

Kingship Institution in Post-Colonial Akokoland, 1960–1999

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The attainment of independence in 1960 opened a new vista in the political history of Nigeria as the new nation, was after long years of tortuous journey in the hands of aggressive external control and coupled with series of destructive internal disturbances across villages, towns, cities throughout the polity, had the first opportunity at self-governance in the modern sense. Retrospectively, historians and other scholars have explicitly documented and argued the huge impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the legitimate trade, colonial rule and the forced union called amalgamation in 1914 on Nigeria. The attainment of political or flag independence was, however, not an automatic guarantee of solutions to the many damages that were done to our socio-economic and political institutions by the above development in our collective history. The paper, therefore, presents discussions on how the kingship institution in Akokoland in particular and Nigeria in general has fared since independence up to the period of return to civil rule in 1999. Using a gristmill of sources, the descriptive and analytical methods were used to present the ideas of the paper and the findings revealed that the kingship institution beyond Akokoland has continued to show resilience despite the various stages of mutations it has passed through.

[Kingship Institution; Post-Colonial Akokoland; Nigeria; 1960–1999]

Introduction

Kingship and power dynamics remain significant in governance discourse in Africa. Existing studies¹ on kingship generally have portrayed the

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¹ A. L. NAJEEM, The Position of the Chiefs, in: B. Y. USMAN (ed.), *Nigeria since Independence: The First Twenty Five Years, Vol. I, The Society*, Ibadan 1989, p. 69; E. A. B. Van NIEUWAAL (ed.), Chiefs and African States: Some Introductory Notes and an Extensive Bibliography on African Chieftaincy, in: *Journal of Legal Pluralism*, 25 & 26, Special Issue on Chieftaincy and the State in Africa: 3, 1987; S. O. ARIFALO – S. T. Okajare, *Changing Role of Traditional Rulers and the Challenges of Governance in Contemporary Nigeria*:

institution as a subordinate agent in colonial administration and modern power dynamics in Africa, including Akokoland. Although the dynamics of kingship and power relations in Nigeria have received a degree of scholarly interest, less attention has been paid to them in Akokoland, north-eastern Yorubaland. This paper was, therefore, designed to examine kingship in postcolonial Akokoland with a view to determining how the institution survived the complexity of modern governance and its challenges between 1960 and 1999. While 1960 would be generally seen as the period that announced the official end of colonial rule in Nigeria, the period marked an important watershed in the political history of Akokoland as it put paid to the colonial system of Native Administration which seriously undermined the powers of the kings and the institution. 1999 was picked as the terminal period to help situate the efforts of government at policy level during the first one year of return to civil rule in the integration of the kingship institution as partners in the nation-building project. The paper used the descriptive and analytical methods to present its discussions. Primary data was sourced from in-depth interviews conducted with purposively selected informants who are knowledgeable on kingship dynamics in post-colonial Akokoland while useful pieces of information garnered from books, journal articles, monographs, national dailies, dissertations, theses and materials from the internet formed the secondary data.

Kingship in Akokoland in the Early Years of Independence, 1960–1966

In many parts of the world, societies are ever more recognising the importance of political stability and democracy as the underpinning for societal development, the African continent is still bogged down by instability in several regions. From a political perspective, quite a significant number of African countries claim some form of “independence” from their former colonial masters. The experiences in specific African country contexts suggest that the reasons for different struggles for independence have

Yorubaland in Historical Perspective, AAU, Akungba-Akoko Department of History Monograph Series, Series No. 03.002, Akure 2005; S. A. OGUNODE, From Kingdoms to Kingdom: A Historical Appraisal of the Chieftaincy Institution in Okaland Southwest of Nigeria, in: *European Scientific Journal*, 8, 23, 2012, pp. 22–37; O. FABOYEDE, *The Akoko Elite, 1900–1960*, a Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Department of History and International Studies, Ekiti State University 2013; J. O. ADEYERI, *British Rule and the Transformation of Akokoland, 1897 – 1960*, a Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Department of History, University of Ibadan 2015.

not changed. In the post-colonial era, contemporary African leadership has not had a mental or ethical re-calibration in terms of how they treat their own citizens, the society and public goods.² This has been the bane of inclusive development and recurring agitations among different interest groups in Nigeria in general and Akokoland in particular since independence. The early years of independence was promising and full of high expectations from Nigerians. Emerging from the dust of nationalist struggles were men of high reputation and vision for a better nation fit for all to live and make their contributions as citizens. The new class of politicians (mostly nationalists) who were later joined by the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie constituted a class labelled, in social sciences, as the bourgeoisie. As observed by Nzimiro; every class in the society has its gradations; there are within the bourgeoisie the upper, the middle and the lower class.³ Buttressing his classification, he submitted that among the classes is a strong group that consists of those who control the destiny of our country, and we call them the ruling class.⁴ The ruling class in the early years of independence in Nigeria before the men in uniform intervened in 1966 accorded the kingship and other traditional political institutions and their custodians their due place as partners in the efforts towards building a better Nigeria. The thinking then was that, all hands needed to be on deck if the expected advancement in the socio-economic and political institutions must be achieved. In fact, the experimental parliamentary system of government in operation which was reflective of what obtained in Britain helped the inclusion of the traditional rulers in the political equation even though their powers and functions were largely limited to their kingly and chiefly domains. The kings, especially in the early of years of independence, still had a feel of their secular powers, but later developments soon proved otherwise as the politicians and in connivance with power brokers who were desperately seeking for means of total control of institutions of state enacted unfavourable policies and chieftaincy declarations to undermine the powers of the traditional rulers. Divide and rule system as used by the colonial masters became a ready

² J. AIHIE, *Africa at Fifty: The Paradox of the Post-Colonial State*, Department of Political Science University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, p. 2, Nigeria. Being a paper prepared for the 23rd World Congress of the International Political Science Association, July 19–24, 2014, Montreal, Canada.

³ Ikenna Nzirimio, *Of What Relevance are Traditional Rulers?*, in: *The Guardian Newspaper*, Thursday, May 17, 1984.

