The Colonial and Post-Colonial Transformation of African Chieftaincy: A Historiography
Moses A. Awinsong

Moses Allor Awinsong is a history graduate student from Feo-Namoo in Ghana. He wrote this paper for Dr. Mark Hubbard's historiography seminar.

Introduction

The arrival of Europeans in many African societies in the 1400s had an enormous impact on the institutions and practices of African people. Not all influences on African institutions lasted. Some institutions simply collapsed in the wake of dramatic change, while others metamorphosed into completely new and significant entities supporting the colonial administration or the people. In the political life of Africa, one institution which stood the test of time was chieftaincy. It grew under the weight of European influence as a collaborator with the imperial power and later as a victim, together with colonialism in general, of the anti-colonial nationalism in the period after the world wars. The years of colonial rule and the postcolonial system all proved influential in the evolution—rather than a revolution—of chieftaincy across the continent.

This paper offers an historiographical assessment of the colonial and postcolonial transformation of the institution of chieftaincy in Africa. A reading of the literature reveals two approaches, each conceptualizing the roles and place of chiefs in both the colonial and postcolonial periods in Africa. The paper then will examine the different roles of chiefs during the colonial and postcolonial systems. While Marxist and imperialist scholars differ on chiefs' role during colonial rule, other scholars disagree about chiefs' fortune in postcolonial Africa. The latter viewpoints are the "adaptive" and the "marginalized" schools. Overall, the paper studies the changes over time in the function of African chieftaincy under colonial rule and in the postcolonial era of self-rule.

The Chief before Nineteenth Century

Political leadership in Africa was not a recent creation. Long before contact with European merchants, African societies developed sophisticated communities and kingdoms. Edward Bovill and Hallett Robin draw attention to the fact that many West African kingdoms had rulers with enormous wealth, organized judicial systems, and large armies before the fifteenth century.[1] Some of these kingdoms were Ancient Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu. Organized judicial systems based on local and Islamic law shaped most of these societies. In Nigeria, the kingdoms of Oyo, Benin, Edo, and the Habe dynasties of the north molded the political destinies of the people.[2] Some of these were neither Islamic nor Christian. They were completely the product of African people, resulting in centuries of political and organizational skills and experience. The kingdoms of Kongo, Zimbabwe, and other advanced societies of the southern parts of Africa were all well organized and

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[1] Edward William Bovill and Robin Hallett, *The Golden Trade of the Moors: West African Kingdoms in the Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: M. Weiner Publishers, 1995). Bovill and Hallett studied ancient states in West Africa. Some of these kingdoms were Ancient Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu.

[2] Toyin Falola, and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

efficient in the pre-colonial era. In modern Ghana, the kingdom of Mamprusi, for instance, is traceable back to the 1300s.[3] It was the earliest of the Mole-Dagbani states in the savannah regions of Ghana and Burkina Faso.

Many of these states and kingdoms were instrumental in the trade, politics, and civilization of the Islamic world. By the time European merchants arrived on the coast of the Atlantic, many advanced civilizations had risen and fallen while many more were flourishing. They did not possess guns and gunpowder, but their social organization, economic interdependence, and involvement in the global economy through Mameluke Egypt and the North African merchants assured prosperity for aristocrats and freedom for the citizens.

With the coming of Portuguese and later other European merchants, the institutions and cultures that were created over centuries adjusted to meet the exigencies of the times. One such institution was chieftaincy, a key force for mobilization and stability in African communities. The position of chief was a ritual one in which they served as links between the living and the dead. Chiefs dispensed justice without favor in their role as the representatives of the ancestors. All these enriched the political fabric of the continent. This meant that Africa was not an empty, disorganized geographical place before the Portuguese encountered coastal Africans; however, as colonialists set about creating the new systems of political administration, the office of chief transformed in many ways.

Colonial Chieftaincy

The formalization of European imperialistic control over African territories saw the first encroachment on the nature and authority of the institution. Mahmood Mamdani, writing from a Marxist-inclined position in *Citizens and Subjects* noted that colonial rule brought with it European concepts of land ownership.[4] In the process, the colonialists made land synonymous with chiefly authority by investing all lands into the native political institutions of the communities in rural Africa.[5] Lands with no private claims were deemed royal lands, and later, government property, which was a deviation from African communal land ownership system. The colonialists therefore succeeded in transforming the ritual function of the chief into a political one. This enhanced chiefly authority over land was an aberration from the custom and practices of the people. It became "the foundation of native rule," according to historian Mahmood Mamdani.[6] In a larger sense, Mamdani's argument shows that this change enabled colonial powers to use chiefs as conduits to gaining concessions for the exploitation of resources for the good of the colonial metropole. He reflects that "chiefs were autonomous is not to say that they were independent."[7] Thus, land re-organization not only empowered chiefs, but colonial powers as well. The reorganized political system based on new land tenure systems involving the colonial administrators and the chiefs was therefore a symbiotic economic relationship in which colonialists and chiefs acted together for their own mutual economic benefit.

