Traditional Rulers and Local Government Administration in Nigeria: A Historicisation

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Abstract

Local government administration in Nigeria predates the country's formal flag independence. Following the conquest and annexation of Lagos in 1861 and the subsequent expansion of British political and economic interests to other parts of what later became Nigeria, the British were able to establish a colonial state in those areas. The expansion and consolidation of British rule involved the introduction of a local government system that imposed British colonial officials over indigenous traditional rulers. Hiding under the veil of ‘advisers’ to the traditional rulers, these colonial officials supervised the collection of taxes for the government. Before independence in 1960, the colonial governments in the different regions had, between 1950 and 1960, also taken steps to replace the Native Authority System with new local government structures. The then Northern Region was the exception. It was in 1976 that a unified local government system was introduced to become operative in all parts of the country. In all the changes and innovations in local government administration, the role of traditional rulers was never lost to the government. Thus, under the regional governments, they were duly acknowledged and provisions made for them in the legislative houses. Since 1979, however, traditional rulers have been denied any statutory roles in the in the constitutions, though the various state governments have found accommodation for them in local government administration. This is in itself an acceptance of their important role in mobilising grassroots support for governments’ programmes and projects.

Keywords: Colonial, Constitution, Grassroots, Legislative, Reforms, Regions, Rulers, Traditional.

Introduction

Local government has been defined as:...government in which popular participation both in the choice of decision makers and in the decision-making process is conducted by local bodies which while recognising the supremacy of the central government is able and willing to accept responsibility for its decisions [1].

Implicit in this definition is the fact that decision-making at the local government level devolves from a higher political authority and that those entrusted with the administration of local governments must be familiar with the political, social and economic peculiarities of the committees that constitute a given local government area.

Local government administration is defined here as government at the grassroots undertaken by the central, regional, or state government through its officials (politicians or civil servants) who work in collaboration with the representatives of the local people.

While decisions are taken by these representatives, the government agents, agencies, or bodies work in advisory or supervisory capacities in the local government areas. The system has universal application and relevance and has achieved varying degrees of success even in advanced democracies like the United States and Britain. Its relevance lies in the fact that in all political systems, especially Nigeria and other developing countries, loyalty to the government must be matched with commitment to the well-being of the citizens. Therefore, the responsibility of extending the benefits of modern civilisation and
governance to communities can best be achieved through a functional grassroots-based political structure.

Such a structure, by obvious implication, is charged with the responsibility of ensuring development in the local communities that make up the state or country. To be meaningful and relevant, any development programme must ensure the increased material well-being of the citizens through the provision of such basic needs as water, shelter, food, education sanitation, healthcare, as well as gainful employment and equal income distribution. In addition, social security and human development must form part of the development process and programme [2]. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, human beings would be in a better position to advance to a higher level of development once their basic needs are satisfied [3].

The satisfaction of the basic human and material needs of citizens at the grassroots is, thus, one of the reasons for the establishment of the local government system. Since traditional rulers constitute a significant factor in the political environment of the local government [4], because of their closeness to citizens at the grassroots level, and because of the significant followership some of them command in the local communities, incorporating them in local government administration is absolutely imperative. That explains why all governments in Nigeria have often made provisions for them in the political system.

This study is divided into two substantive parts namely, the evolution of local government administration in Nigeria, and traditional rulers and local government administration in Nigeria.

The Evolution of the Local Government System of Administration in Nigeria

Local government administration in Nigeria is a British creation because Nigeria itself was a British colony between 1900 and 1960. These two dates are important in Nigeria’s political history because it was in 1900 that the British Crown assumed full responsibility for the administration of Nigeria which had hitherto been governed by the Foreign Office, the Royal Niger Company, and the Colonial Office. This tripartite responsibility for the administration of what was to become Nigeria involved the Colonial Office administering the colony of Lagos and the protectorate territories of Yorubaland, while the Foreign Office administered the then Niger Coast Protectorate with headquarters at Old Calabar. On its part, the Royal Niger Company, subject to the supervision of the Foreign Office, was in charge of the administration of the Sokoto and Kanem–Bornu caliphates, as well as the areas lying around the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue [5].

