

## Tradition and Transition in Nigeria: Historical evolution and Contemporary Challenges of the Chieftaincy Institution

Mojeed Oyetunji OYEDOKUN<sup>1</sup>, Shola Ahmed AKANBI<sup>2</sup> and Fanneh MALANG<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

This paper examines tradition and transition in Nigeria with emphasis on historical evolution and contemporary challenges of the chieftaincy institution. Utilising historical documents, anthropological research, and current policy discussions, the study investigates how the colonial policy of indirect rule reshaped indigenous leadership systems and incorporated them into the framework of state governance. Despite the growing pressures of democratisation, urbanisation, and legal reforms, the chieftaincy institution has endured in the post-independence age as a site of cultural validity, political power, and communal identity. The politicisation and commercialisation of chieftaincy titles, as well as conflicts between traditional authority and constitutional frameworks, are highlighted in the paper. The paper contributes to the body of knowledge on the role of traditional institutions in post-colonial African states by situating the chieftaincy system within larger narratives of continuity and change. The paper concludes that any sustainable integration of traditional institutions into modern governance must address issues of accountability, equity, and cultural representation.

**Keywords:** Chieftaincy Institution, Traditional Authority, Colonial Legacy, Indirect rule, Cultural Transition.

### Introduction

The chieftaincy institution represents one of the most enduring socio-political frameworks in Africa, with its origins rooted in antiquity. Though the precise beginnings of the institution remain uncertain across many societies, its evolution entrenches it as a key structure for managing

- 
1. Department of History and International Studies, Edo State University, Iyamho, Nigeria; doubleoyeonline@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0004-6452-285X
  2. Department of History and International Studies, University of Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria; [akanbiahmed66@gmail.com](mailto:akanbiahmed66@gmail.com)
  3. History Unit, University of The Gambia Faraba Campus, Faraba; mfanneh@utg.edu.gm

economic, political, religious, and social life (Adebanwi, 2017; Sklar, 2004). The form and function of chieftaincy vary considerably from one polity to another, shaped by indigenous traditions, cosmologies, and levels of socio-political development. In some societies, the institution evolved into centralised monarchies wielding significant power and territorial control, while in others it maintained more decentralised structures with limited authority (Ayoade, 2022; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Regardless of the spectrum of authority, the legitimacy of traditional rulers has historically been grounded in communal consent and local customs, rather than external imposition.

In Nigeria, the chieftaincy institution reflects the country's ethno-cultural diversity and its various precolonial political systems, from the centralised emirates of the north to the decentralised kingdoms and confederacies in the east (Ajayi, 2019). Each region developed indigenous mechanisms for leadership selection, succession, and governance, deeply embedded in local norms and values. Prior to colonial interference, these institutions functioned autonomously in the administration of justice, regulating economic activity, and safeguarding communal identity (Oyeleye, 2021). However, the imposition of British colonial rule disrupted these systems by co-opting traditional leaders into the indirect rule system and altering their roles and legitimacy in the eyes of their subjects (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

Despite surviving the colonial encounter and persisting in the post-independence period, the chieftaincy institution faces serious challenges concerning its relevance, authenticity, and adaptability in modern governance systems. In the context of globalisation, democratic transition, and constitutional reforms, traditional institutions are increasingly being scrutinised regarding their compatibility with contemporary governance ideals, particularly those related to inclusivity, meritocracy, and accountability (Ojo, 2020; Oduola, 2023). These tensions have sparked ongoing debates among scholars, policymakers, and traditional stakeholders about the future of chieftaincy in a rapidly changing Nigeria.

This paper critically examines the historical evolution of the chieftaincy institution in Nigeria and interrogates the contemporary challenges it faces in the 21st century. It explores both the resilience and constraints of the institution within a framework of tradition and transition, concluding with reflections on its possible developments in the modern Nigerian society.

## **Materials and Methods**

This paper examines the development and current issues of Nigeria's chieftaincy institution using a qualitative historical approach and utilises secondary sources. Scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal papers, policy documents, and media sources were critically analysed to gather data. Patterns pertaining to conventional authority, legitimacy, political meddling, and institutional transition were found through conceptual analysis. This approach makes it possible to comprehend the chieftaincy institution in the light of Nigeria's larger sociopolitical history.

## Clarification of Concepts/Literature Review

### i. Concept

The chieftaincy institution in Nigeria represents a fundamental element of traditional governance, which comprises both symbolic and functional leadership roles. It encompasses the formal and informal authority vested in individuals usually bearing hereditary or honorific titles who serve as custodians of indigenous political and cultural systems. As such, the institution functions as a significant vehicle for local administration, dispute resolution, and identity formation within communities (Adebanwi, 2014; Ayoade, 2020).