Kofi Abrefa Busia also contended in *The Position of the Chief in Asante* that the African system was originally a non-feudal system.[8] Though not a Marxist, he viewed the influence of chiefs in

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[3] Djibril Tamsir Niane et al eds., *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

[4] Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[5] The Aborigines Rights Protection Society of the Gold Coast protested the investiture of all unused lands in the hands of the British government in the late nineteenth century. For a detailed study, see, Kojo S. Amanor and Janine M. Ubink, *Contesting Land and Custom in Ghana. State, Chief and the Citizen* (Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2008).

[6] Mamdani*, 141.

[7] Ibid, 145.

[8] Kofi Abrefa Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London: International African Institute, 1951).

colonial Africa through an economic lens. The right of usufruct, a practice undergirding African land tenure, was revoked in favor of a more Western system. Chiefs were made actual owners of land rather than the whole community. From them, the colonialists could easily obtain mining concessions, plantations, and other resources without much resistance. This was simpler for the colonial authorities because there were only the chiefs to convince and not the whole tribe or community for access to resources.

While giving chiefs landed authority, the colonialists deprived them of enormous judicial power. Instead, judicial authority transferred to colonial courts. Educated interpreters assumed relevance in the administration of justice. The cumulative impact of these actions concentrated power in the hands of the European administrators. New opportunities in labor, commerce and services provision also helped advance a new class of wealthy citizens. For historian Kofi Abrefa Busia, this created a merchant group whose prestige rivaled that of the chiefs. Traditionally, the chief could not trade or acquire private property. A chief enriched himself through obligatory service from his people. They had worked his farms, built his houses and tapped his palm trees. But the new class of citizens made much more wealth than chiefs through wage labor and the provision of services to Europeans. Gradually, they became socially influential through the accumulation of resources. With no obligatory services to the chief due to increasing urbanization and a growing sense of human freedom and individualism growing among former subjects, the economic basis of chiefly power declined. This reality compelled chiefs to accede easily to European requests for access to mineral and natural resources in return for economic gain, because chiefs needed economic security. Thus, the reorganization of land proprietorship defined the functions of chiefs in colonial Africa. It made them pawns in the hands of the colonial administration. Chiefs gradually lost much economic and social standing relevance to the colonial system.

Alexander Keese studied colonial chieftaincy in French West Africa during and after the Second World War. He focused on the economic relations colonial rule birthed between chiefs and subjects. In an article, Keese observed that chiefs increasingly became oppressors of colonial subjects due to their political and economic roles in the colonial administration.[9] In the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Benin among others, chiefs had helped the colonialists recruit and organize labor for exploration, exploitation, and exportation of the much needed resources from the colonies to France. Chiefs also took the lead in collecting taxes from the people. Citizens who proved recalcitrant were severely punished by colonial troops at the requests of chiefs. The French administration remunerated chiefs well and organized them through the colonial provincial councils of chiefs. Additionally, Chiefs acquired free labor from their subjects for agricultural and other commercials purposes. There developed a familial bond between colonial authorities and chiefs based on their shared interest in the exploitation of the people and the natural resources in the colonies. The colonial experience of chieftaincy in French West Africa was synonymous in many ways with their counterparts in other parts of the continent. It was basically an economic relationship with the colonizers in which they both benefitted and the people suffered.

In contrast, another school of thought, which might be labeled the "Imperialist" school, saw the roles of chiefs not in economic terms but in political and administrative terms. Chiefs were portrayed as partners in the civilizing mission of Europe in Africa. In *The Dual Mandate*, Lord Fredrick Lugard set out to define the role and place of African chiefs in the British Colonial administration.[10] He held that under British administration, "native chiefs retain their titular positions, and were allowed the exercise of restricted powers."[11] Chiefs were administrative partners

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[9] Alexander Keese, "Understanding Colonial Chieftaincy from Its Final Phase: Responses to the Crisis of an Institution in French-ruled West Africa and beyond, 1944-1960," *Africana Studia* 15 (2011): 11-28.

