is selected from only the royal household; next in line to him on the political structure are the kingmakers and chiefs who all form the Council of Chiefs, and the commoners occupy the lowest level.

![Pyramid Structure of Yoruba Political System](image)

Only members of the royal lineage can become an oba, and these must be persons who can trace their descent from the first oba of that particular chiefdom. Female members of the royal lineage cannot become rulers, and as such only male members of that lineage can reign. But even then male membership to the royal lineage is not an automatic qualification to the obaship. Each Yoruba kingdom has its own restrictive bylaws handed down from and sanctified by ancestors long departed, and these regulations are sacred and irrefutable. Among the Oke Ewi Yoruba of Ekiti, there are three prerequisites besides belonging to the royal lineage (Lloyd 1960: 227) and these are: a prospective oba must be that prince born while his father himself was an oba, and even then he cannot ascend to the throne if he was the first born; a second clause prescribes that the mother of the candidate must be a free woman and not a slave. Thirdly, a king should symbolize all that is good, virtuous and pleasant to behold,
and thus he himself must be free of any physical handicaps or limitations—and hence indeed a prospective oba, even though he satisfied all the other conditions, was once rejected because he was too tall, otherwise he could have looked down, literally and symbolically, on his people. And that is what a Yoruba king or chief must never do.

The chieftaincy rank among the Ekiti consists of three grades: the ihare, the ijoye, and the elegbe, all of which form a descending hierarchial power structure in that order respectively. The ihare group of chiefs is further subdivided into three subgrades: the olori marun whose titles are hereditary, and the elesi and ijegbe subgrades which consist of five and ten chiefs respectively. Diagramatically, therefore, we have a polit-

cical structure as shown on page 280. The spatial arrangement is devised to show the relative hierarchial importance of each chieftaincy group. The positions of the three subgroups of ihare chiefs, as the diagram indicates, are higher than the chiefs who occupy the position of ijoye, who are in turn higher than those in the elegbe category. The five chieftaincy positions of the olori marun (literally, five leaders) are at the top of the hierarchical structure of chiefs among the Oke Ewi of the Ado Ekiti Yoruba.

The political structure of the Oyo Yoruba was more complex, based on title grades, and different palace societies, religious groups and a council of chiefs; each group had its own functions. At the top of the pyramid is the alafin (king) of Oyo, who himself was regarded as the ekeji (companion) of God. Next to the alafin were his assistants responsible for the functioning of the polity, namely, the otun efa, the ona efa and osi efa, who were eunuchs and whose functions were respectively religious ceremonies and offerings, the judiciary process, and functions of the political machinery. The religious ceremonies of the monarchy were many and various and thus the otun efa rarely left the afin palace because of the innumerable rituals associated with that office. Below him were several groups of priests and priestesses of the several orisha (gods) who prayed to and placated the wrath of the several deities in their respective pantheons and shrines. Below the alafin in a horizontal direction was the Council of Chiefs, traditionally referred to as the oyo mesi. This was a very powerful council whose decisions could and often did in fact override the alafin, even though the members of the oyo mesi were traditionally and individually less important than the alafin. We will deal more with the special relationship between the alafin and oyo mesi later. Still lower than all the previous groups on the pyramidal political structure was the ogboni cult which is really a religious society. Though lower than the oyo mesi, the ogboni society was even more powerful, and it was thus indeed the most powerful political unit of the traditional political system among the Oyo Yoruba. The ogboni cult itself consists of two grades, the alawo (or senior grade) and the we-we-we or junior grade. The senior grade consists of two subdivisions: ologboni and ereju, both of which are equal in political importance. The ologboni
Spatial Arrangement of the Hierarchical Political Structure of the Oke Ewi of the Ekiti Yoruba
Spatial Arrangement of the Hierarchical Political Structure of the Oyo Yoruba
consists of all the members of the alawo senior grade, while the erelu is made up of all the female members of the senior grade and they represent the interests of the women of the chiefdom. The other function of the erelu was in administering of poison to persons forced to commit suicide; they fitted very well into the machinery of conflict resolution within the political system and this we will discuss more about later.

