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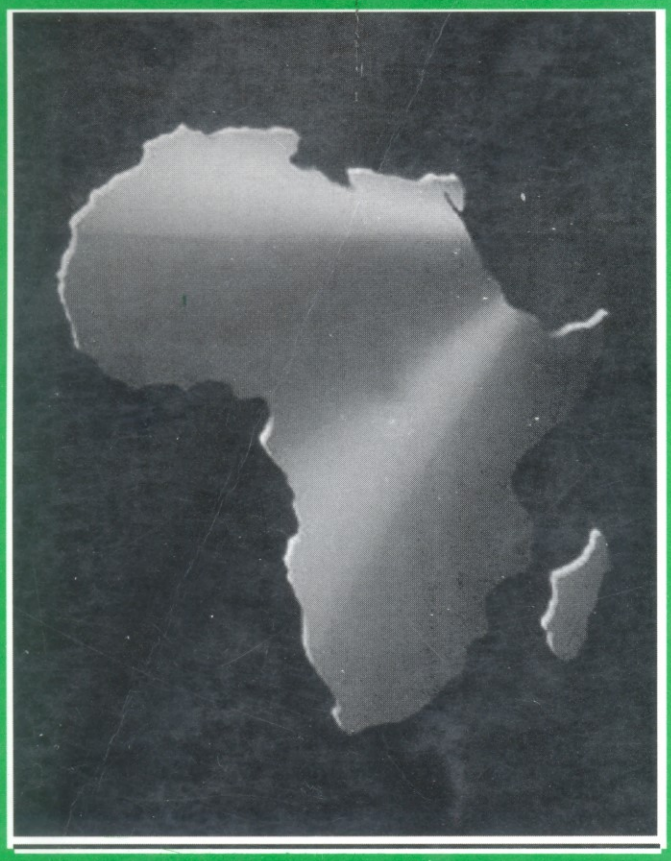

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THE PLACE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN THE NEW POLITICAL ORDER IN NIGERIA

Fatile, Jacob Olufemi and Adejuwon, Kehinde David
Department of Public Administration
Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos State

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relevance of traditional rulers in local government administration in the new political order in Nigeria. The paper contends that the institution of traditional administration has over the years suffered from social and political changes due to the advent of colonial administration and the introduction of the so-called modern government. It argues that in Nigeria today, traditional rulers who are very prominent and powerful in the past have been relegated to the background in the present political arrangement which assign them only nominal and advisory role in local government affairs. The paper also observes that traditional rulers should be more actively involved in democratic governance since their involvement will allow the government to have the advantage of benefiting from the cultural and historical experience of them before making realistic and acceptable policies. The paper therefore concludes that the constitution of Nigeria should be amended to reflect the positive role of traditional rulers in national affairs.

Keywords: ***Traditional Rulers, Traditional Administration, Local Government, New Political order, Constitution, Democratic governance.***

INTRODUCTION

The traditional institution is one of the few institutions that have refused to change with time. This institution according to Aderibigbe (2001:319) has provided a system of administration from which law and order came and provided a stable system of good government. The belief among most western scholars was that pre-colonial African societies had no system of administration, that is, no law, no order, no government and no civilization. This belief has long been seen as not only very erroneous but grossly subjective. It has since been known that traditional African societies, indeed, had well organised and well established systems of administration where public order was provided and maintained; where laws were made and implemented; where tasks were executed, road built, communal wells constructed, shrines and palaces built, villages or town halls built, taxes or tributes exacted or collected. In the traditional states, wars, mainly intercommunal or inter-tribal wars were conducted, and there was dispensation of justice as disputes were settled (Edosa, 1994). Thus, in most parts of Nigeria, local administration was centred around the traditional ruler who was considered the repository of religious, legislative, executive and judicial functions. In effect, traditional rulers formed the nucleus of governance (Ola & Tonwe, 2003:159). From the earliest time therefore, the system of traditional rulership has been a significant feature of the tradition of most West African peoples and commanded a large degree of loyalty and respect among the people. Pre-colonial African societies was known for recognition of a developed system of governance and respected top traditional top hierarchies that served as symbols of authority and power. When these numerous and varied functions and responsibilities are added to the artistic ingenuity and rich cultural heritage of the traditional African people, it takes no less than such a personality as Mungo Park, a famous European explorer, to comment in amazement: "a prospect of civilization and magnificence I least expected of the bosom of Africa" (Edosa 1994). Many of Africans traditional institutions of governance have valuable characteristics that can inform the development of culturally relevant institutions of democratic governance in contemporary Africa. As noted by Arifalo and Okajare (2005), traditional rulers in pre-colonial Nigeria were rulers by every standard because they derived their executive, legislative and judicial functions from traditions long rooted recognized and revered by their people. In essence, the traditional rulers and their offices were to be accorded utmost reverence by the people whose thought was that doing otherwise was acting contrary to demands of traditions. This could result in anger and punishment from the gods. Consequently, traditional rulers were conceived by their subject as divine beings whose authority was not to be questioned. In his own view, Ogebe

