Beyond The Advisory Role: The Roles of Traditional Ruler in Kwali Local Government Council, Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

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Abstract

The traditional institution as well as the traditional rulers have been restricted and limited to certain functions mostly advisory roles but the recent experiences have showed that, traditional rulers performed more critical roles in the local government which are not pronounced or recognised. Their contributions have really assisted in achieving relatively peace and harmony that had translated to development. This neglect and lack of recognition of traditional ruler roles instigated the study which seeks to examine the roles of traditional rulers beyond the usual advisory roles in Kwali Federal Capital Territory in Abuja. The study was a qualitative research design which relied on secondary data to make informed conclusion. The study findings showed that traditional ruler in Kwali and other local council areas performed informal roles that are not recognised by the constitution. Such informal functions include political, social, cultural and economic roles. The study recommended among others that: The traditional rulers should be recognised beyond the advisory roles they play as their contribution to grassroot is all encompassing as they perform political, social, cultural and economic roles, more constitutional roles to enable the traditional ruler's function maximally and traditional institution should be strengthened to do more in security regard.

Keywords: Advisory role-traditional rulers-Kwali-Local Government Council-FCT

Introduction

Governance in Nigeria is characterized by a dual structure wherein modern political institutions coexist alongside enduring traditional systems. Despite the formal demarcation of powers by the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which recognizes only three tiers of government - federal, state, and local - traditional rulers continue to perform vital, albeit unofficial, roles in the country's governance architecture (Ota & Ecoma, 2016). The continuing relevance of traditional authority figures such as Emirs, Obas, Obis, and Chiefs is rooted in Nigeria's complex historical and socio-cultural evolution, and in the persisting institutional weaknesses of local governance structures (Mlambo, 2022).

Historically, traditional rulers in pre-colonial Nigeria wielded substantial political, economic, and religious power. In the north, the emirate system operated under Islamic law, while in the south, the Obas, Obis and chiefs governed through council-based systems. These rulers-controlled land allocation, tax collection, trade regulation, security, and dispute resolution within their jurisdictions. Their legitimacy was based on ancestry, spiritual sanction, and acceptance by the people (Igbokwe-Ibeto & Ogbuagu, 2021).

The indigenous political arrangement was disrupted and restructured by British colonial authorities, particularly through the implementation of the indirect rule system (Ota & Ecoma, 2016). Under this system, traditional institutions were co-opted to administer colonial policies at the local level, turning traditional rulers into tax collectors and agents of colonial authority (Igwubor, 2021). This restructuring had mixed outcomes. While it preserved indigenous governance structures in some areas, it also eroded the autonomy and legitimacy of traditional rulers, particularly in the southern parts of the country where resistance to indirect rule was stronger. Nevertheless, the colonial legacy created a precedent for integrating traditional rulers into the framework of local governance - a precedent that still influences governance practices in Nigeria today (Omitola, Akinrinde & Omitola, 2021).

Post-independence Nigeria underwent significant political reengineering. The centralization of authority, coupled with efforts to modernize state institutions, led to a gradual withdrawal of formal governance responsibilities from traditional rulers. The 1976 Local Government Reforms were particularly significant, as they established local government as the third tier of government with clearly defined administrative, legislative, and fiscal responsibilities. These reforms sought to institutionalize participatory democracy at the grassroots level and reduce the influence of unelected traditional authorities (Aidelokhai, 2022).

Despite this legal and administrative marginalization, traditional rulers have remained central to local governance, particularly in rural and semi-urban communities where modern state institutions are often under-resourced, understaffed, or absent (Abdulsalam, Olokooba, Okafor & Adika, 2020). Effective local government administration is crucial for grassroots development and participatory governance. In Nigeria, local governments, constitutionally recognized as the third tier, are key to delivering services, encouraging citizen involvement, and promoting community socio-economic progress. However, many local governments, including those in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), face challenges such as poor service delivery, corruption, limited fiscal independence, and weak community engagement (Zango, 2020).

The study seeks to respond to these fundamental questions: How do traditional rulers maintain relevance and legitimacy within the modern framework of local government administration in Kwali Area Council, Abuja? What is the nature and extent of the relationship between traditional rulers and formal local government structures in Kwali Area Council? In what specific ways do traditional rulers contribute to conflict resolution, land administration, and community development in Kwali Area Council?

