

**KINGSHIP INSTITUTION
AND POWER POLITICS IN AKOKOLAND NORTHEASTERN
YORUBALAND IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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Abstract

Kingship and power politics remain significant in Africa's post-colonial development discourse. Debates on the role of this age-old political institution in modern governance however remain polarised. For the modernists, traditional political institution has become anachronistic and has little role in a rather 'sophisticated' system of governance. In contrast, the traditionalists submit that since the kingship custodians have identifiable jurisdiction in the periphery, the best the wielders of modern political powers could do was to collaborate with them for inclusive nation-building project. In this context, the paper discusses how the traditional rulers in Akokoland showed resilience through the tactical deployment of power politics as instrument of control, stability and order. The historical approach was adopted using primary and secondary sources. In-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected informants based on their knowledge of the history of kingship and power politics in Akokoland for primary data while secondary data were sourced from books, journal articles, theses and materials from the internet. Data were subjected to historical analysis. The paper argues that the tactical use of the different components of power politics was informed by the desire of the traditional rulers to ensure the continued survival of the kingship institution, their powers and relevance serve as viable social mobiliser, pillar of communal cohesion and integration. The paper concludes that despite some of the challenges facing traditional rulers, they have continued to show dynamism through adaptation and continuity as worthy agents of change and progress. It is, therefore, the position of this paper that efforts should be made by government to help reduce the incidence of bitter kingship/chieftaincy disputes to avoid the further disintegration of the institution and allow its custodians play their roles as reliable partners in the nation-building project.

Keywords: Kingship institution, Power Politics, Akokoland and Northeastern Yoruba land

Introduction

Akokoland is a conglomeration of many towns located in the northeaster part of Yorubaland, South West Nigeria. In the context of this paper, power politics was used to represent the complexity of power play and the dynamics of power relations among Akokoland kings and other traditional rulers in the twentieth century especially after independence in 1960. While reference shall be made to the years before independence, the adoption of power politics as instrument of control by the traditional rulers in Akokoland after the exit of colonial rule up to 1999 shall also be appraised. Kings have had the responsibility of representing and uniting all social groups within the kingdom—rival clans, city dwellers and country folk, the living and the dead, the nobles and the commoners, the free people and the slaves. Kings have stood

above and apart from all groups, even from the royal relatives. However, kings have rarely pleased everyone and have often made enemies. As a result, they have frequently faced attacks from dissatisfied subjects, power-hungry relatives, and opponents within and outside the kingdom. The violent histories of many kingdoms, such as Zulu, Benin, Yoruba and Buganda, show how dangerous it could be to be king, and how often a ruler's grip on power has been loosened.¹ The point here is to show that colonial rule negatively impacted the powers and relevance of the traditional rulers who during their hey days were held in great awe and their words were laws. The divisive politics of divide and rule coupled with the injection of non-blood members to the ruling lineage remain one of the potent causes of threatening chieftaincy disputes in the period under review. African kings have also faced problems related to kinship, marriage and succession. As heads of royal kin groups, they are expected to give wealth and privileges to their younger kin in return for support and loyalty. If royal relatives have grown too powerful or ambitious, they have sometimes tried to overthrow the king. Rulers have worked to avoid such situations by carefully balancing ties with the kingdom's most powerful clans, often through marriage. Polygamy, the practice of taking multiple wives, has allowed kings to spread such ties across all regions, ethnic groups, and major clans within their realms.² This is the aspect of royal power politics that this paper represents.

Power politics also played out while dealing with succession related issues. Kings have had two general methods of dealing with the question of succession which also presents complex power politics among the different royal and non-blue blood families laying claims to the throne. Sometimes, they have named their heirs or established a system of regular inheritance, in which the throne might go to the oldest son or to the firstborn son of the primary wife. This method has prevented conflict over the question of succession, but it has also disappointed and angered relatives and kinship groups by cutting off their access to the throne. The other method has been to declare no heir and to let clan leaders or others choose a new king from among the many competing royal sons and relatives. This approach has often resulted in conflict and disorder upon the king's death. Ambitious royal kins have posed one of the principal dangers to a king. African rulers have used two strategies for surrounding themselves with loyal supporters. Some, like the Ganda and the Zulu, have depended heavily on their mother's relatives, who cannot inherit the throne in patrilineal kingdoms but can enjoy power and privilege as long as their son rules as king.³ The other method, used in the kingdom of Benin and Muslim states of West Africa, has been to appoint royal servants or even slaves as court officials or generals. These people, dependent on the king's favour and unable to rule on their own, have generally made loyal and dependable deputies.⁴