But the Colonial Office, in 1900, ended the tripartite arrangement when it took over the administration of all the areas then under British control. By 1914, the Northern and Southern protectorates, which had been created on the eve of the formal establishment of British rule, were amalgamated, and the local government administrative system known as the Native Authority system (which had been successfully applied in the North between 1900 and 1914) was extended to the Southern parts between 1916 and 1919. However, the municipal areas of Lagos, Port Harcourt, Enugu, Kaduna, Kano and Zaria were not administered under that system up to 1937 [5].

While the adoption of the Indirect Rule System was a success in the North, it achieved limited success in Yorubaland, and recorded a massive failure in Eastern Nigeria. The violent reactions of women in the East to the imposition of the so-called Warrant Chiefs resulted in the Aba women’s war of 1929. Unlike Northern Nigeria where the Sultan of Sokoto, the Shehu of Bornu, and the Emir wielded enormous powers within their areas of jurisdiction, and in Yorubaland where the Oba were still politically relevant despite their diminished powers occasioned by the Yoruba civil wars of the 19th century, communities in Eastern Nigeria had no such natural rulers or chiefs. Thus, there was no one individual or institution among the Igbo, Ibibio and other so-called acephalous societies, who had the
traditional claim to govern any given community [6].

When, therefore, Frederick Lugard introduced the Warrant Chiefs to collect taxes and to generally represent British interests in their local communities, the resentment was overwhelming. For one thing, those who were issued warrants to rule were unpopular because they were seen as lackeys of the colonial government, and for another, the method through which they were selected was arbitrary and therefore unsatisfactory. Opposition to their highhandedness and the concomitant Aba Women’s War led first to the reorganisation of the Native Authority system in the area and its later abrogation in the Eastern and Western parts of Nigeria.

The Local Government Ordinances of the 1950s formally signalled the end of the Native Authority System in the Eastern and Western Regions of Nigeria. In its place, a new and relatively progressive local government system founded on the principle of participatory democracy was introduced [7]. In the East, the Local Government Ordinance passed by the Eastern House of Assembly in 1950 provided for the elective principle, and political control now devolved effectively from the Regional government to the autonomous councils who could now recruit and deploy staff, collect taxes, and award contracts.

However, the Local Government Law of 1955 greatly whittled down the powers of the local councils by providing that the Minister of Local Government could order a fresh election or appoint a Caretaker Committee in the event that any local government council was found wanting in the discharge of its duties.

In the Western Region, a new system of local government was introduced in 1952, which also created local government councils, a majority of whose members had to be elected through universal adult suffrage. A Local Government Service Commission was also set up to ensure effective monitoring and control of the local councils.

In 1958 however, a Local Government Amendment law was promulgated due to the perceived inadequacies of the Local councils. Sole Administrators and Management Committees were appointed to oversee the affairs of these councils.

The situation in the Northern Region as far as the Native Authority system is concerned, was conservative. There were no innovations in local government administration as power remained in the hands of the aristocratic Sultan and Emir until the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1967. In other words, the main basis for political power in pre-1967 Northern Nigeria remained anchored on one’s ascribed status. Thus, the Hausa-Fulani ruling class still had sufficient and indeed overwhelming influence in the administration of the local communities. To a reasonable extent, it was British paternalism towards the Northern Nigerian oligarchy that prevented the Region from effecting any changes in its local government system.

When the military intervened in national politics in 1966, new states were created the following year to replace the old three-region arrangement. All the local government councils in Nigeria were suspended and the newly created states were allowed to adopt necessary measures to reform their respective local government systems. But it was after the cessation of hostilities in 1970 that any kind of real restructuring of the local government system became manifest. The new states were allowed a free hand by the Federal Military Government to choose whatever local government system they considered appropriate and relevant to their local needs.

