

## THE INSTITUTION OF TRADITIONAL RULERS AND ITS ADAPTIVE CAPACITY

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### *Abstract*

*The study examines the place of the institution of traditional rulers in Nigeria, noting that in spite of the odds facing it, the institution has refused to die and, hence, its relevance, even if it no longer plays the role it played in the pre colonial and colonial periods. It highlights the different schools of thought on the traditional rulers and concludes that “Traditional Rulers’ Assembly” could be put in place to contribute to the process of nation building, development and integration.*

*(Key Words: Traditional Rulers, Adaptive Capacity, Nigerian Politics).*

### INTRODUCTION

This study demonstrates the resilience of the traditional institution in Nigeria in the face of traumatic and provocative changes. It notes that rather than the institution collapsing, the framework of traditional and modern power politics held on and the institution remained the rallying point of the society. Dynamism within the traditional institution is a function of its adaptation to regular changes that had taken place from the pre-colonial era, through the colonial period to the post colonial dispensation as we now have it. Hence, the institution of traditional rulers throughout the country continues to be relevant and could not be written off having survived the test of time.

### AN APPRAISAL OF THE SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT ON THE PREDICAMENT OF TRADITIONAL RULERS

Clearly, we cannot compare the position of the present day monarchs (Oguntomisin, 1997:53-70) to the relatively lofty position they occupied in the pre-colonial period. Similarly, their power had severely waned in the period which preceded the military rule. To some extent, it could be said that there is much uncertainty about the future position of the monarchy. No wonder, Lucy Mair opined that:

It is quite easy to predict that the chiefs will eventually disappear from the scene, whether or not the governments of independent Ghana and Nigeria take forcible step to bring this about (Mair, 1958: 205).

Based on this assertion, it is easy to see a bleak future for the institution of the monarchy. Others in this same school of thought hold the view that the monarchical institution is already an anachronism and as such, it should be scrapped (Patridge, 1978:26). To yet another group, the institution is no more than a “museum piece (*The Nigerian Observer*, 1974:6).” And in the opinion of Omojuwa Natufe, one of the strong supporters of this school of thought:

Traditional rulers are relics of historical past struggling to safeguard their respective feudal “kingdoms” and “empires” in a republic neo-colonial polity. As an antiquity of history, traditional rulership is destined to crumble before historical materialistic forces of social development (Natufe, 1985:19).

If the above statement is examined closely, one finds that there are certain elements of truth in it. Firstly, the socio-political changes that had taken place in Nigeria between the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and now had made drastic changes in the position, status and authority of traditional rulers. All the empires, states and kingdoms over which the traditional rulers wielded religio-political authority had crumbled. They had been encapsulated in a geo-political edifice over which they had no control whatever. Secondly, the judicial role of the rulers had been taken over by the judicial arm of the emergent polity. Thirdly, the police and other law enforcement agents had taken over the duty of the maintenance of law and order in various Nigerian communities from the traditional rulers who no longer had coercive agents to enforce their will. Fourthly, economic changes that had taken place in the country over the years had taken the control of the economy of Nigerian communities from the traditional rulers. Indeed, instead of controlling the pace of economic development in their societies, traditional rulers struggled along with other members of the society for economic survival. Fifthly, the introduction of Islam and Christianity has undermined their religious authority. Adherents of the two religions look towards their religious leaders for divine guidance and spiritual satisfaction. To them, the traditional notion that traditional rulers were representatives of the gods on earth is no longer tenable. One can be tempted by the points stated above to agree with this school of thought that traditional rulers are irrelevant to present day Nigeria and that their position should consequently be abolished.

However, though the arguments that give rise to it look plausible, the view itself is unrealistic.

These views constitute a contradiction in terms in a Republic as the monarchy must have a role to play in constitutional government, even though it cannot exercise absolute power and influence. Indeed, in a republic, government and the monarchy should be partners in progress.

At this juncture, it is significant that the disintegration of the various polities hitherto ruled by traditional rulers and their absorption into the country today known as Nigeria was not accompanied by the abolition of the institution of traditional rulers. It did not make traditional rulers politically irrelevant to the society. Rather, the authorities of these rulers had been limited to their respective towns and villages, which were the components that made up the new state. At this level, the institution of traditional rulers was very meaningful and their position in the society was relevant. Today, Nigerian cities, towns and villages are headed by traditional rulers of various grades who are still being reckoned within their societies.