Essentially, power politics is the complex but necessary instrument that reflects the various strategies used by Akokoland kings in their various domain of royal jurisdiction to contain the challenges and threats to their powers and thrones. Moises Naim has excellently argued that power is easier to get, harder to use and easier to lose.⁵ He appraised the extent to which recent developments have made traditional repositories of power – whether political, corporate, or cultural increasingly vulnerable to challenges by smaller entities. The threats from smaller entities within the context of this paper came from competing royal sons, ambitious relatives, chiefs, and non-blue blood members but strongly connected royal power seekers. How the kings confronted these challenges and still stay relevant in the scheme of things is what the current study explained using power politics. The various manifestation and components of power politics in Akokoland, North-eastern Yoruba land are discussed below.

Ancient landmarks

Ancient landmarks were basic requirements to be fulfilled before laying claim to royalty, tenancy and other rights in the period before 1900. As different people moved in groups or bands from their original settlement (apole) to settle at a new location, certain agreements were reached through covenants or oaths by some selected elders (usually leaders of the migrated groups) to seal the bond that brought them together. All the items used for the oaths and the secrets behind them were not often revealed to one person because of its sensitive nature and for the sake of unforeseen development which may warrant one group taking advantage over the other in the period of dispute.⁶

The British establishment of their imperial presence and colonial rule in Nigeria began before 1900. This was manifest in the British declaration of colonial rule in Lagos in 1861 ten years after the bombardment of same, the granting of royal charter to the Royal Niger Company (RNC) in 1886 and the activities of the Company particularly in the North. The establishment of the Company's headquarters at Lokoja brought British informal colonial interest near Akoko. In 1895, two out-stations of the RNC were established at Kabba and Omuo-Oke (a northern town of Akoko). Eventually, after RNC forces had trounced Nupe forces in 1897 liberating Akoko communities from Nupe imperialist rule, the RNC commenced company rule in Akokoland – a rule that served as a precursor for formal colonial rule. Acting under the pretense of establishing a lasting peace or instituting *Pax Britannica*, the RNC agents clearly established mechanisms that were later to be operated for colonial administration with all its attendant exploitative features. Of course, the picture later became clearer to the people that the Company's agents wanted more than mere restoration of peace and trading relations. In a clear demonstration of their readiness to assume proper control, the British Government revoked the 1886 charter of RNC in December 1899, and assumed full control of the, “territories of the Niger” on January 1, 1900.⁷ This marked the official commencement of colonial in Nigeria and Akokoland. The British coins was introduced towards the end of the nineteenth century and banknotes in the 1920s.⁸ The colonial phase of currency in the West Africa sub-region can be divided in to namely: 1914 and 1958 the British West African pound was used and the Nigerian pound came into force in 1958 and its usage stopped in 1960.⁹

From the 1920, the traditional rulers especially the king who was the symbol of the monarchy became the salaried agent and tool of the colonial authority under the District Head System in Akokoland and throughout Nigeria.¹⁰ The introduction of stipends by the British administration led to the gradual commercialization of the kingship institution in the period of the study. As the kings became salaried agents of the British, their survival and continued relevance became the prerogative of the colonial government officials.¹¹ Kings in Akokoland who could not quite adapt to their new subservient status dissented but due to the lack of concerted efforts amongst them lost the fight. Colonial government took advantage of the disunity among traditional rulers in Akokoland to alter their political traditions by imposing untitled persons as kings. The introduction of outsiders through colonial manipulation into royalty became a serious issue after the attainment of independence in 1960. Strangely, communities that, hitherto, settled disputes through internal mechanisms became enmeshed in protracted legal tussles to reclaim 'stolen' titles and settle chieftaincy disputes.¹² To this end; various Commissions of Inquiries have intervened to settle decades of kingship/chieftaincy

contests in Akokoland. Available information in most court judgments revealed that *Owa Ale* of Ikare-Akoko, *Asin* of Okaland and the *Alakungba* of Akungba-Akoko secured respite from the court of law because of the strong traditional evidence provided. They were all able to trace their lineage to Ife, presented list of previous kings that ruled in their lineage and the tradition of beaded crown.¹³ Adetona buttressed the place of ancient landmarks in laying claim to royalty when he observed that:

You see, before one can lay claim to royalty, certain requirements must be met. Historically, a special building called *Ile Olori* and later *Afin Oba* must be linked to the claimant, verifiable list of previous *obas* that had reigned in their lineage and the tradition of right to wear beaded crown. Again, the Ife link is also central in the claim to royalty. So, ambitious chiefs though aware of these requirements, have over the years repeatedly tried in futility to alter well respected tradition of kingship in Ogbagi-Akoko and other towns in Akokoland.¹⁴

The Ajowa-Akoko example of a Yoruba town with seven kings living in harmony for over five decades was interrogated in line with the potency of ancient landmarks. Alhassan was clear when he observed that:

By the time we moved from our different *apole* to Ajowa-Akoko, we started with love and there was a solid agreement by all the eight towns to come together as a mega settlement with each having its leader. It is true that we are in modern time with its own sophistication and dynamism, the place of covenant or oath taking in the unity of Ajowa-Akoko cannot be played down. The elders that met to conclude on how affairs of each town would be managed were very frank with the need to respect the agreements reached before the establishment of the town. Consequences of betraying the terms of agreement to bond despite the obvious diversity in traditions and cultural were constantly re-echoed at important meetings. It was, therefore, very hard for anybody to wake up one morning to alter the structure.¹⁵

Marriage

Marriage remains one of the best mediums of bonding in traditional African societies. The ancient *odesan* (inter-cousin) marriage in Okaland and the *arokun so omiye* (conjugal union between relatives) in Akungba-Akoko played a key role in the strong bond between the different communities that make up the two prominent Akokoland towns. This marriage system has proved helpful in the survival of the traditional political institution and the overall progress of the two towns in the period of the study. Although this marriage system had been practiced as far as the history of the two towns are known, the period of its commencement is not the concern of this paper but the bond of kinship and fraternal ties it has engendered up till the late 1990s in the two towns. Through this marriage system, family members related to the throne of the two towns married close relatives which have produced strong extended bond among the different interest groups. In most cases, daughters of powerful chiefs with potential of creating serious problems for the throne were the ones married to either the king or relatives.

The married daughters often served as checks on their powerful fathers and also regularly gave useful pieces of information on plans that might be inimical to the throne and the kingdom. Afa in Okeagbe-Akoko presented a good instance of how marriage was used by one of their kings as instrument of power politics to stay in control of his domain. Adewumi in his response to the place of power politics in the survival of kingship in Akokoland reminisced on how one Afa king that reigned in the 1930s outsmarted his opposition with the unlikely weapon of marriage. He revealed that:

The *Oba* Omoegun Arasanyi I took 15 wives. During his reign, there were many powerful men who were equally ambitious in the three communities in Afa, Okeagbe-Akoko. He therefore, married daughters of these powerful people who he thought were potential threats to his power and leadership. These wives helped the *Oba* gather intelligence report which the *kabiyesi* relied on to stay in control and survived all threats to his throne.¹⁶

The *omiye* bond (relationship built on the basis of belonging to the same fraternal cord through marriage) as we have it in Oka, Akungba, Okeagbe and other parts of Akokoland remained one of the most reliable factors responsible for the relative peace, good concord and stability enjoyed in the affected towns. Stephen buttressed the place of marriage in the survival of the throne when he argued that in most towns in Akokoland with few exemptions where only one ruling family exists like in Isua-Akoko, marriage is one of the socio-cultural instruments used to build strong fraternal closure. Despite the age long chieftaincy dispute between the *Asin* of Oka-Odo and the *Olubaka* of Okaland, the two traditional rulers have not found a good reason to go into a full fledged war with each other. Although the *Olubaka* sometimes in 1992 tried to force allegiance of the *Asin* to him as the paramount ruler of Okaland by not allowing the latter hold the annual new festival for that year. This unfortunate incident was expected to have generated serious conflict between Oke-Oka and Oka-Odo, but tradition forbids them because of the close relationship that was built over the years through marriage.¹⁷

While the debate on the role of marriage as viable instrument of power politics in future research efforts continues, one fact that has been established was that marriage formed one of the strongest links to the continue survival of the kingship institution in Akokoland during the period examined.