Conceptual Clarifications

Traditional Rulers

Traditional rulers are esteemed leaders within many societies who derive their authority and legitimacy from longstanding cultural, historical, and sometimes divine traditions. While their specific titles and roles vary across different cultures,

traditional rulers share a common purpose: to lead, protect, and preserve the heritage of their communities (Abdullahi, 2022). These leaders can be found across various continents, most notably in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, where they serve as essential links between the people, the past, and the present (Arintoko & Bawono, 2021).

Traditional rulers, according to Smith (2021), are often seen as symbols of continuity in a rapidly changing world. Their authority is frequently rooted in lineage, ancestry, or divine appointment. In many African communities, for instance, the position of a king or chief is passed down through royal bloodlines, while in others, elders or consensus-driven councils elect leaders based on wisdom and merit. The choice of leader often involves a blend of traditional customs, spiritual beliefs, and community consensus, which helps to foster legitimacy and respect (Sokoh, 2018).

To Udeorah and Vincent (2017), beyond governance, these rulers are deeply entwined with the culture of their people. They are the custodians of local history, languages, customs, and art forms. Through oral tradition, festivals, ceremonies, and ritual observances, they ensure the preservation of ancestral knowledge and practices, passing them down to future generations. While modern nation-states have created formal political structures with elected officials and constitutional governance, traditional rulers continue to hold sway in local governance, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. These leaders often function as intermediaries between the state and their communities, helping to maintain social order and ensure the welfare of their people (Aidelokhai, 2022).

In many cultures, traditional rulers also hold a significant spiritual role. They are often considered intermediaries between the people and the divine or ancestral spirits, entrusted with maintaining the balance between the physical and spiritual realms (Manuwa, 2023). Smith (2021) stressed that in some African cultures, for example, the king or chief may be seen as a "divine ruler" who has been chosen by the gods or ancestors to lead and protect the people. Their spiritual duties often include performing sacred rituals, leading religious ceremonies, and ensuring the community remains in favour with spiritual forces. These rulers may also preside

over the rites of passage, including births, marriages, and funerals, as they are seen as guardians of life's most important transitions ((Arintoko & Bawono, 2021).

Local Government

Local government as a concept has attracted several definitions. But unlike other concepts, it has not generated much controversy as to its actual meaning. A sketch of some of these definitions could be helpful. Local government can be defined as the substructure upon which the superstructures of state and federal governments are erected. Yet, Bello Iman (in Akhakpe, 2011) defines local government as "that unit of administration with defined territory and powers as well as administrative authority with relative autonomy". According to 1976 Local Government Reforms, local government could be defined as: Government at local level exercise through representative council established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to compliment the activities of the state and federal government in their areas and to ensure, through devolution of functions to their councils and through the active participation of the people and traditional institutions, but that local initiative and response to local needs and condition are maximized", (FRN, 1976).

The above definitions no doubt are exhaustive, and try to cover much ground in addressing the meaning of local government administration. The essence of local government administration therefore, is to provide for the needs of the people at the grassroots or rural areas.

According to Ekong (in Akhakpe, Fatile & Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2012), rural areas refer to small, inward-looking, and idyllic communities held together by kinship relations and supporting basic agricultural occupations. The differences between rural from urban areas can be seen in terms of: size, population density; homogeneity; presence of few social classes; low standard of living, presence of few or no social amenities such as electricity; pipe-borne water; mainly agrarian in nature; rural-urban migration of young able-men and women in search of greener pastures; domestic labour; poverty; high death rate; high birth rate; illiteracy, high

health risks, inadequate access to productive resources, and lack of credit/market access among others.

Theoretical Framework

Traditional Authority Theory

Traditional authority theory, propounded by Max Weber in 1922, represents one of the foundational typologies in the political understanding of legitimate authority. It refers to a system of power rooted in historical continuity, cultural norms, and inherited status, wherein the right to rule is sanctioned by long-standing traditions rather than codified laws or democratic processes. This form of authority has historically underpinned governance structures in many pre-modern societies and continues to coexist alongside legal-rational institutions in various contemporary contexts, particularly in Africa, Asia, and parts of the Middle East.

Weber classified authority into three ideal types: traditional, charismatic, and legal rational. Traditional authority, in his typology, is the most deeply entrenched in custom and heritage. It relies on a collective belief in the sanctity of age-old rules and the legitimacy of rulers who inherit or assume power through customary norms. Examples include monarchies, chieftaincies, and other hereditary or lineage-based forms of leadership. In such systems, legitimacy is not questioned, as the authority figure embodies the continuation of time-honoured values and practices.

The functioning of traditional authority is characterized by several defining features. First, leadership is typically ascribed, not achieved, meaning it is passed down through inheritance, kinship ties, or social lineage. Second, governance under traditional authority often draws upon customary law rather than codified statutes.

