

## TRADITIONAL CHIEFS IN NIGERIA: THOUGHTS ON AGENDA FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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### Abstract

Although traditional chiefs in Nigeria have remained indispensable in local administration since the advent of colonial rule, they have increasingly suffered loss of relevance. However, the challenges of the twenty-first century such as insecurity, conflict and violence, environmental degradation, and development challenges especially as indicated in the Millennium Development Goals offer an opportunity for traditional chiefs to readjust for relevance. In so doing, they must review their old priorities and come up with a new agenda of responsibilities that would be relevant to the challenges, problems, and needs of the twenty-first century. By the new agenda, the chiefs must focus serious attention on areas such as community development, policy formulation and implementation, conflict management, security, environment, and culture. These areas of focus should constitute their agenda for the twenty-first century.

1

### Introduction

The chieftaincy institution is one of Nigeria's traditional legacies that survived the whirlwind of Western acculturation and colonial rule. As Oba Abolarin more elaborately points out: "In spite of the gargantuan odds and enormous assaults against thrones and stools by both the colonial masters and the deluded foster elites that succeeded them, the institution has survived to be the most enduring legacy of African history and culture."<sup>1</sup>Owing to the ingenuity with which it evolved and developed, the institution offered no room for an alternative approach to community governance.<sup>2</sup> The institution did not only remain resilient to various attempts made in the pristine of the colonial administration for an alternative system, it also

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In the context of this paper, the term, "traditional chief" or "chief", refers to any traditional ruler or head of a village, clan, community, town, city, ward, or local government, chosen by the people and possessing a certificate of recognition by the government to that effect. It does not include traditional chieftaincy title holders or honorary chieftaincy title bearers, who do not fall in this category and do not usually possess any government certificate of recognition.

intrinsically became the genius of local governance in the entire colonial dispensation.

Indeed, the traditional chiefs were the main prop of the colonial regime, which they collaborated with. The chiefs, along with their subjects, constituted the primary constituency for the colonial administrators. Under the nationalist agitation that trailed the twilight of colonial rule, the bond between the chiefs and the colonial masters was emasculated and, indeed, eventually broken, leaving the colonial masters with virtually no constituency.<sup>3</sup> Faced with such loss of support from the chiefs, the colonial masters could not but hasten the process of decolonization and the liquidation of the British empire in Nigeria.

The end of colonial rule was not accompanied by any remarkable structural and systemic change. The colonial superstructure, along with its system, was left intact but was taken over by the indigenous Nigerian elite with colonial orientation and outlook. The status of traditional chiefs, as the *res essentia* of local governance did not, therefore, change with the end of colonial rule. The chieftaincy institution remained the substructure of the successive Nigerian governments that came after colonial rule, and it continued naturally to be the pivot of community administration but footnote in the overall strategy for governance.

Scholars and stakeholders in the chieftaincy institution have been pointing out with great nostalgia the endless erosion of the power and authority of the chiefs and their gradual and unsavory loss of relevance since the advent of colonial rule. Whether this loss of relevance is attributable to an induced inertia on the part of the chiefs or to the government's inability to assign any concrete constitutional role to the chiefs and reposition them from time to time for the challenges of a changing world is another matter of studied interest. Of more import is for us to point out the need for traditional chiefs to review their agenda of responsibilities in line with certain developing challenges of the twenty-first century. The aim of this paper is to identify these challenges and, against their background, suggest an agenda or areas in which traditional chiefs should lay emphasis in the discharge of their responsibilities in order to remain relevant in the present century.

### **Challenges of the Twenty-First Century**

The challenges facing us in the twenty-first century are not new. What is spectacular about them is the hitherto unimagined dimension and ramifications they have assumed. For instance, conflict and violence are not new to the century; but they have been on the increase, with conflict prolonging and escalating into violence and violence into war. One of the implications of this development is the worrisome

increase in global military spending, which rose to \$1.6 trillion in 2010, according to the 2011 report of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).<sup>4</sup> Another is the acquisition and proliferation of small, tactical arms, many of which have been smuggled into the hands of insurgents, militants, terrorists, political thugs, criminals, and warrior communities. A combination of the activities of these armed agents has heightened insecurity and derailed order and socio-economic transactions.

