

# Indigenous People, Leadership and Development: The Role of Chieftaincy Institution in the Development of Ghana

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## Abstract

This paper explores the institution of chieftaincy in Ghana and assesses its relevance and contribution to national development. Chieftaincy institution in Ghana dates back in history and it is associated with movement of people from different places to the present day Ghana. The British who colonized the Gold Coast recognized its uniqueness and made use of it in what become known as indirect rule. Because of the important role the chieftaincy institution plays in the lives of the people, the institution has been given due recognition by successive governments and constitutions since independence in 1957. Primarily, the function of the chief was to rule for social stability, cohesion and order, as well as to bring development to the people. More importantly, the Chieftaincy institution remained an important focal point for grassroots mobilization, and an instrument for social cohesion. This paper reaffirms the relevance of the chieftaincy institution in national development notwithstanding the rapid modernization and the socio-economic changes taking place in modern day Ghana.

**Keywords:** Chieftaincy, Traditional Authorities, Community, Development, Natural Resources

## **Introduction**

The Institution of Chieftaincy has a long history in Ghana and is traceable from the period of migration of people from various parts of Africa and beyond to their present places of abode. The period between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a mass movement of people (exodus) particularly from the Middle East through Eastern and Northern Africa to the present day West Africa. This unprecedented movement of people across Africa was precipitated by conflicts and wars, authoritarian rule and natural disasters. People also moved in search of virgin lands. The movement was well-planned under the control of some leaders. Brobbey (2008 p2) argues that the leaders were invariably individuals who led their people into war, rescued them from wars and liberated them from domination or slavery, united them against divisive occurrences, saved them from a succession of calamities and catastrophes or founded settlement areas where they lived and worked. These leaders or their descendants became the chiefs of the settlements they founded. 'Chief' therefore connotes those who ruled, governed or headed the people as rulers or governors. Chieftaincy was therefore derived from the word chief and is used to mean the institution through which the system of the traditional rule is conducted in Ghana. Brobbey (2008 p2) stresses that chieftaincy as an institution is thus political in nature and that the fundamental concern of the chief and chieftaincy has been and still is the governing or ruling of the people.

## **The Legitimacy of the Chieftaincy Institution**

The British who colonized the Gold Coast for nearly 400 years found the chieftaincy institution to be a well-established indigenous political administrative system, credible and reliable to deal with. The British therefore gave recognition to the chieftaincy institution and administered Ghana's territories through the chiefs in what became known as 'indirect rule'. Brobbey (2008) states that chieftaincy was given due recognition by every government that ruled the Gold Coast and the trend continued after Ghana had attained independence status. He emphasizes that post-independence recognition was reflected in successive constitutions.

It is significant to note that the 1992 Constitution confirms the existence of chieftaincy as an institution, and Article 270 (1) states that "the

institution of chieftaincy, together with its traditional councils as established by customary law and usage, is hereby guaranteed". Even more significant is the fact that Article 290 (1) (p) entrenches Article 270 of the 1992 Constitution meaning that the only way by which the institution of chieftaincy may be abolished is by a referendum.

### Structure of the Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana

Chieftaincy has a well-defined structure and this can be discussed in two ways:

- Traditionally whereby the country is divided along traditional areas and each traditional area is headed by a paramount chief (*Omanhene*). Each traditional area is divided into divisional area and these are headed by divisional chiefs, under the divisional chiefs are the sub-chiefs and below the sub-chiefs are the headsmen (*Odzikros*). There may be variations to this structure in some traditional areas (see Fig 1).