Rules and decisions are guided by precedent and the collective memory of the community, often interpreted by elders or custodians of tradition. Third, obedience is rooted in personal loyalty to the ruler or traditional office, rather than to abstract legal principles or bureaucratic norms. This loyalty reinforces the stability of the social order and the continuity of cultural values.

Charismatic authority is rooted in the personal qualities of an individual leader who is perceived as extraordinary, inspirational, or divinely gifted. Followers obey not because of tradition or law, but because they believe in the leader's vision and exceptional abilities. This form of authority often arises during periods of crisis, where existing institutions are weak or discredited, and a strong, visionary figure emerges to offer direction. Historical and contemporary examples of charismatic leaders include figures like Jesus, and Muhammad. While charismatic authority can be a powerful force for social or political transformation, it is also inherently unstable. The authority is tied to the individual, not to an enduring institution, and tends to diminish once the leader dies, loses credibility, or fails to meet expectations. The process of transferring or institutionalizing this authority is known as the routinization of charisma, which often involves transforming personal influence into more structured forms of governance.

Legal-rational authority is the hallmark of modern bureaucratic governance. It derives legitimacy from a system of formally enacted rules, laws, and procedures. In this system, authority is attached not to individuals themselves, but to the offices or roles they occupy. Officials are appointed or elected based on qualifications or legal processes, and their actions are guided by codified laws rather than personal judgment or traditional custom. Legal-rational authority is characterized by predictability, impersonality, and a clear separation between the individual and the role they perform. It underpins most modern states, legal systems, and bureaucratic institutions. This form of authority provides a stable and efficient framework for managing complex societies, ensuring accountability and transparency through standardized procedures. However, Weber also warned of its potential downsides, particularly the risk of bureaucratic rigidity, excessive rule-following, and the "iron cage" of rationality, where efficiency can overshadow ethical or human concerns. When compared, the three forms of authority - traditional, charismatic, and legal rational - represent distinct modes of legitimizing power. Traditional authority emphasizes continuity and custom, often seen in monarchies or tribal leadership. Charismatic authority introduces dynamism and emotional appeal but lacks structural sustainability. Legal-rational authority brings order and efficiency, but can become impersonal or technocratic.

The traditional authority theory highly relevant to the present study. Applying this theory allows for a deeper understanding of how customary leadership structures interact with modern administrative systems in contemporary governance settings. First, the theory posits that legitimacy arises from long-standing customs, inherited status, and collective belief in the sanctity of age-old institutions. In Kwali Area Council, traditional rulers such as district heads, village chiefs, and ward leaders derive their authority not from electoral mandates or legal statutes, but from cultural recognition and historical continuity. These leaders are seen as custodians of communal values, land, and spiritual life. Their authority is accepted by the local population because it is embedded in cultural identity and social memory, making the theory highly pertinent in explaining why traditional rulers continue to hold influence despite the presence of modern democratic institutions. Furthermore, the relevance of the theory underscored by the coexistence of traditional rulers with formal political actors, such as elected councillors and local government administrators. In Kwali, traditional rulers often serve informal governance functions, including conflict resolution, community mobilization, cultural preservation, and moral guidance. While they hold no constitutionally defined administrative power, their legitimacy often exceeds that of elected officials in the eyes of local communities. Traditional Authority Theory helps to explain this phenomenon by highlighting how personal loyalty and customary legitimacy can operate independently - and at times more powerfully - than formal political legitimacy.

Additionally, traditional rulers in Kwali Area Council, Abuja play a significant role in mediation and social cohesion, acting as intermediaries between local communities and government institutions. This is especially relevant in multicultural and rural settings where official state presence is limited or distrusted. Traditional Authority Theory accounts for this by recognizing that authority rooted in tradition can generate a strong sense of communal loyalty and social order, which modern legal-rational institutions sometimes lack. The theory thus illuminates how traditional leadership contributes to governance not through bureaucratic procedures, but through cultural legitimacy and social trust.

However, the application of traditional authority theory brings to light some of the challenges posed by the integration of traditional institutions into modern governance systems. Because traditional authority is inherently conservative and resistant to change, it can act as a barrier to democratic participation, gender equality, and institutional accountability. In Kwali Area Council, Abuja, for example, traditional rulers may uphold patriarchal norms or make decisions based on lineage and status rather than inclusivity or public deliberation. The theory thus also provides a lens for critiquing the limitations of traditional leadership within contemporary governance, especially where it contradicts the principles of participatory democracy and equity.

