

Should Christians Participate in or Accept Traditional Chieftaincy Title?

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INTRODUCTION

African societies have long-standing traditions that are deeply rooted in religion, culture, and governance. One of the most enduring institutions is the Traditional Chieftaincy system, which plays a significant role in the leadership and organization of many African communities. This institution is often intertwined with African Traditional Religions (ATR), which attribute spiritual and ancestral authority to traditional rulers. Consequently, the question arises whether Christians who often renounce traditional religious practices upon conversion should accept or participate in traditional chieftaincy titles.

This issue is not only a matter of cultural identity but also theological integrity. The complexity arises because chieftaincy, while largely cultural and administrative today, is historically and symbolically tied to religious rituals, ancestral worship, and indigenous spiritual beliefs. According to Olupona, “chieftaincy in many African societies functions as a bridge between the spiritual and the material world, where the chief is seen not only as a political leader but also as a spiritual mediator”.⁷¹ This spiritual dimension of traditional leadership can create a dilemma for Christians who are called to exclusive devotion to God through Jesus Christ. This research seeks to examine the compatibility or incompatibility of Christianity with the acceptance of traditional chieftaincy titles. It aims to explore

⁷¹ Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 92.

both theological and cultural viewpoints, considering historical developments, biblical principles, and current debates within the African Christian community.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL CHIEFTAINCY IN AFRICA

The institution of chieftaincy has deep historical roots in Africa and predates colonialism by centuries. Traditional chieftaincy emerged as a means of organizing communities, maintaining law and order, and administering justice. Chiefs were often seen as custodians of the land, culture, and religion of their people. In many societies, chieftaincy titles were hereditary and accompanied by sacred rituals and ancestral recognition.

Chieftaincy was not merely a political role it was deeply spiritual. In most traditional African societies, the chief served as a spiritual intermediary between the people and the ancestors or deities. This dual political-spiritual role gave the chieftaincy institution a unique place in the social fabric of African communities. As *Wiredu* observes, “the authority of a traditional chief was legitimized not just by lineage, but also by his ritual connection to the spirits and ancestors of the land”.⁷² During the colonial period, European powers often exploited the traditional leadership structure by incorporating chiefs into the colonial administration, a system often referred to as indirect rule. This had a dual effect: it preserved the chieftaincy institution but also redefined its role within new political frameworks. As a result, chiefs were often caught between traditional expectations and colonial responsibilities, a situation that continued into post-colonial governance.

Today, while many chieftaincy titles have become largely ceremonial or administrative, the historical connection to religious and cultural practices remains. The process of enstoolment or installation often includes rituals that may

⁷² Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 48.

conflict with Christian beliefs, such as libation pouring, ancestral invocations, or initiation ceremonies involving traditional priests. This raises significant questions about whether Christians can participate in such roles without compromising their faith. Understanding the historical role and transformation of chieftaincy is essential in evaluating the contemporary dilemma faced by Christians. While the institution itself may have evolved, its spiritual and cultural foundations continue to influence its practice and perception.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP

Christian theology presents a distinct understanding of leadership and authority, rooted in the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. Authority, in the Christian context, is often seen as a form of service rather than domination. Christ himself emphasized servant-leadership when He declared, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26, NIV). This principle radically differs from some traditional African views of leadership, where authority may be tied to ancestral spirits, sacred power, or divine kingship. Christian theology also teaches that all legitimate authority ultimately comes from God. The Apostle Paul, writing in *Romans 13:1*, asserts, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” However, this passage has often been interpreted to refer primarily to civil authority rather than spiritual or ritual-based leadership systems. The challenge for Christians arises when traditional authority roles are infused with spiritual elements that contradict biblical teachings, such as ancestral worship, divination, or ritual sacrifices.

Leadership in the Bible is consistently portrayed as accountable to God, and leaders are expected to uphold moral integrity and spiritual fidelity. Stott explains, “Biblical leadership is not about power or prestige; it is about responsibility, humility, and

obedience to God's revealed will".⁷³ Therefore, any leadership position including traditional chieftaincy must be evaluated through the lens of Scripture to determine whether it aligns with or contradicts the character and mission of Christian leadership.

