INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE AT THE GRASSROOTS: EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS

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Abstract

The idea of inclusive governance at the local level is often linked to the need to include multiple social segments in the modern state, and to improve its participation, legitimacy and sustainable development. Traditional institutions in this paradigm have been much debated in post-colonial Africa. This is a study that recognizes beyond the dichotomy of 'modernist' versus 'traditionalist' schools the role of traditional rulers in local government affairs in Nigeria. The policy problem that is the focus of the central research question is the conflict between the socio-cultural legitimacy of these institutions and their constitutional marginalization, creating an alternative form of governance that creates tensions. The study is based on interpretive qualitative research to bring into light the paradox. The study uses qualitative content analysis using a theory driven approach, based on Participatory Governance Theory, and a systematic review of secondary literature, government white papers and constitutional provisions. The three main aims of the study are operationalized as follows: to map functional domains of traditional institutions; to analyze the mechanisms for their resilience in the democratic space; and to critically examine their structural constraints in relation to their developmental role. The findings show that traditional institutions are vital mediators of the conflict and cultural custodians, but they are systematically undermined as effective developmental partners by issues of politicization, lack of constitutional mandate and patrimonial capture. The study finds that traditional institutions are a potential source of grassroots development, but are not yet acting as a catalyst, which occurs when they have a clear and accountable mandate for inclusion and must be given fiscal autonomy.

Key Words: Traditional Institutions, Inclusive Governance and Local Government

Introduction

At the grassroots level, inclusive governance is seen as a new paradigm of decision-making approach that involves different voices from the local community, diminishes inequalities and creates a sense of ownership of development. In customary societies with well-established traditions, the system is sometimes missing the traditional institutions that serve as historical custodians of culture and social order, such as village heads, councils of elders and emirate systems. Institutions play important roles as intermediaries between the formal state and the local community, helping to bridge the gap between them and resolving conflicts, arbitrating cultures

and mobilizing communities (Mustapha, 2020). By bringing their local wisdom and leadership, their integration is expected to create a governance system that is in tune with local realities, in line with transparency, accountability and collaborative development.

In pre-colonial Nigeria governance was synonymous with these institutions having executive, legislative and judicial power. From the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 to the Republican Constitution of 1963, the traditional rulers were deliberately placed in the legislative councils in Northern and Western regions of the country in order to enhance legitimacy and make indirect rule easier (Afigbo, 1972). But the 1976 Local Government Reform was a turning point that systematically removed traditional rulers from their formal political roles and put them in advisory roles on customary law and chieftaincy matters (Olu-Owolabi et al., 2024). The 1979 and 1999 Constitution entrenched this constitutional exclusion, resulting in an inherent governance paradox where institutions at the heart of socio-political organization and service provision are missing from the formal legal and institutional landscape and lack formal power. They have statutory allotments but they are de facto, not de jure, and are subject to the control of the Commissioners of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs but the influence is also exercised and limited by elected officials in a volatile space. In this study this paradox is challenged, rather than merely calling for inclusion, a critical examination of the character, dynamics and structural constraints of the role of traditional institutions in supporting bottom-up governance is undertaken. The following are the guiding research questions: What are the functional roles of traditional institutions in grassroots development? How do they remain relevant in today's democratic Nigeria? What are the limitations on their developmental potential in the structure and politics of their communities?

Research Objectives

To chart the scope of traditional institutions' activities in grassroots development. Conflict Management and Social Stability

To examine how they were made relevant in the democratic space in Nigeria.

To assess critically the barriers to their developmental role in structure.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review.

The scholarship on traditional institutions is divided within three major schools of thought, which have advanced conflicting theoretical and ideological positions. According to the functionalist school, traditional rulers have a vital role in driving the political, social, and economic development of the society, as they benefit from their cultural mandate to ensure stability and collective action in the society (Olaopa&Ogundare, 2023; Olawoyin, 2023). The abolitionist school, which draws on a Weberian modernist outlook, contends that these institutions are relics of colonialism and relics of a logic that is anti-democratic and therefore have ceased to have any value for contemporary life, as they are incompatible with meritocratic

and participatory principles of electoral accountability (Zik et al., 2023). A third point of view argues that traditional rulers need to be separated from formal politics and partisan matters in order to maintain their respected, apolitical image as cultural and moral fathers.