[10] Lord Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[11] Ibid, 228.

with some degree of autonomy in bringing the benefits of European progress to indigenous people. The chiefs under the British system were employed in organizing social services, implementing taxation, public work, and other exactions made by the colonial authorities. This system of administrative imperialism, a carefully constructed setup of offices and officials to manage and run communities for the benefit of colonial or imperial powers, was known as Indirect Rule. For imperialists like Lugard, chiefs were administrative instruments carrying out a "civilizing mission" on behalf of the colonial administrators. They were not co-equal with the colonial administrators, but were conduits through whom the colonizers oversaw the daily lives of the people. Indirect rule therefore gave legitimacy to the chief in the eyes of his people; but enslaved them in the eyes of the colonial authority. In this way, the chief in the colonial British system in Africa carried out the dual mandate required by the colonial authorities and the active political and spiritual roles expected of them by their citizens.

Similarly, A.A Costa carried the imperialist argument further when he held that colonial Britain thought of and shaped her political administration in South Africa based on traditional African systems of patriarchy.[12] The British established patriarchal relations with chiefs, who in turn dominated their people based on this patriarchal ideal. In this relationship, chiefs in South Africa used native law to administer indigenous people. It formed the foundation of indirect rule. Patriarchy assumed that blacks were ill prepared for liberal, progressive governance. They were subjected to customs not law, and were trained for preservation not assimilation. Authorities fashioned customary law as "an instrument of patriarchal government," using chiefs in this chain. Only private property was protected beyond chiefly authority in rural South Africa. Chiefs held proprietary right over all lands, but colonial authorities could access it without restraint. The chiefs served simply as black governors on behalf of the colonizers. Native or customary law was deemed appropriate to African people, while civil law governed expatriates. This very difference of legal application proved discriminatory because it used cultural differences as a marker of legal maturity. The colonial administration therefore regarded African chiefs as pawns for the achievement of their political aims of administering the many linguistically varied people in southern Africa. In short, chiefs were the trainees who brought British progress to their ignorant, backward people in rural Africa.

In acephalous societies, colonial administrators established the office of chief effectively to gain a semblance of legal authority among the people and to achieve smooth administration in such unorganized communities. Peter Geschiere contended that acephalous societies proved resistant to the imposition of colonial rule.[13] French and British authorities created the position of chief to help stamp out such opposition. The imposition of *chefs coutumiers* in French territories enabled authorities to find executors of administrative orders, who enforced labor requirements, often brutally. Though they were notorious for their brutality, they nonetheless helped extend French political sovereignty into rural Africa. French authorities sought to traditionalize and legitimize these chiefs by enforcing hereditary succession. The chiefs were also effectively supported against rebellious subjects through the use of colonial troops. In the British territories, chiefs in acephalous societies were called *warrant chiefs*. They performed colonial functions similar to those in French domains. But here, chiefs had a high degree of autonomy compared to their counterparts in French colonies. This seeming independence ensured that subjects did not perceive the great intrusion of external powers in their lives because "chiefs seemed to act as a screen between the British and the local population."[14] Thus,

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[12] A. A. Costa, "Chieftaincy and Civilization: African Structures of Government and Colonial Administration in South Africa," *African Studies* 59, no. 1 (2000): 13-43.

[13] Peter Geschiere, "Chiefs and Colonial Rule in Cameroon: Inventing Chieftaincy, French and British style," *Africa* 63, no. 02 (1993): 151-175.

[14] Ibid, 161.

colonial authorities, whether French or British, used the institution of chieftaincy to facilitate colonial rule and exploitation in previously non-organized communities. Colonial administrators from France and Britain both saw and used African chiefs solely for administrative purposes to further the interests of metropolitan Europe.

The fate of chieftaincy under formal colonialism was therefore one of subordination to the colonial authorities. They served to enforce colonial edicts and directives in return for the maintenance of their position of influence. It was with the rise of an educated class of Africans that the position of chiefs faced internal opposition and condemnation. This struggle between chiefs and the educated elites was to form one of the core areas of contention during the fight to regain independence in the years after colonialism.

Postcolonial Chieftaincy

The coming of Europeans saw a rise in castle schools on the coasts of Africa. These unassuming, sometimes one-classroom structures, produced the men and women who proverbially took the colonial system to the cleaners and eventually to its knees. Educated Africans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries used their knowledge of European political ideas to counter the legitimacy of colonial rule, including the compliant institution of chieftaincy. Two divergent approaches to conceptualizing the role of chiefs in postcolonial Africa can be discerned from the literature. The first may be called the "adaptive" approach and the second one may be christened the "marginalized" approach.