(2005) observed that the 30 years of a military in Nigeria favoured the traditional institution as each regime drew its support from the traditional base. It was therefore common, then, to regard the presence of traditional rulers in ceremonies as evidence of the acceptance of the events by the people and the popularity of the organizers. He noted further that in all parts of the country, traditional rulers are regarded as the custodians of their people's culture. That their positions exist and are still revered are glaring testimonies of the socio-cultural heritage of the people. The acceptance of traditional rulers by the people from generation to generation attest to the fact that the Nigerian has always had a culture and that the traditional institution was a natural power base from which Nigerians in their various settings were governed.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Many of Africa's traditional institutions of governance have valuable characteristics that can inform the development of culturally relevant institutions of democratic governance in contemporary Africa. Unfortunately the modern Africa state has, by and large, neglected these institutions. This study explores the relevance of traditional institutions of governance and why these institutions remain neglected by the post-independence Africa State. Pre-colonial African societies had a rich tradition of political, economic and social institutions that dealt with allocation of resources, law making and social control. Traditional institutions, which are still in operation in rural Africa, are complex and vary from place to place. Well before the advent of colonialism, some parts of Africa had developed centralized systems of governance with chiefs and kings. Often times, the powers of these rulers were restricted by various arrangements, including the institutions of councils. The institution of traditional administration has over the years suffered from social and political changes due to the advent of colonial administration and the introduction of so-called modern government. Aderibigbe (2001:321) argued that the institution of chieftaincy had outlived its usefulness and should be abolished. The chieftaincy position argued was seen to be undemocratic due to the fact that they are not democratically elected. He contended that becoming a traditional ruler through the right and privilege of heredity is exploitative, out of place and should be discouraged. Through this system, very incompetent persons most of the time assume rulership positions. People who become traditional rulers under the traditional system are sometimes persons who are spineless; old and illiterates who cannot keep pace with the complex nature of the work modern administration. Besides, in Nigeria today, traditional rulers, especially those who are very prominent and powerful in the past are disillusioned with the present political arrangement which assign them only nominal and advisory role in local government's affairs. Their disillusionment is an open secret in the country. Many of these traditional rulers have expressed dissatisfaction with how traditional institutions and their rulers have been relegated to the background over the years. Also, there is a great deal of insensitivity of modern elected local and state government's actors to the ego of traditional rulers. They believed that since the functions previously performed by the traditional institutions have been taken over by modern government, there is no need for further recognition of the institution. Thus, the traditional rulers have become stooges in the hands of modern government and have in many peculiar circumstances served as hindrances to societal progress by their non-understanding of the current needs and aspiration of the people. Scholars have also argued that even though traditional rulers are assigned advisory role, relevant provisions are not respected to the letter. The traditional rulers have complained on many occasions that because the role envisaged for them under the law is advisory, the local and state actors see the implementation of the relevant provisions as inconsequential in the actual functioning of the local and state governments and as such, an unnecessary burden. This situation has further alienated traditional rulers from the activities of local and state governments. Thus, the traditional rulers are dissatisfied with their present advisory role and this according to Ola & Tonwe (2003) has obviously got a negative effect on their contribution under the present dispensation. On the other hand, the modern democratic government actors themselves seem to portray the fact that the role of traditional rulers in governance in whatever form is an unnecessary burden. This is all the more disturbing when one considers the fact that millions of Naira is spent by state and local government on traditional councils all over the country. It is on the basis of aforementioned problems associated with the role

accorded traditional rulers in Nigeria today that this paper seeks to examine the extent to which traditional authorities have co-existed in achieving the objectives of the contemporary democratic system in the country and their roles in the emergent order.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