In the Igbo-speaking East Central State, for instance, Edict No 18 of 1971 was enacted and a new system of Local Government referred to as ‘Divisional Administration’ was introduced [7]. Similar Edicts were enacted in other states of the Federation with varying degrees of responsibility assigned to the Local Government. For instance, whereas the former Benue-Plateau and Kwara States adopted the divisional administrative structure, the former North-Western and North-Eastern States continued with the Emirate-Native Authority System until 1969 when they were divided into smaller “Development Areas”.

The year 1976 marked a watershed in the history of local government administration in Nigeria. It was in that year that the then Federal Military Government initiated reforms in the local government in the local government system nationally. This sought to unify the principles and practice of Local Government administration throughout the country. The Unified Local Government system was introduced, and the Local Government was formally recognised as the third-tier of government after the Federal and State Governments.

According to the 1976 Local Government Reform Guidelines, the reform was necessitated by the need to:

- Make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by developing or delegating them to local representative bodies;
- Facilitate the exercise of democratic self-government close to the local levels of our society, and to encourage initiative and leadership potentials;
- Mobilise human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development; and
- To provide a two-way channel of communication between local communities and both state and federal governments [4].

These objectives are in agreement with the law establishing the local government system in post-1970 Nigeria. According to the 1999 constitution (as amended), section 7(1);

The system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under this constitution guaranteed; and accordingly, the Government of every state shall, subject to section 8 of this constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils.

Section 3 of the same constitution provides that: It shall be the duty of a local government council within the state to participate in economic planning and development of the area referred to in sub-

section (2) of this section and to this end, an economic planning board shall be established by a law enacted by the House of Assembly of the state.

**Traditional Rulers and Local Government Administration in Nigeria**

From our discussion so far, it is obvious that in Nigeria, the local government system has undergone changes right from the inception of British colonial rule. Also evident is the fact that there was no uniform approach to local government administration in the country until 1976. Prior to that date, each region and later, state, in Nigeria was at liberty to fashion out its own system of local government administration. But the 1976 reform altered all that and introduced a uniform system for the whole country. That is why it has been observed that:

The 1976 reforms represented a fundamental change in the development of local government in Nigeria. For the first time, the country was given a common, single-tier structure of local government in place of the different structures of various regions or states [8].

In this part of the paper, emphasis is on the role of traditional rulers in the administration of local governments in Nigeria. Accordingly, it has four sections devoted to examining this main topic. A thematic approach is adopted in the subsequent analysis in the hope that the readers’ interest would be sustained by the chronological presentation.

**The Colonial Era up to 1950**

Our idea of a traditional ruler is that person who governs or rules a given group of people that share a common belief, customs, and culture. Such a ruler must also be familiar with his/her people’s culture, values, beliefs, and orientations. In addition, it is expected that such a person should be chosen, selected, or elected by his/her people, except where the position is hereditary. Yet, a person who is not the choice of his/her people cannot be an effective and popular traditional ruler whether his/her position is hereditary or otherwise.

It has been observed that the British
colonial government had, prior to the introduction of federalism in Nigeria, clearly distinguished between the organs of central and local government, and had given recognition to trusted traditional rulers. These were to serve as agents for the establishment, expansion, and consolidation of the colonial administration in what was later to become Nigeria [9]. Thus, early in its life, the British colonial administration realised the imperative of utilising the services of traditional rulers. Since the primary motive of the colonial administration in Nigeria was economic, it could only succeed in exploiting the peoples and their resources by working with those who were familiar with the peoples, their customs, and beliefs. The idea probably, was that by upholding aspects of the peoples' cultures and institutions through the incorporation of a few trusted indigenous personalities in the colonial political arrangement, it would be easier to manipulate and exploit Nigerians.

Therefore, local government administration in colonial Nigeria (otherwise referred to as the Native Authority system) was intended to create a political environment conducive for the economic exploitation of the resources of the country by the British. Traditional rulers were appointed essentially to secure the confidence of their people in their relationship with officials of the colonial government. In fact, the history of local government administration in Nigeria goes back to 1900 when Frederick Lugard introduced the Indirect Rule System in Northern Nigeria. Between 1916 and 1937, virtually all parts of Nigeria had embraced the new system of native administration.

