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AJELE: EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ECONOMIC AND HUMAN FACTORS IN THE GROWTH AND EVENTUAL COLLAPSE OF EARLIEST KINGDOMS AND CHIEFDOMS IN YORUBALAND

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Abstract

While a system which looks like a system of political residency similar to that of modern day ambassadorial plenipotentiaries had been developed by some kingdoms and empires that existed in early Yorubaland prior to the contacts with Europeans and which had served them well in several respect ranging from collection of toll revenue, protecting citizens of such empire and kingdoms to serving as embassies to these kingdoms and empires, yet this system eventually was responsible in some cases to the decline and eventual collapse of such kingdoms and empires. Why then did a system that worked so well to the growth of such empires and kingdoms eventually became its albatross by contributing to its fall? This study therefore examines the impacts of the system of Ajele as developed by the Old Oyo empire and later Ibadan hegemon in early pre-colonial Yorubaland and how this system contributed to the growth of these empires as well as their influence in the decline and eventual fall of such kingdoms and empires. In doing this, the study will make use of majorly secondary sources interpreting already existing materials on the subject matter. The study argues that while the system of Ajele in pre-colonial Yorubaland did well to ensure the growth of these kingdoms and empires yet there are important lessons from their histories that can be useful for contemporary African societies in the conduct of diplomatic relations.

Keywords: Ajele, Diplomatic relations, Empires, Kingdoms, Yorubaland.

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1. Introduction

Western Sudan in the earliest period witnessed the rise and fall of several kingdoms and empires. Few of these were the empire of Ghana, the Mali empire, the old Songhai empire, the Oyo kingdom, the Ibadan Republic which rose after the fall of Oyo empire among others. One peculiar feature of these empires and kingdoms was the operation of posts outside the empire where representatives or political residents or ambassadors were seconded to monitor the affairs of the kingdom, oversee the welfare of citizens of the empire where he is posted, later collection of tolls on behalf of the empire was incorporated by the first of such ambassador to be appointed, Timi of ede. In Yorubaland, especially during the reign of Oyo empire and later Ibadan hegemon, this system was known as the *Ajele* system and the representative called *Ajele*. It is worthy of note that while the *Ajele* as the representative of the empire were known majorly for collection of taxes and tolls on behalf of the empire and kingdom, his duty was not limited to collection of tolls alone as he was equally expected to serve as the representative of the king and in retrospect the empire in the outpost thereby making the function or duty resemble that of an ambassador plenipotentiary in modern day international relations or diplomacy.

This study therefore examines how the *Ajele* system operated in some of the earliest kingdom and empire in Yorubaland. How it aided the growths of these kingdoms and how the excesses of the use of the system eventually contributed to the decline and fall of these kingdoms and empires.

2. THE AJELE SYSTEM IN YORUBALAND: THE ORIGIN

In Yorubaland in the early days of the Oyo empire, It is believed that the first king to appoint an *Ajele* or a political resident was Alaafin Obalokun Agana Erin.¹ The *Ajele* who adopted the title Onisare was placed at Ijana near Ilaro, one of the versalages or tributary towns of the empire.² However, those who subscribe to this position based their argument on the fact that it was the first time the political resident would not only be called *Ajele* but the first time he would be mandated to generate revenue for the empire through collection of tolls and taxes. However, it is instructive to note that the system though not referred to with the name *Ajele* had previously being adopted by Alaafin Kori.³ It was he who seconded Timi to Ede as administrator or representative to tackle the menace of the Ijesas who were proving troublesome to their neighbours and molesting caravans to and from Apomu, a frontier town where a large fair is periodically held for the exchange of goods with the Ijebus while at the same time getting frequently embroiled with a neighbouring King, Ido.⁴ Hence, it can be asserted that the practice of appointing a political resident whose function and duty was similar to that of an Ambassador in modern day international relations as regards representation of the king and empire began with Alaafin Kori, a practice which subsequent kings of the empire modified and improved upon.