Oladosu (2021) conceptualises traditional rulers as autonomous figures within their domains whose legitimacy is grounded in customary norms and ancestral traditions. These leaders derive their authority not merely from contemporary political arrangements but from the perpetuation of deeply embedded cultural practices. Similarly, Salahu (2022) defines the chieftaincy institution as a body of authority that may emerge through lineage succession, colonial imposition such as the appointment of warrant chiefs or the postcolonial creation of new chiefdoms often influenced by state-level political considerations.

From a historical and sociopolitical perspective, the evolution of chieftaincy institutions in Nigeria can be understood through three major trajectories. First are those that emerged organically from indigenous socio-cultural and economic systems. These include traditional institutions such as Alaafin of Oyo, emirs in Hausaland, Ooni of Ife, Etsu of Nupe in pre-Islamic times, and numerous clan-based chiefdoms dispersed across Nigeria. These systems typically developed over centuries and retained a degree of communal legitimacy (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Ojebode & Akinleye, 2023).

Second, there are chieftaincy formations that resulted from a combination of internal sociopolitical dynamics and external interventions, particularly those involving religious movements and imperial conquests. Examples include the emergence of the northern emirates following the Sokoto Jihad, Shehu dynasty of Borno, and successive political entities that followed the collapse of the old Oyo Empire. These institutions, though rooted in local contexts, were often reshaped by broader processes of conflict and consolidation (Last, 2019; Mustapha, 2021). Thus, the chieftaincy institution was also created or modified in response to colonial and postcolonial administrative exigencies. The British colonial government's creation of warrant chiefs in the South and emirates in the North introduced new governance models that blended indirect rule with indigenous authority structures. In the post-independence era, new chiefdoms were established by state governments, sometimes as tools for political patronage or regional balancing (Vaughan, 2006; Olutayo & Bankole, 2020).

In a concrete and specific term, the chieftaincy title system in Nigeria could be categorised into three broad types. The first and most prestigious are hereditary titles, often accompanied by specific spiritual or cultural responsibilities. These include the emirs in the North and traditional rulers such as obas and chiefs in the south, whose authority is deeply embedded in lineage and ritual practices (Adeoye, 2023). The second category comprises clan chiefs,

whose titles may be either graded or non-graded and are typically organised into traditional councils led by a paramount chief. These positions are usually restricted to members of specific clans, making the process of accession relatively exclusive yet predictable (Bamgbose, 2018). The third category includes honorary or non-hereditary titles conferred by traditional rulers upon distinguished individuals from within or outside the community. These titles are largely symbolic and serve to enhance the social standing of recipients, often without conferring any formal responsibilities. While these titles help reinforce the influence of traditional rulers and celebrate communal values, they have also been critiqued for commodifying chieftaincy titles and reducing them to instruments of prestige rather than service (Ajayi & Akinrinade, 2021).

## **ii. Literature Review**

Although scholarly interest in the Nigerian chieftaincy institution has increased in recent years, existing research and literature remain unevenly distributed, focusing primarily on community assessments of traditional rulers' roles in development or peacebuilding without adequately addressing the historical evolution and institutional transformation of the institution as a whole. For example, recent studies examine the roles of traditional rulers in fostering peace in communities and in socio-political development at the local government level (Omligbe, 2025; Olatunji et al., 2025), yet they tend to emphasise functional roles rather than situating these within broader patterns of historical continuity and transition across colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary contexts.

Furthermore, research on governance and traditional institutions recognises the persistent influence of chiefs in modern Nigeria (Chidume, 2025), but does not sufficiently link these contemporary manifestations to systematic changes in legal, political, and socio-economic structures that have reshaped chieftaincy authority over time. Although scholars document the tensions between expanding statutory governance and traditional authority, including challenges such as marginalisation within local government systems, political interference, and unclear institutional roles, these studies often lack historical depth, comparative analysis across regions, and a unified framework that integrates past and present transformations.

At the same time, recent legal and policy developments including state-level reforms of chieftaincy laws that seek to redefine customary authority and curb abuses in title conferment highlight emerging continental governance challenges, such as legal ambiguity, title proliferation, and erosion of traditional legitimacy (Lagos State Government, 2025; Abia State Government, 2024). Yet, such developments have not been fully explored in academic analyses that bridge historical evolution with contemporary institutional dynamics. This indicates a substantial gap: a need for systematic, interdisciplinary research that traces continuity and change in Nigeria's chieftaincy institution from historical foundations to present-day legal and socio-political challenges.

Addressing this gap is critical for understanding how traditional authority can be constitutionally and institutionally reconfigured to maintain cultural continuity while responding effectively to demands of modern governance.

The study of Motadegbe and Ibiyemi, (2025) demonstrates a growing scholarly concern with issues of tradition, cultural transformation, morality, and social change in Nigeria. For instance, Motadegbe and Ibiyemi (2025) examine the impact of globalisation on indigenous moral values through the Yoruba concept of Omoluabi, offering important insights into how traditional ethical frameworks are being redefined in contemporary Nigerian society. While this study deepens understanding of moral transition within indigenous cultures, it does not extend its analysis to traditional political institutions such as the chieftaincy, where these moral values historically found institutional expression.