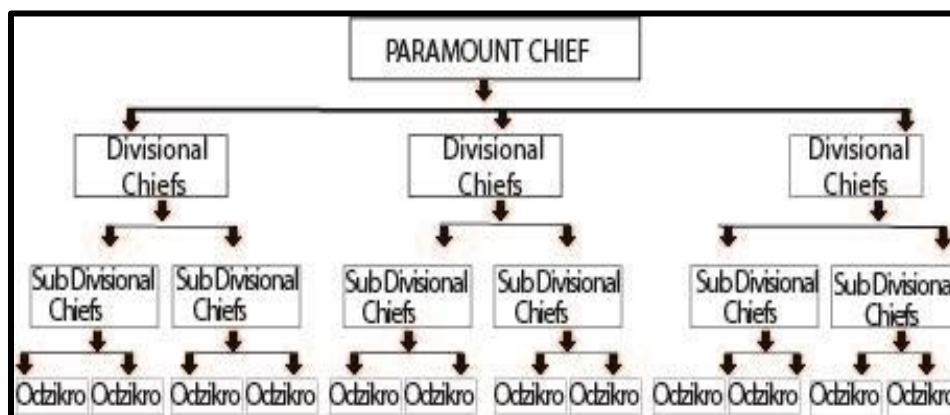
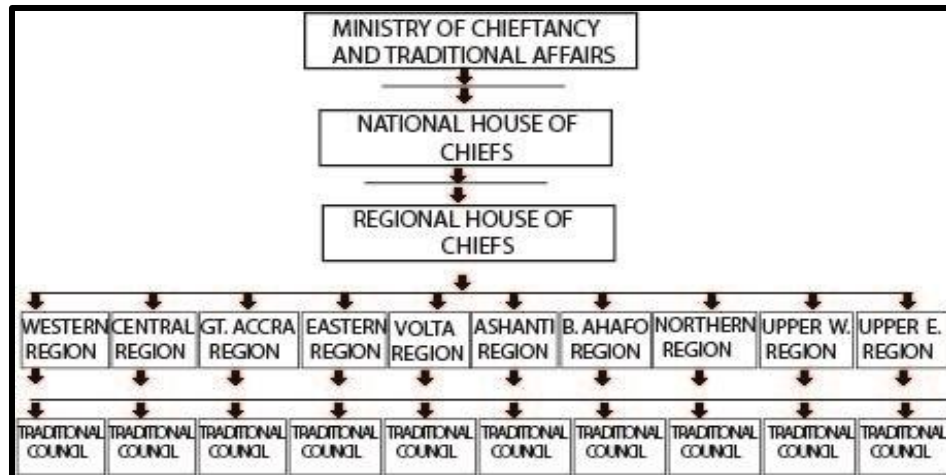


Fig 1: The Traditional Structure of Chieftaincy Institution

- The second can be described as the executive and administrative structure. Under this structure, the highest body in charge of the chieftaincy institution is the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Traditional Affairs. Administratively, the ministry oversees the running of the executive chieftaincy institutions, namely the National House of Chiefs. The National House of Chiefs is made up of 50 members. Five members from each Regional House are elected to represent their regions at the National House of Chiefs. Below the National

House is the Regional Houses of Chiefs. A Regional House of Chiefs is composed of all the paramount chiefs in the region. Below the Regional Houses are the Traditional Councils which are the foundation of the chieftaincy institution (see Fig 2)



**Fig 2: The Administrative Structure of Chieftaincy Institution**

### **Responsibilities of Chiefs**

A chief is clothed with considerable responsibilities which may be grouped under judicial and adjudicatory, administrative/political and cultural/religious function. Another key duty carried out the chief that impacts on the development of Ghana is that of natural resource management. The responsibilities of the chief are discussed briefly as follows:

- The chief has judicial as well as adjudicatory responsibilities. The chief is seen by his subjects as a judge because of the role he plays in settling of all manners of disputes. The chief's palace for that reason, houses the customary court with the chief as the head. It is noteworthy that before the arrival of the colonialists in the then Gold Coast, there was an elaborate but simple system of settling disputes among the people. According to Brobbey (2008 p367), the adjudicatory functions engage the chief in the determination of private disputes that are sent before him, including breaches of certain customs or taboos. More often than not, the chief constitutes a panel of arbiters to settle the dispute between the contesting

parties. The process is adjudicatory in that the arbitrators listen to the disputants and form their judgment, which they hand down to the disputants as their award. In some cases, particularly with very serious disputes, the chief takes part in the adjudication.

