

## Research Article

# Kingship, Karaole and the Question of Loyalty in Colonial Akoko-Yoruba, 1900-1960

Sunday Ogunode<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>. Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria

Communal bonding was commonplace in African societies in the pre-colonial period and the traditional rulers were veritable agents that ensured the viability of the cord of fraternity between and among different interests, groups, and families in the pre-colonial period. While it is trite to say that colonial rule succeeded in dislocating the agency and personality of the traditional rulers throughout the colonial enterprise in Africa, the traditional political institution survived the various stages of mutations that colonial rule subjected it to through its adaptive dynamism and resilience. The reinterpretation of the *karaole* form of salutation as one of the many forms of power politics manifestation used to ensure stability and communal cohesion shall be examined in this paper using the historical analytical method to critically deploy data garnered from primary and secondary sources.

Corresponding author: Sunday Ogunode, [Sunday.ogunode@aaau.edu.ng](mailto:Sunday.ogunode@aaau.edu.ng)

*As an institution that has survived despite its travails, the dynamism of the chieftaincy (kingship) institution in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Beyond attesting to its dynamism, the changing role, power, and perception of the institution in different dispensations are a clear manifestation of its resilience.*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Before the introduction of colonial rule to Africa and indeed, Nigeria, kingship and other indigenous political institutions provided an organized form of political administration with uniquely developed democratic principles and guidelines. Traditional communities were able to survive different stages of

evolution and development due to the enduring and cohesive nature of the pre-colonial African political system developed in line with individual community historical, socio-political, and economic peculiarities. The socio-political disturbances and changes in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries greatly impacted the kingship and chieftaincy institutions in most parts of Yorubaland. At the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, new foci of power rivaling the powers of the kings and other traditional rulers emerged. The attractive economic colouration and patronage given to kingship, the kings, and other traditional rulers since the colonial period has helped to galvanize more people into showing interest in royal power politics. The point of emphasis here is that, due to some failures after 1900, for example: (economic patronage/colorations, rivalries, and complex power play), there emerged in Yorubaland traditionally recognized ruling houses and those that emerged due to legal pronouncements. This development greatly altered the traditions and the political history of many indigenous communities. Emerging from this is a complex power play among traditionally recognized ruling houses and those that evolved due to legal maneuvering strengthened by scripted chieftaincy Commissions of Inquiry, chieftaincy declarations, and the eventual recognition by the government of the day. Arising from this development that threatened the position of the traditional rulers, especially the kings, was the deliberate effort put in place to mitigate a further reduction in their powers and relevance while pushing for improved fortune. One pervasive feature that characterized and shaped social interactions during colonial rule was the silent but potent problem of mutual suspicion and distrust among royal family members and the people. The common manifestation of this delicate trend in social interaction and the attempt at reinventing the dislocated agency and personality of the kings and other traditional rulers was a conscious (re) interpretation of the *Karole* form of greeting. *Karole* means 'let the body be strong. This form of greeting was rightly used in pre-colonial times to see to it that the king was in a good state but also used to validate the people's support for his leadership and expression of communal concern for the king's wellbeing.

A brief run through the historical antecedence of the kingship institution in Yorubaland reveals its evolutionary dynamism and adaptive nature to changes brought upon it through the ages. Analysis of the traditional political institution that evolved in Akoko-Yoruba communities before the advent of colonialism particularly emphasized the plurality of Akoko-Yoruba which made it difficult to ascribe political power to one recognizable individual as the overall leader of all Akoko-Yoruba communities before the establishment of colonial rule in most parts of the area by 1900. Kingship at its pristine stage was symbolic, sacred, and revered. The office and the person of the king were held in great awe

by the people. The king reigned and ruled.<sup>2</sup> The members of the royal family were always interested in the well-being of the king who was seen as the representative of not only the royal family but the people, a true symbol of tradition, the embodiment of history, and the kingdom under his watch. As shall be revealed later in this paper, the traditional rulers that hitherto objected to the society became subject to the society due to the watering down of their powers and authority under colonial rule. As the kings lost their powers to reign and rule and became less relevant in the colonial power equation, what was left for them was how to survive and retain whatever was left of their status as experts in local governance and viable mobilizers of human and material resources at the grassroots. To understand the trajectory of the impact of colonial rule on the kingship institution in Akoko-Yoruba, the *Ebi* social system, and the *ajobi* and *ajogbe* alternative indigenous theories of social interaction and societal revalidation are employed to analyse the thrust of the paper.

