

**CHIEFTAINCY TITLES IN YORUBALAND AND THEIR  
IMPLICATION FOR GROWTH AND TOLERANCE  
AMONG CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS**

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## **Abstract**

This paper will examine comparatively the forms of chieftaincy title given among the three religious faiths in Yoruba land and how they have co-existed without necessarily jeopardizing their basic tenets of faith and practices. Yoruba people of South Western Nigeria have their own way of practicing their beliefs and the demands of the practice. The practices and beliefs held by Christians and Muslims today in Yoruba land in the area of chieftaincy titles have some identifiable variants. Christianity and Islam however did not come to the soil of Africa as a universal religion by which African may claim that it will solely represent the custom and cultural race of the people. The title of a chief which is one of the cultural titles in Yoruba land is associated with village heads, heads of cults or heads of lineages. These heads with a rank of chief perform traditional functions among the people that elect them. In this age of religious acculturation, where Christianity and Islam have taken a similar platform in the affairs of the people, the issues of traditional chieftaincy seem to them a form of tracking the concentration of their members in the act of discharging their spiritual responsibilities. In this case, they prefer to adopt a better mode of disengaging the spiritual conflict of their members for them to remain faithfully committed. Functions of the chieftaincy include addressing any issue in the administration of justice in relation to their office, seeing to the welfare of their communities, monitoring socio-economic and promoting religious tenet as it relates to their convictions. Subsequently, some sects among Christian and Islamic groups therefore created a dimension of title that fits into their faith and is traditionally oriented.

**Key Words: Chieftaincy, Yoruba Land, Christian, Muslim**

## Introduction

The traditional society of Yoruba people is a conglomeration of cultural identities which solicits for relative affinity to a particular social organization. Cultural and traditional events served as the basis of displaying personalities, age group recognition, influences and notable charisma which formed a statusquo for rank identification among peers, groups and clan relationship which exist within the social organization. In olden days Yoruba settings, certain people are given the cognomen “Chief” because they are culturally privileged to be assigned or given certain responsibilities which require their services for the upliftment of the society. But, it must be noted that these services formed the basis for *Awo Iselu* (the Rulers) that controls and guides the interaction and development of a particular clan, village, town or empire. The formation of these rulers is found in networking cults like *Awo Isegun, Awo eegun, Awo Ise Ona, Awo Oro, Awo Ifa, and Awo agbe* which by necessity must be involved in *Awo Ogboni* that formed the basis of checks and balances in the affair of *Awo Iselu* headed by Oba (king). All these cults have special roles to play in the thorough organization of the Yoruba community.(Ilesami,2004:10) The leaders of each cult are given preferential treatment in the society and they are accorded respect by calling them *Oloye* (chief) which carried different titles like *Oloye Alapini, Oloye Latosa, Oloye Otun, Oloye Iyalode, Oloye Iyalaje, Oloye* and *Balogun*. The different titles are attached to different professions that see to the affairs and organization of the community, but they are headed by the king (Oba). Although there are some honorary titles proffered to those who contributed distinctively to the social, cultural and economic development of the society.

The adoption of these nomenclatures later developed in modern times to acknowledgement of good will made by individual towards the development of their different

communities and these are turned into traditional offices to allow full participation in the traditional affairs. This development created the recognition for village heads, clan heads and paramount rulers within the civil terrain and which now increases interest in holding such post because of the stipend attached and the certificate which accords them status that are given. Honorary titles given to chiefs are accorded due respect and the title holder offer financial or material assistance to the community from time to time. Such titles in the case of Muslims are *Asiwaju Adini*, *Balogun Adini*, *Iyalaje Adini* and *Baba Ijo, Iya Ijo, Iyalaje Ijo* for Christians. Titles like these are given in recognition of contributions offer to the religious communities.

