RESEARCH ARTICLE

TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Traditional institutions held pre-eminence positions in the pre-colonial societies in Nigeria. The level of order witnessed during this period was a testimony to the invaluable roles played by the traditional rulers in administering their different empires, kingdoms and communities. However, during the colonial era, the position of traditional rulers was compromised as they became mere stooges of the colonial power. The post-colonial period saw the traditional rulers' roles diminished as they were given advisory roles in previous constitutions and with no single role in the 1999 Constitution. Thus, for the continuous relevance of the traditional institutions, there is a need for re-examination of their roles in the country. This chapter argues for community based developmental roles for the traditional rulers in the country. These include promotion of tourism

development, encouraging modern agricultural development, maintenance of peaceful co-existence among the people of their domain and settlers from other parts of the country, providing platform for alternative dispute resolution, monitoring the activities of the various vigilante groups and other unconventional security apparatus in their communities and lastly partnering the security operatives through intelligence gathering within their domains for effective operations of security outfits in serving the people better.

Keywords: *Traditional Institution, Nigeria, Appraisal, Security and Socio-economic Development.*

INTRODUCTION

It has been observed that from time immemorial, most traditional African societies had been centers of political civilization as a result of the recognition, acceptance and belief of the African peoples in the roles and efficacy of traditional rulers as agents and promoters of value-based governance and politics in Africa (Akinfenwa, 2013). The level of political activities witnessed in pre-colonial Nigerian societies and elsewhere in Africa where traditional institutions held sway in the administration of the people before the advent of colonialism was not unconnected to the invaluable roles played by the traditional rulers (Akinfenwa, 2013). However, with the advent of the republican state, there is a need for re-examination of how the great institutions can be better engaged for further development of the polity especially in the local communities that represent their immediate jurisdiction.

Towards achieving the above objective, the paper has been divided into the following sections: the first section is this introduction, the second section examines various concepts related to this enterprise including various arguments on the role of traditional rulers, the third section trace a brief history of traditional rulers in politics, the fourth sections examine the roles of traditional rulers in a democratic dispensation while the last section concludes the paper.

TRADITIONAL RULERS, DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION, SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

If tradition is truly taken as the handling down of custom, culture, and belief from one generation to another (Horner, 1990), then there is no denying the fact that traditional rulers are the keepers, teachers and symbols of these traditions. Akinfenwa (2013) observes that a traditional ruler is a person who by virtue of his ancestry occupies an area and who has been appointed to it in accordance with the custom and tradition of the area and whose throne has been in existence before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria. Omo Oba Ukhu Akpolokpolo, Eerediauwa II of Benin (1982), using his personal experience, sees a traditional ruler as the traditional head of an ethnic community whose stool conferred the highest authority on the incumbent since the time before the beginning of colonial rule. Within the same perspective, Amusa (2010) equally asserts that the positions of traditional rulers were sanctioned by the traditions, history and culture of their respective peoples who held them in high esteem and reverence. This then suggests that the institutions of traditional rulers are enduring parts of the peoples' heritage. Past and present Nigerian traditional rulers are emblems and custodians of everything that has to do with the peoples' ancestral beliefs, culture, and tradition. They ascended the royal throne by virtue of their birth to royal families and other cultural rite or the leading of the gods.

Democratic consolidation Democracy as a concept or a system is devoid of any generally acceptable definition among most scholars. Thus, democracy has been interpreted by different people to suit their different situations and interests. However, there is a need to consider some definitions especially in order to put the focus of this paper in perspective. For instance, Bobbio (cited in Caron, et.al, 1992: 424) defines democracy as "a cluster of rules permitting the broadest, surest, direct and indirect participation of majority of the citizens in political decisions, for example in decisions affecting the whole country". This definition to a great extent conforms with the classical definition ascribed to Abraham Lincoln that democracy is government of the people, by the people and for the people. Thus, central to these definitions is the role of the people in government through one avenue or the other. It is within this context that Momoh (2006: 63) concludes that "*democracy whether classical or social democratic, popular or socialist, talks about representative government and*

empowerment of the people". In order words, direct democracy practiced in ancient Athens and Greek city states has become impossible in the modern societies; therefore, the principle of representation has become central to the operations of modern democracy. Legislature as a representative institution is thus central to the realization of democratic objective of government of the people by the people and for the people as espoused by Abraham Lincoln. Also, people's interest is transmitted into democratic space in most democracies faster than any other democratic institution.

