

**FROM SACRED RITE TO SECULAR CONTEST: KINGSHIP
SUCCESSION AND LEGITIMACY CRISES IN SOUTHWEST
NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the profound crisis confronting the institution of kingship in Southwest Nigeria, where ancient sacred traditions increasingly clash with modern secular forces. It investigates the historical and contemporary dynamics of kingship selection and appointment, arguing that escalating conflicts stem from a fundamental struggle over the source of legitimacy—divine sanction versus political and legal authority. Employing a qualitative methodology based on documentary analysis, the research traces the evolution of kingship from a spiritually ordained office to one entangled in political patronage, litigation, and commercialization. The analysis identifies three core areas of contradiction: the tension between hereditary succession and meritocratic principles, the erosion of spiritual authority by secular governance, and the damaging commodification of the throne. Findings reveal that these conflicts are symptomatic of a deeper institutional legitimacy deficit. This deficit undermines social cohesion and impedes community development. The paper concludes by advocating for a syncretic model that strategically integrates sacred tradition with modern accountability. It proposes specific reforms to depoliticize appointment processes, curb commercialization, and redefine leadership around a composite legitimacy derived from spiritual validation, genealogical right, and demonstrated merit. This approach aims to ensure the institution's relevance and stabilizing role in 21st-century governance.

Keywords: Conflict, Kingship, Legitimacy, Succession, Yoruba

INTRODUCTION

The institution of traditional rulership in Southwest Nigeria stands as a profound and complex pillar of the region's social architecture. Embedded within the rich tapestry of Yoruba history and cosmology, this system of kingship represents more than a mere political relic; it is a living institution that continues to shape identity, governance, and community cohesion (Babatola, 2020). However, in recent decades, the venerable process of appointing an Oba (king), once a sacred covenant between the people, the ancestors, and the gods, has become a recurrent and destabilizing source of conflict. This escalation of disputes occurs precisely as contemporary Nigerian society grapples with the challenges of modernization, democratic consolidation, and efficient local governance, placing traditional rulers under unprecedented scrutiny (Oguntola-Laguda, 2017).

This paper argues that the persistent conflicts surrounding kingship succession in Southwest Nigeria are symptomatic of a fundamental crisis of institutional legitimacy. This crisis originates from the unresolved tension between the traditional, sacral sources of authority rooted in divine sanction and hereditary lineage and the modern imperatives of democratic accountability, legal-rational governance, and meritocratic selection. Employing a historical-analytical lens, the study traces how colonial intervention and post-independence political manipulation have commercialized and politicized the throne, transforming succession from a sacred rite into a secular contest. The study adds to the continuing scholarly discussions on the sustainability of conventional institutions in contemporary governments by identifying this legitimacy gap and examining its sociopolitical ramifications. Its central contribution is the proposition of a syncretic model of legitimacy which is a deliberate fusion of spiritual validation, genealogical right, and demonstrated merit, as a necessary framework for reforming the institution, restoring its social cohesion function, and ensuring its relevance in 21st-century governance.

At the heart of these tensions lies a fundamental transformation in the nature of authority itself. Historically, the legitimacy of an Oba was divinely ordained, derived from spiritual sanction and hereditary bloodlines within specific royal families (Saka-Olokungboye et al., 2023). Today, this traditional model collides with modern imperatives of democratic accountability, legal-rational authority, and meritocratic selection. The resulting friction exposes the institution to political manipulation, commercial exploitation, and protracted litigation, transforming succession from a sacred rite into a secular contest. This paper posits that contemporary kingship conflicts are symptomatic of a deeper legitimacy crisis, in which historical paradigms struggle to adapt to a rapidly evolving socio-political landscape.

To fully apprehend these conflicts, one must consider the entrenched culture of conflict that characterizes many succession processes. This culture encompasses the entrenched attitudes, norms, and customary practices that shape how disputes are perceived, engaged with, and resolved within communities (Adegbami, 2020). In Southwest Nigeria, this culture is deeply historical, nurtured by pre-colonial rivalries, colonial-era manipulations, and post-independence political engineering. Divergent traditions of leadership and succession among various subgroups, compounded by historical territorial claims and lingering grievances, create a fertile environment where disputes over kingship are not only common but are often expected (Aboyeji, 2023). This normalized contentiousness critically complicates the appointment process.

