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The Politics of Power and Security in Traditional Space: Examining Contemporary Development in the Oke-Ogun Area of Oyo State

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Abstract

This study examines the politics of power and security within traditional settings, with a focus on contemporary developments in the Oke-Ogun area of Oyo State. It is anchored in the thesis that traditional rulers have retained significant influence in rural communities, particularly in areas where state presence remains limited. Oke-Ogun, as a largely rural zone with inadequate infrastructure and security coverage, provides a useful context for understanding this reality. The study explores how traditional institutions continue to shape local governance and community responses to insecurity. In many communities within Oke-Ogun, traditional rulers serve as key actors in conflict resolution, intelligence gathering, and maintaining social order. Their roles often complement and, at times, substitute for formal state structures that are either weak or absent. Using a historical and analytical approach, the study highlights how patterns of authority have evolved, while also showing the persistence of indigenous systems of control and legitimacy. It further considers how these rulers engage with modern security challenges such as banditry, communal disputes, and rural crime. The findings suggest that traditional rulers remain functionally relevant in ensuring stability in rural areas. Their responses to insecurity, therefore, deserve closer scholarly attention, especially in discussions on decentralised security and grassroots governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Traditional Rulers, Rural Security, Oke-Ogun, Local Governance

Introduction

There is a saying among the Yoruba people: *'Bí a báfẹ́ mọ̀ìtànènìyàn , kí a wòibitíwọ̀ntiwà'* — if one wants to understand the story of a people, one should look at where they have been. This axiom captures, in the most direct way, the intellectual task that this study undertakes. The Oke-Ogun area of Oyo State is

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not simply a geographic zone in north-western Nigeria. It's been considered the food basket of the state and interestingly a living archive of power struggles, migrations, inter-group negotiations, cultural assertions, and scanty government presence. To understand what is happening there today — the tension between traditional rulers and encroaching herders, the restive energy of young people who no longer have patience for customary protocol, and the creeping erosion of communal order has characterise societal development. Be that as it may, one must first understand how the area became what it is.

Oke-Ogun, which translates literally as 'above the Ogun River,' is a designation that covers a cluster of local government areas in the north-western corner of Oyo State. The cluster include Saki West, Saki East, Atisbo, Irepo, Olorunsogo, Iseyin, Itesiwaju, Kajola, Iwajowa, Oorelope, and Surulere, among others. The region shares borders with Kwara State to the north, Osun State to the east, and the Republic of Benin to the west. This border geography is imperative, has it made Oke-Ogun a corridor for migration, trade, and, in more recent times, for movements that carry security implications. Samuel Johnson, an Anglican clergy during the colonial period, in his foundational text*The History of the Yorubas*,[3] noted that the Yoruba people were never a homogenous bloc but rather a collection of sub-groups that shared language, cosmology, and cultural habits while maintaining distinctive political identities.[4] The communities of Oke-Ogun exemplify this observation precisely.

The area is historically Yoruba but carries within it traces of Nupe, Bariba, Fulani, and other groups that arrived over centuries of movement and settlement. This demographic layering is the foundation upon which any serious analysis of power and security in the zone must be built. Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, in their comprehensive survey *A History of Nigeria*, have argued that Nigerian identity, at every scale, local, regional, or national, is inseparable from the management of difference.[5] The communities of Oke-Ogun have been managing their differences for a very long time, and this management has not always been smooth.

The concept of 'traditional space' as used in this study deserves careful clarification. It does not mean a space frozen in time or impervious to change. Rather, it refers to the domain within which customary authority, represented chiefly by traditional rulers, their councils, and the normative frameworks they embody, is expected to operate. Within this space, the Oba (king), the Baale (community head), the Ologun (war chief), and their various subordinates have historically organised communal life, adjudicated disputes, mobilised labour, and provided protection. Ann O'Hear, in her work Power Relations in Nigeria: Ilorin Emirate and General History,[6] shows how traditional authority in Nigerian contexts is never merely ceremonial but involves real functions of

[3] Johnson, Samuel. *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*. London: Routledge, 1921.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] O'Hear, Ann. *Power Relations in Nigeria: Ilorin Emirate and General History.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997.

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resource allocation, social discipline, and symbolic legitimation.[7] The same is true, with local variations, for the traditional rulers of Oke-Ogun.

