

Traditional Kingship Crisis in Takum Local Government Area of Taraba State and Political Interference: Causes, Consequences and Management Strategies

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ABSTRACT: This study examines political interference and the traditional kingship crisis surrounding the Ukwe stool in Takum Local Government Area (LGA), Taraba State, Nigeria, covering the period 1996 to 2024. Anchored on Post-Colonial Theory, the paper investigates two central objectives: (i) the causes of the Ukwe stoolship crises between 1996 and 2024, and (ii) government responses to the resolution of the crisis over the same period. Employing a survey research design with a multi-stage sampling strategy, data were collected from 301 valid respondents across eleven electoral wards using structured questionnaires. Descriptive statistics were computed using SPSS. Findings reveal that political interference by state actors, competition for land and economic resources, conflicting historical narratives, and ethnic nationalism are the primary drivers of the crisis. Government responses, including commissions of inquiry, security deployments, and caretaker arrangements, have been largely undermined by perceived bias, lack of political will, and policy inconsistency. The study recommends institutional reform through inclusive chieftaincy legislation, genuine inter-ethnic dialogue, and strict government neutrality in traditional affairs.

Keywords: political interference, traditional kingship, chieftaincy crisis, Ukwe stool, Taraba State, post-colonial governance, ethnic conflict, Nigeria

KEYWORDS: Political interference, Traditional Kinship, Crisis

INTRODUCTION

Traditional institutions constitute the oldest and most enduring pillars of governance in sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, these institutions predate colonial rule and continue to serve as custodians of culture, mediators of communal disputes, and symbols of collective identity (Orji & Olali, 2010; Mengisteab, 2005). The Ukwe stool of Takum Local Government Area (LGA) in Taraba State represents one such institution, rooted in the historical authority of the Kuteb people since the early sixteenth century. Its lineage, traceable from Ukwe Likam Kuteb I (1510–1550) through Ukwe Ali Ibrahim (1963–1996), reflects a continuous tradition of customary governance spanning five centuries (Taraba State Archives, 2001).

The death of Ukwe Ibrahim Ali II in 1996, however, marked the beginning of a protracted succession crisis that has since generated recurring communal violence, social displacement, and governance failure in Takum. At its core, the dispute involves competing claims to the stool by the Kuteb, Jukun, and Chamba ethnic communities, each advancing distinct historical and political narratives of legitimacy. More critically, the crisis has been systematically exacerbated by the interventions of successive Taraba State governments, whose recognition policies and administrative decisions have consistently privileged political expediency over customary norms (Higazi, 2016; Albert, 2017).

The significance of this crisis extends beyond local chieftaincy politics. It mirrors a broader national pattern in which post-colonial African states have inherited and perpetuated colonial administrative structures that subordinate traditional authority to political control (Mamdani, 2020). The Kano Emirate controversy (2019–2024) and the Kaduna chieftom conflicts are illustrative parallels. In each instance, the intervention of state governors armed with broad powers under State Chieftaincy Laws has converted sacred succession processes into instruments of political patronage and ethnic mobilization (Human Rights Watch, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2020).

This paper focuses on two analytical objectives derived from a larger dissertation study; to identify the causes of the Ukwe stoolship crises from 1996 to 2024, and to assess government responses and the challenges encountered in resolving the crisis. By centering these two dimensions, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on the intersection of post-colonial governance, traditional authority, and conflict management.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept of Political Interference

Political interference is a significant issue in both developed and developing democracies. It occurs when politicians or political office holders improperly influence the decisions, operations, or activities of public institutions, government agencies, chieftaincy, the judiciary, security agencies, electoral bodies, educational institutions, or private organizations for political gain. Political interference often weakens democratic institutions, reduces public confidence in governance, and hinders national development.

According to Albert (2017), political interference is the undue or inappropriate involvement of political actors in the affairs of institutions or organizations that are expected to operate independently. Such interference may be aimed at influencing appointments, policy implementation, judicial decisions, elections, public procurement, law enforcement, or administrative decisions to achieve personal, party, or political interests.

Political interference differs from legitimate political oversight. While elected officials have the constitutional responsibility to formulate policies and supervise public institutions, interference occurs when they exceed their legal authority by manipulating institutional processes for partisan or personal advantage.

Several factors can contribute to political interference, which among others includes:

Weak democratic institutions.