During the period under review, Lugard and his lieutenants had realised that ruling the indigenous peoples through their own traditional executive government was the surest way of achieving the economic objectives of the British colonial government. In Northern Nigeria where the experiment began, the Native Authority System involved British officials supervising the traditional rulers who worked with their own councillors and aids. In other words, the idea of native administration implies that British colonial officials were appointed to assist and enable the traditional rulers carry out the executive orders of the colonial administration and govern their subjects [5].

The statutory duties of the traditional rulers in Northern Nigeria included the maintenance of law and order, the prevention of crimes, and the making and enforcement of orders relating to public health and sanitation within their domains. They also had powers to recruit staff to help in the discharge of these and other statutory functions, such as the levying and collection of annual direct taxes on communities in the area [5]. The British justified their relationship with Northern traditional rulers on the need to avoid any disruption of the people's pre-colonial political arrangement so long as there were no contradictions between their traditions and customs and British conception of humanity and justice [10].

In the East, the overthrow of indigenous authority and the imposition of colonial rule in Igboland, Ijoland, Ibibioland as well as among the Ogoja and other hinterland peoples, also involved the introduction of a new administrative structure. In 1900, three administrative divisions were created, namely the Eastern Division, the Cross River Division, and the Central Division. By 1906 when the Southern Nigeria Protectorate was amalgamated with the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos, this arrangement was replaced with the provincial structure which meant the creation of three provinces, with the Igbo, Ibibio, Ijo and Ogoja peoples falling under the Eastern and Central Provinces. A further restructuring of this arrangement saw the breaking up of the three large provinces into the Calabar, Owerri, Onitsha, and Ogoja provinces, with each province also split into divisions and districts [11].

Local government administration at this time (between 1891 and 1912) involved the British officers trying to govern the subdued indigenous peoples through their traditional institutions. But these institutions were not properly understood by the British because no sustained efforts were made to understand and appreciate the peoples' approaches to governance. Eventually,
because the British could not readily locate the traditional rulers in these places, they began foisting an alien system of government on the people.

That system was the Warrant Chief system, which involved the issuance of certificates to those indigenes who had been chosen by the colonial officers to serve as their link with the peoples. Many of these Warrant Chiefs were chosen without reference to anybody, and their new positions imbued them with power and authority that was incompatible with their status in the pre-colonial traditional society. Frictions between them and those they governed were, therefore, inevitable. Their arrogance naturally created suspicion in the minds of their subjects.

Prior to the events of 1929, namely the Aba Women’s War, the duties of the Warrant Chiefs were all-purpose. They combined the legislative, executive, and judicial functions of government under the Native Authority System. By 1912 when Lugard was appointed Governor-General of Nigeria, he introduced changes in the Native Authority system through the creation of sole Native Authorities. Under this arrangement, paramount chiefs and permanent presidents were appointed to assume the responsibilities formerly undertaken by the Native and Provincial courts.

It should be noted at this juncture, that it was the decision of the colonial governments to tax the peoples of Eastern Nigeria directly that resulted in the events of 1929. They used the Warrant Chiefs to execute this task, which was resented by the peoples, given the fact that these chiefs were considered oppressive and corrupt.

In Yorubaland and the other western provinces (Benin and Warri), the Native Authority System of local government varied. Whereas the Oba and Baale in Yorubaland fitted into the theoretical Indirect Rule System of Lugard and his successors, the Warrant Chief system was imposed on the Itsekiri, the Urhobo, and the western Delta Igbo of Asaba, Agbor and environs.

According to Asiwaju [12]: The piecemeal fashion of British acquisition of the Western provinces explains the separate rather than unified development of administrative control... in the Western provinces, there were two major juridical spheres. Lagos ... was administered in the tradition of a British Crown Colony while the vast interior.... fell under the British protectorate type.

Under the Crown Colony system, indigenous political authorities in Lagos had no formal powers because all the inhabitants of the area were British subjects who had no other allegiance except to the British crown. Traditional rulers like the Oba and Baale were, therefore, occasionally appointed as government agents who could not act on any matter on their own initiative. As the colonial government’s administrative assistants, however, they were paid stipends.