Similarly, Wariboko and Nwanyanwu (2024) explore socio-ethical transformations among Nigerian youth in the context of modern connectivity, implicitly raising questions about social legitimacy, value recognition, and authority in contemporary Nigeria. Although their discussion touches on changing social norms, it does not address how these changes affect traditional systems of authority, recognition, and title conferment embodied in the chieftaincy institution. In the same vein, Akinwande's (2025) linguistic study highlights the cultural embeddedness of indigenous systems through language but stops short of interrogating how traditional titles, hierarchies, and institutions evolve or persist amid social and political change.

Furthermore, Esamagu, Wazhi, and Adeyinka (2024) advocate for interdisciplinary approaches to African history, emphasising the importance of combining historical inquiry with contemporary analytical tools. However, despite this methodological advancement, the chieftaincy institution remains under-explored as a concrete historical and socio-political structure through which tradition and transition intersect in Nigeria.

Taken together, these studies reflect a broader scholarly engagement with cultural continuity, moral transformation, and historical change within Nigerian society. Nevertheless, they reveal a clear gap in the literature: the absence of a systematic, historically grounded examination of the chieftaincy institution as a central site where tradition, authority, and modern transformation converge. Specifically, existing literature publications have not sufficiently addressed how the chieftaincy institution has evolved from its historical foundations to confront contemporary challenges such as legal regulation, political marginalisation, and shifting community expectations. This article therefore fills this gap by situating the chieftaincy institution within Nigeria's broader historical path of tradition and transition, linking historical evolution with present-day institutional challenges.

### **Pre-colonial Political Structures and the Centrality of the Chieftaincy Institution in Nigeria**

This explains the varying degrees of indigenous political structures prior to the imposition of colonial rule. The geographical space now known as Nigeria comprised a mosaic of autonomous

political formations with diverse, yet interconnected, socio-cultural, economic, and political structures. These entities ranged from highly centralised kingdoms and empires to loosely organised segmentary societies, all of which incorporated systems of governance rooted in local traditions and historical experience (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Ayoade, 2020).

Centralised polities such as the old Oyo Empire, Benin Kingdom, Sokoto Caliphate, Borno Empire, as well as Itsekiri and Aboh kingdoms, exhibited political configurations where power and authority were concentrated in a monarchical figure, often supported by councils of chiefs or advisory bodies. These rulers were not only political heads but also spiritual and judicial authorities whose legitimacy was derived from divine sanction and ancestral heritage (Adebanwi, 2014; Olutayo & Bankole, 2020). In contrast, non-centralised societies such as the Igbo, Ijo, Ibibio, and several groups in central Nigeria practised decentralised systems where power was shared among lineage heads, elders, and title holders, creating more diffused authority structures (Afigbo, 2003; Ojebode & Akinleye, 2023).

Despite their structural differences, these political systems were rooted in the active consent whether freely given or socially compelled of their constituents. Leadership was often seen as a communal trust bestowed upon individuals or lineages deemed worthy by virtue of tradition, genealogy, or consensus. In patrilineal monarchies, succession to the throne typically followed hereditary patterns, where sons succeeded fathers or uncles, or were selected by kingmakers from eligible royal lineages. In other contexts, leadership rotated among clans determined through selective consensus, thereby ensuring a degree of representativeness and legitimacy within the polity (Salahu, 2022; Ajayi & Akinrinade, 2021).

The authority of traditional rulers in the precolonial period was rarely contested, as they were regarded as the embodiment of political sovereignty and the custodians of moral and spiritual order. Their offices controlled the allocation of titles, privileges, land rights, and civic responsibilities. Such decisions, whether unilateral or made in consultation with advisory councils, were anchored in principles of loyalty, competence, service to the community, and kinship solidarity (Ayoade, 2020). The conferment of titles was both symbolic and functional, representing not only honor but institutional responsibility. For example, titles such as the Aare Ona Kakanfo in Yorubaland (military commander), Shaaba in Nupe (second to the Etsu), and Mayaki in Hausa polities (military leader) illustrate the integration of military, administrative, and ceremonial duties into traditional governance structures (Adeoye, 2023; Mustapha, 2021).

The nomenclature for sovereign rulers also reflected the cultural diversity of Nigeria's polities. While Hausa rulers bore titles such as Sarki or Emir, Nupe leaders were known as Etsu, and in Yorubaland, monarchs were referred to as Oba, Ooni of Ife, Olubadan of Ibadan, or Alake of Egbaland, each reflecting unique local histories and political evolution (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Adebanwi, 2014).

It is important to note that the chieftaincy institution functioned as a sovereign authority within its defined territorial space. Its legitimacy and power were internally generated and culturally reinforced, with no reliance on external validation or foreign oversight. Political

decision-making, conflict resolution, and governance were conducted in accordance with prevailing indigenous laws, customs, and socio-political values. The sovereignty of these rulers effectively ended at the boundaries of their domains, respecting the autonomy of neighboring polities (Oladosu, 2021; Vaughan, 2006).