⁴ *Ibid.*

tool in the hands of later politicians to depose or checkmate dissenting kings and chiefs in Akokoland in particular and Nigeria in general. The impact of the Western Region crisis of 1962, which pitched the tent of war between the Awolowo camp and the Akintola supporters had serious impact on the kingship institutions in Akokoland as will be revealed later as discussions progress in this paper.

The roles played by the traditional rulers during the colonial period seriously undermined their stake as custodians of traditions and expert in local governance. The traditional rulers served British colonial administrative needs wherever they existed. Where they did not, the British created and imposed them by sheer force.⁵ As it was in the colonial period, there were provisions for the House of Chiefs in the then regions to serve as an equivalent of House of Lords. But the House of Chiefs, in the final analysis was some House of Lords. The chiefs (kings of course attended the meetings called throughout the period) were at the mercies of the colonialists who were not for any reason ready to equate the functions of the House of Chiefs with that of the House of Lords. It, therefore, goes to say that, whatever functions and relevance accorded the traditional institutions during the colonial periods were just cosmetic and never expected to extend beyond what the British permitted. The same development played out in Nigeria in the early sixties. Though the influence of traditional rulers was still considerable in the early sixties, they could not win concession from the rising new political class that dominated the constituent assembly. The political class often advanced that it is necessary to insulate the traditional rulers away from partisan politics. They were to preside over the traditional councils, but as far as the local government council was concerned, they had no role.⁶ That is the irony of the much-touted excuses of the politicians for reducing the institution of kingship and chieftaincy to the backwater of history. The professional politicians had outplayed the traditional ones and erstwhile potentates had been humiliated and put in their 'proper' places in the scheme of things. Oguntimehin summed up the experience of kingship institution in Akokoland from 1960 to 1966 when he observed that: "*The attainment of flag independence was initially mistaken by the new political elites as a ticket to securing automatic socio-economic emancipation and stability; sadly, the imagined*

⁵ U. AIKHEN, Kings, Soldiers and Nigerians Concord, in: *Nigeria's International News-magazine*, Weekly, No. 4, August 24, 1984, p. 11.

⁶ E. RAY, A Harmless Anachronism, in: *Newswatch Magazine*, April 18, 1988, p. 16.

Eldorado was hanging in the balance due to the faulty foundation created by the British with the amalgamation of 1914. The Action Group crisis of 1962 was a huge dent on the nationalist disposition of those who claimed to have fought for 'one Nigeria.' Some parts of Akokoland got seriously entangled in the power politics that resulted from the Western Region crisis. Pro-Akintola kings in Akokoland especially in Arigidi-Akoko and Ikare-Akoko were deposed and those for the Awolowo camp were spared."⁷

The impact of the Western Region crisis of 1962 on kingship institution varied from one Akokoland town to another. The extent of the damage done to the kingship institution in Akokoland and other parts of Yorubaland depended on the political alignment or bloc that each town or interest groups supported during and after the crisis. The personality of those for or against the major political bloc with regional appeal and acceptance also determined the level of impact of the crisis. In Ogbagi-Akoko, for instance, the royal stool of the Owa was saved from the raging crisis because it supported the Awolowo camp. The Owa, while reacting with a tone of relief observed that: *"Although I was not king as at the time of the Western Region crisis of 1962, my father, the Oba then consulted widely before pitching his tent with the Awo bloc. The Owa was able to mobilise the larger part of the town to join in supporting the Action Group as the Akintola group was viewed as having more to do with the northern political scheme than the Awo bloc which was fully a Yoruba brand. What mattered to the Owa then was the safety of his kingdom and from every signal, the Awo bloc was worth supporting. The only support that went the way of Akintola from Ogbagi-Akoko came from the Awelewa family but their support was not a popular one. Ogbagi-Akoko was fortunate to have supported the Awolowo camp. So we were not seriously endangered since the choice we made was a wise one."*⁸

Okeagbe-Akoko also followed the wise choice made by Ogbagi-Akoko in supporting the Awolowo group. Adewumi detailed the mix feeling that rented the political atmosphere throughout Akokoland, but with emphasis on Okeagbe-Akoko in the build-up to the crisis. He asserted

⁷ Paul Oguntimehin (76), retired Principal, C/36, Oke-Igbagbo Street, Ogbagi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria, 15/4/2017. Similar view was given by Akinyemi Onibalusi (87), the *Oluparu* of Ogbagi-Akoko, farmer, third in rank to the Owa of Ogbagi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria, 18/4/2017. For details on the Action Group Crisis and its impact see A. E. AFE, Impact of Political Crisis on National Development in Nigeria: Action Group Crisis in Context, in: *Kenya Studies Review*, 6, 4, 2013, pp. 172–187.

⁸ Oba Adetona Victor Ojo, Odagbaragaja III (53+), the Owa of Ogbagi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 18/4/2018.

thus: *“The Western Region crisis of 1962 and the general elections upheaval of 1965 that led to the famous ‘operation wetie’ did affect us here in Okeagbe-Akoko like it did to other Akokoland communities and the entire Yorubaland. The very first party we knew was the Awolowo party – the Action Group with the palm tree insignia. Akintola joined the Northern Peoples Congress as a result of his fallout with Awolowo. He later formed his own party Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP). Some of our sons and daughters who had sympathy for Akintola joined his party and returned home to convince some of us to join the Akintola party but for fear of aligning with the weaker bloc and its eventual consequences, there was palpable tension in the town given the challenge of choice.”*⁹

This was the situation in Akokoland and the Yoruba country when the crisis eventually started. With the ember of discord already fanned from the outcome of the Jos Convention of February 2, 1962,¹⁰ the stage was now set for a full blown crisis and the 1965 Federal elections crisis which went into history as “operation wetie” because of the carnage and wanton destruction that followed its outbreak. In actual sense, a lot of people died because it was then seen as direct conflict between Awolowo loyalists and the Akintola loyalists. This crisis permeated down to the villages across Akokoland. The point must be made here that, Awolowo’s free education policy seriously endeared many people to his party throughout the region. This policy contributed largely to the quality education and exposure received by many sons and daughters of Akokoland and other parts of the region. Oloruntoba and Adewumi were in agreement when they submitted that: *“While Akintola was able to whip up sentiments and garner sympathizers in his period of travails, Chief Awolowo naturally won over large followers and supporters throughout the region due to his visionary leadership which manifested in his hugely successful policy of free education. No matter how hard the Akintola camp tried, there was no way they could have succeeded in outwitting the cult of acceptance of the visionary leadership of Awolowo.”*¹¹

The *Ologotun-Igase* of Ogosi was one of the Okeagbe-Akoko privileged

⁹ Adewumi Ojo Stephen, 70, *Ologotun-Igase*, Ogosi Quarters, Afa, Okeagbe-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 12/4/2018.