In the midst of all these are development challenges<sup>5</sup> of unemployment, low education, massive corruption, environmental degradation, infrastructural decay and inadequacy, low agricultural output, healthcare problems, and extreme poverty and hunger, which have continued to defy sustainable solutions. In a resolve to confront these naughty problems at the beginning of the century, the United Nations drew up a global development agenda, the implementation of which poses the greatest challenge to the nations of the world. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as this agenda is known, are eight in number. They include: eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and women empowerment; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; combating of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global agenda for development.<sup>6</sup> The Millennium Development Goals are so significant, that they are now the centre of gravity of all development efforts and the centerpiece of policy formulation for national governments.

### **The Agenda**

The scenario so far presented furnishes us with a panorama of the challenges facing us in the twenty-first century. In the face of such challenges traditional chiefs would have to review their responsibilities and focus more emphatically on problems related to these challenges. Such a review should take into consideration the following areas:

### **Community Development**

Since the colonial era, community development has largely followed the imperial concept of collaboration between traditional chiefs and government. This concept is further underscored by Peter du Soutoy's definition of community development as:

The process by which the effort of the people are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities to integrate these communities

into the nation and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress.<sup>7</sup>

Thus community development naturally offers itself as an important area with which traditional chiefs should be preoccupied.

Many communities are still in dire need of facilities such as sewage systems, boreholes, health centres, roads, drainages, culverts, primary and secondary schools, civic centres, and markets. These projects are the focus of such development and donor agencies as the Community and Social Development Project (CLDP), sponsored by the World Bank, who are willing to initiate and execute them in collaboration with communities that are willing to make counterpart contributions towards them. Chiefs should take it as their responsibility to mobilise their communities for such development projects.

Outside collaboration with external agencies, chiefs should return to the African primordial ideals of communalism and communal solidarity and cooperation as relevant tools for community development. We cannot continue to abandon this great heritage, on which communities had depended for centuries before the advent of Western civilization. With communal solidarity and cooperation, community labour can be mobilised for the repair and maintenance of broken down facilities such as earth roads, drainages, and other public facilities within the communities, since it is not possible for the government, like any other government in the world, to do everything for the citizens. Indeed, inadequate infrastructure has been identified by international reports as “the main impediment to growth.”<sup>8</sup> It is, therefore, necessary for chiefs to refocus more adequately on community infrastructure as a significant milestone on the path of transformation. Anthony Okoduwa concludes: “In every sphere of community building in any part of Nigeria, the chieftaincy institution cannot be relegated to the background if we must make progress.”<sup>9</sup> This conclusion challenges chiefs to consider community development as a priority in their agenda.

For the past few years, development planners have been looking at the possibility of going beyond the local government to make every community a focal point of development. This has led to the idea of what is called Community Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (CEEDS) – a strategic policy for the development of communities. The CEEDS was conceived as a blueprint in which the development priorities of each community would be defined on a medium term basis with achievable targets. I have elsewhere<sup>10</sup> expressed misgivings on this novel proposal. My view is that it is not possible, even if it is feasible, to implement the policy of CEEDS because communities do not have the institutional framework

of a government, which would enable them to raise fund, prepare and pass their budgets, and make legitimate expenditure on projects in accordance with due process. It may require amending the Nigerian Constitution to create community governments to be able to implement the policy of CEEDS. Perhaps, it is for realities such as this that the idea of CEEDS has not gone beyond the realm of conceptualisation. The challenge before chiefs is to position themselves as catalysts in this imminent innovation by reorganising and mobilising their communities towards the idea of CEEDS. While the idea of CEEDS may yet sound utopian, it suggests the need for the active participation of chiefs in the development planning of their communities.