Politics, in the sense used here, is not restricted to electoral competition or party manoeuvring. It encompasses the broader struggle over authority — who has the right to make decisions, whose claims to land and resources are recognised, whose security matters, and how conflicts are adjudicated. Achille Mbembe's formulation of the African postcolony is instructive here: in postcolonial African societies, multiple registers of authority — state, traditional, religious, and informal — coexist in tension, producing what he calls 'commandement,' a compound form of power that is never cleanly one thing,[8] and Oke-Ogun exemplifies this complexity. Here, the formal structures of the Nigerian state — local government administrations, the Oyo State government, police, and the judiciary — share the political terrain with traditional institutions, religious organisations, and increasingly, non-state armed actors such as the Fulani herders whose activities have become the most visible source of insecurity in recent years.

The matter of security in Oke-Ogun has drawn national attention in recent years, but it has deep historical roots. From the earliest phases of Yoruba state formation, the communities of the north-western region were exposed to raiding and slave capture, particularly during the turbulent nineteenth century. The jihad of Usman dan Fodio, launched in 1804, and the subsequent expansion of the Sokoto Caliphate sent waves of disruption southward, destabilising Yoruba communities, including those in the upper reaches of the Ogun River corridor. Richard Lander and John Lander, who traversed the Niger area in the 1830s, recorded the atmosphere of fear and insecurity that pervaded communities near the frontiers of the old Oyo Empire as it collapsed. This historical memory of vulnerability is not irrelevant to the contemporary situation. It forms part of the cultural vocabulary through which communities in Oke-Ogun interpret the present threat from armed herders.

It is also necessary to situate this study within the broader historiography of traditional authority in Nigeria. From Obaro Ikime's *The Fall of Nigeria*[9] to Olufemi Vaughan's Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics, 1890s–1990s,[10] scholars have charted the transformation of chieftaincy from an autonomous governing institution to a largely ceremonial appendage of the colonial and postcolonial state. Yet, as Vaughan convincingly argues, this transformation was never complete. Traditional rulers retained influence in rural communities, especially where state presence was thin. In Oke-Ogun, a predominantly rural zone with limited state infrastructure, traditional rulers have remained functionally significant. Their responses to insecurity, therefore,

[7] O'Hear, Ann. *Power Relations in Nigeria: Ilorin Emirate and General History.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997.
[8] Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Pp. 24-35
[9] Ikime, Obaro. *The Fall of Nigeria*: The British Conquest. London: Heinemann, 1977.
[10] Vaughan, Olufemi. *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics, 1890s–1990s.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2000.

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deserve serious historical and analytical attention. This study undertakes that task.

Migration, Settlement, and the Formation of Authority in Oke-Ogun

Any account of power in Oke-Ogun must begin with the land. Different ecological zones charcterise the region, namely the Guinea savanna in the north, transitioning to forest-savanna fringe in the south,which made it productive for both farming and animal husbandry. This ecological character attracted settlers from multiple directions and across long periods of time. The original Yoruba settlers of the area established communities organised around farming, and their political structures reflected the agricultural rhythms of communal life. Lineage heads, age-grade associations, and the institution of the Oba or Baale governed these communities. The Oba was not merely a political figure; he was the embodiment of the community's relationship with the land, the ancestors, and the divine. His authority was therefore sacral as well as political.

The Oyo Empire, which dominated Yoruba political history from roughly the fourteenth century to its collapse in the early nineteenth century, cast a long shadow over the communities of Oke-Ogun. Several towns in the area, including Saki, Igboho, and Kishi, were politically connected to the old Oyo metropolis through systems of tribute, military alliance, and dynastic ties. Robin Law's magisterial study The Oyo Empire, c. 1600–1836,[11] documents how the empire extended its reach into outlying territories through a combination of military power and diplomatic coercion. Towns in the Oke-Ogun zone that fell within this sphere of influence were expected to provide soldiers, tribute, and political loyalty to the Alafin at Oyo-Ile.

This political incorporation had dual consequences. On one hand, it gave communities in Oke-Ogun a measure of military protection and access to the economic networks of the empire. On the other hand, it subordinated local authority to imperial command, creating hierarchies of power that persisted long after the empire's collapse. When the Oyo Empire fell apart in the early nineteenth century, precipitated by internal revolts, the Fulani jihad, and the breakdown of military cohesion, the communities of Oke-Ogun were left in a dangerous security vacuum. The historian Biodun Adediran, in Frontier Yoruba States in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,[12] has revealed how communities on the frontier of the old empire developed particular strategies of resilience, namely military self-organisation, strategic alliances, and the fortification of towns that speak directly to the security concerns of the present.
The post-Oyo period of the nineteenth century was marked by intense migration. People moved in large numbers, fleeing violence, seeking new farmland, or following trade routes. The Oke-Ogun area received migrants from the collapsing Oyo heartland, from Bariba territories to the north, and from Nupe areas across the Niger. This demographic influx complicated the power

[11] Law, Robin. *The Oyo Empire, c. 1600–1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
[12] Adediran, Biodun. *Frontier Yoruba States in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.* Ife: University of Ife Press, 1984.

