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THE CHIEFTAINCY INSTITUTION IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN IBIBIOLAND

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Abstract

In Ibibioland, chieftaincy institution though in a very rudimentary form existed as a symbol of administrative authority in the village for the maintenance and enforcement of orders, laws and rules. The executive, legislative and judicial functions were vested in the highly esteemed chieftaincy institution, which evolved naturally from the family circle (Ufok) where the first-born male (Akpan) is the executive head. The clan as the highest political unit among the Ibibio is a colonial creation. In some cases, there were village groups with their totem, symbol and group solidarity and identity. In all cases, there was government at these levels. But the volume of work done at the village level was greater than that at the village group and clan level. But the village was under the authority of the village group and later the clan. This paper focuses on the origin, relevance and evolutionary phases of chieftaincy institution with emphasis on the three historical periods: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Ibibioland. The institutional structure problems and prospects are also brought into focus.

Introduction

The evolution of chieftaincy institution in Ibibioland has a prolonged history with varied speculation and controversy. The chieftaincy institution is the pivot on which the wheel of the customs and tradition of Ibibio rotates. It is an important socio-ethical concept and conduct highly prized and encouraged in Ibibioland which evolved conventionally from the family circle where the first born male (Akpan) is a symbol of administrative authority in the family. It follows that the family units, which constitute the village, meet and choose the village head variously described in Ibibio as *Obong Obio*, *Obong Idung* or most recently *Ete Idung*.

In Ibibio, the executive, legislative and judicial functions are vested in chieftaincy institution as a right of primogeniture either in the family (Ufok) or village (obio/Idung) or the village sub-group (oduuk) or the clan (Ikpaisong) and by extension local government council (Itak Ukara). Thus, Ibibio is not and, therefore, cannot be said to be an “acephalous” society.

This paper is an attempt at understanding the developmental phases of chieftaincy institution in Ibibioland with emphasis in the three historical periods: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era. We shall rely on two sources of historical information, to wit, oral tradition via interviews or personal communication, which as a source of history, keeps alive the memories of the past and preserves the past consciously into the present (Okoro, 2001:6). It is concerned with answering the continuous and puzzling question – what really happened? When and why?

The relevance of chieftaincy institution in contemporary Ibibio shall form part of this work. This is essentially given that in every society, no matter the tradition, devices are made for maintenance and enforcement of orders, laws and rules. Just as the chieftaincy institution is the pillar of the political system, the Ntinya is the pillar of the chieftaincy institution. Edet E. Ukpog (2007:111 – 115) in his *An Enquiry into culture: Ibibio Names* has extensive discussion on the chieftaincy institution and the Ntinya among the Ibibio.

Evolution of Chieftaincy Institution in Ibibioland

The chieftaincy Institution in Ibibioland is as old as other institutions like marriage and religion. The chieftaincy institution, like marriage or religion is intrinsic in the cultural purview of Ibibio.

It will amount to a misnomer to discuss the evolution of chieftaincy institution without having first and foremost a fair understanding of Ibibioland. According to Noah (1980), Ibibio is both an ethnic and a linguistic term and refers to an “area geographically located in southern Nigeria between longitude 7° 25' and 8° 25' East of the Greenwich meridian and between latitude 4° 33' and 5° 33' North of equator.”

Generally, Ibibio is the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria after Hausa – Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. Ibibio thus refers to a linguistic term, the people and the land. Hence, Ibibio language, Ibibio man and Ibibioland. This indeed makes Ibibio distinct and unique. For one to really understand and appreciate the evolution of chieftaincy institution in Ibibioland, the past would not only be looked into but investigated.

Although the origin and migration of the Ibibio like early history of other non-literate people has been a matter of speculation and controversy (EffiongAkpan, 2004:1). Many traditions, scholars, historians, European travellers and colonial agents varied in the origin and migration of the Ibibio. Anwana (2005) posits thus:

Among the Ibibio, there are three competing traditions of origin. One tradition insists on autochthonous origin, while another points to the "East" Yet another clings to Cameroon as their Original homeland.

In any case, all the three prepositions can never be right and all can never be wrong either. One, therefore, must be right which holds concrete fact collected from age-long custom from the ancestors. The cling to the Cameroon is possible because there exist a common ground between Ibibio and Cameroon as evidence in the snail totem as a primary totem of the peoples of Nung Ukim and its environs having been the landing spot of the Ibibio upon arrival from Ibom and this dates back to 8000 B. C. (Noah, 1980:8).

