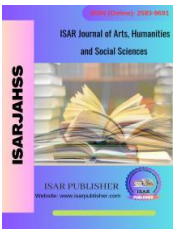
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THE DICHOTOMY ABOUT TRADITION AND POLITICS: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TRADITIONAL LEADERS ON GHANAIAN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract: This article provides an in-depth exploration of the complex relationship between traditional leaders and the democratic processes in Ghana. It begins by tracing the historical roots of traditional leadership in Ghana, highlighting the evolution of their roles and their historical involvement in politics. The article then transitions into an examination of the contemporary roles of these leaders in Ghanaian society, their political affiliations, and their influence on the political landscape.

The core of the article is a critical analysis of the impact of traditional leaders on Ghana's democratic processes. Through a series of case studies, it scrutinizes the ways in which these leaders have shaped political outcomes, discussing both the potential benefits and drawbacks of their involvement in politics.

The article concludes with an exploration of the challenges and opportunities presented by the participation of traditional leaders in politics, offering suggestions for managing their influence to ensure the continued growth and stability of Ghana's democracy. This comprehensive review contributes to the understanding of the intricate dynamics between tradition and politics in Ghana, shedding light on the role of traditional leaders as influential stakeholders in the country's democratic landscape and their impact on socio economic development as a whole.

Keywords: Democratic process, contemporary roles traditional rulers, local governance, politization of chieftancy, political manipulation, elorm kwami gorni vs attorney General.

I. INTRODUCTION

The interplay between tradition and politics forms a fascinating tapestry of influence, power, and societal dynamics. This is particularly evident in the context of Ghana, a country where traditional leaders continue to wield significant influence even in the face of modern democratic processes (Mensah and Badu, 2018)[1]. This article aims to delve into the intricate relationship between these traditional leaders and Ghanaian politics, exploring the historical context, present-day dynamics, and the effect of their involvement on the country's democratic processes.

Traditional leaders, or chiefs, in Ghana have long been revered as custodians of customs, culture, and heritage, playing pivotal roles in the social, economic, and political life of their communities (Crook, 2005)[2]. Their influence extends beyond the confines of their localities, reaching into the national political arena (Ubink and Quan, 2008)[3]. This unique position of traditional leaders in the socio-political structure of Ghana raises intriguing questions about their role in shaping the country's democratic landscape.

The purpose of this article is to critically analyze the nuances, challenges, and potential benefits of traditional leaders' participation in politics. By doing so, it aims to shed light on their role as influential stakeholders in Ghana's democracy. The article draws on a range of sources, including academic literature, case studies, and empirical data, to provide a comprehensive understanding of this complex issue.

In the following sections, we will trace the historical evolution of traditional leadership in Ghana, examine their roles in contemporary society, analyze their involvement in politics, and explore the impact of their participation on Ghana's democracy.

The article concludes with a discussion on the challenges and opportunities presented by the involvement of traditional leaders in politics, offering insights into the future of Ghana's democratic processes.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The African traditional system of governance, including that of Ghana, existed long before the advent of colonialism. These traditional systems, such as the Asante and Dagbon in Ghana, were characterized by a well-defined hierarchy of authority, a clear chain of command, and efficient lines of communication within the system (Obeng, 1986)[4]. They were able to mobilize resources through local investment and taxation, generating revenue for the purposes of development and upkeep of the system (Arhin et al, 1992)[5].

However, the introduction of the modern local government system in Ghana by the colonial administration marked the beginning of a process of marginalization of the traditional system.

The colonial administration introduced policies such as 'indirect rule', which adopted ethnic entities as basic units of local administration. However, these policies often led to conflicts, as they limited the power of traditional authorities to levy taxes and promote development in local areas (Wight, 1947)[6].

In addition to traditional councils, independent town councils were established in various parts of Ghana. Although traditional councils were given some seats on these town councils, they often regarded the town councils as rival institutions meant to usurp their powers (Wight, 1947). This led to tensions and conflicts between the traditional and modern systems of governance.