This paper therefore submits that the chieftaincy institution in precolonial Nigeria was not only central to political organisation but also integral to the social fabric and spiritual life of communities. Its legitimacy, adaptability, and cultural embeddedness enabled it to serve as a resilient institution of governance long before the advent of colonial rule.

### **Colonial Conquest and the Redefinition of Traditional Authority in Nigeria**

As mentioned earlier, the conquest and subsequent imposition of British colonial rule in what later became Nigeria marked a significant rupture in the indigenous political landscape. Prior to colonial amalgamation, the region consisted of multiple autonomous polities, each governed by its own systems of authority rooted in local traditions, customs, and political cultures. The formal integration of these previously independent entities into a singular colonial structure not only dissolved their political sovereignty but also subjected traditional rulers to a new imperial order (Vaughan, 2006; Falola & Heaton, 2008).

This political reorganisation had profound implications. First, traditional rulers who once wielded unchallenged authority within their domains became subordinate actors in the colonial administrative framework. Their authority, previously derived from historical legitimacy and communal consensus, was now mediated and often undermined by British colonial officials. These officials, regardless of their understanding of local customs, were empowered to override indigenous institutions, thereby displacing long-standing governance norms (Adebanwi, 2014; Salahu, 2022).

The British colonial system introduced a new political reality where different ethnic groups with distinct governance models were expected to coexist under a centralised colonial state governed by Western institutions and values. The previous inter-polity diplomacy and local autonomy were replaced by a hegemonic order centered on colonial administrative convenience. This transition also created a dilemma of dual loyalty for many communities which were torn between allegiance to their traditional rulers and subjugation under colonial authorities (Ayoade, 2020; Olutayo & Bankole, 2020).

The hallmark of British colonial governance in Nigeria was the system of Indirect Rule, championed by Lord Frederick Lugard. Under this system, traditional rulers were retained but redefined as instruments of colonial administration. Their roles were embedded within a colonial administrative framework that included native courts, native authority treasuries, colonial police units, and prisons. However, this model functioned more effectively in centralised societies such as Hausa-Fulani emirates than in decentralised regions such as Igboland and parts of Central Nigeria. In these latter regions, the colonial state responded by fabricating chieftaincy institutions such as creating “warrant chiefs” and “paramount rulers” where none had previously existed (Afigbo, 2003; Ojebode & Akinleye, 2023).

In doing so, the colonial government not only restructured indigenous governance but also dispossessed traditional rulers of their foundational source of legitimacy and sovereignty. The land which symbolised both political and spiritual dominion was now controlled by the colonial government. Lord Lugard explicitly declared the transfer of sovereignty from indigenous rulers to the British Crown, which consequently authorised the colonial administration to redraw boundaries, create new chiefdoms, and reassign territories without recourse to traditional protocols (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Mustapha, 2021).

Perhaps most disruptive was the redefinition of the processes of ascension and legitimacy. In precolonial systems, succession to the throne was determined by lineage traditions, communal consensus, and the role of kingmakers. Under colonial rule, however, appointments and dethronements were subject to the approval of colonial officers. Traditional rulers were required to possess appointment letters issued by the colonial government to be recognised. This process eroded the spiritual and cultural significance of chieftaincy, reducing them to bureaucratic titles dependent on external validation (Ajayi & Akinrinade, 2021). This colonial reconfiguration led to a crisis of authenticity and relevance for many traditional rulers. The replacement of communal legitimacy with imperial endorsement severed the organic connection between the rulers and their people, thereby setting the stage for postcolonial ambivalence toward traditional institutions still visible today (Adeoye, 2023; Oladosu, 2021).

### **The Post-colonial Diminution of the Chieftaincy Institution in Nigeria**

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the chieftaincy institution, which had previously functioned as a junior partner to the British colonial administration under indirect rule, entered a new phase of political realignment and institutional uncertainty. As colonial patronage waned, traditional rulers sought to remain politically relevant by aligning with dominant regional political parties. This strategic engagement, however, compromised the neutrality historically associated with their positions and exposed the institution to the vagaries of partisan politics (Adebanwi, 2014; Salahu, 2022).

In the north, the Sokoto Caliphate and affiliated emirates strongly supported the Northern People's Congress (NPC), viewing it as the legitimate heir to the political values of the region. Similarly, the Action Group (AG) received endorsements from prominent Yoruba Obas in the west, while in the east, traditional rulers and clan heads, particularly in Igbo land, aligned themselves with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). These political affiliations undercut the perceived impartiality of traditional rulers and contributed to the politicisation of the chieftaincy institution in the early post-independence era (Ogunleye, 2021; Oladosu, 2021).

The advent of military rule further eroded the status and authority of traditional rulers. The gradual centralisation of power by successive military regimes relegated the institution to the periphery of governance. One of the most significant blows came in the 1970s when key instruments of local governance such as native courts, local policing, and prison administration



were removed from the purview of traditional authorities and transferred to the federal bureaucracy (Ajayi & Akinrinade, 2021; Ayoade, 2020).