Kwame Arhin, arguing for the adaptive school, believed that chieftaincy adapted to the needs of the postcolonial state in Africa. In his article, "The Search for 'Constitutional Chieftaincy,'" Arhin pointed out that the power and sway of chieftaincy wilted in the postcolonial state. In place of influence, there emerged a passive rather than active role for chiefs in governance.[15] When chiefs' active political service ended, some fragments of the institution were transferred into modern governance. State singers, linguists, and other cultural and material aspects of the institution were used to endow the new state with legitimacy. So, though the new state demanded complete loyalty to itself beyond ethnic identity, it nonetheless used symbolic and material appeals from the old institution to court and sustain support for the artificial state. Arhin showed that constitutional chieftaincy, which implies reduced power and reach for chiefs, dominated the political thinking in Ghana following the end of colonial rule. The new Ghanaian state stripped chiefs of their active or effective political functions, but coopted them into running local communities as opinion leaders. It thus gave chiefs symbolic recognition, but no actual power. So, the question "how to reconcile the demands of the growing African Revolution with claims of tradition" was resolved through this novel adaptive settlement named constitutional chieftaincy.

Ørnulf Gulbrandsen asserts that postcolonial states sought to eliminate the chieftaincy institution.[16] But the "force, vitality, and persistence" of chiefs made the attempt impossible.[17] For example, chiefs rose to fill the power vacuum left by the political chaos of the postcolonial era in Congo. In Botswana, it was the relevance of the institution's symbols and aura in unifying and building the new nation-state which encouraged the new leadership to accord chieftaincy the significance it now holds in public affairs. However, this excluded overt political agency. The new nations of central and southern Africa found the aura of chieftaincy relevant to buttressing the

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[15] Kwame Arhin, "The Search for 'constitutional chieftaincy,'" in *The Life and Work of Kwame Nkrumah,* ed. Kwame Arhin (Accra: Sedco Publications, 1991): 27-54.

[16] Ørnulf Gulbrandsen, *The State and the Social: State Formation in Botswana and its Precolonial and Colonial Genealogies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

[17] Ibid, 9.

authority of the nation-state. Gulbrandsen thus agreed with Pierre Englebert that "the quality of leadership and the construction of state capacity in Botswana are directly related to the embeddedness of its postcolonial state into precolonial patterns of political authority."[18] While politicians opted to adapt the institution to the needs of modern governance, they stripped it of any concrete political power. Chiefs in Central Africa are still barred from active politics. So only the material culture of the institution remained relevant to the modern state.

The other approach to understanding postcolonial chieftaincy is the "marginalized" school. This approach holds that postcolonial political institutions and arrangements demoted chiefs politically. O.M Laleye and Victor Ayeni suggest that the postcolonial state deprived chiefs of influence through democratization of institutions like the local councils, national legislatures, and through the grant of universal suffrage. They argued that traditional kingship has remained visible but not vibrant in the postcolonial era.[19] Chieftaincy came to negotiate with and through new institutions and people in order to remain relevant. This was because of the negligence it suffered at the hands of modern institutions of power and interest. These institutions include civil and public service institutions, educated elites, and the media. In negotiating its survival with these institutions, chieftaincy employed innovative approaches like clientelism, education, propaganda, and lobby. In fact, governments have counted chiefs as another segment of society with the same defined interests as all other interest groups. The state now use chiefs for rural mobilization in public and health education, campaigns against bad cultural practices, and for other policy purposes.

However, politicians have largely avoided furnishing chiefs any political agency. The excessive authority of the postcolonial state with its use of new institutions for governance has made chieftaincy less desirable than was the case during colonial rule. The army, civil service, public service, and judicial services have emerged to provide means for modern states to exercise suzerainty over people without any need for intermediaries like chiefs. All these have worked to make politicians less needful of chiefs. In some instances, state officials are hostile to chiefs. The Emir of Kano and the Oni of Ife in 1984 discovered this when the Nigerian government banned them from traveling for six months because they travelled to Israel at a time the Nigerian and Israeli states were in a diplomatic row. This new reality had put chiefs in a dilemma because they must tread cautiously. For this reason, Laleye and Ayeni said that chieftaincy in the postcolonial society is one in which "traditional rulership is locked into the modern setup. It cannot avoid politics and yet politics is no good to or for it."[20] Negligence, relegation, and occasionally hostility has been the lot of the chief in postcolonial Africa, so says Laleye and Ayeni.

More recently, Nana Dr. S.K.B Asante, a chief from Ghana, analyzed the chief-state relations in his home country as a chief and scholar. Nana Asante explained that the modern chief has been marginalized from mainstream governance despite performing community development roles like settling disputes, supporting improvements in education, fostering social cohesion, and furthering cultural welfare.[21] The postcolonial state denied chiefs judicial, executive and political power or a share in it. Chiefs, at their personal level, are not financially endowed to provide for the welfare of their people in ways that the modern state can. His concerns are representative of the larger issue of institutional negligence in Africa. Such negligence occurs despite the fact that the new nation-states cannot hope to exercise absolute suzerainty in rural, remote areas. In these far off

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[18] Pierre Englebert, *State Legitimacy and Development in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 107.

