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## Egalitarianism, Traditional Authority and Local Governance in Nigeria: A Reflection

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### Abstract

Local government in a democratic federal state overtly set the tune for individual and group participation in politics and governance at the grassroots level. This means that every institution associated with must re-echo and reinforce the rhythm of egalitarian and collectivism in local governance. While the local government is to promote this values and ensuring accountable to the civil common traditional authority in Nigeria had remained adamant to upholding such value. Thus, given the nature, structure and orientation of traditional authority it is doubtful if it conforms to this democratic rhythm which gives devolved local government its true meaning and value. Despite the diverge there has been calls in some quarters that traditional authority should be incorporated into the local government system and given responsibilities that have executive, legislative and judicial implication over local government. It is against this backdrop that this paper utilizing the documentary and analytical approach argued against such a marriage as it will have constraining implication on egalitarianism and governance at the grassroot level in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Egalitarianism, Equality, Traditional Authority, Local Governance, Alienation, Democracy, Discrimination and Ethnicity.

### Introduction and Background to the Paper.

The Nigerian state represents an amalgam of ethnic diversity with its differing political institutions that date back in history before colonialism while some emerged and evolved as a by-product of colonialism. Within the polity there exist clusters of groups; that latter came to represent the major ethnic group while the others represent the minority who put together represent a significant proportion of the total population that make up the Nigerian nation who want to significantly express their identity (Usman, 1994:35-52). Given the increasing sectional divide in Nigeria, groups see their identity, character and values to be represented by their traditional institutions. The deep socio-political divide that cloud over what has come to be known as Nigeria had impose upon the system the need not only for social mobilization but establishment of real institutions that promote socio-political participation by the citizenry as a valued instrument for erasing group discontent and fear of marginalization. It was primarily due to the divide that federalism was adopted reflecting the existence of federal, state and local government alongside traditional political institutions to govern relationship between and among the diverse groups. These institutional were to bridge the ever expanding divide within the federal structure by enabling the civil common to participate in making and influencing decisions on matters that affect them; hence giving each group a sense of belonging.

Within the federal structure, it is believed that periodic elections which is conducted every four years at the federal and state level, and two or three years at the local government level coupled with the establishment and institution of the federal character principle in the federal constitution is to enable a fair representation of the diverse groups in government while also making sure that such institutions of government are accountable to the people. Despite such arrangement the degree of group involvement, engagement and participation in influencing decision appropriately by groups at the federal and state level in a satisfactory manner remains questionable if grossly limited to say the least. Primarily because, these mediums gives the ethnic groups with the largest proportion of the population a significant advantage over minority ethnic groups. Due to population advantage the major ethnic groups have greater political leverage, better organization in terms of resource they control, coordination and easy access to the vortex or corridors of state power. This has skewed the process of socio-political engagement in a manner that minorities' are disadvantaged and are significantly left-out in the governance process at the federal and state levels (Ikejiani and Okoli, 1995).

It was evident that the alienation of some groups in the governance process had severe socio-political implication intergroup relations in the polity. Solving this problem by enabling every group to participate in the socio-political progress of their community saw the strengthening of the local government system in Nigeria. This need and process was tied to the need by the federal state to guarantee genuine participation and involvement of every ordinary citizenry in their local governance process. It was for this singular political and related factors that the local government system was adopted as a third tier government which in turn guaranteed it a direct federal allocation to perform certain essential functions of local nature which will altogether contribute to national development. Arising from the now instituted process of constitutional review the traditional authority system the root from which the modern local government system was carved out from is seeking to be intricately tied to it. the existing traditional institution that sat toweringly at the top the pre-colonial traditional political

organizational structure responsible for the failure of the Native Authority (local government as it was then referred to). This form of political organization during colonialism was strengthened by the British colonial (indirect rule) administration; periods of political and economic control of the nation-states that now make-up the Nigerian-nation.

Where the structure of traditional authority have continued to prevailed, its operation and practice continue to inhibit genuine involvement of the ordinary citizenry on issues relating to its operations unlike the local government system even though public funds are used to finance traditional institution. Such element of participation in local government affairs is evident in periodic election and fair representation. Such democratic element is not associated with traditional institutions because traditional institution and its authority system have an elitist orientation; a closed system, restrictive, class structured with an authoritarian character that does not permit the traditional ruler and his chiefs to be accountable to his subjects the people. Rather these personas provided traditional authority a formidable mechanism for manipulating and exploiting their subjects. The character of traditional authority grossly contradicted the democratic egalitarian political value of local governance as incorporated into the constitution of 1979. Ensuring and promoting the egalitarian principle requires evolving a true local government system that guarantee the socio-political participation and engagement of every citizen in local affairs. This goal informed the government decision not only to institute the 1976 local government reform but to also enforce its implementation thereafter without delay.