¹⁰ AFE, p. 172.

¹¹ Oba Oloruntoba Bello Arasanyi I (70+), *Ewi of Aje*, Okeagbe-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 12/5/2015. Adewumi Ojo Stephen (70), *Ologotun – Igase*, he is the high priest of Afa community in Okeagbe-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Interviewed 12/4/2018. Pa Jimoh Aodu (115), the oldest man in Iwonrin Oka-Akoko also supported the view above during an interview session. Beside Ariseh M.A house, Iwonrin, Oka-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Interviewed 1/8/2018.

few that enjoyed the Awolowo free education policy. He was very objective when he presented his view on the circumstances that informed the political leaning of many interest groups in Akokoland with regards to the warring camps in the Western Region crisis. He stated that: “I am one of the proud beneficiaries of the Pa Awo’s visionary free education policy in the then Western Region. This rare privilege informed the larger part of my decision in terms of alignment during the crisis that engulfed the region. In terms of spread and acceptance, what we knew was the Action Group. So, when our enlightened sons and daughters who had in one way or the other had sympathy for Akintola returned home from Ibadan and Lagos, they were able to convince some of us to join the Akintola group. It was not surprising therefore; that some of our traditional rulers joined the Awolowo side while some had sympathy for the Akintola group but could not show it for fear of what the consequences of their action or inaction could bring.”¹²

He observed further that those who pitched their tent with Akintola suffered dire consequences. For instance, in Afa community, people who joined hands with Akintola were *persona non-grata*. Houses that were traditionally supposed to produce high chiefs but had supported Akintola in the past were denied chieftaincy titles. Such titles were said to have been hung on the tree. Until very recently, this was happening here.¹³ The case of Ikare-Akoko is also worthy of mention. The Western Region crisis led to the dethronement of *Oba* Babatunde Ajaguna II who was a strong supporter of Akintola. The politics that resulted from the deposition cleared the way for the emergence of Momoh III who was Awolowo’s loyalist.¹⁴ So it was natural to know who the Awo camp would use to ensure their foothold in the area during and after the crisis.

Arigidi-Akoko also had its own fair share of the 1962 Western Region crisis. The migration history of the people and their strong link with the northern part of Nigeria through their link with the Tapa group to the Niger informed the direction of their political appeal. The Arigidi-Akoko people felt that since the new Akintola party had more links with the north, which is basically their source of history, they supported Akintola. The Western Region politics and the melee that ensued affected the *Zaki*

¹² Adewumi Ojo Stephen (70), *Ologotun – Igase*, he is the high priest of Afa community in Okeagbe-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Interviewed 12/4/2018.

¹³ Adewumi Ojo Stephen (70), *Ologotun – Igase*, he is the high priest of Afa community in Okeagbe-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Interviewed 12/4/2018.

¹⁴ *Oba* Akidiri Saliu-Momoh IV (80+), the *Olukare* of Ikare-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 14/4/2018.

throne between 1967 and 1984. The then *Oba* Momodu Olanipekun was forced on exile to Ibadan due to his open support for the Akintola camp. In fact, his palace was burnt down and three people died in the crisis. Reprieve only came to Arigidi-Akoko's political circle when the exiled *Oba* returned home in 1984.¹⁵ Epimi-Akoko and Isua-Akoko were not caught in the violent current generated by the Western Region crisis. According to George Olusegun, lessons of happenings in other communities in Akokoland that supported the less popular political bloc helped to shape our decision as the crisis spreads to other parts of Yorubaland. It was only wise for us to have supported the popular Awo party.¹⁶ By 1965, the political atmosphere throughout Yorubaland was frenzy, tense and the looming danger was better imagined than described. The crisis that broke out after the 1965 Federal elections was what went down in history as "operation wetic".¹⁷ Ideological differences between Awolowo and Akintola and the unresolved battle of party leadership supremacy metamorphosed into what history has tagged as the most dangerous political crisis ever in the early political history of Nigeria. A regional problem escalated to become a national problem. Fund that could have been directed towards development projects was expended on security and conflict management. This unfortunate development, coupled with other alleged reasons, set the stage for the first military intervention in Nigerian politics and the collapse of the first republic. In a simple expression, the birth of new Nigeria meant a lot to the political history of the newly emergent nation. Hopes were high and millions expected quick turnaround in all facets of life from the ruling class. Sadly, just six years into the euphoria of gaining independence, the uniform men struck, and the rest was history.

The forgoing has revealed that the Western Region crisis of 1962 and the 1965 general elections were major events that shaped the early history of Nigeria up to 1966. The impact they had on the kingship institutions in Akokoland and other parts of Yorubaland varied from one community to the other depending on the level of involvement in the power play

¹⁵ High Chief Francis Rotimi Alabi (50+), *Edibo* of Ogo quarters, Arigidi-Akoko. He is one of the kingmakers. 6/4/2018. Adesugba J.A, *Eleho* of Oguo quarters, Arigidi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 6/4/2018. Adamu Yekini Olugbenga, *Oseré* of Ayase quarters, Ondo State, Nigeria. 6/4/2018.

¹⁶ *Oba* George Olusegun Oyekan (50+), *Gbiri* of Epimi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 7/6/2018.

¹⁷ *Oba* George Olusegun Oyekan (50+), *Gbiri* of Epimi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 7/6/2018.

and politics that characterised the period. Despite the ominous signs occasioned by the happenings in the early years of independence in Nigeria as a whole and Akokoland in particular, the kingship institutions and their custodians stayed hopeful with the conviction that lessons will be learnt from the mistakes of the early years. The extent to which this positive thinking connects to later developments from 1966 to 1999 is the focus of the next discussion. At any rate, the kingship institution in Akokoland has continued to show resilience even though the events of the early years of nationhood have not been pleasant in terms of policy direction and implementation.