### Policy Formulation and Implementation

L.C. Aziken suggests policy formulation and implementation as another area of focus for chiefs. According to him,

In the new democratic dispensation, traditional institutions should be actively involved in policy formulation and implementation at the grassroots because of their vantage position of being closer to the people at the local government level.<sup>11</sup>

Although a possible conflict of interest between the local government authorities and the chiefs cannot be ruled out of this suggestion as rightly pointed out by Kingdom Orji and Stephen Olali,<sup>12</sup> the chiefs can make input in the preparation of such policy documents as the *Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy* (LEEDS), the *State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy* (SEEDS), and the *National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy* (NEEDS). These are the medium term policy documents of the local, state, and federal governments respectively, which are usually prepared on the principle of the bottom-top approach to policy formulation. Since it is a mantra, that the formulation of these policy documents must be based on consultations with the grassroots, the chiefs should, as a matter of duty and for the benefit of their communities participate in the preparation of these blueprints by way of input.

Budgeting, which is the final stage of policy formulation and implementation process offers a greater opportunity for the participation of chiefs in policy implementation. The national, state, and local government budgets are public documents, which are usually prepared by processes which entail consultations with the public and members of the legislative houses. It is important that chiefs should attend budget consultation meetings where they could propose projects which would be of interest and benefit to their communities for inclusion in the budgets. An

alternative way of participating in the preparation of budgets is for chiefs to make their budget proposals through the members representing their communities in the legislative houses at the local, state, and national levels. It is also the right, duty, and responsibility of chiefs to monitor the implementation of any project proposed for their communities. The monitoring of projects must commence from the stage of proposal to full implementation and commissioning. Reports of any neglect or compromise of standards in the execution of any project should be made and sent to the appropriate government authorities for action.

### Conflict Management

It is now being regretted by international policy makers, that much attention was not given to issues of conflict resolution and prevention in the last century. Much of the conflict that the world is witnessing today is the backlash of a preventable build-up from the last century. Against this background, there is a gravitation of global policy towards conflict resolution and prevention. That is why the World Bank is stressing that it is highly important for policy makers to invest in conflict prevention. The bank's 2011 development report places conflict prevention "at the heart of the development agenda as it is critically important for conflict prevention to receive the priority it deserves."<sup>13</sup>

The primary role of every chief is to ensure peace in his domain through proper management of conflict. Given the frequency and ramifications of intra-community and inter-community conflicts, it is not just enough for chiefs to adjudicate on cases of conflict brought to them in their palaces. Chiefs should be proactive and aggressive in their search for peace and in their relationship with issues of conflict. It devolves, therefore, on every chief not only to wait for cases of conflict to be brought to his palace but also to take initiatives towards identifying events and situations that could possibly lead to conflict. It is possible, in looking for early warning signs of conflict, to nip in the bud any conflict that is still in its latent stage. No conflict should be handled with passivity, whether it involves individuals or groups, as any conflict which originated as an isolated incident has the potential to trigger a cosmopolitan crisis. For instance, the killing on 28 June, 1914 of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife in Sarajevo by a young Bosnian student, which could have been handled as an individual issue, was the immediate *casus belli* of the First World War.<sup>14</sup>

Learned opinion and recent studies are increasingly recognizing the relevance of African traditional approach to conflict management and the need to assign a role to such approach in the resolution of conflicts. Among the scholars

associated with the Africanist approach to conflict management is David J. Francis. He offers the rationale for the adoption of an Africanist approach in the following most persuasive argument:

It is therefore reasonable to assume that ancient and pre-colonial Africa must have developed its own 'practical and relational wisdom' and approaches to responding to, and dealing with sources of conflicts such as irreconcilable or incompatible differences, misunderstandings, disagreements, greed, prejudice and tolerance, aggression, domination and injustice at inter-personal, intra-group, inter-group and at both intra-kingdom/empire and inter-kingdom/empire levels.<sup>15</sup>

In line with this argument, it should be noted that the chieftaincy institution evolved primarily for conflict resolution and peace-building. Therefore, as Shedrack Best would want us put it, our chiefs must aggressively respond to conflict and peace challenges and break our dependence on reluctant foreign interveners and their resources.<sup>16</sup> Thus, traditional chiefs must reorganise themselves to become the primary and major stakeholders in the resolution and prevention of conflict, if they are to remain relevant in the twenty-first century. In other words, they should constitute themselves into a domestic conflict resolution mechanism, such a mechanism having been acknowledged under international rating as a major contributor to peace and security.<sup>17</sup>