## Theoretical Framings

Section 2 of the Chiefs Law of Ondo State<sup>3</sup> states that: “chief means a person whose chieftaincy title is associated with a native community and includes a minor and a recognized chief.” Recognized chiefs are now the traditional *obas* within the contemplation of the law.<sup>4</sup> Recognized chiefs are now the kings under a law that has no recourse to traditions of divine or sacred kingship which was rooted in the *Ebi*<sup>5</sup> (this concept represents a larger family tie that comprises direct blood relations and extended family members who may not necessarily share direct blood link but belong to the same family tree) and *ajobi*<sup>6</sup> (ties built on relationship by blood). The two concepts are the root word of *alajobi* (the connecting compound expression used to describe large family groups related by blood) and family ties. Indeed, kings in the Yoruba pristine culture were persons of great personification and held in high esteem among those they ruled. The blue blood tag, which is the true mark of royalty, was not for everyone as far as the *Ebi* framework and *job* concept of society (ties built on relationship by blood) are concerned. Akinjogbin explained that the uniqueness of the *Ebi* social system was its ability to bring together all the blue-blood members of the royalty in an *Ebi* commonwealth. This was a political arrangement that, according to Akinjogbin, is peculiar to itself.<sup>7</sup>

Before 1900, the kings were revered as divine beings and second-in-command to the gods (*alase ikeji Orisa*) and were, as a matter of tradition, forbidden to be seen outside. They were meant to live in seclusion. The tradition of seclusion did not, however, forbid them from active involvement in the defense of their kingdoms and conquered areas. Indeed, pre-colonial Yoruba kings were great

warriors with great mastery of the art of war and democratic leadership. By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this unique socio-political arrangement was reduced as a result of the Yoruba civil wars. The ravaging 19<sup>th</sup>-century Yoruba civil wars seriously affected the powers of the kings as rulers of their respective kingdoms and other territorial interests. The emerging class of powerful and ambitious traditional military aristocrats in the course of the wars created an arena of conflicting interests and a strong manifestation of serious power politics. Consequently, by the end of the wars in 1893, the kings were exposed to many dangers, chief among which was the imposition of strangers (those not related by blood) to the *ebi* and *ajobi* family bond. This was the beginning of non-royal blood individuals or groups, ambitiously fighting to become members of the royal lineage, hence the breakdown of the *alajobi*. This is what Akiwowo called “variations on the theme of sociation”.<sup>8</sup> The breakdown of *alajobi* as a result of the intrusion of foreign elements led to the emergence of its variation: the *alajogbe* (which was more of a forced relationship with no blood ties). These factors disrupted the sacredness and purity of the *alajobi* (family bond) and delimited the powers of the Yoruba kings. Indeed, the disruptions caused by the Yoruba civil wars and other socio-political disturbances contributed to the realignment of forces, kingship intrigues, and strained power relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The establishment of colonial rule in Yorubaland was also a factor that reduced the sacredness and purity of the *alajobi* and the traditional Yoruba political structure by the impact of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Yoruba civil wars which further weakened the already troubled traditional political institutions and also gave strength to the previously planted seed of socio-political discontents among the hitherto united towns and cities in Yorubaland. It was this state of irreconcilable differences among the various Yoruba communities, coupled with other factors that helped the colonialists to establish colonial rule in many parts of Yorubaland. Colonial administration and its many harsh policies did more harm than good to kingship and other institutions in Yorubaland. More non-blue-blood individuals who were in the ‘good books of the colonial government and desired to be part of the royal ruling houses were adequately compensated with royalty during the colonial years. This trend of imposition of non-blue blood individuals also continued even after the attainment of independence. The difficult phases that kingship has undergone since colonial rule notwithstanding, the study presented discussions on how kingship institution and their custodians have continued to serve as a viable source of cultural validation and societal cohesion in Akoko-Yoruba communities, Nigeria’s political space, and beyond. The *ebi* social system and the *ajobi* and *ajogbe* alternative theory of understanding social interactions in indigenous Yoruba society.