Upon settlement, the Ibibio people felt the need for the formation of government in order to keep laws and order. According to Udo (1983), as they (Ibibio) increased in population, they expanded to the various areas they now occupy, carrying with them their system of government which was tied up with social organization and their economic and religious institutions. The Ibibioland therefore covers the geographical area of what is now Akwa Ibom State. The Ibibio and their sub-groups, the Annang and the Oron live in the Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. According to the 2006 census, they number 3.9 million or approximately 4 million people. They are the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria after Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba and Igbo, in that order.

Chieftaincy institution in Ibibio land is inherent and had many revolutionary phases or stages with the impinging of the British legal code on the indigenous social structure.

Chieftaincy Institution in Pre-Colonial Ibibioland

From all indications, chieftaincy institution had taken advanced root in Ibibioland ever before Ibibioland was invaded by the Europeans. During the period under review (prior to 1849) (Noah, 1980:48) two administrative structures existed:

- The Family headship
- The Village headship

In Ibibioland, this is inherent. The eldest male in the family was invariably the headship (chief) as a trustee or protector of his people or family and allocated land and other valuable resources to them. As pointed out, the proper person to manage the family was the oldest male member thereof whether he happened to be the first born or if the first born child be a female, he comes next and so is the oldest male child, according to the local law and custom and of right, was the head. The position of headship in a family or village according to customary law is sacred and held in high hierarchical esteem. This is predicated on the *Ibibio* saying that *edet adaka edet ada*, meaning when one tooth falls off another one replaces it.

The Obong Ufok (family head) receives obedience and token of respect and has duties in assisting members of the family as the chief priest and ceremonial head of the cult of the founder of the family. In some cases, the family head may not necessarily be the chief priest. The chief priest had no executive authority but was consulted on all matters affecting the welfare of the kindred.

In respect of the village – which is a composite of nuclear families and extended families, the headship was much the same as the family. The Eldest family head was as of right, based on customary law, the chief executive officer of the village. Thus Amadi (2004) asserts that:

The political and social organization of the Ibibio began at the level of idip; (or womb), the family group; through Ufok (or house) made up of a number of families; and ekpuk the extended family; to the village which was the largest autonomous political unit headed by the Obong Obio....

Like other ancient societies, it is obvious that the chieftaincy as an institution had a modest beginning in *Ibibio*. His Highness Etebom Nyong Udo Obop Mfit, argues that the Obongship was so recognized and revered because, apart from his membership in the early family to arrive, he could wield considerable influence because of wealth and liberation. That he was able to provide protection and economic security to many. Another source of authority of the Obong was his religious leadership – the priesthood.

Another important source of authority possessed by the chieftaincy institution was his membership and leadership in many strong traditional institutions and societies that had

executive and judiciary powers. For example, the chief occupied a prominent position in *Ekpo Nyoho, Obon, Ekong/Akata, Ekpe* societies according to Obop. All these added lustre to the chieftaincy institution in Ibibioland from antiquity. The chief in this regard was not an autocrat. The principle of collective leadership was leadership by concerns that was fundamental to the orderly administration of the village or family. This was evident in the wide consultation of the chief with his family heads, priests of different oracles and respective cult societies before taking and making major decisions. This is affirmed by the Ibibio saying that *Obong isiboño ikpoon* which means a king or ruler can never rule alone successfully.

Chieftaincy Institution in Ibibio Land: Colonial Era

Colonization of Nigeria dates back to 1849 following the appointment of John Beecroft as consul for the Bight of Benin and Biafra with headquarters at Calabar (Basse, 2004:44).

The chieftaincy institution in Ibibioland was indeed the first point of attack because the colonialists knew obviously that every other thing (social, economic and religion) was tied up into the chieftaincy institution. Either out of ignorance or subterfuge the warrant chief system was imposed on the Ibibio.

H.R.M. Edidem U. J. Ntukobom, stated that the warrant chiefs system was meant to covet the indigenous chieftaincy and political system of the people into an instrument with which the new rulers would govern and influence the natives. He narrated how the warrant chief system corrupted the Ibibio chieftaincy institution. And that the appointment of the warrant chiefs (Mbong Mbakara or the Whiteman's chiefs) did not reveal that those appointed or chosen were the right people as they were neither the village heads nor from royal families. They were in actual fact the "idiots" the "outcast", the "simpletons" who were arbitrarily chosen by the European agent(s) and vested with administrative powers and authorities over and above every other person in the village or community.