Festival and market

Festival and market were also employed to ensure loyalty to the throne. The parade at the annual Oka-Day celebration which started since 1990 has been a very potent instrument used by the *Olubaka* of Okaland to publicly enforce loyalty of all chiefs and communities under his jurisdiction. At the warm glare of dignitaries present at the venue of the celebration, each community head chief with selected delegates in a well-co-ordinated marching parade took turn to pay homage to the *kabiyesi* and openly pledge their loyalty to his leadership. The quarters' parade allowed the people to collectively revere the king despite their divergent history and tradition. The *odunijesutitun* (new yam festival) in Oka-Odo, the Supare, Oba, Ajowa, Ikare and Ogbagi day celebration play key role in the survival of the kingship institution and the culture of the people. Like the Oka-Day celebration, the kings in the above

listed Akoko towns used the festival to measure the quality of support they have from the people. The kings during the festival and as a matter of necessity expected all their chiefs and eminent sons and daughters to be in attendance to show solidarity. When a chief(s) and key individuals who have confirmed their attendance failed to attend the festival, the kings, as expected, would summon a meeting of his Council-of-Chiefs with the festival organising committee to review the situation for further necessary action. This was discovered from the information gathered to have helped the kings to know those that needed to be reached out to, those to be managed for their peculiarity and those to be 'avoided'. This lent credence to the fact that festival can be deployed as instrument of power politics to regulate power and ensure allegiance.¹⁸

One of the traditional things that promote communal spirit and cohesion is trading. Apart from buying and selling, the market performs socio-religious functions. Traditionally, people tend to relate well when they meet in an atmosphere with social appeal. Across many Yoruba towns, the common nomenclature for market around the palace is *ojaoba* (the king's market) which does not necessarily mean that the king owned all the businesses operated around the palace. The name is beneficial to the throne and the merchants dealing in different items in the market. As expected, such market helps to give wide coverage to the institution and its custodian as visitors needed not ask if such town has a king. Sometimes, some visitors even requested to pay courtesy visits to the throne and when they returned to their different domains, they proudly reported their adventures. Markets in Akokoland due to their location some distance away from the palaces were named after the town where the kings ruled. *Oja Oka-Akoko*, *Oja Okeagbe-Akoko*, *Oja Iwaro*, *Oja Oba*, *Oja Supare-Akoko*, *Oja Ikare-Akoko*¹⁹ and many more.

The case of Oka-Akoko and Okeagbe-Akoko deserved mention. Each of the fifteen quarters in Oka-Akoko before the colonial era operated their market differently without any hitch. The appointment of the *Olubaka* as the paramount ruler of all the quarters that hitherto enjoyed virtual independence under their village heads changed the status quo with regards to market operation. The king must ensure his acceptance by all and to do this, he must ensure that the people buy and sell in one central market which has his direct approval. Quarter by quarter market was, therefore, cancelled with the establishment of the *oja Oke-Oka* (upper Oka market) where all the communities under the *Olubaka* carry out their trading activities. As observed by Omosola, "the current king is a lover of peace but very strategic in ensuring his acceptance through collective loyalty from the people of the town. Originally we had different markets on quarter by quarter basis; this was the situation until the colonial masters pronounced the *Olubaka* as the paramount ruler of Okaland. This development meant one thing: the alteration of the old order to allow the needed changes to be effected. One market was established by the king to ensure inclusion and collective allegiance to the throne by all and sundry. The king could not have allowed the town to run independent of his total grip. While the central Oka market might have promoted cohesion and communalism, the ultimate concern of the king was to ensure collective loyalty through the subtle instrument of market".²⁰

Okeagbe-Akoko also presented a good case of how market served as instrument of ensuring loyalty to the crown. Like Oka-Akoko, the four Okeagbe-Akoko communities of Afa, Aje, Oge and Ido observed different market day as independent community under their

different ruler before their relocation to their present settlement. To also promote and entrench a deep sense of togetherness, the four communities since relocation in 1924 collectively agreed to have one unifying market. The initial name for the new market was *enyenyen* which was originally an Afa market. To avoid bad blood among the other three communities who might naturally view Afa as usurping its advantage as the biggest of the four towns, the *Ajana* of Afa met and agreed with other kings and renamed *enyenyen* as Okeagbe market. This development greatly endeared the people the more to their leaders. The market thus, allowed the people to see the survival of their communities as a collective responsibility as instability in one community would naturally have spill over effect on the others. The collective support enjoyed from the people of Okeagbe-Akoko allowed the traditional rulers the latitude to administer their domain and collectively see to the inclusive development of the area. As a show of solidarity and good wishes from the throne, the kings also sent palace messengers with the long beaded royal staff carrying a small beaded crown to convey their prayers and wishes for smooth trading among the traders. The *Iyaloja* (the traditional head of the market women) and associations got words of commendations for their role in ensuring order among the different business interest in the markets. Through this, the people reaffirmed their readiness to support the reign of the king who has shown warm disposition towards them as their fathers and rulers concerned with their wellbeing and progress and partners in progress.