## ***Karole*, Akoko-Yoruba kings, and the question of loyalty**

For a better exploration of the thrust of this paper, it is important to start with a brief explanation of the concept of power politics with the understanding that *karaole* is one of the silent forces employed by the kings in Akoko-Yoruba to reinvent their traditional hold on power and legitimacy. In the context of this paper, power politics was used in its narrow interpretation to assess how its usage by the traditional rulers has impacted the kingship institution in Akoko-Yoruba in the period under review. Pieces of information gathered from purposive interviews conducted across communities in Akoko-Yoruba revealed that power politics manifested in different forms from one town to another. The traditional rulers in Akoko-Yoruba were very much aware of the concept and its application as a means to an end.

Traditionally, *karaole* (let the body stay strong) was the greeting specially made to the kings by royal family members and other well-wishers to ascertain the king's state of health and his availability for the administration of the kingdom. A resounding response from the king from his place of seclusion or closet was always received with a deep sigh of relief as the people were reassured of the readiness and availability of the *Oba* to continue to provide the needed leadership and direction of affairs of the kingdom. Loyalty then was non-negotiable as disloyalty was severely punished. The sacredness of the institution of kingship in Akoko-Yoruba as elsewhere in Yorubaland created consciousness in the minds of the people who needed not be reminded of the danger of desecrating the hallowed institution. Ancient landmarks like covenants, oath-taking, and restraining taboos connected to the institution of royalty and the founding of the towns were very potent in the pre-colonial phase of the kingship institution in Akoko-Yoruba communities. These components of ancient landmarks are still used by the traditional rulers in Akokoland to stem potential threats to their powers and authority.

The kings and their subordinate chiefs in Akoko-Yoruba in the pre-1900 era was sure of their survival as the people voluntarily presented gifts to them in kind and cash. The people took the upkeep of the traditional rulers as their traditional responsibility and found it a worthy gesture towards those who had been appointed by the gods to intercede on their behalf. Services on the kings' farmlands were rendered free of charge by some select members (usually drawn from the age grades) of the towns or kingdoms. As revealed in chapter three, colonialism introduced many strange dimensions to the indigenous political institution across Nigeria without the exception of Akokoland. Akokoland towns and communities that were hitherto not under any unified political control or hegemony were forced

to accept a new political order. By the beginning of colonial rule Akoko-Yoruba communities were brought under the control of the Kabba Province and later Owo Province after many years of protests by the traditional rulers in Akoko-Yoruba. The *Olukare* of Ikare-Akoko, the *Olubaka* of Oka-Akoko, and the *Olisua* of Isua-Akoko were some of the royal voices that fought for the restoration of Akokoland to the people. Removing Akoko-Yoruba from the Kabba and Owo hegemonic domination was eventually achieved but not without its huge negative consequences on the kingship institution.<sup>9</sup> This development altered many aspects of the political traditions in the area. Western education and the excessive politicization of the kingship institution by later political elites further imperiled the institution in terms of relevance and authority. The kingly greeting of *karaole* gradually lost its viability and the traditional trust that was characteristic of it as the kings no longer trust members of the royal family who were equally eager to ascend the throne. Loyalty became a matter of convenience, not compulsion. The issue of loyalty in the modern sense of its usage was succinctly captured by Adewale when he observes that:

When you talk of loyalty in the traditional political space, we are deceiving ourselves. Loyalty is a complex concept that in the context of modern political reality can only be elastically explained. The real question to ask is how the *Oba* has managed the issue of loyalty among his chiefs, princes, and the people. Sincerely, those who work with me have the choice to cooperate with me or do otherwise. For loyalty to be ensured, the *Oba* must be able to know those chiefs who are with him and those who are not. Knowledge of this will help *Oba* to develop a viable strategy on how to relate with them. This is where a clear understanding of power politics and its usage becomes helpful.<sup>10</sup>