However, another school of thought is of the view that Nigeria is gradually gravitating towards a mass-oriented democracy in which loyalty of citizens shifts from traditional rulers to the state. When such a state is finally reached, traditional rulers would be phased out from Nigerian politics (Lawal, 1985:10). This view is as unrealistic as the first. If the mass-oriented democracy referred to here is a socialist conception of a period when Nigeria would be ruled by the masses and, perhaps, a classless society would be attained, such a view is Utopian. However, if it is a reference to the current political situation in which all citizens including traditional rulers are expected to be loyal to the nation, it should be noted that the stage began in 1914 and it was reached in 1960 when Nigeria became an independent nation with the institution of the monarchy unabolished. That the institution survived the stage is a proof of its relevance to the society.

In spite of the pessimistic views cited above, other available evidence indicates that it is far too early to write off the institution of the monarchy as a legacy of a fast disappearing age. Indeed, having survived the vicissitude and uncertainties of the colonial era, as well as the pre-independence and post-independence periods, and successfully adapted to the changing political dispensations, its capacity for future survival should not be under-estimated. It seems fairly safe to postulate that the survival of the institution to date is but an indication of the deep roots it has in the culture and tradition of the people. Some reasons can be adduced to support the assumption.

## **THE RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN MODERN NIGERIA**

Although it has become clear that there are important fields in modern government which fall beyond the scope of duties traditionally performed by the *Oba*, yet the monarchical institution because of its embodiment of aspects of the people's culture,

may enjoy a longer lease of life, especially in the rural areas where Western impact has not effected much cultural erosion. For example, in modern day Benin, the *Oba's* influence and power is not only over Benin City, but throughout Benin and its environs. The *Oba's* authority covers about seven local government areas<sup>7</sup> that constitute the core of the former Benin kingdom. There is, therefore, the need for the government to maintain an alliance with traditional rulers in order to ensure a free flow of communication between the government and the people. Traditional Rulers and Chiefs according to government statement are “partners in progress” who should assist in getting the people to co-operate with government (Mid-West State Press Release, 1974:9). In fact, it was the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo who in 1959 said:

The maintenance of law and order, peace and tranquility in this region (Western Region) would be seriously imperiled if chieftaincy institutions were to disappear or suffer serious impairment (Awolowo, 1959:7).

Thus, the success of any government at the grassroots or local level depends on its relationship with the traditional institutions, particularly the *Oba* who is well respected and honored by his subjects.

There is, therefore, no basis for the abolition of the monarchy in Nigerian societies. According to Oguntomisin, (Oguntomisin, 1997:57) traditional rulers in spite of the changes that have so far taken place in the country are still being looked upon in their various localities as the custodians of the tradition. Yet, in the view of Bello-Imam, being closer to the people than any state or federal government agents, they are veritable linkages between the people and the government as well as the translators and interpreters of government policies at the grass roots (Oguntomisin, 57).

These views expressed by this school of thought are both plausible and realistic. In various Nigerian cities, towns and villages today, traditional rulers are responsible for administrative activities. They and their chiefs ensure peace and orderliness in their localities. They settle minor cases particularly of traditional nature between husbands and wives and among families. In this way, they aid the police and help to lessen congestion in the courts. As leaders of their communities, they coordinate community development efforts of the people and also explain government policies to members of their communities and ventilate the grievances of their people to the government.

The institution of the monarchy is not only the bedrock of much of our tradition, art and culture; it is in fact the centre of many of the people's traditional festivals. In order to preserve the cultural heritage of Nigerians, provisions should be made for the continuity and adaptation of the institution in any form of government.

Moreover, as many empirical studies have revealed, the survival of any institution, particularly traditional ones, in a modern setting depends on the capacity of

such an institution to adapt itself to changing political dispensations or developments. In recent centuries, political progress has been measured, in general, by a movement from right to left of the political spectrum. England is a typical example where the monarch and the aristocracy have come to terms with changing circumstances and where the old institutions of government have been adapted to the new. Two lessons can be learned from the way the monarchy and aristocracy in England managed to survive and reach a *modus vivendi* with democracy, such that today they still have a role in constitutional government and a part to play in the society as a whole.

The first is the need to compromise and adapt to changing circumstance, and the second is the need to achieve a reasonable degree of independence from partisan politics. There is no doubt that the Nigerian traditional rulers possessed this adaptive capacity. This was, of course, brought to bear as the traditional rulers adapted to the yearnings of the different emerging authorities right from the colonial period up to the era of military rule in Nigeria.

