Afrocentric Biblical Hermeneutics *en route*: A Contextual Study of Chieftaincy in Post-Colonial Nigeria

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1. Afrocentric Biblical Theology *en route*

Times are changing and so are traditional African institutions. Chieftaincy was in existence in virtually every part of Africa long before the colonial era. It persisted during that time and has continued to grow stronger in the decades since. In contemporary times, new dimensions have become manifest which are significant for Afrocentric Biblical hermeneutics. Two examples will illustrate this. First, Nigeria's most prominent Biblical scholar, Professor Samuel Abogunrin of the University of Ibadan (Nigeria's oldest University and pioneer Department of Religious Studies), who is also an ordained pastor of the Evangelical Church of West Africa (formerly Sudan Interior Mission) was given the chieftaincy title of the *Esa* of Omu Aran in Kwara State Nigeria in May 2004. This is the next position to the reigning king in the hierarchy. Secondly, a month later, the Venerable Joseph Adepoju, an archdeacon in the Anglican Church of Nigeria as well as a postgraduate student of New Testament Studies was crowned traditional ruler (king) of a prominent Yoruba town, Igbara Oke, near Akure, Nigeria.

Given the colonial perception of traditional chieftaincy in Africa as pagan, what influenced these Christian ministers and biblical scholars to become chiefs, subjecting themselves to rites and customs that were thitherto perceived by Eurocentric scholars as incompatible with Christianity? Are there no contradictions between them? In the case of Abogunrin, he remains a practising pastor in addition to his chieftaincy responsibilities. This shows a changing paradigm in Afrocentric understanding of the Bible and indeed in the practice of African Christianity. I therefore intend to examine the traditional chieftaincy system in Nigeria in the light of the Bible, in order to find parallels between the Biblical concept of kingship and the African chieftaincy system, and explore this as a route to further development of an Afrocentric approach to Biblical Studies.

In colonial Nigeria, there were two main types of traditional government—monarchy and a democratic form of gerontocracy.[1] Despite the powerful influence of colonialism, this institution has remained solid in virtually every nation in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nigerian Biblical scholars have joined their African counterparts in trying either to 'decolonise Biblical Studies'[2] or to 'reconstruct African Christian theology'.[3] D. T. Adamo defines this as 'the Biblical interpretation that makes the African social and cultural context a subject of interpretation';[4] a departure from the Eurocentric perspective on Biblical studies which has been inherited by African theologians and Biblical scholars trained in the West. He popularised the search for African models for Biblical hermeneutics, while Justin Ukpong's major contribution has been in the area of inculturation. He argues that: 'colonialism is founded on an ideology derived from the classical idea of culture…In Africa as elsewhere, colonialism was seen as a "civilizing" process. If colonialism is fundamentally a cultural process, then the most fundamental process of decolonisation must necessarily be cultural. Black scholars over the years have pointed this out'.[5]

Getui and Obeng's *Theology of Reconstruction*,[6] follows in this direction. Mugambi's foreword to this book states: "The twenty first century opens with globalisation as the agenda in most international fora. In the meantime, Africa becomes increasingly marginalized. The theological metaphor of re-construction challenges African scholars to discern new insights to inspire a new movement, hopefully more vigorous than that of the 1970s—a movement that can help the people of this continent to regain their self-esteem and integrity, as they contribute towards the creation of a global community.'[7] The basis for this emergent paradigm of deconstruction and reconstruction is the historical damage which colonialism had done to the total African psyche, which affects everything else. Nahashon Ndug'u restates this clearly: 'The colonialists main concern was to grab as much of Africa's wealth as possible in the colonies they had acquired. Together with the colonialists came the western Christian missionaries, whose main concern was to control both the mind and the soul of the Africans. They considered themselves as having been given a divine mission to save the lost souls of Africa. Thus from the beginning of the missionary enterprise, in tropical Africa, Christianity was presented to the Africans as part of European civilisation, which was intended to replace the

"pagan" religion and "primitive" way of life.'[8] In the process, 'the African culture had to be destroyed in order to have a *tabula rasa* on which the superior European culture was to be inscribed…The colonization of African mind has been the greatest damage that the west has caused on the Africans for they no longer have a basis for developing their African personality.'[9] Leslie Newbigin concludes that 'Western Christian missions have been one of the greatest secularising forces in history'.[10]

African scholars like Kihumbu Thairu are even more severe, suspecting continued western colonialist interest in Africa's persistent economic and socio-political woes, including the ravaging effects of HIV/AIDS, which he thinks may have been deliberately engineered to serve the capitalist interest of the Western powers who aspire to take over the African continent. The back cover of his book 'The African and the AIDS Holocaust' states: 'Professor Kihumbu Thairu goes beyond the myths surrounding the spread of the pandemic, reviews historical antecedents and presents AIDS challenge to Africa in the perspective of racial survival…It is not simply a health issue—it is the survival of a people against whom the scales have been weighted for centuries, and whose extinction would benefit others….'[11] Desmond Tutu goes further: 'The worst crime that can be laid at the door of the white man…is not our economic, social and political exploitation, however reprehensible that might be, no, it is that his policy succeeded in filling most of us with self-disgust and self-hatred.'[12] Abogunrin agrees when he observes that:

African elites are today unconsciously promoting foreign languages and culture to the almost total neglect of African languages, religion and culture and our children are gradually becoming foreigners in their own land. This is one reason for evaluating the colonial readings past and present in Africa, as well as the need to decolonise Bible interpretation.[13]

We argue in this paper that chieftaincy has been one of the most resilient cultural systems in Africa and is a potent factor for an African perception of contextual Biblical studies. In saying this, we are following Gerald West's 'life interest' approach, which is a departure from the common Eurocentric 'interpretative interest' one. According to West: 'Interpretative interests are those dimensions of the text that are of interest to the interpreter, while life interests are those concerns and commitments that drive or motivate the

interpreter to come to the text...life interests come from our experience of the world and from out commitments to the world. With such interests, we come to the Bible to hear what it has to say concerning such things…African biblical interpretation has been dominated by socio-historical interpretative interests, though interest in the other dimensions of text can be detected…We need to begin to describe what is, rather than prescribe what ought to be. It is time to bracket the prescriptive paradigm; it is time to listen rather than to proclaim.'[14] This is the same approach that Manus has advocated in his *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa*. He argues: 'The intercultural method I am canvassing is a vigorous approach in the decolonising process of New Testament interpretation in Nigeria….This way of doing exegesis is another form of contextual theology that is derived from a critically cultural interface between the sacred texts of the Christian faith and the givens of the African life-world.'[15] Interestingly, Manus's book identifies chieftaincy as a potent factor in decolonisation. He notes:

> The missionaries, aware of the subjugation of the African peoples by the colonists, launched a crusade of 'Christianising' the Africans they had encountered; especially their kings and paramount chiefs. The first targets of European missionary conversions and expansion in Africa were the rulers, chiefs, princes and members of the nobility. The Portuguese went as far as taking a Benin Prince (Nigeria) to Lisbon, educated him in Western values and handed him a Portuguese wife so that both could transform Benin culture and religious institutions.[16]

2. Traditional Chieftaincy

Africans, despite Western imperialist notions, have always been people with the capability to organise and govern themselves. Contrary to the widely held opinion that colonialism is the bedrock of African civilisation, African peoples have possessed an independent system of local, native government for over a millennium, as can be attested in the now extinct empires of Borno, Benin and Oyo (in what is now Nigeria). Even now, chieftaincy continues to be integrated in successive political and social arrangements, which confirms its crucial status in the African community. Okafor observes that: 'whether in the north or south of Nigeria, the position of traditional authorities has been vitally important since the pre-British era. Local rule developed around the traditional authorities. Generally they were considered by their people as repositories of religious, executive, legislative as well as judicial functions.'[17] This made the

chiefs and local kings susceptible to manipulation by the colonial authorities in their attempts to suppress their people. The British adopted indirect rule through native chiefs and traditional authorities who were regarded as an integral part of the machinery of government, with well-defined powers and functions recognized by colonial government and law. The local government structure in Nigeria still maintains this situation. Many chiefs are graded as civil servants and are on the payroll of the government. All parts of society, including the churches, have to deal with them. Chieftancy is therefore a meeting point between Biblical Christianity and Christian involvement in politics; a model for an African Biblical hermeneutic in the wake of liberationist theology.

When we talk about chieftaincy, we are referring to the institution of traditional rulers. Originally the rulers or kings were simply chiefs, but today so many other lower strata go by the title chief (mostly honourific) that this term is no longer as clear as it once was. For our purposes, a chief is essentially the same as a traditional rulers. Nigeria is a culturally and religiously plural nation. The major ethnic configurations include the Hausa-Fulani (in the North), Yoruba (in the West) and Igbo (in the East). There are in addition about 250 sub-groups, each with distinct languages/dialects and their own chieftancy system. What binds them together is the vibrant operation of this chieftancy, which is perhaps the only traditional African institution that has defied the distorting influence of colonialism and continues to enjoy support of both the people and governments. What the queen is to England, the traditional rulers (*obas*, *obis* and *emirs*) are to their respective domains, in spite of the controlling power of elected governments. However, it has been noted that the chieftaincies have also acquired certain features which are the result of the effects of globalisation, regionalisation and modernisation.

The changes that have emerged in the Nigerian chieftaincy system since independence on 1 October 1960 have an important religious dimension. Chieftaincy in Africa is intrinsically and inseparably linked to religion. Amadi observes that: '…the real restraints on rulers were religious. Even when a ruler was not a priest, he still had many rituals to perform. These rituals had taboos which the ruler would dare not infringe.'[18] Stackhouse also claims that:

> Religion must be reckoned with in politics…the idea that religion is and should be private and that the state is public and secular derive in large

> measure from the impact that a specific religion has had upon modern western social life. The idea or religion as being basically privatised is a socio-cultural product of the modern global circumstance, an aspect of the ordering involved in the rendering of the world as a single place.[19]

