

Governance and traditional rulership in northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Traditional rulers have long provided security and stability in Nigeria. However, although they play an important governance role, they are not adequately acknowledged within governance literature and discourse. Primarily, this is because the latter are predominantly western-centred and thereby do not adequately acknowledge the nuances and differences in governance practices in other regions of the world. This article provides a Global South reading of governance, specifically focusing on traditional rulership in northern Nigeria. The article explores how and why traditional rulers wield and exercise power within their communities and provides new insights on how informal actors like traditional rulers can – and cannot – influence the governance arena, arguing for greater inclusion in the literature and discourse on the subject.

Keywords: governance; traditional rulers; northern Nigeria; gatekeepers, critical stakeholders

Introduction

This article specifically focuses on one form of African governance, that of traditional rulership in northern Nigeria. The article notes that, over the course of Nigerian history, the role and influence of traditional rulers has been significantly reduced, both formally within the constitution and in practice. These limitations have constrained the work, impact and mandate of traditional rulers within the communities they serve. Thus, while they occupy a position of power and authority on the ground, this has not been reflected in the literature and discourse on governance, further limiting the visibility and credibility of traditional rulers.

The central argument of this article is the need for greater awareness of the value of non-state actors like traditional rulers. It challenges the dominant lens of inquiry on governance, which is

predominantly western-centred, on the basis that this severely limits the focus of analysis to state actors and, to a lesser extent, international organisations. This lens of inquiry does not allow for the adequate inclusion of domestic actors outside the state into the governance conversation; and non-state actors such as traditional rulers are left out of the literature and discourse on governance.

This article therefore provides one way of refocusing the discourse on governance to include alternative actors – ie, traditional rulers. The article specifically explores the processes, actions and decisions that traditional rulers make and implement within northern Nigeria, and how this affects governance within the region.¹ The article also explores the role and influence of traditional rulers, focusing on how they wield and exercise power within northern Nigeria.²

The first section of the article begins by providing an overview of the meaning, formation and context of governance, as currently posited within the literature and discourse. The article then presents findings from the primary research underlying this study, a series of interviews conducted in Nigeria in between 2018 and 2020.³ In this section, the article examines the role of traditional rulers as gatekeepers and critical stakeholders within northern Nigeria. Finally, the article discusses the impact and duality of traditional rulership and provides a brief assessment of traditional rulership as a form of governance within Nigeria.

Governance

The concept of governance is ‘...probably as old as human civilization’ and derives from Greek, Latin, and French origins.⁴ While governance is not a new phenomenon, it remains a difficult concept to pin down.⁵ Scholars have struggled to drill down to a universal understanding of the concept because there are different perspectives on what governance consists of and how it can be understood. While lacking a universal definition, however, governance has been described through the use of various aspects such as characteristics, attributes, institutions, and qualities. This is not to say that there are no other ways of viewing and conceptualising governance, but rather that these are some common elements through which governance is presented. The following section will provide a comprehensive overview of commonly held understandings of governance, as well as the role of governance within northern Nigeria.

As pointed out above, there are many different views or analytical frameworks on governance; for example, there is the normative or philosophical approach contrasted to the materialist or consumerist approach.⁶ Most understandings of governance are focused on the narrow ideal of good governance. The focus of good governance literature includes the pursuit of attributes like ‘transparency, organisational effectiveness, accountability, predictability, legitimacy, popular participation and plurality of policy choices’.⁷ These understandings are commonly associated with the more traditional, positivist and Western style of governance, which can be insensitive to the human condition and to dealing with deeply human interactions.⁸ While these understandings are important in other contexts, they do not always translate well in the African context.

In addition, narrow definitions of governance are often discipline-specific, associated with political science and other realms of public policy. Such disciplines are rooted in Western and ‘Weberian’ principles and ideals.⁹ Governance is also often linked to concepts such as the rule of law, democracy, and human rights.¹⁰ It is commonly referred to as a diffusion of authority and decision-making between several levels of government.¹¹ Political governance is ‘concerned’ with how an actor ‘exercises power, exerts influence and manages the country’s social as well as economic resources leading to better development’.¹² More specifically, political governance focuses on who holds ‘power’ nationally and how they use it.¹³