The question is always asked to the why the search for chiefs did not lead to the selection of the traditional heads of the communities? The answer to this is to be found in the circumstances of the time and in the ignorance of the European agents. Indeed, the uncertainty as to what the Whiteman would do to the actual chiefs tended to push the right person away and the wrong people ended up with warrant of authorities (Noah, 23/09/07).

The general atmosphere of those early years of colonial regime (1849 – 1945) was thickly charged with suspicion, initial ignorance and fear. For example in 1905, according to oral

tradition H. B. Brooks, the District Officer (D.O.) of Uyo had asked Afaha Ibesikpo people to meet him in a village square at Ikot Obio Nkan. The D.O. arrived late wearing a white jumper. The few people who gathered around had cause to disappear into the bush because they saw a ghost riding a bicycle. When Brooks arrived, he gave warrant to anybody he could see and they became warrant chiefs. Hence, during the active colonial days, chieftaincy institution in Ibibio was bruised, bastardized, jettisoned and humiliated (Noah, 1980:18).

There was a sharp contrast between the European made warrant chiefs and the traditional chiefs with parallel administration. Udo (1983) asserted that:

In the absence of a large scale machinery of political organization among the Ibibio, such as existed among the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba of Northern and Western Nigeria. The British invaders concluded that the Ibibio had no political and legal systems, which were worth preserving. In consequence, they grafted their own political and legal systems upon the indigenous Ibibio systems. Even after their imposed rule had ignobly collapsed, some British administrators were still convinced that their system was better than the indigenous one and was god-sent to the Ibibio people and country.

Apparently, as seen above, the Ibibio had political and judicial system embedded in its chieftaincy Institution which was effective as those of the so called centralized states.

Chieftaincy Institution in Ibibioland From Independence in 1960 to Present

Since independence in 1960, the status and role of chieftaincy institution in Ibibio in particular and Nigeria in general has changed remarkably. The need to reach out to the grass root necessitated the institutionalization of the traditional ruler's council. But civilian and military regimes recognized the indispensable role of royal fathers.

As stated earlier, chieftaincy institution in Ibibio is unique and different from others in Nigeria. Noah (1980) has given credence to this thus:

Each Ibibio village was independent and equal in status. The villages themselves consisted of homogeneous families comprising the husband and his wife or wives and children. The oldest member of the family was often chosen as the head of the family unless such a person was incapacitated for any reason and the office of the family head was often combined with that of the chief priest of the family.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that, the Ibibio traditional political organization was limited to the village setting. The creation of clan (Ikpaisong) and Paramount Rulership were colonial and post-colonial military developments respectively. On the existence of clans in Ibibio, AkpanUmana (2004) stated *inter alia* that

...It would be discovered that from the onset traditional political organization was limited to the village setting, but after several years, felt need dictated something else. For instance, leadership among groups of villages was an innovation that is not as old as a century and as a matter of fact, the constitution of Mbong Ikpaisong (Clan Heads) was a creation of Ibibio state union in 1948. This exercise itself was a reaction to the creation of clans by the British in the aftermath of the women's war.

On the paramount rulership, Akpan Umana (2004) observes thus:

The paramount rulership is a legacy of the military regime in Nigeria. The institution was created only recently in 1976. Therefore, the clan headship and paramount rulership are innovations that are originally alien to the Ibibio political culture.

The chieftaincy institution derives legitimacy from customs, natural laws, divine right and habit to direct the affairs of the people on the basis of traditional authority which could be conferred either on one or a combination of the following:

- (a) Descent from or close connection with the recognized founding family or lineage of the community, line of conquerors or those traditionally connected with ruling in the community;
- (b) exhibition of peculiar ability or bravery;
- (c) wealth measured in terms of farm size, quantity of harvest, family size, membership of secret societies, taking of local titles, etc.
- (d) patronage and clientage;
- (e) appointment as warrant chiefs by the colonial authorities (Ekong, 1987:96).

The legal frame work for chieftaincy institution matters in Nigeria is the 1976 guidelines for Local Government Reforms as well as the Akwa Ibom Traditional Rulers Edict No. 15 of 1990 as amended, modified in Akwa Ibom State Traditional Rulers Law, Vol. 4 Cap 134, 2000. These laws reduced the chieftaincy institution to mere advisory body on specified areas. The matter on which the council established under this law may give or be requested to give advice shall be

- (a). matters of a general nature relating to proposals formulated by the council within its area of authority;
- (b). matters relating to assessment and collection of rate and other monies payable to a local government under any written law;
- (c). matters in support of art and culture;
- (d). question relating to chieftaincy matters and to traditional titles, so however that such advice shall not be inconsistent with the provision of any written law in force in the state on traditional rulers or any replacement or modification thereof;
- (e). matters relating to customary laws and practice and such matters as are governed by customary law including land tenure under customary law; and
- (f). any other matter referred to it for advice by the local, state, or federal government.

