

THE GUILD SYSTEM AND ITS ROLE IN THE ECONOMY OF PRE-COLONIAL YORUBALAND

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ABSTRACT

There existed within the Yoruba country several states during the pre-colonial period. Each of these states or kingdoms had centralized political and social organization with wide geographical limits. At the centre of such elaborate socio-political structure in pre-colonial Yorubaland was a strong economic base. It provided sustenance for the administration and the citizenry. The proper co-ordination of the varied economic processes or practices in pre-colonial Yorubaland was the direct responsibility of the guild system. It functioned as a legitimate regulatory body that guaranteed efficiency, quality service delivery and best practices in production relations. This study evaluates the guild system in pre-colonial South-western Nigeria with emphasis on its forms, operational guidelines, features, activities and membership criteria in different parts of Yorubaland. The study which employs primary and secondary sources for its analysis, argues that the guild system played a very unique role in the process of stimulating change and development in the economy of pre-colonial Yoruba states. The women folk, the study observes, dominated the activities of several guilds. The dominant religious beliefs and practices also had considerable influence on the economic role of most guilds in pre-colonial Yorubaland. Although the nineteenth century wars in Yorubaland fraught the effective conduct of the economic activities of most guilds, the study submits that the guild system remained relevant to the Yoruba economy up to the era of British rule and the post-colonial period.

Key words: Guild system, Women, Pre-Colonial Period, Yorubaland, Economy.

INTRODUCTION

The guild system is mainly a capacity-based contributory scheme designed to enhance the economic empowerment of its members. The guild process could therefore be simply defined as a co-ordinated effort by which an organisation is authorized to have the responsibility for the monitoring of economic activities of its members to ensure that production relation is smooth, consistent and unhampered by discreet actions of members and non-members of the organisation. This then implies that the guild symbolized the legitimate authority which regulated or guaranteed professional conduct or ideal commercial practices in pre-colonial Yorubaland. The guild also engaged in a sort of contributory scheme which provided support and empowerment for its members. It is equally evident that for every profession, the scheme provided or established ethical standards for all its practitioners. The women folk established clear dominance in the

affairs of several guilds in pre-colonial Yorubaland. The operational limits of the guilds in Yorubaland actually outstretched economic or commercial lines. As a result of the economic import of the respective guilds, the political class in pre-colonial Yorubaland soon began to see the need to enhance the status of their leaders by way of political empowerment which made such guild leaders to become gradually integrated into the administration of the state. The integration of such guild leaders into state politics was, in turn, to provide economic and social benefits to members of the political class in several pre-colonial Yoruba states.

The Guild System and Forms

The nature of pre-colonial economic organisation in several Yoruba kingdoms gave the privilege of production and exchange to individuals and groups in the society. Those who engaged in the task of entrepreneurship and who had the resources or means of production actually employed the services of the labour provided by the family as well as the slaves to achieve for their immediate and long-term benefits the goal of production and exchange.

Among the Yoruba during the pre-colonial period, each town or state organised its own guild system (Akinjogbin, 1981:69). Within every settlement or town, the guild process had three main categories which were:

- (1) The guild of general traders (*Egbe Alajapa*) that traded largely in inanimate objects such as medicinal herbs, fruits and other food items (Falola, 1983:169).
- (2) The guild of traders (*Egbe Alarobo*) that trade in different types of animate objects such as fowls, goats, etc. It is observed that members of both guilds often engaged in medium and long distance trading, as they moved round other towns and villages to collect their articles for sale in other larger towns or in their own town markets (Akinjogbin, et.al, 1981:71).
- (3) The specialized guilds of traders, tradesmen or professionals. Such guilds were named after the particular items they traded in or after their profession. These included, for example, *Egbe alaso* (guild of cloth dealers), *Egbe olose* (guild of soap makers), *Egbe alaro* (guild of dyers), *Egbe alata* (guild of pepper sellers), *Egbe eleni* (guild of mat makers), *Egbe onisona* (guild of carvers), *Egbe alagbede* (guild of smelters), etc.

All persons involved in the production and/or sale of the same objects or engaged in the same profession would be expected to organise themselves into or belong to a guild whether on local or regional basis. Since trading was a major task of women, most of the guilds were actually dominated by the women folk especially in commercial activities within the coastal belt (Kopytoff, 1965), and also in the Yoruba hinterland.

Features of the Guild System

Most of the guilds already identified had membership that cut across both local and regional boundaries. The more widespread the membership of any particular guild was, the greater the influence it exercised on politics and economy in pre-colonial Yoruba society.