Prior to the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates by Lord Lugard in 1914, each people group was governed as an independent nation state, held together by similar culture and religion. While Islam held sway in the north among the Hausa-Fulani and the Kanuri, indigenous African religion was dominant in the south until Christianity appeared in 1842.[20] The chiefs in Africa were not immune to the influences of these foreign religions but were often the vehicles upon which they rode to mass acceptance. It should be noted that religion and chieftaincy have been intricately related everywhere in the world. In England, the queen is the supreme governor of the Church of England. In Saudi Arabia, the king also double as chief custodian of the most important symbols of Islam. We will always find religion as a tool of local governance, and therein lies part of the relevance and power of the institution of chieftaincy. Christianity and Islam support respect for constituted authorities, including local chiefs. We can say that such feelings have been responsible for the Nigerian people's desire to maintain chieftaincy throughout the colonial era and even after it. In no part of the country does the religious persuasion of a particular ruler affect the respect due to the throne. Martin Luther shares this attitude—'even if rulers are not Christian, they are placed as checks on the excesses of people who would be unruly and disturb the peace of the godly and law-abiding'.[21]

Governance is fundamental to any society. The people of Nigeria have always respected their traditional institutions, partly because of their respect for law and order and partly out of religious conviction. Chiefs are regarded as vice-gerents of God (the Supreme Being). They are often venerated as divine beings who are custodians not only of the traditional values and cultures of their people but also of their religious faith. In the past, some chiefs were deified as gods and added to the already large pantheon of indigenous religious deities.

That is what happened to Sango, who became the god of thunder, and to Ogun, who became the god of iron and smith works in Yoruba indigenous religion. The African chiefs are the political high priests working alongside the

regular priests in the religious activities of their communities. As Bolaji Idowu has said of the Yoruba, they are 'in all things religious'.[22] The chiefs are the royal fathers of their people, a position that has sustained respect for them even greater than that accorded to political leaders at any point in time. They are addressed variously as 'royal highness' or 'royal majesty', and are granted unique privileges which at times amount to immunity from the laws of the secular government.

Such was the aura the chiefs enjoyed in the pre-colonial era, that they were easily used and manipulated as agents of the colonial subjugation of once great African nations. During the slavery period, chiefs were found to collaborate in the capturing, selling and exportation of their own people as slaves to Europe and Americas. This fact of history reveals the weaknesses and vulnerability of chieftaincy as an institution, both then and now. Some rulers were despotic and many were evil, indulging in human sacrifices and other vices. Donald Guthrie agrees with this observation: 'A good case can be made out of the view that political authorities were regarded in some ways in the contemporary world as representatives of the demonic powers which were believed to be the real authorities behind human affairs.'[23]

During the colonial era, in the case of Nigeria, the British authorities ruled the Muslim north indirectly through the emirs, who had a strong control over it already. The Alkali courts were viable, and all it took for colonialism to succeed was to gain the co-operation and loyalty of the local emir. The unquestioning loyalty of their subjects was then guaranteed. The British colonial authorities were prepared to ignore Christian interests in order to safeguard the co-operation of the emirs in northern Nigeria. This was demonstrated by the colonial government's ban on Christian missionary activities in the Muslim north for most of the colonial period. In the west, which was more liberal and democratic, the method was that of direct occupation and control. The effect of this can be seen in the greater power and influence which the emirs have over their people than the southern traditional rulers do. In Yorubaland for example, there were instances in the past where a despotic oba, Alaafin of the Oyo Kingdom, was compelled by tradition to abdicate the throne and to be beheaded once he lost the support of his people as represented by the traditional council. This shows the many faces of chieftaincy and makes it difficult to generalise about it.

As the chiefs are many, so the cultures and traditions that characterise them differ. Yet common strands can be traced, on the basis of which we shall examine contemporary emerging trends, with particular emphasis on the Yoruba chieftaincy system. How much of the past have they retained and what innovations have come into the system in this global age of scientific, technological, religious and socio-political changes? In other words, what new trends are discernible in contemporary chieftaincy and can they be compared with the Biblical portrait of kingship?

3. Models and Trends of Kingship/Chieftaincy in the Biblical and Nigerian Cultural Contexts

i. Historicity and Royal Lineage

The strongest linkage between the African chieftaincy system and Biblical kingship is found in Ethiopian royal history. From Moses' wife to the queen of Sheba, to Simon of Cyrene and the Africans present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the African claim to be co-founders of the Christian faith cannot be ignored. Our focus is on the queen of Sheba story and the claim of her descendants to royalty in Ethiopia. The 1955 constitution introduced by the late Emperor Haile Selassie stated what everyone then regarded as incontrovertible truth:

> The imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line of Haile Selassie I, whose line descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Ethiopia, the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Jerusalem. By virtue of his imperial blood as well as by the anointing which he has received, the person of the Emperor is sacred, his divinity inviolable and his power indisputable.[24]

The Emperor claimed to be the 225th monarch of the Solomon's line. This appeal to historical continuity was violated by junior officers who staged a coup that removed and later killed the emperor, putting an end to an empire steeped in Israelite roots.