The appointment of chiefs in Yoruba traditional setting either as honorary or traditional chiefs has a protocol that must undergo certain rituals and initiation at the point of being installed (Etuk, 2002:134) and since the offices had existed prior the advent of Christianity and Islam, they have continued to exist side by side with different positions of the new religions among the Yoruba communities. The rituals that are performed during the installation of chiefs among the Yoruba people is an indication of the fact that the people still have preference for their traditional and cultural beliefs system despite the presence of the foreign religions. The installation ritual is known as “*ifini joye*”(the ritual of chieftaincy). For the king the term of reference of such ritual is “*iwuye*” and it is always highly elaborate while ritual in the case of other chieftain is less elaborate. The use of “*ewe akoko*”(the leaf of confirmation) serve as symbol that consummate the anointment of the new king or chief. With the anointment it shows that each title holders have a specific and designated responsibility in the Yoruba social and religious communities.

However, occasional conflicts are known to erupt as the three major religions interact. Conflicts sometimes ensue when two candidates from Islam and Christian background claims superiority over a hereditary chieftaincy title. When this occurs, the community elders would come together to amicably resolve the conflict by agreeably pronouncing the verdict about who should be elected. Since the elders serve as the voice of the community their verdicts are often accepted.

Since Yoruba people are extraordinarily interested in the issue of chieftaincy titles at the detriment of their religious piety, the clergy of the new religions have decided to restrict their members from accepting the offer from the traditional quarters. The new religions have therefore decided to create similar offices in Islam and Christianity respectively. In the light of the above the paper will then discuss chieftaincy titles with reference to the religions in the Yoruba community.

### **Chieftaincy Title as a Concept in Yorubaland**

Olaniyan(Olaniyan,2004:279) indicated that the title of chief is common to the village head, head of cults or head of lineages and he categorized the use of the title into three different segments. The categories are council of state (*igbimo ilu*), the military chiefs which involved those who have proved themselves with a militia record of landable exploits, and finally the honorary titles, which are the titles sought after by the emerging political elite that seeks status for identification.

Before this can be applied to the present discussion, it is better to know that the application of chiefs passed through decades of administrative development which ranged from traditional, colonial and then contemporary periods. The traditional period exhibits the

significant roles of the kings and *Baale* (wards heads) in governance as they carry prerogative power to select the person to be granted a title(Olaniyan,2004:279) of chief. The chiefs under the colonial masters were used administratively to designate African administrative authorities recognized by the colonial government.(Ashiru,2010:121-122)<sup>5</sup> Ashiru argument about the concept and theoretical concerns of chieftaincy institution while quoting Makovitz revealed the trends which the concepts of chieftaincy can be likened with in the contemporary period.(Ashiru,2010:121-122).

The indication shows the content of African societies as a confused blending of both traditionalism and modernity. This blending allows adoption, giving and recognition of traditional chieftaincy titles for both religious as in the case of Muslims and Christians (which serves to be a template for modernity) and secular as in the case of traditional society as most practicable. Most societies are not completely modern as they are totally traditional as well. This analogy clarifies the fact that those enrobed with chieftaincy titles in contemporary days act within traditional terrains to gain influences which they use as tool via traditional institution to promote their ego in the modern world by acquiring titles that will give then recognition. This has been the state of chieftaincy holder in the contemporary days. Apart from this, the adoption and recognition of the blending of chieftaincy titles in the modern time also helps to foster unity and sense of belongings

From the analysis above it is important to see the concept of chieftaincy as a cultural form of human affairs that engaged in creating leaders for the societal needs. It can then as well be described as the leader or titular head of a people or similar ethnic group.(Encarta,2007) In the context of this paper, it is seen as a programme drafted by the religious faiths to forge adequate

concentration of their members in their different spiritual responsibilities and commitment. This analysis will be investigated in the course of this paper.

