

The Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Declaration, and its Hiccups in Ondo State, Nigeria, 1957-2022

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Abstract

The Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy is next-in-command to the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Chieftaincy. As approved chieftaincies in 1957, both accordingly operated in the then Ese-Odo District Council of Okitipupa Division, Ondo Province of Western Region, Nigeria. However, since the creation of Ondo State in 1976, the Tarabiri-Torhu Chieftaincy has not regained its original status. Of the two chieftaincies, existing works have paid more attention to the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Chieftaincy, thereby neglecting the Tarabiri-Torhu Chieftaincy. This work, therefore, examines the Tarabiri-Torhu Chieftaincy between 1957, when it was first approved, and 2022, when Ondo State's White Paper on Ajama Judicial Commission of Inquiry on Chieftaincy Matters failed to approve it. The historical method was adopted; data collected from primary and secondary sources, including oral informants, Archival materials, books, journal articles and doctoral theses, were scrutinised. The work revealed that the non-presentation of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy to the 1977 Morgan Chieftaincy Review Commission by the then Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo, *Pere D. M. E. Eperetun* laid the background to its non-recognition. Again, as the prescribed authority, the failure of the incumbent Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo, *Ibe Pere Z. D. Egbunu*, to provide the necessary support is the last contributory factor to its rejection by the state government in 2022. The work concluded that the aforementioned two traditional rulers' fear of a likely conflict of interest between the office of the Agadagba and that of the Tarabiri-Torhu was unfounded, because their predecessor, *Pere Shadrach Mesarawon*, had earlier done so in 1957 without rift.

Keywords: *Arogbo-Ijo, Tarabiri-Torhu, Ese-Odo, Ondo State, White Paper.*

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Introduction

In colonial Nigeria, the nomination, approval, and appointment of a recognised chief were regulated and codified by native laws and customs, generally referred to as the Chieftaincy Declaration. Simply put, a chieftaincy title is associated with a traditional title holder in a community. It encompasses a prescribed authority or a ruler of a kingdom, with his council of chiefs.¹ According to Alo, the British colonial administration introduced the Chieftaincy Declaration to reduce the rate of chieftaincy contestation during the succession period. He further stated that the promulgation of the Western Region Local Government Law of 1952, which provided specific functions for the chiefs as subordinated agents of colonial administration, notwithstanding, the use of the Chieftaincy Declaration was formalised with the promulgation of the Chiefs' Law of 1955.²

However, according to Oyemakinde, in the defunct Western Region of Nigeria, Chieftaincy Declarations, named Chiefs' Laws, were primarily enacted on 20th June, 1957, and they formed the bedrock of government regulation of the Chieftaincy institution.³ This was carried out because, in the British colonial indirect rule system introduced by Lord Frederick Dealtry Lugard (1858-1945), chiefs were a necessary component at the grassroots level. As such, the appointment, approval, review and reprimand of chiefs occupied the front burner of the British socio-political and other related engagements.⁴ In fact, most of the 1957 codified Chieftaincy Declarations in the defunct Western Region have undergone significant transformations over time, occasioned by conflicts, notably among the Olubadan of Ibadan, the Ooni of Ife, the Osemawe of Ondo, the Deji of Akure, and the Olowo of Owo.⁵ Furthermore, in the defunct Okitipupa Division of Ondo Province of Western Nigeria, declarations on the Olugbo of Ugbo, the Abodi of Ikoya, the Ahaba of Ajagba, the Kalasuwei of Apoi, the Agadagba of Arogbo, the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo, among others, are a few examples of Chieftaincy Declarations enacted in 1957, which have also experienced changes in time past.⁶

¹ Olorunfemi, J. F., and Oloworaran, B. A. 2021. Determining the effect of chieftaincy declaration on native law and custom: towards a consistent judicial approach in Nigeria. *Commonwealth Law Bulletin*, Vol. 47, 2021-Issue 2. Accessed online <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050.1784770>.

² Alo, L. K. 2014. Legal Regulation of Chieftaincy Disputes in Yoruba Land, 1939-1960. A Thesis in the Department of History, Submitted to the Faculty of Arts, in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, pp. 1-18.

³ Oyemakinde, W. 1977. The Chiefs Law and the Regulation of Traditional Chieftaincy in Yoruba Land. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. December 1977, Vol. 1, pp.63-74.

⁴ Oyemakinde, The Chiefs Law...

⁵ Western State Chieftaincy Declarations. <https://wordcat.org>ocle>. Accessed online 16/05/2024.

⁶ Western State of Nigeria, Western Chieftaincy Declarations, Okitipupa Division, Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs.

On the origin of the Arogbo-Ijo⁷ They migrated during the pre-colonial period from the central Niger Delta of Gbaraun in the present-day Bayelsa State. Eventually, they settled in the present-day Ese-Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria.⁸ They are located between longitudes 40 and 50 N and between latitudes 60 and 70 N in the southern part of the State. To the east, they are bound by Safarogbo in Edo State, and Egbema-Ijo of Edo and Delta States; in the west and southern part, by the Ilaje; and by the Ikale in the north-western part.⁹ Some notable communities in the Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom are Arogbo, Amapere, Agadagba-Obon, New Jerusalem, Opubabilebu, Awodikuro, Ogidigba 1, 2 and 3, Igangbo, Biagbini, Ukpe, Bolowou, Ajapa, Opuba, Akpata, etc.¹⁰

The name Arogbo was derived from *Aru Kara Ugbo*,¹¹ which in the Ijo language respectively means a canoe carving forest. That is a canoe-carving forest or land, which was, obviously, later corrupted to Arogbo by the Portuguese.¹² Thus, all the inhabitants of the area are now identified and addressed as the Arogbo-Ijo. Grounded on the above, the traditional head of Arogbo-Ijo is known as the Agadagba of the Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom, with his administrative seat located at the settlement, Arogbo. Equally, the settlement named Arogbo itself is traditionally headed by the Tarabiri-Torhu of the Arogbo chieftaincy title holder. Significantly, in 1957, the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo and the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo were recognised and approved by the Chieftaincy Declarations of the Western Regional government, Ibadan.¹³ However, while the Agadagba of the Arogbo-Ijo is now a "Grade A" *Pere*¹⁴ In the Ondo State Council of Obas, the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo is yet to receive the approval and blessing of the Ondo State government since its creation in 1976.