- Administratively, the chief is responsible for the daily running of his palace including the supervision of the attendants and staff of the palace. He is the custodian and administrator of the stool lands and properties. According to Brobbey (2008), in the olden days, the chief was the political head and commander-in-chief of the army in charge of his area of authority and had to lead his people in times of war or crisis. The chief was thus responsible for security in his area of authority. Brobbey continues that the leadership role now takes the form among other things of defending litigation between his stool and neighbouring stools, other families or individuals. Although a lot has changed in modern day Ghana, the chief still exercises considerable power over his area of jurisdiction. Indeed, in most communities in Ghana, the chief is more important than the politician. He is seen as the first person in the community and represents his people at all official functions in and out of his area of jurisdiction. He receives visitors including government officials on behalf of his people. The chief speaks and lobbies for development projects on behalf of his people. Even though the chief is barred by the 1992 constitution from taking active part in party politics, he has great influence on his people in matters of national politics. It is no wonder that politicians and political parties always want to court the goodwill of prominent chiefs in the country in the hope that the chiefs may influence their subjects in their favour to enhance their political fortunes.
- In respect of religious and cultural responsibilities, the chief is seen as the spiritual head and epitome of the culture and tradition of his people. He is the bridge between the past and the present, and the present and the future. The chief is also seen as the link between the dead and the living. Through the appointed palace officials, notably the traditional priests and priestesses, the chief performs a number of religious rites for different purposes and occasions including intercessional prayers and rituals for good harvest, prosperity and protection from calamities on behalf of the community.

- Furthermore, the chief is seen as the embodiment of the culture of his people. There is no gain saying that culture is the bedrock of the society. Asiama (2006 p 263) states it succinctly that the court of the chief today is supposed to be like in the past, the repository of history and tradition, and the arena of artistic and cultural expression. The celebration of annual festivals by many of the traditional areas in Ghana and the pomp and pageantry that characterise such occasions is the means by which the culture of the people is portrayed. Through the celebration of festivals, the culture of the people is passed on from one generation to the other.

### **Chieftaincy and development**

The contribution of the chieftaincy institution to the socio-economic development of Ghana is immeasurable and it may be an understatement to state that Ghana owes its rapid socio-economic and cultural development as well as stability to the relentless effort of many of her chiefs across the country.

The chieftaincy institution has been used by the people as an instrument for the management and distribution of natural resources and as a catalyst for development. For instance, chiefs have over the years been in charge of and responsible for the management of land resources in Ghana. Currently about 85 per cent of all lands in Ghana is controlled by chiefs with the remaining in the hands of the government and some individuals. Through this land ownership arrangement, land resources been judiciously managed and strategically used by chiefs to support the socio-economic development of the country for the benefit all her people. This has been made possible because traditionally, natural resources including land are held in trust by the chief and managed on behalf of the people. Danquah (1968, p 120) states: "in our culture, we do not only hold in trust for the present and future generations all the natural resources on which our welfare and continuance of the community depend, but also are accountable to the ancestors for proper management of the resources". Based on this notion of land belonging to the people, land resources have benefited the rich, the poor and the disadvantaged in the society. More importantly, chiefs have generously given out land to government and the private sector for socio-economic projects that have immensely contributed to the development and the transformation of the country.

The chieftaincy institution has made immeasurable contribution to the provision of social infrastructure that have greatly impacted positively on the lives of the people throughout the country. A unique attribute of the chieftaincy institution is its ability to mobilise and galvanise the people to undertake self-help activities (communal labour) to provide themselves with social and economic amenities. In most cases, the communities are levied and voluntary contributions are also collected at fund raising functions to finance the projects. In all cases, the chief is at the centre of the development processes.

Most of the popular open air markets operating in Ghana now were initiated by chiefs and their subjects. Most of these markets have developed into vibrant hubs for economic activities in the country. These markets provide thousands of people, particularly women who would otherwise have been unemployed, avenues for profitable economic ventures. Some of the popular markets like Techiman market, Mankesim market, Kasoa Market and Kumasi Central market attract traders from neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Togo and Ivory Coast, thus serving as catalysts for trans-border trading activities between Ghana and its neighbouring countries.

In recent times, most traditional areas have selected education as a priority area for development and the chiefs of such traditional areas have put in place different educational schemes (scholarships, incentive packages etc.) aimed at improving the quality of education and making it accessible to all, particularly the poor and the girl child. For instance, the Asebu Traditional Area in the Central Region of Ghana has instituted an education fund and named it after the current paramount chief (*Omanhene*) Okatakyi Dr Amanfi VII. Under the Okatakyi Amanfi Education Fund, a number of students in Secondary and Tertiary Institutions have been offered scholarships for their education. Books have been sourced and supplied to all Junior High Schools and the two Senior High Schools in the traditional area. Motor bikes and some household items such as fridges and gas cookers have been given to teachers to motivate them to give their best. Significantly, the chief recently established a Senior High School in his area to make secondary education accessible to the teeming number of pupils coming out of Junior Secondary Schools. Similar initiatives on education are available to needy students in many traditional areas throughout the country.

