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**Akoko Modern Political Elite and Decolonisation
of Akokoland: A Study in Socio-cultural Freedom
and Identity, 1940-1960**

Olusanya Faboyede
Adekunle Ajasin University

Abstract

There is a dearth of historical studies on Akoko modern political elite, which can yield insights into the political history of Akoko people between 1940 and 1960. This paper attempts to fill the vacuum by examining how local particularism divided the Akoko modern political elites in their quest for power supremacy and domination during the British colonial period. Agitations by Akoko modern political elite arose from political neglect and cultural imperialism. The study concludes that despite ideological differences among some Akoko groups, enlightenment through acquisition of formal education and the formation of political parties through township unions grew the quest for Akoko development among the Akoko modern elite groups.

Keywords: modern, political elite, decolonisation, socio-cultural, identity

Olusanya Faboyede, PhD.
Department of History and International Studies
Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria
Phone: +234 8034420151; E-mail: oaboyedee@gmail.com

Introduction and Conceptual Clarification

A number of studies (such as Trager 2001, Adeboye 1996, Crowder & Ikime 1970, Dlakwa n.d., Beinart 1985, and Faller 1955) have affirmed the importance of traditional institutions in socio-cultural and political lives of African societies, Akokoland inclusive. As the British colonialists sought to establish colonial rule, they later felt that such intention could not be achieved without recognising existing norms and values among Akoko communities. However, the inability of the British officials to integrate Akoko socio-cultural values into colonial administration influenced the modern political elite in Akokoland to struggle for decolonisation and socio-political freedom of towns and villages in the region.

This paper brings to the fore how Akoko modern political elite displayed the spirit of nationalism against the British cultural imperialism. It employs the narrative and analytical method of data analysis to underscore the impact of decolonisation in Akoko society and explain the relevance of the principle of *atunluse* (the progressives) as demonstrated in the formation of socio-cultural associations that later metamorphosed into new political parties in Akokoland. It also demonstrates how Akoko modern political elite resisted British colonial rule and how the resistance against colonial rule in Akokoland led to political activism and agitation for economic liberation. The decolonisation in Akoko society was an important singular factor that hampered the British rule in Akokoland.

The paper conceptualises Akoko modern political elite and decolonisation to guide its focus on the political activities of the elite in Akokoland. Though a worldwide phenomenon as Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2011) observed, decolonisation in this paper refers to resistance to foreign rule and imperialism. As a result of the aftermath of the British colonial rule in Akokoland, the people protested against colonialism with the intention of

eradicating political dominance. The Akoko modern political elite in this context refer to the politically literate, including literate traditional rulers and business men in Akoko communities.

The paper employs primary and secondary data sources. Primary source materials were obtained from archival documents and interviews with some important personalities that were considered to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the trend of political activities during the late colonial period. The word *atunluse* as used in the paper is a socio-cultural concept adopted as a symbol of good leadership among the non-literate people in Akokoland.

Traditions of Origin and Geographical Description of the Study Area

Traditions of origin of Akoko people are diverse and their grouping was based on dialectal speech (Beeley: 1934). On the name “Akoko”, (Akomolafe 1976:4-5) provided three explanations on its origin. However, most of the towns and villages linked their evolution to Kabba, Benin and Ile-Ife through direct or indirect migration to the present domain (Saba 2003: 6 - 8 and Faboyede 2013: 13-15). In response to contentious claims on Akoko background, Oginni (1973) claimed that Ile-Ife was looked upon by Yoruba people, including the peoples of Akokoland as ‘the origin of life’, that is, where the world was created (Oginni 1973:92). As part of the central argument of this paper, contrary to the historical argument that Ile-Ife was the centre of dispersal of Yoruba civilisation, this paper shall further reveal disunity among Akoko communities as earlier pointed out. Instead, it sees Ile-Ife as one of the centres of dispersals (Faboyede 2013: 15).