With the system, the empire witnessed tremendous growth and increase in its revenue generation as the *Ajeles* from the era of Timi devised or developed a revenue generating mechanism which ensured the income accruing to the empire increased. This with Timi started as a way of improverising for his inability to have time for his family and personal development. As Johnson puts it:

As the Timi's duties required all his time, skill and valour, he had no time left to provide for himself and family; the traders and caravans being now well protected, he obtained permission from the Alaafin to levy

¹S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Lagos: CSS Publication, 1921), 199-200.

²Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas...*, 199.

³O.Olaniyi, Beyond Revenue: An Appraisal of the Exchange and Monetary Systems in Pre-Colonial Oyo, *Kaduna Journal of Historical Studies*, 96-98

⁴Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas...*, 185-186.



a toll of 5 cowries each on every trader; by this means he soon had more than enough for the support of his family, and as a good and loyal subject, he paid the surplus into the royal treasury.⁵

In a move reminiscent of the Alaafin of Oyo, the Owa of Ilesha also posted an opposition administrator or kinglet known as Ataoja to Osogbo, however, Ataoja's duty was markedly different from that of Timi as his chief duty was the worship of the fishes in the river Osun.⁶ Although, trouble later arose between the Alaafin and Timi as a result of the refusal of the latter to continue remitting money to the empire's coffer, this did not stop subsequent Alaafin from adopting the same system.

With the collapse of the Oyo empire and rise of Ibadan hegemony over the whole of Yorubaland starting from around 1840, the system became modified when Ibadan rulers began sending these *Ajeles* to upper Yorubaland especially among the Ekiti and Ondo tribes in eastern Yorubaland. These *Ajeles* were not only mandated to serve as revenue generators but were given wide powers and were in theory made to be above even the kings of the towns where they resided which is a marked departure from the system of ambassadorial plenipotentiaries in modern day international relations.

3. Ambassador Plenipotentiary System in Modern International Relations and Correlation with *Ajele* System of Yorubaland

An ambassador or consul or diplomat is a native of the city or state that represents his government in a foreign land or another state or country with the expectation that he would work to protect the interest of the citizen of his home, state or country that appointed him.⁷ According to Wood and Serres, Ambassadors represents the government of his country in relation to authorities of the country in which he resides.⁸ He has delegated authority to speak in the name of his government. He is qualified to carry out communication exchanges between his home and resident governments. He is the official permanent intermediary in relations between both states. And he is the recognised official source of information about his own country. From the above definition, an ambassador performs or engages in diplomatic roles between his home state and state of residence.

Apart from being the official representative of his government, he negotiates between his home government and his host government. The art of diplomacy is as old as the world itself and this is not limited to human beings alone. Nicolson historically traced the origin of diplomacy to anthropoids' apes in one group of caves that came to the realisation of the probable benefit of reaching some understanding with their neighbors concerning their respective hunting territories.⁹ That means the need to negotiate regarding boundary rules and regulations also exists in animal kingdom for peaceful co-existence. The role of the emissaries of either party is very crucial when such negotiation takes place.

Henry Kissinger sees diplomacy as acts of negotiation with the main objective of maintaining friendly relations abroad mainly to prevent war and maintain peace globally.¹⁰ In addition, Melissen defines diplomacy as applying intelligence and tact in addressing official relations with a potential degree of self-satisfaction.¹¹ It is the art of mediating between alienated peoples organised in states that interact within a system (international system). However, Wood and Serres take it a step further that diplomacy is the technique or skill that prevails in entrenching development and harmony to the conduct of international relations.¹² Both the 'Art' and

⁵Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas...*186

⁶Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas...*186

⁷H. Nicolson, "The Evolution of Diplomatic Method", *American Historical Review*, 1953,

⁸J. Wood and J. Serre, "Diplomatic Ceremonial and Protocol", Palgrave Macmillan, 1970.

⁹Nicolson, *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method...*

¹⁰Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994)

¹¹J. Melissen, *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice* (Leicester: Macmillan, 1994)

¹²Wood and J. Serre, "Diplomatic Ceremonial and Protocol"



'Technique or skill' obey conventions and rules. The art of resolving international problems peacefully and the conduct of international relations by official agents of sovereign states only who are accredited representatives. These accredited representatives are called ambassadors, consul or diplomats and because they are officially recognised representative of their home government in the host countries, they are accorded all the paraphernalia of office due to their government in the host countries. These include the ceremony and protocol attached to their roles. On the other hand, there are rules and regulations guiding the discharge of their duties.