Given the interrelationship between African states in pre-colonial times, it is possible that African system of family lineage succession was influenced by the Ethiopian model. In Benin tradition, a single royal family produces the oba (king). This is the first male child of a reigning king. It was the same in Israelite monarchy. Following the abandonment of theocracy in preference for

monarchy, Saul's family initially enjoyed exclusive rights to the throne but the lineage of David took this privilege over. In parts of Africa where the succession system is non-hereditary, competition for the chieftaincy and internal crises relating to it can easily emerge. The Israelite appeal to historicity is similar to the African appeal to oral tradition of tracing ancestors. This is common in Benin and Ile Ife royal myths and legends. Most major thrones in Yorubaland trace their descent from Oduduwa, the progenitor of the race. It thus becomes easy for an African Biblical reader to understand, interpret and apply African custom to the kingship in Israel, for instance in the story of David, his son Solomon and Rehoboam, prior to the division of the kingdom.

ii. Divine Kingship

Guthrie states that throughout in the New Testament, are found traces of the idea of God as king. It comes into focus more because of the kingdom of God concept. 'Clearly the idea of a kingdom implies a king and this furnishes a solid basis for the New Testament usage.'[25] The kingship of God derives from his creation of the earth. In Acts 4:24 the disciples of Jesus prayed to God as the Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and everything that is in them. There are several throne images in the Bible portraying God as both king and judge. African kingship and chieftaincy are built upon the historical traditions of the people. One major basis for establishing and projecting the institution is the divinity attached to it. The Yoruba will readily address a reigning king as *oluwa* (Lord), *ikeji orisa*. This second term means vice-gerent to the gods. Perhaps this concept was borrowed from Greek mythology which attributes divinity to royalty. As in Greek mythology, Yoruba kings are deified, as happened with Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder. Indeed by virtue of their office, chiefs or kings are regarded as ruling on behalf of God the supreme Being and ruler. They wield their judicial powers at the behest of God. Obas are therefore priests within their domain, but they recognise that they only reign on behalf of Olodumare the Supreme God. At social events of communal gatherings, or when in church, the chiefs or kings are made to acknowledge their subsidiary position to the King of kings and the Lord of lords who is often welcomed (albeit *in absentia*). Yoruba songs frequently use the term '*Oba to ju Oba lo*' (a king that superseded others). This perception will help us in interpreting such texts as those which deal with God's response to Samuel when the people demanded a monarchy. Yahweh stated that he was the one they had rejected by asking for a king. In other words, as in the African

system, kingship and divinity are intricately intertwined. The divinities may play subtle roles but the ancestral cult does not. It is prominent in every Nigerian ethnic culture. Thulani Ndlazi resonates the feeling in East Africa, similar to the Nigerian: 'misinterpretation of ancestors "living dead" in African culture is part of tendency to demonise anything of African origin. The relationship between an African and his/her living dead is a real human experience of contact.'[26] Conventional Eurocentric Christianity has yet to accommodate the theology of the ancestral cult which is present in every African locale. The chiefs or kings are protectors of this cult is the same manner as the Israelite kings followed the traditions and religio-cultural heritages of their royal forebears. Moreover the Israelites never ceased to refer to themselves as the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—their patriarchal ancestors! The genealogical presentation with which Matthew opens his Gospel provides ancestral base for the messianic ministry of Jesus Christ: 'The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham' (Matt. 1:1). 'So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations' (Matt. 1:17). Here is a conscious, divinely calculated genealogical presentation of Jesus' ancestral linkage that legitimises his divine and messianic claims. In the same way, kings and chiefs in Africa derive their cultural, spiritual and royal legitimacy from their ancestral roots. Whereas the Bible is a written document, African chieftaincy records remain in oral tradition, but even so, they deserve equal respect.

iii. King Politicians

Kings are usually in charge of the political process of any community and nation. But because of the sensitive nature of politics they are usually expected to be non-partisan. As fathers of their people, they should not be seen to support one political party against others. At best their intervention in governance is advisory or subterranean, but that was not their original role anywhere in the world. The Queen of England remains the titular head of England but she has little influence over the political direction of the nation. In the past however, the kings presided over state functions and were the final authority on any issue. They had powers to sentence their subjects to death. The Israelite kings wielded such powers although they were occasionally checked by equally powerful and politically-conscious prophets such as

Nathan, Ahijah, Amos and Isaiah. Nathan questioned David's seduction of Bathsheba and the stage-managing of her husband Uriah's killing at war. His ironical parabolic condemnation of David as well as the prophetic judgment of the House of David for this unwarranted violence remains classic. Ahab stage-managed the execution of Naboth as advised by his evil and insolent Queen Jezebel. This also called for prophetic judgement which was fulfilled by the death of both Jezebel and her weakling son. In the New Testament, the execution of John the Baptist was effected on the orders of King Herod, on very flimsy grounds, motivated to gratify the vendetta of a promiscuous queen. John's reformist stance was fatally punished. This followed the trend of past persecutions of prophets like Jeremiah at the hands of kings. The modern era with its democratic dispensation has brought the powers hitherto wielded by kings under control, reducing their office to ceremonial status symbols, but the potential for conflict is still there.

In Africa, kings and chiefs wielded the same powers as those in other countries. African legends tell of renowned kings who were dreaded for their awesome powers. Some had to be forcefully dethroned as a check to their extreme acts of terror. In Nigeria, during the first democratic republic, kings were active politicians. The *ooni* of *Ife* (Yoruba's foremost king) Sir Aderemi Adesoji was not only a legislator, but a governor of the Western Region, while serving as traditional ruler. Today, traditional rulers have been integrated into the local government civil service. They preside over customary courts and have administrative, judicial and legislative powers, but only within their own community. Their decisions are still subject to that of the constitution and penal laws. Even the king can be arrested by the police! The role that Israelite prophets played as a check on the kings was played by the priests of the traditional religions of the Nigerian peoples. In the case of the Yoruba, the diviner, using the divination instrument of *ifa*, was always at hand to reveal to the council of chiefs what the gods had to say or command, which was then binding on the kings. Even the selection of a ruler was in past times determined by the choice of *ifa*.

