

**TRADITION, STATE POWER AND THE BATTLE FOR THE UKWE STOOL IN
TAKUM, NORTHEAST NIGERIA, 1912–2024**

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Abstract

Protracted interregnums and recurring instability in Takum stem from a fundamental clash between hereditary customary legitimacy and state-led legislative engineering. This conflict intensified following the 2024 rotational law, which seeks to dismantle a century of Kuteb genealogical primacy. Utilising Political Instrumentalism and Ethnic Competition Theory, this research employs a historical method, analysing government gazettes and judicial rulings alongside oral testimonies. The major finding reveals that the state acts as an ethnic entrepreneur, periodically redefining eligibility to achieve political equilibria by transforming lineage-based kingship into a statutory office. While the state characterises these reforms as administrative necessities for peace, the Kuteb community maintains a steadfast resolve to protect its tradition, viewing the legislation as an existential distortion of its way of life. The study concludes that stability sought through legislative fiat fails without community acceptance. Resolution requires a governance model that reconciles state inclusivity with the people's non-negotiable resolve to preserve their ancestral identity and traditional heritage.

Keywords: *Ukwe, Chieftaincy disputes, Political instrumentalism, Kuteb, Chamba, Kpanzun*

Introduction

The modernisation of traditional institutions is one of the focus areas in political stability in multi-ethnic societies, especially in post-colonial states of Africa, where the overlap of customary legitimacy and state power often creates contestation. The Ukwe Takum of Taraba State in Nigeria is an important example of how traditional stools are not relics of culture but reservoirs of supreme power governed by state law. This stool has been a centre of power between the Kuteb, who assert aboriginal primacy, and the Chamba and Kpanzun groups, who have been historically seeking inclusion since the beginning of the 20th century. The chieftom has entered a new phase of legal and social crisis in 2024, with the newly proposed rotational legislation after almost thirty years of an unresolved interregnum. The ongoing instability in Takum is not a factor of ancient animosities; it is rather a direct consequence of the interventions by the state that have repeatedly redefined the principles of ethnic eligibility.

Central to understanding this conflict is the concept of Political Instrumentalism, also referred to as Ethnic Competition Theory. Ethnic identities in this view are understood as strategic tools used by elites in the struggle to gain access to power, authority, and state-governed resources rather than as inherited cultural markers. Tradition becomes a distributive asset, and group identity becomes politically salient only when institutions assign recognition, office, or material values in ways that make it consequential. Analysis of the shift from the 1963 Gazette to the 1975 Order and the 2024 Rotational Law demonstrates how the state acts as an "ethnic entrepreneur". This conceptual clarity reveals that the struggle involving the Ukwe Takum stool is essentially a conflict over the division of political power.

Historical accounts and previous inquiries into the Takum chieftaincy have largely focused on either colonial administrative convenience or the "correctness" of competing genealogical narratives. Ibrahim and Danfulani¹ explore the crisis as a struggle over borders and boundaries, emphasising that the 1997 crisis was a culmination of deep-seated historical and political factors.

¹ Ibrahim Musa Ahmadu and Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani, "Struggle over Borders and Boundaries: The Reason Why the Takum Crisis Continues to Defy Solution," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 94, no. 3 (2006): 281–304.

Similarly, Bako, Abwage, and Benjamin² anchor the succession tussle in distributive justice, arguing that the 1914 amalgamation of Takum and Zumperi districts created a foundational injustice that fueled later disputes. While British colonial policy is often cited as the origin of Kuteb primacy, a view examined in historical reviews such as those of Asanarimam,³ it frequently overlooks how the Kuteb confederacy was an existing order that the colonial state merely authenticated. Williams⁴ has examined the state's role in dispute resolution, highlighting the recurring failure of reactive state policies. Despite these contributions, the existing literature remains largely centred on policy efficiency or socioeconomic impacts and fails to fully account for the instrumentalist logic driving elite behaviour. This study addresses this critical gap by problematising how the Taraba State government has utilised legislative redesign, particularly the 2024 rotational law, to replace hereditary customary legitimacy with a state-regulated statutory office.

Theoretical Underpinning

This paper is based on the theoretical concept of Political Instrumentalism, also known as Ethnic Competition Theory, which does not subscribe to primordial accounts of ethnic conflict but locates ethnicity within the context of political conflict. In this view, ethnic identities are not understood as inherited cultural markers but as strategic tools used by elites in the struggle to gain access to power, authority, and state-governed resources. The aspect of ethnicity, therefore, gains political salience when the institutions assign recognition, office or material values in such a way that group identity becomes consequential.

Political Instrumentalism has its intellectual background in the writings of Frederick Barth,⁵ who redirected the focus of analysis away from cultural content toward the processes of maintaining boundaries. Barth claimed that ethnic groups do not survive due to fixed traditions,

² Kefas Bako, Samuel T. Abwage, and Benjamin T. Stephen. 2024. "John Rawls' Theory of Distributive Justice and Chieftaincy Tussles in Takum LGA (1996–2023)." *Wukari International Studies Journal* 8 (2): 15–34.

³ Asanarimam Shinge Araen, "The History of Socio Cultural and Political Violence in Takum Local Government Area (1800–2022)," 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359686208_The_History_of_Socio-Cultural_and_Political_Violence_in_Takum_Local_Government_Area_Taraba_State_1800-2022

⁴ Williams A. Ahmed-Gamgum, "The State and the Processes for the Resolution of Chieftaincy Disputes: Taraba State Model," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 5, no. 6 (June 2021): 286–302.