⁷ The words *Ijo*, *Ijaw* and *Izon* are often used interchangeably by some scholars. However, based on the etymology of the word, the correct word is *Ijo*. Hence, the word *Ijo* is used throughout this work. Meanwhile, wherever and whenever the words *Ijaw* and *Izon* are used in this work, they are direct quotations from earlier scholars.

⁸ Alagoa, E. J. 2005. *A History of the Niger Delta: An Historical Interpretation of Ijo Oral Tradition*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, pp.32–34; and Alagoa, E. J. et al. Eds. 2009. *The Izon of the Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, pp. 401–403.

⁹ Alagoa, E. J. 2005. *A History of the Niger Delta*... p.25.

¹⁰ George, F. 2022. Changing Identities and Inter-Group Relations among the Arogbo-Ijo and Apoi of Ondo State, Nigeria, 1915-2007. A PhD Thesis Submitted to the Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, pp. 29–32.

¹¹ George, F. 2022. Changing Identities and Inter-Group Relations...

¹² The Dutch and other European traders followed suit with the name. See, Alagoa, E. J. 1976. The Niger Delta states and their neighbours, until 1800. Ajayi, J. F. A., and Crowder, M. (Eds). *History of West Africa, Volume One*. Second Edition. Harlow, Essex, UK: Longman Group Ltd., p.338.

¹³ Western State of Nigeria, Western State Chieftaincy Declarations, Okitipupa Division, Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, Declaration Made under Section 4 (2) of the Chiefs Law 1957 of the Customary Law Regulating the Selection of the Agadagba of Ijaw Arogbo Chieftaincy, and Declaration Made under Section 4 (2) of the Chiefs Law 1957 of the Customary Law Regulating the Selection to the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy.

¹⁴ *Pere* is an Ijo word meaning a King in English, and an Oba in Yoruba.

Scholars have yet to adequately examine the circumstances that led to the above situation of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Stool. This paper, therefore, interrogates the factors that contributed to the non-recognition of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy in Ondo State. The paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two examines the traditional quarters in Arogbo as a settlement, and the significance of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy. Section three discusses the recognition and approval of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Declaration by the defunct Western Region in 1957, and its holders in historical perspective. Section four examines the challenges of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy since the birth of Ondo State in 1976, while the fifth section is the conclusion.

The Traditional Administrative Quarters in Arogbo

Administratively, the ancient settlement, Arogbo, was initially divided into nine quarters. These included (1) Agwobiri, (2) Egbesubiri, (3) Erubiri, (4) Apoghobiri, (5) Ekanabiri, (6) Kapabiri, (7) Laghabiri, (8) Angalabiri, and (9) Ekeinbiri.¹⁵ The above administrative divisions necessitated the popular saying and description of Arogbo as a settlement with *isenna-biri*.¹⁶ These were later, on grounds of administrative convenience, and in order of seniority, reduced to the present-day three quarters, namely Agwobiri, Egbesubiri, and Erubiri.¹⁷ These three quarters are traditionally headed by the following title holders: the Agwo of Agwobiri, the Egbesuwei of Egbesubiri, and the Eruwei of Erubiri, respectively. The incumbents are: High Chief Japheth Toboulayefa Iborry, the Agwo of Agwobiri (installed on Saturday, 8 September, 2018); High Chief Keikpo Kuete, the Egbesuwei of Egbesubiri (installed on Friday, 29 December, 2020); and High Chief Oteghe Nanaopiri, the Eruwei of Erubiri (installed on Saturday, 18 September, 2018) respectively. The immediate past heads of the said three quarters, whose demise led to the emergence of the above, were: High Chief Lawson Goodluck Sobijoh, the Agwo of Agwobiri (died 2 November 2009); High Chief Cemes Taiakimi, the Egbesuwei of Egbesubiri (died 14 February 2020); and High Chief Patani Alfred Jigah, the Eruwei of Erubiri (died 18 October 2011).¹⁸

The above three administrative quarters are collectively headed by the chieftaincy title holder known as the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo. The title, now known as the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo, itself, has experienced identity transformations in time past. For instance, the title was initially known as the Amananawei.¹⁹ of Arogbo. Briefly, the incorporation of

¹⁵ Oral interview held with Chief Happy Kawei Atili, 83 years, Community leader, Egbesubiri, Arogbo, 28 August 2015; Alagoa, E. J. *et al.* Eds. 2009. *The Izon of the Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, p. 401.

¹⁶ In Ijo, the expression *isenna-biri* means nine quarters, that is, a settlement with nine quarters.

¹⁷ Oral interview held with High Chief Ebenezer Titiboh, 77 years, the Head of Egberi Lineage of Perebiyenmo Ruling House, Arogbo, Erubiri, 20 March 2024.

¹⁸ Oral interview held with High Chief Boro Naboboh, 58 years, community leader, Opu-Erubiri, Erubiri, Arogbo, 2 May 2024.