The search for an appropriate local government system in Ghana has been a long and difficult one, with different models being tried without much success. The Coussey committee, appointed in 1949, recommended that the Native Authorities should be replaced by democratically elected councils, but that a place should still be retained for chiefs, who were recognized as having an important role in Ghana (Hicks, 1961)[7]. However, these recommendations led to further marginalization of traditional authorities, as the modern system was foreign to the Ghanaian socio-political environment.

The historical context of traditional leadership in Ghana is marked by a complex interplay between traditional systems of governance and modern local government systems introduced by colonial administration. This has resulted in a continuous struggle for power and influence, with traditional leaders often being marginalized in the process.

III. TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN SOCIETY

Traditional leaders continue to play a significant role in contemporary Ghanaian society, often serving as the bridge between the past and the present, and between the local and the national. Their influence extends beyond the traditional realm, permeating various aspects of social, economic, and political life.

In the realm of health, for instance, traditional birth attendants (TBAs) continue to provide essential services to pregnant women and women in labour, particularly in rural areas in Ghana where access to modern obstetric services is limited but with the urgency of referral to the nearest facility with a trained midwife or a facility that has a medical doctor. A study by Adatara, Afaya, Salia, Afaya, Konlan, Agyabeng-Fandoh and Agbinku (2018), TBAs in Ghana are initiated through apprenticeship from family members who were TBAs and other non-family TBAs, as well as through dreams and revelations[8]. They employ both spiritual and physical methods in their practice, using spiritual artefacts, herbs, and physical examination. This highlights the continued relevance and influence of traditional leaders in contemporary Ghanaian society, particularly in areas where modern services are limited or inaccessible.

In the political sphere, traditional leaders also play a significant role. A study by Bukari (2017)[9] examines the impact of affirmative action on women's political participation in the Frafra traditional area of Ghana. The study found that socio-cultural factors, many of which are influenced by traditional leaders, pose a significant impediment to the effectiveness of affirmative action programmes aimed at promoting women's political participation. This underscores the influence of traditional leaders in shaping societal norms and values, and their potential role in facilitating or hindering social change.

However, the role of traditional leaders in contemporary Ghanaian society is not without its challenges. For instance, some of the spiritual practices and beliefs of TBAs may pose threats to their clients, and there is a need for appropriate initiation and training to ensure that they can provide safe and effective care. Similarly, in the political realm, traditional norms and values can serve as barriers to gender equality and women's political participation[10].

IV. TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND GHANAIAN POLITICS

Traditional leaders continue to hold significant sway in contemporary Ghanaian society, despite the country's transition to a democratic system of governance. Their influence permeates various aspects of society, including politics, where they play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes.

Historically, traditional leaders in Ghana have been the custodians of customs, traditions, and local governance. They have been responsible for maintaining law and order, resolving disputes, and managing communal resources. Their roles have evolved over time, but they continue to command respect and wield influence in their communities[11].

In contemporary Ghanaian society, traditional leaders serve as a bridge between the past and the present. They are revered as symbols of cultural heritage and continuity, embodying the values, customs, and traditions of their communities. They play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity and fostering social cohesion[12].

However, their role extends beyond cultural preservation. Traditional leaders are actively involved in local governance and development initiatives. They collaborate with local government authorities in the implementation of development projects and the provision of social services. They also play a significant role in land administration, as most of the land in Ghana is held in trust by traditional authorities for their communities[13].

Traditional leaders also play a significant role in the political landscape of Ghana. They are influential stakeholders in the political process, shaping public opinion and influencing political

outcomes. Their endorsement is often sought by politicians during election campaigns, and their influence can sway electoral outcomes in their communities[14].

However, the involvement of traditional leaders in politics is not without challenges. Their participation in partisan politics is a contentious issue, as it contradicts the constitutional provision that bars chiefs from active partisan politics. This has raised concerns about the potential for political manipulation and the erosion of the neutrality of the chieftaincy institution[15].