A major developmental initiative undertaken by a traditional ruler could be found in Ashanti. In early 2000, the Asantihene (King of Ashanti) succeeded in securing a World Bank funding support to implement one of the major traditional authority initiatives in Ghana. The initiative led to the establishment of the project: 'Promoting Partnership with Traditional Authorities Project' (PPTAP). The goal of the project was to improve the quality of life of rural people through sustainable poverty alleviation and capacity building of the traditional authorities and efficient transfer and utilization of resources. PPTAP was implemented in 40 communities in 35 Para-communities making up the Asanteman Council and covering 18 District Assemblies in Ashanti Region. The PPTAP had four components; these were (i) Education Sector Intervention (ii) Health Sector Intervention, (iii) Capacity Building Intervention, and (iv) Cultural Heritage Intervention (see Osei-Tutu 2010).

Activities carried out under the education intervention included renovation, reconstruction of old and dilapidated classrooms and construction of new classroom with water and sanitation facilities. In addition, text books, readers and school furniture were supplied to all schools. Also, teacher incentive scheme was instituted and additionally, 700 pupils benefited from special educational support including scholarships to needy children particularly girls.

Under the health sector intervention, training of community members and other key stakeholders in growth monitoring of children less than 5 years, HIV/AIDS control, disease surveillance including malaria prevention and control were carried out.

A number of training programmes were undertaken under the capacity building intervention. The training focused on building the capacity of all traditional leaders including paramount chiefs and their queen mothers and other sub-chiefs. District chief executives (DCEs) and planning officers of implementing districts benefited from the training. Also included in the training were the members of the community monitoring committees. Participants were taken through community development processes such as community needs assessment and decentralization process among other topics. Health volunteers were trained in health issues and a number of community members were taken through repair and maintenance of boreholes provided for various communities under PPTAP. Under the capacity intervention, Medium



Term Development Plans were prepared for each of the communities and para-communities that make up the Asantiman Council. Under the intervention, the capacity of the district assemblies was built to enhance their role in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development projects in the districts.

The final intervention under PPTAP, the cultural heritage preservation component focused on assisting traditional councils to improve on their ability to carry out programmes that would help them preserve and maintain their cultural heritage. Through heritage intervention, traditional authorities and communities were assisted to package their heritage assets for educational activities and tourism attraction for communities to derive incomes from them to support their developmental programmes. As part of the intervention, a study on the identification of cultural heritage assets was conducted. Another study was conducted on traditional courts and customary laws codified to help the traditional authorities to review the operation of the traditional court system with the view to reducing the incidence of chieftaincy disputes and litigation. Nearly 250 craftsmen including disabled craftsmen have been trained under the intervention to add value to their trade.

### **Conclusion**

The institution of chieftaincy has survived and remains an important system of traditional governance in modern day Ghana. It is the vehicle for social, political, religious and economic development. The British Colonialist found the institution useful and used the chiefs as agents for their indirect rule policy. Following the footsteps of the Colonialists, successive governments after independence have closely worked with the institution for stability. It is the anticipation that chieftaincy would continue to play a significant role in national development particularly in the area of the economy, education, culture, justice, and health. Chieftaincy becomes even more relevant in rural communities where the presence of the Central Government seems remote and where poor accessibility restricts access to vital social and economic services and state institutions. Even where the state agencies exist, they lack the confidence and trust of the people to the extent that the people look up to their chiefs for support in times of need and in seeking justices. More importantly, as custodians of the land and other natural resources, chiefs play a key role in the development of their communities particularly in the area of agriculture. The effectiveness with

which chiefs play their diverse roles has helped to make the chieftaincy institution an important vehicle for governance at the grassroots level and an instrument of social cohesion and development.

While acknowledging the good relationship that has existed between the Central Government and the institution of chieftaincy since independence, the powers of chiefs have been systematically reduced and chiefs have become mere figure heads only to be consulted. The erosion of the authority of the chieftaincy institution is of great concern to observers of the institution. The concern is not to make the institution merely that of consulting or giving very limited power to traditional authorities, but how to effectively use the institution for socio-economic growth and promotion of culture, social cohesion and stability of the country. For that reason, the central government needs to redefine its relationship with the institution to enable the institution to play its role as an effective grassroots governance institution.

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