Further complicating this terrain is a fundamental clash of values and priorities among stakeholders. The succession process becomes a battlefield where competing worldviews confront each other (Adegbami, 2020). On one side are traditionalists who venerate lineage, heritage, and the undisturbed continuity of sacred bloodlines as the sole legitimate basis for authority. On the other hand are reformists who advocate for meritocracy, emphasizing competence, education, and demonstrable leadership capability as paramount (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014). This ideological divide is rarely abstract; it is mobilized by different factions within royal families, community elites, and political actors, each seeking to legitimize their preferred candidate and vision for the institution's future.

Crucially, the outcome of these clashes is ultimately determined by community perception. The legitimacy and effectiveness of a traditional ruler are contingent upon how they are perceived by their subjects. This perception is constructed from a mosaic of historical narratives, personal experiences, familial loyalties, and, increasingly, media representations. A ruler installed through a process widely viewed as politically compromised or financially corrupt suffers an immediate and often insurmountable deficit of trust (Idonije, 2008). Such a perception of illegitimacy can catalyze open dissent, non-cooperation, and factional violence, effectively nullifying the Oba's capacity to unite and lead.

The modern dynamics of politicization and commercialization have further exacerbated these conflicts. The intervention of state politicians seeking loyal allies, combined with the exorbitant costs associated with installation ceremonies and the throne's upkeep, has introduced a transactional dimension to kingship. This commodification risks reducing sacred office to a political spoil or an asset for the wealthy, thereby alienating the populace and deepening cynicism (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2009). Concurrently, the judicialization of succession, whereby disputes are adjudicated in secular courts, often prolongs conflict and imposes external legal frameworks on deeply cultural and spiritual matters.

Therefore, this paper seeks to conduct a detailed examination of the complex interplay between the appointment of kings and the genesis of conflict in Southwest Nigeria. It will employ a historical-analytical lens to trace the roots of these disputes from the pre-colonial era through colonial disruption to contemporary political manipulation. The analysis will integrate cultural, political, and socio-economic perspectives to isolate the key variables that complicate conflict resolution.

The ultimate aim of this inquiry is twofold: first, to provide a nuanced diagnosis of the persistent failure to peacefully resolve kingship conflicts; and second, to offer grounded, culturally-sensitive recommendations. These proposals will focus on reforming appointment procedures, insulating the institution from corrosive external pressures, and outlining a path for traditional rulership to re forging its legitimacy. By doing so, it is argued, the institution can transform from a source of division into a revitalized pillar for sustainable social cohesion and effective local governance in the 21st century (Adepoju & Adelokun, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The crises of succession and legitimacy in Southwest Nigerian kingship are not occurring in an intellectual vacuum. They are central to enduring scholarly debates concerning the nature of traditional authority, the impact of colonialism, and the compatibility of hereditary institutions with modern governance. This review synthesizes the existing literature across three primary domains: the sacred foundations and historical erosion of legitimacy, the colonial and post-colonial politicization of the institution, and the contemporary clash between hereditary privilege and meritocratic values.

The Sacred Foundations and the Erosion of Legitimacy

A foundational strand of scholarship examines kingship through the lens of indigenous cosmology and political thought. Historians and philosophers delineate a model where the Oba's legitimacy was sacrosanct, derived from divine selection (often through the Ifá oracle) and the sanctity of royal lineage (*ori*) (Balogun, 2007; Bewaji, 2005). Within this framework, the ruler was less a political administrator and more a spiritual pivot, responsible for maintaining cosmic balance and communal well-being (Oguntola-Laguda, 2017). Scholars like Aboyeji (2023) and Adepoju & Adelokun (2023) have detailed how pre-colonial conflict management was deeply embedded in this sacral worldview, where authority was rarely contested because it was seen as preordained. The central debate emerging from this literature concerns how this spiritually-derived legitimacy can survive in a secular state. Research by Saka-Olokungboye et al. (2023) and Ogasina (2016) points to a growing "legitimacy deficit," arguing that the state's legal-rational authority has systematically marginalized the spiritual portfolio of the Oba, creating a void that is often filled by political or commercial power.

