The Disablement of Traditional Political Institution in Nigeria

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IN NIGERIA
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Abstract
This paper discusses various salient issues that relate and led to the disablement of traditional political institution in Nigeria. These include the colonial subjugation, vilification by the combined forces of western influence-Christianity and western education, and finally the defilement by some of the contemporary occupants of these institutions. It highlights the vicissitudes that the institution have experienced over the years from the advent of colonialism to the present and the effect of some of the status and operation in the institution. These, among others, are what the paper seeks to bring to the fore.

Introduction
Traditional political institutions in Nigeria are the organic structures, other than those imposed by or created since the advent of colonialism and thereafter, by which the peoples of this country govern and administer their societies. Their existence antedates colonialism. They vary structurally and are full of differences in particularistic details. Ethnographic diversity and the size of the country, among other factors, account for this variety.

The absence of structural description of these institutions in this paper is deliberate. Nothing short of a description of the institutions and structures in all the ethnic groups in the country can effectively and purposefully justify such effort. The pressure for time and space does not allow for such exercise in view of the numerical vastness of the ethnic groups in the country and their structural differences. Moreover, some knowledge of the structure of the traditional political institutions of his area is assumed of each Nigerian adult (Uomoh 25).

This paper proposes that traditional political institutions endure and continue to serve as a support system to the governments of Nigeria's democracy, doing so as of right and from their independent placement within the politics of the country but not as an annex or appendix to any of the three tiers of government in Nigeria.

The relationship between the traditional political institutions and the government of Nigeria's democracy should be similar to that between the latter and the religious organizations, labour unions, and students union-NANS-for example. Nigerian traditional, institutions should continue to perform their usual functions, enjoy their legitimate and inalienable right to free and independent existence. They should be able to exert pressure or influence on the government, within the overall legal and political jurisdiction of the latter, for the good of all and the betterment of the society. Both the government and the traditional political institutions should be free to make demands and offer support to each other mutually.

Traditional political institutions in Nigeria are, presently, condemned to the periphery of power because they are burdened by three serious disablements resulting from, first, colonial subjugation, next, vilification by the combined force of western influence-Christianity and western education, and, finally, defilement by some of the contemporary occupants of these institutions. These issues are expounded below beginning with colonial subjugation.

Colonial Subjugation
Long before the days of colonialism, certain individuals from each cultural group in what is Nigeria today occupied the apex and the various institutional nodes of their political systems. They were not known as chiefs. Nor were their institutions described as traditional. The various peoples had their legitimate names for their rulers and the structures within which they ruled.

Within these cultures, these rulers were the supreme symbols of the unity of their people. They derived their power and authority as well as social status from birth, rank, and age as ordained by the custom of the people. The ruler symbolized his community and stood as the representative of the gods, the ancestors, and his people whom he also faithfully served. He was the custodian of the people's culture and the guardian of their social values, ethics, and morality.

All major orders and instructions were issued in his name. No decision of any moment, whether in judicial or political matters, were given save in his presence and with his concurrence (Talbot, 216). The machinery for social control and political mobilization lay in his hands. He was the father, political head, and the mystical, religious figure of the people. His person was considered sacred. His people accepted him for all of these.

When colonialism arrived in what is Nigeria today, it found the rulers of the people as the indisputable political leaders sitting atop properly organized political structures in their various ethnic nations. It foisted on the ruler the name "chief", meaning the head or ruler of a clan or tribe and another, "traditional", meaning handed down by tradition, on his political institution and system. By no means was the choice of names for the ruler and is institution accidental. Rather, it was deliberate. Colonialism did this so as to denigrate and derogate the people as well as their political system and facilitate, thereby, their exploitation. It was an expression of British ethnocentrism and racism (Noah 16).

Next, British colonialism superimposed itself on the so-called chiefs' traditional political structure and government. It developed a new administrative structure which supervened over and worked through the chiefs' traditional system to reach the people or masses. In other words, the chiefs and their administrative structures were annexed to, and made an integral part of the colonial administration. The traditional structure and their operators were nomenclatural maligned and politically subjected to a position of servitude under the alien exploitative super-structure (Crowder 98).

This system of foreign domination was captioned Indirect Rule by its perpetrators. The colonizers realized, as Whitaker, Jr. puts it, that "to rule directly would require an army of colonial magistrates (Whitaker 27). Thus, they made of these born rulers a high type of colonial officials". The indigenous rulers carried out colonial policies on the principles laid down in the constitution that they evolved for themselves.

In this way, colonialism stripped the chiefs of their independence and status as the ultimate political figures in their chieftdoms, limiting also their scope of decision-making even within the traditional setting and participation in the colonial government. This also meant that chiefs were relegated to the status of traditional elites specializing only in the performance of their ceremonial and traditional functions. Colonial officers became the political elites. They held political posts. Took decisions, and performed executive functions, but left the day-to-day work of administration of the villages and chieftdoms as well as keeping of law and order to the chiefs.