⁵ Frederick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969).

but rather because social actors act to maintain and mobilise boundaries out of which they can obtain benefits. As a result, ethnicity is maintained through communication and competition, not cultural segregation. Paul Brass⁶ expanded on this observation by arguing that the elite actively create and reify ethnic narratives to mobilise support and achieve institutional power. To Brass, ethnic conflict is often a strategic behaviour of actors seeking to redefine institutional arrangements. The theory was further enriched by Donald Horowitz,⁷ who showed how political institutions in multi-ethnic societies transformed into arenas of bargaining, where symbolic offices gained both distributive and strategic importance. All these academic arguments shift the analysis not towards the assumptions of ancient hostility, but towards how state structures provide incentives for ethnic mobilisation.

Taking the case of the Ukwe Takum institution, Political Instrumentalism provides a consistent explanation for the frequent reorganisation of the stool by the state. The Ukwe throne is not just a cultural representation within Kuteb tradition; it is also a seat of supreme authority, acknowledged and controlled by state law. The stool was introduced to the world of political calculation once acknowledgement, grading, and legitimacy became dependent on statutory approval. The groups began to construct historical narratives in ways that vindicated inclusion as state actors exercised discretion in redefining eligibility and institutional design. This perspective can be applied to the reconfiguration of the chieftaincy in 1975 as a redistribution of symbolic power across ethnic constituencies, mediated by the state, in terms of elite calculations rather than administrative reforms. Equally, the 2024 rotational legislation is a modern institutional redesign that aligns with the ethnic-balancing logic of a multi-group polity.

The idea of Political Instrumentalism allows this paper to argue that the conflict involving the Ukwe Takum stool is essentially a conflict over the division of political power. The legal reform of institutions cannot be explained solely by legal evolution or historical redress; it is also a strategy for ethnic competition in Takum. Fast-tracking the procedure in the legislative work, redefining the eligibility, and establishing new chieftaincy stools show an intent to redistribute

⁶ Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991.

⁷ Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

recognition in a manner that rebalances inter-group relations. Under this frame of analysis, ethnicity is a means by which paramountcy claims are voiced, negotiated and institutionalised.

Colonial Foundations and the 1963 Codification of Kuteb Governance

The reformation of the Takum Traditional Chieftaincy between 1912 and 1914 was one of the modifications imposed by the British Colonial Administration in Takum. Until the period of the reformation, all other groups paid homage only to the heads of their immediate groups, except the Kuteb, who formed a sort of confederacy by pledging allegiance to and acknowledging the supremacy of the Likam and Akente political and spiritual heads over those of the various Kuteb tribes.⁸ For example, among the Pa'ati and Jidu groups, the Kuru Pa'ati and Kuru Jidu; Chamba leaders like Boshi, Galumje, and Yamusa, as well as many others, had their power limited to the Chamba groups.

When colonial officials failed to administer the Takum area through Boshi II and Yamusa Galumje II, the last of the Kumboshi line's Chamba leaders, due to their slave dealings, it became imperative to establish a more functional administrative structure to ensure peace and free-flowing trade. And, following the British colonial policy of indirect rule, it became a matter of economic necessity to use the people's established traditional institutions to administer them with little or no restraint. The colonial officials approved the Kuteb form of governance in Takum, which was led by Ukwé Ahmadu (Amadu), a contemporary of Yamusa who was stationed in Lupwe.⁹

This development can be better construed in terms of Political Instrumentalism, as an administrative convenience of a colony, rather than as a strategic recognition of an already established indigenous authority order. Under the logic of indirect rule that dominated British policy, a political formation with territorial legitimacy, internal coherence, and historical grounding emerged. It is on this basis that the Kuteb confederacy, under the Likam and Akente lineages, projected itself as the most territorially anchored and institutionally stable formation in Takum. So, the elevation of Ukwé Ahmadu was not a chance decision but a theoretical recognition

⁸ Dewar, K. 1935. Takum District, Wukari Division, Benue province Intelligence Report. NAK/SNP17/3/24898(B). 37.

⁹ Dewar, K. 1935. Takum District, Wukari Division, Benue province Intelligence Report. NAK/SNP17/3/24898(B). 19.

of the aboriginal Kuteb's inherent custodianship and political preeminence in the territory. In the analytical construct of Political Instrumentalism, the colonial powers did not create Kuteb authority; they authenticated and formalised an already existing order that was consistent with the administrative needs. The Kuteb, being a favourite of the British, indicated that the Kuteb confederacy had centralised ritual and political authority over territory and subordinate peoples.

In identifying the Ukwe as the supreme vested interest, the colonial state succeeded in grounding its system of governance on the group whose right to territorial origin and traditional sovereignty was the most firmly rooted. In this regard instrumental rationality served the interests of the Kuteb: the colonial state chose the framework with native legitimacy, thus strengthening instead of creating Kuteb primacy. As a result, the seemingly colonial restructuring could be interpreted as a compromise between the imperial administrative requirements and already existing Kuteb political power. The move by the British to rule by the Ukwe institution did not replace a pre-existing multi-ethnic sovereign: they only consolidated the political structure that was already in place by the native population. This acknowledgement did not reduce the Kuteb customs and traditions but rather institutionalised the colonial order which, in turn, converted the indigenous legitimacy into the accepted principle of governance in Takum.