The post 1976 LG reform ensured the severance of control of the local government from traditional authority by making local government a third tier government in Nigeria, the grant of some degree of autonomy and fiscal allocation to the local government to respond to local development needs of the local people. This pursuit by the federal government was aimed at giving autonomy as well as pushing forward the wheel of egalitarianism for all beginning from the grassroots. However, now that the process of constitution review is in motion there have been cries which have echoed louder that traditional authority should be included in the governance process especially at the local level. This paper therefore seeks to examine if the focus of traditional authority and local government are in consonance to warrant such inclusion or they diverge significantly. Equally related to this paper is the need to answer the nagging question if such a marriage between traditional institutions and local government will guarantee egalitarianism as enshrined in the federal constitution as well as promote the democratic principle of fair citizenry participation in their government process while ensuring the accountability of their governance institution to the people as promised by democratically instituted local government?

### **Egalitarianism: Meaning and Purpose.**

Egalitarianism ascribes to the rudimentary principle of equality. It is the rudimentary foundation for explaining egalitarianism such that the concept is properly illuminated for the lay mind to grasp the concept and its value appropriately; it is however not a substitute for it. Although people have long dream of an egalitarian society, a society in which all members are equal, such a society has never existed (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). Nevertheless, human societies still strive towards it because it symbolizes a fundamental feature of modernity in which all members of society share certain rights. It is no wonder that Nigerian politician despite their self-centric nature have not missed the opportunity to include it in the constitution as a cardinal objective to be pursued within the whole gamut of Nigeria's federal institutional arrangement.

To be specific, the pre-amble of 1999 federal constitution of Nigeria states that for the purpose of promoting the good government and welfare of all persons in our country on the principle of freedom, equality and justice, and for the purpose of consolidating the unity of our people. S2(15)(1) further re-affirm that accordingly, national integration shall be actively encouraged, whilst while discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited. This section drives home the cardinal value of building an egalitarian society with the sole aim of promoting and sustaining among all its citizenry (fostering) a feeling of belonging and of involvement among the various peoples of the federation, to the end that loyalty to the nation shall override section loyalties S2(15)(4). A cursory look at the nature and character of tradition authority does not concur with this constitutional proviso; in short it fractured it.

Egalitarianism is anchored on the need to strengthen the principle of equality among citizens irrespective of diversity. It is to achieve this goal in Nigeria's federal relations that the philosophical explanation and defense of the value of equality is premise. It is a theory and a practice based on the desire to promote equality; or the belief that equality is the primary political value for all. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term has two distinct definitions which are: i) a political doctrine that all people should be treated as equal and have the same political, economic, social, and civil rights. ii) Or as a social philosophy advocating the removal of inequality among people or the decentralization of power. It is for this latter meaning that local government becomes germane to this discussion because it is evidently a dimension of decentralization via devolution.

Although equality calls to mind the idea of distributive justice, its moral connotation however stand distinctive as its normative claim ascribes to four main applications which are not wholly separable but reflect i) equal consideration within a scheme of (moral) decision-making; ii) even-handed treatment; iii) equality in distribution; and iv) equality in outcome (Reeve, 2003:174). The application of the principle of equality capturing these

values in any polity helps diminishes or prohibits arbitrary discrimination but does not say that discrimination is never permissible (Mervin, 2003:174); however, it provokes procedural fairness in dealing with every citizen. Egalitarianism requires also that the goods, benefits, or burdens of which an equal distribution is thought valuable may be variously specified. The pursuit of egalitarianism is not divorced from a focus on the identification and elimination of inequality. Specifically inequalities which are arbitrary from a moral point-perhaps those which result from natural talent but not those differential efforts, for example. In general, the equality in question is an equality of outcome. Equality of income, wealth, utility, and life-chances have been canvassed for as well as equal consideration and equality of rights (Reeve, 2003:165) reflected in treating equals equally and unequal unequally in society. The rigid application of the rule of treating equals equally and unequal unequally falls to the critics view that egalitarianism necessarily diminishes freedom in unacceptable ways (Reeve, 2003:165). That notwithstanding

equality does not mean that all persons are equal in their talent or possession, but that each individual has an equal claim to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In this view, each person should be seen as an end, not as a means; no one should be a mere tool of another. Moreover, equality in the field of government would suggest that differences in wealth or position are not sufficient reasons for giving one group preference over the other. In a democracy, each one has an equal claim to the attention of the system and should be able to expect just outcomes (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2009:3).