This was the situation until 1901 when the Native Council Ordinance was introduced as a means of meeting the challenges imposed by the attempt to administer Lagos directly. There was a perennial shortage of the necessary personnel and finance to sustain a direct administration of the area, and the passage of the Ordinance resulted in the establishment of Native councils for the colony. A Central Native Council was specifically created for Lagos. Traditional white Cap chiefs of Lagos and other titled men and leaders from the other districts of the Colony were members of the Central Native Council. It was presided over by the Governor himself (William McCallum), and it served as a forum where the colonial government consulted with traditional rulers and the elite on policies and measures necessary for the smooth administration of the area. In the Yoruba interior, Native Councils and Counts were established on the basis of the 1901 MacGregor Native Council Ordinance. Colonial District Commissioners dominated these Native Councils and Counts, while the traditional rulers’ participation was on the basis of nomination.

Thus, both politically and judicially, traditional rulers in mainland Yorubaland lost in status and prestige as a result of the extension of the protectorate system in the area. Furthermore, the posting of colonial
policemen to take charge of important towns in the area further weakened the powers and relevance of the traditional rulers there.

However, when in 1914 the Indirect Rule System was formally introduced in Yorubaland, the traditional rulers were conferred with greater administrative and judicial responsibility. The prestige of the traditional kingship institution was, thus, restored, and traditional rulers now began to work on a more secure financial basis [12]. The Native Courts Ordinance of 1914 and the Native Authority Ordinance of 1916 were the major legislations employed not only to re-position traditional rulers, but also collect direct taxes from the people. Indirect rule, therefore, involved British colonial administrators working through recognised traditional authorities in post-protectorate Yorubaland.

Like the situation in Yorubaland, Native Councils in the Benin and Delta provinces combined legislative, executive and judicial functions. So-called “paramount chiefs” were appointed on stipendiary basis during the protectorate era to serve as government agents. Indeed, prior to the amalgamation of 1914, the traditional kingship institution in the Benin and Delta areas did not serve as the pivot of the Indirect Rule System in the area.

In the words of Asiwaju [12]: The ‘native councils’ in Benin and Warri... in the pre-1914 era, were nothing but a misrepresentation of the traditional usage in the various localities; and the experiment tended to bring to the forefront of local affairs, men who, though of proven ability, lacked the backing of local custom to be rulers in their respective areas of jurisdiction. The dominance of the British political officer everywhere eclipsed the real indigenous rulers and accelerated the decline in the power and status they had enjoyed.

The Warrant Chief system in the two provinces, as earlier stated, was imposed on the indigenous peoples. In Benin, for example, the kingship institution was sidelined, and powerful chiefs like Agho Obaseki, were appointed instead to preside over Native courts while the British Resident presided over the regular meetings of the Central Council. In the outlying districts of Benin, ‘district heads’ were appointed, and they exercised control even beyond their areas of jurisdiction.

Even with the amalgamation of 1914, the traditional political institutions in Benin and the Delta provinces were shorn of all the former powers, status and privileges they enjoyed in pre-colonial times. The administrative districts created to enhance local government administration in these areas did not reflect the traditional areas of jurisdiction of the various native authorities. This failure by the colonial administration to establish an administrative structure on the basis of pre-colonial indigenous political systems led to violent protests in Warri between 1927/28. Eventually, a new system on a basis acceptable to the people was introduced. Under the new system, traditional rulers in Benin and the Delta provinces, such as the Oba (of Benin), the Olu of (Warri) and the Obi (of Asaba and Agbo) became relevant once more, and a broader representative type of local government administration was introduced, with a prominent recognition accorded to the educated elite in the newly established village and clan councils.