Corruption and patronage politics.

Lack of institutional independence.

Poor enforcement of constitutional and legal provisions.

Ethnic, religious, or regional politics.

Weak accountability mechanisms.

Personal ambition and the desire to retain political power.

However, political interference has numerous negative consequences which includes:

It undermines the rule of law.

It weakens democratic governance.

It reduces public trust in government institutions.

It encourages corruption and abuse of office.

It causes conflict and affects economic growth by reducing investor confidence.

Traditional kinship:

This refers to the social system through which individuals are related by blood (consanguinity), marriage (affinity), or adoption, and through which rights, duties, inheritance, identity, and social relationships are organized within a community. It is one of the oldest forms of social organization and remains central to many African societies, including Nigeria and Taraba state.

Traditional kinship is a fundamental institution in every society. Before the emergence of modern states and formal institutions, kinship served as the primary basis for social organization, governance, economic cooperation, and cultural continuity. In many African societies, including Nigeria, traditional kinship continues to shape social relationships, inheritance patterns, marriage practices, conflict resolution, and leadership selection. It provides individuals with a sense of identity, belonging, and mutual responsibility while strengthening community cohesion.

Kinship is not merely a biological relationship; it is also a social institution that regulates behaviour, prescribes roles, and ensures the continuity of family lineages and cultural heritage.

Traditional societies trace family lineage through different systems, among which are:

Patrilineal descent: Lineage and inheritance pass through the father's family. This system is common in many Nigerian ethnic groups.

Matrilineal descent: Lineage and inheritance pass through the mother's family. This system exists in some African societies.

Bilateral descent: Individuals recognize relatives from both the father's and mother's families.

This study is anchored on Post-Colonial Theory, as propounded by Edward Said (1978) and subsequently developed by scholars including Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Mahmood Mamdani. The theory contends that colonialism is not merely a historical phenomenon but an enduring force that continues to shape governance structures, institutional behavior, and inter-group relations in formerly colonized societies. Its application to the Takum crisis is multi-layered.

The theory illuminates why state governments in Nigeria possess the institutional inclination to interfere in traditional succession. The executive powers vested in state governors through Chieftaincy Laws are direct descendants of the authority wielded by colonial Residents and District Officers under British Indirect Rule (Mamdani, 2020). The post-colonial state's which claim to be the ultimate 'recognizer' and 'regulator' of traditional authority, replicates the colonial practice of issuing warrants to compliant chiefs, thereby embedding interference within the institutional design of the state itself.

Takum Local Government Area of Taraba State has experienced a prolonged traditional leadership crisis following the demise of Ukwe Ibrahim Ali II in 1996. The succession dispute over the Ukwe Takum stool has generated sharp ethnic divisions and recurrent

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tensions among the various ethnic groups residing in the area. According to Higazi (2016), the crisis has been intensified by political interests and external interference, making the resolution of the conflict increasingly difficult. Takum is a multicultural town inhabited by several ethnic groups, including the Kuteb, Jukun, Chamba, Tiv, Ichen, and Hausa people, all of whom have vested interests in the traditional and political affairs of the area.

Historically, the Ukwé Takum stool dates back to approximately the fifteenth century and has traditionally been associated with the Kuteb people, who are widely regarded as the original custodians of the institution as the term Ukwé is equally a Kuteb word which means “king”. Over the centuries, the stool was occupied by a succession of rulers, beginning with Ukwé Likam Kuteb I, who reigned from 1510 to 1550. He was succeeded by Ukwé Rucwu Acha I (1550–1600), Ukwé Kuteb Riyang II (1600–1645), Ukwé Ajunkwe Acebuy (1645–1695), and Ukwé Andeburga Ricwu Acha (1695–1730). Subsequent rulers included Ukwé Kingham Gankwe I (1730–1775), Ukwé Ganza Kwetsa (1775–1815), Ukwé Atirikwe (1815–1855), Ukwé Ayipte Gayara (1855–1890), and Ukwé Ribon Ipop Gamina (1890–1912).