In a twist of paradox, one can state that the Nigerian state through the constitution and other institutions it has created have sought to promote the value of egalitarianism on the hand while on the other hand the state have severely inhibited its purpose of achieving egalitarianism by promoting ethnic divide craftily capsuled in a governance system that covertly apply divide-and-rule principle to hold on to power. This situation has led to the detachment of the people from the government dimension. As a result

exclusivist identities continue to define the nature of citizen for which traditional authorities in Nigeria have cashed-in-on to remain relevant in government over the years. As a result of citizen alienation from governance individuals tend to identify with their immediate ethnic, regional, and religious (or subethnic, subregional, and subreligious) groups rather than with state institutions, especially during moments of crisis. Entirely missing from the relationship between state and citizen in Nigeria is a fundamental reciprocity-a working social contract-based on the belief that there is a common interest that binds them (Darren and Lewis, 2010:404).

Breaking-through this divisive line of defense to build an egalitarian society will entail reinforcing local governance institution at the local level that is autonomous and richly rooted in democratic principles.

### **Traditional Authority in Nigeria: Meaning, Origin, and Issues.**

Issues relating to tradition and its institution are handed down or transmitted from the past. Its authority is mostly unquestionably accepted, adhered to and its principles practiced with reverence. Its practice reflects continuity with the past for which its continuity is usually understood to link generations (Heywood, 2006:212). Tradition weave together both social and political system of a collective; the social defines and directs how people of an ethnic group ought to live and relate, the political enforces adherence to traditional norms of a group by exercising authority to secure obedience from the people. This persona is linked to African traditional which sees political power as often personalized and that leadership is permanent in the context of self recruited oligarchy (Okolie and Chime, 2008:349). The ordering of traditional authority in Nigeria had an aristocratic flare that was and still is domineering over their subjects. Even the warrant chief arrangement that were established by the British within the Middle-Belt and Eastern region to help collect taxes and maintain law and order had latter metamorphosed into traditional authority took on the aristocratic and domineering aura on order to command respect and obedience.

The power of traditional authority is rooted in tradition; given its deep root in group beliefs and values it powers is not to be underestimated because it is intricately attached to spiritualism or cultural level of giving meaning to people's lives, of allowing them to experience a sense of belong (Allison, 2003:545). Hence, traditional authority derives its powers by appealing to customs and tradition (Thomson, 2007:93). Traditional authority is hierarchical ordered and structured on the basis of status; it is a compound of factors such as honour, prestige, standing and power. It is characterized by the person's role, rights and duties in relation to the other members of that order (Heywood, 2006:212). Given the distance between the Nigerian state and the people arising from continued government arbitrariness and neglect of the needs of the people Nigerians have strong affiliation to traditional authority for protection.

Traditional authority as used here relates to the system of rulership and it is headed by a traditional ruler. According to the Dasuki Committee a traditional ruler is a person who by virtue of his ancestry occupies the throne or stool of an area and who has been appointed to it in accordance with the customs and tradition of the area and has suzerainty over the people of the area (MAMSER, 1987:147). Reflecting closely on the definition

offered above it is evident that one can only become a traditional ruler only through inheritance. Consequently, only members of the traditional ruling families can legitimately aspire to become traditional rulers. Since, it is a hereditary office those who do not belong to that tradition group or do not have a traditional institution cannot become traditional ruler of a given locality or ethnic group even if he possess better rulership qualities than members of the member of the “ruling” or “royal families”. While this definition assures privileges for some it at the same time results in the exclusion of others.

Determining the exact origin of traditional institution remain elusive but it is certain that most of the nation-state scattered across the then territory now named Nigeria had traditional institution that played a significant role to their growth, influence, development and dominance of other society. At the head of ever traditional institution sits the traditional ruler who exercised sovereign power over the people. In pre-colonial era most of the traditional institutions had well structured system of government that was basically centralized and access to rulership was hereditary. In some parts traditional structures of rulership were more dispersed, or were acephalous (Darren and Lewis, 2010:368). During colonialism all that changed as the colonial government restructured and incorporated the indigenous system to serve the interest of the colonial state and the metropolitan authority. It was an attempt by the colonial authority to rule through the traditional political structures (Akinboye and Anifowose, 2005:238). In reality however, traditional political institutions incorporated into colonial administrative machinery were not allowed to enjoy any autonomy but they were required to operate within the demands of colonial state (MAMSER, 1987:148). During colonial conquest the British colonialist used the prominent traditional authorities to conquer localities that were periphery or interior and elusive to the colonialist reach. Characteristically,

