Adeyemi Lateefat Adewumi

19/MHS01/041

MBBS

Review on chapter two of salient issues in government and Nigerian politics, “An historical analysis of the evolution of the Nigerian state.

The Nigerian state is a colonial creation and hence its historical background involves the pre-colonial period and the colonial period. The precolonial Nigerian state was made up of kingdoms, empires and chiefdoms. These include; Borno empire, Hausa states and the Sokoto caliphate in the north; the Igbo societies in the east; the Benin kingdom and the Oyo empire in the west.

The beginning of habitation is Nigeria cannot be known for sure but archaeological evidence has traced it back to the Paleolithic period (500,000 – 9000BC). This can be the reason for the various and inconclusive origin stories of the Nigerian tribes and culture. For example, according to a particular Yoruba legend, their first leader, Oduduwa, descended directly from heaven and spread earth across to the world that was previously filled with water. In another (more logical and scientifically possible) legend, the Yoruba migrated from the North-Eastern area of Africa.

The only thing these various myths and theories can agree on is that Oduduwa was the first leader of the Yorubas and their first settlement was Ile-Ife. Hence, it can be agreed upon that although there’s no proof of the exact time of settlement in these lands, and the legends are inconclusive, they hold some certain elements of truth to them.

Information on the major landmarks in early Nigerian history was gotten through the excavation work done on places where man lived in Nigeria in the remote past. These places and some of their works they were famous for include; the Nok civilization known for their discovery of terracotta; Benin civilization known for art-work and crafts as well as their sculpting using wood, ivory, bronze and brass; Ife was known for terracotta and bronze heads; and the Igbo Ukwu civilization was famous for its accidental discovery of bronze objects and ornaments which lead to further discovery and information on the state’s past. Sadly, most of these earlier carved art pieces were looted over a century ago by European colonialists and are yet to be returned.

Now, to discuss the historical background of the pre-colonial political system in Nigeria. First of all, to understand the political structure of one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Yoruba, we could use the Oyo empire as a typical example.

This empire is headed by the Alaafin of Oyo, an ‘Oba’ who resides in the palace called ‘Aafin’. His powers are limited and regulated by the Oyo mesi, the kingmakers, which consisted of seven memebers and is headed by ‘Bashorun’. The administration also consisted; the Ogboni Cult which played a mediatory role in any conflict between the Oyo mesi and the Alaafin; and the army headed by the Aare-Ona-Kakanfo and made up of infantry and calvary.

Moving on to the background of pre-colonial Igbo land, it is first established that the Igbo people are known for their segmentary and acephalous way of life due to the fact that they had no centralized state in ancient times and hence, operated a government without kings.

They are grouped into five sub-cultures; the Igbo of eastern; south-eastern; north-eastern; western; and Northern Nigerian. Similar to the Yoruba, the Igbos have a couple of differing migratory stories of origin. The most popular points to Israel, an assumption based on the similarities between their cultures and that of the ancient Hebrew.

Since there was no centralized authority amongst the Igbos, they had what could be referred to as a diffusion of authority into different groups, that is, they practiced direct democracy and hence there were no hereditary claims to traditional stools as there was never a Kingdom or empire to begin with.

Their political structure basically included; the family as the smallest political unit, headed by an ‘Ofo’ title holder; age grade association organized on village basis; Oha-na-eze which was a general form of assembly where adult males usually met to perform legislative functions; and secret societies which played significant roles in the Igbo traditional society and acted as intermediary between the living and the ancestors. The religious lives revolved around mysticisms and superstitions.

Finally, the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria trace their origin back to an Arab prince Bayijidda who married the Queen of Daura and had her sons and his son rule the seven states. The political structure of pre-colonial Hausa land was headed by the ‘Sarki’ who worked with a retinue of officials in a well-organized court and the ‘Sarkin Kasar’ was the full title given to this effective head.

Between the 14th and 15th century, it should be noted that the socio-political organization of the Hausa states went through a change due to the introduction of Islam which led to the; formation of new political institutions such as the offices of the Galadima, Madawaki, Magaji, Dogari, Yari Sarki and Sarki Yau; establishment of sharia law; and the introduction of a new system of selecting and appointing rulers described as ‘Emirs’ to rule the caliphate. The Emir was assisted in his functions by a group of district heads, body of councilors, and council of advisers.

As we can see from this chapter, Nigeria’s pre-colonial political structure was obviously not the savagery the colonialists assumed it was. Speaking of the colonialists, it is a common misconception that the British were the first Europeans to land in Nigeria. The Portuguese actually hold this honor and the trans-Atlantic slave trade was the unfortunate channel that put the British in contact with Nigeria.

The struggle for colonies among the European powers led to the partitioning of Africa among them in the 19th century. By 1900, the whole Nigeria was under responsibility of the British Colonial Office and the May 1906 amalgamation was the first ever of the British colonial office while the second was in January 1914 whereby the British government amalgamated Northern and southern Nigeria.