Many factors have been identified as preconditions for democratic experiment to succeed; top among these conditions have to do with socio-economic and political factors. According to scholars such as Huntington (1968) and Gurr (1980), democratic states must have viable and supportive political and democratic institutions, of these political and democratic institutions which include parliament, the presidency, judiciary, political parties, interest associations and the armed forces among others, the parliament i.e., the legislature is very prominent (Huntington, 1968; Gurr, 1980; Ogundiya, 2010).

Thus, Bratton, (1998) sees the process (of democratic consolidation) as where democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate among its citizens that it is unlikely to breakdown.

While arguing that democratic consolidation is a function of the peculiarity of the country under study, Ogundiya (2010: 7), maintains that "in transiting societies like (Nigeria) where the threat of coup persists, consolidation may be seen as the process of eliminating opposition to democracy on the part of powerful actors" Thus, the process of making democracy acceptable to the people overtime without considering a reverse to the undemocratic era is referred to as consolidation.

Security National Security as a concept is initially predicated on the military force, whereby the state is militarily strong enough to declare war standing by itself. It has however been observed that overwhelming military strength does not always result in security for the states with such strength. This is exemplified in the cases of the United States of America and former USSR now Russian federation during the cold war in Vietnam and Afghanistan respectively and Israel in her wars against the Arabs (Barash and Webel, 2009: 324-325). Although there is often a legitimate military dimension to national security, it must be emphasized that national security cannot be measured by military parameters alone. It is also a function of economic strength, political cohesiveness, social equity and integration, cultural outreach, racial harmony, and environmental soundness. National security is diminished if the populace is

inadequately housed or fed and also if medical care is insufficient (Barash and Webel, 2009: 328).

Thus, the following definition captures the true essence of national security in the sense that national security is defined "*as the freedom from danger or absence of threats to the multidimensional elements that may affect the nation's ability to protect and develop itself, promote its cherished values and national interests, as much as promote and boost the well-being of its peoples*" (Onuoha, 2008).

This is precisely because sustainable development, according to the World Commission on Environment and Development, refers to "a process to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." It is an approach that holds out the promise of maintaining the standard of living somewhat similar to that which we possess today, while recognizing that we cannot continue to exploit the global environment as we have in the past. From the World Summit on Sustainable Development, three basic areas of sustainable development were recognized: economic, social and environment sustainability. Economic sustainability means generating prosperity at different levels of society and addressing the cost effectiveness of all economic activity, with emphases on viability of enterprises and activities and the ability to be maintained in the long term. Social sustainability not only refers to respecting human rights and equal opportunities for all in the society but also to an equitable distribution of benefits, with a focus on alleviating poverty. There is an emphasis on local communities, maintaining and strengthening their life support systems, recognizing, and respecting different cultures and avoiding any form of exploitation (Johannesburg, 2002).

TRADITIONAL RULERS IN NIGERIA HISTORY

Traditional rulers have been actively involved in Nigerian politics and governance even before the attainment of independence in 1960. Before the 19th century encounter with the West, Africa had already instituted sophisticated and highly civilized mode of governance and administration system that was built around the highly revered traditional rulers (Egbe, 2014). The level of political development witnessed in pre-colonial Nigerian societies could not be divorced from the important roles and inputs of the traditional rulers. The roles played by traditional rulers in various kingdoms and communities in pre-colonial Nigerian were self-evident. Across all divides in the geographical composition of pre-

colonial Nigeria, traditional rulers played significant roles in the political development of their respective kingdoms. The Olomu Kingdom, Opobo Kingdom, the Itshekiri Kingdom and the Ilaje kingdom in the Southern parts of pre-colonial Nigeria, to mention but a few witnessed high levels of political centrality and development during the reign of various traditional rulers like Nana in Olomu and Jaja in Opobo (Crowder and Ikime, 1970). In fact, the level of political development witnessed at this time was an attestation to the fact that if the traditional system of governance had not been disrupted by colonialism, these societies would have been models and standards of political organization for other societies outside the African continent (Egbe, 2014). Similarly, the kingdoms and communities in the western part of pre-colonial Nigeria achieved enviable levels of political development partly due to the traditional kingship system that was in place. The old Oyo Empire headed by the Alaafin, the Ife kingdom headed by the Ooni, the Egbaland headed by the Alaake to mention but a few were forces to be reckoned with in terms of political development. In the northern sphere, the Caliphate and the various Emirates attained considerable level of development under their traditional rulers otherwise known as the Sokoto caliphate and Emirs for the emirates like the Ilorin emirate and Kano emirate (Crowder and Ikime, 1970).