Aminu while buttressing Adewale's view aptly submitted that:

A wise *Oba* will find a way to win the disloyal chiefs, ambitious princes, and other interest groups to his side as avoiding them could be counter-productive to his power and the progress of his domain. The wise thing to do is to court new friends from known enemies rather than relying too much on already-established friends. The danger is that, when you rely too much on old friends, however reliable without making new ones, the day they turn their back on you, your fortune may change completely for the worst. So, making friends with known enemies is a wise strategy for living long and taking charge.<sup>11</sup>

The emphasis is on the effect that, the kingship institution in Akoko-Yoruba communities, as we have it in other parts of Yorubaland and Nigeria in general has continued to show flexibility as it continues to evolve new paradigms to enable it to adapt and show continuity in the modern age. The point must be made that the *karaole* greeting is now a silent but useful instrument used by dissenting princes, ambitious chiefs, and members of ruling houses to determine the timing of their access to the throne. The kings interviewed in Akoko-Yoruba communities agreed that their survival is largely dependent on how well they can manage the various interest groups in their respective domains. Being in charge for a long time required two-edged politics. The king who wants to stay in charge and have full control of his domain must play the government politics and the people's politics as well. One-sided politics in this modern era is not in the best interest of the traditional rulers. There must be a real balance of power play within and outside the royal jurisdiction. Given the unpleasant politics that now characterized the selection and election of a new *Oba*, the traditional rulers have as a matter of survival and strategy become weary of greetings from those who lost out during the contest for ascendancy to the royal office. As noted by Sunday,

The wise counsel of the *Oloje* of Igasi-Akoko has helped my reign as the *Osunla* of Erusu-Akoko. The *Oloje* advised when he remarked that: see *kabiyesi*, all these members of the ruling house (chiefs and princes and other interests) that visit every morning to greet you do so to confirm whether the crowned head is still living, hale, and available to continue the administration of the kingdom. So, each time they come, always ensure that you give them a resounding response, and beyond this, treat them with great love and equally show interest in their wellbeing. This is how to prove to them that you are their king, father, and friend. Wishing you bad becomes a hard task for them.<sup>12</sup>

Kings in Akoko-Yoruba while countenancing the danger posed by many interest groups in their domains, believed that their emergence was divinely arranged and mortals could only try, but they would only succeed if the end of their reign had come. This should not be understood in the context that, the kings are indispensable. The place of the people in the survival of the institution cannot be wished away. The institution of kingship has always been people-centered. The point must be made that kingship and other traditional political institutions throughout Nigeria are not what they used to be in their pristine state, while this is true, the traditional content of the institution has not been eroded as consultation through the *ifa* oracle is still relied on in the selection and installation of a new *Oba* in Yorubaland. Traditional rites before and after the installation/coronation of a new *Oba* are still

given serious priority. However wealthy, powerful, and connected an individual might be, if he or she must wear the royal crown, such a person must pass through all the layers of traditional rites. Ordinary heads do not wear the crown as doing so comes with great consequences. In Yorubaland, when royalty is bestowed on you, it places you in another realm far beyond the ordinary mortal. Whatever opinions the politicians and other critics might hold, the crowned head is not an ordinary head and the holders of modern political powers may use their access to an instrument of state to enforce control of the traditional rulers, their actions or inaction cannot change the fact that the institution of traditional authorities has come to stay.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Discussions have so far centered on how colonial rule informed the (re) interpretation of the *karaole* form of greeting by the Akoko-Yoruba traditional rulers as a means to an end. As mutual distrust became a pervasive feature in colonial Akoko-Yoruba communities due to the deliberate adoption of the divide-and-rule instrument of governance by the colonial administration, a development that succeeded in straining relationships and destroying communal bonds, the kings to survive became apprehensive and weary of all while still maintaining their status as the father of all. Indeed, the re-evaluation of the sincerity of the *karaole* form of salutation was one of the instruments of power politics used by the Akoko-Yoruba traditional rulers to validate their agency and personality while ensuring stability in their domains. As loyalty became a matter of convenience rather than compulsion as it was in the pristine state of the kingship institution, it is only safe for the traditional rulers especially the kings to rethink ways of staying in charge while courting the support of the royal family members and the people. Despite the adverse impact of colonial rule on the status and roles of the kings and other traditional rulers in Akoko-Yoruba and other parts of Yorubaland, the kingship institution has continued to show resilience, adaptive dynamism, and continuity. As the kings continue to seek better ways to reinvent their agency as an expert in local governance and reliable mobilizers of human and material resources, they shall stay weary and suspicious of all, notwithstanding their role as the father of all. The strategic advantage of this lies in the desire of the kings to continue to reign even if they are not ruling anymore as they have become the subject of society in the modern political arrangement.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> A.O. Adesoji, 2010. “Traditional Rulership and Modern Governance in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Nigeria” being a chapter contribution in Tunde Babawale. Akin Alao & Bimbo Adesoji (eds.) *The Chieftaincy Institution in Nigeria*, Lagos: Concept Publications. p.416. Published for Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC)

