

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

The study aims at examining the nature of the continued relevance of traditional rulers in contemporary Nigerian politics. In spite of the negative impacts of colonialism and westernization on the institutions in pre-colonial period, traditional rulers occupied important position of political authority in African kingdom. The traditional rulers have served as important adjuncts in the administration of post-colonial government in both Nigeria and Africa. Towards the last years of colonial rule, there was a shift from the traditional rulers to the educated elites who eventually succeeded in achieving political independence for the country. This research is of the view that traditional rulers as the custodian of the customs and traditions of their respective areas should be given opportunities on a basis of recommending some of their experiences to the service as members of customary courts; also, traditional rulers have to adopt the spirit of yearly dialogue amongst the subjects; the outcome of the yearly dialogue will create necessary relationship towards community development programme.

Key words: *role, traditional rulers, socio-economic, political, development.*

Introduction

Nigerian traditional rulers often derive their titles from the formation of independent states or communities that existed before the formation of modern Nigeria. Although, they do not have formal political power, in many cases they continue to command respect from their people and have considerable influence. Modern Nigeria encompasses lands traditionally occupied by highly diverse ethnic groups with very different language and traditions. In broad terms, the South-East, including the Nigeria-Delta, was occupied mainly by Igbos and related people; the South-West is occupied with the Yoruba-related people; while the North by Hausa/Fulani people, with a complexity of different ethnic groups in the middle belt between north and south. In total, there were (and are) more than 250 distinct ethnic groups.

Before the arrival of the British in the late 19th century, the history of the area was turbulent, with the period when empires such as those of Oyo, Kanem-Bornu and Sokoto gained control over large areas and other periods when the states were more fragmented. Although, political structures differed widely between different ethnic groups, it was

common for each town or collection of towns to have a recognized ruler, who might in turn be the subordinate to the ruler of a large polity. Thus, the Sokoto caliphate was divided into emirates, with the Emirs being subordinates to the Sultan of Sokoto; although at times, acting as independent rulers.

Europeans have long traded with the coastal states, primarily exchanging cotton and other manufactured goods for slaves and palm oil products at centers such as Calabar, Bornu and Lagos. The Niger coast protectorate was established in 1891, holding a small area along the coast. During the period of 1879 – 1900, the Royal Niger Company made a concerted effort to take control of the interior, using disciplined troops armed with machine gun and making treaties of “protections with the local rulers.

The company’s territory was sold to the British government in 1900, with the southern region merged with the Niger coast protectorate and the northern Nigeria protectorate remaining separate. In 1914, the two were merged into the colony and the protectorate of Nigeria, with the same boundaries as the modern State of Nigeria. The first British high commissioner for northern Nigeria, Frederick Lugard, ruled through the traditional rulers, and this approach was later extended to the south. Lugard’s successor, Clifford left this system in place in the north where the emirate system had long traditions, but introduced a legislative council with some elected members in the south, relegating the traditional rulers to merely symbolic roles. Over time, the relationship between the colonial administration and the traditional rulers evolved; for example, the Tiv in 1947, appointed Makers Dzakpe as the first holder of this title in order to have a “traditional ruler” to speak for the Tiv people.

The Oba of Lagos with a delegation of Naval officers with independence in 1960, followed by alternating democratic and military government, the states of traditional rulers evolved even further, House of Chiefs as their second chambers. Thus, chiefs were law makers to some extent; also, in the actual operation of the region, the regional Governors were in some cases traditional rulers. For example, the late Ooni of Ife, Oba Adesoji Aderemi was the Governor and member of the defunct western region.

Unfortunately, for various reasons, the traditional rulers who were supposed to be highly revered by the people have their fatherly perception and their being symbols of unity eroded.

Methodoly

This research work explores primary and secondary sources of materials in sample random which implies the role of traditional rulers in socio-economic and political development in Nigerian local government. Data from textbooks, journals, newspapers, magazines, internet and libraries were made use of.

Conceptual Clarification

Traditional Ruler: A traditional ruler is the person of his ancestry who occupies the throne or stool and who has been appointed to it in accordance with the customs and the traditions of the said area.

Social and Economic: These means to a third sector in economy between the private sector and the business or the public sector and the governments, it includes organization such as cooperative, non-profit organization and charities. The social and economic usually develop because of need to find new and innovative solution to the issues (whether they are socially, economically or environmental based) and to satisfy the needs of members and users which have been ignored or inadequately fulfilled by the private or public sectors.

Development: This can be defined as a change and the process of economic, political and social transformation.

Economic Development: Anyanwuocha (2001) defined economic development as the process of increasing real per capita income and engineering substantial positive transformation in the various sectors of the economy. The positive changes which take place improve the general well-being of the people and ensure a sustained rise in the standard of living of the masses.

Local Government: It is the tier of government closest to the people at the grassroots. Bellow Imam see local government as that unit of administration with defined territory and power as well as administrative authority with relative autonomy. The United Nation local office for public administration defines local government as a political sub-division of a nation or (in a federal system) state which is constituted by the law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the power to impose taxes or to exact labour for prescribed purpose.

The Challenges of Local Government in Grassroots Development in Nigeria

Despite the justification for the establishment of local government and its inevitable importance to the people at the grassroots level, this tier of government seems not to have justified questions that summarily come to one's mind which are: why has local government not lived up to its expectation? What are the causes of that seemingly conscious weakness? What are the challenges of the local government? and; how can this weakness be corrected? The problems include:

- i. **Finance:** Despite the increase in the total amount of funds available to the local Government in Nigeria since early 1990s, its economic and financial profit is still very poor, relative to the development programme it is expected to carry out. This situation is not connected with the mismanagement and embezzlement of the funds by local councils.

