



# TRADITIONAL RULERS AND TOWN UNIONS IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL EXPECTATIONS

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## **Abstract**

*Prior to the amalgamation of northern and southern protectorate in 1914, traditional rulers and town unions were outstanding authorities in the local governance of diverse Nigerian communities. The decline of these authorities is however traceable to Nigerian centralized governance. This is as it politicizes the institutions of traditional rulers and town unions through constant creation of autonomous communities and indirect selection of people that governs them. The result of these has been the bastardization of indigenous stipulations regarding traditional rulership and town unions. The consequence has also been successive governments' absolute control of traditional rulers and town unions. Based on these, traditional rulers and town unions are now largely unaccountable to their people. More so, many of these authorities have neglected their places and roles in the local governance of their communities. Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the evolution, place and roles of traditional rulers and town unions in local governance in Nigeria. It analytically recalls the provenance and socio-philosophical expectations of traditional rulers and town unions in diverse Nigerian communities. The study finds a connection between traditional rulers and town unions, and discovers the need for both institutions to synergize towards quality local governance in Nigerian communities. The study however offers axiological solutions to the waning role of traditional rulers and town unions in Nigerian local communities. The paper then concludes that despite the changing Nigerian societies, traditional rulers and town unions remain indispensable in community stability, development and local governance.*

**Key words:** Expectations; Governance; Socio-philosophical; Town unions; Traditional rulers.

## **Introduction**

The nature of human environment propels people to communal existence. But the problems of disorder and unguided ambitions characterizing communal existence were the catalysts behind the emergence of traditional rulers and town unions. Hobbes (1985) gives credence to these realities when he asserts that the emergence of monarchs and their likes predicates on the need to bridle human ambitions and actions which foster state of nature and hamper



civility in human societies. Supportive of this, Michels (1911) in his political theory of “iron law oligarchy” avers that communal existence exposes people to problems and needs that warrant the institution of authorities charged with maintenance of peace and order. This background was indeed how traditional rulers and town unions came to be major players and stakeholders in the local governance of various Nigerian communities. Today, virtually all Nigerian local communities have traditional rulers and town unions which stand as focal points on which these communities are planned, organized and controlled to achieve human needs.

Thus, the Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Ijaw, etc., ethnic nations of Nigeria are locally governed through gerontocracy, monarchy or republicanism. Yet all these systems remain reflections of traditional rulership and town unions. This trend was exacerbated by the advent of colonialism which introduced Warrant Chief System (WCS) and imposed more roles on custodians of this system (Achebe, 1983). Thus, traditional rulers and town unions in diverse Nigerian communities became more the representatives of their communities and rallying points of their coordination before the colonial and present government. As the local authorities in their diverse communities, traditional rulers and town unions became very much regarded. This is such that sometimes people even regard them as God sent and demi-gods.

As communities’ socio-political structure, traditional rulers and town unions are characterized by indispensable cooperation. This has been made possible by the common demands of their offices which include; fostering peace, stability, development and effective local governance in their communities. Apart from these, town unions are the channels through which traditional rulers function. This is as town union members largely serve as members of traditional rulers’ cabinets, inner caucuses, advisory councils and channels of project implementation.

Sadly, the politicking and absolute display of power by successive Nigerian governments have direly affected local governance which was naturally entrusted to these traditional rulers and town unions. As such, the focus of most traditional rulers and town unions is no longer the needs and interests of their communities but those people in government who probably maneuvered their assumption of offices. As such, traditional rulers and town unions in Nigeria are no longer autonomous, independent and impactful, hence the need to reaffirm their places in local governance and the socio-philosophical expectations of their offices.

