

THE PLACE OF TRADITIONAL INSTITUTION IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract. The traditional institution in Nigeria is as old as the country. The institution, from the ages, has been the prime instrument through which the various traditional communities are held together, governed and preserved. When the British colonial authorities came into Nigeria at the turn of the 18th Century, they met the traditional institution in the country at varying stages of development.

The traditional institution had, by then, become well established in some parts of the country, where they ran centralized political and administrative systems, especially in the Northern and Western parts of the country. In some parts, referred to as acephalous societies, mainly the Eastern parts of Nigeria, the traditional institution came in the form of Village Councils in which the most elderly with track record of wisdom were put in charge of the affairs of community.

But in the intervening years, especially following the independence of Nigeria in 1960, the traditional institutions have become well emplaced in all parts of the country, the initial flaws that led to its failure in the East, notwithstanding.

Keywords: traditional institution, traditional communities, Nigeria, Village Councils.

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INTRODUCTION

The traditional institution in Nigeria is as old as the country. The institution, from the ages, has been the prime instrument through which the various traditional communities are held together, governed and preserved. When the British colonial authorities came into Nigeria at the turn of the 18th Century, they met the traditional institution in the country at varying stages of development.

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It was the presence and existence of these institutions that inspired the Colonial authorities to put in place the Indirect Rule system through which they governed Nigeria. The system worked very well in the North and West where they had fairly well established administrative systems. However, it failed in the East which was renowned for its republican traditions.

In his work, "Nigeria and the Crisis of the Nation State", Nwosu (2012) noted that the indirect rule system was the instrument through which the colonialists sought to maintain law and order in the country. He wrote: "After the pacification of the South, the British colonial authorities instituted the system of indirect rule; a programme through which existing traditional institutions were used to administer the people on behalf of the colonial powers. In other words, the newly empowered traditional institutions became the instrument through which the colonialists ensured public order and the exploitation of the people and their God-given resources".

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RESULTS

Conceptual Clarifications

The term "traditional institution" refers to the rulership of the community at the grassroots. The rulership is rooted in the customs, traditions and culture of the people within the locality.

In ordinary parlance, a traditional ruler is "the custodian of the traditions, history and customs of an ethnic group of individuals", and who is appointed by such individuals to rule, govern and administer justice in line with laid down customs and traditions of the people.

Types of Traditional Institutions in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the traditional institution can be classified in three categories, namely hereditary, rotational and democratic.

1. Hereditary

The hereditary type refers to the category in which the kingship resides in one family. In a situation like that, no person can emerge a traditional ruler if he is not from the ruling family. What this means is that succession is by family traditions. In the hereditary system, the mantle of leadership passes from father to son, and continues in that direction in perpetuity.

2. Rotational

The rotational system operates on the basis of ruling families. In this case, the kingship rotates amongst the ruling families in the Kingdom or community. There are usually recognized kingmakers in the Kingdom whose responsibility it is to determine which ruling family qualifies to bring up a candidate when a vacuum occurs on the throne.

3. Democratic

The democratic model refers to a situation where the people in the community directly participate in the election of the traditional ruler. This system is more pronounced in the South Eastern parts of Nigeria where the traditional institution operates within the context of “autonomous communities”.

In all these typologies, the election or enthronement of a candidate as a traditional ruler is governed by laws, regulations and traditions. This is why the institution is recognized by Government which gives the staff of office to the traditional rulers. The staff of office confers legitimacy on the rulers and also serves as instrument of authority.

Roles of the Traditional Institution in Nigeria

Traditional rulers are the custodians of the culture, arts and traditions of the people. They also control traditional titles, offices and rituals. Since the institution functions essentially in the Local Government Areas, it is their duty to inform the local government when there are modifications in their cultural practices.

According to Wikipedia, the internet dictionary, “the traditional institution plays useful roles in mediating between the people and the State, enhancing national identity, resolving minor conflicts and providing an institutional safety-valve for often inadequate state bureaucracies”.

The traditional institution in Nigeria is vested with many important roles which it has continued to perform over the years. Given the high esteem in which the institution is held in Nigeria, the Governments at all levels have continued to rely upon it to move the country forward. The relevance of the institution derives essentially from the fact that it is very close to the grassroots. It performs very important functions which include the following, among others.

1. Maintenance of Law and Order.

The traditional institution, given its closeness to the grassroots, serves as the main instrument of maintaining law and order in the community. The traditional ruler uses the means of carrot and stick to enforce order in his domain. He rewards good deeds among his subjects and sanctions bad behavior through imposition of fines or reprimand as the case may be.