- ii. **Inadequacy of skilled workers:** Save for some few local councils in general and experiencing death of skilled technical and professional staff like qualified engineers (of all types), medical doctors, accountants, statisticians, economists, lawyers, town planners, to mention but a few, the facilitation factors for this include: low image of local government in the mind of professionals who feel and think that there is no job satisfaction sufficient to keep them at that low level of public services. The hopeless nature of the job attributable to and arising from low or no incentives for junior workers, no changes for creativity and innovations as well as perpetual delay in the payment of salary.
- iii. **Problems participation and involvement:** For the past decades, more emphasis phrases have since been employed to justify people's participation at the grassroots, they include: "development from below" bottom-up approach to development, "popular participations", bringing government closer to the people and other to argue for peoples involvement in the affairs that directly affect them. Rural communities also have political connotation for instance, where a community has a very low population, but it is a local government headquarters. It is regarded as an urban area in Nigeria, the occupation of the majority of people living in rural communities are engaged in the primary or informal sector of the economy. In order words, they engage primarily in agricultural practices such as, crop farming, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing. At the same time, local crafts like weaving portal, calvary blacksmiths and the likes. The major occupation and sources of living, roles are shared within the family system according to age and gender.
- iv. **Pre-colonial traditional institute:** Before the advent of the Europeans, societies in Africa had evolved various systems of political administration based on the peculiarities of those ethnic nationalities, these institutions had full executive legislature and judiciary powers in their different domains and exerted sovereign control over their people. According to Oloko (1976), the traditional ruler under the Benin Kingdom was at the head of a well organized system of government. As the sole authority, he was the legislative, executive and the judiciary. Traditional institution during the pre-colonial era was quite clear, since law and order were maintained through a normative system that was part of the general social structure though the system was not sophisticated, the machinery of government was organized enough to manage affairs, resolve tension and administered justice in the society.

The political system was fashioned out in such a way that man could only lead members of his lineage hence, there were many influential and powerful men, their influence was limited to hamlet, clan and village and at most the area in which they lived. In every village, hamlet or clan, there was always a village head who emerged by virtue of age and who in collaboration of other elders settled disputes in that particular village. If the disputes involved another village, the elders led by the eldest from both villages came together and resolved the disputes, especially those bothering the development of the three various lands which was common at that time.

The Colonial Traditional Institution

In the colonial era, the British system of colonial administration employed the system of indirect rule. Indirect rule was a British system of ruling her colonies with the use of local chiefs or other approved intermediaries and traditional laws and customs with the British officials merely supervising the administration. Indirect rule used the existing traditional system of administration and it recognized the status of traditional rulers who served as the priests of indirect rule. The advent of colonial rule ushered in a transformation in that role of traditional rulers; this change was necessitated by the desire to realize the objectives of colonialism, which were to explore the natural resources of Nigeria to the industrial needs of the capitalist metropolis. Traditional rulers were therefore used to serve the objective.

The traditional rulers have witnessed change and have assumed a new status. They were co-opted to perform roles that were completely opposed to the wishes and aspirations of the colonized societies.

The Post-Colonial Traditional Institution

The role and status of traditional rulers in post-independent Nigeria varied with different administrations. They could be said to have remained agents for the perpetuation of our neo-colonialism state, thereby upsetting the ongoing process of development in the country.

Nwankwo (1992) identifies some relevant roles played by traditional rulers in Nigeria during the pre-colonial, colonial and even modern times. He states that the traditional rulers perform amongst others the role of making or contributing to law-making and judgment, adjudicating in disputes in their communities, they also maintain peace, order

and security.

Oloko (1976) maintained that the traditional rulers were responsible for nation building task such as the maintenance of the main road linking their areas, the supply of manpower for the kingdom's army upkeep of the royal capital and collection of taxes and tributes due at various time.

Conclusion

Attempt has been made in this research to explore the impact of traditional rulers in socio-economic and political development in the administration of the local government in Nigerian State.

Some possible impediments to fulfilling these roles have also been examined and useful suggestion in remaining these impediment have been preferred, it can be rightly concluded that it is very important to involve traditional rulers in the running of local government administration to enhance local government in Nigeria.

Therefore, government should incorporate our culture and stop copying other countries' administration and political system.

In conclusion, government should make the traditional rulers familiar with government policies and implementation which the traditional rulers can use to mobilize these subjects and ensure the implementation of such policies. Nigerian government is therefore advised to make the best use of the traditional rulers as partners in progress in giving them the right duties to perform as their roles.

Recommendations

Having undertaken this work, it has eventually given rise to yet another fundamental system. The question is what is the role of traditional rulers in socio-economic and political development in the local community? This research work recommends that the traditional ruler should be more actively involved in the administration of local government in the following ways:

- (i) As custodian of the custom and traditions of their respective areas, traditional rulers should be given opportunity on a constituent basis of recommending some of their experienced subordinate chiefs to serve as members of customary courts.
- (ii) They should serve as the nerve center of the mobilization of the citizens for any collective responsibility and socio-economic development of the rural area; adequate consultation and considered for the formulation and execution of any public policy that will affect the grassroots people.
- (iii) All the functions recommended by the 1976 “guideline” for eminent traditional councils should involve traditional rulers both individually and collectively at the local level.
- (iv) The spirit of honesty, transparency and accountability should be the watch word of the traditional rulers in the state.

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