Through this system of Indirect Rule, therefore, chiefs became tools, and in many cases paid agents, of the colonial administration. They served as conduits through which colonial influence flowed to the masses as well as instruments for the implementation of colonial policies in the society. In other words, chiefs and their traditional structures of government were made to subserve colonialism. So as to ensure continuous support and obedience from chiefs as well as their absolute control, colonial officials invented a practice of recognition and certification of chiefs. For one to be and remain a chief, therefore, such a person had to demonstrate continuous impeccable loyalty to the colonial cause. It was no longer enough to come from a family of chiefs and qualify to be one under the traditional rule. Loyalty to the colonial cause had also to be satisfactorily demonstrated (Umoh 33).

Although the concept of Indirect Rule died with the dissipation of colonialism, the desecration of chieftaincy which that system of rule epitomized and the administrative strategies used by colonialism to achieve and maintain the control of chiefs in this state of powerlessness and servitude have not only survived the system but are also rigorously utilized by subsequent governments till today. Chiefs still remain shunted away from the centre of political power. Strategies of recognition and certification backed by persistent "support the government" slogan are adopted as colonial hangovers to armstrong the chiefs and dwarf their potentials to utilize their cultural and traditional authority to influence policies and behaviour of the government. Given the practice of recognition and certification, the ultimate power to appoint chiefs lies with the government (Umoh 30).

By a recent enactment, public servants have additional burden. They cannot ascend to chieftain stool unless they resign from the public service or obtain the permission and approval of the relevant government to do so. Those who had already been vested with chieftaincy before the promulgation of this flat are barred from the use of that title (Edict No. 5 1978).

Before colonialism, chiefs were subject to control by their people or liable to deposition if they became unpopular. Under colonialism, they could be deposed only if the grounds for such action were approved by the colonial official in charge of the area. The people were dispossessed of their chiefs who, thus, became more of chiefs "for the government" rather than "of the people". Now as then, this is still the practice.

The stance taken here is not unaware of the provision for the council of chiefs of a state in Part two Section B of the Third schedule of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979. Rather than negate, the provision subscribes to the stance of this paper, for the constitution gives only advisory power to the Council of chiefs in very limited and not politically too serious areas. In its subsection 4, for example, the provision empowers the council of chiefs "to advise the governor on
any matter relating to customary law or cultural affairs, intercommunal relations and chieftaincy matters". Subsection 5 gives the council the power "to advise the governor whenever requested to do so on:

a. The maintenance of public order within the state or any part thereof; and

b. Such other matters as the governor may direct.

Here again, the provision introduces another debility to the council. It is given the power but not the initiative to advice. The governor has to ask for the advice before the council offers one. Moreover, the request is at the governor’s discretion, and when or if he does request for one, he has discretion to accept or reject it. In other words, whatever the council of chiefs may offer, because it is an advice, has no mandatory effect on the governor. It may persuade but cannot bind the governor to act.

The Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 reduced the traditional institution it did not make such advisory provision as contain in 1979 but was silent. The relationship between the chiefs and the government is yet another indicator of the imminent threat that faces this country. That is the threat of over-government. Government brings under its rigorous control all social structures that are capable of reasoning with it and offering alternative or contrary ideas. Nigerian governments bring them under their control in order to silence them. This leaves the government as the only voice and intelligence on public and political matters.

Vilification by Christianity and Western Education

Christian missionaries came with the view that all of Africa was savage and chaos. Missionaries believed that Africans were in the grip of a wicked and immoral system and only wholesale Europeanization could bring them salvation (Coleman 97). They condemned everything African and vilified African culture. African institutions were adjudged satanic. Conversion to Christianity, ipso facto, meant denunciation of all associations with indigenous institutions, be they political, social, or religious.

One could not be a Christian and a village head, as an example, for the latter carried, in some areas, the additional functions of ministering to the gods and the ancestors, performing some rituals, and pouring of libations at public and ceremonial occasions. It called for a pattern of life and a high code of conduct.

Western education, which was mainly Christian, fostered the same attitude. It exposed its clients mainly to western values and cosmology to the utter exclusion of their traditions, institutions, and culture (Umo 15). As a result of all this, many beneficiaries of Western education are ignorant of the fine tenets of chiefdom and traditional institutions. A serious damage has already been done to the traditional political institutions of Nigeria particularly in the Eastern States.

Defilement by Contemporary Occupants of Institutions

Many of the contemporary occupants of traditional political institutions are products of Western education. Most in the Eastern States are also Christians. Some were career public servant and politicians. As a result of all this, some of the current chiefs had neither the training nor the upbringing for manning traditional politician institutions. Some got access to the post by untraditional means including bribing their ways to the throne or as rewards for playing the role of political lackeys. Few grew from the ranks of traditional practice to their present posts (Noah 20).