Kingship in Akokoland under Military and Civilian Governments, 1966–1999

In the sixties, when Nigeria operated the Westminster type of constitution, each region had a house of chiefs as an upper house in the regional legislature. Though it did not have the power to veto, the house of chiefs was perhaps the last time when the *Obas* directly participated in governance beyond their local government areas. Since the first coming of the military in 1966, the lot of the royal fathers has been that of gradual but steady decline in power and influence. Opinions are diverse on the impact of the military and civilian regimes on the kingship institutions in Akokoland in the period under review. The *Owa* of Ogbagi-Akoko, *Gbiri* of Epimi-Akoko, the *Olojo* of Ojo, Ajowa-Akoko all agreed that the military responded better to the aspirations of the traditional rulers in Akokoland in particular and Yorubaland as a whole than their civilian counterparts in the area of consultations on sensitive local issues and those of national concern.¹⁸ The views of the above mentioned kings on the military are not without reservations. They also queried the way they got to power and their style of rule. Looking at the military regimes from the point of view of the power of the gun and the need to obey order without complaints, one may also submit that, their rise to power and pattern of administration was not masses based. Whatever the case, later discussion reveals the extent to which the military regimes and the civilian administrations impacted the kingship institution in Akokoland in the period under review.

¹⁸ The views of these Akokoland kings were premised on the positive intervention the military government of Badamosi Babangida, Muhammadu Buhari in the area of meaningful consultation and General Sanni Abacha had on their remuneration.

Military rule wrought several changes in the role and importance of traditional rulers during our period. While their counsel was sought by the new military rulers, they lost their erstwhile formal political roles as enshrined under the 1963 constitution. Many traditional rulers were appointed by military administrators to boards of parastatals and other public institutions. Some rulers saw a substantial increase in their personal perquisites of office. However, several political changes implemented in the wake of military governance of the country had substantial adverse impact on the power and influence of traditional rulers (kings and chiefs alike). For instance, the federal and state government take-over of the local police, prisons and native courts in 1968 constituted a significant blow to the power and influence of many traditional rulers in the northern part of the country. This development also affected the kings in Akokoland. The *Osunla* of Erusu was explicit when he observed that; “*the military and the politicians deliberately snatched our judicial powers to sit at the native courts to hear and dispense justice on issues that have local colouration. This was all in a desperate attempts by the later to take full control of the machinery of the state*”.¹⁹ Sadly, various villages, towns and even cities are crisis ridden today due to several unresolved legal battles at the courts over petty issues such as goat theft, fighting, and family issues which were hitherto, locally handled by the traditional rulers at the native courts. It is common in local communities today to see people from the same family or household threatening to involve the police at any slight provocation and on many occasions, family members have got each other detained over issues that can ordinarily be handled at local community gathering.

The kings’ palaces are no longer viewed by many as viable enough to address issues of local concerns. The institution of kingship in Akokoland is not taking lightly this ugly development as efforts have been made by the kings with the corporation of the chiefs to educate the people on the need to allow local issues to be handled locally by those charged with the responsibility. An informant at Aje, Okeagbe-Akoko was apt when he observed that; although some people still find joy in washing their dirty linens in public glare, the *Ewi* has repeatedly emphasised the need for the people to settle all issues as a community. Aje is so small that we cannot afford to allow distraction of any type to impede our collective resolve to build a united and orderly society. We shall continue to evolve better

¹⁹ Oba Sunday Olaniyi Mogaji, Imole I (63), the *Osunla* of Erusu-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Interviewed on 10/04/2018.

ways of solving our problems without having to externalise them.²⁰ Von Trotha while suggesting provisional principles, by which the transformation of administrative chieftaincy into civil chieftaincy may be evaluated, submitted that: “*the state has to recognize the de facto legal pluralism and to institutionalise the chiefs’ independent legal system, except for such cases as communal violence. While Von accepted that this local justice may ‘perpetuate the injustices’ of the local order, he believes that local autonomy in this matter is to be preferred.*”²¹

More interesting in the principles of Von was the rider he gave to the first principle which is based on local autonomy. Arguing with a depth of native understanding, Von opines that local problems must be solved locally. As long as injustice is not challenged locally, outside intervention should be very cautious. Local people have to determine their own interests, he argues.²² Buttressing Von view, Obada queried that: “*only a shallow thinking government (civilian or military) would want to handle all issues without delegating some to the spread of the state. In the face of dwindling financial fortunes, government can save itself from the heavy financial burden incurred in multiple court cases while handling local conflicts that could have been handled internally by experienced traditional leaders and community elders.*”²³

The above is pointing to the fact the wielders of modern political power have continued to impose their will on the traditional rulers and the grassroots people under the pretence of maintaining law and order as if those societies have no indigenous system of social control and conflict management. The closeness of the kings and chiefs to the rural people which form the largest chunk of any state in Nigeria put them at better position to handle disputes locally and resolve same without necessarily degenerating into serious conflicts. Meaningful development can only be achieved in a peaceful space. It is, however, sad to note that party and electoral politics have contributed significantly to a process in which local disputants seek support from national patrons, whilst national parties

²⁰ Emmanuel Elegbeye Onipinla (JP), 84, S40A, Aje, Okeagbe-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 12/4/2018.

²¹ T. von TROTHA, From Administrative to Legal and Civil Chieftainship: Diversity, Intermediary Domination, Tradition and Authority Historical and Sociological Consideration about some Problems and Prospects of African Chieftainship, in: K. A. BREMPONG – D. I. RAY – E. A. B. van NIEUWAAL (eds.), *Proceedings of the Conference on the Contributions of Traditional Authority to Development, Human Rights and Environmental Protection: Strategies for Africa*, Leiden 1995, pp. 457–473.

²² Ibid.