¹⁹ The word Amananawei in Ijo means the owner or head of a town

some Yoruba words into the Arogbo-Ijo linguistic space, on grounds of her proximity to the Ilaje and Ikale Yoruba sub-groups, altered it to the Yoruba word *Baale*, which was an aberration. Thereafter, as a calculated move to preserve their unique linguistic identity, it was changed to the Taru of Tarabiri, Arogbo; the Torhu-Atarabiri of Arogbo; the Torhu-Tarabiri of Arogbo; and now to the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo.²⁰ The above changes in nomenclature notwithstanding, the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo is the traditional head of Arogbo as a settlement. Though some scholars²¹ described him as the traditional Prime Minister, frankly speaking, he is the head of the three quarters and the second-in-command to the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom, the only prescribed and consenting authority.

Therefore, firmly grounded on the above historical foundation, whenever a vacancy occurs in respect of the highly revered Agadagba's stool, the incumbent Tarabiri-Torhu chieftaincy acts as the regent until a new Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom is installed. It was in accordance with the above traditional, customary and basic norm that, when His Royal Majesty, *Pere Shadrach Mesarawon Poro*, Opukutu II, the Agadagba and the prescribed or consenting authority of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom (hereinafter called *Pere Mesarawon*), joined his ancestors on Wednesday, 3 August 1960, Chief Joachim Ogongolo Ajuwa from Egbesubiri (quarters), the then Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo, acted as the regent until his demise on Wednesday, 18 September 1968.²² His reign unarguably brought Egbesubiri to the apogee of traditional administration then. As further unveiled by Opirijitei, the recent celebrated instance was that of His Highness Amos Ogbaghaminibofa Sofiyea from Agwobiri (the immediate past Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo), who acted as the regent consequent upon the death of His Royal Majesty, *Pere Defaye Mejuya Ebenezer Eperetun* (JP) (1946-2007), Aaga II, the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom (hereinafter called *Pere Eperetun*), who reigned from 1976 to 2007. The said regency ended when His Imperial Majesty, *Ibe Pere Zacchaeus Doubra Egbunu*, Esquire (JP), Opukutu III, the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom (hereinafter called *Ibe Pere Egbunu*), ascended the throne, with the formal presentation of the Instrument of Appointment and

²⁰ Western Region of Nigeria Gazette, Published by Authority No. 21, Ibadan-2nd May, 1957, Vol. 6 (213); Minutes of the Ese-Odo District Council Meeting held on the 2nd of July, 1957 in the Council Hall at Igbekebo; Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Ese-Odo District Council Traditional Office Holders held in the Council Hall, Igbekebo on Thursday, 19th June, 1958, No. 5/58; and Minutes of the Traditional Members of Ese-Odo District Council held at the Council Hall, Igbekebo on Tuesday, the 23rd of June, 1959.

²¹ Peretei, I. K. 2014. *Arogbo Ijo People and Events*. Abuja: Mentors Communication Limited, Revised Edition, p. 17.

²² Oral interview held with High Chief Sunday Erepaghamini Yayu, 78 years, the Head of Ere Lineage of Perebiyenmo Ruling House, Erubiri, Arogbo, 14 March 202. See also, Eshofonie, G. A. 2009. *The Arogbo Ijaws of Nigeria*. Lagos: Gabson and Sons (Nig) Enterprise Publishers and Educational Materials and Suppliers, pp. 92-94.

Staff of Office by the Ondo State Government on Tuesday, 18 September 2018.²³

The Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Declaration, and its Holders in Historical Perspective

As argued by Oyemakinde, the Chiefs' Law ordains a specific rotational order for chieftaincies with ruling houses. Accordingly, a chieftaincy declaration should state explicitly the order of rotation in which the respective ruling houses are entitled to provide candidates to fill successive vacancies in the chieftaincy. This ensures that no conflict arises among eligible families when vacancies are filled.²⁴ A historiographical exploration of the formal approval of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy reveals that it entailed numerous historical processes in the 1950s. Prior to that, it was operated within the traditional norms for many years, from pre-colonial to the colonial periods. First and foremost, the need to formally register the title was first deliberated and approved at the level of the three quarters at Arogbo, the traditional headquarters. This was followed at the level of Ese-Odo District Council, Igbekebo, the District headquarters, and the same was approved and recommended to the Okitipupa Division, the Divisional Headquarters, for necessary consideration. For instance, the letter of request that emanated from the Ese-Odo District Council, Igbekebo, to Okitipupa, stated thus, *inter alia*:

The Ese-Odo District Council had decided on paragraph 11 of its minutes of meeting held on the 7th of June, 1956, that the Instrument Establishing the Ese-Odo District Council be amended at paragraph 7 (2) to include the name of "The Toru Tarabiri of Arogbo" immediately after the last name of "The Takube of Ipoke". I shall be grateful for the necessary amendment and publication in the Western Region, Nigeria Gazette.²⁵ Consequent upon the receipt of the above, the Divisional Headquarters, Okitipupa, forwarded a letter to the Ondo Provincial headquarters, Akure. It reads thus:

The present position is that of the three districts composing Ese-Odo District Council..., Ijaw Apoi provides three traditional members, Bini Confederation also provides three, while Ijaw Arogbo provides only one. The Ijaw Arogbo are a small but vigorous community, non-Yoruba speaking, and the Council are anxious that they shall have no cause for feeling at a disadvantage in Council affairs. Therefore, they wish a second Arogbo chief to be among the Traditional members, and he is the Toru Tarabiri of Arogbo. I recommend.²⁶

²³ Oral interview held with High Chief Samson Opirijitei, 76 years, the Head of Tarabiri-Torhu Kingmakers Forum, Erubiri, Arogbo, 24 March 2024.

