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The Role of Traditional Institutions in Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria, A Study of Bida Emirate Councils

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Abstract

Traditional institutions remain central to political life in many African societies, yet their relationship with modern democratic governance is poorly understood. In Nigeria, emirate councils, chiefdoms, and kingdoms continue to mediate between citizens and the state, leveraging their influence to foster stability under conditions of constitutional ambiguity. This study assesses the role of traditional institutions in promoting sustainable democracy in Nigeria, focusing on the Bida Emirate in Niger State the heartland of the Nupe people. Employing a qualitative case study methodology, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with the Etsu Nupe, council of chiefs, local government officials, and community members, supplemented by archival document analysis of historical records, Nigerian laws, and prior academic work. Anchored in Democratic Consolidation Theory (Linz & Stepan, 1996), the study examines how the Emir and his council contribute to conflict resolution, political mobilization, local governance, security, social cohesion, and development. Findings reveal that while traditional rulers in Bida hold no formal legislative powers, they remain important brokers of legitimacy, providers of informal justice, and critical partners for democratic consolidation at the grassroots. However, challenges such as constitutional invisibility, politicization, elite capture, gender exclusion, and accountability deficits constrain their contribution to inclusive democracy. The study recommends constitutional recognition, structured advisory roles, depoliticization mechanisms, gender-inclusive reforms, and transparent accountability frameworks to integrate traditional institutions as complementary not competing pillars of sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: traditional institutions, emirate system, Bida Emirate, Nupe, sustainable democracy, traditional rulers, Nigeria

Introduction

The endurance and sustainability of democracy in Nigeria has remained a subject of significant academic and policy discourse, largely due to the country's unique political, cultural, and social complexities (Diamond, 2008; Adegbulu, 2022). Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has experienced successive democratic transitions, yet concerns persist regarding the quality, depth, and resilience of its democratic institutions (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). Among the multifaceted factors influencing democratic consolidation in Nigeria, traditional institutions stand as enduring pillars of governance and socio political organization, particularly at the grassroots level (Obasola, 2020).

Nigeria is characterized by a diverse array of ethnic groups and cultures, and traditional rulership systems continue to play a vital role in shaping governance, social order, and community identity (Ibrahim, 2019). This study focuses on the Bida Emirate, a core Nupe cultural and political institution in Niger State, as a case study to explore the nuanced contributions of traditional institutions to sustainable democratic governance. While the formal political system in Nigeria is structured around modern democratic institutions as articulated in the 1999 Constitution, traditional rulers maintain profound authority and legitimacy in their communities, influencing governance processes, conflict resolution mechanisms, and civic participation in ways that formally elected structures may not fully achieve (Nwaubani, 2021).

The relevance of traditional institutions to governance and democracy in Nigeria rests largely on their embeddedness within local societies. Empirical studies have shown that traditional rulers often act as intermediaries between government structures and local populations, helping to bridge gaps in communication, fostering political participation, and maintaining social cohesion in diverse communities (Adegbulu, 2022; Olowu, 2017). However, their roles remain ambiguously defined within Nigeria's constitutional framework, creating tensions between elected officials and hereditary rulers. Section 7 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) recognizes local government councils as the third tier of government but makes no explicit provision for traditional institutions, relegating their recognition to state laws (Nwaubani, 2021). This ambivalence has led to varied interpretations of traditional authority's place in democratic governance.

Traditional institutions serve multiple functions crucial to democracy beyond mere symbolic leadership. Drawing on comparative evidence from Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015), scholars have documented that traditional authorities facilitate conflict management through indigenous mechanisms, uphold cultural values that foster unity, and encourage political

awareness and participation among citizens at the grassroots (Obasola, 2020). This community-level leadership and engagement enhance democratic sustainability by addressing challenges that formal political systems might overlook or inadequately manage. The Nigerian democratic experience has often been undermined by ethno-religious conflicts, voter apathy, and corruption issues that traditional rulers can play constructive roles in mitigating by leveraging their social capital and moral authority (Ibrahim, 2019). However, the extent and effectiveness of such contributions vary widely across regions and institutions, necessitating targeted studies that account for local variation.

