

The Complementarity of Merging the Roles of Local Government, Traditional and Religious Authorities in Ghana's Decentralisation Framework – Prospects for the Reset Agenda

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Introduction

In the context of Ghana's developmental agenda, particularly under H.E. President John Dramani Mahama's RESET initiative, traditional authorities are seen as critical partners in achieving socio-economic transformation. To formalize the role of traditional authorities in the local government system, practical institutional arrangements must be implemented. These include granting traditional leaders' formal representation in District Assemblies, establishing collaborative frameworks between Traditional Councils and District Assemblies, and investing in capacity-building initiatives. Additionally, clear operational guidelines should be developed to facilitate smooth cooperation between traditional and administrative leaders. Such integration would harness the cultural legitimacy and grassroots connection of traditional rulers, thereby enhancing community engagement, improving governance outcomes, and promoting participatory development at the local level.

This is the impetus that has been brought to another chapter of Ghana's decentralisation journey within the context of embracing who we are as a people; and how our diverse traditions have always been and intended to be a part of our formal governance system.

*A review of Ghana's legislative framework reveals key laws governing local governance. The **1992 Constitution of Ghana**, particularly **Articles 240 to 243**, outlines the principles and structure of decentralization. Notably, the **Local Governance Act, 2016 (Act 936)** establishes the legal basis for the creation and operation of District Assemblies, replacing the earlier Local Government Act, 1993 (Act 462). The **Chieftaincy Act, 2008 (Act 759)** further regulates the roles and functions of traditional authorities within the governance system. In this context, the establishment of a Ministry that merges Local Government, Chieftaincy, and Religious Affairs is a timely and strategic move, promoting a more integrated approach to governance and cultural leadership.*

This paper focuses on how the Chieftaincy institution can be leveraged to advance our decentralisation agenda and promote effective and inclusive development at the local level. It outlines the "EXPECTED" role/functions in the newly established Ministry of Local Government, Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs (MLGCRA).

Historical Relevance

Chieftaincy dates back in history and it is associated with movement of people from different places to the present day Ghana. The British who colonised the Gold Coast recognized its uniqueness and made use of it in what became known as INDIRECT RULE. Recognising the important role of the Chieftaincy institution in the lives of the people, the institution has been given due RECOGNITION by H.E. President Mahama's NDC government as part of its RESET AGENDA to revamp the Ghana Local Government system (E.I. 1, 2025).

Traditional Authorities dates back centuries and predates modern forms of governance- played role in shaping the identity and resilience of their communities. Indeed, Traditional Authorities have been instrumental in fostering unity and safe-guarding cultural heritage, ensuring that communities remain connected to their roots. Primarily, the function of the Chief was to rule for social stability, community cohesion and order, as well as to bring Development to the people.

Chieftaincy dates back in history and it is associated with movement of people from different places to the present day Ghana. The British who colonised the Gold Coast recognised its uniqueness and made use of it in what became known as the INDIRECT RULE. More importantly, the Chieftaincy institution remained an important focal point for cohesion.

The 1992 Constitution establishes a non-partisan Local Government System, recognising Customarily Law and Traditional Roles, hence, protecting Ghanaian Cultural Practices. Specifically, Article 11(3) of the 1992 Constitution which made provisions for recognising customary law, indicating that “customary law” means the rules of law which by custom are applicable to particular communities in Ghana. Article 11(3) is therefore an essential part of Ghana's Legal system, while Article 26(1) guarantees the right of communities to preserve and practice their cultural heritage.

Article 270, clause 1 of the 1992 Constitution is express and unambiguous. Thus, “the institution of chieftaincy, together with its traditional councils as established by customary law and usage, is hereby guaranteed.” To further demonstrate the seriousness of the provision, Parliament is disempowered to enact any law that “confers” or

“Withdraws recognition” to or from a chief (including queen-mothers).” Customary processes regulate chieftaincy affairs.