²³ Obada Joseph (76), *Edibo* of Imo, Arigidi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Interviewed on 6/4/2018.

seek electoral advantage by engaging with local factions.²⁴ This, according to Crook, has intensified the political character of chieftaincy (kingship) disputes and ethnic rivalries among communities under the hegemonic influences of disputing kings and chiefs.²⁵

Similarly, the Land Use Decree of 1978 reduced the power of traditional rulers over lands in urban areas. As observed by the *Owa* of Ogbagi-Akoko, the taking over of lands by the wielders of modern political powers was a strong signal to the end of the relevance of the old Yoruba saying that, *Oba lo ni ile* – meaning the king is the owner of the land. Prior to the relegation of the powers and relevance of the kings by the modern political class, the command the traditional rulers had over land was huge and unequivocally confirmed by their powers to give final verdict on any disputed land. The Land Use Decree has changed this. It must, however, be observed that the kings' power over land has not been totally abolished as various kings and other traditional rulers in Akokoland still reserve the power to allocate large portion of land for projects that would be of direct benefit to the people. The allocation is most time done in consultation with the chiefs and some select elders of the community. Given the complexity of power play and the sophistication occasioned by enlightenment, traditional rulers, however powerful and connected, are conscious of the fact that their continued reign is largely dependent on the stability of their domains and of course maximal acceptance of their leadership by the people. They, therefore, tend to always make and implement decisions with extreme caution. In the same vein, the creation of new states and new local governments drastically reduced the geographical domain of many of the large emirates in the North.²⁶ The introduction of local government reforms by the military further reduced the administrative and legislative roles of traditional rulers. Under the 1976 local government reforms, local administration was removed from traditional rulers and was placed instead in the newly created local government councils. From his analysis of the impact of the 1976 local government reforms on traditional rulers,

²⁴ R. CROOK, The Role of the Traditional Institutions in Political Change and Development, in: *Center for Democratic Development/Overseas Development Institute Policy Brief*, No. 4, November 2005, p. 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ It should, however, be noted that the creation of states and local governments enhanced the power and stature of some traditional rulers. For instance, some second-class chiefs were automatically promoted to first-class chiefs in new states that found themselves without any first-class chiefs.

Joseph Egwurube concludes that it: “radically altered the locus of traditional rulers vis-a-vis local government. This alteration is more vividly epitomised in the concrete particulars of the new local government system, in which, among other features, traditional rulers have been extricated from the centre of local government operations and converted into informed observers of local government.”²⁷

Under the 1976 reforms, a new structure known as the Traditional or Emirate Council was created in each local government area. Among other functions, the Traditional/Emirate Council was charged with: formulating general proposals as advice to local governments; harmonising the activities of local government councils through discussion affecting them generally, and giving advice and guidance to them; co-ordinating development plans of local governments by joint discussion and advise; making determinations on religious matters where appropriate; determining questions relating to chieftaincy matters and control of traditional titles and offices, except where these are traditionally the exclusive prerogative of the Emir or Chief in which case the Council’s function shall be advisory to the Emir or Chief.²⁸ It is, however, significant to note that the traditional rulers though had no choice than to accept the rather strange decree enacted by the Murtala/Obasanjo administration, they never supported it because the development bequeathed the state governors absolute authority in land related issues. Their resentment to the Land Use Decree got to its peak during the military regime of Muhammadu Buhari who was favourably disposed to the traditional rulers as viable and reliable partners in the nation-building project. The Gowon regime argued that it had no need of the traditional rulers since it had the civil war to serve as a mobilising instrument. This view was not a popular one among the traditionalist school which observes that the traditional rulers are part of our cultural heritage and must not be allowed to disappear. This school hinges its argument on the fact that, since the kings and chiefs are insulated from politics at all levels and given the esteem bestowed on them by people, they are politically and socially viable. While political expediency might have necessarily served as a strong factor for courting

²⁷ J. O. EGWURUBE, *Traditional Rulers and Modern Local Government in Nigeria-Where the Problem Lies*, Paper presented at the International Conference on Local Government in West Africa, Ile-Ife, University of Ife, February 1982.

²⁸ P. O. AGBESE, Chiefs, Constitutions, and Policies in Nigeria, in: *West Africa Review*, 6, 2004. See also Z. I. ABUBAKAR, The Role of Traditional Rulers: Nigeria’s Emirs and Chiefs in Conflict Management Since 1976, in: I. O. ALBERT – IS-HAQ O. OLOYEDE (eds.), *Dynamics of Peace Processes*, Ilorin 2010, pp. 237–248.

the support of the kingship and chieftaincy institutions in Nigeria by some of the military regimes, the central thesis anchors on the obvious fact that, the military who have no constituency of their own, find it easy to fall back on ready-made vehicles of influence through which to get at the grassroots, especially where the rabble-rousing politicians have been discredited and many of them languishing in jail.²⁹

Before continuing discussion on the impact of military regimes on the kingship institution, it is important to briefly assess the extent to which lessons were learnt and applied throughout Yorubaland with regards to the Western Region crisis of 1962 and the 1965 general elections conflict. Kings in Akokoland and other parts of Yorubaland agree that party conflicts and politics, especially where the personalities involved are strong mobilisers of crowd must be managed properly to avert a repeat of what happened in the first most documented political crisis in Nigeria. Unfortunately, a similar crisis broke out in Ondo State on August 13, 1983.³⁰ The lessons that were not learnt through the political crises of 1962 and 1965 were learnt the hard way after the destructive political crisis that shook Ondo State from its very foundation in 1983. Adetona and Ariseh agreed that the 1983 political disturbance that rocked Ondo State was needless and if indeed the camps involved in the conflict were sincerely aspiring to serve the people, their actions during and after the election did not portray qualities expected from supposed public servants. Even if the Supreme Court finally laid the case to rest, the tension the crisis had created in many parts of the state and the destruction that came in its wake has continued to linger in the minds of many.³¹ Again, state fund was used to prosecute the lengthy court cases that later gave victory to Adekunle Ajasin. The victory, however resounding it was, did not translate to good governance as the state had ran into financial difficulty and the problem was even compounded with the second coming of the military in 1984. Sadly, all institutions in the State suffered neglect because of the crisis. For the kingship and other traditional political institutions in Nigeria

²⁹ CONCORD, Kings, Soldiers and Nigerians, in: *Nigeria's International Newsmagazine*, Weekly, No. 4, August 24, 1984, p. 11.