**Constitutional Developments, Traditional Rulers and Local Government Administration, 1946-1966**

As Nigeria gradually moved towards political independence, efforts were made by the colonial government to provide constitutional guidelines for the emergent nation. What could perhaps be regarded as the first move towards giving some form of recognition to the traditional political institution in colonial Nigeria came with the promulgation of the Richards’ constitution in 1946. Though the new constitution became operative in 1947, it is important in two major respects. In the first place, it introduced the regional principle in the administration of Nigeria by creating three regions, namely, the Eastern Region, the Western Region, and the Northern Region. Secondly, that constitution provided for a legislature of two Houses in the Northern and Western Regions, one being the House of Chiefs for each of the two regions. In the
Eastern Region, there was only a House of Assembly; there was no provision for traditional rulers in the legislature. When the Macpherson constitution was introduced in 1951, it retained the two Houses in the Northern and Western Regions, that is, the House of Assembly and the House of Chiefs. The Eastern Region had just a House of Assembly. The Lyttleton constitution of 1954 also established a House of Assembly and a House of Chiefs for the Northern and Western Regions respectively, while the Eastern Region was given a unicameral legislature. However, by 1959, the legislature in the Eastern Region became bicameral with the creation of a House of Chiefs. It was to contain all first-class chiefs and fifty-five other chiefs just like the legislatures in the two other regions. Similarly, in the Independence Constitution of 1960, the arrangements remained, namely, that each of the three regional legislatures now had both the House of Assembly and the House of Chiefs.

The importance of these constitutional provisions lies in the fact that both the colonial government and Nigerian nationalists appreciated the importance of including traditional rulers in the administrative set up of the period. Ignoring them would have amounted to denying a voice to the vast majority of the rural dwellers. There was of course, opposition to the inclusion of traditional rulers, especially under Arthur Richards’ constitution. Such opposition was anchored on the belief that traditional rulers were at best puppets of the colonial government and could not, therefore, be expected to give any effective representation to the people at the grassroots. The reasoning of many of the opponents of the inclusion of traditional rulers in the new dispensation was that they had served as tax collectors and lackeys of the colonial government under the Native Authority system.

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies issued a directive to the Governors to modernise the then prevailing Native Authority System of administration in their colonies. Without doubt, this move was intended to ensure a much more effective and representative type of local government administration [7] consequently, in the three regions of Nigeria, various steps were taken to give weight to the directive. As will be made clearer in the subsequent paragraphs, the idea to democratic local government administration during the period 1946 to 1966 involved co-opting traditional rulers into the system. In other words, traditional rulers were no longer to be regarded as inconsequential in local government administration, especially in the then Eastern Region which, until 1959, did not even have a House of Chiefs as part of its legislature, unlike what obtained in the Northern and Western Regions.

Thus, in the Eastern Region, the Local Government Ordinance of 1950 formally introduced a new three-tier system of local government. This marked the end of the Native Authority administrative system in the Region. However, this new system did not include traditional rulers in its councils that is, the county, District and Local Councils. Rather, they became avenues for politicians to embezzle public funds. When the local government law was introduced in the Region in 1955, it served to check corruption among office-holders, but it had no provisions for traditional rulers in the retained three-tier system of local government. However, the introduction of a new local government law in 1960 gave recognition to chiefs and clan heads in the affairs of the local councils.

In the Western Region, a new law in 1952 replaced the Native Authority system, which was also a three-tier system. The Oba who had enjoyed a lot of privileges under the Native Authority System had their powers reduced. One-quarter of the seats in the three councils (Divisional, District, and Local) were, however, reserved for traditional rulers. The situation in the Northern Region presented a completely different scenario.

Admittedly, the North was quite conservative in effecting changes in its local government administrative system. Up to 1966, the region still held on to the outdated Native Authority system with very few amendments in its democratisation.
Traditional rulers, therefore, still enjoyed enormous political powers.

Traditional Rulers and Local Government Administration under the Military, 1966-1976

In January 15, 1966 the military intervened in Nigerian politics with the emergence of General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi as Nigeria’s first military Head-of-State. He was assassinated in a counter-coup d’etat in July 1966 and was succeeded by General Yakubu Gowon. The following year, Gowon dissolved the Regional Governments and introduced a twelve-state structure to replace the former three-region arrangement. Thus, the former Eastern Region was split into three states, namely, East Central, South-Eastern, and Rivers States. The former Western Region was divided into the Western and Mid-Western States, while the former Northern Region was split into Benue-Plateau, Kwara, Kano, North-Central, North-Western and North Eastern States.