several pre-colonial societies had democratic elements that scholars speculate might have led to more open and participatory politics had they not been interrupted by colonialism. Governance in the Yoruba and the Igbo communities involved principles of accountability and representation. Among the Islamic communities of the north, political society was highly structured, reflecting local interpretation of Qur’anic principles. Leadership structures were considerably more hierarchical than those of the south, dominated educated and women were especially consigned to subordinate political status. The Islamic Fulani Empire was a confederation in which the ruler, emir, owned allegiance to the sultan, who was the temporal and spiritual head of the empire. The sultan’s powers, in turn, were circumscribed by the obligation to observe Islamic principles. Toward the southern edge of the savanna political authority was diffused, such that later western contact described them as “stateless”, or acephalous societies. Down south were the trading city-states of the Niger-delta and its hinterland, peopled by a wide range of ethnicities (Darren and Lewis, 2010:368).

It is however difficult to agree absolutely with the view that all pre-colonial societies exhibited democratic element that would have in the future led to more open and participatory politics had they not been interrupted by colonialism. While this observation reflected relations and practice in Ibo society and Middle-Belt societies it was not the case with the emirate structure of government in the North that was highly centralized. Although the Middle-Belt society were mostly acephalous and religiously dissimilar with the emirate system of the north yet the British colonial power placed these people under the emir, merging two levels of colonial exploitation and oppression into one, the emirate system.

Although Schraeder, (2004: 305) argued that a modern post independent political institution that might have undermined the traditional leaders instead sustained and cultivated the power and influence of traditional emirs. Far from modern institutions having simply driven out traditional ones, elements of the institutions of each type or origin coalesced to form a workable system of power and authority. He however failed to understand that reclining behind the coalescing of The NPC and the traditional Muslim leaders was a political as well as religious scheme to strengthen, impose and extend the dominance of the sultanate and its emirs and their religion over the Middle-Belt population that had a different system of governance and religion. The emirates system in the Middle-Belt administered populations of which they formed both ethnic and religious minorities, was a situation which sowed seeds of discontent under colonialism, after independence and even today (IDEA, 2001:283). The marriage of irreconcilable dissimilar groups resulted in emerging political cracks on the region’s political wall. The Jos and the Tiv riots and later the struggle by Middle-Belt congress led by J. S Tarka to imposition were greeted with brutal repression by the NPC leader (IDEA, 2001:286-288). Hence the merging of the modern political system and traditional institution with its characteristics of ethnic affiliation and beliefs in the north constituted a formula for disaster rather.

After independence traditional authority reconfigured itself to align with the new structure of political institution of governance the British had left the Nigerian state. However, as political colonialism gave way to self rule the role of traditional authorities in Nigeria also diminished to such insignificance that its role was only advisory in nature and character. The reason for the diminishing political role of traditional authorities in Nigeria can be tied to the sectional and religious character they projected which did not accommodate minority groups with dissenting traditional views of allegiance. Equally not guiltless is the oppressive, corrupt and authoritarian

character most traditional ruler exhibited toward their subjects (IDEA, 2000:281-288). In the Northern region, the dominant traditional institution evolved every known scheme that was inherently brutal to submerge other ethnic groups under their control. The many abuses of traditional institutions are often covered up by the government, such arbitrariness were only brought to the public place when traditional rulers confront and challenge the authority of the state resulting in the dethronement of such a ruler and speedily replaced by a member of the ruling family that is willing to flow with the state; the case of the emir of Kano, Dasuki and the emir of Gwandu are valuable point of reference.

The diminishing role and influence of traditional authority after independence is significantly tied to the role it played during colonialism; as from

the onset colonial administrators selected traditional leaders to be the intermediaries of imperialism. Chiefs or monarchs, who already commanded authority among the people, were charged with raising taxes, supplying labour and ensuring that colonial laws and regulations were respected. In return, these intermediaries could expect power of the state to back their leadership, with considerable benefits in terms of tributes. Administrators, for example, fully expected chiefs to take percentage of tax revenue they raised or the fines they imposed. These traditional rulers were also left to run their jurisdiction largely as they saw fit, as long as colonial interest were not compromised (Thomson, 2007:16),

for all intents and purposes, their powers were abuse. Essentially, traditional institution could be said to be a self-serving institution that knew how to re-configure itself to fit in neatly in response to the expediencies of an ever changing political realities in Nigeria. Hence, after independence, to remain relevant and influential in political and governance mold, traditional authority evoked and utilized the twin tools of ethnicity and religion to escape exclusion from mainstream governance (see also Thomson, 2007:93).