Nevertheless, the situation in Kwali Area Council, Abuja reflects a broader pattern of hybrid governance, where traditional and modern institutions operate in parallel or overlap. Traditional authority theory is particularly useful for understanding the tensions and synergies within such arrangements. It encourages policymakers and scholars to recognize the enduring relevance of traditional rulers, not as relics of the past, but as functional actors in local governance. Moreover, the theory highlights the importance of designing policies that respect cultural legitimacy while promoting democratic accountability and legal uniformity.

Structure of Local Government in Nigeria

The Executive Arm: At the helm of the local government's executive structure is the local government chairman, who serves as the chief executive officer of the council. The chairman is usually elected directly by the residents of the local government area (LGA), conferring democratic legitimacy and political accountability (Arintoko & Bawono, 2021). The role of the chairman is multilayered, encompassing policy formulation, coordination of council activities, supervision of departmental functions, and overall management of resources (Ndukwe et al., 2023).

The vice chairman acts as the deputy to the chairman, assisting in administrative duties and standing in during periods of absence or incapacitation. The vice chairman plays an important role in maintaining continuity in governance and decision-making processes (Adeyemi, 2015). Supporting the chairman and vice

chairman are the supervisory councillors or committee chairpersons, each responsible for overseeing specific sectors such as health, education, agriculture, works, and finance (Ayodele, 2016). These councillors ensure that the departments under their supervision execute the council's policies effectively, while also liaising between the political leadership and technical staff. The executive arm is thus the primary driver of policy execution and service delivery at the local level (Tijani, Ali & Dirisu, 2025).

The Legislative Arm: The legislative function of the local government council is vested in the council of councillors, which serves as the representative body of the people within the LGA. councillors are elected from various wards, ensuring political representation that reflects the diversity of the local populace (Anucha, Chidi & Obera, 2023). Their key responsibilities include the enactment of bye-laws (local legislation), budget approval, and oversight of the executive arm (Arintoko & Bawono, 2021). The council is headed by a chairman of the council, an elected councillor who presides over council meetings, coordinates legislative activities, and facilitates debates and decision-making processes (Ndukwe et al., 2023). This structure aims to foster democratic governance and accountability by providing a platform for local stakeholders to influence governance outcomes (Idoko & Obidimma, 2020). However, Arintoko and Bawono (2021) submit that while councillors have legislative authority, their effectiveness is often contingent upon their capacity to challenge the executive and represent constituents' interests, which can be compromised by party loyalties and political patronage.

The Administrative Arm: The administrative arm forms the bureaucratic backbone of local government operations. It is led by the local government secretary, the highest-ranking career civil servant in the council. The secretary's role is pivotal in managing the council's day-to-day administrative functions, coordinating between political leaders and civil servants, and ensuring the implementation of council policies and decisions (Okechukwu & Ikechukwu, 2017). To Igbokwe (2017), under the secretary are various departmental heads and technical officers responsible for specialized functions such as health, education, engineering, finance, planning, and social services. These officials provide the technical expertise needed to plan and execute development projects, manage resources, and deliver services

efficiently. The administrative structure is designed to provide continuity and professional management irrespective of political changes (Idoko & Obidimma, 2020).

Advisory and Informal Roles: Outside the formal political and administrative structure, traditional rulers and community leaders play influential roles in local governance (Sokoh, 2018). Although they do not possess formal administrative powers within the council, they serve as custodians of indigenous customs, land, and community values (Ayeni, 2021). To Diop (2021), they act as intermediaries between the local government and the people, assisting in conflict resolution, mobilizing community support for development initiatives, and providing cultural legitimacy to governance processes. Corroboratively, Oluwaseun (2023) stresses that their roles are especially pronounced in rural areas where traditional authority often holds more sway than formal institutions. However, the integration of traditional authority with modern governance structures can be complex, sometimes leading to conflicts over jurisdiction and influence (Okoye, Ezeani & Akov, 2023).

Intergovernmental Relations and Oversight

While local governments are constitutionally recognized as autonomous entities, their operations are closely linked to state and federal governments through various oversight mechanisms:

a. The State Government exercises supervisory authority over local councils, often through State Ministries of Local Government Affairs, which coordinate local government activities and oversee compliance with state laws (Idoko & Obidimma, 2020). The state government also controls significant financial resources through the State-Local Government Joint Account (SLGJA), which manages federal allocations to local governments (Chukwu, Ibietan & Ikeanyibe, 2019).
b. The Federal Government influences local governance indirectly through policy frameworks, fiscal allocations, and national development programs. Federal institutions such as the Revenue Mobilization, Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC) set revenue-sharing formulas that impact local government funding (Arintoko & Bawono, 2021).

