

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF EZEAGU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Traditional rulers are the paramount authority or natural rulers in any given community. They provide a system of administration from which law and order came and provide a stable system of governance. The government sees traditional leadership as an institution that has to be utilized to support government in facilitating development at the local level and legitimizing the government of the day. The objective of this paper is to examine the role of traditional institutions in community development in Ezeagu local government area of Enugu State, Nigeria. This paper seeks to explore the extent to which traditional leadership could be adapted to enhance good governance and local development. The paper is theoretical in nature and basically draws its arguments from secondary data including textbooks, journal articles and publications. The paper reveals that the current 1999 constitution, however did not mention the traditional institution at all thereby reversing most of the gains the institution made over the years. Traditional rulers possess accurate local knowledge and also have good networks of communication with the grassroots through title holders. Traditional rulers were accorded with responsibilities during colonial rule. They were members of colonial administration apparatus and were given wide power over matters in their respective communities. This paper therefore, concludes that, traditional rulers play a very significant role of informally managing conflicts through peace-making meetings when matters get out of hand. They also serve as advisory role to the local council. The paper recommends that for effective political transformation to be achieved, the need to involve traditional rulers is very vital. This is because they serve as bridge between the government and the people, and play advisory role to government in administration at both national and sub-national levels and play active role in conflict management and community development.

Keywords: Traditional Rulers, Administration, Grassroots, Colonial rule, Ezeagu.

Introduction

The word “Traditional Ruler” entails the reign of a monarchy or a titled ruler vested with the authority to rule over a people in their affairs of life. Therefore, traditional institutions are headed by traditional rulers and these institutions are very vital in bringing development closer to the rural people as well as Ezeagu local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. This study basically examines the nature of project(s) executed in Ezeagu local government. The age-long traditional institution is one that has not changed with time. This institution has provided a system of administration from which law and order came and provided a stable system of governance. It is important to point out that 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 according to Fatile and Adejuwon (2009) has long been seen as not only very erroneous but grossly subjective. It has been known that traditional African societies, indeed, had well organized and well established systems of ministration where public order was provided and maintained; where laws were made and implemented and where inter- communal and intertribal conflicts were settled. This shows that traditional institutions have been a significant feature of the people and commanded a large degree of loyalty and respect among them. According to Erero (2005), “The general belief is that traditional rulers have no place in a democratic dispensation whereby only the elected are permitted to rule. By their mode of ascension to power, legitimacy exercised by traditional rulers is not generally acceptable”.

Before the advent of the colonial rule, traditional leadership was the centre of all political life in Ezeagu local government area of Enugu State. Traditional rulers thus wielded considerable power and influence and the institution of traditional leadership itself was the core of governance and development for the rural population. The *Qnqkqlq/Qgbaja*, according to Dipholo & Mothusi (2005), a kind of a village square or community parliament played a significant role in generating consensus for proposed actions since it was the place where all matters affecting the community were discussed. For instance, in terms of development, identification of community development projects was done at the *Qnqkqlq* by community members presided over by the traditional ruler, “Igwe”, whereas implementation of these projects was done by the local age regiments. This approach to development planning and management ensured community commitment and ownership of the development process.

There has been change in the role of traditional rulers in Nigeria as it applies to community development since the introduction of local government reforms of 1976. In the said reforms, leadership roles were clearly expressed, which states that it is not the intention of government to destroy the organic

unity of the traditional institutions. The traditional council and chiefdom will remain, although their functions will be changed to accord with the present day circumstances. Although the paramount of chiefs was undone by colonial rule, traditional rulers have served as important adjuncts in the administration of post-colonial government in both Nigeria and Africa (William & Miles, 2007). Ezeagu local Government of Enugu State inclusive.

Local governments are creations of state government. .. As such, the Ezeagu local government under the delegated powers enacted the 1976 local government edict number 14 of 1978. This in effect streamlined the procedure for the selection, recognition and roles of traditional rulers. This therefore, formed the constitutional framework for traditional democracy, by a community selection of an acceptable ruler.