Colonial Disruption and Post-Independence Politicization

A second, critical body of work traces the deliberate destabilization of traditional institutions by external powers. Historians uniformly identify the British colonial policy of Indirect Rule as a watershed moment (Amusa & Ofuafor, 2012; Ogunode, 2023). By co-opting Obas as paid agents of the colonial administration, the organic, covenant-based relationship between ruler and community was severed, reconfiguring authority as a mandate from a foreign power (Babatola, 2020). This historical rupture embedded a legacy of contested legitimacy that the post-colonial state inherited and exacerbated. Scholars such as Aiyede (2009) and Okonkwo et al. (2019) analyze how successive Nigerian governments, both military and civilian, have continued to manipulate traditional institutions for political ends, transforming Obas into instruments of party politics and tools for centralizing control. This literature establishes a clear continuum from colonial co-option to contemporary political patronage, framing modern succession disputes as often being proxy battles for broader political influence (Onuoha & Enyiazu, 2023).

The Contemporary Crossfire: Heredity, Merit, and Commercialization

Contemporary scholarship grapples with the institution's struggle to adapt to modern values. A vigorous debate exists between traditionalists, who defend hereditary primogeniture as the bedrock of cultural continuity (Familusi, 2012; Raheem, 2025), and reformists, who advocate for the infusion of meritocratic principles into selection processes (Adegbami, 2020). This debate, as noted by Onipede (2022), frequently plays out in conflicting interpretations of custom itself, leading to litigation and community strife. Intertwined with this is the alarming trend of commercialization, a relatively newer but critically important focus of research. Sociologists and political economists like Omobowale (2008) and Olu-Owolabi et al. (2024) document how the throne has become commodified, with exorbitant installation costs and political patronage enabling ascension based on wealth rather than spiritual or genealogical qualification. This commercialization, scholars argue, fundamentally corrupts the ethical core of the institution, erodes public trust, and cripples its developmental potential (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2009; Olawoyin, 2023).

Gap in the Existing Literature

While the existing literature effectively diagnoses the historical roots and symptoms of the kingship crisis like colonial disruption, political manipulation, and the heredity-merit debate, there remains a gap in proposing viable, structurally-grounded solutions that do not merely champion one paradigm over another. Most studies either lament the erosion of tradition or advocate for modernization, but few articulate a principled framework for synthesis. This study enters this debate by accepting the analyses of historical erosion and contemporary conflict but seeks to move beyond diagnosis. It argues that the solution lies not in choosing between sacred rite and secular contest, but in developing a syncretic model of legitimacy. This model intentionally integrates the spiritual and genealogical validation of tradition with the meritocratic and accountability imperatives of modernity, proposing specific institutional mechanisms to enact this fusion. In doing so, it contributes a forward-looking, prescriptive dimension to the scholarly conversation on the future of traditional authority in modern Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the historical and contemporary dynamics of kingship in Southwest Nigeria. A qualitative approach was selected as the most appropriate method because the institution of kingship is intrinsically connected to cultural traditions, symbolic practices, and socio-political frameworks that are not readily quantifiable but require in-depth interpretive analysis.

The primary data collection method was a qualitative document analysis, which involved the systematic examination and interpretation of secondary sources. The document corpus was purposively selected to provide comprehensive coverage of the research problem across historical periods and thematic domains. The materials reviewed included peer-reviewed academic journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters on Yoruba history and traditional institutions, published historical texts, doctoral dissertations, credible policy papers from governmental and non-governmental organizations, and documented case reports of specific succession disputes from reputable news archives. The key selection criteria were the scholarly authority of the source, its direct relevance to kingship, succession, or traditional governance in Southwest Nigeria, and its capacity to provide either historical context or analysis of contemporary pressures.