On the geographical description of the people and land in Akoko, many scholars have indeed presented different surveys

(Akintoye 1971:5, Adegbulu 2004:185-187, Olukoju 1983:77 & Olukoju 2003: viii). For instance, Olukoju claimed that Akoko was occupied by the Yoruba-speaking communities of present Akoko of Ondo State (Olukoju 2003: viii). The physical features of Akokoland comprise small rivers and streams, hills, circular plateau and fertile land that enabled farming, social and economic interactions (Olukoju 2003:144, Akomolafe 1976: 3). Akokoland is made up of independent forty-five towns and villages with linear patterns of settlement. The topography is densely forest land that allowed easy movement of people to practice trade on agricultural produce (Faboyede 2013: 9-10 and Akomolafe 1976:2-3).

Akoko Modern Political Elite: Socio-cultural Associations and the Emergence of Political Parties, 1940-1950

The participation of Akoko modern political elite in the decolonisation of Akoko reflected on the altered status of the traditional rulers (old elite) which opened the space for modern political elite to agitate for the development of Akoko towns and villages (Faboyede 2019: 52-53). The sudden change was attributed to yearnings for desirable development in Akokoland among the group of educated elite and political leaders - R. A. Olusa, D. K. Olumofin, I. A. Olukoju, N. G. Asanbe, and J. A. Adeniyi (Faboyede 2013:128)¹ - and the pace of Nigerian nationalism (Olukoju 2003: 200).

In the same vein, socio-cultural groups like Oka Youth Organisation, Supare Development Association (SDA), and Isua Progressive Society (IPS) were formed in the 1940s and 1950s among other reasons to agitate for the inclusion of the modern educated elite in colonial rule. The aim was to foster unity among the educated elite and the new breed politicians in Akoko communities (N. A. I. 1942 & 1949).

Socio-cultural associations in Akoko were more conservative than radical in their demands. The modern political

elite in the hinterland of Lagos were very radical as aptly described by Michael Crowder. He made a clear distinction of their political activities as a proto-nationalism that demanded for an increasing participation in the political processes and a fairer deal for Lagosians, and indeed Africans (Crowder 1971:407, Hodgkin 1951:707, Adeleye 1976:15, Coleman 1971: 98&178).

On this background, it is important to mention that acrimony among the modern political elite in Akoko posed a threat to unity during the early stage of the struggle to achieve their main aim which was decolonisation. In effect, Akoko modern political elite began to cause violence among themselves in order to be individually accommodated by the British colonial officials. Pressure groups were more prominent in major towns such as Ikare, Oka, Ogbagi and Arigidi. Outlying communities were marginally involved in the decolonisation processes due to gradual and uneven expansion of formal education (Faboyede 2013:127-128). The Akoko modern political elite were merely bound by the ties of socio-cultural identity and sub-ethnic dispositions. Adesina (2004:1) observed the inherent danger in sub-ethnic identity on socio-economic development and strained relationship, which are bedrock of growth and development.

At a stage, there was no common bargain among the political class in Akokoland. Different socio-cultural groups of political class in each town and village pursued divergent interests to facilitate infrastructural development in their areas. This was indeed a factor that promoted underdevelopment in Akokoland. Similarly, the structure of kinship that formed the basis of their organisation was turned to instrument of ideological differences. In fact, the problems that further emanated from the seed of non-centralised political institutions and the split of towns and villages into confederacy of a large number of politically

independent units (Akomolafe 1976:13) became the bane of growth in Akokoland during the revival period.

In spite of the differences, however, socio-cultural associations called *ẹgbẹ* were restructured and used as a platform to push for decolonisation towards the transformation of towns and villages in Akokoland. For example, Isua Progressive Society was formed with the aim of facilitating social amenities in the markets for trade and industrial expansion. The association supported the relocation of *Ogbogbo* market from Isua-Ile to *Afin* (palace) quarter in Isua-Oke as a way of integrating Isua-Ile, Ahinmi and Oyara quarters. (N.A.I:1949). Oka Improvement Society (OIS) was launched in 1945 at Oka-Akoko for the purpose of agitating for the building of hospitals for better health services delivery; and establishment of secondary schools for every adolescent to acquire western education. There was also the agitation for provision of adequate supply of pipe-borne water and electricity and the call for Oka roads to be tarred and linked to the Isua major road for easy transportation of kolanuts and other farm produce from Ikare, Akungba, Arigidi, Okeagbe, Supare, Omuo, and Irun to Kukuruku and Ebiraland (N.A.I. 1945).

