THE BLACK AND THE WHITE: THE USE OF DUALITIES IN ETULO HISTORICAL THOUGHT*

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Dualities, agency and the Etulo

In exploring the oral tradition of the Etulo of central Nigeria, it soon becomes apparent that their reconstructions of the past are organised at least in part by dualistic principles of categorisation. On the surface, this mirrors a cleavage in Etulo between two different types of sacral authority. To simplify a multifaceted system, Etulo government since the 18th century has mainly revolved around two sources of power, a sacral king known as the Otse-Etulo and an elaborate network of title-holders, the Ato-Otse. In any oral rendition dealing with their past, the Etulo place the Otse-Etulo within a diachronic perspective, but relegate the Ato-Otse by comparison to a near-synchronous limbo. Most elders with an interest in history can name many, if not all, of the fourteen Otse-Etulo on the ‘official’ king list, whereas only a few can go back further than three generations in enumerating past Ato-Otse title-holders. Not surprisingly, Etulo oral culture is replete with many types of evidence concerning the origins and growth of their sacral kingship. However, it is nearly silent on the subject of the Ato-Otse other than to attribute an origin of most of the titles to Kwararrafa, a famous central Nigerian polity that has long existed in various forms to the east of Etulo in the middle Benue river valley. Today, Kwararrafa is most closely associated with the Wapan Jukun Kingdom of Wukari, 100 kilometres to the east of Etulo.

It is tempting to attribute this imbalance entirely to a desire on the part of the Etulo to emphasize the significance of the figure of the Otse-Etulo as a core determinant of Etulo identity. To do so would also reinforce their centuries-old ties with Kwararrafa, and would underscore their ethnic (and hence territorial) boundaries by
contrast to the decentralized Tiv who completely envelop them territorially. However, too many other currents in Etulo culture and oral tradition undermine this interpretation as a satisfying one. The role of the Ato-Otse today is hardly vestigial. Not only do the sons of specific Ato-Otse take great pride in their fathers, but the ritual and political functions of most of the Ato-Otse have retained their integrity and significance. A recent calendar published by the Etulo Cultural Development Association, for example, consists almost entirely of photographs of the Ato-Otse, all as large as that of the incumbent Otse-Etulo. The Ato-Otse figure prominently in the selection and installation of an Otse-Etulo, not merely as decorative votaries but as active participants. They serve as a council of state, and by no means function as a "rubber stamp". Finally, when one initiates research into Etulo history, one will be directed by most Etulo to begin with the Ato-Otse, since they feel that an understanding of the function of the latter is essential in reconstructing the Etulo past.

A more promising line of enquiry is to consider an internal division of the Ato-Otse themselves into two categories, a majority associated with the colour white, and a minority, called the Ato ozi be, described as "black". Through a consideration of this colour classification, we can gain insights into some of the cosmological assumptions that are interwoven into Etulo political organisation and the symbolic content of much of their title-holding system. Further, an examination of this binary opposition can reveal one way in which the Etulo have tried to use dualities to encompass within one conceptual field several strata of social action and meaning. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that the dual classification as employed by the Etulo has been an intellectual tool rather than a conceptually constraining structure.

The ongoing argument on structure, dualities and hierarchies has developed in depth and intensity. One of the most active participants, both twenty years ago and today, has been Roy Willis. Explicitly, Willis has advocated the insertion of agency into the discussion, one way in which this can be accomplished being to explore the historical dimensions of cultural forms girded by polarities. This approach would involve the attempt to understand how past situations have stimulated the production of dualities, as well as the changing manner in which these dualities have been manipulated. Instead of cognitively 'capturing' entire peoples,