In the early 1950s, the definition of governance expanded with the creation, growth, and integration of subnational and transnational institutions that seemingly bypassed, worked alongside, and even superseded the national authority of the state.¹⁴ This era represented a growing awareness of the need to speak less of the ‘sovereignty and autonomy’ of the state and rather to acknowledge the well-being and needs of the citizens within the state.¹⁵ Within academia and the international arena, definitions of governance also reflected this change, often being linked to ‘international development’ or philanthropy.¹⁶ Ultimately, this shift in thinking culminated in a turn from government to governance, signalling in the view of some, the rise of cooperative and participatory politics.¹⁷ The idea of the dominant and centralised state as the sole bearer of governance lost traction and monopoly, being replaced by multiple, alternative, and creative means of dividing and exercising authority and power within a state.¹⁸ These shifts in governance thinking coincided with the turn to human security and its focus on the security of the people.¹⁹

Key governance authors like Francis Fukuyama, as well as organisations like the World Bank Group, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Thabo Mbeki Foundation and various business schools have worked extensively on measurements and indicators of governance. These include indices like the Worldwide Governance Indicators,²⁰ the Ibrahim Index²¹ and the African Peer Review Mechanism.²² These indices broadly focus on three factors: quality of institutions, administrative capacity, and the relationship between the state and society. These definitional traits outline the different debates and forms of governance. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation Index of African Governance, for instance, categorises governance along four criteria: ‘safety and rule of law; participation and human rights; sustainable economic opportunity; and human development’.²³ International agencies like the World Bank lean on the ‘neoliberal ideology’ of good governance.²⁴ In it, governance is depoliticised within the public affairs arena to make way for technocratic ideals.

While there are many positive attributes to governance as a term, critics like Fukuyama have lamented the vagueness of the term, which can be used to refer to any type of ‘steering’ or regulation.²⁵ Critics have also pointed out the plurality in understandings of governance that have contributed to the overall pollution and dilution of the concept, especially from the neoliberal perspective.²⁶ This has led to a general misunderstanding of what governance means, with many of the definitions based on a conventional state-centric model of governance as opposed to the inclusion of alternative forms of governance and non-state actors.²⁷

The focus on political governance, even if it does include elements that are important, tends to leave out many ‘inalienable aspects of governance’.²⁸ This narrow definition of governance is linked with the ‘popular liberal understanding of good governance’.²⁹ Critics of the good governance definition note, aside from it being narrow and ill-suited to explaining governance frameworks in the Global South, that good governance ‘ignores the central responsibilities of the state to provide safety, security’ and a ‘basic level of well-being for [its] citizens’.³⁰ Too often, this definition of governance is used to explain governance in all sorts of contexts.³¹ However, this narrow view of governance is not suited to explain or contextualise the circumstances and history of the African context.

For the purposes of this article, governance has been defined as the decisions and actions taken in order to address needs within a community – whether at the state or village level.³² It also refers to the roles and influence that the actors in governance have – whether state or non-state – as well as how they exercise their power.³³

The importance of non-state actors within governance discourse

In some scholarly discussions around governance, the focus on the role of actors has increasingly included non-state actors.³⁴ The general definitions above allude to actors present in the governance process who manage the economic, political and social governance processes within their states.³⁵ These actors are a crucial part of the decision-making processes, affecting whether or not decisions are implemented.³⁶

By defining governance as the actions and decisions that actors take to address community needs, it places a tension on ‘the distinction between state and non-state actors’.³⁷ In particular, the study of governance is an attempt to understand the ‘entanglement’ of these different actors ‘in governance processes’.³⁸ While this article focuses on one set of non-state actors – traditional rulers – it is important to note that there are other actors that serve society from outside the ambit of the state. These include, among others, individuals, business, religious organisations, and civil society organisations.³⁹ These actors, with their wealth of knowledge and expertise, are in direct contact with the communities as first responders with their ‘boots on the ground’.⁴⁰

Further developments in the discourse include disagreements over whether governance should be limited to the state or if it can be applied to the international arena.⁴¹ One of the ways the definition of governance can be expanded and deepened is by recognising that there are multiple and alternative ‘forms of authority other than from western-style democratic structures’.⁴² This gives scholars, academics and practitioners the ‘opportunity to better adapt political structures to the socio-economic needs of local communities’.⁴³ This article specifically takes a non-Western view of governance by focusing on traditional rulers as actors that are important to governance in northern Nigeria.