Politically, things began to change as the colonial policy widened the representation of the interests of socio-political groups in Akokoland. Bureaucrats, businessmen and professionals in public services also took profound interests in advancing the development of Akoko communities. Between 1940s and 1950s, the participation of Akoko indigenes at the major policy-making levels and assumption of positions of responsibilities increased. Fellows like D. I. Bada (B.A. and Dip. Ed.) of Ikare and J. Akande (B. A.) of Arigidi went abroad to obtain university degrees while J. L. Akeredolu (B.D. TH.) of Ikare and E. O. Bola (B.A. and Dip. Ed) of Oba were the first set of educated elite that obtained University degrees to influence the

growth of Akokoland (Akeredolu 1986: 75 and Faboyede 2013: 126-127).

The socio-cultural associations became political movements which designed their programmes to promote the spirit of brotherhood and improve on the provision of public amenities. As a result, the principles of associations were springboards to political parties' manifestoes. The Akoko Political Party (APP) and Oka People's Party (OPP) were established in 1950. These were followed by Akoko Freedom Party (AFP), which was inaugurated in Irun in 1954 (Faboyede 2013: 147). The political campaign was more formidable with the formation of Action Group (AG) at Owo in 1951 and National Council for Nigerian and Cameroun (NCNC). The launch of the two political parties opened a new chapter in the political transformation of Akokoland and its people as the pressure groups moved with the tide of politics in Lagos and Ibadan (*The Nation* 2013: 44).

The popularity of growing political parties increased the participation of the likes of young vibrant political elite such as R. A. Olusa, D. K. Olumofin, I. A. Olukoju, N. G. Asanbe, J. A. Adeniyi (Faboyede 2013:128 & Omiyeniyi Interview in 2018), among others to translate the acquisition of formal education into the principle of *atunluse* (the progressives) as the main vehicle of Akoko politics by staging protests against the colonial government. In a related development, the Akoko modern political elite launched public protests and campaigns through local newspapers like *The Daily Service* (1938-1960), *Sunday Express* (1959), *Sunday Times* (1953), *The Nigerian Weekly Record* (1951), and *The Nigerian Citizens* (1948). Also, the newspapers publicised and displayed Akoko political parties' manifestoes and jingles. The newspapers were used for public enlightenment on the danger inherent in the British colonial rule on Akoko society. Thus, the newspapers became the

mouthpiece of Akoko people in condemning colonial policies, especially the colonial socio-economic policy on taxation (Faboyede 2019:55-56).

Decolonisation: Change and Continuity in Akokoland, 1950-1960

The rise of educated traditional rulers like *Olukare* of Ikare, *Oba* Amusa Momoh III, and *Olubaka* of Okaland, *Oba* Abraham Olapegbon Omowa marked a change in the British system of Indirect Rule in Akokoland. These traditional rulers acquired informal education and professional degrees. Literate traditional rulers, who are products of western education, saw themselves as contestants for power and influence. The pressure and high demand mounted on the British colonial administrators became unbearable due to the changing status of educated traditional kings and the practice of the philosophy of *igbákejì òrìṣà* (second-in-command to god) which depicts the sacredness of the kings that usually defied imagination (Crowder & Ikime 1970: 214).

The most noticeable change during the decolonisation in Akokoland can be traced to political structures. The radical alteration in the administrative and judicial re-organisation was in line with the indigenous judicial system of administration. It entailed the application of a combination of the native law and customs and the British legal practice (Faboyede 2013:54). The communal duties of clearing the market, keeping the bush paths, and repairing the houses of village Heads was taken over through direct labour of the worker of Public Works Division. Recreational services were provided by building hotels, Saw Mills, and post-offices to improve socio-economic activities in Akokoland.