Apart from this, a clear cut leadership structure was an important feature of pre-colonial guild system in Yorubaland. In fact, for Ibadan and other parts of the Yoruba country during the 19th century, each guild in the town whether with membership spread that was local or inter-kingdom, often had a leadership structure in its organisation. Thus, we had as head for the respective guilds e.g. *bale ahunso* for weavers; *bale agbe* or *aare agbe* for the farmers; *araba* for the diviners; *parakoyi* for the traders; and, *ojugbede* for the blacksmiths, etc.

The leadership of the respective guilds in each town or kingdom exercised both economic and political functions. This was actually the situation in several Yoruba kingdoms during the 19th century when guild leaders were assigned greater political responsibilities. For instance, at Ibadan

and Ijesha kingdoms, guild leaders were often co-opted by the town council when some decisions relating to war and criminal offences were to be taken (Falola, 1983:68). This was to secure their maximum co-operation and make them equally responsible for the decisions made by the Council. In most cases, the keen interest of the state in any particular guild was mainly dependent on the sort of economic or social benefits it could obtain from it. For instance, the weavers, blacksmiths, hunters and traders were quite important because the state derived much revenue from the commercial activities of their members. Indeed, the hunters served the purpose of providing security or defence services for the community as well as serving as militia in wars of conquest.

A peculiar feature of the guild system in pre-colonial Yorubaland was the indirect control exercised on the activities of each of the guilds by the state. Indeed, as part of the government's responsibility to ensure day-to-day administration of the state, the orderly conduct of economic activities was also guaranteed. The traditional political elite did not directly interfere with the production process or cycle in pre-colonial Yorubaland. But it must be stressed that at least for most of the Yoruba states, an indirect control was exercised on producers and the merchant class or traders by the traditional political authority. This control was by the way of recognising and supervising the activities of the various guilds, by ratifying the appointment of the leaders of the guilds, and by supporting the authority of the guilds' executives to control and discipline their members (Nadel, 1942:257ff).

Although the state in pre-colonial Yorubaland was not, in most cases, directly involved in the task of production, it should be stressed that the state established a considerable measure of control over the exchange or distributive sector of the economy. This was because the larger proportion of the revenue with which the state maintained itself and the elaborate administrative structure was derived from that sector. While it may seem plausible to suggest that a sort of *laissez faire* attitude generally prevailed in the economy, the state in pre-colonial Yorubaland still influenced the exchange process by exercising control over the markets and regulating the activities of traders. For instance, the state determined the market cycles, the period of operation in the markets, the sort of goods and services for transactions, the provision of security and maintenance services in the markets, as well as the collection of market tolls and dues from those who conducted various forms of commercial activities in such centres. It was the state that also co-ordinated the appointment of market officials to oversee the running and management of the markets. Such market officials, as appointees of the state, ensured the maintenance of law and order in the markets, and in some cases, monitored the activities of different groups of traders to ensure that they all conform to the rules and established standards of their respective professions. Indeed, such market officials often had permanent places used as posts in various market centres.

Most of the guilds in pre-colonial Yorubaland were organised on the basis of what they produced or manufactured, the services they provided or their articles of trade such as *egbe alata*-guild of pepper sellers; *egbe eleja*-guild of fish dealers; *egbe elepo*- guild of red oil dealers; *egbe eleran iso*- guild of sheep or goat or cattle dealers. The importance of these guilds to the economy of the respective Yoruba towns in the pre-colonial period was that each of them assisted the state to make their valuable articles or services readily available at competitive rates for prospective customers; engaged in the maintenance of peace and order in the various markets at no cost to the state, and provided a set of rules or procedure of the profession, to which members were compelled to conform with to enhance the economic prosperity of the state.

Another peculiar feature of the guild system in pre-colonial Yorubaland was that the women folk played a dominant role in the operations and activities of most of the guilds. It is observed that except for the blacksmithing industry which was a predominantly male occupation, the women were actively involved in most of the guilds or professions. There were some of the guilds that exclusively had the women as members, especially the salt guild (*egbe oniyo*), the pepper sellers (*egbe alata*), the pot dealers (*egbe onikoko*), palm oil traders (*egbe elepo*), the fish sellers (*egbe eleja*), etc. the guild of kolanut dealers (*Egbe olobi*) was dominated by the women folk, and co-

ordinated the extensive kola trade network between the Yoruba country and Hausaland (Adamu, 1981). The crucial role played by these guilds in the process of economic relations among the Yoruba states is certainly a reflection of the important place of women in the pre-colonial Yoruba economy.