The temporal scope of the documentary review spanned from pre-colonial periods to the present day, allowing for the tracing of institutional evolution. The data were analyzed using a structured qualitative content analysis approach. This involved an iterative process of open coding, where the textual materials were initially reviewed to identify recurrent concepts. These codes were then grouped into thematic categories such as "sacred legitimacy," "colonial disruption," "politicization of appointment," "commercialization," and "merit versus heredity." These themes formed the analytical framework for organizing the findings and constructing the argument. The credibility of the analysis was strengthened through methodological triangulation, whereby insights and evidence were cross-verified across different types of documents; for instance, correlating historical analyses with contemporary case studies and policy critiques, to ensure a robust and multi-perspective understanding of the issue.

The research relied exclusively on publicly accessible documents and academic publications. Consequently, the study did not present ethical concerns pertaining to confidentiality or informed consent. This methodological framework established a robust basis for examining how traditional institutions respond to contemporary pressures and for assessing the viability of proposed syncretic solutions.

The Process of Royal Appointment: Sacred Ritual to Secular Contest

The appointment of an Oba in Southwest Nigeria represents a profound transition where cultural identity, spiritual belief, and political power converge. Historically, this process was not merely administrative but a sacred rite that integrated the ruler into the cosmological fabric of the community. The contemporary analysis reveals that this once-hallowed procedure has become a complex arena where traditional norms are systematically challenged by modern political and legal forces, fundamentally altering its character.

In ancient Yoruba society, kingship was constituted as a divine institution. The Oba functioned not as a secular political office-holder but as a sacred intermediary, a vessel chosen to channel the will of the ancestors and gods (*orisas*) to the people (Bewaji, 2005). This cosmology positioned the ruler as the spiritual pivot of the kingdom, responsible for maintaining cosmic order and communal well-being. The appointment process was; therefore, an elaborate ritual of divine selection centered on the consultation of the Ifá oracle by the priesthood. The oracle's pronouncement was paramount, identifying the candidate whose personal destiny (*ori*) aligned with the community's needs (Balogun, 2007). This spiritual mandate was then ratified through sacral ceremonies—anointing, offerings, and symbolic rites—that transformed the candidate into a sacred king, seen as possessing the foundational authority (*àse*) to rule (Oguntola-Laguda, 2017). Hereditary succession within designated royal lineages provided the structural framework for this system, predicated on the belief that essential qualities of leadership and sacredness were transmitted through royal blood (Familusi, 2012). However, this analysis also identifies inherent tensions within the traditional system; the inflexibility of primogeniture could precipitate conflict when the designated heir was deemed unsuitable or when multiple candidates with credible lineage claims emerged, demonstrating that genealogy alone did not guarantee seamless succession.

The findings indicate that in modern Nigeria, the appointment process has been radically reshaped by the structures of the contemporary state. While hereditary succession remains a potent symbolic expectation, its operation is now heavily mediated by external forces. Political patronage has become a decisive factor, with influential government actors frequently intervening to align selections with their interests (Babatola, 2020). This intrusion has, in documented instances, enabled ascension outside traditional royal lineages, directly challenging the core genealogical principle and creating tension with established cultural norms. Concurrently, the secular legal system has become a primary battlefield for succession disputes. Litigation over candidacy, selection procedures, and chieftaincy declarations is now commonplace (Ogunode, 2023). These court battles transpose familial and communal conflicts into an adversarial legal framework, often exacerbating divisions and draining communal resources.

The central analytical finding of this section is that this historical evolution has produced a dual and often contradictory mandate for the modern Oba. The ancient model demanded they act as divine agents and custodians of tradition. In contrast, the contemporary model expects them to be accountable, transparent, and service-oriented civic leaders (Ayantayo, 2009). The Oba is thus pulled between performing legitimizing ancient spiritual rites and demonstrating modern administrative competence to governments and development agencies. This analysis concludes that these competing expectations create a persistent zone of institutional conflict, where political calculations and traditional norms frequently work at cross-purposes. The transformation from a sacred ritual to a secular contest underscores the broader struggle of traditional authority to define its place within a modern nation-state. This diagnosis of a fractured legitimacy between spiritual heritage and socio-legal pragmatism forms the essential analytical foundation for the original theoretical contribution of this paper: the argument for a deliberately constructed syncretic model that addresses these very contradictions.