2. Protection of Customs, Culture and Traditions.

As the custodians of the culture and traditions of the people, it is the responsibility of the traditional ruler to ensure the protection, promotion and preservation of the customs, culture, traditions, norms, values and mores of the community. The traditional ruler ensures that the cultural heritage of the people is protected and preserved for succeeding generations.

3. Adjudication of Cases.

Another major role which the traditional institution performs in Nigeria is that of adjudication, mediation and arbitration of cases, especially land and marital issues and also matters verging on inheritance rights. The traditional ruler performs this crucial function in consonance with his cabinet chiefs who serve in advisory capacity in the Palace.

4. Government Agents.

The traditional institution in Nigeria also acts as an agent of the Government in ensuring that Government policies and programmes are brought to the attention of the grassroots. A typical example is the programme of immunization against polio by the central Government in Nigeria. This programme was resisted in some of the Northern States in the country on the basis of an unfounded allegation that the exercise was meant to slow down or reduce the population of the North. The Government had to rely on the traditional rulers to allay the fears of the populace.

5. Revenue or Tax Collectors.

In some parts of the country, the traditional institution also serves as revenue collectors on behalf of the Government.

6. Agent of Mobilization.

The institution also acts as an agent of mobilization either for communal or national development.

The Situation in My Domain, Umukabia Okaiuga Alaike Autonomous Community

In the South Eastern part of Nigeria where I come from, the Kingdoms or Chiefdoms are carved out into what we call Autonomous Communities. Every autonomous community has a traditional ruler known as Eze or Igwe. The Eze or Igwe has a Cabinet, consisting of titled Chiefs drawn from every segment of the community. He runs the affairs of the community in consultation with the Cabinet which is known as the Council of Chiefs.

The hierarchy consists of the Eze (my humble self), Traditional Prime Minister (TPM), Palace Secretary, Village Heads and Titled Chiefs. All together, they constitute the Eze-in-Council which presides over the activities of the community. In the absence of the Eze, the TPM is delegated to act on his behalf.

The wife of the Eze which is known and officially recognized as the Ugoeze presides over the activities of the womenfolk in the community. She ensures that the women are properly organized and motivated to render selfless services to the community.

All the traditional roles of traditional institutions as captured earlier are performed by me and my cabinet.

I have been on the throne of Umukabia Okaiuga Alaike Autonomous Community of Umuahia in Abia State for five years now, having being installed in August 2017 as the Ojim 1 of Ojim Ukwu Nnuegbe, which is my official title. Within this period, I have with members of my cabinet given my community a new lease of life and sense of direction.

I also have a town union, Umukabia Progressive Movement (UPM) which functions as the policy implementation arm of the community. While the Eze-in-Council deals with broad issues of traditions, culture and customs, the UPM sees to the issues of infrastructural development and maintenance of existing facilities in the community under the direction of the Eze. With such synergy, we are breaking new grounds in terms of advancing the economic fortunes of the community.

Criticisms against the traditional institution

In spite of the commendable roles of the traditional institution in national development, some critics still assail the institution for one reason or the other. The criticisms include the following:

1. Undemocratic Character

In many parts of Nigeria, the leadership of the traditional institutions is largely hereditary and do not evolve democratically. As a result of this, critics see the institution as lacking in democratic temperament.

2. Despotic Disposition

The antagonists of the traditional institution hold the view that the institution yields to despotic and oppressive tendencies largely because it does not evolve directly from the people. I maintain that this position is not a true characterization of the institution, in the light of experience and reason.

3. Meddlesomeness

Some critics also see the traditional institution in Nigeria as being meddlesome in the lives and affairs of the ordinary citizens within its area of jurisdiction. This criticism, in my considered opinion, does not hold any water. The truth of the matter is that the mediation and arbitration of traditional rulers in the affairs of their subjects cannot be meaningfully construed as being meddlesome.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the enviable roles the traditional institution plays in the life of the nation, the institution is yet to be given constitutional recognition. And given the stabilizing roles the institution has continued to play in the polity, there have been an ongoing clamour for it to be given specific roles under the Constitution. Although at the local government level about five percent of the Council funds is supposed to be utilized in the maintenance of the institution, this policy has largely been observed in the breach. Rather, what has been in place is nothing but tokenism in which token funds are given occasionally to Government-recognized traditional rulers as official allowances.

I support the strengthening of the traditional institution through

constitutional provisions. This will empower it to render much more effective services to the people, especially in the area of peace and security within the grassroots.

The institution has bright prospects if its roles are appropriately recognized and entrenched in the Constitution. It enjoys the support of the people because of its closeness to the grassroots. It is my conviction that for a long time to come, the traditional institution will continue to play useful roles in the life of the nation.

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