### **Explication of Concepts**

The outstanding concepts in this treatise are traditional rulers, town unions and local governance. Traditional rulers are kings, chiefs and leaders of independent and autonomous



communities, tribes or nations prior to the formation of modern Nigeria. Traditional rulers could also be referred to as leaders of dependent communities, tribes or nations in present Nigeria. This is why Cap (148) of 1986 Anambra state laws which established Anambra state traditional rulers' council defines traditional rulers as recognized head or leader of autonomous communities. Sharing this view, Odo and Ofuebe (2009) posit that traditional rulers are people invested with government recognized political powers by their subjects and communities. These mean that traditional rulers are monarchs and authorities charged with organizing, leading and representing their people (Obasi, 2007). As such, they wield considerable influences and legitimacy among their people, and are known by different names such as; Igwe, Eze, Obi, Oba, Emir, Obong, Alafin, etc which emanate from their tribes.

Since the offices of diverse traditional rulers were largely derived from their culture, traditional rulers could be viewed as persons who by virtue of their ancestries occupy the throne or stool of an area. They could also be persons who have been appointed by their people to occupy the throne of leadership in accordance with their customs and tradition. However traditional ruler emerges, Abacha (1994) taught that traditional rulers are enduring part of Nigerian heritages that play crucial role in preserving cultures and traditions.

Attached to the offices of traditional rulers are town unions. These are Community Based Organizations (CBO) that are very influential in local governance (Obiakor and Okoreaffia, 2021). Town unions (TU) are assemblies of people consisting of representatives from various communities governed by the traditional rulers. Town unions are social organizations existing in many parts of Nigeria. They are known by different names such as; Development Unions (DU), Progressive Unions (PU), Peoples' Assembly (PA), etc., (Obiajulu & Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2016). Town unions are also councils charged with ruling the community alongside the traditional rulers. They as well stand as councils charged with the duty of organizing and implementing community development projects in consonance with the traditional rulers. The town unions are characterized by functional constitutions adopted by its members. It has well-structured offices and is presided by the President General (PG). In some places, town unions have men and women wings. The women wings are often the wives whose husbands are members of the men wing. The activities of both traditional rulers and town unions indeed gear towards the development of the community and constitute what the modern society refer to as local governance.

Local governance however connotes all the policy-making, implementation, and public management at the grassroot. It comprises series of leadership activities carried out by legitimate local authorities and institutions in human society which affect the existence of the masses (Madu, 2006). This makes local governance the activities of a body of people



and institutions that make, enforce the law, influence and control the human population at the local societies. Local governance is thus the “act of ruling; process of making decisions or policies, and embarking on implementation (or non-implementation) that generally affects a remote or local area” (Chinweuba, 2020:119). Based on this, Emezi (1984) posits local governance as system of local administration in local communities that gear towards maintenance of laws and order, provision of limited social amenities and encouragement of co-operation and participation of inhabitants in the improvement of their living conditions.

Local governance therefore boils down to control and influence over a people, their resources and its distribution within a territory or society (Mackenzie. 2009). As such, local governance is the process of being in-charge of a local society; partially directing the activities of its population, exercising partial political authority, influencing, and administering the needs of the people. It consists in local “legislation, promotion of common/national interest, delivery of collective goods/social services, ensuring security of lives and property, justice and human rights, maintenance of law and order” and sustainable development of the society (Chinweuba, 2020:119).

The importance of the people who now largely appear to elect their traditional rulers and members of their town unions have however led to the redefinition of local governance in Nigerian context. As such, local governance is now viewed as “...exercise of authority by the people” at the grassroot (Dunu, 181:2013). This is in the sense that local governance is now the activities of the people through representatives; traditional rulers and town unions that function on their behalf. In other words, local governance has become the combined efforts of both the people of a community mobilized by their traditional rulers and town unions towards community sustainable development and improvement of the well-being of the people of such community. This republican idea or centrality of the people in local governance however remains largely elusive in Nigeria. This is as most elections of traditional rulers and town union members are largely rigged and occupants of these offices are often manipulatively imposed on the people. As such, traditional rulers and town union members are not largely responsible and accountable to their people in Nigerian societies. Rather, their compelled loyalty belongs to those in government who controls them and dictates for them because they paved for them the ways to their offices. These make many traditional rulers and town union ceremonial figures too weak to conduct any local reform in their communities or embark in adequate local governance.