Comparative Analysis: Foundational Contradictions in the Institution of Kingship

The institution of the Oba in Southwest Nigeria exists within a field of profound tension, pulled between the immutable pillars of its traditional foundation and the evolving forces of the modern state. A comparative analysis reveals that contemporary conflicts are not superficial disputes but are rooted in fundamental, systemic contradictions between ancient and modern paradigms of authority. The findings indicate that these clashes manifest primarily in three interrelated domains: the sources of legitimacy, the principles of succession, and the nature of the ruler's duty, each creating a distinct point of institutional crisis.

First, the analysis identifies an irreconcilable dichotomy in the very source of legitimacy and authority. In ancient Yoruba society, the right to rule was sacrosanct, derived from divine right and spiritual sanction. The Oba was understood as the earthly representative of the gods and ancestors, a ruler whose authority was preordained and thus beyond mortal dispute (Bewaji, 2005). In stark contrast, the modern Nigerian state operates on constitutional and democratic principles, where legitimacy is conferred by legal statute and popular consent (Ogunade, 2010). For contemporary Obas, this creates a crisis of dual legitimacy. Their traditional authority, rooted in the unseen world, carries diminishing weight in a secular bureaucracy, while their lack of electoral mandate limits their formal political capital. This study finds that the result is often a pervasive legitimacy deficit, where neither sphere fully validates their position, leading to public dissatisfaction and challenges to their relevance (Babatola, 2020).

Second, the core mechanism of succession—hereditary bloodline versus meritorious selection—constitutes a major axis of conflict. The analysis confirms that the traditional system prioritizes genealogy, operating on the belief that royal lineage inherently confers sacredness and leadership qualities. However, this system carries the demonstrable risk of elevating individuals based solely on birth, potentially without the competence required for contemporary governance (Olupayimo & Oyegbemi, 2020). Modern governance ideology, conversely, champions meritocracy, valuing demonstrated skill, education, and administrative acumen. The evidence shows that the insistence on unalterable hereditary rights in the face of demands for competent leadership fuels intense succession wars. Communities are fractured between factions defending primordial lineage rights

and those advocating for a capable leader, resulting in the protracted disputes and instability documented in case studies (Onipede, 2022).

Third, the analysis uncovers a fundamental role conflict arising from the redefinition of the Oba's central duty from spiritual intermediary to civic administrator. Historically, the Oba's paramount function was spiritual; he was the chief priest responsible for maintaining cosmic balance and communal harmony (Oguntola-Laguda, 2017). The modern secular state has systematically marginalized this divine portfolio, recasting leadership in terms of socio-economic development and ethical administration. While ethical governance is emphasized (Ayantayo, 2009), the findings suggest that the spiritual void left by the state's secular framework creates a disconnect between the ruler and the deeply spiritual identity of the community. In societies where spirituality remains a primary cultural cornerstone, the Oba's diminished ritual role can be perceived as a betrayal of core duty, leading to cultural alienation.

These contradictions are encapsulated in the Yoruba proverb: *"Iwofa ri Oba l'ona, o ra wo pe boya o na iba je Oba. Iwofa o mo pe eru Oba o kere"* (The servant sees the king on the road and wonders if he too could be king. The servant does not know the king's burden is not small). This wisdom underscores the profound, often unseen ethical and spiritual burdens of kingship, which are obscured in modern, transactional perceptions of power. The central analytical finding of this section is that these three contradictions of legitimacy source, succession principle, and primary duty collectively generate the persistent crises that undermine the institution. This diagnosis clarifies the specific problem space: a tripartite institutional strain between sacred tradition, legal-rational modernity, and communal expectation. It is within this defined problem space that the present study positions its original contribution. Existing scholarship often delineates these tensions but tends to advocate for solutions favouring one paradigm over another. The following sections will explore how the proposed syncretic model seeks to address these contradictions not by choosing a dominant paradigm, but by proposing a structured integration of their core legitimizing principles.