Revolution in relations between states started when government realised the need (like in the animal kingdom) and decided to maintain permanent missions in foreign capitals. According to Wood and Serres, the practice of diplomacy was initiated in the fifteenth century and gradually came into force as powerful United Nations replaced feudal sovereignty.¹³ It then became a general practice in the seventeenth century after the treaties of Westphalia in 1648, as the development of peaceful relations also created more problems to address. It is further believed that Europe alone practically pursued the game of international politics which was the exclusive preserve of the royal courts until 1914 and foreign relations at that time were shrouded in secrecy while ambassadors operated under strict instructions from the home state. There has been tremendous revolution in modern diplomacy and methods of diplomacy have been subjected to the forces of change thereby expanding its scope, increasing multi-lateralisation with complex rules and procedures, growing volumes and expanded agenda of diplomatic business and the involvement of Para-diplomats (States actors and non-governmental organisation, sub national actors) in indirect diplomatic activities, have all brought transformation to the face of modern diplomacy.¹⁴

Appointment and recruitment of Foreign Service in modern diplomacy have gone through revolutionary changes. Hutching and Suri focusing on recruitment, training and development of professional diplomat in the twenty-first century emphasized the importance of a common foundation for comparing, learning and even integrating training and career development models across nations from different geographical and cultural background. For instance, Brazil, India, Japan, Russia, Turkey, and United States, Foreign Service target top talents that have become scarce and competitive because these are the targets of non-governmental organisations and private sectors that offer lucrative and attractive opportunities for ambitious young citizens.

On the other hand, is the concerns about excessive bureaucracy and politicisation in government which discourages top recruits from joining the government. Politicisation also comes in political party influencing appointments as a means of compensation. Party members are preferred as ambassadors instead of career diplomats that have risen through the ranks and possess the required expertise and experience to fill the positions. Another issue is diversity in ethnicity, religion, and gender composition of the state which also play a key role in appointment and recruitment based on quota system as against merit. i.e. Brazil, India, France. This is also the case in Nigeria.

The overall objective of diplomacy is to make use of peaceful and practical methods of conciliation to tighten the bonds of friendship with allied government, develop friendly relations with neutral countries, and command the respect of hostile governments. By these, the duties of an ambassador covers, (i) representation (ii) information (iii) negotiations and (iv) protection of his national, commerce and shipping.¹⁵

4. THE ROLE OF MODERN AMBASSADOR IN COMPARISON TO AJELE SYSTEM OF YORUBALAND

¹³Wood and Serre, "Diplomatic Ceremonial and Protocol

¹⁴Melissen, *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice...*

¹⁵See Wood and Serre, "Diplomatic Ceremonial and Protocol. See also, Kissinger, *Diplomacy...*, 1994. and ¹⁵ Melissen, *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice...*, Nicolson, *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method...*

Recruitment and Appointment: While the modern diplomats or ambassadors are formally trained in the art of diplomacy i.e. possessing degrees in related fields, professional training, and re-training programs on the job and appointed based on qualification and merit, political recommendations, quota representation, *Ajele* in Yorubaland were appointed based on trust and loyalty to the Oba i.e. Alaafin Obalokun Agana Erin who appointed the first *Ajele* at Ijanna to represent his political and economic interest. The personality of the *Ajele* must command higher integrity in the heart of the Alaafin. The *Ajele* was also an indigene of a particular tribe within the Oyo Empire (Tapa) and a titled chief. i.e. appointment was hereditary.¹⁶