The culmination of this systematic marginalisation was the 1976 Local Government Reforms initiated under the military government, and influenced significantly by the Dasuki Panel on Local Government Administration. The reforms officially divorced traditional rulers from local government structures, effectively reducing them to ceremonial figures within the new administrative hierarchy. Their roles were formalised in the 1979 Constitution, which acknowledged the existence of State Councils of Chiefs and granted traditional rulers an advisory status, including limited representation in the Federal Council of State (Olutayo & Bankole, 2020). However, these functions were strictly honorific, with no constitutional mandate for executive or legislative authority.

Since 1979, subsequent Nigerian constitutions including those of 1989, 1999, and the prevailing constitutional review processes have continued this trend of symbolic recognition without substantial functional reintegration. While traditional rulers still command cultural respect and informal influence within their communities, their formal political roles have remained peripheral, constrained by a legal framework that emphasises representative democracy over hereditary leadership (Adeoye, 2023; Mustapha, 2021).

The evolution of the chieftaincy institution in postcolonial Nigeria thus reflects a broader tension between tradition and modernity. Once vital actors in both precolonial and colonial governance systems, traditional rulers now function largely as custodians of cultural heritage, with limited institutional leverage in formal political structures.

### **The Crisis of Legitimacy in Nigeria's Traditional Institutions.**

The chieftaincy institution in Nigeria, embodied by traditional rulers, represents one of the oldest forms of political organisation in the country. Historically, it has functioned as a sovereign system of governance in which access to power and authority was based primarily on lineage, hereditary right, and the longstanding traditions of specific ethnic groups. This foundation in antiquity granted traditional rulers not only authenticity but an unquestioned jurisdiction over their territories (Adebanwi, 2014; Ayoade, 2020).

However, the conquest and colonisation of Nigeria by the British fundamentally disrupted this indigenous political order. The colonial administration redefined the processes of ascension to the throne, modifying traditional guidelines to suit imperial convenience. This shift subverted what Henige (1974, as cited in Salahu, 2022) describes as legitimate tradition practices widely accepted and passed down through generations. In the colonial era, even when appointments remained within ruling lineages, preferred candidates were often selected based on their alignment with colonial interests rather than the communal will. This not only compromised the integrity of succession processes but also called into question the legitimacy of the institution itself (Ogunleye, 2021; Oladosu, 2021).

Under these circumstances, colonial conquest led to a serious loss of sovereignty. Before colonisation, traditional rulers wielded final authority on judicial, administrative, and ceremonial matters within their domains. With the advent of indirect rule, however, they became subordinate to British colonial officers who issued directives and approvals. Lord Lugard openly affirmed this shift, stating that the British government did not intend to leave any ambiguity regarding where real power resided (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This subordination persisted and intensified in the post-independence era, particularly following the Local Government Reforms of 1976. Under these reforms, even a powerful traditional ruler could not travel outside his jurisdiction without approval from the local government chairman, symbolising the complete administrative marginalisation of the institution (Ajayi & Akinrinade, 2021).

Despite these challenges, traditional rulers have retained some cultural significance, often described as the “fathers of all,” which reflects their idealised role as nonpartisan mediators and custodians of communal values. This image, however, began to erode during the First Republic when many traditional rulers aligned with political parties for personal or institutional advantage. In the North, Sokoto Caliphate supported the Northern People’s Congress; in West, Yoruba monarchs backed the Action Group; while in the East, traditional authorities lent their influence to the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) (Adeoye, 2023). In recent democratic eras, particularly the Fourth Republic, several traditional rulers have openly influenced elections, endorsed candidates, or acted as political intermediaries, often compromising the principle of impartiality (Ojebode & Akinleye, 2023).

The practice of chieftaincy title conferment, once reserved for meritorious individuals who contributed to communal development, has also declined in prestige and substance. Traditionally, titles reflected societal values such as hard work, craftsmanship, or military prowess. Today, the conferments of these titles are frequently influenced by wealth, political power, or government affiliation, regardless of the recipient’s relevance to the cultural context. Many titles lack historical continuity or local meaning and are granted based on perceived financial benefits rather than communal legitimacy (Ajayi & Akinrinade, 2021; Olutayo & Bankole, 2020).

Despite these transformations, the chieftaincy institution has demonstrated resilience through its adaptive responses to modernity and state restructuring. Nevertheless, modernisation has led to diminished reverence for traditional rulers, especially among the younger, more urbanised population. Litigation against traditional rulers has become more common, and in some communities, disputes that would traditionally be settled by royal arbitration now escalate to secular courts. The duality of authority between traditional leadership and elected officials often creates conflict of loyalty for citizens, further complicating the institution’s functional relevance (Mustapha, 2021; Adeoye, 2023).