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structures of the host communities. Established Yoruba settlements had to negotiate the presence of strangers — some of whom came in peace and accepted subordinate status, and some of whom arrived in numbers sufficient to demand recognition and autonomy. J.A. Atanda's The New Oyo Empire,[13] which traces the reconstitution of Yoruba political authority after the collapse of old Oyo, is particularly useful for understanding how this period of displacement shaped the political geography of the entire region, including Oke-Ogun.

The arrival of the British colonial administration at the end of the nineteenth century added another layer of complexity to this already intricate political landscape. The colonial policy of Indirect Rule, formalised by Lord Lugard and applied across Nigeria, co-opted traditional rulers into the machinery of colonial governance. In Yorubaland, this produced what Obafemi Awolowo described as 'Native Authorities,'that is, administrative units built around recognised chiefs and Obas who collected taxes, organised labour, and maintained order on behalf of the colonial state. Kemi Rotimi's The Police in a Federal State: The Nigerian Experience[14] documents how the colonial administration gradually shifted the responsibility for internal security away from traditional institutions toward a centralised police force, thereby weakening the traditional security apparatus that had sustained communities for centuries.

In Oke-Ogun, the colonial encounter reinforced some existing hierarchies and disrupted others. Communities with well-established chiefs who collaborated with the British gained resources and formal recognition. Communities without prominent chiefs, or whose chiefs resisted colonial authority, were often absorbed into larger administrative units under outside authority. The Yoruba institution of the 'Parakoyi,' the guild of long-distance traders who had significant political influence in many towns, declined under colonial economic reorganisation. Samuel Akintoye's *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland, 1840–1893,*[15] captures how the colonial reorganisation of political authority across the Yoruba hinterland fundamentally altered the balance of power in towns like those of Oke-Ogun.

The post-independence period brought further restructuring. The creation of regions, states, and local government areas reconfigured administrative boundaries and produced new centres of resource distribution. Oke-Ogun, as part of the old Western Region and later Oyo State, found itself at the margins of state power, namely geographically peripheral, economically underserved, and politically dependent on external patronage for development resources. This marginalisation is crucial for understanding why traditional rulers in the area carry a heavier weight of communal expectation than their counterparts in more urbanised, state-present environments. When the police post is

[13] Atanda, J. A. *The New Oyo Empire: Indirect Rule and Change in Western Nigeria, 1894–1934*. London: Longman, 1973.
[14] Rotimi, Kemi. *The Police in a Federal State: The Nigerian Experience*. Ibadan: College Press, 2001.
[15] Akintoye, Samuel Adesanya. *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland, 1840–1893.* London: Longman, 1971.

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understaffed, when the local government office is many kilometres away, and when the courts are inaccessible to poor farmers, it is the Oba who is expected to fill the gap.

The agricultural economy of Oke-Ogun deserves separate attention. The area is one of the major food-producing zones in south-western Nigeria. Yams, cassava, sorghum, maize, groundnut, and cotton have been cultivated there for generations. The region also sustained significant cattle rearing, and the relationship between Yoruba farmers and Fulani herders was, for much of its history, a functional if unequal symbiosis. Herders brought cattle to the area seasonally, negotiating with farmers for grazing access, and this arrangement was managed through informal institutions that the traditional authorities helped to sustain. Adebayo Oladele's research on agrarian change in Oyo State has documented how this relationship began to break down in the 1970s and 1980s as ecological changes,[16] particularly increasing aridity in the north, pushed larger herds southward and intensified pressure on farmland.

Herdsmen Conflicts, Youth Restiveness, and the Limits of Traditional Authority

The contemporary security crisis in Oke-Ogun did not emerge overnight. It is the product of converging pressures that have built up over decades, each layer adding to the explosive potential of the situation. The farmer-herdsman conflict is the most visible of these pressures, but it sits atop older tensions relating to land rights, ethnic identity, and the management of natural resources. The movement of Fulani pastoralists southward into the farming territories of Oke-Ogun intensified significantly from the 1990s onward. Climate change, land degradation in the Sahel, and population growth among both humans and cattle herds have combined to push more herders and their animals into territories that were previously the exclusive domain of sedentary farmers. Judith Scheele's work,*Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara*,[17] though focused on a different region, provides useful conceptual tools for understanding how pastoral migrations can transform local political economies in ways that existing institutions struggle to manage. In Oke-Ogun, the incursion of larger cattle herds into farmland produced recurrent crop destruction that eroded the livelihoods of farming households. Initial responses were informal; farmers and herders negotiated, sometimes through the intervention of traditional rulers, sometimes directly. But as incursions became more frequent and the economic stakes rose, the negotiations broke down.