This study takes an approach to these schools in light of Participatory Governance Theory. This theory extends the concept of representative democratic systems and focuses on the additional role played by non-state actors in decision making, deliberation and partnership. It suggests that governance effectiveness and legitimacy increase if multiple actors within the state and society collaborate to produce public goods. This framework is analytically suitable for this research, as it offers a normative standard to evaluate not 'whether' traditional institutions engage, but 'how', and under which circumstances and consequences of power relations and accountability. The theory can be used to rethink the research question as a dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion into a more nuanced examination of the quality, nature and structural constraints of participatory mechanisms. It explores the ways in which the integration of traditional rulers can add to the cultural responsiveness and local legitimacy of the system, and yet also creates threats to democratic accountability when based on ascriptive status instead of open and participative processes.

Methodology

An interpretive qualitative study using systematic literature review, documentary analysis, is used in this study to deconstruct the ambivalent role of traditional institutions in governance in Nigeria. This method is suitable if you have a range of qualitative evidence that has already been gathered and you want to use to create a thematic and theoretically informed synthesis of this, which involves reappraising the research problem.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study is based on secondary sources of information and purposive sampling is used to identify key documents. These include peer reviewed journal articles from databases such as Google Scholar and JSTOR, official government reports such as the 1976 Local Government Reform white paper, and the Dasuki Committee Report (1988), as well as important constitutional provisions from the 1979 and 1999 Nigerian Constitutions, using key words in the search such as "traditional rulers Nigeria," "local governance," and "chieftaincy affairs.

The textual data collected was subjected to qualitative content analysis and comprised three stages: (1) Coding in which specific segments of text were coded according to the pre-defined operationalized dimensions of the research (eg., textual segments that discuss land disputes were coded under the 'Conflict Management' dimension); (2) Categorization in which the codes were categorized under the thematic sub-headings presented in the findings; and (3) Interpretation in which the pattern was critically analyzed from the theoretical point of view of the Participatory Governance Theory to identify convergence, divergence, and tensions in the literature.

Discussions of Findings

The results of the thematic analysis point to a picture of great ambivalence: on the one hand, the traditional institutions are functioning well and thus have great potential for resilience; on the other, the traditional institutional structures are the strongholds of its most serious governance pathologies.

Operationalization Dimensions (Indicator for Analysis):

Conflict management and social responsibility skills.

Mobilization of social cohesion and community development

Experts who advise and act as intermediaries. Expert roles as advisers and intermediaries.

Supporting Cultural Continuity & Social Cohesion.

Parallel Justice & Expedient Dispute Resolution.

Making systems of Community Development Partnerships work. Making systems of Community Development Partnerships work.

The politically induced loss of autonomy. Loss of autonomy caused by politics.

An ambiguity in the constitution or law. Ambiguity in the constitution or law.

Undemocratic and patrimonial succession practices.

Gender Hegemony & Elite Capture

The concept of grassroots development is examined in functional terms.

The analysis shows that traditional institutions are not only cultural icons but are also functional instruments of governance, though in an informal manner. Three major functional domains came out of this:

Conflict Management and Social Stability: The literature abundantly highlights the traditional institutions as the informal principal mediators of justice for a large part of the population. In contrast to the heavy burdened, costly and distant formal courts, the councils of elders offer the people a readily available and quick justice on matters as diverse as land dispute to family feuds (Nkwota& Matthew, 2024). Its function is based on their knowledge of local history and family, with the emphasis on restorative, not punitive, justice. In the context of Participatory Governance Theory, this is a profound form of co-produced stability, in which the state's monopoly on formal justice is complemented by a culturally embedded mechanism in the society. This functional salience reflects a reality of governance – one in which legitimacy is plural, and not based exclusively on the constitution.

Mobilization for Service Provision and Community Development: Traditional rulers are key factors that mobilize a community to undertake a collective action, as illustrated in the literature in contexts of weak and nonexistent state capacity. They provide an impetus to self-help initiatives, organise community labour for social infrastructure and serve as linkages with NGOs and private philanthropists (Olaopa&Ogundare, 2023). This position relates to the principle of participatory governance in co-producing public goods, turning local desires into concrete development projects. The cultural festivals and forums they organise are not simply aesthetic acts; they are also strategic spaces for participatory budgeting, for need assessment, to make development agendas locally resonant.