These intergovernmental relations often lead to tensions around autonomy and control, as state governments may interfere in local government affairs, affecting their independence and efficiency. Clearly, the structure of local government councils in Nigeria reflects an attempt to balance democratic representation, administrative efficiency, and traditional influence within a federal system (Arintoko & Bawono, 2021). The executive arm drives policy implementation, the legislative arm provides oversight and representation, and the administrative arm ensures continuity and technical expertise (Tijani, Ali & Dirisu, 2025). Traditional rulers and community leaders offer cultural legitimacy and grassroots linkages, while intergovernmental relations shape the operational environment (Sokoh, 2018).

Traditional Rulers in Nigeria

Traditional rulers represent a foundational element of indigenous governance systems that predate modern state institutions. Their authority is embedded in cultural heritage, historical legitimacy, and communal recognition, often passed down through generations within ruling families or appointed through community consensus (Okonkwo, 2019; Smith, 2021). To Abdullahi (2022), unlike formal political leaders who derive power through elections or constitutional mandates, traditional rulers' legitimacy primarily stems from customary law, cultural continuity, and social acceptance.

Traditional rulers have historically served as the primary political and social leaders within their communities. They acted as custodians of customs, religion, and the social order, regulating community life according to ancestral laws and practices (Udeorah & Vincent, 2017; Aidelokhai, 2022). For example, the Obas in Yoruba land, Emirs in Northern Nigeria, and Chiefs in other regions exemplify such leadership. These roles encompass more than mere governance; they symbolize the identity, unity, and continuity of the community (Sokoh, 2018).

According to Manuwa (2023), traditional rulership is one of the fundamental tenets of Nigerian governance and administration as it predates the colonial period. The traditional institution is ingrained in the history, culture, and customs of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, traditional rulers are appointed

based on agreed processes among every tribe to rule, govern, and administer justice in accordance with the established customs and traditions of the people (Jooji, 2022; Smith, 2023). Corroboratively, Makinde and Olabode (2020) submitted that the traditional rulership in the early era of Nigeria community which keep to the laws and norms of the society and the governance of the traditional rulers created mutual relationship between the citizen and the leaders, expressing strong concern for community development and mandating sanitation, meet the government as regard to community development project and citizens wellbeing. In essence, the traditional institution preserved the tradition, the customs, cultural heritage of the people and to manage, settle and resolve disputes/conflict arising within or between members of the community by the instrumentality of laws and customs of the people in that particular community or society (Osakede & Ijimakinwa, 2015; Jooji, 2022). Equally, Obi-Obiora and Asiazobor (2021) submitted that traditional institution is an ancient institution prevalent across the entire African continent. It is an enduring part of cultural heritage in Nigeria as it plays a critical role as the custodian of culture and traditions. In this regard, traditional rulers are the heads of their communities and owe their legitimacy to customs and traditions. Hence, traditional rulers are traditions, history, and customs keepers (Omitola, Akinrinde & Omitola, 2021). To have a balance status of traditional rulers in Nigeria, it is vital to take a look a historical background of the country in relation of traditional institution. Hence, the following subsections are presented.

Roles of Traditional Institution in Nigeria

Traditional rulers occupy numerous roles that extend beyond mere ceremonial significance. Their functions permeate various dimensions of community life, political, social, cultural, and economic, making them pivotal actors in local governance and development. This multidimensionality reflects the integral position traditional institutions hold in sustaining indigenous governance systems and community cohesion. The following are some of major roles as reviewed from the studies of Oke (2019); Okonkwo (2019); Ayeni (2021); Diop (2021); Omitola, Akinrinde and Omitola (2021); Abdullahi (2022); Mlambo (2022); Aidelokhai (2022); Jooji (2022); Okoye, Ezeani and Akov (2023); Oluwaseun (2023); Smith, Johnson and Davis (2023); Smith, (2023); Zik, Munkaila and Kasimu (2023) and; Tijani, Ali and Dirisu (2025):

Political Roles: Traditionally, rulers served as the primary political authorities within their domains. They wielded significant power in governance, including lawmaking, dispute resolution, and maintaining order. In many pre-colonial societies, traditional rulers were the ultimate custodians of political authority, exercising executive, legislative, and judicial functions. In the contemporary context, although their formal political authority has been curtailed by constitutional and democratic reforms, traditional rulers still play influential political roles. They act as intermediaries between the government and the people, particularly in rural areas where state presence is limited. Traditional rulers often mobilize communities during elections, participate in local government advisory councils, and mediate conflicts that have political undertones. Their endorsement or opposition can significantly affect political outcomes, underscoring their continued political relevance.