The Kuteb traditional form of governance was founded on the confederacy of the Likam and Akente Senior tribes. According to Kuteb customs and history, the Ukwe has supreme authority over the land and people. The Kwes, or chiefs of other Kuteb tribes, as well as the heads of other groups living alongside the Kuteb, such as the Kpanzun, Chamba, and Hausa, stood next to the Ukwe. The colonial administrative reforms under discourse, which brought the Kuteb to the spotlight, were not acts of magnanimity on the part of colonial officials; they rather had imperialistic implications intended to facilitate the economic exploitation of Takum.¹⁰ Ukwe Takum was chosen by five traditional selectors, or kingmakers known as *Mbakfain*, but the actual appointment was made by the Kwes (village heads) of the Kuteb. Only males from the Likam and Akente clans were considered for the selection. These were the five traditional selectors (Mbakfain): Itsekwe (Royal father and Chairman of the Council of King Makers), Kutubkwe

¹⁰ Hassan, E. L. 1995. The Kuteb, Kpanzun and Chamba peoples of Takum: A Study in the History of Inter-Ethnic Relations from 1900-1993. Dissertation. History. Arts. University of Jos. 95.

(Traditional Prime Minister), Ferkwe, Ndeyakwe (Defence Minister or warlord), Risu-Nyisukwe (Head of the Princes).¹¹ During the colonial period, British authorities used this indigenous style of government to oversee the Takum region. This system was modified and gazetted in 1963, following Nigeria's independence and the death of Ukwe Ahmadu. As a result, the traditional selectors were broadened to include groups other than the Kuteb (Chamba, Kpanzun and Hausa). Late Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang II was appointed in accordance with the requirements of this statute.

The gazettal of the process of selection of 1963 is a crucial shift towards the state-controlled recognition and away from purely customary authority. In the context of political instrumentalism, codification would become important because the lineage's final authority would shift to statutory approval. The postcolonial state did not simply democratise tradition through the extension of the composition of selectors to non-Kuteb groups; it was now active in its redesign of the institutional structure, such that it would redistribute symbolic participation. The instrumentalist theory holds that this type of redistribution is often an elite calculation regarding stability, inclusion, and control. As a result, the growth of the electoral college is an indicator of the infantile phases of institutional engineering in reaction to inter-ethnic pressure.

The aforementioned reform was prompted by concerns from the Chamba, Kpanzun, and other groups desiring greater participation in Takum's traditional government than ever before. It should be highlighted that in 1938, the Chamba formally petitioned the Wukari Division District Officer for their expulsion from the throne of the Ukwe of Takum. On March 1, 1938, the District Officer stated unequivocally in a memorandum addressed to the resident, Benue Province, that neither the Chamba nor the Kpanzun had any stake in the Ukweship of Takum. On the 23rd of July 1962, the then Takum District Council conducted a meeting titled "TARON MAJALISAR TAKUM DISTRICT" to discuss the 1963 reform.¹² Mallam Abduljarim, the Divisional Officer of Wukari Division at the time, was present during the meeting. The goal of the meeting was to explore democratic ways to change the Kuteb tradition and practices surrounding the nomination and appointment of Ukwe Takum so that other groups may be fairly incorporated into the system.

¹¹ Oral Interview with Pastor Hosea Mbataeson at Bikka-Baba, Retired pastor, 80years, 13th May, 2021.

¹² Hassan, E. L. The Kuteb, Kpanzun and Chamba peoples of Takum...

During the meeting, a voting exercise took place between the Likam and Akente, the ruling houses of the Kuteb, on the one side, and the Chamba and Kpanzun, the challengers or contestants to the throne on the other. The Likam and Akente received 19 votes, while the Chamba and Kpanzun received 4 votes. As a result, the Ukweship was to remain limited to the royal houses of Likam and Akente.¹³ This resolution only succeeded in putting the chieftaincy squabbles to rest for a few years.

Political Instrumentalism offers a very useful approach to understanding petitions and counterclaims. The early strategic mobilisation of ethnic identity geared towards institutional access is exemplified in the 1938 Chamba petition. The statement of being involved was expressed not only as a cultural statement but as a call to inclusion in a politically significant office. On the same note, the 1962 deliberations suggest that the stool had, by then, gained a distributive meaning within the state administrative system. The electoral result that favoured Likam and Akante did not exclude contestation, since the competition in the background was over access to known authority, not procedural fairness. The instrumentalist theory thus explains the persistence of the claims after the numerical defeat; the ethnic elites did not give up and sought other avenues for restructuring the institution through state channels. What was to follow was the temporary truce that was not the end, but merely the postponement of conflict, to be carried on at a more opportune political time.

The 1975 Reform and the Rise of Ethnic Contestation

In 1968, the late Joseph D. Gomwalk, as Military Governor of Benue-Plateau State, solicited input from local administration on the procedure of selecting chiefs and, where none existed, methods to establish them under the laws of northern Nigeria 1963 Volume II Section 49(3) of Native Authority law (cap.77). In addition to this call, the Governor sent a memo to the state executive council defending the Chamba's desire to reign in Takum.¹⁴ Gomwalk's intervention represents the state's role as an "ethnic entrepreneur", where a political actor moves beyond neutral governance to actively shape the boundaries of traditional legitimacy to suit

¹³ Hassan, E. L. The Kuteb, Kpanzun and Chamba peoples of Takum...96.

¹⁴ J. D. Gomwalk, 12th March, 1975. "Chiefs Appointment Procedure: Chief of Takum Memorandum Executive Council of Benue-Plateau State, BPM 25(75). 1

administrative objectives. His position was based on the historical narrative of the Chamba chief of Donga, M.S. Garbosa II's book *Stories on the Chamba and their Customs*, and the genealogical tree of Tikari chiefs in Takum District,¹⁵ as recorded by Freemantle¹⁶ and Kirk-Greene¹⁷ in the *Gazetteer of the Muri Province* and the *Gazetteers of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*, Vol. II, respectively. Governor Gonwalk's views and policy ideas in his memo were informed by the genealogy supplied by these authors. Based on the genealogical data, the governor decided that the original holders of the chieftaincy were the Chamba-Tikari people, but that this changed following Yamusa's deposition to Ahamdu. This selective use of historical texts to redefine the "rightful" holders of the stool illustrates the instrumentalist argument that history and tradition are not static, but are strategically reconstructed by elites to provide a normative basis for shifting power from one group to another.