Both the *Ajele* and modern ambassadors perform similar functions in that both represent the interest of their home empire/state in a foreign land. The *Ajele* maintained and protected the political and economic interest of the Alaafin of Oyo at Ijanna as the 'eyes' and 'ears' of the Oba, likewise the ones appointed during the period of Ibadan hegemony in Yorubaland. The ambassador in his diplomatic role also represents his home government's political and economic interests. However, the scope of the duties of a modern ambassador has expanded to include other issue areas i.e. protection of nationals, mediation, communication, information, conflict resolution among others due to revolutions/innovation within the international system that have continuously shaped the conduct of international relations. As a result of expansion in scope and portfolios, ambassadors also enjoy retinue of staff that assists him in the discharge of his duties.¹⁷

Ceremonial and Protocol; The *Ajele* was accorded recognition at Ijanna where he operated in the interest of the Alaafin Obalokun. This implied that there must have existed a cordial and mutual understanding between Alaafin Obalokun and the oba of Ijanna for *Ajele* to be able to operate effectively. That understanding could be regarded as a form of protocol in that aspect. Ceremony and protocol in modern diplomacy consists of

- i. Privileges and immunities of an ambassador i.e. inviolability, jurisdictional immunities, courtesy prerogative, diplomatic passports, and protection in time of war.
- ii. Observance of certain formalities by ambassador
- iii. Keeping to rules of courtesy and hierarchical order i.e. good manners, politeness.
- iv. Termination of diplomatic mission i.e. acceptance of ambassadors, presentation of credentials and end of diplomatic mission. These are written and unwritten rules guiding the conduct of a foreign mission. As he enjoys special privileges, he is also expected to reciprocate the same gesture by conducting himself in a manner befitting the government he represents. Anything short of that can lead to termination of his assignment.¹⁸

Among the numerous challenges in modern diplomacy that affect the ambassador in the discharge of his duties is technological advancement. The rate of transformation and innovation the world has experience due to technological advancement is unprecedented. Technology has succeeded in shortening the distance of conducting diplomatic affairs. It affords actors at home the opportunity to manage distant events from the nation's capital without prior knowledge of the on-the-ground expert. There is also the tendency for presidents or foreign ministers to appoint private expert outside traditional diplomatic institutions that is likely to absorb their excess, biases and preference based on personal loyalty as against professionalism. Issues of exclusive professional reserves have become public knowledge through informal sources with claims to authority over such issues because of spread in communication technology. *Ajele* on the other hand had sole responsibility and maximum control in the discharge of his duty and was recognised as the only authority to speak for and on behalf of the suzerainty as his mouthpiece in the tributary town.

¹⁶See Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yoruba...*199. See also, Olaniyi, *Beyond Revenue...*, Melissen, *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice...*, Hutchings and Suri, *Modern Diplomacy in Practice...*

¹⁷Melissen, *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice...*, Wood and Serre, *Diplomatic Ceremonial and Protocol*, Kissinger, *Diplomacy...* Olaniyi, *Beyond Revenue...* Nicolson, *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method...*

¹⁸ Wood and Serre, *Diplomatic Ceremonial and Protocol...* See also, Melissen, *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice...*

5. RISE AND FALL OF KINGDOMS IN YORUBALAND: THE ROLES OF AJELES.

In spite of the noble roles the *Ajeles* played in the growth of kingdoms in Yorubaland, it is on record that in most of these kingdoms, their excesses also contributed significantly to the fall and collapse of the empires.

The practice of collecting tolls as revenue for Oyo empire started by accident.¹⁹ The Timi who was posted to Ede as representative of Alaafin Kori but who in the absence of goods to exchange with the Ijebu and Ife traders sought and got the approval of Alaafin to levy a toll of 5 cowries out of which he sent part to the Alaafin and retained the rest to maintain himself and his family can be credited with starting accidentally the practice thereby generating and raising the revenue of the empire. In addition, by ensuring the security of Oyo subjects at markets in Apomu, he was able to instill confidence in the authority of Alaafin as the suzerain in Oyo Empire.

This practice was eventually adopted by subsequent Alaafins after Kori to increase the revenues and growth of the empire starting first with Alaafin Obalokun Agana Erin who placed and named the first *Ajele* at Ijana near Ilaro and later continued by Alaafin Ajagbo who began the practice of sending expeditions out four expeditions at the same time under four Commanders.²⁰

With the rise of Ibadan as the hegemon in Yorubaland, the practice was taken a step further as all governments in Ibadan began to appoint *Ajele* in all the tributary towns conquered in Yorubaland especially in eastern Yorubaland. With this, tributes began to pour in from every corner into Ibadan which made the Ibadan war chiefs rich and prosperous.