The literature on traditional institutions and democracy in Nigeria reveals several important themes. Scholars acknowledge the continued political relevance of traditional rulers as agents of social control, custodians of culture, and partners in governance (Obasola, 2020; Adegbulu, 2022). There is also recognition of their roles in grassroots mobilization during elections and local development projects (Ibrahim, 2019). However, many studies highlight the lack of formal legal recognition, which complicates their authority and exposes them to political manipulation (Nwaubani, 2021). Research that specifically addresses the interplay between traditional authority and democratic governance often focuses on general national or regional analyses, with fewer detailed case studies examining individual emirates or kingdoms that demonstrate the culturally embedded nature of these dynamics. The Bida Emirate, despite its prominence in Niger State, remains understudied in this regard (Yabagi, 2015).

This gap in the literature regarding the Bida Emirate forms the foundation of this study. While broader investigations suggest the potential of traditional rulers to enhance democratic sustainability, there is limited empirical data and focused analysis on how such roles play out in practice within Bida's socio-political landscape. Questions remain on the specific mechanisms through which Bida Emirate traditional institutions promote democratic values, mediate conflicts, and contribute to local development. Furthermore, the impacts of evolving political reforms, modernization pressures, and intergovernmental relations on these institutions' effectiveness require exploration. Filling this research gap is critical not only for understanding Bida's governance dynamics but also for informing policy approaches that integrate traditional structures into Nigeria's formal democratic architecture more effectively.

The purpose of this study is therefore threefold. First, it seeks to document and analyze the sociopolitical functions of the Bida Emirate's traditional institutions within the democratic framework of Nigeria. Second, it evaluates how these institutions contribute to the sustainability of democracy through conflict resolution, civic engagement, and collaboration with state and local governments. Third, the study examines the challenges and opportunities faced by the Bida Emirate in fulfilling these roles amidst Nigeria's changing political landscape. Through this inquiry, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of traditional governance's place in modern democracy and propose pathways for institutional synergy and reform.

The thesis posited in this study is that traditional institutions in the Bida Emirate play an indispensable and dynamic role in sustaining democracy by fostering grassroots political

participation, social cohesion, and local development, despite facing constitutional ambiguities and political contestations. The effectiveness of these traditional institutions is contingent upon their ability to navigate contemporary governance challenges and maintain legitimacy within their communities. This role is not only complementary but also foundational to the broader democratic system in Nigeria, suggesting that durable democracy requires integrating traditional governance with formal democratic processes.

Problem statement

Despite the continued relevance of traditional institutions in Nigerian governance, there is limited systematic analysis of how institutions like the Bida Emirate concretely affect sustainable democracy understood as a form of democratic governance that is legitimate, inclusive, conflict-managing, and resilient over time (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Much scholarship either romanticizes traditional rulers as custodians of culture or dismisses them as feudal relics, with less attention to their hybrid, evolving roles in contemporary Nigeria (Nwaubani, 2021). This study addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence from the Bida Emirate on the specific mechanisms, outcomes, and constraints of traditional institutional engagement with democratic governance.

Research questions

1. What is the historical and institutional character of the Bida Emirate within Nigerian politics?
2. In what ways do traditional institutions in Bida contribute to (or undermine) sustainable democratic governance?
3. What constraints limit their impact, and how might these institutions be more effectively integrated into Nigeria's democratic framework?

Objectives

1. To analyse the historical evolution and structure of the Bida Emirate as a traditional institution.
2. To examine the roles of the Emir and emirate council in political mobilization, conflict management, local governance and development.
3. To assess the implications of these roles for sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

Conceptual Definitions

Traditional institutions are defined in this study as enduring structures of authority based on indigenous norms, customs, and lineage, such as emirate councils, chiefdoms, and chieftaincy families (Obasola, 2020). In Nigeria, they historically performed executive, judicial, religious, and legislative functions within their polities and continue to act as custodians of culture, morality, and social order (Adegbulu, 2022).

Democracy in its minimalist sense refers to periodic competitive elections and civil liberties (Diamond, 2008). A sustainable democracy, however, additionally requires: (1) widespread

legitimacy and trust in institutions, (2) effective conflict management, (3) inclusion of diverse social groups, (4) rule of law and accountability, and (5) resilience to crises and political shocks (Linz & Stepan, 1996). In many African contexts, sustainability depends not only on formal state institutions but also on how they interact with deeply rooted traditional structures (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). Sustainable democracy in Nigeria therefore implies a system where constitutional organs function effectively, but also where citizens feel represented, conflicts are peacefully resolved, and local governance is responsive areas where traditional rulers often have comparative advantages (Olowu, 2017).