On the 18th day of September, 1968, Wukari Local Administration responded to the State Government's request by submitting the procedure of selecting the chief of Takum based on what was gazetted in 1963 by the Northern Nigerian Government. The Governor went on to say that the Chamba Gando family elites petitioned for the procedure for selecting the Ukwe of Takum, which was later counter-petitioned by the now-threatened Likam and Akente ruling family elites from the Kuteb. It is the petitioning process that brings to the fore the most important element of the ethnic competition theory: ethnicities become politically salient when state institutions have a material or symbolic interest in an office, and this traditional title is turned into a prize that forces particular groups to mobilise. And that, as a result of this development, law and order were jeopardised, and that his government needed to reassure the people of Takum that the system for selecting the Chief of Takum would not be altered.¹⁸ The following is an excerpt from a letter of assurance written three years after the petition and counter petitions were filed:

It has been observed that instability has been generated in the Takum area because of the impression created by some people that the military government will change the existing order

¹⁵ Garbosa, M.S. *Stories on the Chamba and their Customs*. Trans. B.B. Usman & M.P. Noku. Maiduguri: ED-Linform Services, 2001.

¹⁶ Fremantle, J. M., ed. *Gazetteer of Muri Province*. Printed by order of the Governor of Nigeria, 1922. 39-40

¹⁷ Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, ed., *Gazetteers of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*, vol. 2, *The Eastern Kingdoms (Muri, Yola, Bornu)* (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1972)

¹⁸ J. D. Gomwalk, *Chiefs Appointment Procedure*. 1.

regarding the declaration of the Takum Chieftaincy. I am directed to request that you draw the attention of Wukari Local Administration to this and stress that the people of Takum should be left in no doubt that the State Government has no intention of changing the declaration regarding the method of selection and appointment of the Chief of Takum.¹⁹

Despite the aforementioned communication, the Governor turned around in 1975 and asked the Executive Council to urge him to allow the accession of the Gando family of the Chamba-Tikari to the existing Takum ruling houses, as well as changing the makeup of the traditional selectors. This policy turnaround reveals the state's ability to bend institutional structures to alter the rules of the game, thereby allowing previously marginalised groups access to state-managed resources, which is one of the main principles of instrumentalist theory. His prior guarantee to the people of Takum that the government had no intention of altering the system of selecting and appointing the Ukwe was simply designed to restore normalcy to the area, he claims. However, in his opinion, Takum's history focuses on three ethnic groups: the Kpanzun, the Chamba, and the Kuteb, in that order. The Kpanzun governed Takum initially, followed by the Chamba, until 1914, when the last of them, Yamusa, was ousted by the British for his role in the slave trade. Since then, the Kuteb have ruled Takum. Governor Gomwalk then approved the appointment of two royal households to the Ukwe throne for the Chamba. As a result, the Native Authority Law No. 56 of 1963, also known as NALN, was abolished by the provision of BPSLAN 2 of 1975, which was published the same year under the heading: THE LOCAL ADMINISTRATION LAW CAP (77), THE WUKARI LOCAL ADMINISTRATION (DECLARATION OF NATIVE LAW AND CUSTOM RELATING TO THE SELECTION OF CHIEF OF TAKUM) ORDER, 1975.²⁰

The Kuteb were enraged at the situation and took the state government to court. Although nothing is known about the lower court's judgment in this case, it is probable that the lower court's decision was unfavourable to the Kuteb, as they had to file an appeal with the Federal Court of Appeal, Kaduna Division, on January 12, 1979. Madaki Akente and five prominent Kuteb leaders filed an appeal against Benue-Plateau State's Attorney General and the Wukari Local Administration (as respondents). The appellants were represented by Barrister G.P. Akisoto, while

¹⁹ SEC/A/5/VOL.II/317, Official Report of the Executive Council of Benue-Plateau State on Chiefs Appointment Procedure. 1.

²⁰ J. D. Gomwalk, Chiefs Appointment Procedure. 1.

the respondents were represented by Aminu, the Attorney General of Gongola State. Clause 8, which abolished Legal Notice No. 56 of 1963, was the subject of the Appellants' concern in the dispute. This order, issued in 1975, was declared null and invalid because it was issued outside of the Military Governor's authority and in violation of provision 47 of the Local Administration Law, Cap. 77.²¹

The defendants contended that the Appellants' issue was a chieftaincy affair, as determined by S.M.A Belgore in a lower court ruling. And that the Governor has the right to repeal under section 20 of the Interpretation Law. They went on to say that the Appellants' complaint in this instance was "limited in scope", since the Appellants simply sought the court to notify them whether the Governor has acted ultra vires by a proposed repeal of legal notice of 1963 by clause 8 to the schedule of legal notice No.2 of 197 and not challenging the correctness of the declaration of Native Law and Custom of Takum relating to the selection and appointment of a chief of Takum, it is this narrow basis that we deal with in this appeal.²²

Following the respondents' observations, the appeal court, consisting of Justices Coram, Eta, Coker, and Ademola, held that the Military Governor can revoke or rescind an earlier order relating to the selection of the Ukwe Takum by a new order, and that such action is not patently unconstitutional under the Local Administration Law (Cap. 77) read with the provisions of the INTERPRETATION LAW (C) (2). Even if the Appellants' concern had encompassed the propriety or otherwise of the Governor's conduct, as pointed out by the respondents, this is the extent to which the Federal Appeal Court could go in this case. This is because the court lacks jurisdiction under NNLN No. 186 of 1963, which states in section 11 of the (Chiefs Appointment and Deposition) Law (Cap. 20) and it reads that notwithstanding anything contained in any written law whereby or where under jurisdiction is conferred upon a court, whether such jurisdiction is original, appellate or by way of transfer, a court shall not have jurisdiction to entertain any civil cause or matter instituted for:

(a). the determination of any question relating to the selection appointment, installation, deposition or abdication of a chief, or

²¹ Hassan, E. L. The Kuteb, Kpanzun and Chamba peoples of Takum. 100.