There were the warrant chiefs during the indirect rule system, and the then colonial government recognized local chiefs, who performed as native court judges. The first class chiefs were recognized in the Enugu state of Nigeria during the colonial era. All these sets of traditional rulers contributed in no small measure to the upliftment of community development (Ojo, 1976)

The Enugu State traditional society is purely a republican one; ruled by ideas of political sovereignty, egalitarianism and human co-operation. The Enugu political authority includes the traditional ruler (Igwe), district heads, state government officer responsible for chieftaincy matters and the council of elders. The role of traditional rulers in Enugu has been undergoing changes as the democratic dispensation within the country develops. It has therefore become necessary that they redefine their roles as heads of their polities within the framework of developmental efforts by the central government and its adjuncts; as well as, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Wilhelmina & Donkoh, 2002).

Traditional rulers in Enugu remain for a variety of reasons, important to the design and implementation of development projects within his area of jurisdiction. Their core functions include mobilization of their communities for developmental purposes. This includes the provision of infrastructure for enhanced standard of living within the community. Sometimes, traditional rulers initiate development projects and secure the support of both internal and external development agents for the execution of these projects. Traditional rulers work in conjunction with their subjects and therefore carry the whole community along to accomplish development projects that will be of benefit to the entire community. Thus, this study is aimed at finding out the role of traditional rulers in Ezeagu local government area of Enugu State, Nigeria.

Review of Related Literature

The paper focuses on discussing the role of traditional rulers in community development in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State. The research examines views and opinions of people and writers based on the role of traditional rulers in community development. The elected representatives at all levels of government wide on their influence during election periods (Uche, 2007), when actually traditional rulers are supposed to be apolitical. Some of them have forgotten their primary duties and have chosen to go extreme with their power. They are only interested in what they get from the government. But the traditional rules in Ezeagu are quite different and unique. They are the opposite. They follow the tradition of the land and obeys it to the letter, knowing fully well that if they err, the land will fight them. Attention was focused on the role of traditional institution from the pre-colonial era up to the present democratic political system of government. The theoretical frameworks adopted for this study are modernization and functionalism.

Pre-colonial Traditional Institution

Before the advent of the Europeans, societies in Africa had evolved various systems of political administrations based on the peculiarities of these ethnic nationalities. These institutions had full executive, legislative and judicial powers in their different domains and exerted sovereign control over their people.

According to Oloko (1976), the traditional ruler under the Benin kingdom was at the head of a well organized system of government. As the sole authority, he was the legislature, executive and the judiciary. Traditional institution during the pre-colonial era was quite clear, since law and order were maintained through a normative system that was part of the general social structure. Though the system was not sophisticated, the machinery of government was organised enough to manage affairs, resolve tension and administered justice in the society. Also, the institution was controlled by certain unwritten laws which ensure the security of the institution. This implies that, traditional rulers had positive impact on the evolution of political, economic and social institutions in which they had dominant control.

According to Igwe Stephen Ngene Ede-Njoku, the political institutions of the pre-colonial societies included the paramount chiefs, the council of elders, age grade and religious organizations. The Igbos at the pre-colonial period did not have a single political authority; even though they were a contingent. Since the Igbos shunned the idea of having a single leader at that time, they operated a lineage system as a basis for political organization.

This political system was fashioned in such a way that a man could only lead members of his lineage hence, there were many influential and powerful men.

Their influence was limited to hamlet, clan and village and at most the area in which they lived. In every village, hamlet or clan, there was always a village head who emerged by virtue of age and who in collaboration of other elders settled disputes in that particular village. If the disputes involved another village, the elders led by the eldest from both villages came together and resolved the disputes, especially those bothering on elopement and land, which was common at that time.