One unresolved challenge is the lack of uniformity in chieftaincy titles across ethnic groups. Titles such as Oba, Emir, Etsu, and Igwe reflect the rich diversity of Nigeria’s cultures, but they also complicate efforts to create a unified institutional identity in the national political

landscape. While cultural heterogeneity is to be celebrated, a clearer constitutional framework could help streamline traditional governance roles in modern Nigeria without compromising local traditions. Even though the chieftaincy institution in Nigeria has survived colonial and post-colonial disruptions, its authenticity, authority, and societal relevance continue to be contested. The challenge for policymakers, scholars, and traditional communities is to reimagine this institution in ways that preserve its cultural heritage while enhancing its legitimacy and utility within the broader framework of democratic governance.

### **The Role of Chieftaincy Authority in a Modern Nigerian State**

Over a century has passed since the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 and more than six decades since the country gained independence in 1960. Within this period, Nigeria has experienced varied governance models, including military authoritarianism and multiparty democracy. Despite these transitions, the country has continued to grapple with the challenge of forging a unified national identity and achieving political stability based on democratic principles (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Olutayo & Bankole, 2020). Amid this dynamic and often turbulent political environment, the chieftaincy institution which predates colonial and postcolonial state structures has persisted as a critical, though contested, element of Nigeria's socio-political fabric.

Indeed, irrespective of its origins or structural variations across regions, the chieftaincy institution has enjoyed widespread societal acceptance, often legitimised by the consent of the people. This acceptance reflects its embeddedness in communal identity and collective memory. The institution offers a vital sense of belonging and serves as a symbol of cultural continuity and moral authority. For many communities, traditional rulers are custodians of customs and traditions and serve as conduits between the people and their cultural ethos (Ayoade, 2020; Adebawí, 2014).

Despite the considerable decline in the sovereign authority and territorial control of traditional rulers due largely to colonial restructuring, post-independence reforms, and constitutional limitations the institution continues to function as an important intermediary between the state and local populations. Contemporary traditional leaders no longer exercise judicial or administrative autonomy, and the process of ascension to the throne has been altered repeatedly by political interference. Nevertheless, traditional rulers remain influential figures who mobilise community support, mediate disputes, and facilitate grassroots participation in governance (Ajayi & Akinrinade, 2021; Adeoye, 2023).

Nigeria's diverse ethnic composition and plural cultural landscape have made nation-building a particularly complex project. The country has been plagued by recurring ethnic, religious, and regional conflicts that threaten its cohesion. In such a volatile context, the chieftaincy institution assumes an expanded role as a stabilising force. Traditional rulers are often called upon during national crises to mediate peace, serve on conflict-resolution committees, and act as moral compasses within their communities (Mustapha, 2021; Ojebode & Akinleye,

2023). Their symbolic authority and local legitimacy have, in many cases, been more effective in de-escalating tensions than state interventions.

Furthermore, the evolving nature of chieftaincy institutions, especially in terms of leadership quality, has contributed to its relevance in modern governance. Many traditional rulers today possess formal education, professional experience, and global exposure, which enhance their capacity to contribute meaningfully to public discourse and institutional reform. Their involvement in constitutional assemblies, government commissions, and developmental initiatives demonstrates their continued importance in Nigeria's democratic journey (Oladosu, 2021; Salahu, 2022). Some have spearheaded administrative innovations within their domains, thereby blending indigenous governance principles with modern state practices.

This synergy between tradition and modernity affirms the argument that traditional institutions are not inherently antithetical to democratic governance. On the contrary, their integration, if properly structured, can complement the modern state by offering community-based legitimacy, enhancing participatory governance, and contributing to social cohesion (Adeoye, 2023). As Nigeria continues to confront challenges related to national unity, democratic consolidation, and security, the chieftaincy institution must be recognised not merely as a cultural relic, but as a potential partner in state-building and policy implementation.

Indeed, the chieftaincy institution in Nigeria, though significantly transformed and constrained by modernisation and constitutional reforms, remains relevant in contemporary governance. Its historical resilience, adaptability, and societal acceptance underscore the need for a renewed policy approach that formalised its role in the democratic process. A stable Nigerian polity demands not the abandonment of tradition but the creative fusion of traditional and modern institutions in pursuit of inclusive governance and national integration.

### **The Future of Traditional Authority in Nigeria**

The chieftaincy institution in Nigeria has faced significant challenges and transformations since the colonial conquest and the imposition of British administration. Historically a custodian of indigenous governance and communal authority, the institution was reshaped by colonial indirect rule, which positioned traditional rulers as intermediaries within an imposed administrative structure. This involvement in colonial governance and continued political alignment during the early post-independence period placed the institution within the domain of statecraft and power negotiation (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Salahu, 2022).