Forcefully, colonial administration structured the diverse groups into north, south and west resulting in placing people with dissimilar cultures under a leader who was more concerned about enhancing his wealthy and promoting his group dominance. This problem was instrumental in raising the minority question. In the north, the measure adopted by the dominant group to resolve the minority question was brutal which proved to be counter-productive. The post colonial government measure to resolve the minority question as it relates to traditional institution resulted in the proliferation of tradition institution in Nigeria. While some newly established traditional institutions (chiefdoms) had a large landmass with a fairly large population some have a scope of authority that is barely larger than a few collections of villages. Although this measure by the state government has given marginalized minorities (especially in Kaduna state) some sense of belonging and identity, it on the other hand has generated the problem ethnicity, cultural alienation, seclusion and conflict. The desire by the minorities that have been given their chiefdom to exact themselves on the political arena so as to influence the power relations is look at by the dominant group with disdain accusing them of wanting to bite too much. The struggle for re-assertion of group identity and for socio-political participation in power struggle polity has rather taken an ethnic dimension thereby re-enforcing the existing problem of ethnic and religious politics in the polity.

On the whole, traditional institution to which traditional authority is associated has an abiding character of discrimination both for some members of the ethnic group not designated as members of the royal families and those classified as outsiders. This is evident in the manner the Wukari Jukun view other Jukuns outside Wukari. Discrimination is the prejudicial persecutory or distinguishing treatment of an individual based on his or her membership-or perceived membership-in a certain group or category. It involves the group's initial reaction or interaction, influencing the individual's actual behavior towards the group or the group leadership, restricting member of one group from opportunities or privileges that are available to another group, leading to the exclusion of the individual or entities based on logical or irrational decision-making (Wikipedia, 2012:1). Primarily, the class and divisive nature of traditional authority as practiced in Nigeria is a bitter form of institutional discrimination covertly existing in most societies in Nigeria.

Institutional discrimination refers to the denial of opportunities and equal rights to individuals and groups that result from the normal operation of a society. This kind of discrimination consistently affects certain racial and ethnic groups than other (Schaefer, 2006:249). It is related to the established and customary way of doing things in society-the unchallenged rules, policies, and day-to-day practices that impede or limit minority members' achievements and keep them in a subordinate and disadvantaged position (Ferrante, 1992:295-296). This form of discrimination is evidently covert (Shirin, 2003:155), difficult to identify, condemn, hold in check, and even punish because it cannot be traced to motives and actions of a particular people; but result from simply following established (traditional) practices that seem on the surface to be impersonal and fair (Ferrante, 1992:296-297). This form of discrimination reclines behind the many cases of individual discrimination that deny members of minorities opportunities to participate, or do violence to minorities lives and properties in Nigeria.

Despite the degree of care rained on traditional institutions, traditional rulers are still clamouring for a discernable political role in the national scheme of things (Bello-Imam, 2004:146). Specifically associated with their call for engagement is the exclusive power to resolve chieftaincy disputes arising from within the state

without prejudice to the powers of the law courts; the maintenance of law and order through the restoration of the power in judicial administration; rights to determine customary law and practice on matters such as lands under customary law; formulation of proposals for local government development programmes; the rights to preserve and promote the culture and tradition of the people by financing annual festivals or exhibitions; supervision of the collection of taxes; initiation and supervision of communal projects; serve as a link between the local government and state government or any other authority; and right to approve decisions taken by democratically elected local government. It is no doubt that the traditional ruler areas of influence as requested for are lofty with serious legislative, executive and judicial implications for governance in Nigeria; which raises some significant concerns.

The first issue is how reasonable is it for an institution that utilizes a closed, restricted access and undemocratic method of ascending to the throne (its leadership position) be placed to exercise authority over a proven democratic institution such as the local government in a federal system. More so, are such calls not trying to impose traditional authority as a tier of government located between the state and the local government? The third relate concern is how is one sure that this institution will not abuse the powers given its given its poor antecedents in handling public power in the past. Finally, does it directly contravene the egalitarian (equality principle) inherent in the constitution that requires the democratic process free, fair and open access, to vote and be voted for or to participate in the choice of one's leader and to ensure that such a leader is accountable to the people.