Social Roles: Socially, traditional rulers are central figures in maintaining societal order and harmony. They uphold social norms and values, enforce customary laws, and preside over community rituals and ceremonies that foster social solidarity. Their role as moral exemplars commands respects and compliance within their communities. Traditional rulers also act as mediators in resolving interpersonal and communal disputes, often through customary courts or informal arbitration. This social function is crucial in areas where formal judicial systems are inaccessible or distrusted. By facilitating reconciliation and restoring peace, traditional rulers contribute to social stability and cohesion.

Cultural Roles: The cultural dimension of traditional rulership is perhaps the most visible and enduring. Traditional rulers are the custodians of culture, heritage, and indigenous knowledge systems. They safeguard cultural institutions, promote traditional festivals, and ensure the preservation of languages, arts, and customs unique to their communities. Through their patronage and leadership, traditional rulers transmit cultural values across generations, reinforcing community identity and continuity. They also regulate rites of passage, ancestral worship, and other cultural practices that define communal life. This role enhances the cultural vitality and pride of their people, fostering a sense of belonging and historical consciousness.

Economic Roles: Economically, traditional rulers influence local development through land administration, resource management, and community mobilization. In many Nigerian communities, land tenure systems are customary, with traditional rulers playing a key role in allocating land for agriculture, settlement, and commercial purposes. Control over land resources confers significant economic power, as land is a critical asset for livelihoods. Moreover, traditional rulers often facilitate communal projects, attract investments, and encourage entrepreneurship within their jurisdictions. Their endorsement can legitimize business activities and development initiatives, thereby fostering economic growth at the grassroots (Tijani, Ali & Dirisu, 2025). They also collaborate with government agencies and NGOs in implementing development programs, leveraging their influence to mobilize community participation and resources (Tijani & Damisah, 2020).

Traditional Rulers and Local Government

The relationship between traditional rulers and local government is complex, shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors. While modern local governments are based on formal democratic processes, traditional rulers continue to wield significant influence at the grassroots level in many regions, particularly in African, Asian, and some Pacific societies. The roles of traditional rulers and local government institutions often intersect, overlap, and sometimes conflict, depending on the specific political context of each country or community (Ayeni, 2021).

Traditional rulers, such as kings, chiefs, emirs, or sultans, are deeply embedded in the cultural and social fabric of their communities. Their authority often comes from traditional systems of governance passed down through generations (Tijani, Ali & Dirisu, 2025). Their roles include the following as reviewed in the studies of Osakede and Ijimakinwa (2015); Oke (2019); Yakubu and Salihu (2020); Abdulsalam et al. (2020); Ayeni (2021); Tijani, Ali and Dirisu, (2025):

i. **Cultural and Spiritual Leadership:** Traditional rulers are considered custodians of culture, traditions, and ancestral knowledge. They play a central role in preserving customs, leading rituals, and maintaining the spiritual integrity of their communities. They are seen as links between the

living and the ancestral world, and their leadership is often regarded as divinely or ancestrally ordained.

ii. **Conflict Resolution:** Traditional rulers often mediate local disputes, whether related to land, family issues, or community disagreements. They use indigenous conflict resolution methods, relying on customary laws and practices that have been in place for centuries.

iii. **Community Mobilization:** Traditional rulers have the ability to rally their communities for collective actions, such as agricultural programs, communal work projects, or responses to emergencies. Their authority and respect in their communities give them a unique position to mobilize people effectively.

iv. **Advisory and Consultative Roles**: In many systems, traditional rulers serve as advisors to local or national government officials, offering wisdom on local issues, governance, and social cohesion. In some countries, traditional rulers have constitutional roles and are consulted on important matters affecting their people.

The interaction between traditional rulers and local governments varies by country, region, and specific community contexts. However, several common themes emerge in this relationship:

i. **Complementary Roles:** In many regions, traditional rulers and local governments function in parallel, with each fulfilling distinct but complementary roles. Traditional rulers often handle matters of culture, tradition, and community cohesion, while local governments focus on formal governance, service delivery, and law enforcement. In some cases, both entities work together to ensure community welfare and maintain stability.

ii. **Conflict and Tension:** Tensions sometimes arise between traditional rulers and local governments, particularly in cases where their roles and authority overlap. For example, local government officials may have the legal mandate to govern, collect taxes, and administer laws, while traditional rulers may feel their ancestral authority and influence are being undermined. This tension can become particularly pronounced in areas

where traditional governance systems are still strong, but the formal political structure is modern and centralized.