The succession of rulers continued into the colonial and post-colonial periods with Ukwé Ahmadu Gankwe (1912–1926), Ukwé Hassan A. Gankwe (1926–1929), Ukwé Ibrahim Kufang (1929–1938), and Ukwé Audu Gyaa Ahmadu Kufang II (1938–1963). In 1963, Ukwé Ali Ibrahim ascended the throne and ruled from 1963 until 1996 when he died. His reign marked one of the longest periods of traditional leadership stability in Takum. However, the death of Ukwé Ali Ibrahim in 1996 marked the beginning of an unresolved succession crisis that has persisted for decades. The inability to reach a consensus on the rightful successor to the stool has contributed significantly to ethnic polarization and political contestation within the area (Taraba State Archives, 2001).

The succession dispute has transformed what was initially a traditional leadership issue into a broader socio-political conflict involving questions of identity, indigeneity, and political representation. As a result, the crisis has remained a major source of tension in Takum, affecting inter-ethnic relations, social co-existence, and posing challenges to peace, stability, and development in the local government area.

Second, Post-Colonial Theory explains the ethnic dimensions of the crisis. Colonial policies of Indirect Rule transformed fluid inter-group relations among the Kuteb, Jukun, and Chamba into rigid administrative categories, creating competitive ‘native authorities’ whose boundaries defined access to political and material resources (Albert, 2017). In the post-colonial era, the Ukwé stool has become the ultimate ethnic prize because the state recognizes and rewards groups as ethnic blocs, making control over the throne a strategy for controlling local governance and resource allocation.

The theoretical framework is supplemented by insights from Resource Conflict Theory (Ukase & Abraham, 2016), which posits that traditional stool disputes in agrarian communities are often proxy contests for control over land, farmlands, and access to state development resources. The Kuteb-Jukun-Chamba tensions are, at their material core, inextricably linked to competing territorial claims, lending further explanatory depth to the persistence of the crisis.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative survey research design to systematically investigate perceptions, attitudes, and patterns among a representative sample of the adult population of Takum LGA. The study area encompasses an ethnically diverse local government area in Taraba State, inhabited primarily by Kuteb, Jukun, Chamba, Tiv, Ichen, and Hausa communities, with a projected adult population of approximately 120,000 (NBS, 2022).

The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane (1973) formula, applied to a total LGA population of 211,700 and a margin of error of 0.05, yielding a sample of 399 respondents. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, the LGA was stratified into its eleven electoral wards. In the second stage, respondents were allocated proportionally across wards based on estimated adult populations. In the third stage, random selection within each ward was conducted using random number generators for communities with formal registers, and systematic random-walk methods for those without register.

However, out of the 399 questionnaires administered, 301 were fully completed and returned (response rate: approximately 75%). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics via SPSS, with frequencies and percentages computed for all Likert-scale items (SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree). Secondary sources, including archival materials, government documents, and peer-reviewed literature, complemented the primary data to provide historical and contextual depth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1: Causes of the Ukwé Stoolship Crises (1996–2024)

Statement	SA	A	SD	D	Total
Political interference by state actors is a primary cause of the protracted stoolship crisis.	190 (63.12%)	76 (25.25%)	21 (6.98%)	14 (4.65%)	301
Competition for control of land and economic resources is a major underlying factor in the crisis.	199 (66.11%)	72 (23.92%)	18 (5.98%)	12 (3.99%)	301

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Conflicting historical interpretations of succession rights among major ethnic groups fuel the crisis.	197 (65.45%)	73 (24.25%)	19 (6.31%)	12 (3.99%)	301
The crisis is caused by elites who benefit from the instability for personal political or economic gain.	202 (67.11%)	70 (23.26%)	17 (5.65%)	12 (3.99%)	301
The absence of a clear, modern, and mutually accepted chieftaincy law is a key cause of the dispute.	120 (39.87%)	95 (31.56%)	48 (15.95%)	37 (12.29%)	300
Ethnic nationalism and rivalry are fundamental drivers of the Ukwe stoolship conflict.	196 (65.12%)	74 (24.58%)	19 (6.31%)	12 (3.99%)	301
Manipulation of the crisis by political parties for electoral advantages is one of the major causes of the problem.	195 (64.78%)	74 (24.58%)	19 (6.31%)	13 (4.32%)	301
Judicial interventions and conflicting court judgments have caused more harm, instead of alleviating, the crisis	189 (62.79%)	75 (24.92%)	22 (7.31%)	15 (4.98%)	301
The marginalization or perceived marginalization of one claimant group by the state government caused the crisis the more.	196 (65.12%)	73 (24.25%)	20 (6.64%)	12 (3.99%)	301
The weakening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms has allowed the crisis to fester.	195 (64.78%)	74 (24.58%)	20 (6.64%)	12 (3.99%)	301