During the colonial period, traditional rulers continued to be engaged in the governance and administration of the people but not as independent entities. They were to serve as the medium of interface between the colonial government and the people. Although, serious resistances were put forth by some traditional rulers like Jaja of Opobo and Nana Olomu who were opposed to foreign rule, the colonialists however succeeded in suppressing these resistances (Crowder and Ikime, 1970). During this period, it was clear that the traditional rulers had to rule their people according to new administrative principles introduced by the colonial government. Whereas in Northern Nigeria, the Emirs exercised stronger participatory role in the colonial administration of their local areas, the participation of traditional rulers in colonial administration was limited in the west and almost non-existent in the east because of its decentralized nature (Egbe, 2014). Regrettably, the imposition of colonial administrative system on the indigenous governing system headed by traditional rulers brought some fundamental changes to the traditional institution. Agbese (2004) observes that with colonial rule, traditional rulers were no longer sovereign; instead, their central role was transformed from serving their people to ensuring colonial exploitation. Secondly, the repressive nature of the colonialists was bestowed on traditional rulers by empowering rulers to deal with their opponents through the

instrumentality of the native authority. For instance, prisons, courts, and police institutions were all established for the local rulers. Some of them used the police to arrest their political opponents who were then tried in courts which were presided over by the traditional rulers. Many of such opponents ended up in jail on trumped up charges.

Another notable legacy of colonialism on the traditional political systems was the relegation of women to the background. Women were consigned to subsidiary role in politics and government. As Nweke (1992) noted, women such as Queen Amina of Zazzau, Queen Owani of Ilesha, Princess Inikpi of Idah and Princess Moremi of Ife played crucial and decisive roles in the politics of their societies and exhibited valor and dynamism matched with solid achievements in their times. Colonialism further disposed people's entrenched mechanisms for removing or disciplining errant rulers. Unlike the pre-colonial practice whereby rulers governed through customarily established rules and procedures, traditional rulers now ruled under letters of appointment spelling out their powers and functions as colonial underlings. So long as they carried out the wishes of their colonial overlords and did not threaten the process of colonial exploitation, they could retain their power. Heineke (2012) maintains that traditional rulers became the instruments for enforcing British colonial policies including such policies as collection of taxes, levies, and procurement of able-bodied men for force labor.

In the immediate post-independence period, precisely from 1960 to 1966, the traditional rulers constituted the membership of Houses of chiefs in the Western and Northern regions of the country where they contributed their quota to the development of the country.

TRADITIONAL RULERS IN A DEMOCRATIC SETTING

There are two strands of argument as to whether there are roles, if any, for traditional rulers in the process of consolidating Nigeria's nascent democracy or not. On one spectrum of the argument, there is an increasing disapproval of the involvement of traditional rulers in the political process of the country due to the following reasons: One is the tendency for clash of supremacy between the traditional rulers and the elected representatives of the people. Second, some believe that as a result of the legacy of colonial intervention, the traditional institution has become anti-democratic institution, and the instrument for entrenchment of patriarchy, which relegates women to the background in term of

participation at the highest level of politics. Thirdly, it has been argued that the engagement of traditional rulers in political affairs of the country could bring about primitive political injunctions that may not be in tandem with present realities. For instance, the staging of traditional rituals as part of signs and symbols of the institution sometimes clash with the norms of modern life. However, some commentators have observed that the traditional rulers could still contribute their quota in the democratic dispensation in various ways (NICO, 2014).

The provision of the 1979 Constitution gave the traditional rulers mere advisory roles to play in the administration of the local governments. However, the 1999 Constitution did not assign any role to traditional rulers. However, one can observe that the traditional rulers and the institutions they represent are still relevant to democratic process provided this would not in any way clash with the power and functions of elected office holders at any level of governance. It is therefore imperative to explore how traditional rulers can contribute to peace, security, and development of their respective communities.

TRADITIONAL RULERS FOR PEACE, SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

It cannot be gainsaid that the traditional institutions have come a long way in the development of the country. The corps of royal fathers in Nigeria are not only well educated but at the same time highly sophisticated and accomplished achievers in their respective fields of endeavor before mounting the throne of their forefathers. In the light of this, it would amount to a great waste of human resources if these highly intelligent and great achievers are not saddled with great responsibility towards the development of their communities and invariably the country. In addition, Nigerians are still essentially cultural people as the traditional behaviors and ways of life co-exist side by side with modernity. Thus, the traditional institutions still play active role in the organization of the society (Omitola, 2013; Omitola, 2014). The traditional leaders still engage in social control mechanism in our society therefore they can complement the security agencies in the search for solution to the insecurity pervading the state (Omitola, 2012). This has become even more germane as the current wave of insecurity in the country now has no status limitation as both subjects and

nobility could fall victim. In fact, our royal fathers like other citizens of the country have been victims of kidnapping and other sundry crimes.