Compulsory Meeting

Another means of ensuring loyalty to the leadership and power of the *Oba* in Akokoland is through the imposition of compulsory meeting period for all chiefs with the *Oba*-in-Council. This development has continued beyond 1999. Oka-Akoko presented a good example of how the *Olubaka* has been able to ensure loyalty of his chiefs through the mandatory meeting with them. Tuesday of every week is the day for a compulsory meeting of Oka Chiefs-in-Council with the *kabiyesi*. Except when the *kabiyesi* is unavoidably absent, he presides over the meeting to provide leadership and direction on important issues that bothered on the growth and development of the kingdom.²¹ Specifically, the Council is like *agboibawi* (place of admonition) where notes are compared and ideas are shared on how to move the community forward. Also, the last Sunday of every month has been set aside by the *Olubaka* of Oka-Akoko as the time of general meeting of all the chiefs' resident in Oka-Akoko and those living outside to meet with him to discuss the problems and progress of the town. This arrangement has seriously helped the *kabiyesi* to detect dissenting chiefs and as a leader and father of all, he has always found a way to win them back as friends ready to work with him for the progress of the kingdom.²² As it would be discussed later, the *Olubaka* like his counterparts some Akoko towns did not succeed in bringing all the dissenting chiefs back to his fold.²³ In Aje, Okeagbe-Akoko, the *Oba* presided over the *ajoilu* attended by the male elders (*agbaokunrin*) and the chiefs of the town. At this meeting, important issues that concerned the progress of the town are collectively discussed. The king ensured that definite conclusions were reached before the end of the meeting. The general meeting of the entire town (*ajogbogboilu* or *apejoilu*) is then called. The general meeting holds in front of the *Oba's* palace. Again, the king presided over the meeting but everyone interested in making presentation was allowed to do so without constraints.²⁴ The strategy is to ensure that the king takes control and stay in charge.

Afa in Okeagbe-Akoko also showcased how the king used compulsory meeting venue to secure loyalty to his power and authority. There are two lines of High Chiefs in Afa, Okeagbe-Akoko: *Iyares* (the father chiefs which are the highest ranked in Afa and the *Elegbe* representing the lower chiefs. The *Ajana* of Afa and his deputy the *Rawa* are both *Iyares*. Just as the *Ajana* is the head of the community, he is also the head of the *Iyares* and the *Rawa* the second in command. For strategic reason, the *Iyares* members as a matter of compulsion meet in the palace of the king at all its meetings.²⁵ The *Osunla* heads the *Elegbe* chiefs and they meet at the *Osunla*'s house. The king allowed the meeting of the *Elegbe* outside the palace to allow the chiefs engage themselves freely in discussion without the limitation that their meeting in the palace could have imposed. This tradition continued in Afa until 1932, when something unusual happened during the reign of *Oba Omoegun Arasanyi I*.²⁶ The year marked an important chapter in the history of ascendancy to the throne of the *Ajana* of Afa. For the first time, two people contested but Prince *Omoegun* won. While the people preferred his candidature, his second-in-command *Rawa Aliu* did not like him. Due to the high level of education of *Rawa Aliu*, he manipulated *Ajana Omoegun* who was of less educational exposure.²⁷ This negative tendency of *Rawa Aliu* did not go down well with the *Ajana* who saw his action as deliberate attempt to usurp his powers and authority. *Oba Omoegun* now decided that both the *Elegbe* chiefs and the *Iyare* chiefs should, henceforth, meet in his palace, because he knew that if he allowed some dissenting chiefs to meet separately outside the palace, his power, authority and control might be seriously threatened. Records available during data gathering revealed that the change in the meeting venue of the *Elegbe* chiefs has played key role in raising the relevance and power of the *Ajana* as loyalty to the throne was made stronger and better. This has helped in the effective management of the town by subsequent *Ajana* that reigned after the demise of *Oba Omoegun Arasanyi I*.