²² Plateau Law Reports, Volume 2, 1981. 353

(b). the recovery or delivering up of any property in connection with selection, appointment, installation, deposition or abdication of chief (3 of 30 of 1948).²³

When this legislation is read in connection with Section 49 of the Local Administration Law, it indicates that chieftaincy issues must be resolved or amended administratively rather than in a court of law. As a result, all the government needed to do to modify the way of selecting and appointing the chief of Takum was to set up an administrative procedure that will start in the Takum District, through the Wukari Traditional Council, and ending with the Governor's approval or disapproval. This was the method that was followed in 1962, culminating in Legal Notice No. 56 of 1963.

In contrast to the method outlined above, the process that resulted in legal notice 2 of 1975 was orchestrated in Wukari without the participation of the Takum Native Authority or the Takum Traditional Council. This notification was only properly delivered to the Takum Traditional Council after the Notice was published in the 1975 Gazette. The then Ukwé Takum, Late Alhaji Ibrahim Kufang II, was taken aback by this and demanded to know why and how such a structural change could be implemented in his area without his knowledge or consent. The then Aku Uka of Wukari, Manu Adda Ali's inadequate response to this query sparked a commotion that shook the council Chambers, the meeting's location in Wukari, to its very foundations.²⁴ This aggravated Wukari and Takum's already fragile ties, and a royal hatred formed between their royal houses. This fuelled the movement to create the Takum Local Government Council out of the Wukari Local Administration, which was achieved in 1976.²⁵ It should be observed, however, that the undemocratic method in which the state government altered chieftaincy rule did more to exacerbate the issue than the reform itself, even though the latter was undesirable to the Kuteb. As a result, they accused the government and the Wukari traditional council of collaborating with the Chamba and Kpanzun in Takum to usurp traditional control from them.

To substantiate the conspiracy accusation levelled against the Wapan, Kpanzun, and Chamba, as well as the Gomwalk government, in connection with the Kuteb chieftaincy dispute

²³ Plateau Law Reports, Volume 2, 1981. 353-354.

²⁴ Hassan, E. L. The Kuteb, Kpanzun and Chamba peoples of Takum...

²⁵ Oral Interview with John Kwesimam at Takum, Retired Civil Servant, 64 years, 18th May, 2021.

in Takum, in a public lecture held in his honour in Wukari, Mr. Usman Ibrahim Sangari, a prominent person in the government and a pioneer politician in Wukari, said:

At the time I was a Commissioner in the Government of Mr. J.D Gomwalk in Benue-Plateau State from 1973-1975 I was one of the people that brought into being certain things in Wukari Division. We modified the Chieftaincy affairs of Takum and Donga such that today, the Chamba and Kpanzun have shares in then.²⁶

Considering the aforementioned lecture, it is clear that Mr. Ibrahim Sangari, as a commissioner under the Gomwalk regime and, of course, a member of the state executive council, played an integral part in the executive decisions that gave the Governor the go-ahead to reform the method of selecting the Takum chief in the manner he did. Sangari's admission provides a clear "smoking gun" for the instrumentalist theory, showing how elites (the commissioners) use their position within the state apparatus to "modify" traditional affairs to reward certain ethnic constituencies, thereby ensuring their own political support base. While it cannot be denied that the Benue-Plateau State government put forth some effort in attempting to resolve the Takum Chieftaincy matter, it is important to note that the government's investigation into the chieftaincy's history was one-sided and biased. Despite the discrepancies between the two king lists presented by Sambo and Fremantle/Kirk-Greene, the government should have considered the Kuteb king lists before making a final selection. Even though, this was not done, it was obligatory on the government to provide all parties involved a fair hearing by taking an open and democratic approach to the problem at hand.

The state administration, it should be noted, was hell-bent on ensuring that the Chamba got a part, not just a fair portion, given the circumstances, as evidenced by both the Governor's Memorandum to the Executive Council and Mr. Ibrahim Sangari's lecture mentioned earlier. As a consequence, the government's investigation into the Takum Chieftaincy's history found that the Kpanzun were the first chiefs, followed by the Chambas, and that the Kuteb only emerged as Kings in 1914, following the deposition of Yamusa, the last Chamba chief, during the reign of Ukwe Ahmadu. The Kuteb lost faith in the Gomwalk administration after the government falsified historical facts pertaining to the Takum chieftaincy. This falsification, in the terms of

²⁶ Public Lecture delivered by Ibrahim Usman Sangari at Wukari on 23rd of September, 1982.

instrumentalist thought is not just an error but a kind of re-mythologisation of the past by the actions of the elites; a new historical narrative is being created, in which the past is a tool of the present politics, and all this is being used effectively as an instrument by the political players. They ignored the Federal Court of Appeal's decision, which they saw as just scraping the surface of an iceberg. The government's position was saddening because evidence is yet to surface that the Kpanzun were the first chiefs of Takum, as asserted by the government. Even if this is true, the issue that begs an immediate explanation is, why was the government only interested in including the Chamba into the ruling houses and not the Kpanzun, who were the first chiefs of Takum? The inconsistency was immediately apparent. The issue of inter-group relations in Takum was exacerbated in no little part by government action or inactivity, as evidenced by the publishing of legal notice 2 of 1975.