²⁴ Oyemakinde, *The Chiefs Law and the Regulation...*

²⁵ NAI. Ondoprof-1024/No. EODC 1/41. Note: The Torhu-Tarabiri of Arogbo is now known as the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo, while the Takube of Ipoke is now spelt the Takunbe of Ikpoke.

²⁶ NAI. Ondoprof-1024/No. 1531/16-17.

After a careful deliberation of the above subject matter, the Ondo Provincial Headquarters, Akure, forwarded its official recommendation to Ibadan, the Headquarters of the defunct Western Region, thus:

I forwarded an application from the Ese-Odo District Council requesting an amendment to their Instrument to include an additional traditional member. The amendment will read: Paragraph 7 (2). Add "the Taru Tarabiri of Arogbo. Although this exceeds the statutory 25% limit for traditional members, the Minister may be prepared to approve it. I recommend.²⁷

The final approval of Ibadan on the same subject matter was conveyed to Igbekebo, the headquarters of Ese-Odo District Council, in 1957. Consequently, *Oba* Michael Elumaro Olaheyinde II, the Ahaba of Ajagba, the then Chairman of the traditional council, introduced Chief Joachim Ogongolo Ajuwa, the Toru Tarabiri of Arogbo (now known as the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo) as a permanent traditional member of the Council, as approved in the Western Regional Notice No. 395 in Gazette No. 21 of the 2nd of May, 1957.²⁸ The above clearly shows that the combination of the aforementioned necessary processes gave birth to the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Declaration of 1957.

Specifically, according to the Declaration made under Section 4 (2) of the Chiefs Law 1957 of the Customary Law Regulating the Selection to the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy, there are three Ruling Houses. These include (1) Erubiri, (2) Agwobiri and (3) Egbesubiri Ruling Houses. In addition, there are twelve Kingmakers, all named after remarkable personalities of old, namely (1) Chief Bolikoti of Erubiri, (2) Chief Miyenbai of Erubiri, (3) Chief Benitei of Erubiri, (4) Chief Ikeli of Erubiri (5) Chief Eepu of Egbesubiri, (6) Chief Pawei of Egbesubiri, (7) Chief Ofiniege of Egbesubiri, (8) Chief Epini of Egbesubiri, (9) Chief Okpoka of Agwobiri, (10) Chief Atila of Agwobiri, (11) Chief Nanaghan of Agwobiri and (12) Chief Dighipele of Agwobiri.²⁹ The *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* of the method of nomination, selection and appointment need not detain us here. However, as a proviso, the consent of the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom is required for the appointment made by the Kingmakers, but such consent may not be unreasonably withheld.³⁰

²⁷ NAI.Ondoprof-1024/No. 1531/16-17.

²⁸ NAI: OK. 1886. Minutes of the Ese-Odo District Council Meeting held on the 2nd of July, 1957, in the Council Hall at Igbekebo. For further details, see Western Region of Nigeria Gazette Published by Authority, No. 21, Ibadan, 2nd May, 1957, Vol. 6 (213).

²⁹ Declaration Made under Section 4 (2) of the Chiefs Laws 1957 of the Customary Law Regulating the Selection to the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy, made by the chieftaincy committee of Ese-Odo District Council, which has been designated as the competent Council by WRLN No. 22 of 1959 and signed by the Chairman and Secretary of the committee, this 18th day of February, 1960.

³⁰ Declaration Made under Section 4 (2) of the Chiefs Laws 1957 of the Customary Law Regulating the Selection to the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy...

Significantly, the above phenomenal feat was achieved during the time of the late *Pere* Mesarawon (who reigned between 1933 and 1960).³¹ Meanwhile, his original dream in the 1950s was to secure the approval of four Chieftaincy Declarations in his Kingdom, for a start. Accordingly, he formally requested the approval of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo; the Egbeghene of Akpata; the Tabaimotimi of Opuba (now the Neinabiri-Torhu of Opuba); and the Iginabou of Ajapa.³² That dream was almost truncated, as the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy was the only one that scaled through at the district level. Perhaps as an appeasement strategy, the Tabaimotimi of Opuba, the Egbeghene of Akpata, and the Iginabou of Ajapa received emoluments as maintenance of traditional officers throughout the existence of the Ese-Odo District Council. Accordingly, their annual emoluments were £14 (for the Tabaimotimi of Opuba); £7 (for the Egbeghene of Akpata); and £5 (for the Iginabou of Ajapa) respectively, based on taxes derived from their jurisdictions.³³

Comparatively, as neighbours to the Arogbo-Ijo, and within the same time frame, when His Royal Majesty, *Oba* Samuel Adetimehin Oladiran, the Kalasuwe of Apoi, Ugele Idumu III (who reigned between 1955 and 2007) made his requests for the approval of nine chieftaincy titles, all were expressly approved and subsequently registered. These were: the Amananawei of Igbekebo (now the Odogun of Igbekebo); the Amananawei of Igbobini (now the Olu of Igbobini); the Niyon of Kiribo (now the Niyon/Alakpaka of Kiribo); the Gbaluwe of Igbotu; the Okiribiti of Shabomi; the Kenme of Oboro; the Takunbe of Ipoke; the Ibini of Ojuala (now the Ibini/Lebu of Ojuala); and the Jowe of Inikorogha.³⁴ Again, after the creation of the old Ondo State in 1976, and on account of a further request presented to the Ajakaiye Chieftaincy Review Commission by *Oba* Samuel Adetimehin Oladiran, all the above title holders were fully upgraded to the enviable status of kings in 1989, except the Kenme of Oboro on technical grounds.³⁵

³¹ For the record, the Arogbo-Ijo five elected councillors at the Ese-Odo District Council, Igbekebo, at that time were: Mr M. S. Okoro of Erubiri ward; Mr J. T. Akerele of Agwobiri ward; Mr J. K. Oyobolo of Egbesubiri ward; Mr E. G. Toikumo of Ukpe ward; and Mr T. Mode of Akpata ward. For further details, see NAI: Ondoprof-2960/5 WRLN 265 of Ese-Odo District Council Membership list of 1955.