Like the *Oyomesi* in Oyo empire, a powerful age grade called the *Oyeres* was the organ saddled with the responsibility to check the excesses of the *Ajana* of Afa, Okeagbe-Akoko. Tradition provided that the *Oyere* age grade members must meet at the king's palace. Unlike the *Iyare* and *Elegbe* chiefs, the *Oyere* have their own kind of mini-palace located within the main palace. This mini-palace is called *omodeowa*. The king is forbidden by tradition from visiting the *omodeowa* despite its location in his official residence. Membership of the group comprised hunters picked from the three quarters of *Ogosi*, *Oguna* and *Ogotun* in Afa. The *Oba* hunter is also chosen from the palace to represent him in the *Oyere* age grade. This is where power politics come to play. Traditionally, the *kabiyesi* is not allowed to attend their meeting since it is the only body that can call him to order in the event that he erred. In fact, it was revealed that the *Oyere* is so powerful that no *Ajana* has ever risked joining issues with them. Interestingly, the palace hunter out of respect for the *Oba* is naturally allowed to assume the leadership of the *Oyere*. This translates to the *kabiyesi* having control over the membership or decisions of the group. The head of the group also functions as the eye of the *Oba* as he was expected to give first-hand useful pieces of information on developments in the town. The quality of information provided and the actions taken by the palace representative either make or mar the position of the *Ajana*. His loyalty to the *kabiyesi* and his readiness to always pursue the interest of the throne are key to determine the usefulness of the game of power play between the *Ajana* and the *Oyere* on the one hand, and his relationship with the other three members of the group.

Management of ambitious royal family members/chiefs and others

The introduction of the District Head System from 1920 which was due largely to the reorganization exercise carried out by the colonial authority to 'strengthen' the *oba* governing council led to the creation of new forces as chiefs who showed loyalty to the colonial policies got upgraded. This development meant that the *oba* could no longer influence the judicial council as hitherto less powerful chiefs had been upgraded to crown wearing kings. Essentially, the ease of tax collection became enhanced as the salary of the traditional rulers was largely consequent on the frequency and quality of tax remittances to the colonial authority. The introduction of salary and other monetary inducement by the colonial authority made the kingship/chieftaincy institution made it to become economically attractive and source of envious desperation as those who would traditionally worked toward the continued survival of the institution became locked in threatening battle of wits for the royal throne even though they were not qualified by tradition.

This economic dimension visited on the traditional political institutions across Nigeria communities and villages with the introduction of salary for the traditional rulers since the colonial period, has created cut-throat quest for royalty by both the qualified and outsiders. Even chiefs with no link to royalty have suddenly become awakened with the desire to upgrade to *obas*. It is very true that all royal male members of the ruling family are qualified to desire the throne but the final decision rests in the hands of the kingmakers and the collective decisions of the people. Interestingly, Isua-Akoko presented a unique example of ruling family in Akokoland. Only one ruling house produced the *Oba*. So, managing the intra-royal family crisis becomes a very easy task. The records available revealed that Isua-Akoko *Oba* (then and now) have not had serious issue with equally qualified princes and where such cases were reported, the king has been able to handle them with traditional wisdom without resulting in serious legal frenzy.²⁸

Committees with different community related assignments to be carried out by designated individuals also play important role in the survival of the kingship institution in Akokoland. Interestingly, the committees are headed by chiefs or individuals who posed serious threat to the power and authority of the kings. This strategy has really worked in Aje, Okeagbe-Akoko, Oka-Akoko, Ogba-Akoko, Ajowa-Akoko, Isua-Akoko and others for many decades. The result of this strategy has been awesome, as the king through his seeming benevolence imposed a moral burden on the head of each committee to deliver the set goals. Through this, the chiefs are made to see the unity and progress of the town as a collective responsibility that can be achieved when they give the king who is the eye of the town the needed support.²⁹ For the assurance of loyalty, the different committees meet in the *Oba's* palace at an agreed date. The head of each committee reports directly to the king who was expected to give approval to all issues agreed upon. It is, however, important to say that, the king do not usually attend the committee meeting, except when there is a pressing issue that required his intervention. Holding the meeting in the palace is enough to compel loyalty from the committee members. While some members appointed into the different committees were often those loyal to the throne, others are there to help the king close ranks and ensure that they are positively engaged in activity that give them a sense of inclusion as partners in the development of the community. They see themselves as stakeholders who must do everything possible to ensure the unity and stability of their towns.