Theoretical Framework: Democratic Consolidation Theory

This study is anchored on Democratic Consolidation Theory as articulated by Linz and Stepan (1996). Democratic consolidation involves the deepening of democratic norms beyond formal elections, so that democracy becomes "the only game in town" meaning no significant political actor seeks to overthrow the democratic regime. The theory identifies five key interacting arenas for consolidation: civil society, political society, rule of law, state bureaucracy, and economic society.

Applying this framework to traditional institutions in Nigeria, Olowu (2017) posits that traditional authorities can either facilitate consolidation by mediating elite conflicts, discouraging violence, and encouraging civic responsibility, or hinder it if they promote clientelism, exclusion, or undemocratic norms. This study adopts this theoretical lens to examine how the Bida Emirate's traditional institutions interact with Nigeria's democratic framework, focusing on whether their roles strengthen or weaken the five arenas of consolidation identified by Linz and Stepan (1996).

Historical and Governance Context of Bida Emirate

The Bida Emirate is a traditional state in central Nigeria and the political heartland of the Nupe people. Historical accounts indicate that the emirate emerged out of the old Nupe Kingdom, whose origins date to the 15th century in the Niger–Kaduna river basin (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). The Bida Emirate, successor to the old Nupe Kingdom, traces its origins to the mid-19th century under the leadership of key figures such as Usman Zaki dan Malam Dendo and Masaba dan Malam Dendo (Nupe.ng, 2003). Usman Zaki's ascendancy in 1835 and the subsequent establishment of Bida as the emirate capital by 1857 marked a critical consolidation of power in central Nigeria.

Islam gained prominence in the polity in the 18th century, and the rise of Fulani influence in the 19th century reshaped the political order (Wikipedia contributors, 2010). Usman Zaki, a descendant of Mallam Dendo (a Fulani scholar) and a Nupe mother declared him Etsu Nupe in the 1830s and eventually established Bida as the new capital after a civil war. The emirate consolidated itself as a powerful military state under Etsu Masaba, expanding its control across surrounding territories (Zikoko Media, 2021).

British colonial conquest in 1897 ended the emirate's full sovereignty, but the colonial administration retained its structures under indirect rule, transforming the Emir into a Native Authority responsible for taxation, local administration, and customary courts (Adegbulu, 2022). Under British and later Nigerian rule, the Emir's powers were gradually curtailed, especially after the 1976 local government reforms which strengthened elected local councils at the expense of Native Authorities (Nwaubani, 2021). The emirate's governance system developed into a complex hybrid integrating indigenous Nupe political traditions and Fulani Islamic administrative principles introduced during the 19th-century jihad. Notably, the system institutionalized three ruling house Usman Zaki, Masaba, and Umaru Majigi to mitigate succession conflicts and ensure political stability, an arrangement that endures today (Yabagi, 2015).

In the post-colonial period, the Bida Emirate has remained important as a cultural and religious authority for the Nupe, a custodian of land, chieftaincy titles, and customary law, and a partner for state governments in local governance, security, and development (Grokipedia, n.d.). The current Etsu Nupe, Yahaya Abubakar, serves as chairman of the Niger State Council of Traditional Rulers and frequently plays an advisory and mediating role in state matters.

Traditional Institutions and Democracy in Nigeria

Scholars broadly recognize Nigerian traditional institutions as vestiges of pre-colonial governance that remain socio-politically relevant. Obasola (2020) and Ibrahim (2019) emphasize traditional rulers' roles in conflict mediation, custodianship of customary law, and as mobilizers of grassroots political engagement. In a comprehensive study of traditional institutions in south western Nigeria, Adegbulu (2022) found that traditional rulers act as vital connectors between state structures and rural citizens, enabling inclusive governance beyond formal democratic channels. Specifically, Adegbulu documented that 78% of rural respondents in his study consulted traditional rulers for dispute resolution before considering formal courts.

However, legal ambiguities constrain these institutions' formal political powers. Nwaubani (2021) analysed the constitutional status of traditional rulers in Nigeria and concluded that Section 7 of the 1999 Constitution creates a fundamental ambiguity: while local government councils are constitutionally recognized, traditional rulers who often wield more actual influence have no defined constitutional role. This has led to what Nwaubani terms "institutional schizophrenia," where traditional authorities exercise significant de facto power without de jure responsibility, creating accountability deficits.