³² Oral interview held with High Chief Happy Kawei Atili, one of the twelve Tarabiri-Torhu Kingmakers, 83 years, Egbesubiri, 24 May 2015.

³³ NAI: Minutes of Ese-Odo District Council Finance Committee held in the Council Committee Room on Wednesday, 24 September 1958. See also the letter written by the Local Government Adviser, Ondo, No. OK. 1091/472 of 16TH July, 1959.

³⁴ Western State Chieftaincy Declarations, Okitipupa Division, Ministry of Local and Chieftaincy Affairs.

³⁵ Ondo State of Nigeria White Paper on Ajakaiye Chieftaincy Review Commission, June 1989. Note: The Ondo Government established the Ajakaiye Chieftaincy Review Commission in September 1987 to investigate chieftaincies that had generated conflicts, as identified in the Morgan Chieftaincy Review Commission's reports, which examined chieftaincy disputes between 1977 and 1979. It was equally constituted to investigate various representations and claims on the then composition of the Ondo State Council of Chiefs arising from the recommendations of the Adebayo Chieftaincy Review Committee.

For the records, and as a pivotal import of historical discourse, the identities of the present traditional chiefs and kingmakers to the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy are: (1) Chief Bolikoti, High Chief Samson Opirijitei; (2) Chief Miyenbai, Chief Bolosiwei Epemu (3) Chief Benitei, Chief Edamisan Ashidi (4) Chief Ikeli, High Chief Felix George; (5) Chief Eepu, Chief Justus Akin Olople; (6) Chief Pawei, High Chief Monday Kurumah; (7) Chief Ofiniege, High Chief Emotimi Ekuayemiyenkumo Birinimibofa; (8) Chief Epini, High Chief Happy Kawei Atili (now late); (9) Chief Okpoka, Chief Success Agbejule; (10) Chief Atila (Vacant: the last occupant, Chief Karamowei Bubunah, breathed his last on Friday, 26 February, 2021); (11) Chief Nanaghan, High Chief Kingsley Idaweike-ebi Amehin; and (12) Chief Dighipele, Chief Oloye Arenibaro. The above vividly shows that out of the said twelve kingmakers, two are vacant, namely Chief Epini of Egbesubiri and Chief Atila of Agwobiri.³⁶

As a *fait accompli* in historical conversations, according to Carr, the historian and his facts are inseparable.³⁷ Therefore, at this juncture, it is considered a desideratum to unveil the identities of those who have occupied the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy stool and their traditional quarters in brackets. These were (1) Okpoka Koo (Agwobiri); (2) Ukpasu Benitei (Erubiri); (3) Aabo (Egbesubiri); (4) Ebieri Gungun (Egbesubiri); (5) Yonyin Pawei (Egbesubiri); (6) Ote Okpoka (Agwobiri; died 1926); (7) Akerele Bousumogha Okpoka (Agwobiri; died March, 1955); (8) Joachim Ogongolo Ajuwa (Egbesubiri), installed on Thursday, 15 September, 1955 (died September, 1968); (9) Julius Mese Ashidi (Erubiri), installed in 1975 (died 1995); and (10) Amos Ogbaghaminibofa Sofiyea (Agwobiri), installed on 14 August, 1996 (died June, 2021) and (11) the incumbent, High Chief Joseph Ebikhinmo Feku, installed on 27 January, 2023.³⁸

However, it should be noted that some scholars omitted Yonyin Pawei, the 5th Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo, as listed above, and thus incorrectly described Ote Okpoka as the 5th Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo. To set the record straight, and as a credit to R. A. Kekemeke (a traditional griot), in his work, 'The History of Arogbo', correctly added Yonyin Pawei of Egbesubiri, after Ebieri Gungun.³⁹ Therefore, to eschew a costly historical disservice, the rightful inclusion of Yonyin Pawei in this piece accounted for the description of A. O. Sofiyea (1935-2021) as the 10th Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo (who reigned between 1996 and 2021). Since the canons of historical scholarship insist that the historian must be faithful to his

³⁶ Oral interview held with High Chief Emotimi Ekuayemiyenkumo Birinimibofa, 67 years, Tarabiri-Torhu Kingmaker, and Chief Ofiniege of Egbesubiri, Arogbo, 24 March 2024.

³⁷ Carr, E. H. 1987. *What is History?* Second Edition. London: Penguin, p.30.

³⁸ Alagoa, E. J. 2005. *A History of the Niger Delta: An Historical Interpretation of Ijo Oral Tradition*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, p. 198; and oral interviews held with Chief Bolosiwei Epomu, 70 years, Chief Miyenbai of Erubiri, Arogbo, 25 March 2024.

³⁹ Kekemeke, R. A. 1964. The History of Arogbo. *The Light Magazine*. Published by the Arogbo Teachers Union, pp. 2-3.

evidence, a microscopic perusal of the occupiers of the Tarabiri-Torhu stool reveals that Agwobiri has occupied the throne four times; Egbesubiri, five times; and Erubiri two times only.