Some of the kings interviewed also believed that dialogue can be used to manage aggrieved members of the town, especially the princes and chiefs. In one of his speeches at the *ajoilu*, the *kabiyesi* (Ewi) Olorunfoba Bello was apt when he observed that:

I am aware that some of the princes that contested with me would be sad at the turn of event, but having emerged after fulfilling all that was required of me by the extant provisions of our customs and tradition and with the collective acceptance by the people of Aje, I am ready to be the father of all which by virtue of my royal office I am expected to exhibit at all times. Aggrieved princes and other interest groups have the natural right to vent their anger, but in doing so, they should ensure that their actions do not in any way endanger peace, unity and stability of the community. I am not Oba of my household; I am the father of all and the rallying point, whatever the issues are, remember we could always talk and reach valid conclusions for the good of all. Aje was handed over to me united and I forbid anybody for whatever reason start any bad history during my reign. While the unity of all in this town is not negotiable, the place of dialogue cannot be over emphasized.³⁰

Momoh also stressed the place of dialogue in handling cases that involved aggrieved members of the society especially in the royal circle when he submitted that: "I soft pedal a little to avoid shooting myself in the leg. Remember the princes are very much free to interact with the people of the town and if the *Oba* in power fails to manage these princes and allow them to muster ready and willing hands to revolt against the power of the reigning king the result can be damaging".³¹ Oyekan also lent his voice to the importance peaceful resolution of problems in the society. Although he acknowledged that he went through the most harrowing experiences before ascending to the throne of his fathers, he never avenged those who were bent on taking all from him. He captured his experience thus;

At emergence and after winning all the court cases, I extended hands of friendship to my aggrieved uncle who contested with me. Despite my appeal to him, he went ahead to institute legal process against me at the High Court. He lost and never appealed because he was convinced that his case has no merit for further legal interrogation. Thankfully, we mended fences and the peace that followed has been very tremendous. Interestingly, I made a point of duty to visit all those who were not in my support and I even slept in their houses as a king. My open-mindedness and sincere love has allowed the chieftaincy disputes in Epimi-Akoko to die a natural death. They have come to accept the fact that, only little can be achieved in crisis and vice versa.³²

The *Olusin* of Owalusin who hitherto, was a member of the Council of Chiefs in Okaland suddenly renounced his membership due to his conviction that he is more than a High Chief. His consistent absence from meetings of Oka Chiefs-In-Council with the *Olubaka* of Okaland was perceived as disrespect to the paramount of the consenting authority in Okaland. The chiefs, the people and the *kabiyesi* held divergent opinion concerning the decision of the *Olusin* to become a king. While the first two groups, especially those of Oke-Oka collectively

condemned the action of the *Olusin*, the *Olubaka* held a contrary view. While acknowledging the painful decision taken by one of his trusted high chiefs to become king, he submitted that:

as the paramount ruler of Okaland, I have managed the unfortunate development, the point must be made that choices made by conscious individuals must be respected and where there are conflicts that cannot be resolved with the available traditional mechanisms; the parties concerned can approach a court of competent jurisdiction to settle the matter. Whatever the outcome of the court intervention might be, the disputants remain one big family strongly linked together by the bond of one ancestry, *omiye* tie and language. We will always disagree to agree and this is good for communal bonding, fraternity and collective progress.³³

As noted earlier, it is important to state here that the *Olubaka* has not succeeded in resolving issues with all the alleged dissenting chiefs. For example, the *Asin* of Oka-Odo has consistently refuted the claim that he is a chief under the *Olubaka*. Pieces of information gathered through extensive interviews, archival documents and court proceedings have proved to the contrary that the *Asin* is a chief under the paramount of the *Olubaka*.³⁴ In the same vein, the *Olusin* of Owalusin who fell out with the *Olubaka* of Okaland has also argued that he is an *oba* in his own right not a chief. While clarifying issues on his decision to become independent of the *Olubaka*, he argued that:

“As you now know and can confirm, there is an old palace traceable to my lineage. My claim to royalty was not accidental. My forefathers came from Ile-Ife with the beaded crown. Yes, there are a lot of issues surrounding my claim to kingship, the question is not whether I am qualified to be a king but why on earth was the old palace from where I oversee the affairs of my people built? Does a chief build palace, only royalty uses palace and that is the class I belong. Until our plurality is respected and accepted, there will always be issues to fight over. *Oba agba la fi moagba*. If the higher king cannot tolerate the existence of the smaller ones with their own unique story of migration and crown history, there will always be an issue to argue over”.³⁵