This section deals with some conceptual clarification as well as review of theories, which are considered relevant to this paper. Perhaps it is right to observe as Okoli et al (2007:53) did that despite its high profile and long usage, the concept of local government is still not always well understood. In fact, it is a problematic concept, which means that it has been conceived and constituted in different ways, depending on the orientation and experiences of the practitioners. For example, Bhagwan and Bhusha, (2006) sees local government as infra sovereign geographic units found within sovereign nation or quasi-sovereign nation. Like other units of government, local government possess a defined area, a population, an organization and the power to perform public activities. Within its territory, a local government unit seeks to give opportunities to the people for the expression of their opinion in regard to local affairs. It enables them to choose their representatives to take care of local affairs on their behalf. In his own view, Osuofia (2006) perceived local government as government at the local level or grassroots government, that is, power is allocated to local authority by the constitution to provide services of a local nature. It involves representation of the people in government. This representative exercise specific within a defined area. Hassan (2002), recognized local government as government at the grassroots. The word "local" shows that council are meant for small communities and the word "government" goes to confirm that councils have certain attributes of government. He stressed further that what makes a given administration at the local level, a local government is the autonomy enjoyed in exercising the powers to execute the functions allotted to it as well as its use of resources both human, materials and financial in the execution of those functions. Oyeleye (2007) clearly distinguished local government and local administration. According to him, local government is the government in which popular participation both in the choice of decision makers and in decision making process is conducted by local bodies which, while recognizing the supremacy of other levels of government is able and willing to accept responsibility for its decisions. On the other hand, he defined local administration as the administration of local communities essentially by means of local agents appointed by and responsible to an external agent which may be state, regional or national government. The above definitions indicates that local government can be generally discussed as government at the local level in which the people must elect their own representatives and section 7 sub section 1 of the Nigerian Constitution recognize it as the third-tier of government in Nigeria. It is government that exist to enable people at the grassroot have a direct or indirect participation in the matters that concerns them. Also, a traditional ruler has been viewed from different perspective by different scholars and authorities in the field of local government administration in Nigeria. Adamolekun (1988) gave an operational definition of traditional rulers as "individuals or groups of individuals who occupy communal political leadership positions sanctioned by immemorality, and are through the consent of community members granted authority and legitimacy to direct the affairs of particular ethno-cultural or linguistic groups in an ordered manner". He added further that the basis for such authority is traditional rather than charismatic or legal rational. In his own view Akpan (1994) narrowly defined traditional rulers from rulership perspective thus; "Traditional rulers are those accepted and drawing strength over a history of many generations". Traditional rulers means the traditional head of an ethnic community whose stool conferred the highest traditional authority on the incumbent since the time before the beginning of British rule (Oba of Benin). To Adewunmi and Egwurube (1985), traditional rulers are individuals occupying communal political leadership positions sanctified by cultural, moral and values, and enjoying the legitimacy of particular community to direct their affairs. They argued further that the basis on legitimacy is tradition, which includes the whole range of inherited culture and way of life; a people of history; moral and social values and the traditional institutions which survive to serve those values; traditional religious ideas surviving as autonomous religions. According to the law of Western Region (1959), traditional ruler was seen as "the traditional head of an ethnic group or clan who is the holder of

the highest primary executive authority in an indigenous policy or who has been appointed to the position in accordance with the customs and tradition of the area concerned by instrument or order of the state government and whose title is recognized as a traditional ruler by the government of the state". While Bendel State Edict (1979) defined traditional rulers as "the head of an ethnic unit or clan who is for the time being the heads of the highest traditional authority within the ethnic unit or clan and whose title is recognized as traditional ruler title by the Governor of the state". Traditional rulers are group of individual deriving legitimacy from customs, 'natural law', "divine right", and habit to direct the affairs of particular communities, "traditional rulers include hereditary monarchies, tribal chiefs and tribal councils (Egwurube, 1985). To Oladosu (1985), a traditional ruler is the paramount authority or natural ruler in any given Nigerian community. In some cases, he is the spiritual leader and custodian of all the traditions of his subjects. To be precise, he is commonly regarded as the "father" of all the citizen within his community. From the above definitions so far, it shows that traditional ruler is one who rules on the basis of the traditional authority. In Nigeria, what could confer traditional authority were either or a combination of the following:

- Descent from or close connection with the recognized founding family or lineage of the community, line of conquerors or those traditionally connected with the ruling community.
- Exhibition of peculiar ability or bravery
- Wealth measures in terms of farm size, quality of harvest, family size, membership of secret societies, taking of local titles e.t.c.
- Patronage and clientage.

It is necessary to state at this juncture that Gboyega (1987:94) provides a two-way typology for local government. The first attempts to justify the existence of the system on the basis of its usefulness to the furtherance of democratic principles and practices, while the other believes that an effective local government system contradicts the essence of democracy because they are hardly democratic. These arguments according to Okolo et al. (2007) are subsumed in the Democratic participatory school, the efficient service school and development school theories. These theories can be summarized into the general and developmental categories. Thus, the main ideas of democratic participatory school and efficiency school are, democratic ideals, political participation, protection services and infrastructure development. Under the development school are national integration, social and economic and manpower resources development. The issue of relevance of traditional authorities in the country's modernizing policy is a highly controversial one as there are divergent opinions and interests. Egwurube (1985) and Sambo (1987) identified three schools of thought in this regard. The first of these is the protagonist /abolitionist school. The abolitionist contends that the institution of traditional rulership is an anachronistic and as such should be abolished. This school of thought is concerned with the seeming incompatibility of traditional authority structures with the demands of democratic ethos. Abolitionist school of thought argued that traditional rulership is politically irrelevant given the ascendancy of modern democratic government. (Sambo, 1987). The supporters of this school conclude that, if the country is serious about ensuring that the citizenry imbibes the democratic and participatory culture needed to quicken the pace of the modernity of the policy, then a decisive step need to be taken as stated by Ayeni (1985) to jettison this archaic institution once and for all", to enable the people develop the required orientation in line with the reality of the present age and time. While Tonwe (1995) conclude that "sometimes in the distant future when the polity is fully modernized, there may be no need for the institution of traditional ruler. However, at this modernizing stage, it is desirable to handle the issues relating to traditional authorities with caution and tact, if the objective of achieving a stable and durable democratic government is to be achieved. The retentionist school is another school of thought championed by the holders of traditional rulership positions. This school contend that traditional rulers should be allowed to participate in politics to enhance their political position in the present scheme of things. This school of though envisaged a situation where traditional rulers could engage in politics at local level and thus effectively contribute their quota to the well being of the citizenry. As Oba of Benin (1985) rightly argued:

"the traditional ruler or king is not man made but that who answers to the position is God-anointed and therefore not to be brushed aside or relegated or disrespected"

While Egwurube (1985) in support of this school argued that "subjecting traditional authorities to rigours of the electoral process and the pettiness which is associated with politics in our society would not only make them target of public scrutiny, but also would destroy their sacredness thereby destroying their major source of strength". Similarly, the intention of this school of thought is to carve out a prominent role in governance at the local level for traditional authorities.

The third school of thought is the middle path. These represents the opinions of scholars who are middle of the road, neither-here-nor-there. This school accepts the position of the abolitionists on the anachronistic nature of traditional chieftaincy institutions, but rather curiously argues for a "befitting role" for traditional rulers in specific aspects of our development process. The middle path view point is presented as a position of moderation which reorganize the traditional and cultural relevance of traditional rulers which at the same time agreeing to the point that the traditional rulers might not have much place in modern government.