Furthermore, some scholars argue that Christians must exercise discernment when engaging with cultural structures. While culture is not inherently evil, it must be redeemed and transformed by the gospel. Hence, a chieftaincy title that requires participation in rituals incompatible with Christian beliefs may represent a compromise of one's faith. Others suggest that Christians can accept such titles if they clearly redefine their roles in a way that excludes unbiblical practices, using the position as a platform for moral and spiritual influence. Ultimately, the theological question is not just whether a Christian can become a chief, but under what conditions and with what implications for faith and witness.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS AND THEIR CONNECTION TO CHIEFTAINCY

African Traditional Religions (ATRs) are deeply interwoven with the political and social structures of many African societies, and one of the most prominent areas where this integration is evident is in the institution of chieftaincy. In traditional settings, the role of a chief goes far beyond administrative or civil functions; it often includes spiritual responsibilities that are inherited and ritually conferred. These spiritual dimensions of chieftaincy create a complex intersection between governance, culture, and religion that poses challenges for Christians. In many African societies, the process of installing a chief involves rituals rooted in ATR. These may include libation pouring to ancestors, invocation of deities, ceremonial cleansing, and oaths taken before traditional gods. These

⁷³ John. Stott, *Calling Christian Leaders: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 75.

practices are not merely symbolic; they are believed to invoke spiritual powers and establish a sacred bond between the chief, the ancestors, and the community. Mbiti, a leading African theologian, notes, “A chief or king is a religious as well as a political leader; he is often the link between the living and the ancestors, presiding over religious ceremonies and maintaining cosmic order”.⁷⁴

Such beliefs present a theological conflict for Christians, who affirm that only God, through Jesus Christ, should be worshipped and consulted for guidance. The Ten Commandments explicitly forbid the worship of other gods or the making of offerings to them (Exodus 20:3-5). Participation in ATR rituals, therefore, may be viewed as incompatible with Christian doctrine. Moreover, many of these rites are designed to consecrate the chief’s role in a way that ties his leadership to spiritual forces outside of the Christian worldview. Despite these concerns, some argue that not all chieftaincy roles are uniformly religious. In modern times, especially in urban areas, the chieftaincy institution has been redefined in some contexts as more cultural or administrative. However, the underlying traditional expectations often remain. A chief may still be expected to attend and officiate traditional festivals, perform rituals, or uphold community customs that contradict Christian teachings.

For a Christian, then, the issue is not only about accepting a title but also about the spiritual obligations and cultural symbolism that come with it. Discerning whether participation compromises one’s Christian witness is essential. Where chieftaincy remains deeply rooted in ATR, acceptance of such titles by Christians may lead to syncretism or a dilution of biblical truth.

⁷⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational Books, 1990), 110.

CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH AFRICAN TRADITIONS: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The relationship between Christianity and African traditional institutions including chieftaincy has been complex and evolving since the arrival of Christianity on the continent. Early Christian missionaries, particularly during the colonial period, often took a hostile stance toward African Traditional Religions (ATRs), viewing them as pagan and incompatible with Christian faith. This stance led to the rejection of many traditional customs, including chieftaincy roles that were intertwined with religious practices.

However, the reality on the ground was more nuanced. While some Christian converts completely abandoned traditional roles and rituals, others attempted to navigate both worlds. Certain traditional leaders who converted to Christianity sought ways to adapt their leadership style to align with Christian values. In some cases, they redefined the spiritual elements of their office or delegated ritual responsibilities to others, while focusing on moral leadership and development. Sanneh, observed that “African Christians often worked to preserve aspects of their cultural identity, including chieftaincy, while resisting religious elements they viewed as incompatible with the gospel”.⁷⁵ Throughout the 20th century, African theologians and church leaders increasingly called for a contextualized Christianity one that recognizes the cultural identity of African believers without compromising biblical truths. This movement, known as inculturation, argued that Christian faith should be expressed in culturally meaningful ways, including in how leadership and community organization are approached. In this context, some churches began to accept the participation of Christians in chieftaincy, provided that the individual refrained from

⁷⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 143.

participating in traditional rituals that conflict with Christian doctrine.