Since independence, the institution has sought to adapt to Nigeria's volatile political landscape by maintaining active engagement with political actors and institutions. This survival strategy, however, has not been without consequence. Traditional rulers have often been criticised for their susceptibility to political manipulation, loss of neutrality, and self-serving behaviour. Among the institution's structural limitations are its hereditary mode of accession, its occasional lack of transparency, and its resistance to full democratisation (Adebani, 2014; Ajayi & Akinrinade, 2021). It is essential, however, to distinguish between the traditional

rulership of the early post-independence period and its modern iterations. Nigerian society has evolved considerably since the 1960s, shaped by advances in education, urbanisation, civil awareness, and changing socio-economic conditions. Today, individuals rely less on traditional authorities for access to land, economic opportunities, or dispute resolution. As a result, the basis for legitimacy in chieftaincy has also shifted.

Contemporary accession to traditional thrones is increasingly influenced by a variety of merit-based criteria, including formal education, bureaucratic and business experience, professional accomplishments, and public acceptability. These evolving standards reflect a growing awareness among communities that leadership must balance tradition with competence and adaptability (Adeoye, 2023; Oladosu, 2021). Despite structural setbacks, the chieftaincy institution remains relevant due to its deep historical roots, adaptive resilience, and symbolic value in Nigeria's socio-political evolution.

It is pertinent to know that the continued survival of the institution, despite modernisation and constitutional limitations, underscores its broad-based cultural legitimacy. Its role as a unifying force and intermediary between the state and local populations positions it as a critical stakeholder in contemporary governance. Indeed, many Nigerians still view traditional rulers as guardians of cultural identity and last-resort figures in times of community crisis (Ojebode & Akinleye, 2023; Mustapha, 2021). To ensure greater effectiveness and accountability, however, reforms must be undertaken. One such reform involves democratising the process of accession to the throne. While hereditary principles may remain, communities should be empowered to participate in the selection of their traditional rulers through popular consultation or voting, particularly among eligible royal lineages. Moreover, a clearly defined mechanism for removing a ruler who is found wanting through community-based review or plebiscite would enhance public trust and accountability within the institution (Olutayo & Bankole, 2020).

From the discussion above, the chieftaincy institution, although influenced by history and facing modern challenges still plays an important role in Nigeria's culture and politics. Its continued relevance lies in its ability to evolve with the times, embrace democratic reforms, and serve as a bridge between tradition and modern governance. In this respect, chieftaincy institutions will not merely be relics of the past but stakeholders in Nigeria's future.

## Conclusion

The chieftaincy institution in Nigeria occupies a complex yet enduring position within the country's historical and political evolution. From its precolonial foundations as a sovereign authority rooted in communal traditions, through its instrumentalisation under British indirect rule, to its contemporary role as a cultural and advisory institution within the modern Nigerian state, the institution has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. While colonial conquest and post-independence state reforms significantly eroded the chieftaincy's political sovereignty and administrative powers, traditional rulers continue to wield substantial informal influence and enjoy broad cultural legitimacy in many communities. Nonetheless, the institution

faces numerous contemporary challenges, including political manipulation, contested succession processes, loss of relevance among younger generations, and questions regarding its compatibility with democratic values. The growing call for reforms particularly those that promote transparency, merit-based leadership, and accountability suggests a shifting public expectation of what traditional leadership should represent in a modernising Nigeria.

In bridging the divide between tradition and modern governance, the chieftaincy institution can play a constructive role in conflict resolution, grassroots mobilisation, and cultural preservation. For this to occur meaningfully, traditional rulers must reimagine their roles beyond ceremonial functions and adapt to the democratic aspirations of their people. As Nigeria continues to navigate its path toward national integration and democratic consolidation, the future of the chieftaincy institution lies not in resisting change, but in redefining its relevance within the contemporary socio-political landscape.

## References

- Abia State Government, (2024). *Abia State Govt bans chieftaincy titles, traditional positions*. The Eastern Updates. URL: <https://theeasternupdates.com/2024/11/30/abia-state-govt-bans-chieftaincy-titles-traditional-positions/>
- Adebanwi, W. (2014). *Yoruba elites and ethnic politics in Nigeria: Obafemi Awolowo and corporate agency*. Cambridge University Press.
- Adebanwi, W. (2017). *The nation as grand narrative: The Nigerian press and the politics of meaning*. University of Rochester Press.
- Adekunle, T. K. (2021). Judicial and legal intervention in chieftaincy law and administration in Nigeria: Implication for policy. *African Journal of Educational Management*, 14(1), 135–158.
- Adeoye, A. A. (2023). Traditional authority and the politics of legitimacy in Nigeria. *Journal of African Political Structures*, 19(1), 45–61.
- Afigbo, A. E. (2003). *The Igbo and their neighbours: Inter-group relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953*. University Press.
- Afigbo, A. E. (2003). *The warrant chiefs: Indirect rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891–1929*. Humanities Press.
- Ajayi, K. (2019). Traditional institutions and governance in contemporary Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 13(3), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.5897/AJPSIR2019.1115>
- Ajayi, K., & Akinrinade, S. (2021). Commodification of chieftaincy titles and the crisis of traditional authority in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Social Sciences*, 15(3), 77–95.
- Akinwande, I. (2025). Tense and aspect in Ìlḡlḡrì. *Àgídìgbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities*, 13(1), 149–161. Retrieved from <https://journals.abuad.edu.ng/index.php/agidigbo/article/view/1656>
- Ayoade, J. A. A. (2020). The cultural logic of traditional governance in Yoruba society. *African Governance Review*, 12(2), 34–50.
- Ayoade, J. A. A. (2022). *Traditional political systems and structures in Nigeria*. Ibadan University Press.
- Bamgbose, J. A. (2018). Chieftaincy and democracy in Nigeria: An uneasy relationship. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 12(6), 98–106.
- Chidume, C. G. (2025). Governance and the traditional institution: Examining the roles of chiefs in Nigeria. *Jalingo Historical Review*, 9(1&2). Retrieved from