It is also observed that members of the guild especially those involved in trade often moved in the form of a team or party whenever they were engaged in long-distance commercial activities. This was especially the case during the era of wars in the 19th century when most of the trade routes became unsafe for merchants in different parts of the Yoruba country. The need for traders' protection against kidnappers probably led the guild members to band together in large caravans, an example of which T. J. Bowen, a Baptist missionary, observed on a journey in the neighbourhood of Ibadan in 1852 (Bowen, 1968:173). In fact, during the journey of David Hinderer to Ibadan in the 1850s, he travelled with 'a caravan consisting of not less than 4000 people' (Hinderer, 1872:229). The Ibadan *Ajele* (political agents) in the provinces also provided necessary protection for members of the guilds who used such routes that attracted Ibadan economic interests at that period. As in the case with Ibadan, the political agents of Ilorin, Egba, Ife, Ekiti and Ijesa kingdoms also gave protection to members of trade guilds especially as they often used their residence to provide shelter for many groups of merchants on long-distance trading activities.

An important feature of the guild system in pre-colonial Yorubaland is the potential for the economic empowerment of members. This was a sort of capital accumulation achieved through constant re-investment of profits made from commercial activities by members of the respective guilds. As part of the efforts to increase their capital and facilitate their trade, members of each guild organised a contributory scheme known as *Esusu* (Bascom, 1952:63-69). This was a system whereby each guild member regularly contributed a fixed amount usually every fifth, ninth or seventeenth day, corresponding to the periodic market days. Each member receives the total amount contributed by all, and the process was repeated until every contributing member had taken his turn. The practice in most pre-colonial Yoruba settlements was that *Esusu* was always organised within each guild or profession. This notwithstanding, it was not compulsory for every guild member to participate (Akinjogbin, 1981:50). At the same time, a participating member could also undertake to contribute twice the agreed amount, and in that case, he receives double or twice the proportion given to others (Akinjogbin, 1981:50) whenever he took his turn among the team of contributors. A substantial proportion of the amount received in turn by each member was often invested in commercial enterprise to enhance the economic base of the respective members of the guild.

Economic Role of the Guilds

The purpose for the formation of any guild is to promote economic development. This was the situation in pre-colonial Yorubaland where the state relied heavily on the guilds to ensure smooth commercial transactions for the realization of economic prosperity.

It must also be stressed that the economic activities of the various guilds in pre-colonial Yorubaland seemed to have been facilitated or enhanced by two important factors, namely the adoption of the Yoruba as lingua franca in market transactions and related activities, as well as the use of uniform currency in cowry shells as medium of exchange for all commercial transactions. The use of cowries was both ancient and widespread in Yorubaland (Johnson, 1921:17-51). As early as the 17th century, European merchants in West African kingdoms emphasised that cowry shell was used as money in the Yoruba and Benin economic regions. It is in the same light that a French trader who visited Yorubaland in the early 18th century equally compared the role and use of cowries with those of silver and gold in Europe:

Cowries are the currency of the country... accepted for all goods; even for gold, which they regarded as no more than an article of trade. Among the Blacks you can buy with cowries anything that gold or silver will buy in Europe (Akinjogbin, 1981:38).

Since cowries were uni-denominational and had no language barrier in usage, the European traders who came to West Africa with a different monetary system quickly integrated the cowry currency into their accounting system. Thus, for the English by the mid-18th century, two thousand cowries made one ounce of gold which was equivalent to £4 of British currency (Dalzel, 1793:133-135). This was a monetary standard that was clearly understood by different categories of merchants within and outside Yorubaland at that period for commercial purposes and also for all other transactions.

The role of the guild in market organisation in pre-colonial Yorubaland was equally important, and in this way the guilds influenced the process of commercial relations. For most of the notable kingdoms and settlements, the organisation of the markets in pre-colonial Yorubaland also took into consideration the interests of the guilds. As Clapperton reports on the Akesan market in Old Oyo and others which he visited in 1826 that:

“The market had more than 6000 black men and women.... We were surprised about the order and arrangement of the tent, the different quarters for each kind of merchandise, the peace and order which existed among a people who had been thought to be incapable... The market had sections for traders of tobacco and pipes; ...of dyed cloths; ...of mat traders and basket; ...for sellers of boiled fish, palm oil and cooking pots; sellers of legumes and fruits; for sellers of yams and grains; for sellers of cotton cloths; for sellers of goats and livestock; for sellers of salt and pepper; ... Everything in the market is arranged in a manner to give pleasure, without confusion and full of orderliness” (Clapperton, 1829:59).