Given the restrictive scope and the lack of legal definition of traditional rulership, the oppressive and divisive nature of traditional institution coupled with their inability to mediate the peaceful resolution of conflicts which has been on the increase in their domain in Nigeria the call for inclusion of traditional authority in mainstream government remains controversial and vexing to many whose tax money is use to maintain those traditional institutions. While some still find this form of organization useful and relevant scholars like Haralambos and Holborn, (2007:876) argued that this organizational structure is of little importance in contemporary societies. This view concurs with that of Heywood, (2006:211) who noted that although they help keep alive values such as deference, respect and duty albeit, it is of marginal significance in advance industrial societies where logic and rationality supersedes abstract beliefs that is honed on superstition. For the Nigerian state maintaining the value of deference has paid-off badly as it has covertly undermined the effectiveness of institutions established to foster national integration in Nigeria. Equally saddening is the fact that it has aggravated the old problem of preventing pro-democratic groups from achieving country-wide mobilization as the North/South divide, religious cleavage, ethno-political conflicts, regional disparities in the levels of development and poverty (IDEA, 2001:188) still exist. Maintaining deference especially along ethnic lines has been deliberately manipulated by elite groups and interests, aimed at dividing civil society groups from and preventing them from achieving concentration of objectives and efforts.

While the contention remain the debate to in-cooperate traditional authority in government have raged on five main fronts which are: i) the abolition of the institution, ii) the co-optation of the institution to participate in government, iii) the democratization of the system to conform with the process of modernization, iv) the maintenance of status-quo, and v) the determination of their relevance and future by the people. Despite the debate about the inclusion or non-inclusion has taken this dimension it is however fiercely raging between proponent and antagonist of inclusion and non-inclusion of traditional authority in mainstream government. For proponents of inclusion, their argument centers around closeness to the people, they are also strategically located for the purpose of mobilizing support for government programmes, serve as channel of communication between the people and the government, enhancing local participation.

Although these points are laudable, yet antagonist point to the fact that these roles of interest aggregation, interest articulation, political communication and social mobilization ascribed to traditional authority is now being performed by political parties (MAMSER, 1987:152) and local governments in Nigeria (Bello-Iman, 2004:2-10, Heywood, 2007:166 and Enemuo, 2005:318). Critics of the idea of inclusion couch their arguments on the factionalized nature of traditional authority, inherently characterized by corruption and indiscipline nor act as custodian of probity in public life, they are inclined to supporting only the party in power and canvassing support for such party, and that most of them serve as fronts for multi-national companies and those in power thus contributing to the deepening of the neo-colonial status of the country. Apart from the above, it is observable that it was with the connivance of traditional authority that the military established its stronghold over government in Nigeria and continued to exercise its reign of terror on Nigerians. Specifically, during the era of Babangida regime, the political role of the traditional institutions is believed to be excessive (Joseph, et. al. 1996:334).

As the contention rage it is imperative to reflect on the observation below which notes that

this category of leaders possess no special qualities and the question of using them to enrich the political system or instill moral rectitude in public life does not arise. It will make little or no sense to instill in the political system people whose primary qualification is ascribed status at a time when the people are demanding a truly democratic polity. We must point out also that

the critics of this category of leaders have been very vehement in their attack. They view with seriousness and great concern the acts of oppression which some traditional rulers mete out to the common people and insist that they should not be granted unlimited powers in their domains. Furthermore, tradition can be more effectively promoted and disseminated by other means rather than the institution of traditional rulership. The continuity of tradition can be effected through language, literature, music and dancing. This means that if the institution of traditional rule is abolished, the tradition of the people will not be lost (MAMSER, 1987:152).

#### **Local Government Institution: and citizenry Mobilization and Participation in Nigeria.**

Given the plethora of definition of the concept of local government in the extant literature all of which have dovetailed one direction reflecting a common framework (see Okoli and Ikejiani, 1995, Bello-Imam and Edu, 2004:454, Akume, 2012:234 and Bello, 2012). From most observed views, the resume of the above definitions of local government is that it is a unit of administration with defined powers and authority imbued with relative autonomy while its decision-making organ as well as its chief executive could be elected on nominated (Bello-Imam and Edu, 2004:454). Hence this paper will not be tied to the boring academic exercise of rehearsing them here again. Albeit, it is essential to reflect on the definition of local government captured below as a:

government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers with defined areas. These powers should give the councils substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of service and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and the federal government in their areas and to ensure through the active participation of the people and the traditional institutions, that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized (See Eke, 2009:268).