TRADITIONAL RULERS AND GOVERNANCE: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Before the advent of the British, governance in different parts of what make up the present day Nigeria was synonymous with traditional institutions and their rulers, local administration was centered around the traditional rulers, who were considered the repository of religious, legislative, executive and judicial functions. In effect, the traditional ruler formed the nucleus of governance. One striking fact is that the geographical spheres of authority of these traditional rulers were essentially localized. This is evident from the fact that no traditional ruler ever had jurisdiction over the entire geographical area, which now make up Nigeria (Tonwe, 1995). During pre-colonial days, the traditional rulers enjoyed full powers in their kingdoms. They commanded respect and obedience from their subjects, who regarded them as sons of the gods, their spiritual as well as their political leaders. They were believed to have had regular communication with the spirits of their ancestors for the benefits of the living. Akpan (1994) stated that besides this cultural influence on their subjects, they could punish severely any person who was disobedient or went against the norms of the society. The punishment could range from the lashes of cane, to be sold into slavery or put to death. No wonder their subjects looked on their chiefs with awe and trembling. Government by traditional rulers was personal government; a sort of local dictatorship. They had their courts, police, soldiers and prisons and made use of these institutions to their own advantage and to sustain their powers and influence. A close examination of the established traditional institutions and their rulers during the pre-colonial era reveals that in the task of governance, the traditional rulers had to shape appropriate policies, order priorities and generate revenue to meet the needs of their communities in the exercise of these functions. The executive powers of the Emir in North were hardly discernable. The Emir could therefore be referred to as a strong executive participation in local administration. In South West, besides the Oba, there were other power blocks or centers such as the body of king makers (Oyo Mesi), the town council and powerful secret societies. The Yoruba Oba was a constitutional head of government. (Oyeleye, 1988). In the South East, there was absence of centralized executive authority. The indigenous political set up in the part of the country reveals a great deal of popular participation and was highly decentralized and fragmented with authority being exercised at different levels, from the house hold to the village level. It must be emphasized that there was no generally accepted system among the Igbo. The advent of colonialism was a great blow to the power and influence of traditional rulers. The colonial masters were not only masters of the common people of Nigeria, but also masters of the traditional rulers. The British colonial administrators were apt to recognize the strategic and influential position occupied by traditional rulers in the country, therefore the colonialists avoided attempting any drastic reforms of the indigenous local administration. Instead, the British colonial administration took steps to put in a place a system of indirect rule. Indirect rule was a convenient strategy by the British to govern the people through their traditional institutions and rulers while ensuring close guidance by their superior British Administrators. In this way, the allegiance of the people was secured by the British via their traditional rulers (Adewunmi & Egwurube, 1985). The whole system of Indirect Rule practiced during the

colonial era as observed by Akpan (1994) was not aimed at entrenching the power of our traditional rulers, but was a means to an end. That end was the British rule for the politico-economic interest of Great Britain. What remained of the power and prestige of the traditional rulers was capitalized in making British rule more acceptable to the people. The traditional rulers were the government functionaries and could not exceed the limits of the powers given to them. During this period, they were allowed such power as enabled them to exercise personal, although controlled power over members of their communities. Those traditional rulers who did not conform with the policies of the British Administration were disposed and those ready to conform were installed. Edosa (1994) conclude that, the period of colonial rule witnessed the transformation or replacement of the old political and administrative systems in the pre-colonial societies or territories now called Nigeria by the modern system characterized by laid down rules and role definition, impersonality, continuity, hierarchy order or conformation, achievement, accountability, specialization and documentation. In conclusion, Walter (2005) summarized the colonial government in Africa, when he asserted that:

> *"We have been oppressed a great deal, we have been exploited a great deal, and we have been disregarded a great deal"*

According to Abdulkardir and Adagba (2005), the post colonial Nigeria witnessed epoch making events in the long match of traditional institutions into irrelevance. Firstly, the existence of this institution was made to be at the mercy of the new power holder. Not only were they stripped of power but some of them were also deposed, particularly in the Western and Northern regions. The support of the ruling party and government became the beginning of wisdom, traditional ruler therefore became victims of power play. Since independence various government in Nigeria have not enhanced the power of the traditional rulers. Rather, there has been a steady encroachment on the power and influence of the traditional rulers. William (1976) argues that the leadership of the post colonial Nigeria owes its existence on what he calls the legacy of "colonial patrimonialism" when he stated that:

> *"a system of administration in the ideological guise of indirect rule in order to enlist the dominant status groups in the service of colonial rule and to contain the political consequences of change in the class structure"*

The traditional rulers however, were now expected to interact with the new nationalist leaders who had taken over the power from the colonialist. But rather than playing their pre-colonial function of being the guarantors of the rich cultural values of Nigerian traditional society as a sovereign state; they now served a new purpose. Thus from the colonial period through the post-colonial the role of traditional rulers came to be as unindigenous and therefore untraditional as the other political institutions that had emerged in the Nigeria polity.