Traditional rulers as a form of governance in Nigeria

Observations from research into Nigeria's governance patterns reveal that traditional rulers are seen as the custodians of the beliefs, customs, values, norms and traditions of their communities, and they are heavily relied upon for leadership, governance and security.⁴⁴ As such, they form a vital part of the governance and security structure, occupying this position with other actors such as the state and civil society. However, while traditional rulers remain significant, their role and relevance has been 'periodically renegotiated' to reflect the changing authority, geography, and political landscape of their respective locales.⁴⁵ This forms an important basis for understanding the history and scope under which traditional rulers fall.

Traditional rulers generally hold leadership positions over ethnic groups or clans, imbued with the 'highest primary executive authority' over those groups. This power is gained through heredity, nomination, appointment or instalment as enshrined in the laws and the provisions of the Nigerian constitution.⁴⁶ They serve multiple roles as religious, legislative, executive and judicial leaders; preservers of tradition, customs and cultural heritage; managers and resolvers of disputes; and disseminators and lobbyists of 'projects and patronage' and the promotion of 'communal solidarity'.⁴⁷

In Nigeria, traditional rulers are a diverse and age-old institution.⁴⁸ 'Traditional ruler' is an overarching term that refers to religious leaders, councillors, Emirs, Obas, elders, heads (family, district, ward, and village) or even oracles.⁴⁹ This study focused on the Emirs, elders, and heads present in northern Nigeria.

In northern Nigeria, traditional rulership is divided broadly between the farming and non-farming communities. In the farming community, there is a hierarchy comprised of elders and councils.⁵⁰ In the non-farming community, traditional rulership is conducted through Emirs and heads of villages, as well as ward and district heads, and the Miyetti Allah, all of whom help with conflict resolution.⁵¹ The Emir is the principal executive among the Hausa-Fulani.⁵² In southern Nigeria, specifically in the south-west and among the Yorubas, the principal traditional ruler is known as an Oba (or King).⁵³ There are other power centres who act as a check and balance on the Oba, including 'the body of king makers, the town council and powerful secret societies'.⁵⁴ Unlike the

Emirs in the north, the Obas are generally considered the weaker executives in Nigeria.⁵⁵ In the south-east, traditional rulership is ‘decentralised and fragmented’ and exercised at various levels, from household to village level,⁵⁶ while in eastern Nigeria among the Igbo, traditional rulers are comprised of ‘the Family Head, the Umuada, the Village Tribunal (Amala), Age Grades, Titled men (Chiefs), [and] Oracles’.⁵⁷

For the purposes of this article, the focus will be on traditional rulers in northern Nigeria. This is because these actors are the strongest of the traditional rulers within Nigeria, wielding more influence, authority and power than in other parts of Nigeria.

The central role of traditional rulers

The previous sections discussed who and what traditional rulers are within Africa and Nigeria, explaining the different types of traditional rulership across the different regions. The following sections examine the centrality and importance of traditional rulers in northern Nigeria along the following two sub-themes: traditional rulers as gatekeepers and traditional rulers as critical stakeholders.

Traditional rulers as ‘gatekeepers’

The influence of traditional rulers can be most felt and understood by viewing their relationship with other societal actors. During field research in Nigeria, in 2018 and 2019, it became evident during interviews that such actors need to go through traditional rulers to gain access to the communities.⁵⁸

For instance, an official from an NGO that works in the north-east expressed the view that traditional rulers are the first point of access to communities, noting that visitors must ‘...always see the traditional rulers first...that’s the entry point’.⁵⁹ This first encounter is important for success and continued access in the communities, and must be carefully conducted.

Another NGO official operating in the north-east agreed that traditional rulers are a gateway to the communities, especially for anyone seeking to gain electoral success and traction within the communities, noting that:⁶⁰

‘For rural setting[s], it is more evident because it is them [that] the politicians will go to when...seeking for electoral votes or ...seeking to mobilise the community to do certain XYZ projects. They [the traditional rulers] are usually the gatekeepers, right. So, politicians, investors, they always bring them to the table because they recognise the power and authority ... to mobilise local people’.