These limitations imposed by the law belittle the highly esteemed chieftaincy institution and obviously accord no recognition to the Ekpuk and family headship, which is the cradle of the institution. According to the said law, "it is hereby declared that nothing in this law shall be deemed to extend to or affect the institution of family chieftaincy of any person recognized by a community merely as a family chief." Consequently the institutional structure is reduced to three. part III 5 (1) of the said law states

For the purpose of this law, all traditional rulers in the state whose traditional offices qualified them for official recognition under this law are hereby classified as paramount rulers, clan heads or village heads:

Apparently, chieftaincy institution in the present Ibibioland is constrained by the relevant laws and at the mercy of the governor with authority to appoint, recognize and dismiss the paramount rulers, clan heads and village heads. "The governor may by order establish for a Local Government Area Council to be known as the Traditional Rulers Councils" and that:

No person may bring any action against the Governor or Government functionary or any person or body charged with any function in connection with the selection, installation, recognition or withdrawal of recognition of a person as paramount rulers, clan head or village head whether or not the cause of action arose from any act of commission or omission in the execution of the provisions of this law by the Governor or....

The law rather than consolidate the chieftaincy institution weakens it as the Royal Fathers are merely "advisers" whose advice in actual fact are often not considered. Chieftaincy institution should be claimed from the past and repositioned to meet the present challenges locally and internationally.

Problems and Prospects

Apparently, there is no human Institution devoid of problems. Chieftaincy institution in Ibibioland has its share of problems and they are best examined under the following headings:

- (a) Problem of succession
- (b) Finance
- (c) Low educational attainment
- (d) Lack of respect for the Institution.

Problem of Succession

One outstanding and noticeable problem of chieftaincy institution in Ibibioland is the problem of succession. This problem is traceable to the warrant chieftaincy system. The descendants of those who were so appointed as warrant chiefs lay claims to the stool as of right. In some of the villages in Ibibioland, this development has continued to pose a real threat to peace. This problem has eaten deep into the fabric of chieftaincy institution in Ibibioland to a point that blood are shed and property damaged and bad blood generated within families. There should be a well-defined hierarchy of succession. The ruling *Obong* for example should ensure the choice of his successor by invoking the sanction of divine right. A more institutionalized and permanent system of succession based on hereditary rather than elective principle is hereby advocated.

Finance

Prior to the European infiltration in the chieftaincy institution in Ibibioland, prominent and wealthy individuals were crowned as the village or lineage heads. In short, the wealth or fame of the village head was synonymous with the wealth and fame of the village (Udo, 1983:195).

This was earned through hard work in the contrary, some traditional rulers are "Glorified Beggars". They are seen in the government ministries and multi-national corporations canvassing for money, contract and employment opportunities. This act debased and subjugated the institution because he "who pays the piper dictates the tune".

Low Educational Attainment

The institution of chieftaincy in Ibibioland is full of uneducated men especially at the village level. In some cases, qualified educated men disparaged and shy away for the fear of being killed. Training programmes should be organized to train Traditional Rulers as potential leaders. Time changes and the institution must respond to the changing times. If traditional rulers are educated or trained, they would be alert to subterfuge, neo colonialist and other forms of political intrigues.

Lack of Respect for the Institution

One of the pressing problems facing the traditional institution is total lack of respect and reverence especially by politicians who may not readily get the "mandatory support" and blessings of these royal fathers. A case in point is the recent events in the palaces of the paramount rulers of Ini, Ika and Eastern Obolo where their palaces were burnt by political thugs. Often times, clan heads, village heads are arrested and unlawfully detained on mere allegations.

Prospects

There is no doubt that the chieftaincy institution is the first and last line of administration. This is evident on the fall back by government to the traditional rulers on matters that defy political solutions.

If the institution is claimed from the past and repositioned, it will indeed serve better. It could serve as a watch dog to the political and public office holders. As a vehicle of peace, the chiefs should issue traditional injunction to government officials when situations warrant.

The village head, clan head or the paramount ruler represents his own community in its dealing with other communities especially outside Ibibioland (Inter-group and Inter-personal relations). This demands that they be vested with a good sense of judgment in contemporary issues: politics, economy, international relations, international law, science and technology given the concept of globalization.