The Colonial Traditional Institution

In the colonial era, the British system of colonial administration employed the system of indirect rule. Indirect rule was a British system of ruling her colonies with the use of local chiefs or other approved intermediaries and traditional laws and customs with British officials merely supervising the administration. Indirect rule used the existing traditional system of administration and it recognised the status of traditional rulers who served as the priest of indirect rule (Abdullahi, 2007).

The advent of colonial rule ushered in a transformation in the role of traditional rulers. This change was necessitated by the desire to realize the objectives of colonialism, which were to exploit the natural resources of Nigeria to meet the industrial needs of the capitalist metro poles. Traditional rulers were therefore used to serve these objectives.

According to Aidelokhai (2008), traditional rulers before the advent of colonial rule in Nigeria were the political, cultural, economic and social administrators and lords of their various domains. The status of traditional rulers changed with the advent of colonial rule as the colonialist who imposed their power on traditional rulers usurped their sovereign authority. This development was meant to enable the colonialist perfect their exploitation through the use of traditional rulers.

Crowder (1978) asserts that chieftaincy institution were maintained and used by the colonialist for colonial interest. The indirect rule in Northern Nigeria attests to this phenomenon. Arguing further, Crowder believes that whether they had fulfilled the entire traditional pre-requisite for assumption of office, which would have allowed them rule in pre-colonial days, their right to rule depended on the colonial authorities.

Afigbo (1972) opines that the British instituted Native Courts and installed chiefs by warrant that controlled them. This was because the British believed that African people had to be governed by chiefs, thereby maintaining the organic unity of the Nigerian society. In effect, many warrant chiefs solely constituted colonially, backed usurpers of power and had little legitimacy beyond the fact of being installed by colonial state. Nevertheless, they had

power and used it for their own gain. Their main source of power was the control of Native Courts and labours for example; for colonial road and water way construction (Ofonagoro, 1982). According to Oyeama (1982), Enugu warrant Chief Onyeama was described as an “African god” by his grandson. He controlled the flows of labour to the emerging coal mining industry and established himself as a powerful ruler combining wealth, terror and magical power over his people.

In spite of the subordination to the British overloads, it could be argued that, the powers of traditional rulers were not eroded. Rather, the positions of rulers were strengthened. The Emir for example exercised stronger participatory roles in administration. This was because more powers of coercion were accorded to the Native Courts and the British treated Emirs with caution. The rulers also exercised executive powers as sole Native Authorities which determined the pace and direction of local administration subject to British guidance and needs. The above description of the role of traditional rulers in Nigeria during the colonial period shows that, change occurred and traditional rulers assumed a new status. They were co-opted to perform roles that were completely opposed to the wishes and aspiration of the colonized societies.

iii. The Post-Colonial Traditional Institution

The role and status of traditional rulers in post independent Nigeria varied though with different administrations. They could be said to have remained agents for the perpetuation of our neo-colonial status, thereby upsetting the ongoing process of development in the country. Nwankwo (1992) posits that chiefs are custodians of the land and they held the land in trust for the people. They served as a link between that rural people and the government. They assist the government in political education and socialization of the rural people. They acted as the custodians of the traditional religion, arts and culture of the people. They explained the customs and tried to preserve it.

In view of the political administration, traditional rulers have been given limited authority to settle minor disputes. In this regard also Axel (1998) asserts that traditional rulers try to make peace within the community and with neighbouring communities. To Axel, traditional rulers act as instrument of state control at the local level.

Oloko (1976) maintains that the traditional rulers were responsible for nation building task such as the maintenance of the main road linking their areas, the supply of man-power for the kingdom’s army, the up keep of the royal capital and collection of taxes and tributes due at various times. In the socio-cultural aspect he continued that in their role as the patrons of the creative and expressive arts of their people, traditional rulers took active steps to encourage

the work of talented African carvers, sculptors, potters, blacksmiths and so on.

Nwankwo (1992) identifies some relevant roles played by traditional rulers in Nigeria during pre-colonial, colonial and even modern times. He states that traditional rulers perform amongst others the role of making or contributing to law making and judgment, adjudication in disputes in their communities. They also maintain peace, order and security.