II. — Conflit Resolution

While the traditional political system of the Yoruba was not immutable to inherent weaknesses, there was ample provision for, using a description of Almond and Powell (1966: 11), "a regulated system of 'multifunctionality' (checks and balances), a mixture of functions which, by preventing the aggrandizement of any institutions at the expense of the others, maintained the balance of power." First the Council of Chiefs. The five titles of the olori marun in Oke Ewi are hereditary within non-royal lineages and hence none of the titles could be conferred, not even by the oba, on a non-member of that particular lineage. Some of the seats of the elesi are hereditary while the others are filled by appointees of the oba or of other senior chiefs. Only one title of the ijegbe was hereditary and most of the remaining 24 or so positions of these third-grade chiefs were filled by members of the royal lineage. The institutionalization of the various grades of chiefs constitutionally, as defined in the traditional code of the Yoruba, ensured that there would be no usurpation of power by one lineage group, or even by the oba for that matter. Thus we find that a chieftaincy title in the ebi lineage is an exclusive possession of that particular household, and the appointment of a member to fill it is the sole prerogative and decision of that ebi. Each lineage or extended family consists of lineage segments and it is within this framework that a new chief is selected on the death of the previous occupant of a hereditary title.

The chieftaincy title rotates from one segment to another, and hence we should emphasize that a son cannot inherit the title of the father. If a son were allowed to inherit directly from his deceased father, a family could consistently build on its position by its occupation of the chieftaincy title and thus arrogate a further amount of power to itself. Over time, the strength of a family within the lineage group could soar high, as to lead to ultimate usurpation of the hereditary title which is regarded, of course, as a common property of the whole lineage. The family could legitimatize its usurped position later by further power acquired through its prolonged occupancy of that position. Thus we find that the provision that a son cannot inherit a chieftaincy title directly from his father is a form of resolution of any potential conflict inherent in the ascendance to the title. This deliberate exclusion of the sons of a deceased chief from a direct inheritance of the lineage title is, therefore, a
form of maintenance of the status quo. Apart from the exclusion of the sons, inheritance of a chieftaincy title must rotate from one segment of the lineage to another. Again, this provision ensured that a lineage segment could not unduly arrogate power to itself by successive inheritances of the title, and hence this clause provided an egalitarian postulate of the political relationship of the several segments of a lineage.

The fact that the choice of a lineage member to fill a chieftaincy position is an exclusive right of that particular lineage has served an essential conflict resolving role. Were the oba to have the right to interfere in the choice of a successor to a hereditary position of a lineage chieftaincy title, he could influence the choice of the new chief. Thus a newly-installed chief, for the sake of gratitude, theoretically, could owe allegiance more to the king, his benefactor, than to his lineage. This could be detrimental to the interests of the lineage group and the other people in the kingdom. Further, it is indeed very conceivable that an oba, if he had the power, could influence the choice of chiefs and surround himself with an overtly sympathetic court; and hence the possibility of an eventual institutionalization of an autocratic establishment, rather than the continuation of the democratic concept which the ancestors had handed down from time immemorial. The arrogation of the exclusive right of a choice of a successor to a hereditary title to that particular lineage, has permitted the perpetuation of the democratic process in the traditional Yoruba political system. The only one factor outside the lineage that could influence the choice of the successor is the ifa oracle; but the inherent fears as well as the psychic agony of any future retributions which will be consequential to any falsifications of the ifa pronouncements (Bascom 1941: 43-53; Morton-Williams 1960: 34-40), mitigate against rigging or choice of an unsuitable or unpopular candidate. Thus we have found from our investigations that in the traditional society, the choice of a successor had always been within the accepted code of the political structure.

There have been, however, some deliberate breaches of traditional prerequisites in the choice of candidates since the institution of local governments under the Lugardian strategy of Indirect Rule, and even more so during the period of vigorous and militant political activities in the post-independence period. It was during this period that traditional rulers and chiefs had their own Regional House of Chiefs, and their political activities became subject to jurisdiction of the Western Regional Ministry of Local Government. With political brigandry by the various political parties in Nigeria at that time, appointments of chiefs became dictated by the desires of the regional governments and thus led to loss of faith of subjects in some of their chiefs. The unprecedented fact that subjects could pour kerosene on and set their own traditional chiefs on fire, as occurred during the period of political piracy that engulfed the Western Region in 1965 and which was known as “Operation Wet-e,” is
an indication of the result of the process of undemocratization that the traditional system had been reduced to.