Despite these challenges, the participation of traditional leaders in politics can also have potential benefits. Their involvement can enhance the legitimacy of the political process, foster greater political participation, and ensure that the interests of local communities are adequately represented.

The involvement of traditional leaders in Ghanaian politics is a complex and multifaceted issue. Traditional leaders, or chiefs, have been a part of Ghana's political landscape since pre-colonial times, and their influence has endured through the colonial period and into the present day. Despite the formal adoption of democratic governance structures, traditional leaders continue to play a significant role in Ghanaian politics.

Traditional leaders in Ghana are not merely symbolic figures; they wield considerable power and influence within their communities. They are often seen as the custodians of tradition and culture, and their authority is deeply rooted in the social and cultural fabric of their communities. This authority extends to the political sphere, where traditional leaders often serve as intermediaries between their communities and the state.

The involvement of traditional leaders in politics is not without controversy. The Ghanaian constitution prohibits chiefs from engaging in active partisan politics. However, in practice, many traditional leaders openly align themselves with political parties and candidates. This has led to concerns about the politicization of the chieftaincy institution and the potential for political manipulation.

The influence of traditional leaders varies across different regions and communities, and is shaped by a range of factors, including the strength of local governance structures, the level of economic development, and the historical relationship between chiefs and their communities.

Summing up, the involvement of traditional leaders in Ghanaian politics is a complex and multifaceted issue. While their participation can enhance the legitimacy of the political process and help to bridge the gap between the state and local communities, it also raises concerns about the politicization of the chieftaincy institution and the potential for political manipulation. Understanding the role of traditional leaders in Ghanaian politics requires a nuanced and context-specific analysis.

V. IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY

The impact of traditional leaders on Ghana's democracy is a topic of considerable debate. On one hand, their involvement in politics can enhance the legitimacy of the political process and help to bridge the gap between the state and local communities. On the other hand, their participation raises concerns about the politicization of the chieftaincy institution and the potential for political manipulation.

The influence of traditional leaders on Ghana's democracy can be seen in several ways. Firstly, traditional leaders often serve as intermediaries between their communities and the state. They are often seen as more accessible and responsive to the needs of their communities than elected officials. This can enhance the legitimacy of the political process and help to bridge the gap between the state and local communities.

Secondly, traditional leaders can play a role in shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes. They often have a deep understanding of their communities and can use this knowledge to influence political decisions. This can have a significant impact on the democratic process, particularly in areas where traditional leaders have a strong presence. However, the involvement of traditional leaders in politics also raises concerns about the potential for political manipulation. The Ghanaian constitution[16] prohibits chiefs from engaging in active partisan politics and the recent Supreme Court decision in **Elorm Kwami Gorni vs Attorney General**[17] gives detail what constituted active partisan politics as "commendations or expressions of appreciation (or criticism) by Chiefs about the policies, projects, and programmes of a candidate or their party, whether past, present or proposed, do not amount to participation in active party politics. However, endorsement of the person of the candidate or of their party, whether free-standing or embedded in an otherwise innocuous statement, is violative of Article 276(1)." However, in practice, many traditional leaders openly align themselves with political parties and candidates. This has led to concerns about the politicization of the chieftaincy institution and the potential for political manipulation.

Thirdly, judicial committees of the Traditional Councils, the Regional House of Chiefs and the National House of Chiefs are given judicial functions in relation to causes or matters affecting chieftaincy by Chapter 22 of the 1992 Constitution and Section 39 of the Courts Acts, 1993. In contrast to this collective exercise an adjudicatory role as customary arbitrators. Section 30[18] states that: "the power of a chief to act as an arbitrator in customary arbitration in any dispute where the parties consent to the arbitration is guaranteed." That is not all; the president of the National House of Chiefs is a member of the Council of State, the highest advisory body to the president of the Republic of Ghana as stated in the Constitution[19].