The guilds were relevant in both political and economic affairs of the state in pre-colonial Yorubaland. For instance, within some of the Yoruba kingdoms, the *aare agbe* was also recognised as an important non-political official of the state (Falola, 1983:68). As the head of the guild responsible for production of foods and other supplies within the agricultural sector, the *aare agbe* was often consulted especially during wars to provide the necessary assistance for other related guilds within the traditional domestic economy. This was mainly to ensure regular and uninterrupted supply of foods and other provisions for the soldiers and carriers as well as the entire populace.

The loyalty and efficiency of the guild system also provided economic support for the traditional ruling elite in pre-colonial Yorubaland. The regular commercial activities in market centres which the guilds actually guaranteed made the ruling class to become confident of the ability of the state to secure economic sustainability. Whether in the era of warfare or peace, the ruling class relied heavily on the co-operation of the various guilds for regular supplies to sustain the military personnel or warriors, the aristocrats and the generality of the populace.

Closely related to this was the fact that the guild system provided for the chiefs and other members of the traditional ruling elite the opportunity to appropriate part of the surplus of traders, farmers and craftsmen in pre-colonial Yorubaland. This took the form of regular or periodic contribution of products or items by members of a particular trade guild or profession; the presentation of goods or items with the best quality in order to be distinguished as to earn the praises of the ruling elite; and, the constant order or instruction given to the guild members to surrender a specified quantity of goods, with a further directive that those who were well established or well known in their specialized crafts or guilds were expected to surrender a greater quantity of products.

The guild system also provided opportunity for the chiefs or members of the traditional ruling class in Yorubaland to appropriate a large surplus of the products and wealth of traders and craftsmen through borrowing and buying on credit. Although some chiefs appropriated so much from the guilds that they became heavily indebted, this process enabled many chiefs to sustain

their privileged positions in state affairs in pre-colonial Yorubaland up to the era of British intervention. Indeed, some of the chiefs became so indebted and so notorious in terms of their indebtedness to the guilds that they were henceforth denied any form of credit by their creditors. There were occasions when some ungrateful and aggressive chiefs organised conspiracy against their creditors in order to avoid the payment of their debts. A vivid example of this sort of ploy was that organised by the Ibadan chiefs against their benefactor, Efunsetan Aniwura, *Iyalode* of Ibadan up to the 1870s who was by that period a prosperous and influential trader in that empire. The refusal of *Iyalode* to grant further credits to *Are Latosa* on account of the latter's inability to pay his debts provoked a conspiracy of the Ibadan chiefs against her at the period the *Are*, as the military cum civil head of Ibadan between 1871 and 1895, wanted to embark on Ado expedition in 1873 (Falola, 1983:79). This later culminated in the brutal murder of Efunsetan in May 1874 possibly in order to evade the payment of huge debt they owed her (i.e. *Iyalode*) and others in that guild or profession (Johnson, 1921:39).

The guild system also provided opportunity for corrupt enrichment of the chiefs and other members of the traditional ruling elite. For instance, in the old Oyo empire during the 17th and 18th centuries, the chiefs usually took returns from the gate keepers and the market officials in form of daily market tolls, and large quantities of foodstuffs and other items which were delivered to them on regular basis. Within old Oyo and in some other Yoruba kingdoms up to the 19th century, several categories of craftsmen also often sent part of their finished products to the chiefs in their respective wards. As an era that was characterised by political instability and civil wars, several individuals and groups who were attracted to a settlement or ward by a particular chief often continued to show their gratitude by presenting lavish gifts to such a chief on regular intervals (Falola, 1983:78). It was also a usual practice in pre-colonial Yorubaland that traders on the advise of their guilds usually gave the chiefs associated with the markets they patronized certain proportion (at times a small quantity) of their articles of trade. This was done to ensure that such traders maintained their hold unto the markets, and that their commercial activities received official recognition. There were instances of other groups of traders especially those outside or did not belong to the guild system who also made 'informal payments' to the chiefs and other market officials to enable them gain access to such markets (Falola, 1983:78).

Another way by which the traditional ruling elite used the guild system for the purpose of exploitation and corrupt appropriation was by empowering the members of the chief's household to gain undue and unrestricted access to the markets and collect all sorts of goods they wished from the traders. It was indeed a sort of practice in the pre-colonial Yoruba states of Ibadan, Ekiti (Akintoye, 1973) and Ijebu whereby members of a royal or chief's household could, at any moment, go to the associated with the chief to take small quantities of all goods brought to the market on a particular, in a custom referred to as "*oja rire*," and carried out by people known as "*reja reja*" (Falola, 1983:79).