### **Chieftaincy Title among the Yoruba Muslim**

The legitimacy of chieftaincy title among the Yoruba Muslim is viewed as been authentically approved by the doctrine of their faith. Islamic doctrine from the inception of the religion shows the authenticity for chieftaincy title, the Quran and Hadith also emphasized its adequacy where it mentioned some of the prophets of the religion that were given one titles or the other. Oladiti in his work identified the fact that Muhammed, who is the prophet of Allah was referred to by the Holy Quran as the prophet of Allah and the founder of Islam and at the same time given the title *Nabiyyi – Allah* and *Rasul-Allah* (Prophet and messenger of God). (Oladiti, 2010:305) He also noted that his demise created the title of Caliph and *Siddiqun* (the successor to the messenger of Allah and the truthful person) through which the successions after him were recognized. During the tenures of these successors other offices like *Amir* (president), *Wali* (local governor) *Qadi* (Islamic judge), *Amil* (tax collector) were created.

In the light of this, the institution of titles then became paramount among the adherents of Islam. This development influenced the phenomenon of chieftaincy positions which are found among the Muslims entirely. It is important to say that this development is not only applicable to the Yoruba Muslims as other culture like Hausa culture also recognized the title like *Emir*, *Waziri*, *Galadima*, *Alkali*, *Yerima Sarki* and many others. The only difference is that, while the Hausa tradition was influenced by the Arabic template of chieftaincy, the Yoruba followed the template of Yoruba traditional settings. It is fundamental to see in the two developments that the tone and objectives of the titles emphasized Islamic injunction.

The scope of Islamic titles among the Yoruba people clarified outrightly the portfolio the holder belongs to. This is easy to identify. Relating these portfolios, the culture of the people informed the application upon the holder. It is then right to find different forms of title like *Aare Musulumi*, *Balogun Musulimi*, *Otun Balogun*, *Balogun Adini*, *Iya Adini*, *Musulumi*, *Isale Otun Musulumi*, *Seriki Musulumi*, *Iyalode Musulumi*, *Otun Iyalode* and several other titles.

The formation of chieftaincy titles in Yorubaland which created room for its modern development could be traced to the period when Islam was introduced into the religion of south west. According to Gbadamosi, the Parakoyis who are the trade agents and head of Muslim community around the period when Islam penetrated into Yorubaland were seen as the first carrier of titles which later metamorphosed into diverse application among the Muslims today(Gbadamosi,229-227). The Parakoyi during the period as title holder became an umpire and mouthpiece to the alien Muslims and traders who needed patronage and protection in Yoruba land. They also assisted in the process of conversion which took place then. This title “Parakoyi” then became noted among the indigene of Oyo, Osogbo and Ogbomoso around the period. The Parakoyi title seems to be traditionally oriented but created avenue for other titles to be introduced. Their influence during the period could be seen in the socio-political atmosphere of the people where they were seen at the forefront of organization and maintenance of law and order among the people.

Apart from the above references, it is noted that most members due to their sociological involvement in the society where they belong, become legally appointable to certain position which are traditionally connected to chieftain offices. Islamic faith connects this act to syncretism if they choose to take it. This development therefore created the medium of acculturation which Islam adopted by creating the same titles within the Yoruba Islamic faith to



allow progress, propagation and spread of the faith among the Yoruba who are title-conscious. The contextualization of the same titles found among the Yoruba traditional people within the Islamic faith is targeted towards influencing the minds of lovers of chieftaincy titles away from accepting the traditional worldly titles from traditional rulers, as it is thought that this may affect their spiritual life and their relationship with Allah. Some of the titles involved in this category are *Balogun* (Warlord), *Otun* (right), *Osi* (left) which are meant for honorary or gesture of good works. Quadri bluntly emphasize this influence in his word that:

because their counterparts were conferred with traditional titles, it became necessary to honour wealthy and influential Muslims in order to retain them in Islam. (Quadri, 2003:241)

The above clarifications could be emphasized through the table below:

<b>TITLES</b>	<b>STATUS</b>	<b>FUNCTION</b>
Aare Adini	President of religion	Promotion of religion
Baba adini	The father of religion	Promotion of religion
Iya adini	The mother of religion	Promotion of religion
Balogun adini	The chief warlord of religion	Fighting in support of religion
Iyalaje adini	The mother of prosperity of religion	Promotion of religion
Iyalode adini	The outstanding mother of religion	Promotion of religion
Otun balogun	The right hand of the chief warlord	Islamic promoter
Otun iyalaje	The right hand mother of prosperity mother of religion	Islamic promoter
Otun iyalode	The right hand mother of religion	Islamic promoter
Seriki adini	The chief of religion	Leader of religion
Seriki musulumi	The chief of Muslim religion	Leader of Muslim community

### **Chieftaincy Title among the Traditional Yoruba People.**

The Yoruba cosmological milieu gives credence to the traditional democratization in which *Oba* (king) serves as the head of an empire, town or city. The *Oba* (king) is the title of a traditional ruler. A traditional ruler is a person who by virtue of his ancestry occupies the throne of an area and who has been appointed to it in accordance with the customs and traditions of the area.(Olubusola) The office is thus hereditary and patrilineal but assisted by principal chieftain officers who are part of the administration of the community. It is already referred to at the beginning of this paper that such officer are associated with village heads, head of cults and heads of lineage as indicated by Olaniyan. Most important among the principal chieftains are the *Igbimo ilu* (council of chiefs) who are called by different names in different part of Yorubaland. Names like *Oyomesi*, *Iwarefa*, *Ilamuren* and *Ogboni* in different part of Yorubaland could be used to identify these positions and chieftain offices.(Olaniyan,2004:279)

Following these categories are the titles which cut across all other major ethnic groups and they include: *Basorun* (the head of all the traditional titles and next to the king), *Balogun* (chief warrior and generalismo of the army), *Aare Ona kankafu* (The grand commander and overall war generalismo), *Jagun* (War general) *Alapirin* (Captain of Masquerades), *Asipa* (head of the hunters and civil defenders of the city), *Parakoyi* (a security chancellor and head of trade units), *Akogun* (war general), *Asiwaju* (a honorary title which is given to someone who is in the forefront of development of the city).(Salami,2008:319-322) These chieftain offices make the government of the Yoruba people monarchical only that the installation of chiefs is not flamboyantly popularized as that of the king but it is the duty of the king (*Oba*) to command the selection of a person to be granted a title. The king thus conferred a title on a person based on the lineage right which is hereditary or with the impression of honoring a job that is well done by

individuals in the community. Women who belong to a ruling class may be elected as regent as the kingmakers search for a male to occupy the throne. However, chieftaincy titles are also accorded to women who distinct themselves in the community. Women who belong to a ruling class may be elected as regents, as the kingmakers search for a male to occupy the throne.

It is within this template that Islam and Christianity couched their method of installing titles on members of their adherents to prevent those who are too conscious of annexing themselves to title from derailing from their faith and to allow them full concentration in their practical faith which they are converted to. The titles like *Balogun*, *Aare*, *Parakoyi*, *Asiwaju*, *Otun*, *Osi* and host of others are thus common within the terrain of the two religions. The table below shows the clarification of the concept of the titles:

<b>NAME</b>	<b>TERMS</b>	<b>CONCEPT</b>
Oba	Hereditary	The town/ city ruler(king)
Balogun	Hereditary	Member oba's council
Otun	Hereditary	Member oba's council
Osi	Hereditary	Member oba's council
Are ona kakanfo	Hereditary	Member oba's council
Ogboni	By election	Ogboni secret society guild
Parakoyi	By election	Traders guild

### **Chieftaincy Title among the Yoruba Christians**

Christian faith in Nigeria has three faces through which it can be identified. The common background to Christian faith which cuts across all geopolitical zone of the country is the established churches which serve as an orthodoxy through which the church penetrated and established itself within the soil of Nigeria. This movement started with the planting of Churches by the Church Missionary Society in Nigeria (C.M.S) and this mission was quoted by Ayandele as “unquestioned spheres of English national influence”(Ayandele,1966:275). This influence shows the allegiance the mission owes to the British authority. This mission later corroborated to the formation of Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches under the same orthodox faiths. The second face of identification is the Pentecostal mission which shows more modern outlook and seems to follow the yearnings of people in different dimensions that cannot be equal to that of orthodox settings. The third face is Independent Aladura Churches that set pace for the groups who are notable in their different professions like farmers, artisans, and trade. They owe no allegiance to any authority. They are founded by indigenous African leaders who are not fully satisfied with churches planted by the Europeans.