THE DIMINISHING ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION – THE CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

The general decline of the power of the traditional ruler is worldwide. It is not true as many people believe that the institution of traditional ruler is only peculiar to African countries. All communities in the world were first ruled by their traditional leaders. Ancient history abounds with stories of kings and patriarchs who ruled their various communities the world over. The emergence of a strong government seriously affects the power of the traditional rulers. Again, social, political and economic development and awareness helped to diminish the loyalty to the traditional rulers, which was based on mystery and fear of the chiefs. Ronald (1972) sums up the problem when he says:

> *"The problem of the chiefs is that the decline in authority which they share with royalty and aristocracy the world over has not yet penetrated very far below the surface of African Society"*

Each of the former regions enacted "Appointment and Deposition of Chiefs Law" which gave the Governor or Prime Minister the power to manipulate the chiefs and even send any chief on exile if need be. Though the 1960 Independence Constitution provided for a house of chiefs in every region. All first class chiefs were to be ex-officio members of the house while fifty-nine other chiefs were to be nominated by the legislative, yet they were merely ceremonial. In 1963, the Republican Constitution also made provisions of the constitution of each region of a House of

Chiefs as a second chamber or the upper house of the House of Assembly with which it had the legislative power of the state. Despite this provision, the roles of the kings were merely advisory and ceremonial. Even when the Ooni of Ife became Governor of the western Region, the Premier was the Head of Government. At best, the kings were made Minister without Portfolios (Arifalo and Okajare, 2005). The 1976 local government reform gave statutory recognition to traditional rulers by "setting up a traditional council in each local government. The main philosophical thrust of this reform was to create the impression that traditional rulers were not being displaced when in reality, it was the last straws that hacked the spine of the traditional rulers. From 1976, the traditional rulers became non-executive and non-participatory. In fact, they were obviously removed from the mainstream of the decision making process of duly established democratic local administration. The events of 1976 marked the beginning of the final process of overthrow of the traditional rulers from the mainstream of Local government administration in Nigeria, while the 1979 constitution did not specify any role of the traditional institution. This prompted the Oba Oyekan of Lagos, in fear of extinction, to call for a union of traditional rulers to serve as a common forum to fight their cause. In the administrative guidelines handed by the Babangida's regime to local governments in 1988, the institution of monarch lost its vibrancy and recognition, specifically, guideline "B" states that:

> *"The local government chairman should regularly address the meeting of the traditional council on the policies and programmes of the local government. All recommendations, decisions and conclusions of the traditional council should be passed to the local government for consideration. A traditional ruler traveling outside his local government should inform the chairman of the local government"*

The above guideline shows that the traditional rulers were reduced in status and placed under the unbearing control of the local council chairman. The 1989 Constitution drew sharp criticisms from the traditional rulers and their supporters in Nigeria on the ground that it made no provision for their roles. Since the beginning of this present democratic dispensation since 1999, traditional rulers were not offer any identifiable role beyond using them as mobilisers of grassroot people such that the politician saw them as a good means to attain electoral victory. All local governments have one way or the other eroded the power of traditional rulers. The concept of popular participation in local government brought about the gradual transfer of ruling power from the traditional rulers to the elected local councils. No where in the constitution of Nigeria, (especially 1999 which is currently in operation) is an executive rule prescribed for traditional rulers. Both 1979 and 1999 constitution of Nigeria and the Federal Government Guidelines for Local Government Reform throughout the country seriously render the traditional rulers a "toothless bull dog", they can bark but not bite. They can advice but cannot execute or enforce their advice. They can talk and warn but they may not be heeded. In short, they may be ignored without any constitutional repercussion for such an action (Oladosu, 1985). According to the constitution, the traditional rulers are represented in state basis on the national council of state, which is an advisory body to the President of the country; that is it is a body that has no executive power or functions. The discontentment of traditional rulers over their non-executive role in the Nigeria political system led to the organization of the conference of Obas in 1980s with traditional rulers from Lagos, Ogun, Oyo and Ondo states. A portion of their memorandum to the then President reads;