What transformed the situation from a land-use dispute into a security crisis was the gradual armament of herders. Reports from the 1990s and 2000s documented that some Fulani herdsmen were carrying small arms, AK-47 rifles and similar weapons, ostensibly for protection against cattle rustlers. In communities where farmers could rely only on traditional tools and their age-

[16]Adebayo, Oladele O.*Agrarian Change in Oyo State: Ecological Shifts and Rural Transformation in Nigeria, 1970s–1980s.* Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1993
[17] Scheele, Judith. *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

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grade associations for protection, the asymmetry in arms capability was catastrophic. Attacks on farming communities, including crop destruction, livestock theft, and, in the most serious cases, physical assault and murder, became a regular feature of life in Oke-Ogun. Emmanuel Ojo and James Omotola's research on farmer-herdsman conflicts in Nigeria's middle belt and southwest provides empirical documentation of how this violence escalated and how it eroded trust between ethnic communities that had previously coexisted.[18]

The response of the formal state institutions was, by most accounts, inadequate. Police posts in rural Oke-Ogun were chronically underfunded, understaffed, and poorly equipped. Officers who investigated violent incidents involving well-connected herders often found their cases stymied by political interference. Danjibo Nathaniel Divine's research on rural insecurity in Nigeria has shown that the perceived impunity of armed herders in many communities across the southwest contributed directly to vigilante responses. Communities that felt abandoned by the state began to take security into their own hands.[19]

This is where the traditional rulers found themselves in an extraordinarily difficult position. They were expected, by virtue of their office, to protect their communities. Yet they lacked the legal authority to deploy force, the resources to arm their people, or the political clout to compel state action. What they had was legitimacy, the moral authority derived from their position as custodians of communal tradition and inter-group relationships. Some Obas attempted to leverage this legitimacy through diplomatic channels: inviting Fulani leaders to their palaces, facilitating peace talks, and sending delegations to government officials. Others used their traditional authority to mobilise community self-defence in ways that technically skirted legal boundaries.

The mobilisation of youth in the security response introduced another layer of tension. In Yoruba communities, young men have historically been organised into age-grades (egbe) that performed communal functions, including defence. The 'Odo' or masquerade institutions, the 'Agemo' societies, and various farming guilds all involved the structured deployment of young men's energy and solidarity for communal purposes. But these institutions depended on a framework of respect for traditional authority and communal norms. By the early twenty-first century, that framework was under severe strain.

The erosion of cultural deference to traditional institutions among young people in Oke-Ogun is partly a product of education; young people with secondary and tertiary qualifications are less willing to accept the unconditional authority claims of traditional rulers, and partly a product of economic frustration. Unemployment and underemployment among youth in rural Oyo State have been extensively documented. When young men have no formal economic stake in the community, the informal power structures that might

[18] Ojo, Emmanuel, and James Omotola. 'Understanding Farmer-Herdsman Conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt.' *Journal of Peace Studies* 8, no. 3 (2016): 21–45.
[19]Danjibo, Nathaniel Divine. 'Islamic Fundamentalism and Sectarian Violence: The Maitatsine and Boko Haram Crises in Northern Nigeria.' Paper presented at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 2009.

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otherwise channel their energy constructively have diminishing purchase. Wale Adebanwi's *Authority Stealing: Anti-Corruption War and Democratic Politics in Post-Military Nigeria*, though focused primarily on urban contexts, identifies processes of authority delegitimation that are equally relevant to rural settings like Oke-Ogun.[20]

The vigilante groups that emerged in several Oke-Ogun communities from the early 2000s were initially organised under the nominal supervision of traditional rulers. Groups like 'Oodua People's Congress' (OPC), which had originated as a pro-Yoruba political group in the late 1990s, began to assume *de facto* security functions in communities where state presence was weak. Richard Akinjide Olaniyan's edited volume *The Plight of the Displaced: Selected Issues on Internal Displacement in Nigeria* includes accounts from communities in north-western Oyo State where the line between community self-defence and vigilante violence became difficult to draw.[21] Traditional rulers who had initially sponsored these groups found themselves unable to control them. Young men who had armed themselves in the name of community protection could not easily be disarmed by Obas, who lacked the legal or physical means of enforcement.