Again the chieftaincy institution is the surest instrument for crime detection and control. Available records have confirmed that during the pre-colonial era crime rates were relatively low. In most communities it was even a *taboo* because of the potency and efficacy of the traditional injunction (*mbiam*) which dispensed justice without fear or favour.

The Government of Akwa Ibom State under Chief Godswill Akpabio has done remarkably well by donating prestigious vehicles to the 31 Paramount Rulers in the state. Also a conference of Village Heads was organized on the 8th of September, 2007 for the *Ete-Idung*. This is a right step in the right direction. The recent conference of family heads in Akwa Ibom State is equally a welcome development, which should be sustained. This fresh breath meets the prevailing definition of chieftaincy institution as participants rather than spectators in the scheme of things nationally and internationally. We are in total agreement with Akpan Umana who assert that:

Elsewhere in Nigeria political leadership comes from the traditional institutions. The north has its Emirs: the South and Mid-West, their Obas and Alafins, the East central its Obis and Ezes and there are the Etsus of Nupe, Atas of Igala and Tors of Tivland. Even the areas that were once classified as "stateless societies" alongside the Akwa Ibom region have gone ahead to reposition their traditional institutions in order to make such establishments serve them better. (Akpan. Umana, 2004).

This may not readily work out since the Ibibio region is divided along four linguistic lines: Ibibio, Annang, Oron and Eket each evolving its chieftaincy institution. Example the *Oku Ibom* of Ibibio, the *Itai Afe Annang* and *Ahta* of Oron should be subject to one rulership – the *Oku Ibom*.

Recommendations

Chieftaincy institution as a base for modern administration should be reformed and repositioned to meet the challenges of contemporary age. In an attempt to contribute to knowledge, the following recommendations become imperative.

First and foremost, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria should make provisions for chieftaincy matters in the country as a whole.

The Ibibio Council of Chiefs should adopt a uniform title for Village Heads, Clan Heads and Paramount Rulers. The proliferation of titles like *Okuku*, *Edidem*, *Nsobom* etc and subsequent usage by some paramount rulers should be discouraged. The title of *Nsobom* is most preferred to others because it is aboriginal to Ibibio. *Edidem* is Efik-like, hence an adulteration of Ibibio cultural names.

For crime detection and prevention, each village head should be made the “Chief Security Officer” of his village and should be responsible to all crimes within his domain.

The office of the Deputy Village Head should be recognized by Government as this would guarantee line succession without dispute. The elective principle should give way to a more institutionalized and permanent system based on hereditary (father-son, brother-brother or family line).

The position of community leadership and honorary chieftaincy awards should be distinct from crown chief with rulership authorities especially the recent division of Ibibioland into three linguistic groupings: Ibibio, Annang and Oron with traditional leadership of *Oku Ibom* Ibibio, *Itai Afe Annang* and *Ahta Oron*. This new innovation with its disintegrative potentials should not be incorporated into the chieftaincy institution Ibibioland.

Summary/Conclusion

It is obvious that the theory of chieftaincy institution though in a very rudimentary form was from time immemorial a practice in Ibibioland. Traditional Ibibio leaders evolved from the first-born male (*Akpan*) in the family except where the said *Akpan* is incapacitated. In other words, the leadership of a house belonged as of right to the eldest male member of the family.

Apparently, chieftaincy in Ibibioland is the base of modern government. However, over the years, it has experienced remarkable transformations in structure and procedures. The hereditary principle in the pre-colonial days gradually gave way to the selective principle via the warrant chieftaincy system of

the colonial era. With the concept of clan and subsequently local authorities (government) the structure changed to meet the needs of the colonial masters. According to Akpan.Umana (2004).

Clan was a colonial creation. The product of colonial administrations philosophy which held that the best way to govern Nigeria was to divide the country into regions, districts, county, clans... 'for administrative convenience.

This institution should be jealously guarded and preserved as service oriented institution in Ibibioland by assigning constitutional functions and recognition.

China grew in population, trade, wealth, new ideas and artistic achievement during the period of *Tang* and *Song* dynastic between 751-1279 AD. Most advanced democracies today especially England, France, Germany, Italy had its root and foundation laid by traditional kings, lords, chiefs.