<https://jhrhds.org.ng/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Governance-and-the-Traditional-Institution-Examining-the-Roles-of-Chiefs-in-Nigeria>.

Esamagu, E. E., Wazhi, E. N., & Adeyinka, T. A. (2024). The intersection between artificial intelligence, interdisciplinary collaboration and African history. *Àgídígbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities*, 12(2), 540–553. Retrieved from <https://journals.abuad.edu.ng/index.php/agidigbo/article/view/1173>

Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M. (2008). *A history of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press.

Ifeoma, C. (2023). *An examination of the effects of chieftaincy institutions on local governance in Orumba North Local Government Area, Anambra State*. DataProjectNG. Retrieved from <https://www.dataprojectng.com/project/33378/An%20examination%20of%20the%20effects%20of%20chieftaincy%20institutions%20on%20local%20governance%20in%20Orumba%20North%20Local%20Government%20Area%2C%20Anambra%20State>

*Lagos to amend kingship, chieftaincy laws News Express Nigeria (2025), also available online and citing the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN)*. URL: <https://newsexpressngr.com/news/263639/lagos-to-amend-kingship-chieftaincy-laws>

Last, M. (2019). The Sokoto Caliphate and the reinvention of traditional authority in Northern Nigeria. *African Studies Quarterly*, 19(3), 1–18.

Motadegbe, A., & Ibiyemi, S. O. (2025). Globalization and the transformation of indigenous morality: A philosophical study of the Yoruba concept of Omoluabi. *Àgídígbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities*, 13(1), 17–27. Retrieved from <https://journals.abuad.edu.ng/index.php/agidigbo/article/view/1307>

Mustapha, A. R. (2021). Colonial legacy and the fragmentation of traditional governance in Northern Nigeria. *Contemporary African Studies*, 17(2), 103–120.

Oduola, A. A. (2023). The politics of chieftaincy titles in Nigeria: Relevance and challenges in a democratic era. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 41(2), 224–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2023.2165132>

Ojebode, A., & Akinleye, L. (2023). Community leadership and traditional governance in postcolonial Nigeria. *Leadership Studies in Africa*, 5(1), 21–38.

Ogunleye, T. A. (2021). Traditional institutions and party politics in post-independence Nigeria. *Nigerian Political Science Review*, 11(1), 65–81.

Ojo, E. O. (2020). Traditional institutions and the democratisation process in Nigeria: A critical assessment. *Journal of African Political Economy & Development*, 5(1), 109–125.

Oladosu, A. (2021). Tradition, legitimacy, and modern governance: A study of chieftaincy institutions in Southwest Nigeria. *African Heritage Review*, 8(2), 54–70.

Olatunji, T. S., Aminu, A., & Edith, D. F. (2025). The role of traditional rulers in socio political and economic development of local government areas in Nigeria. *International Journal of African Sustainable Development Research*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.70382/tijasdr.v07i2.037>

Olutayo, A. O., & Bankole, A. (2020). The politics of traditional rulership in postcolonial Nigeria. *Journal of Contemporary African Governance*, 6(4), 118–132.

Omligbe, J. O. (2025). The roles of traditional rulers in fostering peace in Nigerian communities. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, 9(09), 397–408. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000034>

Osaghae, E. E., & Suberu, R. T. (2005). *A history of identities, violence, and stability in Nigeria*. CRISE Working Paper No. 6, University of Oxford.

Oyeleye, T. A. (2021). Colonialism and the transformation of traditional authority in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of History and Culture*, 18(1), 55–70.

- Salahu, A. M. (2022). The evolution of traditional authority and governance in Nigeria. *Journal of Indigenous Studies and Governance*, 4(2), 39–57.
- Sklar, R. L. (2004). *African politics and the search for the state*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Vaughan, O. (2006). *Nigerian chiefs: Traditional power in modern politics, 1890s–1990s*. University of Rochester Press.
- Wariboko, O. P. C., & Nwanyanwu, F. C. (2024). The dark side of connectivity: A socio-ethical exploration of internet fraud and Nigerian youth. *Agidigbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities*, 12(1), 89–104. Retrieved from <https://journals.abuad.edu.ng/index.php/agidigbo/article/view/906>