Accordingly, they carry the deficiencies occasioned by their untraditional backgrounds into their posts and, sitting atop a structure already denatured by years of subjugation under colonial and subsequent governments; these office-holders further defile the institutions by living their past experiences in the traditionally sacred institutions.

They Christianize the Nigerian traditional political institutions and introduce into it a system of bureaucratic practices that had never been a part of the system. Present day chiefs are, generally, more political than traditional. Contrary to African norms, they have now become the first, rather than the last, to speak and act on issues, including political matters. In doing this, chiefs deny themselves the opportunity to benefit from the views of other social groups and individuals which could even make them wiser when they speak as the last voices on the issues. Furthermore, they risk being contradicted by others in the society (Umo, 10).

Traditional elites are no longer satisfied with ceremonial and advisory role in politics. Some of them fall heads over heels trying to catch the eye and attention of government. Unlike their pre-colonial counterparts who shaped attitudes and behaviours as custodians of values, ethics, and morality of their peoples, contemporary traditional rulers are tremendously scant and indifferent in this wise. They are indifferent to the extent that they not only even fail to bring their cultural influence to bear on the government officials or political elites as a group or individuals when the latter are found
to stray from the values, ethics, or morality of the cultural or ethnic group, but they rather extol them (10).

One searches in vain through the Nigerian first Republic up to the military's coming to power and the present for concrete evidence to show that occupants of traditional political stools, as the traditional elites and cultural fathers of Nigerians, ever came out collectively or as individuals openly and strongly to condemn bribery, corruption, greed, avarice, and intolerance that the politicians and other public officers of this country made their stock-in-trade or oppose any bad policy.

In general, what remains of the traditional political institutions in Nigeria is a mere shell of their original selves. They are unable to infuse into Nigerian Youths the native lores that form the foundation on which social morality is built. All of this ought to change in the present dispensation.

Traditional Rulers and Democratic Government

While on a tour of the then Bendel State a former Chief of General Staff, Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe, remarked that “the Federal Government holds traditional rulers in high esteem ... since it is easier to reach the people at the grassroots through the traditional rulers” (Chronicle New Paper). True as this statement stands, it also confirms the characterization of the relationship between the government and the chiefs earlier proposed in this paper. The remark clearly states the instrumental-conduit role of traditional rulers.

Many traditional rulers see themselves more as a part of the government and the representatives of same rather than of their people. In such areas, the masses see themselves stranded in the midst of the social system. They see the traditional ruler not as their common father but as an agent under a kind of remote control by the government.

To increase the effectiveness of traditional rulers in stimulating development in their areas and their capacity to serve the traditional needs of their people, the democratic government should return traditional rulers and chiefs to their people. They should revert back to the former status of the chiefs of the people rather than for the government. This is another way of saying that government should discard its policy of certifying and recognizing chiefs and traditional rulers.

Once the people appoint and install their chiefs in keeping with, and as ordained by their culture, tradition and history, the names of such people should only be sent to the government for information and to notification. They should remain responsible and accountable to their people who should, as in the past, have the power to remove such chiefs if they are found to flout traditional sanctions.

In order to counteract Western and undesirable influences to which they had been exposed, all new chiefs should undergo a period of induction training during which the king-makers would teach them the tenets, functions, responsibilities, and demands of the institutions that they occupy or personify. Chiefs of this type will have a firm knowledge of their roles in their societies and cultivate between them and their people intimate relationship capable of restoring to them the father image of all in the society.

This recommendation comes without prejudice against government's policy of using the chiefs as access channel to the masses or the chiefs' continuous receipt of stipend and other benefits from the government. Rather, it puts the traditional rulers where they belong and constitutes them and the traditional political institutions into a more effective power group with an independent power base within the framework of Nigerian government.

Abrogation of government certification and recognition will give the chiefs a sense of independence and security. As practitioners and custodians of the indigenous ethics, culture, and morality, and seated on their people's confidence as their cultural fathers, traditional rulers will be better placed to aggregate local interests and opinions for articulation to the government. Government itself can, thus, feel the true pulse of the people at the grassroots. Again, the chiefs will feel free and bold enough to advise the government against or object to policies, practices, and laws which, in their opinion, are substantively and procedurally contrary to indigenous ethics, wisdom, lores, and equity. They will be able to admonish the youths as well as politicians and public officers to put them on the path to moral rectitude.

Conclusions

As hinted in the introduction, this paper proposes that traditional political institutions and their operators should continue to operate in the Nigerian democratic government. It highlights the vicissitudes that the institutions have experience over the years from the advent of colonialism to the present and the effect of same on the status and operation of the institutions. The paper ends with
suggestions on how to adapt traditional political institutions and their operators to the democratic government and make them serve society and the cause of democracy in the country.

Works Cited