Following the promulgation of the 1975 gazette that reconfigured the Ukwe Takum institution, Takum's traditional polity entered a prolonged and unresolved phase of contestation. The 1975 ordinance, introduced by the then Benue-Plateau State government under Military Governor Joseph D. Gomwalk, altered the established indigenous arrangement by withdrawing the exclusive right of the Kuteb to select the paramount ruler of Takum from the two recognised Kuteb ruling houses, Likam and Akente, and broadened eligibility to include non-Kuteb lineages. The deepening of eligibility supports Paul Brass's theoretical suggestion that a collective of elites will cement and enhance ethnic discourse to enrol a wider following and topple the institutional monopolies of their opponents. This measure transformed the stool from a hereditary office embedded in Kuteb native law and custom into a chieftaincy position that, in theory, could be contested by other groups resident in Takum. The change was rooted in political engineering and reflected the influence of individuals within the state government who favoured a broader conception of eligibility, a development that many Kuteb historians and traditionalists interpreted as a departure from long-standing indigenous governance practice.

The effects of the 1975 gazette were profound. Although the title "Chief of Takum" was introduced and non-Kuteb lineages were acknowledged as potentially eligible, the amendment was not the result of dialogue with the custodians of customary law in Takum. Instead, it was enacted through executive fiat, a process that, in subsequent decades, became a central grievance of those who insisted that the stool remain an exclusive preserve of the Kuteb people. These tensions

persisted throughout the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century, with periodic calls to repeal the 1975 ordinance and restore the traditional order.

The dispute took a decisive turn in 1996 following the death of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kufang, the last undisputed holder of the Ukwe Takum stool under the pre-gazette arrangement. His passing marked the beginning of a prolonged vacancy, the longest in the history of the institution, because no successor was appointed. The underlying cause of this vacancy was a deepening controversy over which legal framework should govern the selection of a new paramount ruler.²⁷ The Kuteb insisted that the 1963 gazette, which explicitly confined eligibility for the Ukwe Takum stool to the two Kuteb ruling houses of Likam and Akente, remained the valid normative guide for selection. They argued that this gazette reflected the culmination of indigenous consensus and colonial recognition of traditional order and should therefore prevail. On the other hand, the Chamba and Kpanzun groups maintained that the 1975 gazette had effectively repealed the 1963 arrangement by expanding eligibility and introducing rotation among multiple ethnic lineages. On this basis, they claimed the right to ascend the throne. The inability of the contending parties to reconcile these opposing legal interpretations prevented any coronation after 1996. It set in motion a dispute that led to the outbreak of the 1997 crisis in Takum.

The Interregnum and the Statutory Redefinition of the Ukwe Takum Institution (1996–2024)

The death of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kufang in 1996 brought to a close a significant chapter in the political history of Takum. His reign, though shaped by the reforms and tensions that followed the 1963 and 1975 gazettes, represented the last phase in which the institution of the Ukwe functioned with an occupant whose authority was publicly acknowledged, even if juridical debates lingered beneath the surface. His passing did not just create a vacancy; it reopened unresolved historical and legal questions that had trailed the institution since the mid-1970s. From a historical standpoint, succession in Takum had always been governed by native law and custom rooted in the Likam and Akente ruling houses of the Kuteb. This arrangement, though codified in 1963 under the Northern Nigeria administration, predated colonial intervention. The 1963 Gazette formalised the indigenous structure within the statutory framework of the Native Authority

²⁷ Oral Interview with Rimamtari Mairiga at Takum, 51 years, civil servant, April, 2021

system.²⁸ It recognised the Ukwe Takum as the paramount ruler and confined eligibility to the established Kuteb royal lineages. In doing so, it gave legal expression to an already functioning political tradition.

The 1975 Gazette represented a rupture in that historical continuity. Enacted under the Benue-Plateau State government, it purported to repeal the 1963 declaration and broaden eligibility. This intervention was part of a broader pattern in post-civil war Nigeria in which military administrations restructured traditional institutions for political and administrative ends. Although the Federal Court of Appeal in 1979 affirmed the power of a Military Governor to revoke or amend earlier legal instruments, the judgment addressed executive competence rather than historical legitimacy. It confirmed that such alterations were within the state's authority, but it did not resolve the deeper historical dispute over the stool's origins and custodianship.

When Taraba State was created in 1991, the legal and administrative environment shifted once more. Under Nigeria's federal structure, matters relating to chieftaincy fall within the jurisdiction of the state. Taraba State, therefore, possessed full authority to regulate traditional institutions within its territory. Historically, this marked a new phase in the evolution of the Ukwe stool. The earlier gazettes of 1963 and 1975 became part of a layered legal inheritance, subject to the interpretive and legislative direction of the new state. The Taraba State Council of Chiefs Edict No. 9 of 1995²⁹ constituted a significant moment in this trajectory. In formally listing "the Ukwe of Takum" among the members of the Council alongside the Aku Uka of Wukari and the Emir of Muri, the State acknowledged the institution's continued existence and legitimacy. The retention of the indigenous title "Ukwe" was historically meaningful. It signalled continuity with pre-1975 usage and reaffirmed the traditional nomenclature established in Kuteb's political culture. In legislative history, terminology is rarely accidental; it often reflects the underlying conception of authority.