The image of such kings as sitting on throne in the court is another area of similarity between the Bible and modern Nigeria. There is a prominent throne imagery of God in the New Testament that links the concepts of king and judge. There is also the idea of a court in heaven hinted in Luke 12: 8f, which

shows the Son of Man acknowledging men before the angels. In the book of Revelation, the enthronement idea is marked in the vision of 4:2 (repeated in 5:1), where God is described as 'the one sitting on the throne.' In the African context, every king has a courtyard in the palace, where the *iwarefas* (council of chiefs) meet. The *kabiyesi* (king) is greeted respectfully as they bow at his entry. He discusses issues with them, seeks their advice, calls the *ifa* priest to consult the oracles if the matter is complicated, but the final decision on any matter always lies with him. His throne is set aside, and is reserved for his use only. When he dies, his son takes over if the system requires hereditary succession.

We have common ground here also in interpreting Biblical kingship in the light of the African situation.

iv. Prophet-Kings

David and Solomon are the best examples of the prophet-king model. Despite the burden of kingship, they made their mark as repositories of wisdom, poetry, and inspirational spirituality. They combined political acumen with scholarly erudition. The Psalms of David and the Proverbs as well as Ecclesiastes of Solomon remain the sources most consulted sources by practising Christians in areas of personal as well as communal study and worship. They thus represent a combination of the powers of rulership and the gift of God. That a king can also be a spiritual resource was a novelty introduced by this father and son combination and agrees with Plato's utopian conception of a philosopher king who should provide beneficial rule in human societies. The story of the visit of Queen of Sheba is relevant here again. Her immediate motive (there could have be some other secondary interests) for visiting Solomon in Jerusalem was his famed wisdom, splendour and affluence. Being a rich royal herself, the attraction of Solomon could have been mainly intellectual. African chiefs and rulers are of a similar mould. They are all expected to be the chief repositories of the traditions and oral cultures of their communities. Readily found at every palace are court praise singers who recount not only the genealogy of the kings and prominent families, but also the history and past achievements of the community. Every family in Nigeria is traditionally expected to have its own praise poetry. From this, the past history and inclinations of the family are known. Aside from this, traditional rulers are regarded as the chief priests of their communities. There are rites that only the

ruler performs under the guidance of the vocational chief priests. This trend persists even in cosmopolitan centres like Lagos, where local people still perform the traditional rites. In the Ojo area of Lagos, the College of Education had to close down briefly in June 2004 because the host community was performing rites that women were forbidden from witnessing. They had to be indoors. No one dared risk defying the traditional ruler's orders, despite the secularism and modernity prevailing in the country.

v. Subjugated Autonomy

The subjugation of the autonomous powers of chieftaincy in Nigeria began with the colonial power but it is sustained even in the post-colonial era by the indigenous political authorities. The colonialists used religion, in this case Christianity, to whittle down the effects of traditional religion over the people, from which chieftaincy derived its power. Historically, the hierarchies, rituals and structures of the Church have been used to interpret and legitimise social situations of mastery, patriarchy, colonisation and capitalism by linking them to be ordained by God.[27]

The effect of this is the tendency of some chiefs to demonstrate a colonial mentality in their conduct of chieftaincy affairs, trying to be modern and western in their approach rather than sustaining the traditional values of their stools. On the part of their subjects, the effects of Christianity and Islam have been adverse, because representatives of these two religions see many aspects of the indigenous religion as pagan idolatry. Therefore they disobey them, and consequently reduce the control of the chiefs over the community. Urbanisation and the evolution of cosmopolitan and metropolitan cities have complicated matters still further. In most cities today the residents are composed of people from different tribes. It is thus difficult to impose a single chieftaincy tradition upon them. There is a trend now, whereby members of a particular tribe resident elsewhere appoint chiefs over themselves in *diaspora*. In Lagos, the Igbos have their *eze*, while the Hausas in the city have their *serikis*, despite the fact that Lagos is a Yoruba city. This is a new innovation in the institution of chieftaincy.

The traditional chieftaincy thrived because of the awe in which the subjects held it. It was virtually autonomous of the political powers in so far as the running of its own system was concerned. For example, each local community

had its system of appointment as well as succession of chiefs. Among the Yoruba, four systems existed and can still be found today. First, the traditional oracle *orunmila* was consulted through *ifa*, its divinatory instrument. Whoever was selected among the screened contenders was chosen as chief. This system, though revered because of its religious process, could be manipulated and was definitely undemocratic. Secondly, hereditary succession was common as is still practised by the *Bini* royal dynasty. Here, only one family produces the *oba*. The eldest male child of an *oba* was sure to take the throne after his father. Some emirs in Northern Nigeria operate the same system which is comparable to the British monarchy. It hardly leaves room for dispute, as the choice is obvious. The third system is hierarchical, and is the practice among the Ibadan people in Yoruba. Here, the ruling *oba* has deputies in their ranks. The most senior occupies the throne. The fourth system is found among the Okun people of southeast Yorubaland and is rotational. Selected families who were regarded historically as the earliest members of the community form the group of royal families. Each family produces the oba in turns on a rotational basis. This system worked well before the colonial era.