The Commercialization of the Throne: Erosion of Sacred Legitimacy and Its Socio-Political Consequences

The commodification of traditional kingship in Southwest Nigeria represents a profound existential crisis for the institution. This analysis identifies a critical shift from a sacral model of authority to a transactional one, driven by the escalating financialization of both the selection process and the performance of the royal office. Historically, the legitimacy of an Oba was irrevocably rooted in divine will and cultural precedent, with selection seen as a sacred covenant mediated through spiritual mechanisms like the Ifá oracle (Raheem, 2025; Ogunade, 2010). This spiritual mandate positioned the king as an intermediary whose authority was derived from supernatural sanction, explicitly not from secular capital.

The findings of this study indicate that this foundational principle has been systematically eroded. Evidence suggests that ascension to the throne is now increasingly contingent on financial capability and political patronage (Omobowale, 2008). This transformation is fueled by exorbitant demands on candidates and incumbents to fund lavish installation ceremonies and public

engagements. Consequently, the throne is progressively perceived in transactional terms, accessible primarily to the affluent or politically connected, which effectively marginalizes candidates of modest means regardless of their spiritual or genealogical standing (Oyeweso, 2017). This commercialization corrupts the ethical core of the appointment process, allowing financial inducement to override established normative procedures (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014). The resultant erosion not only destabilizes individual successions but also fundamentally delegitimizes the institution, as communities come to perceive selection as a corruptible market exchange rather than a sacred revelation.

A key finding is the direct link between this commercialization and a severe deficit in legitimacy, which corrodes communal trust. When leadership is perceived as purchased, the ruler's moral authority which is the bedrock of traditional governance, dissipates. This triggers tangible internal strife, as documented in cases from communities like Ikirun and Igbajo, where contested, commercially-tinged appointments have led to public protests and protracted unrest (Olu-Owolabi et al., 2024; Onipede, 2022). Community members become estranged from leaders viewed as illegitimate, rejecting their authority and disrupting the social cohesion the Oba is meant to steward.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the ramifications extend critically into the socio-economic realm. Traditional rulers historically function as vital developmental intermediaries (Olawoyin, 2023). However, a leader shrouded in legitimacy controversies loses the credibility required for this role. Public cooperation wanes, stalling community initiatives in education, healthcare, and infrastructure (Saka-Olokungboye et al., 2023). The perception that a ruler prioritizes financial aggrandizement over communal welfare exacerbates inequalities and fosters widespread disillusionment (Onuoha & Enyiazu, 2023). This breakdown severely limits the institution's capacity to mediate conflict or foster social unity, particularly among younger generations increasingly skeptical of traditional authority (Opasina, 2016).

In summary, the analytical conclusion of this section is that commercialization constitutes a multi-faceted institutional threat. It subverts the spiritual and ethical foundations of kingship, incites intra-community conflict, and cripples the institution's developmental utility. This finding that the throne's commodification creates a self-reinforcing cycle of delegitimization and dysfunction, provides a crucial diagnostic lens. It establishes the urgent need for a reconceptualized framework of legitimacy, one that can structurally inoculate the institution from such transactional forces. This diagnosis directly informs the originality of the subsequent argument, which moves beyond merely condemning commercialization to proposing a constitutive model designed to resolve its root causes by reintegrating sacred, genealogical, and merit-based sources of authority.

A Syncretic Model for Legitimacy: Architecting a Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the foundational contradictions and the corrosive impact of commercialization reveals that the institution's crisis is structural, stemming from incompatible sources of authority. This necessitates moving beyond diagnosing tensions to theoretically constructing a viable resolution. The findings of this study culminate in the proposition of a syncretic model of legitimacy, conceived as a deliberate, principled integration of traditional and modern paradigms. This model is not an advocacy for reform but an analytical framework designed to resolve the

identified contradictions by constructing a composite basis for authority where spiritual sanction, genealogical right, and demonstrated merit are not mutually exclusive but are codified as interdependent pillars.