iii. **Cooperation and Partnership:** In many modern contexts, traditional rulers and local governments work together to address community issues. For example, traditional rulers may be consulted on matters related to land allocation, cultural heritage, or social conflicts, while local governments focus on implementing practical solutions such as infrastructure or healthcare. The mutual respect for their respective roles often fosters cooperation, leading to better governance outcomes.

iv. **Legal Recognition:** Some countries formally recognize the role of traditional rulers within the local government framework. This recognition may come in the form of advisory positions, constitutional roles, or the inclusion of traditional leadership in local government councils. For instance, in Nigeria, many states have constitutional provisions for traditional rulers, who serve as advisers to the government or help mediate conflicts within their domains.

v. **Decentralization and Power Dynamics:** In some areas, the decentralization of power from the central government to local authorities has led to a reassertion of the power of traditional rulers. As local governments gain more authority, traditional rulers may see their influence grow, especially in rural or remote communities where they still hold significant sway. However, this decentralization can also lead to power struggles, as both entities vie for influence and resources.

vi. **Collaborative Development Initiatives:** Traditional rulers often play key roles in community development projects, particularly in rural or indigenous areas. Local governments, recognizing the trust and influence traditional rulers have, may involve them in initiatives like infrastructure development, environmental conservation, or educational programs. Their leadership can significantly improve the success of such projects, as they are seen as legitimate voices for the community.

Generally, in Nigeria, traditional rulers hold an important consultative role in many local governments, especially in the northern and southwestern regions. The Nigerian Constitution recognizes traditional institutions, and in many states,

traditional rulers are members of Local Government Advisory Committees (Orizu, Obiakor & Ojiakor, 2022). They play a key role in conflict resolution, especially in areas affected by communal or ethnic violence. While their powers are largely symbolic or advisory, their influence remains significant in local governance (Abdulsalam et al., 2020). Therefore, relationship between traditional rulers and local governments is dynamic, shaped by a blend of historical legacies, cultural values, and contemporary political systems.

Traditional Rulers in Kwali Area Council

Kwali Area Council, located in the southwestern part of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja, has a rich historical trajectory shaped by the socio-political transformations of Nigeria's central region (Ajah, 2020). Prior to the establishment of the FCT in 1976, the geographical area now known as Kwali was predominantly rural and inhabited mainly by indigenous ethnic groups such as the Gwari (also known as Gbagyi), Hausa, Bassa, and other minority communities. These groups engaged largely in subsistence agriculture, fishing, traditional crafts, and local trade, sustaining a way of life deeply embedded in their cultural heritage and communal institutions (Adamu et al., 2023).

The creation of the FCT was a strategic political decision by the Nigerian government to establish a neutral and centrally located capital that would unify the ethnically diverse nation. This political reorganization led to the formal designation of Kwali as one of the six Area Councils within the FCT, providing it with a distinct administrative and political identity (Oluwole, 2020). This change marked a shift from traditional, largely autonomous governance towards a hybrid model combining formal governmental administration with enduring traditional institutions (Ogbu et al., 2024).

Historically, Kwali's development has been influenced by its dual identity as both a rural community with deep-rooted traditional governance structures and a part of the rapidly modernizing Federal Capital Territory. The council comprises ten geopolitical wards - Kwali Central, Yebu, Yangoji, Pai Ashara, Dafa, Kundu, Wako, Gumbo, and Kilankwa - characterized by dispersed settlement patterns reflective of rural land use and kinship-based communities. The preservation of these

settlement patterns has presented both opportunities and challenges for governance and development initiatives in the region (Ogbu et al., 2024).

The integration of Kwali into the FCT administrative structure necessitated the incorporation of traditional rulers into the local governance system, facilitating a blend of indigenous leadership with formal governmental roles (Oladipo, 2021). Traditional rulers in Kwali, like other places in Nigeria, have continued to play pivotal roles in community mobilization, conflict resolution, and the preservation of cultural norms, while also engaging with elected officials and bureaucratic structures to advance local development agendas (Zango, 2020).

Over the past few decades, Kwali Area Council has undergone gradual socioeconomic changes catalysed by infrastructural development, educational expansion, and increased access to healthcare services. These changes, propelled by federal and FCT policies, have aimed to improve the quality of life of residents while managing the pressures of urbanization emanating from the proximity to Abuja's city center (Kwali Area Council, 2025). The council thus functions as a critical administrative unit bridging the rural-urban interface, where traditional values coexist with modern governance practices (Ali & Bukar, 2019).