Reflecting on the above expressed view, it illuminates the idea and value of local government. Hence it is a mistake to assume that the constitutional subordination of local government means that it is politically irrelevant (Heywood, 2007:166). The place of local government in the polity is considered primarily when compared with those of the federal or state government yet significant to the overall development of the nation. LG from a liberal democratic stand point has been considered important to encouraging political education and participation, and the basis upon which services (of local nature) could be provided according to local needs (Bradbury, 2003:316). These roles has given local government both political and utilitarian administrative value within the federal system. it is strategically located to perform its function of local nature effectively because of its: i) proximity to the people, ii) responsiveness due to ease of articulating and aggregation of the needs of the people, and iii) simplicity of operation (MAMSER, 1987:120).

The bases for a functional local administrative system as envisaged by the 1976 Local Government Reforms are tied to the following stated core values mirrored by the observation noted below:

To increase the responsibilities of the local authorities by a process of decentralization that ensures appropriate divisions of functions between State and Local Governments. ii) To ensure that participation and involvement begin at the grassroots level. Since local authorities are very close to the people, they are most favourably placed to understand and appreciate the people's demands. Local authorities should hence, serve both input and output functions within the system. They should articulate the demands of the masses, and when these are satisfied within the limits of available resources, they should provide authorities with feedback. iii) To ensure that, both in the short-run and long-run, both the staffing and financial requirements of local authorities are satisfied to enable them perform their statutorily assigned functions (Elaigwu, 2001).

Reflecting on the origin of local government in Nigeria it can be observed that the evolution of this institution cannot be divorced from the native authority which was hitherto intricately tied to traditional political institution. It was a political design by the British colonial administration to help it administer the vast area effectively through the native authority (NA). The structuring of the now defunct native authority was however a regional subject. Accordingly, each region designed its local government, with some showing more success than others (Bello-Imam and Edu, 2004:459). Characteristically, despite regional difference the relations between native authority and the regional government was one that reflected a master-servant relationship as the former was subjected to extensive control of the latter. This structuring of relationship was significantly a contributing factor to the failure of native authority to serve the local population in Nigeria before it was finally abolished by the 1976 LG reform.

The prevailing development challenge that confront the rural people is part due to the prevailing fact that basic infrastructure improvement is provided only at the various state and government capitals, to the detriment of the rural areas, where a vast majority of the population reside (IDEA, 2001:273). Given the perceived service provision bias and its accompanying infrastructure gap and other challenges facing the people at the grassroots for which the hitherto existing system of local administration could not resolve. it became imperative to re-

configure and re-enforce the system of local government administration to provide service of local nature so as to reduce the gross development gap in ways that enhance i) citizen participation; ii) services; and iii) resource mobilization for development purpose (Eke, 2009:268) in accordance to the need individual locality.

The functions that the LGs were to perform in order to reduce the existing development gap are expressly stated in the Fourth Schedule of the 1999 Federal Constitution. Thus, it was to remedy and strengthen the LGs institution for better local administration that the 1976 local government reform was instituted. The reform had sweeping changes that hinged on strengthening administrative autonomy, improved fiscal capacity, a third tier status and a uniform structure with define functional areas for local government in Nigeria. The goal of the 1976 reform and other subsequent adjustments was to strengthen and effect positive local administration for development thereby making local government a value generating, value increasing, and value distributing instrument for local communities in Nigeria (Akume, 2012:233) based on democratic principles and values.

In Nigeria, irrespective of the challenge of interference that will be examined latter

decentralization efforts have focused on encouraging greater public participation through the institutions of representative democracy, as the importance of popular participation has received greater recognition and as concern with improving democratic processes has increased. Although democracy is not a necessary part of decentralization, its presence can have a significant influence on the perceived legitimacy of decentralized systems. Democracy does appear to improve methods of accountability, although an important proviso to this statement is the impact on disadvantaged social groups (Parker, 1995:25).

The 1976 local government reform had this focus in mind, albeit, the needed post 1976 reform impact of engendering collective participation of the rural population in local governance and the subsequent creation of additional local government remains grossly unacceptable. Although in part, the creation of additional LGs was to respond to the minority problem, by harnessing their similarities, managing their differences for harmony and streamlining their internal structuring and inter-relationship to entrench a democratic culture. It is however an establish fact that reclining behind the creation of LGs is the desire that the system should exist without entirely depending on the federal or state government. Over the years this ideal has remained a mirage for LG administration in Nigeria.

This is due to the fact that the re-engineering process of local government went-side-by-side with intensified federal and state government meddling (especially the latter via the ministry of local government and chieftaincy affairs in collaboration with traditional rulers) in the affairs of local government. Such interference symbolized by the imposition of candidate on the people, withholding or misappropriation of local government funds by the state government, refusal of the state to conduct local government elections as at when due, prolong administration of the local government by care-taker committee or chairperson rather elected representative and the utilization of unethical standard for promotion, placement and transfer of senior cadre staff of local governments that reflected a pattern of political reward for cronies of the government in power.