### Security

Insecurity arising from criminal activities and, in recent times, from the operations of militants, insurgents, and terrorists is one of the greatest problems Nigeria is grappling with. Terrorism in particular is an enigma, which has continued to challenge the sensibilities of Nigerians. In groping for a suitable solution, Nigeria appears to be markedly dependent on the international approach against terrorism because of the notion, that terrorism is an international phenomenon, which requires an international consensus to fight. Nigeria's dependence on the international consensus was clearly indicated during the Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments at the United Nations headquarters in New York in September 2005, where the then Senate President Ken Nnamani pointed out:

In line with developments in international security norms, we are considering an anti-terrorism bill to align Nigeria with the global consensus against terrorism. Here also, we are learning from other

countries on how to meet the challenges of terrorism and respect for human rights.<sup>18</sup>

In the same accord, Bola Akinterinwa, a columnist, argues: “*Boko Haram* is not simply a Nigerian phenomenon; it has an international character.”<sup>19</sup> We are, however, of the view that *Boko Haram* is essentially and fundamentally a Nigerian product and, *ipso facto*, requires essentially and primarily a Nigerian solution. We also think that the conventional warfare approach adopted by the Joint Task Force (J.T.F) in countering insurgency in Nigeria should not be solely relied upon, as it is not possible to stop insurgency, especially if ideologically animated, by any conventional warfare, no matter the level of sophistication of the military hardware applied. A most recent experience is that of Iraq, where the end of the war was trailed by an orgy of insurgency which the U.S military tanks were of little or no relevance in countering.<sup>20</sup>

This being the case, insurgency in Nigeria could be more effectively tackled by an inward-looking approach in which a strong collaboration between counter-insurgency agents and the chiefs is established. This collaboration is critical because insurgency in Nigeria is home-based. Its agents - both terrorists and militants - are resident within the Nigerian communities, where indeed they have their hiding and resting places. Traditional chiefs must seize this opportunity to work in collaboration with the government to end terrorism, militancy, and related criminal activities in the land.

Since there is not much the chiefs can do in terms of physically confronting the agents of insecurity, they should possibly collaborate within the concept of community policing, which in recent times has occupied the thoughts of security experts and prominent Nigerians. What is community policing? Essien Efoli, a security expert, who also advocates community policing, furnishes us its meaning in this definition:

Community policing is a philosophy, a management style, and an organisational strategy that promotes pro-active partnerships between the police and the community. Community policing is therefore a new philosophy of policing, which accepts that the police can only effectively solve problems related to crime, fear, social and physical disorder, and neighborhood decay, if they work in partnership with private citizens and other service providers.<sup>21</sup>



With this understanding of community policing, Otunba Ogunnusi, a member of the House of Representatives, recently presented a bill in the house, seeking the strengthening and institutionalisation of community policing in Nigeria through a constitutional amendment. He argues that from primordial times, policing has been essentially a local service, and that since every crime is local in nature, "community policing is an approach that can help the Nigeria Police Force to restore trust and confidence of the public....because it involves community consultation, cooperation and interdependency."<sup>22</sup>

In this context, community policing lends itself as primarily a function of the chiefs. It offers the chiefs another window of escape from the splendid isolation and abandonment of the past into a duty so dear to the nation and the world. Thus, within the concept of community policing, chiefs should collaborate with the police and other security agencies in the area of surveillance. Furnishing the security agencies with information on criminal activities and persons suspected to be criminals, militants, terrorists, insurgents, and vandals by chiefs, as recently called for by Dr. Ade Abolurin, the Commandant-General of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps,<sup>23</sup> would assist greatly in the on-going war against terrorism, militancy, insurgency, and vandalism.