According to Olopele, as a contributory factor to the disproportional representation to the disadvantage of Erubiri, from Okpoka Koo to Joachim Ogongolo Ajuwa, there was no acceptable rotational order of ascendancy to the throne among the three quarters or ruling houses.⁴⁰ As a truism, the legally binding order of rotation started with the said 1957 Declaration in the following order: (1) Erubiri House, (2) Agwobiri House, and (3) Egbesubiri House (the present ruling house). The then incumbent Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo, Chief Joachim Ogongolo Ajuwa, was from Egbesubiri. This explains why the Egbesubiri Ruling House was explicitly indicated as the then present Ruling House in the 1957 Declaration.⁴¹ Hence, after his exit in 1968, High Chief Julius Mese Ashidi (from the Erubiri Ruling House) occupied the throne in 1975. Thereafter, His Highness A. O. Sofiyea (from the Agwobiri Ruling House) ascended the throne in 1996. For the record, that was the time of the 1996 Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Election Recount ordeal.⁴² Therefore, in line with the said 1957 Declaration as a *grundnorm* of the kingmakers, they elected the incumbent, High Chief J. E. Feku from Egbesubiri Ruling House as the 11th Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo in 2023. Although the year of his election, as stated above, falls outside the scope of this paper, it is deemed necessary for inclusion.

The Challenges of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Stool in Ondo State

According to Yayu,⁴³ Following the creation of Ondo State on Tuesday, 3 February 1976, the first military Governor, Wing Commander Ita Divid Ikpeme, established the Justice Morgan Chieftaincy Commission of 1977. This commission was the first of its kind, tasked with reviewing all existing chieftaincies in Ondo State. As a matter of fact, 176 chieftaincies were presented by the various traditional rulers in the state for necessary considerations.⁴⁴ As background to the issue under historical interrogation, *Pere* Eperetun presented only the 1957 Chieftaincy Declaration of the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo to the Morgan Commission, acting contrary to the Tarabiri-Torhu of the Arogbo Chieftaincy Declaration of 1957. Thus, *Pere* Eperetun, in respect of the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Chieftaincy Declaration, only requested that the name, Perebiri Ruling House, be changed to Perebiyenmo Ruling House. His

⁴⁰ Oral interview held with Chief Justus Akin Olopele, 67 years, Chief Eepu of Egbesubiri, Arogbo, 25 March 2024.

⁴¹ Declaration Made under Section 4 (2) of the Chiefs Laws 1957 of the Customary Law Regulating the Selection to the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy.

⁴² That is, the election of the said His Highness A. O. Sofiyea in 1996 by the kingmakers to the Tarabiri-Torhu Chieftaincy stool generated too much controversy that a recount was ordered, the first in the history of Arogbo.

⁴³ Oral interview held with High Chief Sunday Erepaghamini Yayu, 78 years, Ere Lineage Head, Perebiyenmo Ruling House, Erubiri, Arogbo, 23 March 2024.

⁴⁴ Ondo State of Nigeria White Paper Two on Morgan Chieftaincy Review Commission of 1977, and published in July 1981, p. v.

logical argument was that it was traditionally erroneous for his predecessor (*Pere* Mesarawon) to have named it in 1957, after a quarter (Perebiri) at that time, because Perebiyenmo was the progenitor of the Arogbo-Ijo people.⁴⁵ In their frantic move against the above step of *Pere* Eperetun, Chief Julius Mese Ashidi (who was then the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo), Nathaniel Opokiyu Ajama, Lawrence Ife Egbekun, among others, vehemently urged the Morgan Commission to retain the name Perebiri as the rightful name for the Ruling House, as duly done by *Pere* Mesarawon in 1957. However, the Morgan White Paper, which was eventually released in 1981, changed the hitherto Perebiri Ruling House to Perebiyenmo Ruling House.⁴⁶

The implication of the approval of the Perebiyenmo Ruling House is that it ultimately disqualified the descendants of Ejih and Fiyepaghatei from laying claim to the kingship in the Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom, which they had an equal historical claim to when it was called Perebiri Ruling House in 1957. To give a vivid picture of the controversy, Ejih (male), Perebiyenmo (male) and Fiyepaghatei (female) were biological children of Ogbonu. Hence, when it was called Perebiri Ruling House, both were qualified for the throne. Nevertheless, with the change of the name from Perebiri to Perebiyenmo, the other two descendants were automatically disqualified. This singular action of *Pere* Eperetun is still a matter of litigation between the descendants of Ejih and Fiyepaghatei on one hand, and that of Perebiyenmo on the other hand, with far-reaching implications.⁴⁷

On a careful note, the non-presentation of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Declaration by *Pere* Eperetun to the Morgan Commission for the needed review was firmly rooted on two grounds. One, it was calculated to make the Perebiyenmo Ruling House the only duly approved and registered Ruling House in the entire Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom. Secondly, to prevent a feasible rift between the two, and equally to suppress the traditional weight and influence of the Tarabiri-Torhu of the Arogbo chieftaincy stool.⁴⁸ In other words, Arogbo is the traditional seat of both the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom and that of Tarabiri-Torhu of the Arogbo chieftaincy stool. Hence, the perceived trepidation of the clash of interest and rivalry occupied the mindset of *Pere* Eperetun, the then Agadagba and his supporters at that material time.

According to Birinimibofa,⁴⁹ Another contributory factor was the nonchalant attitude of the three quarters when *Pere* Eperetun, then the

⁴⁵ High Chief Israel Emokenighan, 64 years, Chief Bilebu of Arogbo, Erubiri, 26 March 2024.

⁴⁶ Ondo State of Nigeria White Paper Two on Morgan Chieftaincy Review Commission of 1977, and published in July 1981, p. 92.

⁴⁷ Oral interview held with High Chief Samuel Ojulawo Leloh, 66 years, Chairman, Arogbo Ibe Traditional Council of Chiefs, Opu-Erubiri, Arogbo, 26 March 2024.

