

**TRADITIONAL RULERS AND THE PROMOTION OF  
NATIONAL UNITY IN NIGERIA-EMERGING TRENDS**

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**Abstract**

Before the advent of colonialism, every African community was blessed with a well-enshrined political process anchored by Monarchs. Kings and Queens were the major traditional rulers that determined how communities were administered and how they related with one another. The Monarchs were referred to as Oba, Emir and Obi. Going by a Yoruba adage "Agba kiiwa loja ki ori omo tuntun wo", meaning, "Elders in the community do not allow the young to go astray, Traditional rulers in any human society are the divine beings that uphold the above assertion. As a symbol and custodian of culture, Traditional rulers are the solid corner stone through which human societies are glue and become unified; they are the major block through which unity becomes reality among communities, cities, states, and empires. They are also the unified factors that bring people of different cultural background under a single political unit. The foregoing culminates in the curiosity to examine, how traditional rulers tend to promote unity in the present day Nigeria socio-political life. However, lack

of constitutional roles for traditional rulers, partisanship politics and corruption were identified as challenges facing traditional rulers in Nigeria. It was recommended among others that traditional rulers should also see themselves as father to all and enemy to none while discharging their leadership roles and ensure that they sow the seed of peace and unity in the communities. It was also recommended that they should endeavour to amplify certain cultural heritage that assists in achieving the value of integrity, discipline, tolerance, cooperation and unity not only among the youth but including adults that are in various positions where issues concerning distribution of national resources are taking place.

### Introduction

The present day Nigeria is an integration of different cities, kingdoms, caliphates and empires that are naturally independent of one another into a single political entity. However, Traditional rulers in the pre-colonial era immensely contribute to the formation, extension, greatness and promotion of good relationship among different kingdoms and empires in the area known today as Nigeria. The partitioning of most areas in Africa would not have been very easy if not for the then existing traditional political arrangements earlier made by African traditional rulers. The establishment of Sokoto Caliphate by Uthman Dam Fodio after the 1804 Jihad culminated in a strong political arrangement that brought a larger part of the Northern Nigeria under a single political body. The formation of Kanem Borno Empire put the vast area of the northern Nigeria under just two major political entities with a strong cohesion. These political entities were made possible and sustained with the efforts of traditional rulers. The efforts of the erstwhile Alaafin of Oyo to establish and extend Oyo Empire beyond South-Western part of Nigeria also unified the people living in the area under a single political entity. The Benin Kingdom, Eze Nri, kingdom, the Ijaw and Itsekiri communities are all able to exist due to the efforts of traditional rulers that later informed the unification of the area known as NIGERIA.

It therefore follows that, the existence of the different political entities created a good template and solid structure upon which the colonial masters under Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard annex and unified the different Empires and kingdoms into a single vibrant territory called Nigeria through the amalgamation of 1914. Thus, the unification of different political structures was made easy because of the roles and efforts of Nigerian's Monarchs. Traditional rulers engaged and direct their subjects particularly the age grade who constructed trade routes to connect neighboring communities and placed local army to provide security for their subjects and itenary traders in order to enhance commercial activities which in turn, promoted unity among cities and empires in the pre- colonial era. This fact was corroborated by Okolo (1976) who posit that traditional rulers were responsible for nation building task such as construction and maintenance of major roads linking their areas and the supply of manpower for their kingdom army that up keep their domain.

It was also on record that in the nineteenth century, a prominent traditional ruler in the present day Niger state, that is, the Etsu Nupe sought advice from the Balogun of Abeokuta while the Sultan of Sokoto mediated in the Yoruba civil war (Tariki, 2000). This is another instance of efforts towards promotion of unity among the traditional rulers in the pre- colonial era. Also, traditional rulers, being the spiritual heads of their domain also leads in rituals and traditional festivals, neighbouring communities do converge to celebrate different traditional festivals. This singular effort also contributes much to cohesion and unity among various communities in the pre-colonial era. It is not a gain saying that, the formation of Nigeria as a nation state by colonial master was made easy and convenient as a result of the efforts of traditional rulers.

Tush (1977) posits that, "our sense of what is practicable in the future is formed by an awareness of what has happened in the past". Which means that what we are to do today is a function of what has happened in our past, hence, if traditional rulers in the primitive days of the nation could go as far as promoting peace and unity among their subjects and neighbouring communities which culminated into the formation of present day Nigeria as a nation state, what then prevent traditional rulers in the present time from maximizing their

efforts towards promoting national peace and unity?.