The post-colonial era has witnessed the gradual erosion of the autonomy of the chieftaincy institutions by ruling political as well as military governments. The appointment of chiefs has become very attractive and competitive, and draws the intervention of political parties that want to install their cronies as a way of using the chiefs as instrument of mobilisation of their subjects to support such parties. There have been instances where ruling governments have forcefully removed chiefs from the throne because they had fallen out of favour with the ruling government. The *alaafin* of Oyo was dethroned by the Western regional government led by Obafemi Awolowo in 1956, partly because of his support for the rivals of the ruling party. The Emir of Kano, Alhaji Sanusi was also dethroned by the Northern regional government led by Sir Ahmadu Bello.

During the military era the Government of General Sanni Abacha dethroned, exiled and detained Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, the Sultan of Sokoto (one of the most powerful traditional chieftaincy stools in Nigeria and traditional head of the Muslim caliphate) in 1995. These precedents, involving two of the nation's most respected chieftaincy stools, signalled the decline of the institution's traditional immunity. Today, any traditional chief selected by traditional kingmakers must receive the approval and official appointment of the

government. The chiefs are put on the government pay roll, given official cars and receive their promotion and grading from the governor, who usually presents them with staffs (sceptres) of office. Traditional chiefs are required to be present at major government functions. At best, their significance is merely ceremonial, except in their limited domain where the local people accord them some respect. This emerging subject status of chiefs is a consequence of the colonial era, the only difference being that independent governments now replace the colonial masters in their control of the chiefs as subjects and tools of indirect rule.

vi. Secular Functionality

There have been attempts to modernise the institution of chieftancy by incorporating it within the secular superstructure of society. Although the chiefs had absolute executive, legislative and judicial powers prior to the colonial era, these powers were either totally taken away or were greatly reduced. Today, each chief has a traditional council (cabinet) of lesser chiefs. Together they try cases such as marriage disagreements, land disputes, minor theft, etc. Cases that border on criminality are referred to the police and the magistrate or high courts. No chief is above the law. If the *oba*, *obi* or emir breaks the law, he is subject to arrest, trial and possible imprisonment. In other words, the contemporary institution of chieftancy operates as an arm of government, as another appendage of the public service. The above limited powers notwithstanding, chiefs have been found to be necessary go-betweens in the management of Nigerian communities. Whenever crisis broods, the chiefs are found to be essential in controlling the actions and reactions of their people. At times they have failed or proved incapable of doing this and they have even been accused of generating crises themselves, but in spite of that, they have proved to be very useful. A case in point is the government consultation with all major traditional rulers in 1999, during the crisis arising from the controversial annulment of the presidential elections held on 12 June 1993, which threw the country into years of political turmoil. When religious crisis erupted, traditional rulers were appointed as part of the Advisory Council for Religious Affairs. Other members included the topmost leaders of the two major religions in the country (Christianity and Islam).

As noted earlier, the colonial authorities used the chiefs to undergird their indirect rule. In northern Nigeria, the emirs were granted judicial powers in

matters relating to customary laws. Even now, customary courts abound in every part of the nation to try cases which are not criminal but have to do with aspects of the customs of the people. That was the rationale for the permission by the colonial authorities to allow the operation of *Sharia* (Islamic Judicial system) in northern Nigeria. The *Sharia* courts thrived in the north but were not totally independent of the normal civil courts. After the colonial era, the Northern regional government under Ahmadu Bello maintained the *Sharia* as a penal code but not as the criminal code. Unfortunately in the current political dispensation this privilege has been used to enforce the adoption of *Sharia* as a legal code in most states of northern Nigeria, a development which led to public protests by non-Muslims who saw it as part of Islamisation process of the nation. The riots that arose from this claimed about 2000 lives in Kaduna city in 2000. In the unfolding of these events, the role of the chiefs (in this case emirs) was pronounced because they stood to benefit from the use of religion to restore their waning powers and influence in contemporary Nigerian society.

vii. Capitalist Chieftaincy

One area in which post-colonial chieftaincy in Nigeria has changed is in the introduction of capitalism into the system. Traditional African communities practiced communalism and the bi-polar struggles between capitalism and socialism were irrelevant. Western imperialist tendencies now characterize the traditional stool. The original idea of chieftaincy was simply to provide traditional governance. Although by their office and powers, chiefs were not usually deprived in material terms, their choice was not usually dictated by their material affluence but by the procedures laid down for such appointments. It was the duty of subjects to provide for their chiefs. Consequently they never lacked the means of common sustenance. In fact they were the traditional custodians, not only of the traditions of their people but also of the citizens, land and societal institutions. That was why a chief could marry as many wives as he wished, with little restraint when he desired a lady to be his wife. Some would even take over the wife of another out of greed, as David did of Uriah's wife (although with dire consequences). This traditional privilege was hardly tampered with by the colonial authorities. They allowed the chiefs hold the reins in their community in such matters.

This privilege was carried over into the post-colonial era, a fact that has contributed to the larger-than-life image which prominent traditional rulers

have of themselves in Nigeria today. They adorn themselves in peculiar royal garments, the Christians among them do not remove their caps in church as is the custom for males, they drive customised cars (usually very sophisticated ones), their car registration plates are not the usual numbers but bear the name of a traditional ruler, they drive in a convoy of several accompanying cars, led by police escorts blaring sirens to clear the way for the supreme chief. The chiefs have thus acquired a larger than life image that unfortunately detaches them from the people they govern.