<sup>2</sup> Atanda J.A., 1991. “Kings in Nigerian Society through the Ages”. An Inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan, 24 January. p.6.

<sup>3</sup> See Gboyega Kusamotu, 1994. *Chieftaincy and the Law*, Ikirun: Gboyega Publisher, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> See “Ogun State and Oyo State Chiefs Laws, 1978, Section 2; Obas and Chiefs Law of Lagos State, 1981.”

<sup>5</sup> Details on *Ebi* concept can be found in I.A. Akinjogbin, “The Ebi System Reconsidered”, a seminar paper delivered in the Department of History, University of Ife on 10<sup>th</sup> of January, 1979. p.2. See also I.A. Akinjogbin, 2002. *Milestones and Concepts in Yoruba History and Culture A Key to Understanding Yoruba History*. Ibadan: Olu-Akin Publishers

<sup>6</sup> Details on *Ajobi* and *Ajogbe* concepts can be found in Akinsola Akiwowo, 1980. “Ajobi and Ajogbe: Variations on The Theme of Sociation”, *An Inaugural Lecture* delivered at the University of Ife. Inaugural Lecture Series 46, p.15.

<sup>7</sup> I.A. Akinjogbin, 1979. “The Ebi System Reconsidered”, a seminar paper delivered in the Department of History, University of Ife on 10<sup>th</sup> of January. p.21. See also I.A. Akinjogbin, 2002. *Milestones and Concepts in Yoruba History and Culture A Key to Understanding Yoruba History* (Ibadan: Olu-Akin Publishers). pp. 117-119.

<sup>8</sup> Akinsola Akiwowo 1980. “Ajobi and Ajogbe: Variation on the Theme of Sociation”. An Inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ife, University of Ife Press, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Series 46.

<sup>9</sup> This issue has been properly explained in the chapter three of this work.

<sup>10</sup> Oba Timothy Adewale Afiwasaye I, 86, *The Olojo* of Ojo, Ajowa-Akoko. 10/04/2018. Same view received the support of: Oba Josiah Kolawole, 87, *Elesuku* of Esuku, Ajowa-Akoko and Oba Ipinmoroti, Timothy, 70, *Oluro* of Uro, Ajowa-Akoko, Ondo State. 7/04/2018

<sup>11</sup> Aminu, C.O., 92, community leader/farmer, Amo, Erusu-Akoko. 6/4/2018. *Oba* Jimoh, Clement Omo-Ola, 65, *Oloso* of Oso, Ajowa-Akoko. 7/04/2018. Ipinlaiye, A.E., 82, the *Oloje* of Igashi-Akoko, Igashi-Akoko, Ondo State. 15/4/2018.

<sup>12</sup> *Oba* Sunday Olaniyi Mogaji, Imole I, 63, the *Osunla* of Erusu-Akoko, Ondo State. 10/4/2018

<sup>13</sup> *Oba* Sunday Olaniyi Mogaji, Imole I, 63, the *Osunla* of Erusu-Akoko, Ondo State. 10/4/2018

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