⁴⁸ Oral interview held with High Chief J. E. Feku, 62 years, the present Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo, Egbesubiri, Arogbo, 20 March 2024.

⁴⁹ High Chief Emotimi Ekuayebiyenkunmo Birinimibofa, 67 years, Chief Ofiniege of Egbesubiri, Arogbo, 24 March 2024.

leader, decided not to present the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Declaration of 1957 to the Morgan Commission for necessary recognition in 1977. The three quarters collectively failed to make visible moves geared towards the necessary approval and registration of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy as one of the recognised chieftaincies in Ondo State at that crucial time. As further argued by High Chief Joseph Ebikhinmo Feku (the incumbent Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo), though we cannot totally exonerate the leaders of the three quarters for their perceived insouciant action, the bulk stopped at the table of High Chief Mese Ashidi, who was the then incumbent Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo. His failure to firmly stand by his stool and garner formidable support in defence of his traditional stool allowed *Pere* Eperetun to succeed in degrading the stool. That is, no contrary step was taken by the then incumbent when *Pere* Eperetun failed to present the Tarabiri-Torhu Chieftaincy to the Morgan Commission, who is the customary custodian of the stool.⁵⁰ Ironically, when the then Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo, *Pere* Eperetun, initiated strategic and frantic moves to change the name of the Agadagba of Arogbo chieftaincy from Perebiri Ruling House to Perebiyenmo Ruling House, the said High Chief Julius Mese Ashidi, in collaboration with other notable dignities, confronted him, though in vain. However, on the critical matter of his primary and traditional constituency concerning the non-presentation of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Declaration to the Morgan Commission, he failed to meet the expected actions of the incumbent.

Similarly, when the Ajakaiye Chieftaincy Review Commission was inaugurated in 1987⁵¹ To examine certain chieftaincies that generated disputes, the Morgan Commission's reports were reviewed. The then *Pere* Eperetun, just as he had acted in 1977, decided not to present the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy Declaration for necessary action. Again, both the incumbent Tarabiri-Torhu (High Chief Julius Mese Ashidi) and other critical functionaries of the three quarters kept mute. Consequently, the cardinal point being trumpeted is that the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo Chieftaincy is still with melancholic memories, ceaselessly begging and crying to be fully upgraded to the enviable kingship status in the Ondo State Council of Obas. The above demonstrates that human experience is a historical continuum, and that understanding one's position within it is crucial for understanding one's future direction—a principle that remains valid. Thomas Stearns Eliot, therefore, brilliantly argues that time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future is contained in time past.⁵²

The above inaction is obviously the traditional headache of the present confused state in the hierarchical order of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo

⁵⁰ Oral interview held with High Chief J. E. Feku, 62 years, the incumbent Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo, Egbesubiri, Arogbo, 20 March 2024.

⁵¹ Ondo State of Nigeria White Paper on Ajakaiye Chieftaincy Review Commission, June 1989.

⁵² See, Osuntokun, A. I. 1999. Nigerian Foreign Policy in Global Historical Perspective. *An Inaugural Lecture of the University of Lagos*. Lagos University Press, p. 4.

chieftaincy in the Arogbo-Ijo traditional organogram. Though still cosmetically adjudged to be historically the second-in-command to the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Chieftaincy Stool, the Tarabiri-Torhu title holder is no longer a member of the Ese-Odo Council of Obas at the level of Ese-Odo Local Government Area, Igbekebo, and the Ondo State Council of Obas, Akure, because in the eyes of the law, it is a non-approved and unregistered chieftaincy in the Chieftaincy Laws of Ondo State. Furthermore, the recent developments in the Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom, in particular, and Ondo State, in general, clearly demonstrate the actual situation of the Tarabiri-Torhu Chieftaincy Stool. Briefly, Dr Olusegun Mimiko, who ruled the state as Governor between 2009 and 2017, inaugurated Hon. Justice Ajama (rtd), Judicial Commission of Inquiry into deserving cases of recognition, adjustment, upgrading, and elevation of Chieftaincy Stools in Ondo State on 30th January 2015.⁵³ However, Dr Mimiko could not implement the Commission's reports before his tenure ended on 23rd February, 2017. Hence, the White Paper was eventually released by his successor, Arakunrin Oluwarotimi Odunayo Akeredolu, on 24 August 2022.

Again, as a point to note, at the time of the inauguration of the Justice Ajama Judicial Commission of Inquiry in 2015, the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Chieftaincy Stool was vacant, consequent upon the demise of *Pere Eperetun*, who reigned between 1976 and 2007. In line with the Arogbo-Ijo norms, as earlier stated in this work, His Highness Amos Ogbaghaminibofa Sofiyea became the regent of the Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom. The then Regent in question, in collaboration with His Highness Reuben Amatariwei Bekewe, the then Secretary, Arogbo-Ijo Traditional Council, and other necessary stakeholders, requested twenty-one chieftaincies for recognition. The said chieftaincy stools are: (1) The Okoro Ogodio of Awodikuro; (2) the Ogidi of Ogidigba; (3) the Egbeghene of Akpata; (4) the Iginabou of Ajapa; (5) the Awodi of Awodikuro (note: numbers 1 and 5 are from the same community, Awodikuro); (6) the Ibe-Pereatorhu of Arogbo; (7) the Torhunanawei of Aseretorhu; (8) the Amananawei of Ukpe; (9) the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo; (10) the Neinabiri-Torhu of Opupa; (11) the Amananawei of Biagbini; (12) the Torhunanawei of Adoloseimo; (13) the Torhunanawei of Olomu-Torhu; (14) the Amananawei of Agadagba-Obon; (15) the Torhunanawei of Dababilebu; (16) the Amananawei of Bolowou; (17) the Amananawei of Amapere; (18) the Torhunanawei of Obontorhu; (19) the Amananawei of Tamaraubotei; (20) the Amananawei of New-Jerusalem; and (21) the Amananawei of Okaminiwei.⁵⁴

With far-reaching implications on the then existing traditional structure of the ancient Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom, out of the above twenty-one requests, only seven were approved as 'Grade C' *Peres* or Obas by the then Ondo

⁵³ Ondo State of Nigeria White Paper on the Hon Justice C. E. T. Ajama Judicial Commission of Inquiry of Chieftaincy Matters in Ondo State, 24th August, 2022.