The guild system also provided opportunity for enterprising craftsmen and traders as well as farmers to become more adventurous, creative and resourceful. It is evident that those who appeared prominent in their respective guilds by way of good output were able to occupy positions of authority within the specific guild. Some guild members invariably became title holders based on their recognizable productive capacity in their trades or professions. Various categories of entrepreneurs that cut across age grades and sexes had a relatively open ground in pre-colonial Yorubaland to demonstrate their ability which enhanced the economic growth of the society. Many of the guild leaders actually won fame and recognition from amongst both the ruling elite and the citizenry. It is observed that as a symbol of appreciation for the recognition accorded the guild leaders, most of the new recipients of guild titles gave presents in cash and goods to the chiefs in their wards.

Influence of Religion on the Economy and Guild Practices

It is evident that in pre-colonial Yorubaland, religion greatly influenced, and certainly played a key role in, the conduct of various forms of political, socio-cultural and economic activities. The influence of religion in the organisation and control of the economic activities of various guilds in pre-colonial Yorubaland is equally noteworthy. For instance, there were elaborate religious rituals employed by certain guilds most especially the iron smelters to protect the secret or enhance the relevance of their profession, to create elite values, and to regulate behaviour of members (Adeniji, 1977:5).

Religion also played an important role in both internal and long-distance commercial activities of various groups of traders (Falola & Babalola, 1991:158). It is observed that members of the commercial class introduced themselves and their wares by conspicuous generosity in form of gifts to members of the political elite and the gods or the religious priests, all in the attempt to stabilise the polity and also promote or guarantee the success of their own enterprise. For the Yoruba people in the pre-colonial period and even up to the present, a common practice was, and has always been, the performance of rituals at the market place to pray for a permanent crowd of buyers and sellers, peace and the continuity of trade (Falola & Babalola, 1991:158).

The introduction and spread of Islam before or as from the 1820s and Christianity in Yorubaland by the mid-19th century only further enhanced the activities of the guild system. This is because of the fact that both religions advocated for and promoted economic enterprise. For instance, Islam permits the conduct of trade and commerce but condemns exploitation that threatens collective interest in form of usury, gambling and avarice; it allows private property but enjoins charity; it tolerates slavery and economic inequality, but preaches the humane treatment of the poor; it emphasises extensive corporate transactions but pays adequate attention to rules on laws, contracts and exchange (Trimingham, 1959:184). As Islam gradually became an important belief system in Yorubaland, guild members in various professions also became attached to Muslim *mallams* who provided them certain spiritual or magical support (atimes in form of charms and amulets) to protect them against the hazards of their profession or to promote their economic activities (Gbadamosi, 1978).

It is important to stress that as from the mid-19th century, Christian evangelisation also resulted in the introduction of a number of new crops especially cocoa which was found to be quite suitable for cultivation in Yorubaland. The Christian missionaries also introduced various forms of crafts and technical works such as carpentry, masonry, leatherworks and printing in Yorubaland during the 19th century (Ayandele, 1966:256). The missionaries also promoted cotton cultivation and the development of apprenticeship system in Yorubaland especially those in the forms of tailoring, brick-making, etc. By the close of the 19th century, many of the professions that were initiated through the activities of the Christian missionaries developed a sort of guild system within Yorubaland. Such guilds became widespread in the region during colonial rule, and their influence on the economy had continued to manifest probably up to the contemporary period.

CONCLUSION

The Yoruba country covered a wide geographical terrain over which a considerable amount of commercial and industrial transactions was conducted. The travellers' accounts of Arab and later European traders clearly allude to the high level of economic relations that existed among the Yoruba states on the one hand, and between Yorubaland and her neighbours on the other. Perhaps, quite central to the organisation of such economic relations in pre-colonial Yorubaland was the existence of the guild system which co-ordinated and regulated transactions in every sector of the domestic economy. It is obvious that the pre-colonial Yoruba economy was predominantly agrarian, and supported with a network of commercial activities. The report of European traders and missionaries who visited the Yoruba country during the 18th and the 19th centuries clearly showed that the economy of the region was orderly conducted, and had the

potentialities to sustain the populace as well as the state and its elaborate political and social organisations.

The vibrant nature of the pre-colonial Yoruba economy was obviously a status that could not have been achieved without the effort of the specialized guilds which were responsible for the coordination of market activities, the maintenance of standards and discipline among those in the commercial sector.

Thus, the guild system greatly enhanced the establishment of a viable economic structure in pre-colonial Yorubaland. Although a proportion of the surplus made by the guilds seemed to have been appropriated by the traditional ruling elite, the close interaction which the guild leaders had with the indigenous authority enhanced their political relevance in several pre-colonial Yoruba states. On the whole, the activities of the various guilds really gave the required stimulus to trade and commerce by promoting or enforcing discipline, equity and proper conduct in market and industrial transactions.

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