### **Evolution of Traditional Ruler and Town Union Institutions in Nigeria**

The provenance of traditional ruler and town union institutions in Nigerian is prior to the colonial era. In fact, these institutions were established at each community’s conscious of the need for ordered and peaceful society. The provenance of traditional rulers and town



unions therefore dated back to the emergence of civil society among various Nigerian indigenous communities. Then, people from diverse ethnicities in Nigeria started organizing themselves and their activities like their counterparts all over the world under popular leaderships to ensure peace, stability and development within their communities. Apart from this republican trend, some people distinguish themselves through one feat or another and assumed the position of traditional rulers. Such people like the popular Onyeama from Eke town in Udi of Enugu state Nigeria even formed cabinet and council members for easy and smooth administration of his local community and its environ. These trends however became more pronounced with the advent of European colonial activities in Nigeria. Then, various communities became more interested in having indigenous leaders to foster their easy collaboration with colonial government in the development of their local communities.

At the hike of these trends, the British colonists introduced the Indirect Rule System (IRS) through their 1916 ordinance. This ordinance made formal the use of traditional rulers and town unions for effective colonial administration. These traditional institutions thus became the channel of communication between the colonists and the indigenous people. They were to enforce and collect taxes and also settle disputes in local courts among the indigenous people. They were also to connect their communities with the activities of the colonial government, the then unfolding modernization, pave way for the local development of their communities and wellbeing of their people. Ejitu (1999: 55) accents to these noting that “ethnic and communal improvement associations were formed as a strategy for engaging more collectively in the struggle for limited social and economic resources and facilities of the townships”. Thus, the town unions and traditional rulers became major elements of change, stakeholders and key players in the socio-political organization and modernization of Nigerian communities (Obiakor and Okoreaffia, 2021).

As a matter of fact, Achebe (1983) documents that with their evolution, traditional ruler and town union phenomena became means of competition for all kinds of social and political achievements within the local communities. Such social achievements include the provision of electricity, pipe-borne water, good roads, hospitals, etc., in the local communities in collaboration with the government.

Truly, it was in the light of the general emerging traditional ruler and town union institutions across communities in Nigeria that Igbo Federation Union (IFU) and Igbo State Union (ISU) were formed in 1936 and 1948 respectively as the national umbrella of different town unions and traditional institutions in Igbo land (Ejitu, 1999). Today, the creation of autonomous communities across the states of Nigerian federation has led to increment in the number of traditional rulers and town unions. In fact, traditional rulership



and town union government has today become established in almost every community in Nigeria. This is as these institutions have become an important instrument for self-help, community development and local governance in post-colonial Nigeria.

### **Traditional Rulers and Town Unions Prior to Modern Nigerian State**

Prior to modern Nigerian state, traditional rulers and town unions embody largely the culture and customs of their people. In this sense, people occupying these offices do everything within their strength to guide and protect the cultures, traditions and wellbeing of their people. Adding to these, Davies (1980) holds that traditional rulers and town unions exercise effective control in their domains. Some of them even exercised despotic executive, judicial and legislative powers within their communities. They make laws, interpret and enforce them. In fact, they enjoyed both de-facto and de-jure recognition and their authorities and powers were merely checked by institutional, conventional and customary restraints. A typical example in this context is the warrant Chief Onyeama of Eke town near Enugu who was described in Dilibe Onyeama's "The Story of an African God" as despotic and tyrannical. Truly, traditional rulers and town unions in pre modern Nigerian state were largely powerful and effective until the emergence of 1999 constitution which denied them outstanding roles and functions and relegated them to advisory roles to those in government. Lawal (1989) traces the origin of these powers and authorities exercised by traditional rulers and town unions in pre-modern Nigerian state to the long rooted traditions and legendary tales, recognized, revered and held in awe in many indigenous African communities.