Dispensation of justice was one of the principal tests of the smooth running of the machinery of the Native

Administration. The announcement of the Federation Union of Native Administration (FUNA) on July 7, 1942 that an educated person should be the President of the Native court aggrieved the king (*Oba*)-in-council (Cole 1975: 152-153 & Faboyede 2013:153). At the annual meeting, *pelupelu* (Council meetings of the recognised *Oba* in Akokoland) held between 1945 and 1947, the sacred status of the kings that had been relegated with the participation of the educated elites in colonial rule was reviewed and discussed. The indigenous system of administration was replaced with the British judicial system of justice. However, to some extent, the decision was rejected on the grounds that the pre-colonial judicial system should be honoured. Subsequently, the kings in Akokoland did not give their support to such re-arrangement (Memorandum 7 & 8 and Arifalo 1979:425-426).

By this development, under the Native Administration, the sacred status of the traditional institutions was displaced as the modern political elites began to operate at different levels with diverse perceptions. Learning from A. Y. Yansane's observation, it can be viewed that domestication is making imported version of modernity to be more relevant to the society where the kings mainly became second fiddle in grassroots' administration (Yansane 1980:83). His view on the position of the kings further showed the danger of the involvement of traditional institutions in partisan politics. In spite of being biased, from the perspective of the native law and customs, it was forbidden for the monarch to participate in active politics (Partridge 1973: 22). Thus, the involvement of the kings, particularly the educated rulers in partisan politics and their concession to building of schools in Akoko towns and villages also prevailed on the change and socio-economic development, which increased the number of youths admitted into educational institutions. The kings in Akoko communities, for example, *Olukare* of Ikare, *Oba* Adu Momoh II; *Olubaka* of Okaland, *Oba*

Abraham Olapegbon Omowa; and the *Zaki* of Arigidi *Oba* Asunmo Olanipekun II contributed to the establishment and growth of post-primary schools in Akoko District (*National Concord* 1984: 5 & Animasaun n.p: n.d.). Victory College Ikare was built in 1947 to appreciate the role of education on the socio-economic activities and the political progress of Akoko communities (Akeredolu 1986: 66-67). Then, the privilege of going to school rejuvenated the political ambition and idea of young articulate intellectuals to be fitted into the positive exercise of decolonisation of Akoko community. By 1960, J. A. Adeniyi (B.A. 1957) and D. O. Kolawole had returned from Fourah Bay College. While Honorable I. A. Olukoju (MP) was elected in 1960; his opponent, Mr. Daodu, was a graduate; just as Honourable N. G. Asanbe (MP), J. O. Jacobs, L. O. Omojola (Second World War ex-serviceman), Mr. Obanla, Mr. Alareyo, J. A. Adeniyi, J. A. Asanbe, Olu Emidun, Amuda Awoyemi, F. J. Ayegbusi, and J. K. Yahaya actively participated in Akoko politics as led by the Action Group leader, R. A. Olusa from Akunnu/Ajowa axis, who mobilised the young graduates to embrace politics (Faboyede 2013:147 & Babadele² 2019 Interview).

Notwithstanding, the political mobilisation by the educated elites influenced politics in Akokoland and, with the formation of different political parties, the politicians had options to join any political party of their choice (*The Headlines* 1991: 6 & Wann 21).

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the role of the modern political elite in transforming Akokoland arose out of political consciousness with the emergence of political parties. It was understandable that development could be favourably achieved due to symbiotic relationship among different groups of people in a particular place

(Munoz 1981: 20); as such, decolonisation in Akokoland was a gradual process and not an event. The paper reflected on the role of Akoko modern political elite in advancing socio-political and infrastructural development of Akokoland to a considerable level; and showed that it was an incident that marked the beginning of a transition. The paper, therefore, as an exposition of the relevance of socio-cultural associations and the emergence of political parties on the remaking of Akoko communities, concluded that the contributions of the Akoko modern political elite in socio-political activities enabled the people of Akokoland and eventually freed them from British political domination and cultural imperialism.

Notes

¹. see also the interview of Omiyeni, M. Adebukola, an active politician. She was interviewed on 04-07-2018 at No. 14, Ode Arikasen, Awolowo Road, Òbà-Akoko.

². Babadele, F. is a retired Principal and former Majority Leader of Ondo State House of Assembly. He was interviewed on 10-07-2019 at No. 87, Bababdele's Compound, Korowa Street, Ayegunḡ-Òka.

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