### **Environment**

International conventions on environment are advocating more involvement of governments and the public in environmental matters.<sup>24</sup> Environmental issues such as storm, flood, deforestation, desertification, depletion of the ecosystem, erosion and, most recently, climate change and global warming have been making the rounds in different local and international fora. Although, for well-nigh a decade, interest in these issues has been domiciled within conferences, seminars, lectures, and workshops and has only marginally gone beyond the frontiers of knowledge and advocacy, there is no doubt that policy making on them has moved substantially from fiction to action in the last few years. Even though environmental degradation in general is attracting more concern at the international and national levels, its ultimate link with individuals and communities remains indisputable. Bakut Bakut pointedly concludes:

Therefore, the threatening capacity of environment can be compared to both military and economic threat in its ability not only to affect the 'national' interest of states, but the very interest of individual and communities.<sup>25</sup>

Now that it is understood, that environmental problems have an unhealthy nexus with individual and community interest, it is open to chiefs to decide how they can key into the global agenda on environment. Is it possible for them to do something to stop bush burning, embark on reforestation, check unauthorised cutting down of timber and wood and, by means of communal manual labour, manage flood and erosion through channelisation? All these are options for participation and for which assistance could be sought from donor and development agencies.

## Culture

The importance attached to culture nationally and internationally as evident in the creation of cultural ministries, departments, and institutions by the state and federal governments and the transactions of UNESCO quickly suggests the promotion of culture as a significant area where chiefs should lay emphasis in the discharge of their responsibilities. A. O. Adesoji places high premium on the cultural role of chiefs. He notes:

One thing that cannot be wished away is that despite the growth of modern government, the cultural significance of the traditional ruler has not diminished. As custodians of customs and tradition, the involvement of traditional rulers in festivals and ceremonies is pertinent. Beyond re-enacting the customs and in the process ensuring their survival, they also serve/help to market them.<sup>26</sup>

As Adesoji has indicated, the role of chiefs in the promotion of culture is pertinent. It should, indeed, significantly form part of their agenda for the twenty-first century. As custodians of African cultural heritage, chiefs should protect its valuable traditions and check the plunder and destruction of its artifacts and institutions by cultural iconoclasts. They should expand the shrinking frontiers of African culture and protect it from all forms of antipodal influences.

The revival of African ethical values such as honesty, integrity, transparency, and hospitality in the face of the corruptive influence of an ever expanding urban culture and Western values is of great and urgent necessity. It was on these African cultural attributes that the “trust system”<sup>27</sup> of international trade and business between Nigerians and Europeans was founded and sustained in the nineteenth century - a vintage perpetually lost to monumental corruption induced by Western values and sharp survival practices of a distressed capitalist economy.

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## Conclusion

In spite of their loss of sovereignty since colonial rule, traditional chiefs have remained the pivot of local administration. Over the years, however, their relevance has continually reduced, evoking much concern among scholars and stakeholders in chieftaincy affairs. Nevertheless, the chiefs can shore up their relevance by adopting an agenda that could meet the challenges and requirements of the twenty-first century.

Such an agenda should encompass areas such as community development, policy formulation and implementation, conflict management, security maintenance, environmental protection, and the preservation and promotion of African culture. Chiefs should work more assiduously, lay greater emphasis, and play more articulate roles in these areas in order to regain and sustain their relevance, instead of spending time in cheapening themselves as lackeys and surrogates of politicians and indiscriminately conferring chieftaincy titles on undeserving personalities in order to curry favour, recognition, and relevance as argued by Adesoji.<sup>28</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Oba Abolarin, "Foreward", in Tunde Babawale et al., eds., *The Chieftaincy Institution in Nigeria* (Lagos, Nigeria: Concept Publications, 2010), p.ix.

<sup>2</sup>J. F. Ade Ajaji, "The Continuity of African Institutions under Colonialism", in T. O. Ranger, ed., *Emerging Themes of African History* (Dar-es-Salam: East African Publishing House, 1967), pp.190-191.

<sup>3</sup>G. N. Uzoigwe, "From the Gold Coast to Ghana: The Politics of Decolonization", in Gerhard Wienberg, ed., *Transformation of a Continent: Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 380-383.

<sup>4</sup>Ali Bahajjoub, "Global Military Spending Rises to \$1.6 trillion in 2010", *North-South*. Vol.5, No.4, May 2011.pp.24-25. SIPRI undertakes research which monitors developments in military expenditure worldwide. It furnishes the most consistent, extensive, and comprehensive data on military expenditure.