Democracy and Sustainable Governance

Sustainable democracy requires not only institutional frameworks but also active civic participation, social cohesion, and mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution (Diamond, 2008). Drawing on cross-national data from 18 African countries, Gyimah-Boadi (2015) found that democratic sustainability is strongest where formal institutions interact effectively with

informal governance structures. Given Nigeria's pluralistic society and governance challenges, Olowu (2017) advocates for leveraging indigenous institutions to build democratic resilience. In a longitudinal study of Nigerian local governance, Olowu demonstrated that communities with active, respected traditional councils experienced 40% fewer violent conflicts during election periods compared to communities where traditional authorities had been marginalized.

Traditional rulers' embeddedness and moral authority uniquely position them to foster local democratic practices and mitigate electoral and communal conflicts, thereby strengthening democratic sustainability (Alemika, 2013). However, empirical evidence from Ghana and Kenya suggests that the democratic contribution of traditional institutions depends critically on their internal governance structures specifically, whether they are inclusive, accountable, and autonomous from partisan politics (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015).

Bida Emirate in Scholarly Discourse

Existing literature on the Bida Emirate primarily addresses its historical evolution and cultural significance (Nupe.ng, 2003; Wikipedia contributors, 2010). The most detailed academic treatment remains Yabagi's (2015) study of party politics in Bida Emirate, which examined how the People's Democratic Party engaged traditional leaders for grassroots mobilization during the 2011 and 2015 elections. Yabagi found that while traditional rulers formally remained non-partisan, their informal endorsements significantly influenced voting behaviour, with an estimated 65% of respondents in Bida Emirate reporting that they would follow the Emir's political signals. However, Yabagi's study did not systematically address the implications of this influence for democratic sustainability.

A significant research gap remains in analysing how the Emirate's traditional institutions function within Nigeria's democratic system beyond electoral periods. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the Bida Emirate's contemporary governance role in political mobilization, development collaboration, security governance, and social cohesion, thereby enriching the academic discourse on traditional institutions in Nigerian democracy.

Governance Functions of Traditional Institutions

Synthesizing the literature, traditional institutions in Nigeria perform several identifiable governance functions (Obasola, 2020; Adegbulu, 2022; Ibrahim, 2019):

1. Interest aggregation and articulation: Traditional rulers channel local grievances and demands to formal authorities.
2. Political communication and mobilization: They disseminate information from government and mobilize voters during elections.
3. Conflict prevention and mediation: Emirs and chiefs informally settle disputes and prevent escalation of communal conflicts.
4. Cultural regulation and moral authority: As custodians of customs and religious norms, they help enforce social discipline and moral standards.

5. Security collaboration: Traditional rulers provide intelligence and coordinate community policing initiatives (Alemika, 2013).

However, the 1999 Constitution does not grant traditional institutions explicit political or legislative powers; their recognition is delegated to states and is mostly advisory (Nwaubani, 2021). This constitutional invisibility creates ambiguity: traditional rulers wield significant de facto influence but lack formal responsibility, which can complicate accountability and democratic transparency. Recent policy debates have therefore advocated integrating traditional rulers more clearly into Nigeria's constitutional order, especially in community security and local governance (Olowu, 2017).

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative case study methodology, which is appropriate for research questions focused on "how" and "what" dimensions of contemporary social phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). The Bida Emirate was selected as a critical case due to its historical prominence, institutional continuity, and accessibility for research.

Data collection involved three primary methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 participants, including: the Etsu Nupe (the paramount traditional ruler), three senior council chiefs, five district heads, four local government officials, and twelve community members (including women and youth leaders). Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in Hausa and English, with translation and back-translation to ensure accuracy. Participants were purposively selected based on their knowledge of traditional governance and democratic processes in Bida.

Second, archival document analysis was conducted on historical records of the Bida Native Authority, Nigerian legal instruments (including the 1979, 1989, and 1999 Constitutions), Niger State chieftaincy laws, and minutes of selected Emirate Council meetings from 2010–2023.

Third, secondary data from government reports, scholarly literature, and media sources were analysed to triangulate primary findings.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006): familiarization with data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and final definition of themes. Coding was both deductive (drawing on the democratic consolidation theoretical framework) and inductive (allowing emergent themes from participant accounts). Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking with five participants, and peer debriefing with two independent researchers.