The model's first theoretical component addresses the fractured appointment process. It proposes the conceptual framework of a hybridized selection body. This body, integrating lineage heads (*Omooye*), priestly representatives, and non-partisan elders, would operationalize a two-stage process that sequentially validates different forms of legitimacy. The first stage respects the principle of hereditary eligibility, confining candidacy to verified royal lineages and thus acknowledging the traditional pillar of genealogical right. The second stage introduces a transparent meritocratic assessment of eligible candidates against published criteria such as educational attainment, proven community leadership, and moral probity, thereby incorporating the modern demand for competence. Crucially, the framework posits that the final selection requires spiritual authentication through consultation of the Ifá oracle. This sequence is analytically significant; it ensures the process culminates in, rather than begins with, divine sanction, theoretically insulating it from *post-hoc* political manipulation and restoring the sacred covenant as the culminating act of legitimacy (Adegbami, 2020).

To address the role conflict and governance deficit, the syncretic model further theorizes the formal structuring of traditional governance functions within the modern polity. This involves the conceptual codification of two institutions. First, a *Traditional Ethics and Arbitration Panel*, formalizing the Council of Elders' role into a first-line, culturally-grounded mechanism for mediating chieftaincy and community disputes. This provides a structured alternative to immediate litigation, leveraging indigenous conflict resolution knowledge (Nweke, 2012). Second, the model envisions a *Statutory Joint Council* as a formal interface for collaborative governance. This body, convening the Oba, chiefs, and elected local government officials, creates a structured platform for harmonizing community development plans (Aiyede, 2009). Theoretically, this integrates traditional rulers into the development architecture not as sovereigns, but as stakeholder-partners, clarifying their modern civic role while utilizing their grassroots influence.

Finally, the model directly engages the problem of commercialization by proposing a re-sanctification of the institution's symbolic economy. The analysis suggests that countering commodification requires depersonalizing the throne's financial aspects. The theoretical response is twofold: first, the establishment of community-endorsed standards to regulate the scale and funding of installation ceremonies, shifting emphasis from personal wealth display to communal dignity; second, the creation of a communal trust to fund core traditional activities. This approach, coupled with public investment in cultural patrimony (Oyewumi, 2016), is designed to collectively finance kingship's symbolic functions. This strategically re-centres the ethical philosophy of leadership, where authority is rooted in service and integrity (Bewaji, 2005), over its perception as a vehicle for accumulation.

The originality of this syncretic model lies in its structured, integrative response to the tripartite legitimacy crisis. It advances beyond existing scholarship, which often merely critiques the tradition-modernity clash or advocates for the supremacy of one system, by offering a principled blueprint for their institutional fusion. It posits that sustainability is not found in choosing between

sacred rite and secular contest, but in architecting a system where each form of validation—spiritual, genealogical, and meritocratic—is given a definitive, procedural role in constituting an Oba's authority. This framework provides the theoretical foundation for the specific, actionable recommendations that follow.

Recommendations

To resolve the structural crises diagnosed in this study, the implementation of concrete, multi-level reforms is essential. The following recommendations outline specific institutional, legal, and cultural actions designed to operationalize the syncretic model of legitimacy, aiming to restore the integrity, relevance, and stabilizing function of the kingship institution in Southwest Nigeria.

1. Institutionalize a Hybrid Selection Process through Statutory Kingmaker Councils

We recommend that state legislatures, in consultation with the Council of Obas and community stakeholders, enact laws to establish statutorily recognized *Kingmaker Councils* in each kingdom. These councils, composed of verified lineage heads (*Omooye*), priestly representatives (e.g., *Aworo* or *Ifa* priests), and respected non-partisan elders, should be mandated to administer a codified, two-stage selection procedure. The first stage must verify hereditary eligibility within designated royal lineages. The second stage should subject eligible candidates to a transparent meritocratic assessment based on published criteria, including formal education, demonstrated leadership in community development, moral probity, and knowledge of history and custom. The final step must require spiritual authentication of the selected candidate through the Ifá oracle. This sequence—genealogical qualification, meritocratic filtration, and culminating divine sanction—should be codified to protect the process from political manipulation and commercial influence.

2. Enact Legal Safeguards and a Code of Ethical Conduct

To insulate the institution from political and commercial exploitation, state governments must promulgate *Traditional Institution Charters*. These charters should explicitly prohibit executive interference in selection processes and criminalize the commercial trafficking of chieftaincy titles. Concurrently, the national Council of Obas should draft and ratify a binding *Code of Ethical Conduct for Traditional Rulers*. This code must mandate financial transparency, requiring the periodic disclosure (in a culturally appropriate format) of resources related to the office. It should also establish clear, internal grievance and mediation procedures for addressing complaints against a sitting Oba, providing an accountability mechanism that operates within the traditional framework before recourse to secular litigation.

