

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN MODERN ADMINISTRATION: A NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

During the colonial administration, African traditional rulers enjoyed latitudinal power over their subjects until the native authority system was laid to rest and the repayment of the 1976 returns that defined their status quo under the third tier jurisdiction. The paper examines the enormous tasks before the African traditional rulers regarding rural and community development, tax administration, and conflict resolution in areas under their jurisdiction. It suggests setting up positive mechanism in the enhancement of their function, since the sustainability of any society depends on the improvement of the traditional ruler in administration.

Introduction

African traditional rulers have been involved in different types of administration right from time immemorial. The indirect rule system was successful because of the conjugal involvement of the traditional rulers in the administration. To appreciate the background against which they now operate, scanty reference need to be made to their roles in the administrations under different regimes.

The term traditional ruler refers to an influential personality in a community, such as Emir in the Northern part of Nigeria, Oba in the

Southern and Obi in the Eastern part of Nigeria, who had complete sovereignty over his territory of administration and who was not subjected to any higher authority within or outside his domain. In this paper, we shall attempt to identify some paramount roles of the traditional rulers in administration devoid of social functions of honorary chieftaincy titles, in recognition of the services rendered to their communities.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical framework that guided this paper is the role theory chosen to better explain the subject matter. Are (1989) observed that role describes the part to be played by the individual organization in fulfilling their job requirements. Role also effects the specific kind of individualistic behaviour required for carrying a specific measurable task certain in a specific job description. The role of African traditional rulers in administration is to help bring about efficiency and effectiveness towards the sustainability and the enhancement of the institution as well as modern administration.

Adedokun (1985) pointed out that role is used to designate the complete culture pattern associated with particular status position, attitudes, values and behaviour ascribed to the society, to any and all persons occupying a specific position, and this include the legitimate expectation of incumbents with respect to the behaviour of other persons. Under their administrative jurisdiction in the Nigerian society, the role perception of traditional rulers in administration is therefore to administer their domain towards meeting the aspiration of the subjects.

Who is a traditional ruler?

The success or failure of every community depends wholly on traditional ruler who serves as good gate keeper or the solid bedrock of that community. Therefore, the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, in its third schedule part III^B, made provision for the establishment of council of chiefs in the state level (FRN, 1999).

Adedokun (1985) says that the traditional ruler:

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is a person who by virtue of his area occupies the stool or throne of the area and who has been appointed to an area and who been appointed to it in accordance with the custom and tradition of the land and has sovereignty over the people of that area.

Since traditional rulers are the custodians of cultures and traditionalists who plays important role in the development of their communities as well have enormous latitudinal powers over their subjects, by this explanation, they came on board through dynasty.

Are (1989) rightly pointed out that the traditional ruler is the embodiment and custodian of the community, and any kind of modern development or civil legislation is built upon the traditional administration. His institution has been contributing grossly to the development of the society from pre-colonial era to the present day by ensuring good atmosphere and maintenance of peace.

Functions of traditional rulers

Adedokun (1978) traced the role of the traditional ruler from the era of former Empires of Benin, Borno, Oyo, and the Sokoto Caliphate. He argued that traditional rulers played very vital roles in the original conception and evolution of Nigeria. He states that:

It is doubtful whether Nigeria as we know today, have existed but for the cohesion of so many divergent communities brought together. Examples are the Benin Empire, Borno Empire and the pacification exercise giving birth to Oyo Empire or for that matter, the effort of Usman Dan fodio.

Nasarawa State Local Government (2005) posits that traditional rulers have role to play in securing cohesion of Nigeria. All that is needed is to have an articulate democratic policy that will guide their conducts.

Adedokun (1985) acknowledges this when he states that ward and village heads are the encyclopedia of the administration. They know every single individual in their locality and have detailed knowledge of their movements. They know the locations of all of them and have detailed knowledge of the wives a particular man has, how many children and their various ages.