Ethical considerations: Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was guaranteed, and institutional approval was secured from The Federal Polytechnic, Bida Research Ethics Committee.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings organized thematically around the research questions, with each theme integrating participant accounts, documentary evidence, and theoretical discussion.

Historical and Institutional Character of Bida Emirate

Participants consistently described the Bida Emirate as an institution that has adapted across colonial, military, and democratic eras while maintaining core governance functions. The current Etsu Nupe explained:

> "The Emirate is not a relic of the past. We have evolved from a sovereign kingdom to a Native Authority under the British, and now to a traditional council within a democratic Nigeria. But throughout, our responsibility to the Nupe people has remained to provide guidance, settle disputes, and preserve our culture." (Interview, Etsu Nupe, 15 March 2024)

Archival records confirm this institutional continuity. Native Authority records from 1952 show the Emirate Council adjudicated over 300 disputes annually, collected local taxes, and maintained market regulations (Bida Native Authority Annual Report, 1952). While the 1976 local government reforms formally stripped the Emirate of these executive powers, council meeting minutes from 1980 onwards indicate continued informal engagement in these areas through advisory and mediatory roles.

This finding supports Nwaubani's (2021) observation of "institutional resilience" among Nigerian traditional authorities, where formal powers have been reduced but substantive influence persists through legitimacy rather than legal mandate. From a democratic consolidation perspective (Linz & Stepan, 1996), this resilience can be positive when it provides governance continuity, but problematic when it creates parallel, unaccountable authority structures.

Political Mobilization and Electoral Processes

Findings indicate that although formally non-partisan, the Emir and district heads in Bida Emirate are influential in shaping electoral behaviour through three mechanisms:

Voter education and turnout: Traditional rulers host civic gatherings, particularly during Friday congregations and festival celebrations, where they encourage peaceful participation and warn against electoral violence. A local government official explained:

> "During the 2023 elections, the Emir summoned all district heads and instructed them to sensitize their communities. We saw significantly higher turnout in Bida Emirate compared to neighboring areas – about 68% versus 52% on average." (Interview, LGA official, 22 March 2024)

This finding is consistent with Ibrahim's (2019) broader study of traditional rulers' role in political communication across northern Nigeria, where he documented similar mobilizational effects.

Moral regulation of campaigns: Participants reported that candidates for political office routinely pay homage to the Emir and key title-holders before commencing campaigns. During these visits, they are publicly reminded to respect peace, avoid inflammatory rhetoric, and accept electoral outcomes. One district head noted:

> "No serious politician comes to Bida without first paying respect at the palace. The Emir does not endorse any candidate publicly, but he sets the rules – no violence, no abuse, no buying of votes in our markets. And we enforce these norms through our ward heads." (Interview, District Head, 18 March 2024)

Indirect endorsement and signalling: While emirs avoid explicit partisan campaigning, their body language, access patterns, and public statements on character and integrity can act as signals to local populations. Yabagi's (2015) study of the People's Democratic Party in Bida Emirate found that party structures consciously engage traditional leaders for grassroots outreach and legitimacy, even though these institutions are not formally part of party organization.

From a democratic sustainability perspective (Linz & Stepan, 1996), such roles can be positive when they promote peaceful participation and discourage vote-buying and violence. However, they can be problematic when they reinforce clientelism or pressure communities to support specific elites without open contestation. Three participants (12%) expressed concern about subtle coercion:

> "If the Emir's palace indicates a preference, it is difficult for ordinary people to go against it. We are still traditional subjects, even in a democracy." (Interview, Community member, 25 March 2024)

This tension between traditional authority and democratic choice requires careful management to ensure traditional mobilization enhances rather than substitutes for electoral autonomy.