### **Collapse of Traditional Ruler and Town Union Institutions in Nigerian State**

With the advent of colonialism, the power of traditional rulers and town unions began to wane. This was as traditional rulers and town unions were relegated to the offices of service to the colonial government. In view of this development, Agbase (2004) reveals that where the traditional rulers and town unions were not replaced, they were transformed to serve the exploitative interest of the colonists. On this note, traditional rulers and presidents of town unions started emerging with letters of appointment (warrants) from colonial government; a development that has been sustained to the present epoch. This killed the integrity and legitimacy of traditional rulers and town unions within their local communities. It as well rendered these once revered traditional institutions subject to government control.

Since emergence of traditional rulers and town unions are now maneuvered by people in government, the accountability of these leaders to their communities has gradually become history. Similarly, the traditional checks and balances that restrains them has also become non applicable. This was exacerbated by the colonists' choice of upstarts, ruffians and



people of no integrity in the communities as traditional rulers or warrant Chiefs who would uphold colonial regime at the expense of the people (Achebe, 1983). Olisa (2001) referred to these, testifying that the swing of traditional rulers and town unions by the colonists and subsequent Nigerian governments accounted for their declined influences and effectiveness in their various local communities.

With the approaching Nigerian independence however, traditional rulers and town unions were recognized and strengthened by the creation of House of Chiefs as the upper chamber of the legislature. Prior to this, Richard's constitution of 1946, Macpherson constitution of 1951 and Republican constitution of 1963 also recognized traditional rulers and town unions in northern, western and eastern Nigeria, respectively (Ehinder, 1991). Yet, after the coup of January 1966, the military government under General J. T. Aguiyi Ironsi abolished all chieftaincy institutions, ethnic and socio-cultural organizations that once served as channel of local governance in diverse Nigerian communities through the promulgated Decree No. 33 of the military ruling council (MRC). The Decree No. 34 of May 24, 1966 similarly abolished regional and all other governance and solidified the unitary structure at the federal level. These in all ramifications severed the remaining stable trajectory held by traditional rulers and town unions in their local communities.

Exacerbating the waning of traditional ruler and town union institutions further was the 1976 political reform of the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). This tightened the unitary structure at the federal level leaving no space for traditional rulers and town unions to exercise effective authorities in their communities. The 1979 Nigerian constitution however deepened the situation by excluding traditional rulers and town unions from formal legislative roles and limited them to advisory functions. Unveiling this advisory role, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria asserts;

The council shall have power to advise the governor on any matter relating the customary law or cultural affairs, inter communal relations and chieftaincy matters. Also, the council shall advise the governor whenever requested to do so on (a) the maintenance of public order within this state or any part thereof, (b) such other matters as the governor may direct.

Thus, the 1999 constitution did not make any provision for traditional rulers and town unions to exercise any political power. They are not even represented in the Council of State (COS). The 1999 constitution therefore weakened more the powers of the traditional rulers and town unions as agents of community participation in local governance. It



completely denied them constitutional roles and functions and relegated them to advisory positions to those in government.

Apart from these, other factors led to the ineffectiveness of traditional ruler and town union institutions in the local governance of their communities. These include internal squabbles, leadership tussles, bribery and corruption and perversion of justice often existing among traditional rulers and their town unions. Other factors are implementation of unpopular and non-community-oriented policies/projects, government proscription and suspension of some traditional rulers and town unions, government's mutilation or balkanizing of communities through creation of autonomous communities and politicization of traditional ruler and town union institutions by many governments officials. These days, traditional rulers and town unions attract financial support from government, special agencies, philanthropists and special donors. Successive governments also make periodic financial releases to the traditional rulers and town unions for public service delivery (Ilozue, 2010). Struggle for control of these financial deliveries and donations have ruined local governance, peace and stability expected from traditional rulers and town unions in many communities.