This sentiment was echoed in the words of a member of a different NGO who noted that ‘traditional rulers hold more power because, for political office holders, they need their support to get what they want in government politics and so on and so forth’.⁶¹

Viewed through another lens, traditional rulers are the heart of the community. One NGO official stated it thus: ‘The traditional rulers are helping to bring people together. They identify those that should be at the table for [these] conversations’.⁶² He went on to say that, without the traditional rulers at the table ‘...We can’t meaningful conversations’.⁶³

According to these interviewees, traditional rulers are extremely important actors within the socio-political environment, with an intimate knowledge of their communities who should be included in any negotiations. They are able to bring in marginalised and side-lined groups; without them, conversations would be meaningless. This is an important function, as it draws a multitude of potentially important actors to the table, granting voices to those that are needed and necessary.

While the power and influence of traditional rulers is seen in a positive light, it can also have negative implications. Gatekeeping can also be a limitation and a restriction. One government official interviewed pointed out how the intimate knowledge that traditional rulers have regarding the various actors could potentially be dangerous: ‘...traditional rulers know the people within their domain. If a strange person comes, they know. They even know the criminal’.⁶⁴

Extrapolating from this statement, it becomes obvious that a traditional ruler who knows criminal elements could gain power from withholding that information from legal investigators, or providing sanctuary for criminals, either to protect them or to use them for illegal purposes.

Furthermore, according to the same government official, traditional rulers not only have the power to grant access, they can also block or deny access to the communities: ‘They [external actors] must consult traditional rulers. If the traditional rulers say, “no, this is not good for my people”, they can’t move forward with it’.⁶⁵

This was echoed by a member of an NGO, who noted:⁶⁶

‘In the farmer/herder conflict, a lot is resting on the chief to help to restore some normalcy and to bring the conversation to the table. When you meet with them, they will tell you that, ‘My people say, let’s talk with them, we’ll talk with them. My people say let’s not talk, we will not talk’. ...Traditional rulers are very powerful because they are the ones who connect with the bottom level of people in the community. So, whatever you are going to do, without them involved, you are sure to have failure’.

It is clear, from these statements, that the gatekeeping role that traditional rulers play is seen as very powerful. Without the buy-in or blessing of traditional rulers, any attempts to engage with communities invariably end in failure. This is borne out in some scholarly works which support the view that traditional rulers wield much power and authority and are key to the success or failure of elections, projects and initiatives within the community.⁶⁷

In addition, traditional rulers’ gatekeeping role can inadvertently keep their communities isolated from outside influences and actors, leaving those communities reliant on the traditional ruler. This evokes questions on who is being ‘secured, from what and by which means’.⁶⁸ While in some respects, this isolation shelters the communities from the corruption of foreign ideas, it at the same time leaves the communities vulnerable and alienated from the wider world. It may also deprive communities of aid, resources, information and development. This stance can also be detrimental because it limits access to – and joint efforts with – other marginalised and vulnerable actors.⁶⁹ Actors outside the ambit of traditional rulership who are not vouched for by traditional rulers are viewed with distrust, suspicion, and even hostility. It also means that the burden of responsibility for communities’ well-being rests squarely on the shoulders of traditional rulers. For better or worse, traditional rulers occupy the central point for communities.

Despite these important roles that traditional rulers play, they are portrayed by mainstream literature as on the periphery of formal governance practice, owing to academe's fixation with formalised state structures and international institutions and actors. This is in contrast to the importance placed on local actors such as traditional rulers within their own communities. It is this contrast which underscores the non-traditional analysis of this article. It directly questions the prioritisation of mainstream discourses⁷⁰ and posits that traditional rulers, while on the periphery of formal governance practice, actually have more power and currency within their communities than other formal actors, like the state.

Traditional rulers as critical stakeholders

Traditional rulers are also perceived as critical stakeholders in northern Nigeria, both as leaders in their communities and as providers of services such as security, governance and mentorship.

In personal interviews with representatives from two NGOs, traditional rulers in the north were referred to as 'very significant'⁷¹ and 'influencers'.⁷² Traditional rulers are reported to have a significant impact on, and relevance to 'everyday life, especially in the north'.⁷³ This facilitates trust and builds relationships within the communities.

Traditional rulers are also critical stakeholders because of the ways they are able to support the state in dispensing governance in the north. As pointed out by a number of NGOs that work in the north-east, not only does the state look to traditional rulers for support, they also 'recognise' the power and prestige that this position holds.⁷⁴ In one interview,⁷⁵ the respondent commented thus:

'Now, they [traditional rulers] are not necessarily recognised in the constitution as a governance structure, but they are recognised more as a supportive structure for governance, because of the kind of power and voice they wield'.