However, it could not be out of place to submit that the recent general assembly meeting of the traditional rulers held in Osogbo in Osun state under the banner of National Council of Traditional Rulers of Nigeria (NCTRN) where 250 traditional rulers were in attendance was an extension of the bid to promote national unity, peace and cohesion in Nigeria. Nevertheless, it is not an over statement to submit that traditional rulers are good instrument to promote unity; This is because they are endowed with awe and respect, dignity and honour which makes it convenient for them to control and direct their subjects without rejection. This perhaps influences the former Secretary to the Federal Government, Senator Anyim Pious Anyim who was quoted by Gbenga Faturoti that “Traditional rulers should come to the aid of the government and the entire country in tackling the security challenges facing the nation. In the same vein, the former National Security Adviser, General Andrew Owoye Azazi (rtd) also appealed to traditional rulers at the National Council of Traditional Rulers of Nigeria (NCTRN) meeting held in Osogbo, that “Monarchs are in the best position to address security challenges facing the nation in order to promote national unity and survival. However, it is upon this premises that this paper tends to examine the roles of traditional rulers in the promotion of unity in the present day Nigeria and at the same time examine challenges being faced by traditional rulers in discharging their traditional roles of promoting peace and unity among their subject.

### Conceptual Clarification

#### Traditional Ruler

The concept of traditional rulers is defined by many authors based on the way they perceive it. This at times, depends on the time and circumstances. The word “Traditional Ruler” entails the reign of a monarch or a titled ruler vested with the authority to rule their subjects in their affairs of life. Ibraheem (2015) defines traditional ruler as a person who by virtue of his ancestral position occupies the throne or stool of an area and who has been appointed to it in accordance with the customs and traditions of the area.

Traditional rulers are part of the natural environment of their societies, most of them assumed leadership position being the

founders of the political communities (Bakare, 2015). They were seen as divine beings with stable political and religious power. They were considered as the representative of God or the gods, they are the Supreme Being on earth. Ola and Tonwe (2009) argue that a 'traditional ruler' may be defined as 'the traditional head of an ethnic group or a clan who is the holder of the highest primary executive authority in an indigenous polity, 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 recognised as a traditional ruler title by the Government of the State.'

Traditional rulers were regarded as representatives of the gods of the land and custodian of the people's history and culture. They were hardly seen in public places except at a very important function, festival and religious celebration. Traditional rulers are the symbol and custodian of their cultural heritage through which traditions, religion and customs are preserved. Traditional rulership is an ancient institution prevalent across the entire continent of Africa.

In England, there was in existence a traditional system known as divine right of king in a political theory which claims that the sovereign is a direct representative of God and it is his right to rule absolutely. In Nigeria, the monarchs are given different appellations such as Oba and Kabiyesi in the Yoruba land. Oba is also the title of the Edo paramount ruler. In the northern Nigeria, Emir is commonly used in the English language, but names in the local languages include Sarki, Shehu, Mai, Lamido, etc In the Eastern part of the country, they are called Obi, Igwe or Eze, but again there are many local titles amongst their immediate neighbours such as Amanyanabo, Orodje, and Obong. (World Statesmen, 2010.).

### National unity

The word unity can simply mean a state of being in full agreement. It connotes a social and political process. It is a state of heart and the mind that promote mutual relations among different people. It could therefore be explained to mean togetherness, oneness, and willingness to identify with one another, irrespective of any difference, to achieve a specific goal. Describing the importance of unity, Digvijay Chandhary (2013) sees unity as power, he explains further that power

lies in unity and not in diversity.

Wasawa Vision 2020 in Malaysia defines national unity as a key component of development. The Malaysia Department of National Unity defines it as a situation in which all citizens from various states live in peace as one united nationality giving full commitment to federal constitution.

### Roles and Influence of Traditional Rulers in Promoting Unity

Though the colonial rule in Nigeria had drastically reduced the power of the traditional rulers, still they play useful roles in mediating between the people and the state, enhancing national identity, resolving minor conflicts and muster support for government of the day in running the affairs of the country. However, the following are the roles that traditional rulers play due to their powerful influence:

#### Promotion of National Cohesion

Traditional rulers in Nigeria maintain a great deal of cohesion by allowing every tribe residing in their domain to have their tribal heads who protect the interest of their people and also serve as a link between the king and his people. For instance, nearly every major town in Yoruba land has Sabo Market dominated by the Hausas while shopping complex dominated by Igbo traders in Ibadan, Lagos, Oyo, Ogbomosho and the likes. Also, there are title holders like Serikin Shasha at Ibadan who is recognized and respected by Olubadan and the Alaafin of Oyo. There are also recognized Igbo leaders both in Ibadan and in Oyo township, they also exist in other Yoruba towns with a mutual relationship. These gestures are possible because of the spirit of national unity that Yoruba Obas display. The above justifies the fact that traditional rulers are part of human agents God is using to promote and sustain cohesion and stability in Africa. Summarily, traditional rulers are to foster unity, peace and harmony in their community.