In traditional society, the appointment of an *oba* as the head of the political institution and government among the Ekiti Yoruba was the function of the *ihare* chiefs; in Oyo, the function was performed by titled officials of the *ogboni* society after the royal lineage had chosen a successor. Just as the royal lineage could not interfere in the choice of candidates to inherit a hereditary lineage title, so also the general public could not interfere in the deliberations of the royal lineage for the choice of an *oba*. The several ceremonial rituals that would legitimize the appointment of the new *oba*, and the sanctifying sacrifices, were all performed by the senior grade chiefs and the *ogboni* cult. These religious ceremonies are many and complex, one of which was the ritual eating of the heart of the previous *oba*. In Oyo, in particular, not only did the new ruler eat the heart of the previous *oba*, he also drank from the skull. The belief was that a newly-installed *oba*, by so doing, acquired the magico-political power and wisdom of all the previous *oba*, even as far up the ladder as Oduduwá himself. Another belief was that immediate death would result to a newly-installed *oba* who did not meet the prerequisite of a biological descent in the royal lineage. This belief was greatly feared by the Yoruba and hence it was a severe psychological conflict resolution prescription; and it thus acted as a magnanimous restrictive measure against non-royal Yoruba people who might aspire to the throne of that particular chieftdom. It is important to stress that the arrival of missionaries and Christianity sowed doubt in the minds of a number of Yoruba people. Where traditional moral sanctions and beliefs had been judicious means for conflict resolution, or more correctly the prevention of non-royal members to seek the title of the *oba* or even a chieftaincy title, financial wealth could now buy titles. This was particularly common all through post-independence Southern Nigeria, where chiefs were made and unmade because of which candidate had more money to plough his way into an office he was not qualified for.

### III. — Spheres of Power

From the discussion of the schematic hierarchical structure of the traditional political system of the Yoruba, we found that the senior class of chiefs played the most determinant role in the appointment of subordinate chiefs to non-hereditary positions. This restriction of such appointments to the *ihare* chiefs was again a means of ensuring that an *oba* did not have a partisan group of chiefs in his court. Were any of the non-hereditary chief titles appointed by the *oba*, an appointee could regard himself as more important than any of the senior grade chiefs because of the mere fact that he was appointed by the *oba*. This could undermine the importance of the holders of hereditary chieftaincy titles. However,
the powers of the *ihare* chiefs were limited in that they could not appoint all non-hereditary titles. Further, some positions of eligible chieftaincy positions were reserved for members of the royal lineage, and hence an *oba* at least had a group of potential supporters within the council of chiefs. But an autocratic rule was curtailed by the fact that members of the royal lineage were excluded from holding titles of the rank of *ihare* or *ijoye*, and it is these two powerful groups of chiefs that represented the elected body of the kingdom. In this way the subjects of the kingdom felt that they and their interests were represented at the governmental level of the political structure.

Among the Oyo Yoruba, the more powerful machinery in the political system was the group of *oyo mesi*. Any split within the *oyo mesi* was avoided by the taking of a common oath. Because of the oath that bound every member to a unanimous decision, no chief or group of chiefs could mobilize dissident factions within the *oyo mesi* council for their own selfish ends. The *oyo mesi* could, therefore, pass a unanimous decision to oust the *alafin* who was forced to commit suicide. However, the *ogboni* cult was more important than *oyo mesi* itself, and thus the political power of the latter and its leader, the *basorun*, was restrained. Thus as an *apena*, one of the leading *ogboni* cult officials once remarked to Morton-Williams (1960: 364), “every Oba must have Ogboni so that people may fear him.” But as we stated earlier, *oyo mesi* are members of the *alawo* senior grade of the *ogboni* cult, and hence they could, in fact, theoretically at least, influence the *ogboni* cult to uphold any sanctions against the *alafin* they agreed on in their council. This was prevented by the provision that though the *oyo mesi* were members of the *ogboni*, they could not hold any of the title offices of the cult. Should the *ogboni* cult itself be split over a particular decision, a majority rule was accepted, and this was made unanimous and binding by oaths and ritual carried out with the *edan*, the insignia of the cult. Anybody who broke the vow was severely dealt with. Secrecy is paramount in the code at the deliberations over decisions, and anybody who revealed decisions arrived at, met with death. This was not just a threat, but an actual practice and hence an effective weapon for coercing members. This was an important means of preventing tale-bearers, and hence the *alafin* could not count on some members coming to secretly tell him of decisions the cult arrived at.