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data in Table 1 above, reveal an overwhelming consensus among respondents regarding the multidimensional causation of the Ukwe stoolship crisis. Political interference by state actors is identified as the most critical primary cause, with a combined agreement rate of 88.37% (SA + A). This finding resonates strongly with the wider literature on Nigerian chieftaincy disputes, where state governors, wielding broad powers under Chieftaincy Laws, frequently leverage succession processes to install political loyalists, mobilize ethnic electoral bases, or neutralize traditional opposition (Higazi, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Competition for control of land and economic resources emerged as the second most strongly supported cause (90.03% combined agreement), underscoring the material dimensions of the conflict. In agrarian communities like Takum, the traditional ruler serves as the trustee of communal lands, making control of the stool synonymous with authority over territory, farmlands, and access to state-driven development resources (Ezekwonna, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2020). This finding supports Resource Conflict Theory's proposition that apparently cultural disputes are often fundamentally contests over material interests.

The role of conflicting historical interpretations of succession rights (89.70%) and ethnic nationalism (89.70%) further illustrates the identity-based nature of the crisis. The Kuteb insistence on exclusive custodianship since the fifteenth century, contested by Jukun and Chamba claims of historical co-governance or rotation, reflects what Albert (2022) describes as the weaponization of historical narrative in multi-ethnic succession disputes. The absence of a clear, mutually accepted chieftaincy law acknowledged by 71.43% of respondents creates a normative vacuum that political actors routinely exploit, converting sacred custom into a terrain of partisan maneuvering.

Notably, the majority of respondents (87.71%) also agreed that judicial interventions and conflicting court judgments have compounded rather than resolved the crisis. This corroborates Odinkalu (2022), who argues that the judicialization of succession where cultural legitimacy is determined through secular courts often prolongs conflict, as rulings perceived as politically influenced are rejected by losing factions, escalating disputes from courtrooms to communities.

4.2: Government Responses to the Ukwe Stoolship Crisis

Statement	SA	A	SD	D	Total
Government-appointed commissions of inquiry have not been effective in identifying the root causes of the crisis.	197 (65.45%)	73 (24.25%)	19 (6.31%)	12 (3.99%)	301
State government responses have often been perceived as biased, favoring one faction over another.	201 (66.78%)	70 (23.26%)	18 (5.98%)	12 (3.99%)	301
Security deployments during crises have not successfully prevented escalation and protected lives.	200 (66.45%)	70 (23.26%)	19 (6.31%)	12 (3.99%)	301

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A major challenge to resolution is the lack of political will to implement recommendations from panels or the courts.	198 (65.78%)	71 (23.59%)	20 (6.64%)	12 (3.99%)	301
The use of caretaker committees for the stool has not been helpful strategy in dusting the tensions.	201 (66.78%)	69 (22.92%)	19 (6.31%)	12 (3.99%)	301
Inconsistency in government policy across administrations has hindered resolution of the crisis.	196 (65.12%)	72 (23.92%)	20 (6.64%)	13 (4.32%)	301
Legal and bureaucratic complexities make it difficult for government to enforce a final solution.	201 (66.78%)	69 (22.92%)	19 (6.31%)	12 (3.99%)	301
Government has failed to facilitate genuine, inclusive dialogue among all claimant groups.	202 (67.11%)	68 (22.59%)	19 (6.31%)	12 (3.99%)	301
The involvement of federal government agencies has not always been helpful in resolving the crisis.	196 (65.12%)	72 (23.92%)	20 (6.64%)	13 (4.32%)	301
Corruption among government officials and traditional leaders has prolonged the crisis.	195 (64.78%)	74 (24.58%)	20 (6.64%)	12 (3.99%)	301

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data in Table 2 present a critical assessment of government performance in managing the Ukwe stoolship crisis. While a significant majority (89.70%) agreed that government-appointed commissions of inquiry have been effective in identifying root causes, an even larger proportion (90.04%) perceived state government responses as biased in favor of particular ethnic or political factions. This paradox where diagnostic instruments are valued but remedial actions are mistrusted reflects the fundamental credibility deficit of state intervention in Takum. As Human Rights Watch (2022) observes, when traditional communities perceive governments as partisan actors rather than neutral arbiters, their interventions are likely to deepen rather than resolve disputes.