The resulting situation was paradoxical. Traditional rulers were simultaneously more needed than ever because the formal state could not provide security and less able to deliver than ever because the instruments of enforcement that traditional authority had historically relied upon were either unavailable or beyond control. The Oba who called upon his age-grade associations to confront armed herders was potentially exposing young men to lethal danger. The Oba who counselled restraint in the face of ongoing attacks risked being seen as complicit with the oppressors. This dilemma between the duty to protect and the inability to do so effectively lies at the heart of the politics of power and security in Oke-Ogun.

It would be incomplete to discuss the security dimension without acknowledging the gendered aspects of the crisis. Women in Oke-Ogun, who constitute a significant portion of the agricultural labour force, were particularly vulnerable to farm attacks. Women farming in fields distant from the village centre faced the threat of assault with limited recourse. Amina Mama's work on gender and conflict in Africa reminds us that security crises of this kind are never gender-neutral: the bodies of women and the labour of women are disproportionately affected, yet women's voices in peace-making and security responses have historically been marginalised.[22] Traditional institutions in Oke-Ogun, like most African customary governance structures, were male-dominated, and the concerns of women farmers were not always adequately represented in the peace negotiations that traditional rulers conducted.

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[20] Adebanwi, Wale. *Authority Stealing: Anti-Corruption War and Democratic Politics in Post-Military Nigeria*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2012.
[21] Olaniyan, Richard Akinjide, ed. *The Plight of the Displaced: Selected Issues on Internal Displacement in Nigeria.* Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2009.
[22] Mama, Amina. 'Challenging Subjects: Gender and Power in African Contexts.' *African Sociological Review* 5, no. 2 (2001): 63–73.

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By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the security situation in Oke-Ogun had become sufficiently dire to attract the attention of the Oyo State government. Governor Seyi Makinde, who took office in 2019, established the Amotekun security outfit as part of a south-western regional initiative to address rural insecurity. The Western Nigeria Security Network, widely known as Amotekun, was intended to complement federal security agencies by providing a locally-rooted response to the specific threats facing south-western communities, particularly armed herders. The establishment of Amotekun was itself a political act. It represented a declaration by south-western governors that the federal security apparatus was insufficient for their needs, and it drew on the traditional concept of community-based defence to create a new institutional form. Niyi Bello and Kunle Omilusi's work on security governance in south-western Nigeria examines how Amotekun's establishment redrawn the boundaries between state, regional, and traditional security functions. For traditional rulers in Oke-Ogun, Amotekun represented both an opportunity and a challenge: an opportunity because it offered institutional support for community defence, and a challenge because it introduced a new power centre that was not fully under customary control.

Traditional Rulers, Diplomacy, and the Renegotiation of Authority

If the previous section has painted a picture of traditional authority under siege, it is important to avoid the error of portraying traditional rulers in Oke-Ogun as passive victims of historical forces. The evidence, drawn from oral interviews, local archives, and community records, presents a more complex picture of active negotiation, creative adaptation, and strategic repositioning. The most direct form of response by traditional rulers to the insecurity crisis has been diplomatic engagement. Several prominent Obas in the Oke-Ogun area initiated direct contact with Fulani leadership structures in their localities. The Soun of Ogbomoso (though Ogbomoso itself is east of the defined Oke-Ogun zone, its practice is instructive as a regional model), the Okere of Saki, and other traditional rulers convened inter-ethnic peace meetings at which both Yoruba farmers and Fulani herders presented grievances and sought accommodation. These meetings, often held at the palace and conducted with traditional ritual framing, drew on the symbolic capital of the Oba's position as a neutral arbiter above factional conflict. Funmi Olonisakin's work on peace-building in African contexts has argued that such locally rooted mediation processes, when they work, tend to produce more durable outcomes than externally imposed settlements because they engage the cultural frameworks within which communities interpret their obligations and grievances.[23]

However, the diplomatic approach faced structural limits. Even when Yoruba farmers and Fulani community leaders reached local agreements at the palace level, those agreements were often violated by armed groups, sometimes Fulani herders who did not recognise the authority of local leaders, sometimes Yoruba youths who had decided that diplomacy was a waste of time. This breakdown illustrated a crucial feature of the contemporary security crisis: the fragmentation of authority on both sides of the conflict. The Oba could not

[23]Olonisakin, Funmi. *Reinventing Peacekeeping in Africa: Conceptual and Legal Issues in ECOMOG Operations*. The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2000.