The result of such untoward action by the various state governments is that the goal of popular participation, effective service delivery and accountability to the people necessary for accelerating local development as envisaged by 1976 reforms is systematically eroded. This continued meddling in the affairs of local government negated the principle of positive discrimination and lacked the needed affirmative action by those in government to press home the need to promote LG autonomy and citizenry engagement in their local governance as a necessary pre-condition for improving the living condition of the rural populace. Hence the creation of local governments by the government, ostensibly to bring government nearer to the people is being defeated. This situation has rather given room to frustration and political manipulations of communities that had hitherto lived peacefully into conflict with each other with severe implication for local and state democracy.

Sadly due to the plethora of challenges most, if not all, local government in Nigeria are faced with they are unable to overturn and reduce the huge infrastructure gap between rural communities and urban communities in Nigeria. it thus hold that local government ineffectiveness is intricately tied to the role of states that have contributed in undermining the financial viability of local government given the systematic diversion statutorily allocation meant for local government as well as encroaching on their revenue-yielding function like markets, motor park, tenement rating, liquor licensing etc (MAMSER, 1987:120) that have resulted in their revenue capping. Another far imposing problem is the conception of local government as an administrative apparatus established mainly for efficient delivery of services or for the maintenance of law and order which significantly underplayed or ignore the political objective. The inevitable consequence of these abuses is efficiency of administration, dislocation of the decentralization principle by fracturing the vital role of enhancing rural mobilization for effective political engagement, involvement and participation in local affairs at the local level in Nigeria.

Although it is arguable in the light of the 1976 local government reforms that the local government was formally devolved from the control of traditional authorities in Nigeria. It is however evident that traditional rulers meddling in the affair of local government is still significant in Nigeria. It has been noted that traditional rulers especially the more powerful ones are instrumental in the nomination or removal of a local government chairman



and their council as they deem fit. It is now a known ritual that the chairmen nominated by traditional rulers continue to pay homage and allegiance using local funds to such emirs, oba's, chief or obi's apart from the five (5) percent of LG revenues allocated to traditional authorities in order to secure their positions as local chairmen. This reaffirms the fact that the allegiance of such chairperson is to the emir, oba, chiefs or obi rather than to the people. It also means that accountability of the chair persons would be to the emir, oba, chief or obi rather than to the people which indicates the removal of the locus of power and control over the local government from the people to the traditional rulers. By such meddling traditional authority have fractured the political rights of citizens to collectively determine who their democratic representative should be thereby undermining participatory governance at the local government level. The unwholesome interference by traditional authorities in the political process of local governance has significantly contributed to rising public frustration and the cause of many conflicts in localities in Nigeria.

### **Concluding Observation.**

From the preceding discussion it is observable that the federal constitution aims at promoting an egalitarian state by affirming equality which guarantees the civil, economic and political rights of all citizens in the polity. It is however evident that the nature, operation and power direction of traditional authority in Nigeria directly contravenes the political rights of most citizens who do not belong to the so-called royal family. It is clear that while local government is tuned to enabling the decentralization of power traditional authority tend to toward the centralization of power which on the long run has the propensity to lead to social exclusion of the majority both in terms of political participation and public service delivery of local nature in accordance to local wishes thereby undermining the egalitarian principle. Anchoring on this definition it presupposes that traditional institutions are arenas of discrimination where access to the highest position any citizen who aspires to is determinately restricted; although they are referred to as public institutions. If however they are to be referred to as public institutions the principles of democracy should apply to them. In which case, all citizens can exercise their socio-political right which provides the individual with the opportunity to participate; that is the right to vote, the right to stand for election, and the right to hold public office (Heywood, 2006:415) for which traditional institution should not be excluded from abiding by this principle.

It is only when traditional institutions in Nigeria guarantee the principle of collective civil participation that it can be linked to advancing constitutional government which will reflect in the extension of political rights and civil liberties (Heywood, 2006:415) of all citizens irrespective of class definition and beyond the confines of primordial criteria. Without meeting the criteria espoused above by Heywood, (2006) traditional institution fails the democratic standard test to be defined as public institution and off course inconsistent with the principles and values of local government hence should not be co-opted into the local government system as envisaged by some. It thus follows that the practice of genuine local government system that is responsive to the will of citizen and the system of traditional institution are strange bed-fellows, contrastingly dissimilar in their aim, nature, focus and the usage of public power which if merged together has unwholesome implication for true democracy at the grassroots and so should be avoided.

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