[19] O. M Laleye, and Victor Ayeni, "On the Politics of Traditional Rulership," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 6, no. 4 (1993): 555-571.

[20] Ibid, 569.

[21] S.K.B Asante, "Chieftaincy, Non-partisan Good Governance and Development in Ghana's Modern Democracy," in *Reclaiming the Human Sciences and Humanities through African Perspectives*, vol. 1., eds. Helen Lauer and Kofi Anyidoho (Accra: African Books Collective, 2012), 1096-1115.

places, government capacity for enforcement weakens because communities are farther and sometimes inaccessible to state institutions. Chiefs become the only intermediaries for government in such situations.

Explaining this, Nana Asante identified two worlds in the new nation-state. The first world is one with an educated and rich populace. This is usually urban and possesses adequate infrastructure. Chiefs have little place in the first world. The second world is one where people possess less education and finances, less infrastructure, and are rural in outlook with maximal chiefly authority and involvement in everyday life. Nana Asante reasoned that the modern state has eliminated chiefs from active politics, but they are needed in the second world for "crucial leadership." However, in this second world, financial and political limitations hamper chiefs' ability to provide the needed leadership. The issue of resource dearth raised by Asante is very significant. The lack of resources compel many chiefs to resort to patronage in an effort to exploit politicians for material and financial gains. They also lobby politicians for infrastructural development. This can compromise their political neutrality. He also laments situations where politicians use state resources to provide luxuries for powerful chiefs to gain electoral favors because of the influence they hold in rural areas. This has been detrimental to the development of certain areas because self-seeking chiefs have enriched themselves at the expense of the people.

Lastly, Rijk van Dijk looked at the diffused nature of power in postcolonial Africa between chiefs and the modern state. He observed that managing chieftaincy was a matter of policy for postcolonial governments.[22] Though the idea of sovereignty became divided and diffused between the new nation-states and earlier units like chiefs and other markers of ethnicity, the state's possession of coercive tools and financial power made it possible to override all other competitors. Also new national leaders worked to gain loyalty from citizens through the creation and use of national symbols. These symbols, which were emblems of chieftaincy, became markers of state power and legitimized individuals' patriotism towards the state. Rijk van Dijk further argued that such legitimization helped politicians appropriate greater power using the authority of the state. However, they tended to do so at the expense of chiefs. Gradually chiefs were marginalized into a pale shadow of their former selves.

Rijk van Dijk noted, for instance, that politicians assumed the agency to determine the legitimacy of chiefs in the postcolonial era through legal and political confirmations. He drew attention to the fact that in Ghana, for instance, structures and systems have been created to accommodate and attend to the peculiarities of chieftaincy. These solutions have only served to give the state even greater agency over chiefs because the state funds and thus, covertly controls the undertakings of chiefs in such bodies like the National House of Chiefs. But then again, in most states, he argued, this power over chiefs by politicians led to a relegation of the institution through the denial of economic and other forms of power. He added that the "right of choice" and "ability" assumed by postcolonial governments through politics furthered the vulnerability of chiefs at the hands of politicians. Chieftaincy consequently lost any active role and relevance in modern governance. It has therefore become a marginalized institution.

Overall, chieftaincy in the years after Africa regained independence has had limited political impact. Even in remote areas, governmental authority is still visible due to the efficient use of media and the availability of new, improved means of transport and communication. All these elements of modernity have made chieftaincy redundant as a governance mechanism and proxy for central authority.

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[22] Rijk van Dijk, *African Chieftaincy in a New Socio-political Landscape* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag Münster, 1999).

Conclusion

Traditional authority in Africa was as active in the precolonial era as any form of government anywhere in the world. Later, chieftaincy aided in guaranteeing the extension of colonial administrative control to every nook and cranny of the continent. However, the currents of modernity and political change eventually limited its role in politics. Its place in the postcolonial era became largely cultural and social—a means to highlight the distinct indigenous material and intellectual traditions of a nation. The historiographical tradition moved from seeing chieftaincy as an active participant in colonial governance to one with limited space in postcolonial states. The prohibition of chiefs from active politics will be the key feature to understanding the institution in the next few years. As chiefs become increasingly apolitical, scholarship will move towards understanding the moral leadership and spiritual sway of their authority in the modern states.