This was also pointed out by a previous government official:⁷⁶

'So, it made it easy for the traditional institutions to have a role to play, because if you have a government that is using traditional rulers to take decisions... and government found those useful, even to become policy... then you can see they were being carried along and they were also critical stakeholders who gave ideas that were useful'.

Another NGO respondent went further, noting that ‘the traditional rulers hold more power, because...political office holders...need their support to get what they want in government politics.’⁷⁷

Even though the state views traditional rulers as only part of a ‘supportive structure’, there is a recognition that traditional rulers are important for governance in the north. Their value, power and voice make it difficult to entirely dismiss or leave them out of the discourse on security and governance, for instance.⁷⁸ Traditional rulers thus seem to be essential actors and the state, as well as other actors, are aware of how ‘useful’ they are.⁷⁹

Traditional rulers and security and justice in northern Nigeria

The critical role of traditional rulers in governance involves multiple spheres including administration, security and justice. This article will specifically focus on the spheres of security and justice in northern Nigeria. According to several sources interviewed during this study, traditional rulers are the first line of defence when it comes to security issues within their communities.⁸⁰ However, in order to ‘maximise the potential’ of traditional rulers in providing security services, ‘both to the people and to the state government’, they must be properly positioned.⁸¹ This entails establishing channels of communication, so that they are able to ‘send messages to contain any security threats in those areas’.⁸²

As gleaned from further interviews, communities seem to have ‘more confidence in’ traditional rulers than in other institutions i.e. NGOs, law enforcement officials etc, and the people ‘listen to’ and trust them.⁸³ Traditional rulers are said to wield more influence and ‘have a lot to offer’ in terms of security because they are ‘closer to the people’.⁸⁴ This was confirmed in statements by an NGO worker and a government official, who both said that the state often uses traditional rulers to relay and demystify programmes and initiatives. In the view of the former interviewee, the state knows how invaluable it is ‘to find a way to work with traditional rulers’.⁸⁵ This implies that without the mediating role of traditional rulers, the communities would be less likely to listen to actors, like the state, or take their programmes and initiatives seriously. It leaves the state, seemingly, at the mercy of the traditional rulers.

Within the judicial sphere, traditional rulers contribute to administering justice in the communities. In one interview, a previous government official commented on how pronouncements made by traditional rulers hold significance not only for the communities, but for the traditional rulers themselves.⁸⁶

‘Whenever the traditional institutions have made a pronouncement on a case in a community,...if it [is] not based on justice and truth, the traditional ruler himself will have his own stool placed in jeopardy. And if they [traditional rulers] pronounce justice based on truth and factual issues, and if you don’t obey, the gods will also deal with you. So, it [the pronouncement] was highly respected, and the society was much better in terms of obeying the traditional institutions.. And so, the traditional institutions were seen as the final court of arbiter for the common man. And people were happier’.

A member of an INGO corroborated this by stating:

‘They [traditional rulers] have their limitations but are considered to be very effective in dealing with ...cases of wife battery and gender-based violence... .The community leader[s] met with members of [the] traditional leaders’ council, and they came up with a policy in which any man who beats his wife would be brought to the traditional rulers’ council. The public would be there, and he [the wife beater] would be given 100 strokes with a cane. Since they started that [giving 100 strokes], the cases of wife battery stopped. Every man who wants to do it, wouldn’t do it because he doesn’t want to be embarrassed. It’s not the pain of the cane, it’s the embarrassment, the public disgrace and all that. [The communities] said, for them, it is their traditional way of dealing with issues’.⁸⁷

It is clear from this interview excerpt that, unlike their attitude toward the formal court system, people are more willing to listen and accept the judgments and pronouncements made by traditional rulers. The communities believe that these judgements and pronouncements are based on ‘justice and truth’ and therefore more ‘effective’.⁸⁸ These pronouncements and any accompanying public shaming are also enough of a deterrent – through ‘embarrassment, the public disgrace’ – to dissuade people from doing things that would threaten the overall safety and stability

of the community.⁸⁹ At the least, generalised understandings of governance miss the nuance that takes place on the ground through this form of justice, it is here argued.