#### The Role of Peace Making

The awe and respect bestowed on traditional rulers enable them to command respect from their subject: This made it convenient for them to settle dispute, to mediate between warring factions, to

maintain orderliness and absolute peace in their various domains. Traditional rulers are instrument of peace. In most cases, government do saddle them with the responsibility of appealing to their subject in order to restore calmness and peace. Traditional rulers according to Olubusola as quoted from the Punch Newspaper (2007) "after the 2007 general election, traditional rulers from different communities in Nigeria rose to the challenges and made appeal to the aggrieved parties and persons to accept the election results in good faith and to let peace reign in the nation as a whole, because if they continue to drag themselves to court and attack each other, peace will never reign and no society can develop without peace. The recent meeting of traditional rulers in Osogbo under the banner of NCTRN was a move to broker peace in Nigeria.

#### Traditional Rulers and Dispute Management

Since conflict is part of human society, traditional Rulers do not fold their arms and feel unconcern. Right from the pre- colonial era, they served as the major body that settle disputes between and among families, groups and communities. They succeed in this by virtue of being in existence for long and their being on the throne indefinitely has given their subjects confidence, assurance, reliability and continuity. Their subject sees them as permanent pillars of their existence. In fact, it is believed that failure to adhere to advice given by traditional rulers can spell doom on whoever rejects their advice.

However, one of the volatile public conflicts is land dispute, traditional rulers have good historical facts and experience with which land dispute can be addressed, so elected government find it difficult or in most cases cannot settle land dispute amicably without the intervention of the traditional rulers. A good example of this is the role being played by traditional rulers in Bauchi state; also, the land dispute between Osun and Ekiti states was settled by traditional rulers and representatives of the state government. Traditional rulers, during the reign of a former military head of state, General Saani Abacha, intervened in the phantom coup crisis to appeal to Gen. Abacha in other to settle dispute in the military ranks. Also, traditional rulers settle a lot of religious crisis that could have degenerated into a serious anarchy,

### Reconciliation role of traditional rulers

Olubusola (2007) posits that traditional rulers always reconcile people back to their families and warring communities in the society. They are able to do this by virtue of the divine position they occupy in the society. Traditionally, they play the role of judge, arbiter and chief security officer of their community in crisis situation. In the recent past, notable traditional rulers from the northern Nigeria such as sultan of Sokoto, Emir of Kano, Bauchi, Gwandu, Sheu of Borno and Ilorin met and planned to appeal for the release of major Hamza Al- Mustapha the former Chief Security Officer to the then head of state, late Sani Abacha. Traditional rulers from south west had earlier appealed for the release of Chief MKO Abiola, the presumed winner of the June 12 presidential election in 1993, while it is on record that traditional rulers from south-south also mediate between their subjects and the federal government to release Alhaji Asari Dokubo. Nigerian Tribune also reports the role being played by Oyo State Traditional Council of Obas who mediated and settled the problem that ensued between the State Governor Otunba Alao Akala and workers on the payment of their salaries. Traditional rulers are instrument for reconciliation to achieve peace and unity across the nation.

### Sensitization Roles of Traditional Rulers

Traditional rulers of modern times perform vital roles in their domain. They embark on awareness campaign or sensitization of their community on government policies and programmes. Most programmes that could have suffered a setback have received the blessing and support of Nigerians, when routed through traditional rulers. Special programmes such as immunization against polio, infectious diseases, Census and voters registration etc are accepted by Nigerians, unlike when they show a lukewarm attitude to the programs. Knowing fully well that security is a strong cord through which unity of a nation can be guaranteed; Traditional rulers do sensitize people living in their domain on security matters and the need to cooperate with security agents in the discharge of their duty. This is one of their roles that government does not play with.



### Promotion of Religious Tolerance

Religion is one of the relative single socio-cultural phenomena that can build or destroy a nation, as it promotes peace and unity in one hand, it also creates tension and disunity especially when its adherents cannot display a sense of tolerance to other peoples belief. Olubusola (2007) submits that traditional rulers being the representatives of God and gods do participate actively in the Shrine, Mosque and in the Church. They balance everything in their domain to confirm the believe that traditional rulers have no religion of their own, they enhance interreligious dialogue by promoting religious harmony, freedom and tolerance in Nigerian society.

### Challenges Facing Traditional Rulers in Nigeria

#### Lack of Constitutional Roles for Traditional Rulers.

Unlike in the days of colonial masters, when house of chiefs were created for traditional rulers to partake in modern day governance, the 1979 and 1999 constitution did not assign a specific role to traditional rulers, they have become a pencil in the hand of the elected political office holders who determine for them what to do and what not, the divine power to directly administer their domain was reduced by the constitution. Today, they run errands for those in political office and they can be called upon at any time to attend one function or the other, either relevant or not, not minding the custom and tradition that make them sacred not to be seen everywhere. Most of them feature in political rallies and become politicians themselves otherwise they could be subjected to penalty. This and other factors have drastically reduced the level at which traditional rulers could have promoted peace and absolute unity across the nation.