However, the second condition of insulation from partisan politics seems difficult to achieve. In fact, it was the traditional rulers' participation in partisan politics during the pre-independence and post-independence era that showed the resilience and adaptive nature of the traditional rulers' institution. As it has been stated earlier, the economic factor, to a considerable extent, accounts for the traditional rulers' involvement in partisan politics. Many of them depend on the politicians during the civilian regime for their sources of income. The fact that they remain in office is at the behest of the political leaders and governments of their state, even if the force of tradition is very strong. Without doubt, the state government through the local government pays the traditional rulers' salaries. How then can they abstain from politics, especially now that we are under the civilian administration?

No man can operate independently of the social forces of his age. The monarch, the chiefly aristocracy and other elements of our day are all affected by the social forces operating in their societies. According to E.H. Carr: Heroes and rebels alike were the products of the specific conditions of their age and century (Carr, 1973:52). No matter the degree of economic independence a monarch attains, he cannot isolate himself completely from political currents in his society. This is not to say that traditional rulers should sacrifice their traditional honor and values on the altar of partisan politics. They can still play a significant role in the community without compromising the cultural values inherent in their office.

From our analysis above, it is clear that as a result of the structural changes that have so far been made in Nigeria's political system; traditional rulers can no longer retrieve their past glories. They are no longer relevant at the federal level of administration. Their continued use both as rubber stamps of government decisions and megaphones of government policies is a desecration of their revered position.

However, the role of traditional rulers should be strictly limited to their areas of jurisdiction, that is, the local level of administration. It is in these local areas that they are accorded respect. They are in a position, at this level, to aid the government in galvanizing people for development.

It suffices to state here, that the traditional rulers should be made the ceremonial presidents of the local government council in their domain. It is worthy of note that I have argued somewhere that, in the case of Benin, the traditional rulers should be made ceremonial president of all the Edo-speaking groups of Local Government Council areas in Edo State (Edo, 2001:148).

This, in fact, should be the case with all the first class traditional rulers in Nigeria. By so doing, the constitution would have provided the traditional rulers a role in the affairs of the country. It appears this was what the 1976 unified local government reforms were set at achieving, but it never assigned any specific role to the traditional rulers who were the ceremonial heads of the councils. Besides, the traditional rulers should be accorded recognition by the government and be guaranteed a minimum annual income from public funds commensurate with their role, status and duties and that such payments be insulated from political control. This will definitely enhance the status of the traditional rulers.

## **CONCLUSION**

So far, the traditional institution has survived. Its survival has been due to its resilience and ability to adapt to the changing political dispensations in the country overtime. More importantly, it has continued to make itself relevant to the needs of the society. Without doubt, the palace remains the court of the common man or masses, where justice was and is still dispensed with equanimity and without fear or favour at the grass root level. From the foregoing, therefore, it becomes clear that with every major development or change in the socio-political situation in the country, the institution of traditional rulers kept on adjusting and adapting so as to be able to maintain its relevance and retain its status even though it was loosing its power and influence, which prevailed in the pre-colonial period when the institution of traditional rulers held sway.

However, it must be noted that every government in Nigeria right from the colonial era has found a place for the traditional rulers and so grant them some form of recognition and relevance. It is no gain saying that at the moment, the traditional rulers occupy a strong position in our universities as chancellors. Besides, every government in post colonial Nigeria has used them to legitimize their rule, be it civilian or military. Of high significance was the constitution of the Council of Elders and Traditional Rulers by the Babangida Administration towards the latter part of that administration.

It suffices, however, to add that even though first class traditional rulers in Nigeria are members of the state council it would be necessary if government can go a

step further by re-introducing the House of Chiefs as was the case in the old Northern and Western regions. By so doing, the traditional rulers would be able to make meaningful contributions to national development. Thus, it is hereby suggested or proposed that the upper house, which is the Senate, could be replaced with “Traditional Rulers’ Assembly” an equivalent of the “House of Lords” in Britain.

This proposition is germane in view of the fact that all traditional rulers are today literate and would easily adjust and adapt to legislative procedures. The wisdom of the traditional rulers would have thus helped in bringing about a new Nigeria that the current re-branding aims at achieving. There is no doubt that as men of wisdom and custodian of the society, they will contribute meaningfully to nation building and national integration.

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