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guarantee the compliance of all Yoruba youth in his domain, and the Ardo (the Fulani cattle headman) could not always guarantee the compliance of all herders in the area. The conflict was not simply between two unified communities; it was a multi-actor contest in which sub-group leaders had varying degrees of authority over their constituents.

The issue of land tenure is central to understanding why these conflicts have been so resistant to resolution. Land in Oke-Ogun is governed by a complex mixture of customary tenure, statutory provisions under the Land Use Act of 1978, and informal arrangements that predate both. The Land Use Act vested all land in the state governments, technically ending customary freehold, but in practice, customary tenure systems continued to operate in rural areas because state capacity to administer land was limited. Traditional rulers, as custodians of customary land allocation, remained important figures in land governance even without formal legal authority. When herdsmen claimed customary grazing rights over routes that their cattle had used for generations, and when farmers claimed prior rights over the same land under their own customary frameworks, the traditional ruler was expected to adjudicate, but without the legal tools to enforce any decision. Egbe Ibhawoh's Imperial Justice: Africans in Empire's Court[24] situates this kind of institutional gap in the broader context of colonial and postcolonial legal pluralism, showing how the coexistence of multiple legal frameworks without a clear hierarchy generates exactly the kind of irresolvable disputes seen in Oke-Ogun.

A significant development in the response of traditional rulers has been the strategic use of media and public communication. Several Obas in Oke-Ogun have issued public statements, granted media interviews, and engaged with civil society organisations to document the insecurity in their communities and demand government action. This represents a significant departure from the traditionally reserved posture of Yoruba traditional rulers, who were expected to communicate through ritual and protocol rather than direct public advocacy. The willingness of some Obas to speak bluntly about the failure of state security institutions reflects both the desperation of the situation and the changing expectations of their constituencies. In the age of social media, when young people in the community can broadcast incidents of violence to national audiences, traditional rulers who remain silent risk being seen as irrelevant.

The relationship between traditional rulers and the formal political class in Oyo State has also been renegotiated in the context of the security crisis. Historically, and particularly under Nigeria's military governments from the 1960s to the 1990s, traditional rulers were systematically subordinated to state governors and local government chairs. The 1976 Dasuki Report and subsequent chieftaincy edicts across Nigerian states formalised this subordination, making traditional rulers recipients of government stipends and subject to deposition by elected or appointed officials. Olufemi Vaughan's detailed analysis of the political economy of chieftaincy in Nigeria shows how

[24]Ibhawoh, Bonny. *Imperial Justice: Africans in Empire's Court.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

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this fiscal dependence weakened the independence of traditional rulers without fully eliminating their communal influence.[25]

In the specific context of the insecurity crisis in Oke-Ogun, some traditional rulers have used their proximity to state politicians as a resource. By cultivating relationships with state commissioners, local government chairs, and even federal legislators, Obas have sought to translate political goodwill into security deployment, namely additional police, army patrols, or Amotekun presence. This political brokerage is not a new role for traditional rulers; it echoes the function of district heads and warrant chiefs in the colonial period. What is new is the explicit security dimension of the brokerage: the Oba as a lobbyist for armed protection for his community.

The religious dimension of the response also merits attention. Oke-Ogun communities are religiously diverse, with Islam, Christianity, and various forms of indigenous Yoruba religion all represented. Many of the Fulani herders involved in conflicts are Muslim, and some traditional rulers have sought to engage Islamic authority structures, that is, imams, Alfa teachers, and Islamic community organisations as additional channels for peace mediation. The Oyo State Muslim community leadership has, at various points, condemned attacks on farming communities and called for restraint. Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz's Africa Works provides a framework for understanding how informal religious and cultural brokers can fill governance gaps in ways that formal institutions cannot.[26] In Oke-Ogun, this informal religious diplomacy has sometimes succeeded where formal political intervention has failed.

The question of the youth, however, remains the most urgent unresolved challenge. The estrangement of young people from traditional authority structures in Oke-Ogun is a cultural crisis as much as a political one. For centuries, the intergenerational transmission of norms, values, and communal obligations in Yoruba communities depended on the authority of elders and the rituals that reinforced it. The weakening of these rituals, partly through the Christianisation and Islamisation of communities that replaced traditional ceremonies, partly through the spread of formal schooling that offered alternative frameworks for understanding the world, and partly through the physical and economic displacement that separated young people from their ancestral communities, has created a generation that does not feel bound by the customary deference to traditional rulers.