The support of the people and wielding the big stick

Kings through the ages were and are still looked upon as the father of all. They are expected to provide leadership with traditional finesse and native wisdom. As the Yoruba elders would always say: *ojul'obaya, obakiyaenu* (the king should be patient in observing more, but never in hurry to make pronouncement especially when he is angry).³⁶ While patience is a long term strategy, kings who are not super humans, are sometimes, although rarely, forced to wield the big stick to arrest some disturbing situations that could threaten peace and order in their domains. It is equally a fact that the survival of the traditional rulers on the thrones of their fathers is largely premised on the quality of support they get from the people. While the support of the chiefs is critical, the place of the people from whom the kings derive their power and relevance is more central to the overall wellbeing of the throne and the administration of the society.

The people factor in the survival of kingship in Akokoland was given credence after the sad event of 1957 that led to the burning down of *Zakiof* Arigidi-Akoko old palace by some elements that supported the opposing Memudu Olanipekun family is worthy of mention. Despite the deposition of the then *Zaki*, the leaders of the rebellion was unable to achieve his inordinate ambition of becoming the new king as he met stiff opposition from the people who insisted that since their king was not dead, he must be allowed to return home and continue his reign as the paramount ruler of the town.³⁷ Interestingly, those who led the rebellion of 1957 were also responsible for the return of the deposed *Oba* from exile in 1985. Omosola agreed that grass roots mobilisation remains a factor in any rural society where a ruling king or traditional ruler desire to stay relevant and have the support of his people at all times. A wise king will count on the support of the people by running an open government and leading aright.³⁸

The masquerade menace of 1998 in Epinmi-Akoko was a good instance of wielding the big stick can be used to court loyalty and allegiance. *Gbiri* of Epimi-Akoko detailed the situation when he recounted how hard it was for him to use extreme measure to restore order and take charge of his domain which was at verge of anarchy due to unnecessary crisis secretly orchestrated by some vested interests in the town. He submitted that: “there was a religious crisis that seriously threatened the peace of my kingdom but I was able to arrest the situation through careful dialogue. But since some vested interests were bent on complicating issue and thereby making the management of the town difficult for me, I had to assert my authority as the *Oba* by involving the police to arrest the menacing masquerade.”³⁹ Through the intervention of the law enforcement agents, some respected son and daughters of Epimi-Akoko and with my resolve to take the centre stage as the father of all, peace was restored and the town has remained united since then.”⁴⁰

The most reliable means of ensuring loyalty and respect of the people for the throne in a more inclusive way was summarised thus: “once you understand the people you are managing, you can be sure of their commitment and loyalty. It is normal for some chiefs to dissent but the king in power must also show that there is the need to ensure that such dissent is managed properly to the extent that it does not affect the peace and stability of the kingdom. It must be stressed also that, the king may have to sometimes wield the big stick in the event that a dissenting chief or aggrieved royal family member(s) refused to accept amicable resolution after due intervention from stakeholders”.⁴¹

Conclusion

The foregoing has discussed the different components and manifestations of power politics used by traditional rulers in Akokoland as instrument of control, stability and order in their domains. Given the dynamic nature of every human society, the need to always evolve new methods of staying in charge becomes a necessity. Kings and other traditional rulers in Akokoland and Yorubaland in general have continued to show dynamism on the workings of modern governance and how to stay relevant. While the colonial masters used power politics to alter the traditional institutions and create divisions amongst ruling families, set the indigenous people against each other, the traditional rulers in Akokoland used same to build trust, loyalty, communal cohesion and inclusive society. Aware of the fact that their powers had

weaned appreciably, traditional rulers in Akokoland wisely took the part of caution through the tactical adoption of power politics to ensure that their stakes as custodians of traditions, customs and history of the people as well as viable grassroots mobilisers are protected. The myriad of challenges faced by the traditional rulers notwithstanding, through the progressive adoption and application of power politics, they have continued to show dynamism through adaptation and continuity. The government of the day must come to the realisation that the traditional rulers have good roles to play in the efforts at nation-building and emplacing a better society safe enough for all to co-habit and contribute to the development of the country. On the strength of this, the controller of the instrument of state should continue to see the traditional rulers as development partners and work towards ensuring that their place in the scheme of things is properly outlined and assured through the necessary instrument of the state.

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