In Athens, during its golden age (461-430) drama, sculpture, poetry, philosophy, architecture reached new height (Littell, 2004:120). This was a consequence of traditional system of rulership

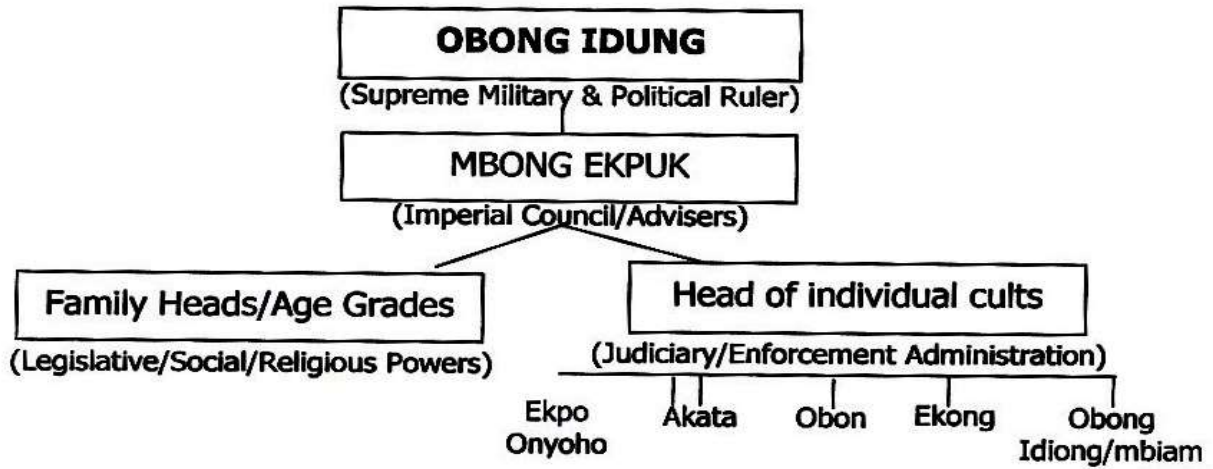
To strengthen the institution at the village level, the law should provide for the Deputy Village Heads and the Secretaries. This will surely prepare the way for succession either rotationally among ruling families or direct line of succession. The division of the Ibibio along dialectical lines: Ibibio, Annang and Oron with the emergence of leaders – *Oku Ibom, Itai* and *Ahta* respectively should be fused and must not be allowed to be hijacked by local political overlords. As a panacea, therefore, only innocuous personalities with track records of proven integrity and honour should be recognized as paramount rulers.

In conclusion, the fact that the Ibibio did not have a single king who ruled over the entire Ibibioland did not in any way make the Ibibio an acephalous society (Udo, 1983:158). Ibibio villages are autonomous, each with a well organized Council of Chiefs with the Village Head presiding. The claim by Eurocentric writers of Ibibio as a “stateless” society was a misnomer, as the commentators were looking for a vast territory and concentration of power in one man hence they missed the point (Edemekong, 2007:5). The Village Head was the head of state while the *Ekpuk* heads were the modern governors. From all indications, therefore, it has been shown that right from the ancient times, chieftaincy had existed in Ibibioland with a well-organized system of government, which maintained law and order throughout the land.

The role of a traditional ruler not only as the custodian of customs and tradition of his people but as the guardian, councillor, leader and father of same has been highlighted. These must be upheld for sustainable growth and development in Ibibioland.

ORGANIZATION OF IBIBIO GOVERNMENT

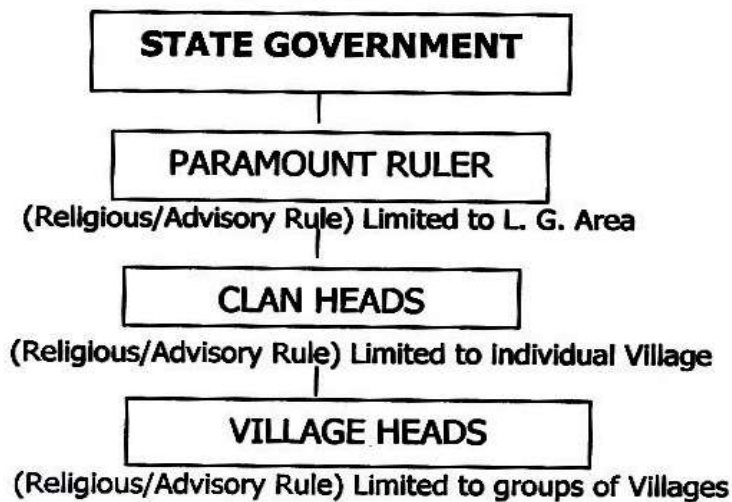
PRE-COLONIAL ERA



COLONIAL



POST COLONIAL



Source: Compiled by the Author

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