³⁰ Afe, Adedayo Emmanuel (50), lecturer, Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 11/7/2018.

³¹ Oba Adetona, Victor Ojo, Odagbaragaja III (53+), The *Owa* of Ogbagi-Akoko, interviewed at the *Owa* palace, Ogbagi-Akoko. 18/4/2018. Ariseh Micheal Adefemi (80), pensioner and a member of the Iwonrin Elders-in-Council since 2004, interviewed at his residence, Iwonrin Oka-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 1/8/2018.

and Akokoland in particular, the journey to stability has been a tortuous one. The second coming of the uniform men was equally received with mixed feelings throughout the country. Ayesa gave his view on the return of the military to active politics in Nigeria when he submitted that: *“In my early adult life, the word military was synonymous with barracks and security. The military was not expected to have any business whatsoever with partisan politics. In the first instance, their first coming was hinged on maladministration and massive corruption which characterized the politics of the first republic, but they ironically ended up promoting the vices that led to their intervention. Since the major function of the military is to restore order and ensure stability in the polity, the events that featured their return fell short of expectation.”*³²

Debates on the impact of modern governance on kingship and chieftaincy institutions in Akokoland appear to favour the military more than the civilian governments in the period of study. The reason for this is simple. Discourse on colonial rule has revealed that the politicians have scores to settle with the traditional rulers who they believed usurped their positions as having better qualifications to take over leadership in the period. The obvious exclusion of the political elite in the British divide and rule tactics in the administration of most parts of the country was what climaxed to the bitter disenchantment and strong hatred for the traditional rulers. The favourable time came when the country gained independence in 1960. The political elite were now at an advantaged position to take their pound of flesh. Government policies, declarations and laws were established to put the traditional rulers in their rightful place. The Kano riot of 1981 and its aftermath meant little or nothing to the politicians from the South-west. The belief by the political elite that once they have control of the machinery of State that all other things will fall place in place was what perhaps emboldened Governor Abubakar Rimi to ignore the feudal power of the then *Emir* of Kano. His action led to unprecedented cataclysmic events that almost consumed the State. The point of emphasis here hinges on the fact that, the wielders of modern political power certainly need to come to terms with the viability of the traditional rulers as useful partners in the management of the polity towards building a better and safer society for all.

³² Ayesa Christopher (60+), hotel manager, Imo, Arigidi-Akoko. 6/4/2018. His view was also corroborated by Sule Obafemi, 60+, Aro of Owake, Oka-Odo, Oka-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 26/7/2018. He is a retired military officer who fought actively during the Nigerian Civil War.

The Shagari administration was a law and order, conservative, government unwilling to alter anything in the status quo – a philosophy which suited the traditional rulers best during the period. Many observers have viewed this development as a product of political expediency. The position of the administration was good omen for the traditional rulers across the country between 1979 and 1983. The point must be made that the ruling party was not having the entire country under its control. The need to court new friends to gain large scale acceptance became necessary. Like in the colonial period, the Shagari administration found the traditional rulers as useful agents of mobilising the people at the grassroots to support and accept the ruling party. Adewumi observes that: *“However gracious the hands of friendship extended to the traditional rulers by the Shagari administration might be, later developments show that, the government did what it had to do to court the support of the kings and chiefs given the unpopularity of the government as a result of maladministration and the unmitigated high incidence of financial and administrative corruption among politicians of the period.”*³³

To gain the support of the traditional rulers in the states not controlled by the ruling party, the Shagari administration utilised all the perquisites at its disposal, including contracts, gifts and other privileges. This alliance between the rulers and the unpopular government accounts for the cynicism and open jeers at the love-affair between the new government and the traditional rulers. The spontaneous condemnation that trailed the Shagari administration from the traditional rulers who had hitherto supported the same government was a clear display of their frustration during the hay day of the administration. Across the country, the traditional rulers praised the ousting of the Shagari government because they believed that they would fare better under the military. So, the events that followed the sack of the second civilian administration reaffirmed the earlier confidence expressed in the leadership of the new military regime.

The Buhari junta after sacking the Shagari administration at the close of 1983 started off his government by sending General Muhammed Magoro (rtd.) to the *Sultan* of Sokoto to plead their case and seek his support.³⁴ This hand of friendship was extended to traditional rulers in other parts of the country. Since 1984, the military regime treated the traditional rulers with velvet gloves. Buhari was never tired of referring to them as our “royal

³³ Adewumi Ojo Stephen (70), *Ologotun – Igase*, he is the high priest of Afa community in Okeagbe-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Interviewed 12/4/2018.

³⁴ T. DAPO, *Discord Here, Concord There*, in: *Time Week Magazine*, 1, 4, May 6, 1991, p. 14.

fathers”.³⁵ The Buhari military regime was perhaps the warmest to the traditional rulers in terms of consultation and inclusion in vital decision making during the one year plus of its existence. The regime, though short, left its impact in many areas in the evolving nation. Its usual romance with the traditional rulers was what received widespread condemnation from the class of Nigerians who perceived everything that is evil, oppressive and corrupt in traditional rulership. Those who hold this often hard stance, belongs to the pseudo-revolutionaries who see the kings and chiefs as part of the oppressive ruling class which feeds fat on the sweat of the poor masses.³⁶ The democrats are also of the view that there is no longer any meaningful role for traditional rulers, especially after the Land Use Decree of 1978 had taken away the last vestiges of the of the old powers of these rulers who are now left with the near-empty role of the custodians of our traditions. The Buhari administration had a different view from the above pseudo-revolutionary and democratic stance. The memory of the Kano riot of July, 1981 was perhaps one the factors behind the hands of friendship extended to the traditional rulers by the Buhari administration.