It is true that the king was linked to the cult through a female *ogboni* delegate, who in turn also linked the *ogboni* to the *alafin’s* religious assistant, the *otun efa*. But it was only the *basorun* and in the presence of the *oyo mesi*, who briefed the *alafin* of serious decisions such as when the *basorun* advised him “to go to sleep” (to commit suicide) because he did not rule well. This was achieved in one of three ways: presenting the *alafin* with an empty calabash; presenting him with eggs of the parrot; or for the *basorun* to inform the *oba* directly that he has abused his office and that he was no longer fit to be king. The dethronement of an *alafin* by suicide was executed by the *cretlu*, the female members of the senior
grade of the ogboni cult; and it was they, "well versed in the most arduous and wicked arts, whose business was spying and eavesdropping and, if called upon, handing the poisoned cup to the persons destined" (Frobenius 1913: 172). Thus the decisions of the oyo mesi could be sanctioned only by the ogboni. The ogboni cult was not only the restrictive measure against the oyo mesi. Another means was that one member of the oyo mesi had to commit suicide also any time an alafin was requested "to go to sleep." And which member of the oyo mesi would want to die with the king?

IV. — The Control of Financial Power

Wealth is indeed an influential factor in the traditional government and political system, since the maintenance of the afin (palace) and the oba's court were all expensive institutions. There are several ways in which the oba acquired wealth. One was through the traditional law which specified that a newly-installed oba should inherit all the property associated with the throne, all of which—including wives—was acquired by previous rulers while they occupied the office. The oba himself would leave all the wealth that he acquired while on the throne to it, and it would in turn be acquired by his successor. Other ways by which an oba acquired wealth included the collection of taxes (mainly in the form of tribute), import duties on all merchandise entering the kingdom, and a part of all booty was arrogated to the king. An oba also acquired wealth through fines imposed at judicial meetings since the government and the judiciary functioned with the traditional ruler at their top, though he might not be present at all proceedings. Newly-installed chiefs paid a certain amount of initiation fee, and part of this went into the coffers of the throne. But by far the greatest amount of revenue was collected by the chiefs in the form of tax on behalf of the king, and the chiefs kept part of this revenue for themselves; "in general, however, the share of the oba tended to equal that of all the chiefs put together" (Lloyd 1960: 229).

This uneven distribution of the revenue collected assured that financial rivalry, and hence political influence and power of the chiefs, was controlled. Further, at the death of a chief, all his wealth passed to all his children and other members of the family—following the traditional laws of inheritance (Ojo 1967: 180-201; Coker 1966: 131-208; Ajsafe 1924: 20-30; Schwab 1955: 370-373; Lloyd 1959: 7-32). Since the wealth and property of a deceased chief was inherited by all his children and relatives, instead of by only his successor, no one single chief could, therefore, rival an oba's wealth and hence a limitation of the power of each chief. Collectively, of course, the chiefs had enough power in other ways to thwart any unnecessary aggressive shows of power by the king. The wealth of the king could not be inherited by his royal lineage segment. However, a newly-installed oba left all the wealth that he acquired before his installation behind for his children and family. The fact is that the
throne is an extremely prestigious position and a shrewd oba could use it to build a financial empire that he could pass on to his children were his children allowed to inherit from him on his death. The prescription that all wealth acquired while a man held the title of an oba belonged to the throne, was an effective weapon of curtailing any excessive wealth—and hence the political power—of the royal lineage, an influence and financial power which could lead to the usurpation of the throne. Any usurpation, of course, would be at the expense of the other lineage segments. Should such a situation occur, the inevitable outcome would be conflict, and hence the traditional provision for conflict control that all the wealth an oba acquired while on the throne should be an exclusive possession of the throne itself.