Today traditional chieftaincy in Nigeria has become the exclusive preserve of the rich. Capitalism characterises it and the throne is usually given to the highest bidder. An eligible poor contender has little chance over a wealthy one. Because of the aura of power and affluence attached to the office, chieftaincy disputes are common, often leading to the murder of opponents. The educated elite have suddenly developed an interest in chieftaincy offices which were hitherto the preserve of elderly people from the grassroots of society. In the north, virtually all the emirs are educated and wealthy, and some are multi-millionaires. The same goes for the prominent ones in the south and west. Some, like the Emir of Kano and the Ooni of Ile Ife are partners who own and run international businesses. Many traditional rulers today are big-time contractors who are patronised by government agencies. They use their royal offices to further their personal business interests. In other words, the institution of chieftancy is an avenue for the possible exploitation of privileges by the chiefs.

Chiefs in the post-colonial Nigeria are often only part-time rulers. They run their businesses alongside performing their royal functions as occasions demand. As a sophisticated elite, some alternate between living overseas and performing their traditional duties at the palace. This is a departure from the earlier situation whereby the chief was mostly confined to his domain.

Most Nigerian communities make it a policy that their chiefs must be educated and well to do. One of the reasons for this is the role of the chiefs as the spokesmen for their communities before the government. In other words, the institution of chieftancy is a tool for lobbying for community development. Wealthy traditional rulers have initiated developmental projects that they or their business friends sponsor. Some have brought their influence to bear on

government agencies to establish industries and social infrastructure in their communities. It does not follow however that only wealthy rulers can achieve such feats. Wisdom and diplomacy are not always contingent on material possession. Our conclusion is that this new feature, which is different from the colonial era, is a result of the economic, social and political benefits arising from democratic and independent government.

A notable phenomenon is the sale of chieftaincy titles by traditional rulers, to selected persons who are regarded as of financial benefit to the throne. It is the tradition for rulers to award honorary chieftaincy titles (they go by various coined names) to persons they favour. It is common practice that the poor are rarely so honoured. Past and present leaders in government, wealthy businessmen and foreign diplomats are awarded the titles. Sometimes this is motivated by the desire by the rulers to have such awardees become interested in the development of the community. However the question remains as to whether the material status of a person ought to determine his qualification for community leadership and reward. Our opinion is no. The difficult aspect of this phenomenon is the suspicion that awardees of chieftaincy titles donate huge sums of money to the rulers in exchange for the awards. The awardees go by the title 'chief'. Some honorary chiefs have been discovered to be fraudulent and of no good reputation. This commercialisation of chieftaincy erodes the respect traditionally given to it.

viii. Chieftaincy and Religious Puritanism

The African Chiefs are traditionally the custodians of the indigenous religions of their people. This refers to the religion which was inspired, initiated and sustained by the African forebears and passed on to successive generations through oral tradition. This faith features belief in the One Supreme Being who is served by a pantheon of divinities as well as spirits, a belief in ancestors and in magic as medicine. The chief is the patron of all gods (divinities) in the community and a superior priest to the patron god of the community. On festive occasions, it was the duty of the chief to perform the rituals stipulated for the gods. It was not only the gods who got the chief's attention, but also the representatives of the esoteric forces that operate and rule over the town, who must be patronised and protected by the chief. Because of the potency of their supernatural powers, the chief was expected to be initiated into their cults and to possess higher spiritual powers than his subjects. He was regarded as

the 'husband' of the witches and an expert in the magical arts. In times of crisis he was expected to be the last resort.

For the foregoing reasons, the majority of traditional rulers are dreaded for their *juju*. The palace of the *ooni* of Ile Ife for instance is believed to be occupied by more that 1000 gods, each of which has its turn in receiving occasional worship and rituals. There is a ritual sacrifice to one god or another in such palaces every day in the year. Some rulers are still believed to indulge in human sacrifices in their search for superior powers and in keeping with age-old customs. These are some of the reasons why the rulers are treated with fear. The respect offered them is therefore compulsive rather than earned.

Today, a new trend is emerging in the institution of chieftaincy, which is the introduction of religious puritanism. Most of the traditional rulers today have joined new religions, mainly Christianity or Islam. Islam and Christianity are monotheistic faiths that are intolerant of African indigenous religion. When a chief becomes a committed Christian or Muslim, a crisis arises because it becomes difficult for such a ruler to remain the faithful custodian and patron of the 'pagan' cults and practices. A choice has to be made, although several take the option of least resistance—syncretism. Syncretism is the concurrent practice of essential elements of two normally incompatible religions. This is common. The same chief who sacrifices to gods is found regularly in church on Sunday or in the mosque for the Friday *jumat* prayers.

What is interesting today is the emergence of prominent chiefs or rulers who maintain a puritanical commitment to their faith while on the throne. Rather than compromise, they carry out a bold review of aspects of African indigenous religion which are repulsive to their new-found faiths. Some contenders or selected candidates for the throne set the precondition that their reigns will be in accordance with their chosen faiths that are contrary to African indigenous religion. Upon such agreements, these rulers are allowed to run the affairs of the community and palace according to the precepts of their chosen religion. In the western parts of Nigeria some rulers, like the alake of Egbaland in Abeokuta, hold daily Christian devotions in his palace before commencing the activities of the day. Some have chapels or mosques in their palaces. In the north, all traditional rulers or emirs are committed Muslim leaders as well.