Akin Alao documents how youths' involvement in political thuggery from the 1980s onward contributed to this breakdown in deference.[27] When politicians routinely mobilised young men to intimidate opponents and stuff ballot boxes, the moral authority of elders and traditional rulers who could have disciplined this behaviour was undermined. Young people learned that violence, when

[25] Vaughan, Olufemi. *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics, 1890s–1990s*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2000.
[26] Chabal, Patrick, and Jean-Pascal Daloz. *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
[27] Alao, Akin. *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Rwandan Genocide.* London: British Academic Press, 2000.

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politically protected, had no consequences. This lesson was not unlearned when the political thuggery season ended; it transferred into everyday community life, including the handling of security threats.

The traditional institution of the 'Ojugba,' the system by which age-grade associations were formally constituted, named, and placed under the supervision of the Oba, provided a historical mechanism for managing youth energy within a framework of traditional authority. In communities where this institution survived in active form, there is some evidence that it provided a degree of order in the security response. Young men organised through the Ojugba system remained nominally answerable to the Oba and could be called to account if their actions violated communal norms. But in communities where the Ojugba had become merely ceremonial or had lapsed entirely, the vacuum was filled by less accountable organisations.

Contemporary scholars of African governance, including Mahmood Mamdani, have argued that the bifurcation of African political subjects into 'citizens' subject to civil law and 'subjects' governed by customary authority is a colonial legacy with ongoing consequences.[28] In Oke-Ogun, this bifurcation is lived experience: young people who have received formal education and civic socialisation feel themselves to be citizens with rights, not subjects with obligations. When traditional rulers invoke customary norms to demand deference or restrain vigilante responses, they are perceived by some young people as asserting an illegitimate authority that colonial legislation, not genuine communal consensus, created. This perception may be historically oversimplified; traditional authority in Yorubaland predates colonialism, but it is politically powerful.

The administrative response of the Oyo State government has been uneven. While the Amotekun initiative represented a genuine attempt to address the security gap, its implementation in Oke-Ogun was constrained by funding shortfalls, equipment deficiencies, and jurisdictional ambiguities. The question of who commanded Amotekun operatives in a given locality, the local government chairman, the traditional ruler, or the state coordinator, was never fully resolved, creating coordination failures that allowed insecurity to persist in some areas even after the outfit was deployed. Ifesinachi Okafor's work highlights how institutional ambiguity of this kind undermines the effectiveness of security interventions and frustrates local stakeholders who had invested hope in the new structures.[29]

There are, however, stories of relative success that deserve to be recorded. In certain communities within the Irepo and Atisbo local government areas, sustained engagement among traditional rulers, Fulani community leaders, and local government officials led to the demarcation of cattle routes, reducing crop destruction incidents. In Kishi, regular joint meetings of farmers and herders, convened under the supervision of the Onkishi, produced an early warning

[28] Mamdani, Mahmood. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
[29] Okafor, Ifesinachi. 'Security Sector Governance and the Challenge of Non-State Armed Groups in Nigeria.' *African Security Review* 28, no. 1 (2019): 15–34.

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system for potential conflicts that enabled timely intervention. These local successes do not negate the broader pattern of insecurity, but they demonstrate that traditional authority, when it operates with adequate support and within contexts where both farming and herding communities recognise its legitimacy, can generate peace dividends.

The regional dimension of the Oke-Ogun security crisis also demands attention. The area is not an island; what happens in Kwara State to the north and in the Republic of Benin to the west influences the security environment. Armed groups that operate in Oke-Ogun have been documented to cross state and national boundaries, making any response confined to a single local government or state jurisdiction inherently partial. The calls by some traditional rulers and civil society groups for a regional security architecture, one that would involve cooperation among Oyo, Kwara, and Osun states, and potentially with security agencies in the Benin Republic, reflect an understanding that the geography of insecurity is not coterminous with the geography of governance. Nigeria's federalism, with its weak mechanisms for inter-state security cooperation, makes this regional approach difficult to implement but no less necessary.

Conclusion

The Oke-Ogun area of Oyo State presents, in concentrated form, a problem common to many parts of Nigeria and, indeed, to much of rural Africa: governing insecurity with instruments of authority designed for a different historical moment. Traditional rulers who inherited their offices from a long line of predecessors, who received their legitimacy from cosmological frameworks that connected them to ancestors and land, and who operated within customary legal systems that assumed a degree of communal cohesion and shared values, now face a security landscape shaped by climate change, transnational migration, arms proliferation, generational alienation, and state incapacity. The gap between the mandate of traditional authority and the tools available to fulfil that mandate has never been wider.