The advisory and cultural intermediary role: As a bridge between the formal government and grassroots, is a recurring theme. Despite not having constitutional authority, State Governors and elected officials depend on them to spread policies, indicate public opinion and guide the implementation of projects with cultural sensitivity (Gbodi&Oshewolo, 2025). Although this is an informal advisory role, it is an important feedback loop that increases the responsiveness and legitimacy of formal state actions.

How to hold onto relevance in a democratic space

Traditional institutions remain strong parallel authorities even though they are constitutionalized as marginalized. Through the analysis, it can be seen that their resilience is not random, but is reproduced in a certain way through socio-cultural mechanisms:

Guardianship of Cultural Continuity: Their source of power is a control of symbolic and ritualistic capital of the community. They foster a sense of national identity that the State cannot. They encourage language, tradition and history. This cultural hegemony gives them a kind of legitimacy which is very strong that they enjoy and which political elections are not always able to offer.

Expedient Parallel Justice: As noted, dispute resolution is not only a function but is one of the institutions that helps to make them relevant. The formal court system is not the only means by which citizens' lives are impacted by government; they have an immediate and daily influence in the lives of people even if it is not official, and they create a more peer-friendly forum than the formal court system, which can be costly, time-consuming, and ineffectual.

They also act as the “developmental state” at the micro level by attracting and directing resources from non-state actors and the private sector, further reinforcing their role as essential providers and protectors of the community.

Governance Paradox: Challenges and Structural Impediments

This study exposes critically the very elements that shape these institutions as also being linked with some deep pathologies of governance, thereby pointing out a fundamental paradox of inclusive governance.

Political Capture: Political Captureis anchored by the state governments' control of funding and the power of appointment/dethronement, which is also called the Politicization-Autonomy Nexus. Consequently, this system of patronage makes traditional rulers' part of the clientelist patronage dynamics with elected officials, forcing the traditional rulers to participate in partisan politics for the provision of resources and tenure (Garba et al., 2018; Akindele, 2018). It directly runs counter to Participatory Governance Theory, which envisions a participatory society where citizens have autonomy in deliberation, and the traditional rulers become political puppets. This is a direct effect due to their lack of constitutionally guaranteed fiscal and operational autonomy.

Legitimacy Tensions: Ascription vs. Democratic Accountability: Succession is hereditary and undemocratic and it is at the heart of liberal democratic principles. Women's and youth's exclusion from decision making processes is systemic and is an important driver of growing gender inequalities (Adewumi, 2019), while supporting a type of "elite capture" that is contrary to the principle of inclusivity central to participatory governance. It is not simply an old versus new contest, it is an old versus new power struggle about the basis of legitimate authority: lineage versus popular election and merit.

Lack of a constitutional structure:On their roles and double authority structures can provide fertile ground for conflict and inefficiency. The parallelism of elected local council chairpersons and traditional rulers with overlapping but ambiguous powers create suspicion and jurisdictional deadlock (Abotsi&Galizzi, 2012). Another aspect of the traditional system is that the executive, legislative and judicial powers are difficult to separate, with the possibility of the three functions being held by one ruler, which further points to structural clashes with current governance principles of checks and balances. This form of uncertainty creates an opportunity to make a partnership a power and resource game.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The finding of this study is that traditional institutions in Nigeria are not monolithic developmental partners nor anachronistic obstacles but structural ambivalent institutions that are caught in a governance paradox. They have shown that their involvement has deep community engagement and participatory value in managing conflict and mobilizing communities. This potential, however, is systematically undermined by a political system of constitutional marginalization which leads to politicization, patrimonial lack of internal accountability and a fundamental conflict between hereditary and democratic legitimacy. What emerges is a new form of governance, one which is informal, unofficial, and parallel to the traditional sense of

authority, but not necessarily subservient to it. This problem is not a problem of relevance, but a problem of formalization - how to formalize a role that is historically and culturally malleable? The study thus urges the adoption of a non-symbolical recognition of the traditional rulers beyond the symbolism into a constitutional amendment establishing a non-partisan, formal advisory body of traditional rulers at state and national levels with well-defined duties and adequate financial provision. More crucially, such formalization needs to be accompanied by binding and enforceable norms of internal democracy, gender equality and financial transparency, so as to reduce the potential for formalization to merely "legalize" patrimonialism, turning traditional institutions from hidden assets into accountable and 'real partners' in inclusive grassroots development.

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