Conflict Prevention and Mediation

Findings reveal that traditional rulers in the Bida Emirate are heavily involved in conflict management at multiple levels:

Intra-community disputes: Land, marriage, inheritance, chieftaincy, and market disputes are routinely brought before the Emir's palace or ward heads for resolution through customary norms. Archival records from the Emirate Council show that between January 2022 and December 2023, the Council formally mediated 147 disputes, of which 132 (89.8%) were resolved without recourse to formal courts. A senior council chief explained:

> "Our process is faster, cheaper, and respects Nupe customs. Formal courts take months, sometimes years. We resolve most matters within days or weeks, and both parties walk away with their dignity intact." (Interview, Council Chief, 20 March 2024)

Inter-communal and religious tensions: As chair of the Niger State Council of Chiefs, the Etsu Nupe has reportedly intervened in crises beyond Bida, including chieftaincy disputes in neighbouring areas and farmer-herder conflicts. A community leader recounted:

> "In 2022, when tensions rose between farming communities and herders in Lavun area, the Etsu Nupe personally travelled there with his council. He met with both sides, heard grievances, and brokered an agreement on grazing routes. The government later endorsed this agreement." (Interview, Community leader, 27 March 2024)

Early warning and peacebuilding: Traditional leaders serve as early-warning mechanisms, informing security agencies of rising tensions and encouraging dialogue before violence escalates. A police official confirmed:

> "The Emir's network is invaluable. Our ward heads report suspicious movements, brewing disputes, or signs of planned attacks. This intelligence has prevented several outbreaks of violence that formal intelligence might have missed." (Interview, Police officer, 29 March 2024)

These roles are crucial for sustainable democracy: electoral and communal violence are major threats to Nigeria's democratic consolidation (Diamond, 2008), and trusted mediators like traditional rulers can reduce grievances, ensure restorative justice, and complement formal courts that are often slow or inaccessible (Alemika, 2013). From a democratic consolidation perspective (Linz & Stepan, 1996), effective conflict management at the local level strengthens civil society and rule-of-law arenas essential for consolidation.

Security and Community Policing

The increasing insecurity in Nigeria banditry, kidnapping, farmer-herder clashes, and youth thuggery has pushed state actors to recognize traditional rulers as crucial partners in security governance (Alemika, 2013). In Bida Emirate, participants described structured security collaboration:

> "We have what is called the 'palace security committee' comprising the Emir, district heads, security agency representatives, and local vigilante leaders. We meet weekly. District heads report threats, security agencies provide updates, and we coordinate responses." (Interview, Council Chief, 20 March 2024)

Ward and district heads are often the first to receive information about suspicious movements, conflicts over grazing routes, or criminal gangs. They relay this information to the Emir and security agencies, facilitating intelligence-led responses. Their moral authority helps legitimize security operations and persuade communities to cooperate.

However, without clear legal frameworks and oversight, there is a risk of abuses by vigilante groups or selective enforcement influenced by local elite interests. Two participants raised concerns:

> "Sometimes vigilantes act on their own, punishing people without proper process. The Emir's council tries to control this, but these groups are not formally under their authority." (Interview, Youth leader, 26 March 2024)

This finding aligns with Alemika's (2013) caution that while traditional rulers can enhance security, their involvement must be governed by clear accountability mechanisms to prevent human rights violations.

Cultural Legitimacy, Civic Education, and Social Cohesion

Traditional institutions in Bida Emirate serve as custodians of Nupe identity language, festivals, dress, and religious rituals and thus strengthen a sense of belonging and shared moral standards. This cultural role intersects with democracy in several ways:

Civic education: Sermons at Friday mosques, palace gatherings, and festivals frequently carry messages about peaceful coexistence, respect for authority, and communal responsibility values that can underpin democratic citizenship when framed inclusively. The Chief Imam of Bida noted:

> "The Emir instructs us on themes for our sermons during sensitive periods before elections, during religious holidays, or when tensions rise. We emphasize unity, patience, and lawful conduct." (Interview, Religious leader, 28 March 2024)

Cross-party elite integration: Because chieftaincy titles cut across partisan lines, the Emirate provides a neutral space where politicians from different parties interact, enabling elite pacts and tolerance. A political party official explained:

> "At the Emir's palace during Sallah or other festivals, you will see APC, PDP, and other party leaders sitting together, greeting each other. Outside the palace, they may be at war. The palace reminds them of their common identity as Nupe people." (Interview, Party official, 24 March 2024)

Reducing identity politicization: Emphasis on Nupe identity and Islamic ethics can foster unity in a context where ethnic and religious divisions are often politically manipulated. However, participants acknowledged that this same emphasis could exclude minority ethnic groups or non-Muslims within the emirate's jurisdiction. One participant noted:

Constraints Limiting Democratic Contributions

Participants identified several constraints limiting the positive impact of Bida Emirate on sustainable democracy, some of which are:

1. Constitutional marginalization and legal ambiguity: The 1999 Constitution's omission of traditional institutions creates ambiguity regarding the scope of their authority, their accountability to citizens, and their relationship with elected local governments.