The royal fathers are in position to complement the efforts of the current administration in the state to address the root cause of insecurity which includes youth unemployment leading to crimes and other vices. There is no gainsaying the fact that it is government responsibility to provide for security of the people, however, our royal fathers can help in mobilizing their people for various government policies and projects. Such policies and projects include farming, implementation of modern agricultural development initiatives, and regular staging of festivals and other activities to promote tourism development in their communities.

The royal fathers are in good position to do all these because of their proximity to the grassroots and their respective communities and Oyeweso, (2012: 15-16) has argued that the peace of the communities will eventually translates to the peace of the states and ultimately that of the country as a whole. One effect of such would be generation of employment opportunities for the teeming youths of the country. Gainful employment will ensure the youths are not available for criminal and other activities that constitute security risks to our country. Our royal fathers can also assist government greatly, this could be done through the mobilization of the people for intelligence gathering, which would ensure that crimes are nipped in the bud, and that criminals are apprehended promptly. In recognition of this, Enugu state government in its efforts to combat the spate of insecurity in the state recently asked the traditional rulers to assist in recruiting 50 persons that would make up their community security units (Chiedozie, 2016: 14). Another area of royal intervention in security issues could take the form of sensitization of the people to the need to develop eagle eyes about the goings on in their environment and help forestall any criminal act. Lastly, on security, our royal fathers need to take more than a passing interest in the activities of the various unconventional security apparatus in their communities such as the traditional watchmen and vigilante guards among others to ensure that their activities are not antithetical to the peace and security of the communities (Omitola, 2016a).

For adequate maintenance of peace in their communities, our royal fathers need to encourage peaceful co-existence among their subjects and between their subjects and settlers from other parts of the country, especially settlers from other ethnic groups in the country. To achieve this objective various platform for interactions at the community level can be instituted. Activities that promote

peaceful competition can be put in place to encourage spirit of oneness among the people such as traditional sports including wrestling among others.

Also, in situation where the peace of the community is threatened, our royal fathers should be actively involved in alternative dispute resolution practice among their people. This step helps to discourage adverse and costly litigations. Alternative disputes resolution also serves the end of preventing breakdown of law and order when grievances among the people in the communities are immediately addressed by our royal fathers without fear or favor of any contending party.

Another area for our royal fathers' intervention is to promote the our traditional values and virtue such as hard work, honesty, goodwill and good character and most importantly moderation in everything especially as it relates to political competition should be preached to the people (2016b). Such intervention will help to deepens democracy as political competitors would see themselves more as brothers than antagonists thus violence will gradually disappear from our political arena.

Still on royal intervention at stimulating development in the country; our revered Kings have been serving and they should continue to serve as channel of communicating various government policies, programs, and decisions to the people in languages that will best aid the people understanding and appreciation of such policies, programs, and decisions.

However, before our royal fathers can discharge all the above responsibilities very well, they must totally remove themselves from participation in active partisan politics. In other word, there is no need for our royal fathers to engage in supremacy contest of any form with the elected office holders in their communities. Our royal fathers are fathers to all the contending parties in the political arena. The Kings own everything in traditional connotations, and this should be meaningful in the sense that the King owns all the political parties and their members are all his children and therefore the King is expected to treat all of them equally. It is by following this path that we can sustain the esteemed and reverence conferred on the traditional institution. Moreover, such self-enlightened modus operandi shall further justify the continuing funding of the institution no matter how little from the government.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the continuous relevance of the traditional rulers in the current democratic dispensation in the country lies in their invaluable roles as the custodian of customs and traditions of their people and the deployment of same for the peace, security, and overall development of their communities. Specifically, areas of royal intervention identified include, preaching the time-tested traditional values of various groups and communities in the country on the need for fairness in political competition, serving as channel for communicating government policies, programs and policies to the people, promotion of festivals and other activities to promote tourism development, mobilization of the people for modern agricultural development, maintenance of peaceful co-existence among the people of their domain and settlers from other parts of the country, providing platform for alternative dispute resolution among their people, thereby discouraging conflicts from escalating, monitoring the activities of the various vigilante groups and other unconventional security apparatus in their communities and thereby ensuring that those groups do not violate the rights of the people and lastly partnering the security operatives through intelligence gathering within their domains for effective operations of security outfits in serving the people better.

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Our great democracies still tend to think that a stupid man is more likely to be honest than a clever man, and our politicians take advantage of this prejudice by pretending to be even more stupid than nature made them.

Bertrand Russell
New Hopes for a Changing World