<sup>5</sup> See, also, CODESRIA, <http://www.codesria.org/spip.ph...>, “Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty First Century”, 13<sup>th</sup> CODESRIA General Assembly, Rabat, Morocco, 5-9 December, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Cross River State, Nigeria, *Millennium Development Goals: The Handbook* (Calabar, Nigeria: Department of International Donor Support, 2009), p.I.

<sup>7</sup> I.R Amadi, “The Evolution of Local Government in Nigeria 1900-1990”, in *The Calabar Historical Journal*. Vol. No.1, June 2000. p.27.

<sup>8</sup> *The CIA World Factbook 2009*. p.480.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Irenosen Okoduwa, “Chieftaincy Institution and Community Building in Nigeria – The Esan Example”, in Babawale, *Chieftaincy Institution*, p.165.

<sup>10</sup> This view was expressed by the author in a workshop on development planning jointly organised by the National Council on Development Planning and the Joint Planning Board, Calabar, Nigeria, 15th-17<sup>th</sup> March, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Kingdom E. Orji and Stephen T. Olali, “Traditional Institutions and their Dwindling Roles in Contemporary Nigeria: The Rivers State Example”, in Babawale, *Chieftaincy Institution*, p.411. <sup>12</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> World Bank, “Invest in conflict prevention is a must, W B report”, *North-South*. Vol.5, No.6, July 2011. p.23.

<sup>14</sup> F.K. Buah, *The World Since 1750*(London: Macmillian, 1967), pp.271-273.

<sup>15</sup> David J. Francis, “Peace and Conflict Studies: An African Overview of Basic Concepts”, in Shedrack Gaya Best, ed., *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies in West Africa* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books Limited, 2006), p.31.

<sup>16</sup> Shedrack Gaya Best, “Introduction”, in Best, *Peace and Conflict Studies*, p.xi.

<sup>17</sup> John T. Rourke, *International Politics on the World Stage*. 12<sup>th</sup> Ed. (New York: McGraw- Hill, 2009), p.343.

- <sup>18</sup> Sam Amadi, ed., *The Third way: A Selection of Speeches of Senator Ken Nnamani* (Enugu, Nigeria: Ken Nnamani Centre for Development, 2006), p.210.
- <sup>19</sup> Bola A. Akinterinwa, “Random Thoughts on Threats to Global Security in 2013”, *This Day*. December 30, 2012. p.18.
- <sup>20</sup> Rourke, *International Politics*, p.251.
- <sup>21</sup> Essien Efoli, “Lecture on Police Duties I: CPL-SGT Promotion Course”, Police Training School, Odukpani, Calabar, Nigeria, 2011.
- <sup>22</sup> Otunba Abayomi Ogunnusi, “Now is the Time for Community and Effective State Policing”, *The Nation*. Monday, September 17, 2012. p.29.
- <sup>23</sup> Ade Abolurin, Commandant-General, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, on Channels Television News, 2:00 p.m., Friday, 25 January, 2013.
- <sup>24</sup> Ban Kimoon, “The Importance of Convention on Environment”, *North-South*. Vol. 5, No. 7, August 2011. p.34.
- <sup>25</sup> Bakut tswah Bakut, “The Environment, Peace and Conflict in Africa”, in Best, *Peace and Conflict Studies*, p.243.
- <sup>26</sup> A. O. Adesoji, “Traditional Rulership and Modern Governance in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Nigeria”, in Babawale, *Chieftaincy Institution*, p. 433.
- <sup>27</sup> Monday Effiong Noah, *Old Calabar: The City States and the Europeans 1800-1885* (Uyo, Nigeria: Scholars Press, 1980), pp. 87-101. According to Noah, “The trust system involved the supercargo [European merchant] giving his African middleman more European goods than he could immediately pay for, trusting the middleman would supply him with palm oil to the value of the goods delivered.” See particularly p. 87.
- <sup>28</sup> Adesoji, *Traditional Rulership and Modern Governance*, pp. 430-433.