Are (1989) states that traditional rulers have always been called upon and are used to neutralizing conflict. Besides, successful government realizes the surest way to win hearts and minds of the citizens on major issue of the day was through the traditional rulers regarding their significant role. Norman Miller in Are (1989) observes that, whatever the basis, the political survival of traditional leaders is significant because they provide the vital linkage between the government and the people. They influence the success of specific modernization schemes by serving as translators, interpreters, and mediators of government goals. With the foregoing argument on the position of traditional rulers, matters of national security is, therefore, very clear.

The traditional rulers also participate in policy formulation and also are used in different capacities for national development. Thus, the nation has had the National Conference of Traditional Rulers (1966), Northern conference of chiefs (1968), and Conference of Traditional Rulers to address federal government (1976) in Lagos, Nigeria.

Moreover, the 1979 Nigerian Constitution, third scheduled in II^B, made precise provision for the establishment of Council of Chiefs in the State level. The Council shall have power to advice the Governor or whenever requested to do so on any matter relating to customary law or cultural affairs, inter community relations and chieftaincy matters as Governor may direct.

Problems of traditional rulers

Despite the paramount roles of traditional rulers in the development of the society from time immemorial there are some scholarly contestations against the traditional institution. Adedokun (1985)

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regrets the idea that traditional rulers have nothing as they are elementary or agents of retrogression in the grass root development. Although, the 1979 Constitution, in its third schedule part II(B) made provision for the establishment of Council of Chief in the States, the role of traditional rulers have been eroded and relegated advisory level at the request of the government. The 1979 Constitution also made the traditional rulers to be ceremonial members of the Council when they are suppose to pilot the affairs of communities (FRN, 1999).

The role by traditional rulers may never be underestimated, recognized, retained, respected and protested by many people, but it should be completely insulated from partisan politics. The abolition of school on the constitutional ground that portrays traditional rulers as embodiment of oppression and political retrogression is unacceptable. *Ceteris paribus*, traditional rulers still have stabilizing roles in the development of the society, despite the incessant conflicts between them and local government or state bureaucratic machineries.

Recommendation on enhancing the effectiveness of the traditional ruler

To enhance the effectiveness of traditional rulers in administration, there should be constitutional provision for State and Local Governments to give official recognition to them, such as the right to guard and watch committees. Also, a Police command should liaise with the traditional rulers to ensure peaceful co-existence in their domain. By so doing, there should be strong police community relations.

A separate ministry of chieftaincy affairs will make proper utilization of the traditional rulers. When traditional rulers were deprived of natural power by government, they should not be appraised for their role on the basis of mere administrative function, which they played during the yester years of colonial rascalism. The perfection of the dual mandate should also allow them to participate in decision making process and also ensuring that their roles are properly democratic in constitution.

As we progress to nationhood, let us not imagine that the future will be crisis-free, but work for stability. To this end, every institution that can contribute to stability and speedy resolution of dispute and crisis need to be preserved over the years whether it be under British, colonial civilian rule, independent or even under military rule with strong weapon of cover at our disposal. Traditional rulers have been called up and used to stabilize situations.

Conclusion

The central premise of this paper is the appraisal of the significant role of African traditional rulers in administration during the colonial years and post colonial era. From the time immemorial, they added their basic function in all aspect of human endeavor.

Traditional institutions were invented to face the challenges of customs and tradition operating in different levels of Nigerian political administration up to date. They serve as agent of development in their various communities. Matthew Kereko's Benin Republic in 1971, traditional institution played a vital role in mobilizing the people to support and implement government policies, programs even though the government campaigned violently against traditional rulers. To give more credence to the position, Nicolo Machiavelli as quoted by Are (1989) stated that, "He who desires or proposes to change the form of government in a state or wishes to be acceptable and to be able to maintain to every one's satisfaction, must need to retain at least the shadow of its ancient customs so that institution may not appear to its people to have changed, through fact radically difference from the old ones.

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