The historic elevation of the stool occurred in 2005 under the administration of Reverend Jolly Tavoro Nyame. Through the Taraba State Traditional Rulers (Upgrade and Creation of

²⁸ Northern Nigeria Government (1963a). Laws of Northern Nigeria, Native Authority CAP 77 [27]

²⁹ Taraba State Council of Chiefs Edict No. 9 of 1995

Districts) Order,³⁰ The Ukwe Takum was upgraded from Second Class to First Class status. This was a watershed in the institutional history of Takum. Classification within the Northern Nigerian chieftaincy system determines hierarchy, recognition, and ceremonial precedence. The elevation of the Ukwe to First Class status placed the stool in the highest rank of traditional authority in Taraba. The Order further stipulated that where a stool was vacant, any subsequently appointed occupant would assume the upgraded status. In effect, the law preserved the institutional dignity of the Ukwe irrespective of temporary vacancy.

The Taraba State Council of Traditional Rulers Law of 2010 consolidated this position. The anchoring of Council membership to the graded chiefs recognised in the 2005 Order reinforced the place of the Ukwe Takum within the constitutional architecture of the State. Across these enactments in 1995, 2005, and 2010, the historical pattern is clear: the Taraba State Government consistently recognised the Ukwe as a paramount institution, using the indigenous title rather than the altered designation introduced in 1975. From a historian's perspective, this continuity in statutory language is evidence of the stool's enduring legal personality.

Yet, paradoxically, the throne remained vacant after 1996. The prolonged vacancy was not due to the institution's disappearance from the law; rather, it reflected the inability of contending groups to reconcile divergent historical narratives and legal interpretations. As Ethnic Competition Theory posits, the vacancy became a strategic pause where elite groups from the Kuteb, Chamba, and Kpanzun engaged in a war of attrition, awaiting a favourable political climate to instrumentalise their version of history. The Kuteb continued to rely on the 1963 codification as the authoritative expression of their political tradition. The Chamba and Kpanzun, drawing from the 1975 reconfiguration, asserted a broadened claim. Successive administrations, particularly those of Danbaba Suntai and Darius Ishaku, sought consultations and interventions to restore stability in Southern Taraba.³¹ However, each prospective move toward enthronement carried the risk of renewed violence, and caution prevailed over decisiveness.

³⁰ Taraba State Upgradement of Traditional Rulers and Creation of Districts (Order), 2005

³¹ Asanarimam Shinge Araen, "Post mortem analysis of Motive and implications of the Executive bill on the Creation of Rotational and three Third class Chieftaincy Stools for Takum Chieftdom, Takum LGA, Taraba State" https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378677725_Post_mortem_analysis_of_Motive_and_implications_of_the_Executive_bill_on_the_Creation_of_Rotational_and_three_Third_class_Chieftaincy_Stools_for_Takum_Chieftdom_Takum_LGA_Taraba_State

In January 2024, nearly three decades after the death of Kufang, the Kuteb announced the selection of Rimamnyang Habu Ahmadu II through their traditional process rooted in the Likam and Akente ruling houses and the Mbakfain kingmakers.³² Historically interpreted, this action represented an attempt to restore interrupted continuity. It drew upon precolonial custom, the 1963 codification, and the subsequent statutory recognitions within Taraba State law. It was at once an invocation of tradition and an appeal to the cumulative legislative history that had consistently acknowledged the Ukwe Takum as a First-Class institution.

In 2024, the Taraba State Government adopted a course of action that marked a decisive departure from the expectation that followed the Kuteb selection of Rimamnyang Habu Ahmadu II as Ukwe Takum. After nearly three decades of vacancy, the selection conducted through the Likam and Akente ruling houses, in conjunction with the Mbakfain kingmakers, was widely interpreted within the Kuteb community as the final customary stage preceding formal state recognition. Under established administrative practice, what ordinarily remained was the presentation of the staff of office, the instrument through which the state confers legal authority on a traditional ruler.

Recognition did not follow. Rather than issuing the staff of office, the government initiated a legislative process that fundamentally altered the institutional framework of chieftaincy in Takum. An executive bill was introduced to the Taraba State House of Assembly under the title: “A Bill for a Law to Provide for the Establishment of One Rotational First Class Chief and Three Third Class Chiefs in Takum among the tribes of Kuteb, Chamba, and Jukun Takum respectively, and Other Matters Connected Therewith 2024”.³³ The speed and manner of its passage quickly became central to public debate. Legislative hearing was accelerated, deliberations were compressed, and the bill was reportedly passed at night. Such procedural urgency conveyed the executive's determination to secure statutory backing for a restructured chieftaincy order before formal recognition crystallised around the newly selected Ukwe. Legislative redesign thus replaced ceremonial endorsement as the state's immediate priority.

³² Oral Interview with Yohanna Adamu at Takum, 70 years, retired civil servant, April, 2021

³³ Taraba State House of Assembly, *A Bill for a Law to Provide for the Establishment of One Rotational First Class Chief and Three Third Class Chiefs in Takum among the Tribes of Kuteb, Chamba, and Jukun Takum respectively, and Other Matters Connected Therewith, 2024* (Jalingo: Taraba State House of Assembly, 2024).