In these states, there were changes in the local government administrative system. For instance, in the East Central State and the South-Eastern State, there were the Divisional Administration system and the Development Administration System respectively. These systems were basically the same in terms of their objectives, which included ensuring not only a decentralisation of functions but also the participation of the local or indigenous peoples in the affairs of the local government authorities. This, of course, implied the inclusion of traditional rulers in both the Community and Divisional Councils.

The Western State Government introduced a single-tier all-purpose local government system [7]. There were no specific roles assigned to traditional rulers, though the military government could not have failed to consult them, given the history and relevance of the traditional institution in that part of Nigeria. In Benue-Plateau State, a divisional system of local administration was put in place, just like what obtained in Kwara State. In both states too, there was no statutory provision for traditional rulers, though they played advisory roles to the military government.

But in Kano, North-Central, North-Western, and North-Eastern States, the Emirate-Native Authority System continued up to 1976. Traditional rulers still enjoyed privileged a status in the local government system though there were some changes, such as the splitting of the existing Emirate-Native Authorities into smaller so-called “administrative areas” (for Kano and the North-central States) or “local authorities” (for the North-Western and North-Eastern States). (The local authorities were divided into smaller units labelled “Development Areas”). The important thing is that governments in these states made provisions for the inclusion of traditional rulers in the local government system. Their status may not have been as rosy as in the period before 1966. Yet, there is no denying the fact that traditional rulers in these states remained powerful, especially the Emirs.

The 1976 Local Government Reforms and the Role of Traditional Rulers in Local Government Administration

The local government system in Nigeria was unified in 1976 following the recommendation of a committee earlier set up by the Federal Government to review the structure of local government. Accordingly, a single-tier structure was introduced to replace the previous arrangement under which states operated structures that suited them. Part of the reasons for the new structure was the need to introduce a functional system for the local governments.

By the letters of the 1976 Reforms, the local governments were to be given fixed proportions of revenue from both the federation account and the revenues of each state. The 1977 Aboyade Revenue Commission provided that a mandatory allocation be made to each local government area, while the 1979 constitution empowered the National Assembly to determine the proportion to be given to the local governments from both the federation account and each states revenue. From 10% in 1981, the Federation account now allocates 25% to the local governments. This is a reflection of the larger development roles which local governments are expected to play in making life more meaningful for
the majority of Nigerians, especially those in the rural areas.

In assessing the role of traditional rulers under the 1976 Reforms, cognizance must be taken of the basic justifications for the continued existence of the local government system. Among these is the fact that local governments constitute platforms under which the indigenes of the localities could conduct their own affairs on the basis of their peculiar need and customs. Secondly, they serve to aggregate local interests and communicate same to the government and also transmit to the local people government’s programmes and projects [13].

Section 7, sub-section 3 of the 1999 constitution (as amended) also provides that local governments shall participate in economic planning and the development of their localities, and sub-section 2 stipulates that the common interests of the communities shall be taken into account by the local governments in the performance of their statutory roles. That sub-section also provides for the recognition of traditional associations in the administrations of the local government areas.

Since the 1976 Reforms were informed by the need to involve the local people in the administration of their localities, and granted that local governments are statutorily required to mobilise the local resources for efficient delivery of social and economic services to the people at the grassroots, it follows, therefore, that traditional rulers must be involved. This is anchored on the fact that traditional rulers are, because of their positions as the custodians of the peoples’ culture, very influential in the local communities.

According to Onah [4]: Traditional rulers.... constitute a significant factor in the political environment of the local government. Where they command some significant followership, like the emirs, sufficient influence is brought to bear on politics...

In fact, the forward to the Guidelines for the 1976 Local Government Reforms explicitly stated that recognition would be accorded the traditional rulers, and that the organic unity of the traditional institutions and societies would never be compromised by the Reforms.