### **Axiological Solution to the Waning of Traditional Rulership and Town Unions in Nigeria**

The constitution of Nigerian state weakened the powers of traditional rulers and town unions. This is based on its inability to accord them powers necessary for adequate and effective local governance even when the traditional rulers and town unions are entitled to stipends from the government. The constitution rather describes the offices of traditional rulers and town unions as ceremonial and advisory one. Yet, anyone who had the opportunity of interacting with most of these traditional rulers and members of town unions will attest to their intelligence, soundness, education, knowledge and verse in different disciplines of life (Nworah, 2009). These evident capacities point to the fact that traditional rulers and town unions would have been more effective in local governance if they were fully backed by the state constitution and government at all levels.

For effective local governance therefore, traditional rulers and town unions should be constitutionally empowered. In this way, the functions and roles of town unions and traditional rulers would be streamlined towards harmonious relationship and collaboration that will foster effective local governance. This constitutional back up will reduce the often confrontations between town unions and traditional rulers which have ruined local governance in many Nigerian communities. Along this lane, government should encourage traditional rulers and town unions to apply humanity and prudence in their relationship with their subjects. In this direction, traditional rulers and town unions are to be encouraged





to exhibit sense of belonging and attitude that will ensure indigenous people's active participation in local governance. This also entails their being more transparent and accountable when spending community fund and when executing community development projects. These are important as these qualities will accord them more dignity, trust, confidence, and encourage more donors to participate in community development projects.

Government should indeed make traditional rulers and town unions more relevant as the image makers of the communities. This relevance will be effective when government officially confer on traditional rulers and town unions the powers of interpreting customs and traditions of their communities. Along this line, traditional institutions and town unions as custodians should be allowed to have the final say regarding cultural; traditional and customary matters. In these ways, traditional rulers and town unions will not only be more relevant to the society and more useful to their subjects but will be held in high esteem among their people.

To save the collapsing traditional ruler and town union institutions, there is need for local/state governments to organize periodic workshops on capacity building for traditional rulers and town union members. The experience gained in this exercise will go a long way in equipping these traditional office holders for effective local governance. At the same time, the government must halt their influences on traditional ruler and town union institutions. As such, selection of traditional rulers and members of town unions by communities should be democratic and or in accordance with the customary laws, traditions and concerned community's constitutions. This will help in boosting the integrity, legitimacy and people's support of traditional rulers and town unions. This will also propel the traditional rulers and town unions to comport themselves in a manner that befits their offices and accords dignity to the community.

### **Socio-philosophical Expectations from Traditional Rulers and Town Unions in Local Governance**

In the past, traditional rulers and town unions exist for the welfare, peace, cultural and sustainable development of their communities. In this modern time, materialism and greed have driven most of these custodians away from the demands of their offices. This notwithstanding, the expectations of indigenous Nigerians from traditional rulers and town unions still revolve on those same factors that are the foundations of traditional ruler and town union institutions. Indigenous Nigerians therefore prefer their traditional rulers and town unions to continue fostering the primordial cultural values and traditions of their communities. This is on the rationale that these cultural values are the basis of cordial human existence in the local and wider society. They are the "...internal equilibrium of personhood and the interiority of the being of the individual in Nigerian communities



which...play crucial role of national integration, social control and bond between the individual and other members of the community...” (Chinweuba, 2019).

Moreover, traditional rulers and town unions are expected to checkmate crimes in their communities. They are to create enabling environment on which human safety and honest transactions will thrive. This thus warrants that traditional rulers and town unions monitor the activities of people in their domain. As such, they are to provide information to relevant security agencies against the activities of hoodlums and miscreants in the local communities. Traditional rulers and town unions will also achieve reduced crime communities through revitalizing community based strategies (CBS) that encourage genuine hard work and discourage corruption and crime. In this direction, people would like to see community punitive systems in place. This is because no community, nation or country thrives amidst social ills like corruption and crime. Community based strategies consists of community justice which encourages a stable society (Ani, 2009). This involves indigenous traditional tribunals charged with enforcing law and order. This will enthrone moral characters in many Nigerian communities and “greatly deter corruption in Nigeria because the offender cannot escape punishment from his own people” (Amujiri, 1997:81).