Buhari, therefore, knew exactly what he was doing in calling on the kings and emirs for support. He pursued his principle of courting the friendship of the traditional rulers all through his one year plus in power. His coup message to the traditional rulers set the precedent for the relationship between the military and traditional rulers. His government indeed, enhanced the standing of the kingship and chieftaincy institutions in Nigeria despite its short reign. *Olukare* of Ikare-Akoko aptly captured the impact of the Buhari’s military regime when he observed that short as the Buhari military regime was, he was smart to have courted the friendship of traditional rulers across the country. While some people argued that his action was largely because of political expediency, I am of the opinion that the Shagari regime which was rather choking and unfriendly, left little to be desired in terms of relationship with the traditional authorities.³⁷ During this period, the politicians, to further circumscribe the powers of the traditional rulers, promoted some lesser ones to higher status as if they were civil servants and even went ahead to increase the number of local government from 301 in 1979 to 703 by

³⁵ RAY, p. 16.

³⁶ B. LABANJI, Traditional Rulers Have a Role to Play, in: *National Concord*, March 16, 1984, p. 6.

³⁷ Momoh, Saliu Akadiri (80+), the *Olukare* of Ikare-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 18/08/2016.

1983.³⁸ The development further eroded the little that was left for the traditional rulers to relish in terms of power and relevance in the modern political space. It was a painful period of hide and seek game for the royals and when the military struck again in December 31, 1983, it was a rescue from the jaw of disaster.

Despite the close association cultivated between military administrators and traditional rulers, the 1979 Constitution which was promulgated by the military, excluded traditional rulers from any formal legislative role. Instead, the Constitution made provisions for the establishment of a Council of Chiefs at the state level. Only limited advisory roles were provided for the Council of Chiefs. As the Constitution says: *“The Council shall have power to advise the governor on any matter relating to customary law or cultural affairs, inter-communal relations and chieftaincy matters. The Council shall also have power to advise the Governor whenever requested to do so on: (a) the maintenance of public order within the State or any part thereof; and (b) such other matters as the Governor may direct.”*

The 1979 Constitution also established a Council of State at the federal level. Among the membership of this body is one person from each state who shall, as expected of the State, be appointed by the Council of Chiefs of the state from among themselves. With respect to the constitutional role of traditional rulers, there is no difference between the 1979 and the 1989 constitutions. The wording of the 1989 Constitution with respect to the Council of Chiefs is the same as in the 1979 Constitution. It should be recalled that the Political Bureau which the Babangida regime set up in 1986 as part of the steps that led to the 1989 Constitution had emphatically recommended that no formal constitutional role be established for traditional rulers under that constitution. Among the reasons advanced by the Bureau for the exclusion of traditional rulers from constitutional role was the claim that: *“In the context of the new social and political order proposed, traditional rulers should have no special role to play in government beyond the local government level where they have relevance. Furthermore, by virtue of the scope and character of the contemporary Nigerian state, it is a misnomer to designate incumbents of these traditional institutions as traditional rulers. It will be appropriate for them to be officially designated in accordance with their role in the state and society. This official designation must not accord them a rival status with the principal political offices of the Nigerian state.”*³⁹

³⁸ RAY, p. 16.

³⁹ FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF NIGERIA, *Report of the Political Bureau*, Abuja 1987, p. 151.

The Babangida era was a summer of mutual affection with regards to his administration relationship with the traditional authorities across the country. His regime was reputed to have continuously stated that the traditional rulers constitute a direct link to the grassroots and the latter, too, recognised the romance as an instrument of class survival.⁴⁰ Adedeji submitted that the attitude of the Babangida military administration was a direct function of what Buhari did when he came to power. He has perhaps learnt that despising the traditional rulers could mean something ominous to the survival of his regime. Yes, the military has the power of the gun and could make pronouncement and take decision at very top speed, they are not necessarily in charge of the grassroots which is our strongest base. As efficient mobilisers of people with little resources, the traditional rulers can influence acts that could make governance difficult for wielders of modern political power, however powerful. So, the Babangida regime made the best choice by following the path of his predecessor. Our powers might have been seriously eroded by the events of the past years, but we are not weaklings and cannot be wished away for whatever reason in the agenda of building a better and safer society for all.⁴¹ Like the recognition given to the kingship institution during the Buhari era, the Babangida regime brought respite and assurance to the institution across the country, Akokoland inclusive. The sheer stability and assurance availed the traditional rulers the opportunity to settle down to provide the needed leadership longed for by their people. As it was in Erusu-Akoko so it was in other parts of Akokoland. As a result of the recognition extended to the kings and traditional rulers by the Babangida government, his Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and MAMSER scheme were widely supported and applauded by the traditional council. In the civilian years of the first and second republic, the traditional rulers suffered a lot of degrading and painful experience as concerted efforts were made to confine them to a state of little or no relevance in the power equation.⁴² Opinions may vary on the Babangida SAP policy; the support he received from the traditional rulers in many parts of the country was a question of class survival borne out of the quest to stay relevant in the scheme of things at the time.

⁴⁰ RAY, p. 16.

⁴¹ HRH *Oba* Adedeji Kasali Adejoro Omosogbon II (65+), the *Olusupare* of Supare-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Interviewed at his palace on 7/6/2018.

⁴² Olagunju Moses (65+), High Chief *Olukosi* of Okesan. 10/C33, Okesan, Erusu-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 7/4/2018.

The Abacha regime also impacted the kingship institutions in Akokoland in the period under review. For instance, between 1993 and 1997, the highest paid kings in Akokoland were the *Olubaka* of Oka-Akoko and the *Olukare* of Ikare-Akoko who were earning a little above one thousand naira. The nearest to it was the *Olisua* of Isua-Akoko who was on a monthly stipend a little above four hundred naira. Others like the *Gbiri* of Epimi-Akoko, *Alale* of Akungba-Akoko, *Oloba* of Oba-Akoko and the *Olusupare* of Supare-Akoko earned between three hundred and eighty-four naira. According to George, it was the Abacha regime that changed our fortune with the approval that 5% of the total money allocated to the local government should be given to the Traditional Council of Obas.⁴³ The implementation of the directive has not been sincere as the politicians saw it as a way of controlling the kings and other traditional rulers in their domains. In fact, at the end of the Abacha regime, the kings and their chiefs have had running battles with the government with regards to the regular release of the five percent share of the total allocation sent to the local government areas in the State. Reacting to the impact of the military and civilian governments on the kingship institution in Akokoland, apart from the improvement in the royal fathers' allowances, Adetona opined that: *"In my own view, the military era fared better than the civilian government. Specifically, General Sanni Abacha with the help of the then military administrator in Ondo State, consulted widely with the Olukare of Ikare-Akoko when the Akoko North-West local government area was to be carved out of North-East. The military head of state followed the advice of the Oba and things worked out as expected."*⁴⁴