Beyond security and justice issues

As critical stakeholders, traditional rulers also go above and beyond the prescripts of their role and duties in justice and security. During one interview, a local government official in northern Nigeria remarked that traditional rulers often try to assist the people.⁹⁰ The same local government official also added ‘the present Emir Sanusi reviewed the salaries of the Dogarai’,⁹¹ going as far as to ‘demolish a large part of the old houses within the Emir palace, build new ones for those who inherited those houses, and reviewed their salaries at the same time’.⁹²

Additionally, the local government official stated that:⁹³

‘I think he [Sanusi] had a foundation to assist and give out scholarships to those who are less privileged to obtain education... . You know, the politicians are at loggerheads with him because he believes that, if you empower the people and encourage the people, you won’t have any problems. But they [the politicians] are spending the money on infrastructure, building bridges and making Kano modern. He [Sanusi] said no.

A member of an NGO also confirmed these statements, saying:⁹⁴

‘They [traditional rulers] encourage especially the youth. You know, young people are very unpredictable, and they are also the worst hit because they are largely unemployed... [W]hen conflict starts...[the youth] are [the] ones whose educational pursuits are disrupted. And they are the ones who run farms, get their farms destroyed. Traditional rulers help to see that they are empowered...to provide them with the seedlings and to provide alternative skills for them to be engaged. Also, they [traditional rulers] promote human capital development in their own way. They don’t need [to] use they monies per se, but they put pressure [on government].

These excerpts show how intimately involved traditional rulers can be in the quality of life of those they have authority over, as well as in the general well-being of the community. However, while

the foregoing section describes the positive aspects associated with traditional rulers, there are also negative implications seen in their continued roles.

Negative views of traditional rulers

Looking historically, it becomes clear that after Nigeria's independence in 1960, the reverence and respect for traditional rulers began to wane in some quarters. There were many who viewed them with distrust and suspicion.⁹⁵ While some saw no further need for traditional rulers, others lost faith in these non-state actors altogether, describing them as 'anachronistic, retrograde', 'reactionary', 'parasitic' and 'corrupted' – out of line with the new African vision after colonialism.⁹⁶

According to an official from an NGO that operates in the north, the modern era changed the way in which people perceived and understood traditional rulers:⁹⁷

'Over time, that [referring here to the law of the herders] changed. People felt: "I don't need to really take permission from anybody". Others became a bit stubborn. And so, these permissions were not set over time, and people just move freely'.

This set of statements clearly contrast with the notion expressed in the previous sections that pronouncements made by traditional rulers are absolute and upheld by all. This disregard of the 'law of the herders'⁹⁸, for instance, has created opportunities for conflict and added to the already simmering tensions in the north. The changing times and the erosion of customs may partially explain why there have been flare ups between the herders and farmers in the north.⁹⁹ They may also explain why traditional rulers are side-lined, in view of their inability to effectively mediate and/or mitigate these kinds of conflicts.

Thus, while on the one hand traditional rulers are considered powerful and respected by many, there are concerns about their rule. According to an official from an NGO who works in the northeast, where traditional rulers remain influential enough to sway and convince their communities, traditional rulers have the potential to weaponise their influence to 'convince' their

communities ‘to accept or reject’ even those changes which may not be beneficial.¹⁰⁰ In a sense, their word is absolute, but at the same time, they can be corrupt.

When this is the case, traditional rulers have been seen as a threat to the very communities they are supposed to serve and protect. Their absolute power allows them to exploit their close relationship and proximity to their communities, according to this view.¹⁰¹ This view is corroborated by one traditional ruler who noted that:¹⁰²

...there are occasions when traditional rulers [have] been accused of being part of the security problem in other regions. Now, it’s a very complex system... I’ve seen situations where they [traditional rulers] are actually in control of the territory. They know a lot of things that happen there and sometimes you find that those that you call traditional rulers, are security threats to an environment.

This section highlighted how by changing the lens of focus on the referent object, we see first how crucial non-state actors like traditional rulers are to governance in northern Nigeria – and then some of the negative aspects of that critical stakeholder role. Traditional rulers are a pillar of governance in northern Nigeria that cannot be discounted, set aside, or forgotten, it is here argued, and thus their contribution and voices should have significance within the practice of and literature on governance. At the same time, questions arise about the execution of their roles and the dangers of corrupt leadership.

More broadly, the discussion provides a platform for challenging the exclusion of non-state actors in governance in northern Nigeria; traditional rulers, while central to the workings of the communities, are excluded from formal and legal interpretations of governance.¹⁰³ By the same token, it is important to note how the state, and other formal governance actors, are often sidelined from the informal workings of the communities, a domain in which traditional rulers reside and thrive.