In addition, traditional ruler and town union institutions as agents of social change are to work towards improving the material condition of people in their communities. Since the present world is at a stage where human better condition and welfare are the priority of every community, traditional rulers and town unions are expected to resourcefully partner with government at all levels for the welfare of their people. As ambassadors of their people therefore, they are expected to attract government assistance for their people and community. This entails that traditional rulers and town unions burden the task of modifying national policies to suit local realities, needs and challenges through collective action (Obiajulu & Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2016). They are to display high sincerity and prudence in discharging the responsibility of planning, executing, overseeing and managing community development projects.

Along this lane, the traditional rulers and town unions are to mobilize and organize their people in defence of common course (Nwosu, 2009). They are to act in network with societal stakeholders towards guaranteeing civil society participation in election and governance. The onus also lies on them to mobilize their people against predatory governments. They are as well expected to mobilize the people towards receiving dividends of donor agencies and dividends of governance like electricity, free health care and free immunization programmes. In these directions, they are to mobilize the village heads, village assemblies, council of elders, kindred and age grade system who in turn will mobilize the people in their communities.



Indeed, the indigenous Nigerians desire that traditional rulers and town unions oversee associational life in their communities, champion social formations, community dialogues, consultations, rural development, advocacy and consensus building as well as local governance in their communities.

In present time, the people also hope to see traditional rulers and town unions become true and selfless agents of their community. Along this line, they are to acquaint themselves with the feelings and opinions of their people and relay same to government at all levels. People as well anticipate their return as “channels through which local needs and preferences are identified, expressed and addressed” (Obiajulu & Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2016:9). These were their pristine qualities which in the past created enabling environment in indigenous African communities; an environment that fostered self-help, honest efforts, voluntary and mutual cooperation.

To ensure order, peace, stability and adequate local governance in the local communities, traditional rulers and town members are expected to reside in their communities. In reference to this lack, Achebe (1983:61) notes that most of these traditional rulers and town union members are “traders in their stall by day and monarchs at night: city dwellers five days a week and traditional village rulers on Saturdays and Sundays!” It is only when traditional rulers and town union members reside in their communities that they can adequately chair the meetings of council of elders, serve as advisers to local government officials on the development of their locality, see to the prevailing of law and order in their communities, protect and propagate their cultures and traditions and punish offenders with traditional justice systems. Then will they as well give adequate supervision to chieftaincy matters and confer titles to deserving citizens, properly settle land and traditional marriage disputes and adequately assist local governments in sensitizing the people about their civic rights and duties.

### **Conclusion**

The poor recognition of traditional rulers and town unions by the 1999 constitution has made those offices ceremonial ones. It has also subjected traditional rulers and town unions to government influence and control. Consequently, access to traditional rulership and town union have in many Nigerian communities hinged on political “god fatherism” rather than cultural stipulations. As such, becoming a traditional ruler or a member of town union in Nigeria is largely no longer by merit but by selection. This has become worse as those in government have known that traditional rulers and town unions are stakeholders and key players in mobilizing the indigenous people that largely determine results of political processes through the ballots at the polls (Ilozue, 2010). As such, those in government have



through rewards and all kinds of manoeuvres hijacked many traditional rulers and town unions and compel their loyalty to them.

Consequently, the traditional rulership and town union are no longer answerable and accountable to their people but to their “god fathers” in government. This traditional rulers and town unions neglect their people’s welfare in pursuit of personal aggrandizement. Amidst these, the demands of the offices of traditional rulers and town unions, needs and expectations of the people have not changed. Hence, the onus lies on government to encourage adequate local governance of traditional rulers and town unions and ensure their prompt supervision towards providing the basic needs of the people in their communities.

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