Among these three Christian religious segments the issue of chieftaincy title is taken more seriously among the orthodox churches than others. The reason was that they identify the significance of culture with Christianity. This significance to some is noted in the attitude and approach developed from the cultural life of the people which helps them to function within the scope of respect and regard. This is also attached to the title of chieftaincy as a cultural stance that can assist the standard of faith members. This identification became necessary due to the issue of paternalism which was involved during the early missionary activities in Nigeria. This issue became more polemic among the Yoruba and Igbo settings as the Christian mission query

title-taking by Christians. (Ayandele, 1966:275) They were of the view that how far it would be consistent for Christian to take titles and become chiefs without at the same time running into the spiritual dangers of the 'heathenism' rites that went along with these titles (Ayandele, 1966:275). But in the view of the African adherents, they consider church chieftaincy as answers to some questions which the Christian missions could not supply any answer. Such questions informed the fact that, if Christians were to be debarred from taking titles or becoming chiefs, how would Christians become important in Nigeria society? Would evangelization not be thus hampered and important men and chiefs become alienated from Christianity? If the chiefs who wielded political power were alienated from Christianity, what hope would there be for permanence of this creed in Nigeria? (Ayandele, 1966:275) The responses of the Christian missions to these polemics issue were pragmatic and thus allow circumstances to direct their decision. The different districts were then allowed to solve the problems according to individual conscience.

Within the context of individual conscience as noted earlier in the argument, the orthodox churches among the Yoruba then fixed in the idea of creating image of Chieftaincy titles which can be compared to that of traditional milieu of the people in order to prevent the members from eloping from Christian faith totally or loosing interest of service as member. Thus the idea of *Baba Ijo, Otun Ijo, Balogun Ijo, Iyalode Ijo, Babalaje Ijo* and other rewarding titles became awardable and prominent among the church members.

<b>TILES</b>	<b>STATUS</b>	<b>FUNCTION</b>
Baba ijo	Father of the church	To promote the interest of the church
Iya ijo	Mother of the church	To promote the interest of the church
Otun baba ijo	The right hand man of the father of the church	To assist in promoting the interest of the church
Otun iya ijo	The right hand mother of the mother of the church	To assist in promoting the interest of the church
Balogun ijo	The warlord of the church	To resolve conflicts and promote peace
Babalaje ijo	The father of prosperity of the church	To assist the church financially
Iyalode ijo	The outstanding mother of the church	To promote the interest of the church

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion it is important to recognize the fact that religion plays a vital role in the development of the cultural traits of the Yoruba people. The Yoruba cosmology on chieftaincy already explained in this paper shows that chieftaincy title is a phenomenon present in the three major religions of Islam, Christianity and Indigenous Religion respectively. The worldview also shows the new developments in the three religions with reference to chieftaincy affairs. This development shows to a greater extent how religion could be used to develop cohesion and understanding. Further, it also revealed how religion could provide avenue for growth and tolerance among the adherents of different religious beliefs relative to their traditional background. This paper also revealed that in order to have the elite and important personalities in the society to participate fully in religious beliefs other than the traditional belief, opportunity

should be created for people of note and affluence so that they can enjoy what their counterparts are enjoying in African Traditional Religion.

It has been noted that in Islam the extensive nature of the traditional titles are well reflected in the various central mosques in Yoruba land. It showed that Christian have limited number of titles borrowed from the traditional settings when compared to that of Muslims. The reason for this is that in Christianity, religion is separated from governance, whereas in Islam, religion and governance are treated as one entity. It is then understood that the various honorary titles is to acknowledge the outstanding contributions of the individual adherence to their faith.

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