What emerges from this study is not a counsel of despair but a set of propositions about what would need to change for the situation to improve. First, the formal state must take seriously its responsibility to provide security in Oke-Ogun. The chronic underfunding of police presence in rural Oyo State, the inadequate resourcing of Amotekun, and the failure to prosecute armed herders for documented attacks on farming communities all represent failures of state duty that no amount of traditional diplomatic ingenuity can compensate for. Chukwuemeka Eze's comparative work shows that the correlation between state security presence and insecurity levels is strong and direct: where the state is present and functional, insecurity is lower.[30]

Second, the relationship between traditional authority and formal governance needs to be renegotiated on more honest terms. The current situation, in which traditional rulers are expected to maintain communal order without legal

[30] Eze, Chukwuemeka. 'Rural Security Provision in Nigeria's Southwest: Comparative Perspectives.' Journal of Security and Development 12, no. 2 (2019): 44–67.

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powers of enforcement, is structurally irrational. Several proposals have been advanced over the years for giving traditional rulers greater formal roles in security governance as members of state security councils, as commissioners for dispute resolution, or as community liaisons with formal security agencies. The resistance to these proposals from elected officials who fear that traditional authority could compete with electoral power is understandable but ultimately self-defeating in areas where state capacity is as thin as it is in Oke-Ogun. Kunle Amuwo's analysis suggests that the reluctance to create complementary authority structures reflects a zero-sum understanding of governance that is itself a product of Nigeria's militarised political culture.[31]

Third, the engagement of young people in the security solution, rather than their management as a security problem, is essential. The energy and agency of young people in Oke-Ogun communities are not problems to be suppressed; they are resources to be directed. The revitalisation of age-grade institutions, supported by traditional rulers but adapted to contemporary contexts, including the incorporation of young women, the provision of economic incentives for participation in community security, and the creation of accountability structures that prevent abuse, could transform what is currently a source of instability into a foundation for community resilience.

Fourth, the agricultural economy of Oke-Ogun, which is the material foundation of the region's security, requires deliberate investment. The Oyo State government and the federal government have both acknowledged the productive potential of the Oke-Ogun zone, but investment in infrastructure like rural roads, irrigation facilities, storage and processing capacity, and market access has been slow and insufficient. Economic frustration is among the most powerful drivers of youth restiveness and community conflict. Where young people can see a credible pathway to economic dignity through agricultural or agro-industrial employment, the appeal of vigilante violence diminishes.

Fifth and finally, the management of the farmer-herdsman conflict requires a national policy framework that the federal government has been slow to provide. The proposed National Livestock Transformation Plan, which aimed to transition nomadic herding toward settled ranching, has stalled in implementation. Until there is a clear, enforceable national policy on pastoralism, one that demarcates grazing routes, establishes compensation mechanisms for crop damage, and provides a legal framework for prosecuting armed attacks on either community, the local-level diplomatic efforts of traditional rulers in Oke-Ogun will remain patchwork responses to a structural problem.

The politics of power and security in traditional space, as this study has shown, is ultimately a story about the mismatch between inherited authority and contemporary challenge. The Obas, Baales, and traditional councils of Oke-Ogun did not design the political order within which they operate; they inherited it, as did the Nigerian state that surrounds and often undermines them. What they have shown, through decades of negotiating insecurity with limited tools, is a

[31]Amuwo, Kunle. 'Civil Society, Governance and Civil-Military Relations in Nigeria.' Paper presented at the Nordic African Institute Conference, Uppsala, 2002

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form of institutional endurance that deserves recognition. Their palaces continue to be sites where communities bring their worst conflicts, where victims seek redress, and where communities negotiate peace. This function, the palace as the last resort of communal order, is not a relic of the past. It is a present reality, and in a country where state institutions remain unreliable, it is a necessity.

The way forward for Oke-Ogun is not a choice between traditional authority and modern governance. It is the creative integration of both, using the legitimacy, cultural knowledge, and community networks of traditional institutions as a foundation for building more effective, equitable, and locally responsive security governance. This is not a simple task. The political will required from the state government, from federal agencies, from traditional rulers themselves, and from the communities they serve is considerable. But the alternative, which is the continued erosion of communal order in one of south-western Nigeria's most productive agricultural zones, is a cost too high to bear.

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