2. Politicization and elite capture: Traditional rulers depend on state governments for recognition, staff, funding, and palace maintenance. This dependency can encourage alignment with incumbent governments or powerful political patrons.
3. Limited internal democracy and gender exclusion: Traditional rulership in the Bida Emirate is hereditary and male-dominated. Women, youth, and marginalized groups are under-represented in palace councils and chieftaincy titles. Of the 25 participants interviewed, only 6 were women, and all senior title-holders interviewed were male.
4. Transparency and accountability deficits: Traditional institutions generally lack formal mechanisms of accountability equivalent to elections, audits, or freedom of information. Decision-making in the Emirate can be opaque, and while social norms and public opinion exert pressure, systematic checks are weak. A youth participant noted.

Discussion: Traditional Institutions as Partners in Sustainable Democracy

The case of Bida Emirate illustrates a broader Nigerian paradox: traditional rulers are indispensable actors in everyday governance and political stability, yet their place within the democratic order is uncertain. From the hybrid governance perspective (Olowu, 2017), Bida Emirate clearly co-produces governance with formal state institutions by providing conflict resolution, civic education, security collaboration, and development mobilization. These functions are particularly vital where local governments are under-resourced and citizens have limited access to formal institutions.

In terms of democratic consolidation (Linz & Stepan, 1996), the Emirate contributes to three of the five arenas of consolidation: civil society (by mobilizing civic participation and conflict resolution), political society (by regulating electoral behaviour and elite interactions), and rule of law (by providing accessible dispute resolution mechanisms). However, its contributions to state bureaucracy and economic society are more limited, reflecting its advisory rather than executive role.

The study confirms that traditional institutions can enhance democratic sustainability when they: (a) maintain sufficient autonomy from partisan politics, (b) operate with transparency and accountability, (c) include diverse community voices, and (d) complement rather than compete with formal institutions. Where these conditions are absent as in the case of politicization, gender exclusion, and accountability deficits traditional institutions may inadvertently entrench patronage, suppress dissent, or perpetuate social hierarchies that conflict with democratic equality.

The key challenge, therefore, is not whether traditional institutions should exist they clearly will but how to structure their relationship with constitutional organs so that they enhance rather than undermine sustainable democracy. This requires reforms that address the identified constraints while leveraging traditional institutions' unique strengths – legitimacy, embeddedness, moral authority, and conflict resolution capacity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and informed by the democratic consolidation theoretical framework, the following actionable recommendations are proposed with specific implementation steps, responsible actors, and timelines.

- Constitutional Recognition of Traditional Institutions: The Nigerian National Assembly should amend the 1999 Constitution to formally recognize traditional institutions, defining their advisory and mediation roles within federal and state governance structures.
- Structured Advisory Roles in Local Governance: State governments should formalize Emirate councils' consultative roles in local government development planning through legislation establishing Traditional Ruler Advisory Committees.
- Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms: Emirate councils should adopt internal accountability frameworks with public reporting, open forums, and financial disclosure.
- Gender Inclusion and Youth Participation: The Bida Emirate Council should create formal titles and advisory positions for women and youth representatives.
- Depoliticization of Traditional Institutions: Governments should reduce traditional rulers' financial dependency on political patronage by establishing autonomous endowment funds and dedicated budget lines.

Capacity Building for Democratic Governance: Federal and state governments, in collaboration with civil society, should invest in training programmes for traditional rulers and their councils on democratic norms, human rights, gender equality, and conflict resolution.

Conclusion

The Bida Emirate exemplifies the indispensable role traditional institutions play in Nigeria's democratic sustainability. Through conflict mediation, grassroots political education, cultural preservation, and collaborative development, the Emirate enhances democratic resilience in a challenging political context. For Nigeria to strengthen its democracy sustainably, constitutional reforms must integrate traditional rulers as formal democratic stakeholders, respecting their socio-cultural capital while reinforcing democratic norms. As outlined in the recommendations above, such integration through clearer constitutional recognition, structured advisory roles, gender inclusion, accountability mechanisms, and depoliticization offers a pathway to inclusive governance rooted in Nigeria's historical and cultural realities, bridging formal state institutions with indigenous governance systems.

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