Modern Days Traditional Rulers

In view of the above, the modernization helps the traditional rulers to introduce new ideas for community development such as being democratic in their decision making giving room for the people to participate in the community affairs.

Traditional rulers of modern times perform vital roles in their domain like embarking on awareness campaign or the sensitization of their community populace on HIV/AIDS epidemic, the construction of classroom blocks and providing learning materials in school to help develop education system, provision of medical facilities and the building of the community health centre.

The strength of modernization theory is argued on the basis that, the sociological imagination is more important than controlling the risk found in contemporary societies; and fulfills the potential for improving peoples' lives. Despite its strength the modernization theory has its weakness. It lacks a theory of culture. In reality there are difference in culture between varieties of groups in modern societies, significantly, it also affects how people experience social life and behaviour. Parson (1964) opines that for any social system which the community is part to survive, there are three basic functional pre-requisites: They include: Adaptation, Goal attainment and Integration. These can be seen as problems that communities must solve if they are to survive and progress.

Adaptation: This refers to the relationship between the traditional rulers and their communities. In order to survive, traditional institution must have some degree of control over the community.
Goal Attainment: This refers to the need for all communities to set goals towards which socio-economic activities are directed. Procedures for establishing goals and deciding on priorities between goals are institutionalized.

Integration: This has to do with primary adjustment of conflict in the community. It is concerned with the co-ordination and mutual adjustment of the community members. Legal norms define and standardize relations

between individual and institutions and so reduce the potential for conflict. But when conflict does arise, it is settled by the traditional rulers and does not lead to the disintegration of the community and its development in general. Using the three functional perspectives, traditional rulers are part of the society who have some functions to perform and contribute to the maintenance of the society (i.e their communities). Such functions include the contribution of their quota in the maintenance of the internal peace and security in their domain which is the only way development can take place in the community. They help in revenue generation and community tax assessment, determination of religious matters and settlement of conflict arising there from. They also contribute in community development efforts of their respective communities like building of health centre, town halls, market shops, post office, electricity, construction of road networks, bridges and culverts e.t.c

The functionalist perspective has to be subjected to considerable criticism. Critics argued that the type of explanation states that the parts of the system exist because of their beneficial consequences for the system as a whole. The main objection to this type of reasoning is that it treats an effect as a cause. Therefore the assertion that traditional rulers embark on development projects in their domain is an attestation of consensus value and institution is a misplace one.

Finally, despite the widespread criticism, it should not be rejected out of hand, the assumption that society should be seen as an integral whole, that its parts are interdependent, that social institution exist and the social structure directs human behaviour.

However, these approach to community development are considered relevant in evaluating the role of traditional rulers in Ezeagu local government area. In other words, it presents traditional rulers as a structure within a given system which has functions to perform in the transformation and development process within local government environment as well as in a larger society.

Conclusion

This study is aimed at finding out the role and prospects of traditional rulers in community development with specific emphasis on Ezeagu Local Government Area in Enugu state. Traditional rulers are very important in any traditional setting. They play a very significant role in informally managing conflict and arranging peacemaking meetings when matters get out of hand. The study revealed precisely that traditional rulers are the major agents in transforming the attitude of the rural people provided they are answerable to a titled ruler vested with the authority of governing the affairs of the people. Based on the findings, the paper has come to conclusion that traditional rulers

have made a positive impact in community development to a degree more especially in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. The study recommends the following for better performance of traditional rulers in community development:
Traditional rulers have to adopt the spirit of yearly dialogue amongst his subjects, the outcome of which will create necessary relationship towards community development programmes.
2. Wealthy individuals in the community can support the traditional institution to enable traditional rulers embark on elephant projects.
3. The entire population or community should be sensitized to respond to self-help development projects of the community.
4. The resources realized for community development projects both money and materials should be utilized in such a way that the people will gain from them.
5. The spirit of honesty, transparency and accountability should be the watch word of any traditional ruler.

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