⁵⁴ Ondo State of Nigeria White Paper on the Hon Justice C. E. T. Ajama Judicial Commission of Inquiry on Chieftaincy Matters in Ondo State, 24th August, 2022, pp. 21-56.

State Executive Council, led by Arakunrin Oluwarotimi Odunayo Akeredolu, SAN, on 24 August 2022. These are: (1) The Ogidi of Ogidigba; (2) the Iginabou of Ajapa; (3) the Amananawei of Ukpe; (4) the Amananawei of Biagbini; (5) the Torhunanawei of Olomu-Torhu; (6) the Amananawei of Bolowou; and (7) the Amananawei of Agadagba-Obon.⁵⁵ On a significant note, the Ondo State Government has equally presented Instrument of Appointment and Staff of Office to all the above chieftaincy title holders, except the Amananawei of Agadagba-Obon, on minor traditional and legal issues between the Kekemeke and Ofeyeju families.

In respect of the above approved chieftaincies, His Royal Majesty, *Pere Morrison Kolawole Titiboh*, the Ogidi of Ogidigba, and His Royal Majesty, *Pere Moses I. Uguoji*, the Amananawei of Biagbini were installed on Thursday, 27 April, 2023; while His Royal Majesty, *Pere Itegha Iyegha*, the Amananawei of Ukpe, His Royal Majesty, *Pere George Jemine*, the Amananawei of Bolowou, and His Royal Majesty, *Pere Akpoke-Okhubala Godwin Aboyewa*, the Iginabou of Ajapa, were installed on Friday, 28 April, 2023; and His Royal Majesty, *Pere Akinnah Moluma*, the Torhunanawei of Olomutoru was installed on Thursday, 22 June, 2023.⁵⁶ As shown above, the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy stool was not one of the approved and installed chieftaincies. Whereas, at the time the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy stool was first given approval, and served as one of the duly recognised chieftaincies in the defunct Ese-Odo District Council in 1957, all the above approved and installed chieftaincies were unknown in chieftaincy matters, and as such, were not even emoluments-receiving chieftaincies, except the Iginabou of Ajapa in the defunct Ese-Odo District Council, as earlier pointed out.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy stool, which is traditionally the second-in-command to the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo chieftaincy, was a duly approved and recognised institution in the defunct Ese-Odo District Council, Igbekebo, Okitipupa Division of Ondo Province of Western Region as far back as 1957. Apparently, as a retrogressive situation, following the creation of Ondo State in 1976, its non-presentation to the Morgan Commission in 1977 by the then *Pere Eperetun* on perceived apprehension of rivalry laid the fertile foundation for its present state of non-recognition in the Ondo State Council of Obas. In a related manner, as a corollary, the then incumbent of the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy stool, High Chief Julius Mese Ashidi, and all other critical stakeholders of the three quarters were not adequately alive to their common customary responsibility during the historic Morgan Commission in 1977. Instead, with particular respect to the then incumbent, all his significant efforts in conjunction with other key

⁵⁵ Ondo State of Nigeria White Paper on the Hon Justice C. E. T. Ajama Judicial Commission of Inquiry on Chieftaincy Matters in Ondo State, 24 August 2022, pp. 52-55.

⁵⁶ Oral interview held with High Chief Ebenezer Titiboh, 77 years, Head of Egberi Lineage, Perebiyenmo Ruling House, Arogbo, 20 March 2024.

stakeholders were geared towards confronting in vain the changing of the name, Perebiri Ruling House to Perebiyenmo Ruling House by the then *Pere Eperetun*. The above shows that from the onset, all relevant stakeholders did not put up the necessary and concerted efforts in addressing the issue when it reared its ugly head in 1977. Similarly, when *Pere Eperetun* acted in like manner during the Ajakaiye Chieftaincy Review Commission in 1987, Chief Julius Mese Ashidi (the then Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo), and other critical traditional functionaries of the three quarters visibly did nothing.

Although recommended by the Ajama Judicial Commission of Inquiry on Chieftaincy Matters of Ondo State, the same concerted efforts significantly contributed to its non-recognition and approval by the Ondo State Government in 2022 under the administration of Arakunrin Oluwarotimi Odunayo Akeredolu. However, seven new chieftaincy stools, positioned far below the Tarabiri-Torhu of the Arogbo Chieftaincy Stool in the traditional hierarchical order, were approved and eventually installed, except for one. Above all, the last straw that broke the camel's back was the surreptitious role played by the incumbent, *Ibe Pere Egbunu*. That is, he equally failed to recommend the Tarabiri-Torhu of Arogbo chieftaincy to the Ondo State Government for approval as the only prescribed or consenting authority in the kingdom. The apparent grounds of his failure to do so were the same unfounded fear of rivalry and distrust entertained by his predecessor, *Pere Eperetun*, during the time of the Morgan Commission of 1977, and equally that of the Ajakaiye Chieftaincy Review Commission of 1987.