However, in spite of these contributions of *Ajele* to the prosperity of these Yoruba Kingdoms, they have also been accused as being responsible in no small measure to the collapse of these kingdoms. Akinjogbin had suggested that the decrease in the efficiency of the army during the reign of Alaafin Abiodun was responsible for the decline and eventual collapse of the Oyo empire.²¹ He posits that one of the reasons for this was as a result of deliberate weakening of the army by the Alaafin in order to undermine the power of the military chiefs and their families.²² Smith however disagrees with this position as he believes such a course was unlikely and there was no evidence for it as it was even the support of the army that allowed Alaafin Abiodun to overthrow Gaha in the first place, hence, it is unlikely that Abiodun would deliberately undermine an institution that helped him so much and contributed so much to the sustenance and stability of his own government.²³

Apparently, it will make more sense to look at economy as being responsible for the decline of the kingdom rather than mere political factors even if politics also played its part. More so as Olaniyi quoting Johnson has pointed out the reckless spending of the Alaafins of that era as one of the reasons for the weakening of Oyo Empire. According to him, Alaafin Obalokun Agana Erin was said to be in friendly relation with the King of France with whom he sent 800 messengers with present, people who never returned.²⁴ For what purpose those messengers and present were sent was never told. Alaafin Onisile who reigned c.1746-1754 was also said to be very artistic that he made seven silver doors to the seven entrances of his sleeping

¹⁹ Olaniyi, *Beyond Revenue...*96

²⁰ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas...*, 199-200.

²¹ I.A.Akinjogbin, "The Economic Foundation of the Oyo Empire in the Eighteenth Century", I.A.Akinjogbin and S.O.Osoba(eds.), *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History* (Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., 1980)

²² Akinjogbin, *The Economic Foundation of the Oyo Empire...*

²³ Robert Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (London: The Chaucer Press Ltd., 1969),

²⁴ See Olaniyi, *Beyond Revenue...*, 99. See also Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas...*, 199



apartment.²⁵ Further pointing to the extravagant lifestyle of the Alaafins occasioned by the prosperity of the empire as a result of the tributes coming into the empire through the tributary states where the *Ajeles* were placed.

However, beyond the roles of the Alaafins, it is instructive to also note the power wielded by the *Ajeles* in their tributary states as being responsible for dissent against the Kingdoms in Yorubaland where the *Ajele* system was adopted. Explaining the enormous and arbitrary powers wielded by the *Ajeles* of Ibadan and how this influenced dissent against Ibadan among the tributary towns, Johnson says:

The power of the Ibadans being dreaded by all the interior tribes, their messengers to the provinces under them took undue advantage of the subject states and that to such an extent as to drive them to rebellion. (As a result of the activities of the *Ajeles*), the name Ibadan stank in the nostrils of all the *Ijesa* and *Ekiti* tribes, so that they were only seeking for an opportunity for throwing off their yoke. And strange to say these messengers who were doing all the mischief was not the Ibadan born, but the *Ijesa* and *Ekiti* slaves who were sent with messages to their own native towns.²⁶

Matters however came to a head during the reign of Aare Latosisa as ruler of Ibadan when in addition to the excesses of the *Ajeles*, Ibadan subjects in the tributary states had to contend with the atrocities of the Messengers of Aare Latosisa and few leading chiefs of the land. These Messengers who were always sent to these tributary towns to enquire about the welfare of these tributary towns were in the habits of committing series of atrocities ranging from extortion to rape among others. For instance, Johnson cataloguing the various atrocities committed by these messengers says:

As soon as each gets outside the Ibadan town walls he secures to himself the services of a drummer and fifer and a bard to sing the praises of his master as if the latter were coming; he collects behind him idle fellows who follow no regular employment and he moves as a little chief aping the master who sent him. When he enters a town he asks for the Ibadan *Ajele* there and introduces himself as the messenger of such and such a chief, the *Ajele* is to introduce him to the authorities of the town who will assign him quarters for lodging. The landlord has to defray all expenses of the keep of this messenger and his followers who will remain there as long as they like.... A landlord would be compelled to wait on them at meals, at times holding the lamp in his hand for them and sometimes the lamp is placed on his head making him as it were a lamp post whilst they are partaking of his hospitality, forcing their women, raping their girls, riffling their valuables, are common causes of complaints, and they generally return to Ibadan with booty as from a raid. Who dares touch the messenger of a great Ibadan chief? Thus all the *Ibolos* under their protection, the *Ijesas*, *Ekitis*, *Yagbas*, and *Akokos* were groaning under the yoke of Ibadan, not from paying tribute which was only nominal, but from the excesses of these messengers who were their own sons.²⁷

The resultant effect of all these atrocities by the *Ajeles* and the messengers from Ibadan was revolt from the people of these tributary towns. The rebellion started among the *Ekitis* precisely at Okemesi when the wife of an *Ekiti* warlord and Prince, Prince Fabunmi Okemesi was raped by an *Ajele* which led to the confederacy of *Ekiti* and *Ijesa* warriors known as *Ekitiparapo*. It was the war that ended Ibadan's hegemony in Yorubaland and later signaled the imposition of the peace of Britain on the whole of Yorubaland at the end of the sixteen year war.

²⁵ I.A Akinjogbi, "The Economic Foundations of the Oyo Empire in the Eighteenth Century", I.A.Akinjogbin and S.O.Osoba (eds.) *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History* (Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., 1980), 36

²⁶ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas...*, 498-499

²⁷ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas...*499



6. Lesson for Contemporary World

Looking at the similarities and differences in appointments of duties of modern ambassador and *Ajele* in Yorubaland, there are too important lessons for contemporary world i.e. Loyalty and Respect for delegated authority.

Loyalty to the home government that the ambassador represents, protection and defense of nationals in the host country should be his top-most prerogative. In the case of *Ajele* all his loyalty was to the Alaafin and the suzerain and he sought to defend that loyalty both politically and economically. He must have earned the trust of the Oba as a man of integrity for that role to have become hereditary. While not advocating for heredity to be recognized as the basis for modern ambassadorial appointments, diplomats should patriotically seek and work to win the trust of the government and nationals from home country by discharging his duties with altruism. Many ambassadors in today's world are nominated and appointed on the basis of political party member compensation especially in Nigeria. Apart from lacking the knowledge as to what their roles are, the interest is more about personal aggrandizement, enjoyment of privileges attached to the office and sometime abuse of office opportunities to run personal businesses. Another issue that have generated agitation against ambassadors especially those representing Nigeria for instance, is the neglect and exposure to Nigeria nationals to series of danger abroad i.e. Nigeria nationals in Dubai facing work permit restriction and possible deportation by the United Arab Emirate government for non-justifiable reason. Another case in recent time was the neglect of Nigerians studying in Ukraine by the Nigeria embassy official in the wake of Russian invasion.²⁸. All these by Nigeria ambassador have made the citizens to lose faith in whatever they represent. It would not be out of place to say these acts would not be limited to Nigerian diplomats alone.

Respect for delegated authority represents another lesson that can be learnt by contemporary world. This concerns both the government and the people generally. A government that delegates authority to its representatives to act on his behalf must respect and keep to the rules irrespective of whatever happens. The idea of "Para diplomat" i.e. Presidents and foreign minister indirectly engaging in direct diplomacy most time without the knowledge of the ambassador is in contrast to the rules and conduct of diplomacy. In addition, abusing the advancement in communication technology via social media handles (facebook, twitter, you tube channels) to announce and claim authority over issues that should have been an exclusive reserve of the ambassador as the official source also contravene the rules of diplomatic practices. Ambassador's authority should be respected and allowed to do their duties without prejudice. *Ajele* was the only recognised authority to carry out his functions as the representative of the Alaafin both politically and economically. He was the mouth-piece of Oba in Ijanna that disseminate necessary information and no one else dare usurp that role else the person will face the consequences and that will be fatal.

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