> *"We feel that the constitution does not recognize or give positive recognition to traditional or paramount rulers and that the position should be reviewed, so that traditional or paramount rulers in the whole of the federation, will be given positive recognition and effective powers, duties and responsibilities in the running of our various governments" (cited in Oladosu, 2005).*

A considerable number of traditional rulers themselves have openly expressed serious dissatisfaction with the present arrangement whereby the chiefs have only an advisory role to play and their erstwhile executive functions taken away from them. The Alaafin of Oyo, Oba Lamidi Adeyemi, said, traditional rulers are being systematically relegated to the background by some politicians who have no respect for dignity of the institution (Daily Times, Jan 24, 1983, p.7). While Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki stated that he was unhappy about the fact that there is no legal

constitutional framework within which traditional rulers could exercise political power (Sunday Punch, March 20, 1983, p.16). He therefore called on National Assembly to re-examined the role of traditional rulers within this context. According to the Governor of former Gongola State, "the role of traditional rulers in maintaining law and order must be recognized in whatever constitution this country operate" that "the objectives of government in maintaining peace and stability could not be achieved without the full support and cooperation to Emirs and chiefs" and that the traditional rulers have significant role to play in the affairs of the state (cited in Oladosu, 1995).
In his own view, Oba Adeyinka Oyekan II, expressed his dissatisfaction with the situation and asserted that "the traditional rulers might soon form a trade union if the present withdrawn of some of their traditional duties as contained in the constitution was not rescinded. He even suggested that the Oba will soon form themselves into a Union. The formulation of the union was necessary because traditional rulers are no more rulers but "traditional keepers of our customs" (Oyewo, 1995). Looking back at the past involvement of traditional rulers in local administration, it will be correct for one to draw the conclusion that the present ceremonial functions assigned to traditional rulers is quite inadequate. The statutory provisions hitherto made must be reviewed so as to accord the traditional rulers better dignity and more roles to play in the affairs of the government.

TRADITIONAL RULERS AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, the democratic governance at the local level developed around the traditional authorities. Generally, they were considered by their people as repositories of religious, executive, legislative as well as judicial function. This prompted Ola (1984) to declare that "whether in the North or in the South of Nigeria, the position of traditional authorities has been vitally important since the pre-British era", while Walter (2005) posited that "before even the British came into relations with our people, we were a developed people, having our own institutions, having our own ideas of government". The importance of the traditional rulers in the socio-political development of Nigeria has never been in doubt. Not only do they possess tremendous possibilities for progress at the local level, but as the community heads and the custodians of our cultural heritage, also hold the key answers to national security, unity and survival. However Oyewo (1983) reiterates the position of the traditional rulers in Nigeria democratic governance and he is of the opinion that they should be more involved in local governance. He backed up his points by stating that traditional rulers have more effective ways of communicating and enforcing members of their community to do certain things proposed as beneficial by the council. This is because among Nigerian and particularly the Yorubas in the South West, there is a great respect for traditional rulers, passive obedience in all aspect of life. Traditional rulers has a vital role to play in democratic governance at the local level. First, loyalty to the chiefs are still strong and they are in position to promote local agreement in problems before their councils. Also, they often have varied experience in government. Thirdly, in some countries, the chiefs have functions in matters of customary law and chieftancy. Lastly, to leave the traditional authority out of democratic governance child possibly generate a more powerful centre in loyalties outside the council (Maddick, 1963) The involvement of traditional rulers in democratic governance will allow the government to have the advantage of benefiting from the cultural and historical experience of them before making realistic and acceptable policies. The political survival of traditional rulers is significant because they provide the vital linkage between the government and the people, they influences the success of specific modernization scheme by serving as translators, interpreters and mediators of government goals. In his own view Bello-Imam (1987) posited that traditional rulers should be more actively involved in democratic governance in the following ways. That since traditional rulers are the nerve centres for the mobilization of the citizens for any collective effort, in Nigeria, they should be adequately consulted and considered during the formulation and execution of any public policy. Also, the traditional rulers themselves should appreciate the fact that a lot of changes in all aspects of our national endeavour have taken place since colonization and by extension should be prepared to accept such changes which have also affected the traditional institutions in good faith. This way, they will perpetually commend local support, respect and above all integrity. Another relevant aspect of the traditional institutions in democratic governance is the decentralized system of decision making. Extensive decentralization