There are notable historical examples of Christian leaders who were also traditional rulers. For instance, in parts of Nigeria and Ghana, Christian chiefs served their communities while maintaining their religious convictions. However, these individuals often faced criticism from both traditionalists (for rejecting ancestral rites) and some Christians (for accepting a title rooted in non-Christian heritage). These tensions reflect the broader challenge of maintaining Christian faithfulness while participating in cultural institutions that carry spiritual significance. Ultimately, history shows that Christian engagement with traditional chieftaincy has varied widely depending on personal conviction, denominational teaching, and the specific cultural context. Some saw the institution as redeemable, others as incompatible. The debate continues in contemporary Africa, particularly as chieftaincy roles evolve in modern society.

ETHICAL AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

The question of whether Christians should accept traditional chieftaincy titles is not only theological but also deeply ethical and cultural. For many African communities, chieftaincy represents the pinnacle of honor, responsibility, and cultural identity. Chiefs are expected to uphold customs, maintain peace, and serve as cultural symbols of continuity. However, for Christians, the ethical dilemma arises when cultural expectations include participation in traditional religious rituals that may contradict biblical teachings. From an ethical standpoint, one key concern is the risk of syncretism the blending of incompatible religious beliefs. Christianity calls for exclusive devotion to God through Christ (Matthew 4:10), and involvement in chieftaincy rites, which may include libations to ancestors, oath-taking before deities, or ritual sacrifices, can blur the line between cultural expression and spiritual compromise. Martey, an African theologian, argues that “while

culture is a gift from God, not every cultural practice can be accepted without critical evaluation from a Christian ethical standpoint”.⁷⁶

On the other hand, the cultural implications of rejecting a chieftaincy title can also be significant. In many African societies, refusal to accept such a role especially when one is next in line can be seen as a betrayal of one’s family, heritage, or community. This may lead to social tension, misunderstanding, or accusations of alienation from one’s roots. For African Christians, particularly those in leadership positions, the pressure to uphold cultural obligations while maintaining a distinct Christian identity can create inner conflict and external judgment.

There are also broader social benefits to Christian participation in chieftaincy. Some argue that when Christians accept these titles with a commitment to biblical ethics and refuse to participate in non-Christian rituals, they can become instruments of moral reform within their communities. They may influence the transformation of certain traditional practices, promote peace, and integrate biblical values into the leadership structure. However, this must be approached with discernment. Acceptance of the title must be accompanied by clear boundaries publicly and privately about what is acceptable for a Christian to practice. The Christian leader must be prepared to forgo any aspect of the title that demands allegiance to spiritual forces or rituals outside of the Christian faith. This requires spiritual maturity, communal understanding, and often the support of the local church body.

In sum, Christians must weigh the ethical implications of accepting traditional titles against the cultural responsibilities and potential influence such a role brings. The decision should be guided by Scripture, prayer, and community accountability.

⁷⁶ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 61.

CONCLUSION

The issue of whether Christians should participate in or accept traditional chieftaincy titles is complex, touching on theology, ethics, history, and cultural identity. From the preceding discussion, it is clear that the chieftaincy institution in Africa is not purely a political office but one with deep religious roots, many of which stem from African Traditional Religions (ATRs). These roots often include spiritual rituals, ancestral veneration, and symbolic acts that may contradict Christian doctrine and practice. Christian theology upholds the authority of Scripture and calls for exclusive devotion to God. In light of this, any leadership role that demands participation in rituals invoking spirits or ancestral deities poses a serious theological concern. Kato, a pioneer in African evangelical theology, firmly stated, “Syncretism is the greatest threat to Christianity in Africa. The moment Christ is no longer exclusive, He becomes unnecessary”.⁷⁷ His warning reminds us that Christian identity must be guarded, especially in areas where traditional practices can subtly compromise biblical truth.

Sources

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⁷⁷ Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 32.