Thus, each local government council was mandated to create a traditional rulers’ council. Overtime, however, the existence of this parallel body in the local government system has resulted in rivalries between elected council chairmen and traditional rulers. With no clearly defined roles (except, perhaps advisory), traditional rulers are known to have struggled with the elected officials for influence in the localities. Traditional rulers, unlike the elected council chairmen and council members are closer to the people, more accessible to them and by implication, wield more influence over them than the elected officials.

That notwithstanding, the most significant thing about the 1976 Reforms is that it was the first time in post-colonial Nigeria that the traditional rulers were clearly identified as indispensable in local government administration nation-wide. Ever since 1976 too, that recognition and honour accorded the traditional institution has remained throughout the 774 local government councils in the country, whether the councils are run by elected officials or by Care-taker Committees. Unlike the situation before 1976 when states had the authority to take decisions on what roles to assign to traditional rulers, the 1976 Reforms were emphatic on assigning a place constitutionally, to traditional rulers. It was, in other words, no longer left for states to decide whether or not to involve traditional rulers in local government administration. By establishing a nationally uniform single-tier local government system for the country, the 1976 Reforms assigned local governments the responsibility of repositioning the rural areas for economic development and social transformation. Thus, by providing for a traditional rulers’ council in each local government area, the Reforms invariably recognised traditional rulers as important players in mobilising the local people for the overall development of their localities [14].

Concluding Remarks

Local government administration in Nigeria has a long history that stretches back to the opening years of British colonial rule. In a like manner, the roles assigned to traditional rulers have vacillated between
acceptance and recognition by regional and state governments to a constitutional recognition occasioned by the 1976 Reforms. While the colonial administration recognised the indispensability of traditional rulers in local government administration in the former Northern and Western Regions before independence in 1960, their status in the former Eastern Region was not clearly defined until the promulgation of the Independence Constitution in 1959. It was in that year that the Eastern Region was given a bicameral legislature of a House of Assembly and a House of Chiefs to bring it in line with the situation in the North and West.

At the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970, and consequent upon the creation of states in 1967 to replace the regional arrangement, different states adopted their own modalities for running the local communities. Once again, the Native Authority System continued in the Northern states, and traditional rulers remained relevant, unlike the situation in the East-Central State. But all that changed with the 1976 local government Reforms. For the first time in the history of local government administration in Nigeria, a unified system was introduced for the entire country, with the local governments granted constitutional autonomy as the third-tier of government after state and federal governments.

The position of traditional rulers now witnessed a radical transformation from being optional to being statutorily mandatory in local government administration. This recognition was no doubt informed by the realisation of the fact that they are close to the people at the grassroots. Also, given the fact that they held tremendous influence in the local/rural communities, traditional rulers could serve as a veritable link between the government and the people. They could, thus, be used to mobilise support for governments in the local areas. Not many of the elected council officials can match the influence of traditional rulers in grassroots mobilisation.

Unfortunately, traditional rulers have been blamed for whittling down the powers of elected local government officials, essentially because of their firmer grip on local politics. In the long run, frosty relationships between the traditional rulers and elected officials would negate the idea behind the 1976 Reforms and, therefore, need to be addressed.

One way of stemming conflicts between elected council officials and traditional rulers is by specifically defining constitutionally, the duties of traditional rulers in local government administration. It is not enough to accord recognition to them: that recognition should come with constitutionally stipulated responsibilities. There is no denying the fact that they will remain key players in the political environment of the current local government system. But traditional rulers’ roles should go beyond those of advising elected officials. Furthermore, the appointment of traditional rulers by the state Governors imbues them with an exaggerated sense of importance and relevance in their respective local governments. It is not, for instance, uncommon for some of them to insist on having their candidates as chairmen and members of local governments because of their connections to their state Governors.

Thus, a competent and qualified aspirant who is not deemed to be loyal to the Governor and even the traditional rulers in his/her locality may be frustrated in the course of trying to actualise his/her ambitions. As a matter of fact, so long as states continue to see local government councils as their agencies rather than as the third-tier of government with some degree of autonomy, so long shall personality clashes between elected chairman and traditional rulers continue to impede development in the rural areas.

Yet, traditional rulers have come to stay as far as local government administration in Nigeria continues to be part of the constitution.

References