Despite these advances, Kwali continues to grapple with challenges common to many rural local government areas, including limited resource allocation, infrastructural deficits, and the need for effective service delivery. The historical interplay between traditional authority and formal governance remains a defining feature of Kwali's administrative landscape, shaping the area council's responses to development demands and community aspirations (Kwali Area Council, 2025). Traditional rulers in Kwali Area Council, like their colleagues across the country, occupy a central position in the socio-political and cultural landscape of the region. They represent indigenous authority structures that predate modern governmental institutions and continue to play a significant role in local governance, community leadership, and cultural preservation (Ayeni, 2021). The traditional leadership system in Kwali is embedded within the broader context of the Federal Capital Territory's unique administrative framework, where indigenous governance coexists with formal local government structures.

The traditional rulers in Kwali include various tiers of chiefs and district heads, each with distinct roles and responsibilities. These leaders are custodians of the customs, traditions, and values of their communities, and their authority is often legitimized through hereditary succession or community recognition. Their influence extends across the ten geopolitical wards of the Area Council - Kwali Central, Yebu, Yangoji, Pai Ashara, Dafa, Kundu, Wako, Gumbo, and Kilankwa - each with its own traditional leadership hierarchy.

Key titles among traditional rulers in Kwali include Graded Chiefs, Degachi, and Hakimi, reflecting a hierarchical structure that aligns with the socio-cultural organization of the indigenous groups, primarily the Gbagyi (Gbari), Hausa, and other minority ethnicities. Graded Chiefs hold recognized ranks within the traditional chieftaincy system, often categorized as first-class, second-class, or third-class chiefs based on their jurisdiction, influence, and historical significance. They act as intermediaries between the grassroots communities and higher traditional authorities, as well as formal government officials.

The Degachi serves as a community leader or district chief responsible for specific localities within the council, overseeing customary affairs, dispute resolution, and community mobilization. Similarly, the Hakimi, commonly found in Hausa-Fulani traditional settings, functions as a district head with administrative and judicial responsibilities within a defined territory. Both titles exemplify the fusion of indigenous leadership forms adapted to the administrative needs of the FCT. Traditional rulers in Kwali wield considerable influence in areas such as land administration, cultural festivals, conflict mediation, and the enforcement of customary laws. They often collaborate with local government authorities to ensure effective governance and grassroots participation in development initiatives. Their role in conflict resolution is particularly crucial in maintaining peace and social cohesion within diverse and sometimes fragmented communities. However, like other cities in Nigeria, the relationship between traditional rulers and formal government structures in Kwali is complex and at times contested. Issues of jurisdictional ambiguity, resource allocation, and political relevance occasionally lead to tensions between elected officials and traditional leaders (Abdulqadir, 2016). Nonetheless, traditional rulers remain vital stakeholders in the

local governance ecosystem, providing continuity, legitimacy, and cultural anchorage in the evolving administrative environment of the FCT.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The study x-rayed the roles of traditional rulers beyond the usual advisory roles in Kwali Federal Capital Territory in Abuja. It was established that traditional ruler performed informal roles that can be classified as political, social, cultural and economic roles. Politically, they served as the primary political authorities within their domains and wielded significant power in governance, including lawmaking, dispute resolution, and maintaining order. Socially, they are central figures in maintaining societal order and harmony by upholding social norms and values, enforce customary laws, and preside over community rituals. Culturally, traditional rulers are the custodians of culture, heritage, and indigenous knowledge systems. They safeguard cultural institutions, promote traditional festivals, and ensure the preservation of languages, arts, and customs unique to their communities. Economically, traditional rulers influence local development through land administration, resource management, and community mobilization.

Recommendations

Although, the constitution has limited the roles of traditional rulers in local government administration, their involvement and participation cannot be underestimated in local government administration. It is recommended therefore that:

The traditional rulers should be recognised beyond the advisory roles they play as their contribution to grassroot is all encompassing as they perform political, social, cultural and economic roles. This recognition should be explicitly stated clearly in the constitution to give them more sense of belonging and leverage in their domain. The study advocated for more constitutional roles to enable the traditional ruler's function maximally. In the issue of security challenge, the traditional institutions can be a veritable mechanism to checkmate insecurity if proper constitutional recognition is granted to them.

The peaceful co-existence in the rural communities can be attributed to the capacity and expertise of the traditional rulers who coordinates, advise and counsel natives on the importance of peace and harmony as prerequisite for development. In other words, traditional institution should be strengthened to do more in this regard.

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