#### Partisanship Politics

Nigerian politics is more of party politics; no one can contest without being a member of a political party. Most traditional rulers fully involve in partisan politics, forgetting the fact that they are traditional rulers and royal fathers to all their subjects who could be in different parties. An attempt by a traditional ruler to identify or pitch tent with a political party portrayed him as an opposition to members of other parties who are all his subjects. These at times reduces the dignity and honour of

some traditional rulers and in turn prevent them from broker peace and promote unity because they will be regarded as a bias umpire. The recent cry of the Igbo community in Lagos State against the utterances of the Oba of Lagos, Oba Ridwan Akiolu before the 2015 gubernatorial election is an instance that could stain the divine honour of traditional rulers in Nigeria. However, traditional rulers are to demonstrate their fatherly role to accommodate everybody in the political circle such that they will be free to broker peace and promote unity at any given time when the situation demands for it in the country. Also, most traditional rulers suffer in the hands of government in power especially when traditional rulers support opposition party.

In the recent time, Traditional rulers in Ekiti State became subjects of ridicule and embarrassment during the first time tenure of Governor Ayodele Fayose. He was disrespectful to the Ekiti State Traditional Council and specifically targeted the Wei of Ado-Ekiti to dethrone him for not supporting his administration; he later demanded a public apology from the Monarch. It was also in the record that the palace of Owa Obokun in Osun State was set into fire by aggrieved politicians.

#### Effects of Corruption

Olubusola argued further to emphasize the effects of corruption on traditional institution in Nigeria. Majority of the monarchs were bought over by the politicians, and this has reduced their respect and prestige in the society. They are partial in their judgments and harbour criminals and thugs in their domain. For instance, traditional rulers, during the 2007 general election, were accused of harboring political thugs and allowing their palaces to be used for election rigging. Most of them look unto politicians for favour and in turn lose their authority and dignity.

Other challenges faced by traditional rulers are military dictatorship that dethrone and clip wings of monarchs and also subservient culture. Creation of more state and local government areas have further balkanized the kingdom being overseen by the traditional rulers, conflict of interest between local government authorities and traditional rulers and a need to clarify who should do what in local community matters.

### Conclusion

It is an indisputable fact that a drop of water is not too strong enough to wash anything away and a thin thread is very weak, even a child can break it but when a number of thread are woven into a thick rope, that an elephant can't break. Yes, this illustration portrays the power in unity and that unity is the only ingredient that promotes growth and development of any nation, particularly a country like Nigeria due to her multi-cultural and multilingual nature which in most cases threatens national cohesion.

Traditional ruler as an institution with honour and dignity and as a divine being whom people rely upon and trust require to discharge true leadership role by sowing the seed of peace, unity and harmony in the Nigerian societies. They are to ensure harmony among themselves such that they will jointly promote absolute peace and unity. Identifying unity as a power, all hands should be on deck, and Nigerians should be aligned with the submission of the Osun State government Mr. Rauf Aregbesola who posits that, "all humans are basically the same, even if we have differences in culture, sociology, education and technological attainment, which are temporary, and that we must respect our differences, promote our similarities and areas of agreement and pursue relentlessly our common aspiration because unity is a gargantuan investment which we cannot afford to be jeopardised". We should therefore respect, allow and support our monarchs to promote peace and unity in Nigeria.

### Recommendations

Traditional rulers should see themselves as fathers to all and enemy to none while discharging their traditional role at the same time ensure they sow the seed of peace and unity in their communities. Also, for traditional ruler to function as agent of change, peace and unity, they should work in tandem with the various community developmental programmes in their areas by contributing their wealth of experience to government policies.

Traditional rulers should desist from partisan politics and see themselves as fathers that accommodate all into their fold: This will enable them to easily promote unity both at the local level and at the

federal levels. Government at all levels should also ensure uniform policy of improving the welfare of traditional rulers and at the same time desist from action that could create disparity among the royal fathers.

Traditional rulers should endeavor to amplify certain cultural heritage that assists in achieving the value of integrity, discipline, tolerance, cooperation and unity among not only the youth but including adults that are in various positions where issues concerning distribution of national resources are taking place. Government should provide special security agents and ensure a good welfare package for traditional rulers.

The meeting of the National Council of Traditional Rulers of Nigeria (NCOTRN) should be given much attention by the government and such meeting should be held across the country and not only in Abuja, this will further advance the course of unity among traditional rulers which will in turn enhance their efforts in promoting national unity in Nigeria.

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