On 23 February 2024, the same day the House of Assembly passed the bill, the Governor operationalised the new law. Barrister Sopiya Sopiya Ahmadu Gboshi III was appointed as the First-Class Chief of Takum under the rotational arrangement established by the legislation. The simultaneity of legislative passage and executive appointment underscored the resolve to entrench the new framework without delay. Substantively, the law introduced a rotational First-Class stool in Takum and created three additional Third-Class chieftaincy stools distributed among the Kuteb, Chamba, and Kpanzun; the rotational principle was structured among the three groups.³⁴ By changing the Ukwe from a lineage-based role to a rotational chief, the state used a political strategy to turn a cultural symbol into a bureaucratic position. This arrangement represented a structural reconfiguration of traditional authority in the area. Instead of affirming a singular paramount institution rooted in a defined lineage framework, the state established a rotational mechanism intended to distribute symbolic and political authority across major ethnic constituencies.

When placed within a historical perspective, this action constituted the most far-reaching governmental intervention in the Takum chieftaincy system since the 1975 gazette. Earlier administrations had managed tensions surrounding the stool through postponement, consultation, or incremental administrative measures. The 2024 legislation, however, directly recast the architecture of authority. The central question shifted from whether the selected Ukwe should be recognised under existing law to whether the existing legal structure itself should continue to define the scope of paramountcy in Takum.

The Kuteb community rejected the law in unequivocal terms. Through the Kuteb Yatso of Nigeria and the recognised Kuteb ruling houses, a suit was instituted against the Taraba State Government challenging both the procedure and substance of the enactment.³⁵ The plaintiffs argue that the law distorts their history, culture, and customary political system. In their interpretation, the rotational model is incompatible with the foundational character of the Ukwe stool. At the heart of their argument lies a historical claim regarding the nature of kingship. Traditional stools, in their classical formation, are not rotational constructs of statute but institutions grounded in genealogy,

³⁴ Taraba State House of Assembly, *Establishment of One Rotational First Class Chief and Three Third Class Chiefs Law, 2024 (Takum LGA)*, Taraba State Gazette (2024).

³⁵ Terna Chikpa, "Taraba chieftaincy stool: Kuteb ethnic group rejects high court ruling," *Tribune Online*, May 14, 2024, <https://tribuneonlineng.com/taraba-chieftaincy-stool-kuteb-ethnic-group-rejects-high-court-ruling/>

ritual authority, and inherited legitimacy. A kingship that derives continuity from ancestral lineage cannot, in this view, be subjected to periodic ethnic alternation without altering its essential character. Once rotation becomes the organising principle, the stool ceases to function as a lineage-based kingship and assumes the character of a statutory office defined and regulated by the state.

Legitimacy at the community level further illustrates the depth of the dispute. Allegiance among the Kuteb has continued to centre on Ukwé Rimamnyang Habu Ahmadu II, whose selection in January 2024 they regard as valid under established custom. Barrister Sopiya Sopiya Ahmadu Gboshi III has not been acknowledged as their king within the Kuteb ritual and social life. Takum therefore stands in a dual situation: a government-recognised rotational First-Class Chief operating under the 2024 law, and a community-recognised Ukwé whose authority is asserted through lineage and tradition. Judicial determination now remains the decisive arena. The litigation seeks clarification of the scope of state legislative power over traditional institutions and the extent to which statutory restructuring may override historically established customary systems. Until the courts pronounce on the matter, the tension between statutory authority and customary legitimacy continues to define the contemporary history of the Ukwé Takum stool.

Conclusion

The history of the Ukwé Takum stool demonstrates that traditional institutions are not static relics of the past but dynamic arenas of state-mediated ethnic competition. This study reveals that the crises surrounding the stool are direct consequences of deliberate state interventions that have periodically redefined the rules of ethnic eligibility to achieve contemporary political ends. Historical analysis shows that the British colonial administration did not create the Kuteb authority but rather authenticated an existing indigenous confederacy for administrative convenience. The 1963 Gazette subsequently codified this arrangement, shifting the lineage's final authority toward statutory approval while maintaining Kuteb's exclusivity. However, the 1975 intervention by the Benue Plateau State government represented a fundamental rupture in which the state acted as an ethnic entrepreneur by unilaterally broadening eligibility to include the Chamba and Kpanzun lineages. Despite the prolonged interregnum following the death of Ukwé Ali Ibrahim Kufang in 1996, successive Taraba State enactments in 1995, 2005, and 2010 consistently utilised the

indigenous title Ukwe. They elevated the stool to First Class status, effectively preserving its legal personality.

The introduction of the rotational chieftaincy law in 2024 marks the most radical departure from custom, utilising a state-led strategy to replace hereditary legitimacy with a statutory, bureaucratic office. These findings resonate with global scholarly debates on the reinvention of tradition and the resilience of traditional authority in modern democratic states. The Takum case confirms the observation that in multi-ethnic societies, political institutions serve as arenas of bargaining, where symbolic offices take on both distributive and strategic importance. This study illustrates a broader global phenomenon where states attempt to balance traditional stools through statutory redesign, often creating a dual situation of contested authority.

Central to this contemporary tension is the unwavering resolve of the Kuteb community to preserve their traditional heritage against what they perceive as a distortion of their history and way of life. From a theoretical perspective, this resistance highlights the limits of political instrumentalism. At the same time, the state may treat a stool as a statutory office to be redistributed. Still, the Kuteb view the Ukwe institution as a non-negotiable repository of genealogy, ritual authority, and inherited legitimacy. For the Kuteb, the stool is not merely a political prize but a foundational element of their social existence that cannot be subjected to periodic ethnic alternation without altering its essential character. The struggle over the Ukwe throne reveals that stability sought through legislative engineering often comes at the cost of customary legitimacy. The future of this institution depends on whether the state can move beyond instrumentalist redesign toward a governance model that respects the foundational character of indigenous kingship and the cultural survival of the people it governs.

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