3. Formalize Collaborative Governance and Community Engagement Structures

To rebuild trust and integrate traditional authority into modern governance, we recommend the creation of a *Statutory Joint Council* in each local government area. This council, convening quarterly, should include the Oba, his senior chiefs, the elected local government chairperson, councillors, and representatives from youth and women's groups. Its mandate should be to harmonize community development plans and mediate conflicts. Furthermore, the selection process

managed by the Kingmaker Council should incorporate a mandatory, moderated town hall forum where shortlisted candidates present their vision and respond to community questions, embedding a mechanism for direct public engagement and consent-building.

4. Integrate Cultural Education into Formal and Community Curricula

A sustained investment in cultural education is critical for intergenerational legitimacy. We advocate for the integration of structured modules on indigenous Yoruba governance, the philosophy of kingship, and civic ethics into the state-approved curricula for secondary and tertiary institutions within the region. Complementing this, community-based initiatives—such as publicly documented rites of passage, cultural heritage workshops, and the digital archiving of oral histories—should be supported by local governments and cultural trusts. This dual approach will foster an informed citizenry that values the institution's sacred foundations while critically engaging with its modern role.

5. Implement Professional Development Programs for Traditional Rulers

To equip Obas for their complex dual mandate, specialized training programs should be developed in partnership with universities and leadership institutes. These programs should cover essential modules in conflict resolution, public administration, project management, and ethical leadership. Attendance should be encouraged and potentially mandated for newly installed rulers, ensuring they possess the skills necessary to be effective civic leaders and custodians of tradition. This strategic adaptation bridges the gap between the institution's sacred heritage and the practical demands of contemporary community governance.

Ultimately, these interdependent recommendations are designed to cultivate the proposed syncretic model, where legitimacy is consciously built upon a tripartite foundation: traditional sanctity (via genealogy and divine assent), demonstrated merit, and communal consent. Only through such a comprehensive, legally-grounded framework can the kingship institution transcend its current crises and secure its vital role as a pillar of social cohesion and sustainable development.

Conclusion

This study has elucidated that the protracted conflicts surrounding kingship succession in Southwest Nigeria stem from a fundamental crisis of institutional legitimacy. The analysis demonstrates that this crisis is structural, arising from the unresolved tension between the traditional, sacral foundations of authority rooted in divine sanction and hereditary lineage and the modern imperatives of democratic accountability and legal-rational governance. The historical trajectory from sacred rite to secular contest, marked by colonial manipulation, post-independence politicization, and rampant commercialization, has eroded the moral authority of the Oba, transforming succession into a recurrent source of communal discord.

The primary implication of these findings is that the institution's sustainability and relevance depend on its capacity for deliberate, structured reform. The proposed syncretic model of legitimacy, which integrates spiritual validation, genealogical right, and demonstrated merit into a

composite framework, offers a viable pathway forward. This model moves beyond the entrenched dichotomy between tradition and modernity, suggesting that the institution's future lies not in a return to an idealized past nor a full capitulation to secularism, but in a principled hybridization. Implementing the recommended legal, institutional, and educational reforms would reposition the Oba as a unifying figure capable of bridging cultural heritage and contemporary development needs.

Future research should build upon this theoretical framework by conducting empirical case studies of communities experimenting with hybrid selection or governance mechanisms. Comparative studies with other African traditional institutions undergoing similar legitimization challenges could further refine the model's principles. Additionally, qualitative research measuring community perceptions of legitimacy before and after specific reforms would provide valuable data on the practical efficacy of syncretic approaches.

In the end, the Southwest Nigerian kingship institution can overcome its present problems by adopting such a reconstructed basis. In order to secure its vital role in promoting social cohesion, maintaining cultural identity, and advancing sustainable development for future generations, it can regain its sacred purpose while developing into an effective partner in government.

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