V. — SIZE OF LINEAGE

We argued at the earlier stages that wealth conferred power on its possessor, and the wealth of the king was usually far more than that of any chief. Thus an oba could theoretically arrogate more power to himself, the throne or the royal lineage. Further, the size of the royal lineage could also ensure more political power to the king. Again, the Yoruba traditional society was such that there were provisions for the curtailment of the king’s political power acquired through size of the royal lineage. An important way of curbing such political influence of the royal lineage was by reduction of its size, and this was achieved in one of several ways. Since an oba must come from the royal lineage, its size could be theoretically very great bearing in mind the numbers of oba that had occupied the throne. Thus over the several score decades the size of the royal lineage could have multiplied several times over, but for the check-and-balances within the traditional society. One mode was the position of unsuccessful candidates. A man who lost his bid for the position of an oba often emigrated with his lineage segment far away to another area to found his own kingdom because he was unwilling to accept a subordinate position or acknowledge the authority of the selected candidate. Usually he left with some of the members of the royal household, and thus resulted a fractionalization of the royal lineage. Another way was for the unsuccessful candidate or a powerful prince to be made a representative of the ruling oba of the metropolitan town in some outskirt of the kingdom. The prince occupied and played a similar role in his new territory as the oba himself did in the metropolis. Another very important means of reducing the power of the royal lineage through a preponderance in the number of its members, was the relationship of princes and their maternal lineage.

As we stressed earlier, a prince could not inherit directly from his deceased oba father. One provision was for him to inherit from his mother’s own lineage. Since the son of a deceased oba could not ascend
to the throne, many princes found it expedient to inherit and develop lands in their mother's lineages, and this was a particularly severe means of reducing the size and weakening the power of the royal lineage. An oba was polygamous and invariably had very many siblings by his different wives. Thus with each child inheriting from his own mother's lineage, the children were invariably scattered and they could not function collectively from their respective maternal homes. An able and energetic man could build and extend his influence substantially in his new residence in the maternal lineage. But as we have indicated the political power he so acquired within his own maternal lineage was not strong enough nor was it adequately cohesive as to successfully create a common political oneness among all siblings of different mothers. In fact, these princes and their own descendents became absorbed into their maternal lineages within two or three generations. In this way people of royal descent were excluded from the royal lineage and hence a reduction in the size of the royal lineage itself. With the curbing of the size, came a weakening of political power of the royal lineage.

VI. — INTRIGUE AND BALANCE OF POWER

There is no difference between the judiciary and legislative arms of government in the traditional Yoruba political system. Both functions were performed by one and the same body. Each group of chiefs met separately and then transmitted its deliberations to the next higher group. The final decisions were made by the olori marun chiefs of the ihare chieftaincy title holders, who in turn informed the oba through one of their own chiefs. Thus, all executive functions were in actual fact carried out by the chiefs rather than by the oba; the latter's function being merely to announce a decision and in such a way that it appeared as if the decision was his personally. The ihare chiefs had to reach some sort of unanimous decision before it was passed on to the king; in this way an arbitrary decision by one person, such as by the oba, was avoided. But the Council of Chiefs could not make any announcements; it was the oba who had to do it, and this royal announcement gave sanction to any deliberations. It is conceivable that the decision of the ihare chiefs of the oke ewi could be different from that of the oba; but then the oba would not make a contrary announcement because by so doing he would be going against the ihare chiefs and hence alienating himself from the whole population. Therefore, we find a delicate balance of power between the oba and his chiefs. Very obviously, the power of the king was limited and hence he could do nothing to bring the chiefs along his own line of thought and action.

However, the king was not all that powerless. His greatest weapon was intrigue. Let us, for example, take the traditional Yoruba warriors. These were organized by the elegbe chiefs, some of whom were, of course,
members of the royal lineage. Yet officially the *oba* could not call on the warriors to put down an insurrection against him. But he could mobilize the warriors through *elégbè* chiefs. Thus since many of the chiefs were members of the royal lineage, it was very practical for the *oba* to mobilize the traditional warriors to quell any riots directed against him. The fact that the warriors were not under the jurisdiction of the *olóri marún* meant that the latter group of chiefs could not unnecessarily use the warriors against the *oba*. Similarly among the Oyo Yoruba, the checks and balances entrenched in the proper functioning of the army were also a means of conflict resolution. The military, which was really a cavalry, was led by the *áre ona kakanfo*, the Army General, who was himself responsible to only one person, the *aláfin*. The *aláfin* himself never went to war but rather he was represented by the *osi 'efa*. Though the *áre ona kakanfo* was responsible to the *aláfin*, the fighting men of the army were raised by the *óyó mesí*. Thus each facet of the military was responsible to only one organ of the political machinery, each of which juggled for power and on each other and thus maintained restraining influences on one another.