He argued further that the civilian government contrary to their military counterpart, made frantic effort to choke the institution. According to him: *"civilian government from 1960 up to the terminal period of your study orchestrated plans to de-emphasise the powers and relevance of the kings and other traditional rulers in Ondo State in particular and Nigeria as a whole. Today, everything has been politicised, no respect, no recognition, no honour given to obas by the civilian government personnel. While I agree that the military had their flaws, they still respected Obas. Today, you will see a common Councilor inviting an Oba*

⁴³ HRM Oba George Olusegun Oyekan (57+), the *Gbiri* of Epimi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Interviewed at his palace on 7/6/2018. This view was also buttressed by the *Olukare* of Ikare, Oba Akadiriri Saliu-Momoh IV (JP, CON), 80+. 14/4/2018.

⁴⁴ Adetona, Victor Ojo, Odagbaragaja III (53+), The *Owa* of Ogbagi-Akoko, Owa palace, Ogbagi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 18/04/2018. HRM Oba George Olusegun Oyekan (57+), the *Gbiri* of Epimi-Akoko. Interviewed at his palace on 7/6/2018. He equally lent his voice to the observation made by the *Owa* of Ogbagi-Akoko.

with higher educational qualifications and far older in age and experience to his office, it was never done during the military era."⁴⁵

Despite the widespread euphoria that greeted the return to civil rule in Nigeria by 1999, the crop of leaders that emerged from the struggle to wrestle political power from the military and ensure their return to the barracks were quick to show their lack of direction in terms of leadership deliverables. While little was done to change the fortunes of Nigerians, the traditional rulers who were long looked upon as competitors for political power and influence by the elites were quick to realize that they were in for a long struggle for relevance in the scheme of things. The signs of the first one year since return to democracy have not shown any positive thinking towards the kingship institution by the ruling elite and wielders of modern political power. While the traditional rulers are still being looked upon by their people as capable of providing viable leadership, the plans of government for them beyond 1999 is worth anticipating and interrogating in future research.

Conclusion

Discussions in this paper revealed that kingship institution in Akokoland and other parts of Yorubaland and beyond in the period under study, survived the civilian and military governments unfavourable policies directed towards undermining the powers and relevance of the kings and the chiefs. While the military could be accused of seizing power through the force of gun, their administration according to popular opinions as analysed above, gave more leverage to the traditional rulers in Akokoland than the civilian governments. Be that as it may, from a balance perspective of narrative, it is correct to say that the traditional rulers were at best under successive military and civilian administrations instrument of class survival and victims of deliberate neglect. Even the local government administration where they are supposed to be actively consulted as experts in local issues fell short of such expectation. The traditional rulers have continued to survive by cooperating with the ruling elite. It was revealed that in the early years of independence, the kingship institution in Akokoland as it happened in other parts of Yorubaland faced serious threats from the Western Region crisis of 1962 and sad events that followed the 1965 general elections. The kings and chiefs that

⁴⁵ Adetona, Victor Ojo, Odagbaragaja III (53+), *The Owa of Ogbagi-Akoko, Owa palace, Ogbagi-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria*. 18/04/2018.

survived the storm of the two political crises were those that aligned with the stronger political bloc. It, therefore, means that the period marked an important watershed in the politics of power struggle and leadership supremacy among the Nigerian modern political elite who were up in arms to control the political soul of the new nation. As the struggle for control rages, the traditional rulers who equally desire to stay relevant in the scheme of things became the victims as their loyalty or otherwise to the warring political blocs came with dire consequence as in the case of Arigidi-Akoko and Ikare-Akoko where the traditional rulers were removed and exiled because of their alliance with the Akintola bloc.

The story of the experience of the kingship institution in Akokoland between 1960 and 1999 has been one of mixed feelings, struggle for survival to secure a little space to operate in the rather complex system of modern governance deliberately created by the politicians to completely have control of the institutions of state. While it may seem that the traditional rulers in Akokoland spoke with one voice with regards to the better patronage they enjoyed under the military regimes compared to what they experienced during the civilian administrations, they were however, circumspect of the circumstances that brought the former to power. As elsewhere in other parts of the world, kingship institution in Akokoland has shown constant continuity which is largely a function of its dynamism. Dynamism within the kingship institution in Akokoland is a direct consequence of its adaptation to regular changes. Hence, the kingship institution continues to be relevant and could not be wished away having withstood decades of stormy gale and survived the test of time. The custodians of the institution have continued to evolve creative ways of adjusting and adapting to the development or change in the socio-political situation of the country without necessarily altering the extant provisions of their customs and traditions. This is where the dynamism of the institution has proved fluid and enduring as the institution has continued to make itself relevant to the needs of the society.

This paper, therefore, has contributed immensely to the already existing literatures on north-eastern Yorubaland, the kingship institutions and other traditional political systems in other parts of Yorubaland and beyond. Further research is expected to interrogate the other areas where kingship and power politics interfaced in Akokoland, Yorubaland, and other parts of Nigeria, Africa and beyond. So far, the kingship institution in Akokoland has survived even beyond 1999 as the traditional rulers have continued to prove their mettle as viable social mobilisers, progres-

sive agents of development and trusted transmitters and interpreters of government policies and schemes to those at the grassroots. It is not without any good reasons that Britain and other countries around the world have continue to accord the institution of royalty its rightful place in the scheme of things. While the question of the continued relevance of the kingship institution and the traditional rulers in contemporary Nigeria politics remain issue for debate among scholars, what is certain in all of this is the fact that, the kingship institution has continued to show resilience in the face of daunting challenges. In the quest towards democratic renewal tailored towards engendering a better nation, the kingship institution and the machinery of state must be collectively overhauled and new systems emplaced to foster inclusive growth and development.