together with a consensual system of decision making, not only in the making of rules but also in their implementation, allows villagers to become masters of their own destiny. Vaughan (2003), therefore argued that there is little disadvantage in retaining such a system. It saves the country in administrative cost since the overwhelming majority of the population living in villages administers itself. More importantly, it empowers the population by allowing it to control decision making that affects its own livelihood and narrows the gap between civil society and the government by preventing the government from becoming too overbearing. This aspect of the traditional institutions is highly relevant for building a democratic system of governance in contemporary Nigeria. Summarily, the very great majority in this debate tend to approach the present arrangement is not relevant to the prevalent socio-cultural ecology and the configuration of power at the local level by advertently failing to capture the superior nature of traditional authority structures in the calculus of local politics and developments. According to Adamolekun (1988) this superior nature of traditional rulers is a function of a number of factors. The first of it is the fact that traditional rulers are still highly regarded by everybody and without them there would be no peace, proper unity and stability. Secondly, traditional rulers provide continuity in government. This is because they survive like the bureaucracy all types of "ephemeral" modern governments. They are thus placed to served as stronghold where a consistent and continuous approach to local development can be conceived and executed with minimum risk. Thirdly, if primacy on modern democracy is placed on citizen participation *ipso factor,* traditional rulers themselves consult with individuals and bureaucratic albeit through unofficial channel before they embark on certain strategic decisions. Traditional rulers still perform integrative and communicative functions which are very crucial in the attempt to redistribute power to all sectors of the political system. In addition, traditional rulers have better knowledge of local conditions and local needs. They are thus better placed to articulate and rank order the priorities of these communities for better more equitable and effective resource allocation. Also, modern government still exists in a traditional setting. For example, traditional rulers are still looked at by many rural dwellers as local governments and problems such as murders, even come to them before they go to the police. Finally, the alternatives to traditional rulers are said to be themselves not above broad. Modern structure of local government has been criticized for not exhibiting more efficient cost conscious methods resource allocation.

CONCLUSION

A thorough examination of the roles of traditional rulers have shown that the traditional rulers are still needed for the smooth functioning of government. The traditional authorities serve as intermediaries between the modern government and the larger masses of the people. The institution of traditional authority serves as the communicator and interpreter of government ideas and programme to the people. In remote places in most West African countries today, traditional rulers still render important services to their respective societies, such as the settlement of civil cases related to marriages, inheritance and customs. The traditional rulers serve as the custodians of the tradition of the people and are often consulted on cultural and traditional matters. The rulers are still reckoned with therefore as a unifying force in the society (Aderibigbe, 2001:34). Traditional rulers are important relics of our traditional political system and the embodiment of our culture consequently, the institution of traditional rulers should be preserved. In this paper, we have attempted to present the multifaceted role of traditional ruler and whether or not the political role of traditional rulers should be enlarged within the context of our democratic existence. There are several arguments that could be made within the boundaries of the concepts of democracy and local administration examined here. But one theory is definite, the answers to the questions we set out to examine are not indisputably clear. Although it may be said that the concept of democracy is not congruous with the idea of giving more political power to traditional rulers, one must equally say that there are gray areas in which pluralist or populist concepts may be complementary. If therefore one agrees that there are millions of Nigerians who are outside the mainstream of party politics and the realm of representative government, and argument may be made for the recognition of traditional rulers as representatives of these social forces. The constitution of Nigeria should be amended to reflect the positive role of traditional rulers in the

nations affairs. Traditional institutions will atrophy and die if no positive role is defined for the traditional rulers in the national scheme of thing. The mere giving of advice, which may or may not be heeded, is not good enough. If every Nigerian must continue to look up to them for leadership and fatherly advice as statesman who constitute the "link between antiquity and modernity" – our glorious traditional edifice then traditional rulers in Nigeria must be positively involved in the task of nation building.

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