Implications of the duality of traditional rulership in northern Nigeria

In this article, we have seen how traditional rulers are described as being both revered and reviled. Traditional rulers occupy a space of duality within governance.¹⁰⁴ They are part of a ‘complex and multifaceted’ institution.¹⁰⁵ They command respect, ‘power and influence’.¹⁰⁶ Traditional rulers

have been able to endure and ‘adapt to [the] changing political order of the postcolonial period’.¹⁰⁷ However, there are those who question ‘the desirability and legitimacy of traditional authority in modern forms of governance’.¹⁰⁸ They question how compatible these kinds of systems and rulers are with modern, ‘democratic rule of law’, as well as how these institutions can exist and work alongside modern and largely European ideas of statehood¹⁰⁹

What does become clear in the research is that, on the ground and among the communities, traditional rulers are significant and important. They are at the heart of their communities, and their importance cannot be downplayed. The state and international organisations are also intimately aware of how powerful traditional rulers are and what they mean for society and Nigeria.

A non-traditional governance approach introduces non-state actors like traditional rulers as a focus of inquiry and analysis. The interviews in this article illustrate how traditional rulers have a role to play in promoting unity and peace within their domain. They explore the positive and negative implications of the governance of traditional rulership. They also show that there is a need to re-evaluate and open up governance practice to allow for multiple types of actors, from different contexts, to add value and nuance to governance, reflected as well in the literature and discourse. By focusing on one such actor, traditional rulers, we can see how they are ‘agents of conflict resolution’, as well as ‘security managers’ and champions of the youth, among many roles.

Conclusion

This article provided a glimpse into one form of governance within Africa: traditional rulership in northern Nigeria. It sought to fill a gap in the governance literature and discourse, considering that a large part of discussions around governance are Western- or Eurocentric. This unfortunately leaves out many alternative and non-traditional ways of understanding and viewing governance. Their inclusion is important if scholars are to counter the hegemony of traditionally focused governance.

The article analysed the ways in which traditional rulers showed up as gatekeepers and critical stakeholders within northern Nigeria, and provided a brief assessment of the duality of traditional rulership, as a form of governance in Nigeria. It concluded that while traditional rulership is both

revered and reviled within various communities, their influence is evidenced in the views of many of the interviewees. Unlike the traditional narrative on governance which prioritises the state and international organisations as the main repository of governance power, traditional rulers are here given their due. It becomes clear that traditional rulers can hold sway over community responses, leading either to success or failure of governance initiatives. In short, non-state actors such as traditional rulers have a nuanced and pivotal role to play within the governance of a state.

¹ Salami Issa Afegbua & Kehinde David Adejuwon, 'The Challenges of Leadership and Governance in Africa', *International Journal of Academic Research and Social Sciences* 2, no. 9 (2012): 141–157; Georg Lutz & Wolf Linder, *Traditional Structures in Local Governance for Local Development* (Berne: Bank Institute's Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion Learning Program, 2004).

² Francesco Colona & Rivke Jaffe, 'Hybrid Governance Arrangements', *European Journal of Development*: 1–9 (2016); Lutz & Linder, *Traditional Structures in Local Governance for Local Development*, 16.

³ This data was gathered in the course of the author's doctoral research at the University of Pretoria.

⁴ Afegbua & Adejuwon, 'The Challenges of Leadership and Governance in Africa': 145; Francis Fukuyama, 'Governance: what do we know, and how do we know it?', *Annual Review of Political Science* 19, no. 1 (2016): 89–105.

⁵ Afegbua & Adejuwon, 'The Challenges of Leadership and Governance in Africa': 145.

⁶ Michael Bratton & Rothchild, 'The Institutional Bases of Governance in Africa', In *Governance and Politics in Africa*, ed. by Goran Hyden & Michael Bratton, (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992); Georg Hyden & Michael Bratton, *Governance and Politics in Africa* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992); Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, 'The Eight Modes of Local Governance in West Africa', *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (2011): 22–31.

⁷ Kenneth Booth, 'Security and Emancipation', In *Security Studies*, ed. by Christopher W Hughes & Lai Yew Meng, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2011); Bratton & Rothchild, 'The Institutional Bases of Governance in Africa', 265; Dele Oluwo, 'Local Institutional and Political Structures and Processes: recent experience in Africa', *Public Administration and Development* 2 (2003): 41–52.

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