

African traditional institutions



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As the second largest continent in the Earth, Africa may best be described as a land of diversity (Stock et al 2009). Comprising 53 African countries, it is safe to assume that the continent is no stranger to fragmentation. This fragmentation has greatly influenced the governance, economic development and culture of Africa. Despite the colonial rule brought on by the Europeans in the continent, a large chunk of Africa still follows the traditional institutions (Economic Commission for Africa 2009).

By tradition, this can be taken to denote customs and traditions that have been passed on from generation to generation. As everyone knows, culture, or the accumulation of behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, values and ideals are integral in shaping a particular culture (Ember and Ember 161).

Furthermore, it is said that the shared experiences of a society, which forms its basic personality, is the result of the society's primary institutions (such as the family) and its secondary institutions (represented by religion and art) (407). Africa, given its diversity, has plenty of customs and traditions.

In spite of the wide breadth of African culture, the African traditional institutions take two forms: decentralized and centralized.

In most parts of Africa, traditional institutions were decentralized in issues regarding, political, society and economics (Economic Commission for Africa 2009). By decentralized, this means that the bulk of power and authority was based on consensus decision (2009). Instead of adhering to a strict hierarchy, differences were settled through negotiations.

In doing so, the rights of the individuals are taken into consideration (2009).

In addition, it prevented disparities between the people and those enforcing

the rules. On the downside, going through negotiations would go slow, eating up a lot of time.

Examples of African communities that have decentralized institutions included the Ibo in Nigeria, the Oromo in Ethiopia and Kenya, Tseo and Lango of Uganda, Tonga of Zambia and the Neur of Southern Sudan (2009).

On the other spectrum lied the king and monarchy of African traditional institutions, subscribing to centralization. There were no negotiations, instead there were chieftains, ruling over everyone else (Economic Commission for Africa 2009).

One advantage of having a centralized system was that decisions were easily made. However, unlike the decentralized communities, villages that followed this had difficulty conducting a check and balance precisely because there would be no third-party, no objective figure. Accountability was difficult to achieve. The Abyssinia in Ethiopia and Rwanda were examples of villages that followed absolute power. In some cases, authority was handed down by a council (2009).

Both the consensual (decentralization) and chieftaincy (centralization) systems greatly influence the colonialism of Africa. For instance, villages following the consensual system would not easily accept modernity, as represented by the colonial state for abiding them would negate everything they believed in.

The colonial State attempted to persuade decentralized traditional systems by creating chieftaincies and enforcing rules but was unsuccessful (2009). The same outcome happened with centralized traditional systems.

Africans' sense of identity has been rooted in traditional institutions that altering them prove futile. Traditional institutions, whether decentralized or centralized, have been ingrained into African society so much that the people have a lack of adaptive capacity.

This means that Africans are not able to assimilate any foreign idea. This is rather interesting for traditional African institutions are actually entrenched in modern, democratic ideas such as consultation and accountability.

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