The effects of this development are significant. First, it is an effect of colonial influence, for colonialism rode upon the tide of religion in the conquest of Africa. Secondly, it makes the rulers more popular with their people, many of whom have also joined the foreign religions. Christianity or Islam eventually become the official religion. No meeting of the community will be held without opening prayers and closing prayers from either or both of these religions. A typical Christian crusade, such as the one held monthly by the Redeemed Christian Church of God (which draws crowd of about 400,000), usually has an array of traditional rulers in attendance. Thirdly, this development is a threat to the continued relevance of the African indigenous religion which the rulers are expected to patronise and protect. This is a reflection of the fact that the post-colonial era witnesses a continuation of colonial influence upon the institution of chieftaincy in the area of religion.

In conclusion, what we have attempted to do here is to identify and highlight aspects of the institution of chieftaincy in Nigeria which have changed in the post-colonial era. In the emerging trends, religion plays a crucial role. It is also in religion that the institution of chieftancy will continue to find its most potent relevance and derive the strength needed to maintain itself.

The Western world has much to learn from Africa in this respect. The fact that despite modern civilisation and technological development chieftaincy sill survives and is widely supported, patronised and respected, shows that Africa is determined to recover its identity and maintain its fundamental structures in spite of colonialism. As Amadi says: 'Is it possible to weld the traditional concepts of government into an instrument capable of coping with the running of a modern state? That is the possibility that African nations should explore.'[28] We agree with Amadi. It is in remaining truly African and at the same time contemporary in the global world that the institution of chieftaincy can survive and remain relevant. By and large, African chieftaincy is a vital model for exploring an Afrocentric Biblical hermeneutic. It is how many similarities there are between the Biblical and African worldview.

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ENDNOTES

1. Elechi Amadi, *Ethics in Nigerian Culture*, (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1982), p. 94.

2. Between 6th and 9th July 2004, African Biblical Scholars met at the Annual National Conference of Nigeria Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS) to discuss the theme—"Decolonizing Biblical Studies in Africa". It was held at the Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria, hosted by the Theology Department of the University. It drew participants from Europe, South Africa and most Nigerian Universities.
3. See collection of essays on this current subject matter in Mary N. Getui and Emmanuel A. Obeng (eds.), *Theology of Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1999).
4. D.T. Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Oregon: WIPF and Stock Pub. 2001), cf . "What is African Biblical Studies?" Paper presented in NABIS Conference, Lagos, Nigeria, July 2004
5. Justin Ukpong, "Inculturation as a Decolonisation of Biblical Studies," paper presented at NABIS conference, *op. cit.*
6. Getui and Obeng *op. cit.*
7. Jese Mugambi, 'Foreword' in Getui and Obeng *op. cit.*
8. Nahashan Ndung'u , "Towards the Recovery of African Identity," in Getui and Obeng eds., *op. cit.*, p. 260.
9. *op. cit.*
10. Leslie Newbegin, quoted in P.G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the excluded Middle," Missiology, 10 (1982), p. 44.
11. Kihumbu Thairu, *The African and the AIDS Holocaust : A Historical and Medical Perspective* (Nairobi: Phoenix Pub., 2003), 5; Notes on back cover-page.
12. Desmond Tutu, quoted in G.S. Wilmore and J.H. Cone (eds.), *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 484.
13. S.O. Abogunrin, "Decolonising New Testament Interpretation in Africa", paper presented at NABIS Conference, *op. cit.*
14. Gerald West, "Decolonising (South) African Biblical Scholarship: The Bible in (South) African History and Culture". Paper presented at NABIS Conference, *op.cit.*
15. Ukachukwu Chris Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and Approaches* (Nairobi: Acton Pub., 2003), 7.
16. *Ibid.*
17. S.O. Okafor, " Traditional Authorities and Local Government in Nigeria," in S. Olugbemi (ed.), *Alternative Political Future for Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Political Science Association, 1990), p. 344 .
18. Max I. Stackhouse, "Politics and Religion," in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The*

Encyclopaedia of Religion Vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 410.

19. *Ibid*.
20. See D.F. Asaju, "Christian Evangelism in Badagry, Nigeria," in G.O. Ogunremi *et al* (eds.), Badagry: History and Culture of an Ancient city (Lagos: RexCharles Press, 1994).
21. Martin Luther, "The Works of Martin Luther" in W.T. Jones *et al* (eds.), *Approaches to Ethics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 170.
22 E. Bolaji Idowu, Olodumare: *God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman. 1968), ix.
23. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Liecester: IVP, 1981), p. 132.
24. Graham Hancock, *The Beauty of Historic Ethiopia,* (Nairobi: Camerapix pub., 1977), p. 20.
25. Guthrie, *op. cit*., p. 84.
26. Thulani Ndlazi, "Bridging the Gap Between Christianity and African Culture" in Roswith Gerloff (ed.), *Mission is Crossing Frontiers* (South Africa: Cluster Pub., 2003), p. 107.
27. *Echoes*, World Council of Churches publication, Vol. 18, (2000), p. 7.
28. Amadi, *op. cit*.