2.15. Individuals refusing chieftaincy titles

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National media reported that traditional rulers hold various titles according to their respective ethnic groups. Among the Yoruba, prominent titles include Ooni of Ife, Alaafin of Oyo, and Oba of Lagos, each symbolising spiritual leadership and ancestral authority. The Oba of Benin in the Edo State leads the Edo people and is revered for preserving the heritage of the ancient Benin Kingdom. The Olu of Warri is the monarch of the Itsekiri people in Delta State, while the Igbo recognise leaders such as the Obi of Onitsha and the Obi of Nnewi. In the South-East, the Obong of Calabar heads the Efik Kingdom and plays a significant role in cultural and community affairs. Each title carries not only ceremonial value but also social and cultural influence within Nigerian society. In northern Nigeria, Islamic titles such as Sultan of Sokoto and Emir of Kano denote religious and traditional leadership within the Hausa-Fulani communities.736 National media widely announced new chiefs during 2024 and 2025.737 Although ‘women are rarely given chieftaincy titles by traditional rulers’, a cultural shift is taking place with recent nominations, including in Abba in 2023738 and in Lagos in 2025.739

On 21 June 2024, the Supreme Court of Nigeria addressed a dispute over traditional chieftaincy rankings in Erinmope-Ekiti, affirming that a chieftaincy declaration can be set aside if it conflicts with tradition, lacks legal basis, or results from bias or procedural unfairness.740

While most individuals in Nigeria accept chieftaincy titles with pride, some decline them due to religious convictions, personal or professional obligations, or incompatibility with modern lifestyles. Although refusal is generally permitted without legal or formal repercussions, social pressure may arise within families or communities, particularly in hereditary cases, with rare instances of coercion or social exclusion.741 In southern and central Nigeria, refusing a chief priest or shaman title when hereditary or spiritually conferred, may lead to social or spiritual consequences, such as exclusion from community life, family pressure, or fear of offending deities. However, physical coercion is ‘rare’, and many refusals, especially by Christians and Muslims, are increasingly accepted due to the decline of traditional religions.742 In Edo state, in South South Nigeria, when an heir refuses to ascend the throne automatically forfeits both his right to the throne and his entitlement to inherit the property of his late father, the Onojie. In such cases, the selection of a new Onojie is entrusted to the discretion of the kingmakers (designated quarters or families whose elders traditionally serve as the kingmakers).743

In correspondence with EUAA, Prof. David Pratten744 explained that refusing chieftaincy titles is uncommon in Nigeria. While some cases exist, the expert had not documented any cases. Given the status and remuneration of such roles, there are usually multiple willing candidates. Known

consequences for refusal tend to be limited to rumour or social shaming. Individuals usually refuse chieftaincy titles due to religious convictions. In Southern Nigeria, this often concerns Pentecostal Christians rejecting roles like village headship, which may involve rituals such as libation to ancestral spirits. In South-Eastern Igbo-speaking communities, churches frequently oppose traditional practices, contributing to tensions. Nonetheless, many Christians have accepted chieftaincy roles and sought compromises on ceremonial elements. Tensions between Christianity and traditional office-holding are longstanding, and recent shifts appear minimal. In most communities, refusal is likely to be respected, and sometimes even admired.745

Prof. Pratten further noted that chieftaincy roles can be risky, however dangers - such as accusations of embezzlement or conflict with local youth - typically follow acceptance, rather than refusal of office.746 The source added that different set of pressures to accept the titles may apply to roles associated with shrines or deities, rather than the more bureaucratic forms of office tied to administrative units such as villages, clans, local government areas, or ethnic groups. In such cases, individuals may be viewed as predestined to hold positions that might be translated in English as ‘shrine priest’, and therefore subject to greater expectations to accept the role. However, the extent of the pressure involved - beyond mild social sanctions -remains unclear in the absence of further evidence.747

Recent examples of individuals refusing chieftaincy titles in Nigeria include Governor Seyi Makinde of Oyo State, who declined such honours in June 2025 during his tenure to allow for unbiased public assessment of his performance.748 Similarly, Valentine Chineto Ozigbo, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) governorship candidate in Anambra State, declined the title ‘Enyi Oma Anaocha’ offered by the Anaocha Traditional Ruling Council, citing concerns over potential politicisation and a desire to uphold the integrity of the traditional institution.749 No consequences were reported for refusal.750

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