Moreover, the influence of traditional leaders on Ghana's democracy is not uniform. The impact of traditional leaders varies across different regions and communities, and is shaped by a range of factors, including the strength of local governance structures, the level of economic development, and the historical relationship between chiefs and their communities.

In essence, the impact of traditional leaders on Ghana's democracy is a complex and multifaceted issue. While their participation can enhance the legitimacy of the political process and help to bridge the gap between the state and local communities, it also raises concerns about the politicization of the chieftaincy institution and the potential for political manipulation. Understanding the impact of traditional leaders on Ghana's democracy requires a nuanced and context-specific analysis.

VI. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The involvement of traditional leaders in Ghanaian politics presents both challenges and opportunities. The challenges are

primarily rooted in the socio-cultural norms and practices that have historically defined the roles and responsibilities of traditional leaders. These norms and practices, while deeply ingrained in Ghanaian society, can sometimes conflict with the principles and processes of democratic governance.

One of the main challenges is the potential for traditional leaders to exert undue influence over political processes and outcomes. This is particularly concerning given that traditional leaders are not elected and are therefore not directly accountable to the public in the same way that elected officials are. This lack of accountability can lead to abuses of power and can undermine the integrity of the democratic process.

Another challenge is the potential for traditional leaders to perpetuate socio-cultural norms and practices that are discriminatory or exclusionary. For example, traditional leaders have been known to enforce customary laws and practices that discriminate against women and marginalized groups[20]. This can undermine efforts to promote equality and social justice in Ghanaian society[21].

Despite these challenges, the involvement of traditional leaders in Ghanaian politics also presents several opportunities. Traditional leaders have deep-rooted legitimacy and authority in their communities, which can be leveraged to promote democratic values and practices[22]. They can play a crucial role in mobilizing and educating their communities about the importance of political participation and can serve as mediators in political conflicts[23].

Moreover, traditional leaders can play a key role in promoting development and social justice. They can advocate for the needs and interests of their communities in the political arena and can work with elected officials to implement development projects and social programs. They can also use their authority to challenge discriminatory norms and practices and to promote social change.

Summarily, while the involvement of traditional leaders in Ghanaian politics presents both challenges and opportunities, it is clear that they have a crucial role to play in shaping Ghana's democratic landscape. It is therefore essential to find ways to mitigate the challenges and maximize the opportunities associated with their involvement.

VII. CONCLUSION

The intricate relationship between traditional leaders and Ghanaian politics is a testament to the enduring influence of traditional institutions in contemporary society. Despite the formal adoption of democratic governance structures, traditional leaders continue to play a significant role in Ghanaian politics, shaping public opinion, influencing political outcomes, and serving as intermediaries between their communities and the state.

However, the involvement of traditional leaders in politics is not without challenges. The potential for traditional leaders to exert undue influence over political processes and outcomes, the lack of direct public accountability, and the perpetuation of discriminatory socio-cultural norms and practices are all issues that need to be addressed. These challenges underscore the need for ongoing dialogue and engagement to ensure that the involvement of traditional leaders in politics is consistent with the principles and processes of democratic governance.

At the same time, the involvement of traditional leaders in politics also presents several opportunities. Their deep-rooted legitimacy and authority in their communities can be leveraged to promote democratic values and practices, foster greater political participation, and ensure that the interests of local communities are adequately represented. Their role in promoting development and social justice, and their potential to challenge discriminatory norms and practices and promote social change, are also significant.

In conclusion, traditional leaders have a crucial role to play in shaping Ghana's democratic landscape. While there are challenges associated with their involvement in politics, there are also opportunities that can be harnessed to enhance the legitimacy of the political process and ensure that the interests of local communities are adequately represented. It is therefore essential to find ways to mitigate the challenges and maximize the opportunities associated with their involvement. This will require a nuanced and context-specific approach, as well as a commitment to ongoing dialogue and engagement. As Ghana continues to navigate its path towards democratic consolidation, the role of traditional leaders will undoubtedly remain a critical factor in this journey.

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