One form of intrigue that was open to the *oba* and which was repeatedly used in Yoruba country was the downgrading of a hereditary lineage title. It was within the traditional framework for the *oba* to apply this form to his political advantage because there is the traditional Yoruba belief that all the chieftaincy titles were, according to Yoruba legend, first given to non-royal lineages by an *oba*; and any *oba* had the right to withdraw such honors bestowed by a ruler long departed. While an *oba* could not really withdraw a chieftaincy title from a non-royal lineage, he could at least reduce its importance. This was a particularly efficient means that was open to the king to use against a chief who was unnecessarily unruly. Further, an *oba* could use some of his latent power inherent in the fact that there was usually tremendous competition among the chiefs even though all of them were at parity; no one non-royal lineage title ranked higher than another. Because of this intense competition among the chiefs for favors from the king, there was incessant blackmailing of one another within the Council of Chiefs. There were chiefs who carried tales and gossips about their fellow members to the king. One other method open to the king was to curse a recalcitrant chief or to ban him from entering into the royal palace. Of course, a wise *oba* made sure that he did not use his coercive measures unnecessarily otherwise all the chiefs could indeed ban together to engineer his dethronement, which was usually in the form of being forced “to go to sleep” (to commit suicide).

The king could use his intrigue very advantageously to himself; however, it must be emphasized that the chiefs had greater power than the *oba* had. For example, an *oba* could not arbitrarily relieve a chief of his title, even though he could downgrade a chieftaincy title or even curse or ban a chief from the palace. He could not depose a chief without that
chief being proven guilty of crimes committed against the town as a whole and not just against the person of the oba. This was an important provision that an oba did not just get rid of a chief because the latter displeased him or did not carry out any of his own selfish ideas. One other recourse open to the chiefs was to boycott the akin (palace) and carry on the judicial and administrative functions of the town without the oba. This was indeed a severe action by the chiefs against the oba. However, the oba was again not left all that powerless. While he could not use any of his political power to coerce the chiefs, he could resort to the religious powers traditional society bestowed on him. An oba performed certain rituals which were for the prosperity of the town and the kingdom as a whole, and traditional law required that all the chiefs be part of these rituals. “Striking” chiefs could refuse to attend such ritual meetings and hence the obvious confrontation between them and the king. Absence at the rituals meant an endangering of the prosperity of the town. The people of the town who are, of course, very bound to tradition and strongly believe in the powers of these ceremonies and rituals, could be drawn into any confrontation. The chiefs, if they were unanimous, could force the king to commit suicide and thus rid the town of a disagreeable oba. The presentation of eggs of the parrot among the Oyo Yoruba was a means of demanding the alafin or ruler to commit suicide. Lloyd (1960: 233) notes that the people of Ado among the Ekiti Yoruba in 1940 demanded that their oba should abdicate, that is commit suicide, by symbolically clapping stones together in the market place. A new oba was, of course, duly appointed.

VII. — Conclusion

It is obvious by now that there were means for conflict resolution within the political system of the Yoruba. While there was no question of the legitimacy of the obaship, there were sanctions against the person who occupied it. A deposition of an oba was not merely an abdication or a banishment since a newly-installed oba would not meet all the necessary demands of the consecration rights while a predecessor oba was still alive. Thus it was legitimate for the populace to demand the death of the previous oba. This was why we stated earlier that the people were not really the subjects, but rather that an oba was the subject of his people since he had to serve them. Hence we find that

“...The deposition of a Yoruba oba is a constitutional procedure. The rights of the royal lineage are not questioned. The opposition of the chiefs is solely to the individual whom they selected and who has not fulfilled their hopes. ... The oba’s protection was his sacred right to rule. He did not stand above the customary law of his people; the law, ancient and supreme, stood unquestioned. His commands were valid, in sight of his people, so long as they were within the law. He did not make new laws; he ordained the law to suit particular current needs,
making the necessary rules. By his conservation the oba received wisdom to interpret the law—wisdom not possessed by his chiefs who had performed no such ceremonies. Thus, mere disagreement with his chiefs was not sufficient cause for the people to turn against their oba” (Lloyd 1960: 233).

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