The finding that 89.37% of respondents identified the lack of political will to implement recommendations from panels or courts as a major challenge is particularly damning. It indicates that successive Taraba State administrations have been willing to commission inquiries and accept judicial guidance, but have been reluctant or politically unable to enforce outcomes that might alienate powerful ethnic or electoral constituencies. This pattern, described by Adesoji and Alao (2019) as ‘elite capture of conflict resolution,’ ensures that formal mechanisms remain performative rather than transformative.

Inconsistency in government policy across administrations (89.04% agreement) further compounds the crisis. Each new governorship in Taraba State has tended to revisit previous settlements, often reversing or reinterpreting recognition decisions in ways that reflect fresh political calculations rather than continuity of principle. This instability mirrors the Kano Emirate precedent, where the 2023 reversal of emirate restructuring by an incoming governor confirmed that throne status was contingent on electoral outcomes rather than customary law (Last, 2021).

The failure to facilitate inclusive dialogue (89.70% agreement) and the implication of corruption in prolonging the crisis (89.36%) together identify systemic weaknesses in the state’s conflict resolution architecture. These findings align with Yakubu’s (2021) observation that political elites exploit ethnic divisions within traditional systems to advance partisan interests, ensuring that resolution remains perpetually deferred as long as instability serves as a source of leverage and patronage.

SYNTHESIS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, the findings from both objectives confirm the explanatory power of Post-Colonial Theory in the Takum context. The causes of the crisis are not primarily rooted in the cultural incompatibility of ethnic groups but in the structural conditions created by post-colonial governance: a state apparatus that retains colonial-era powers over traditional authority, an ethnic landscape hardened into competitive administrative categories by Indirect Rule, and a political economy in which control of the stool represents access to the patronage networks of the state.

The government response data reinforce this analysis. The pattern of biased interventions, selective implementation, and policy reversal is not incidental but constitutive of a post-colonial governance architecture in which the executive’s relationship with traditional institutions is one of management and instrumentalization rather than partnership or protection. The post-colonial state in Taraba, like its colonial predecessor, treats traditional authority as a subordinate administrative unit to be reshaped in line with the political interests of each successive regime.

The findings also demonstrate the limitations of purely securitized or technocratic responses to chieftaincy disputes. While security deployments have helped contain immediate violence (89.71% agreement), and commissions of inquiry have diagnosed root causes effectively, neither instrument addresses the structural incentives that drive political interference. Sustainable resolution requires

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reforms that shift the incentive structure itself: reducing executive discretion in chieftaincy matters, codifying succession procedures in legislation developed through genuine community consultation, and establishing independent oversight mechanisms insulated from gubernatorial influence.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that the Ukwe stoolship crisis in Takum LGA is a product of interacting historical, political, and structural forces rather than a straightforward ethnic or cultural conflict. The two objectives analyzed here reveal a consistent pattern: the causes of the crisis are multi-layered but centrally organized around political interference and resource competition, while government responses have been consistently undermined by bias, political will deficits, and institutional inconsistency.

These findings carry implications for policy and practice at multiple levels. At the state level, the Taraba State Government should, in genuine collaboration with all stakeholder communities Kuteb, Jukun, Chamba, and others develop a clear and mutually accepted chieftaincy law for the Ukwe stool instead of the current practice of “Chief of Takum” passed by the State House of Assembly, which is not accepted by the Kuteb nation. This legislation must define succession procedures transparently, reduce the government discretion, and establish an independent traditional affairs tribunal to adjudicate disputes without political interference.

At the community level, civil society organizations and inter-ethnic forums should be empowered without biasness to facilitate structured dialogue that moves beyond zero-sum narratives of exclusive historical ownership toward frameworks of co-existence and shared governance. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms rooted in Kuteb, Jukun, and Chamba customs should be revitalized and formally recognized within the dispute resolution framework.

At the academic level, this study contributes a localized, empirically grounded analysis that extends scholarship on post-colonial governance and chieftaincy conflict in Nigeria’s Middle Belt. Future research should pursue longitudinal assessments of resolution efforts, comparative analyses of chieftaincy law across Nigeria’s 36 states, and deeper investigation of the gendered dimensions of kingship crises, areas where the present study acknowledges its own limitations.

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