Empirical evidence shows clearly that there has been a lot of institutional arrangements to strengthen the chieftaincy institution in Ghana. It is therefore imperative that we take cognizant of such government aim to strengthen the chieftaincy institution.

In spite of the development of the chieftaincy institution, one may ask:

1. Have we in the past had any major chieftaincy conflicts in the country?

The answer is, yes! We have in the past had four major conflicts in the Northern part of the country which cost thousands of lives and destruction of property worth millions of cedis. In the early 1980s, during the government of President Dr. Hilla Limann we saw the Nanumba Konkomba conflict and the Gonja-Vagla conflict. During the time of Mr. J. J. Rawlings and the

PNDC we saw a conflict involving Dagomba, Gonja, Mamprusi, Nanumba on one hand and the Konkomba, Nawuri, Nchummuru etc on the other. Lastly, during the time of President Kufuor in the 2000s, we witnessed a major conflict, internally among Dagombas, between Abudu-Adani after the tragic death of the Ya-Na, Yakubu Andani II.

2. What was the chieftaincy system in place in all these cases?

During the era of President Limann, it was the Chieftaincy Secretariat. Likewise, during the era of President Rawlings, it was the Chieftaincy Secretariat. During the time of President Kufuor, it was first the Chieftaincy Secretariat and then later the Chieftaincy Ministry.

3. What is a chieftaincy Secretariat or Ministry?

It is an office which serves as a bridge between traditional rule and central government. Normally, it is headed by a Presidential Staffer or Secretary as was the case during Presidents

Limann and Rawlings' times or, a Minister of State as was the case in the latter part of President Kufuor right up to the time of President Akufo-Addo. The staff of the office are civil servants recruited and trained by the government to assist chiefs to carry out their statutory duties.

The Chieftaincy Secretariat or Ministry has administrative oversight over all houses of chiefs and traditional councils in Ghana. It is a special place for chiefs. It has to be noted that chiefs in Ghana

are not at all supposed to eat or drink in public. However, if a chief or queenmother does so in the chieftaincy secretariat or ministry, he or she is deemed not to have done so in public. The office belongs to the government but it is also more or less a palace exofficio for the chiefs and queenmothers.

During chieftaincy conflicts, the Chieftaincy Secretariat or Ministry plays a crucial role in promoting trust, through behind-the-scenes diplomacy, between disputant chiefs as well as between chiefs and government. Indeed, during the above-mentioned conflicts, it is worthy of note that when the Asantehene accepted to lead in the struggle to settle the conflict in Dagbon for instance, chiefs across the country were all together with him moving in one direction like one silent army on a peace-keeping mission.

4. When was the Chieftaincy Secretariat established and why?

It was established in 1971 under the government of Prime Minister Prof. Busia. The reason for its establishment was to guarantee the independence of the chieftaincy institution. Its establishment in 1971 was, in fact, a reenactment of the status quo ante under the colonial regime where there was the Office of Native Affairs established in 1901 and directly administered by the Governor. It is an undeniable fact that during the first Republic under President Dr. Nkrumah, chieftaincy was under the Local Government Ministry, and the general view is that, this situation brought about interference in the chieftaincy institution by the government or state.

Let us not forget that the Act 81 which was passed under the government of President Nkrumah defined a chief as a person who has been enstooled or enskinned and has received Executive recognition. What this meant in effect was that the rightful heir to a stool or skin could not become a chief if he did not receive Executive recognition.

It is important to note that the Act 370 which was passed under the government of Prime Minister Busia, in its definition of a chief, did not at all mention Executive recognition.

Likewise, the Act 759 passed during the government of President Kufuor which is the chieftaincy law in force, does not also require Executive recognition to become a chief.

In Ghana's Local Government system, traditional rulers, do not have a formally recognized role or function, though they have representation on the District Planning Coordinating Units (DPCUs) of the Assemblies and observers at the General Assembly level. While they may have cultural influence and serve as Community Leaders, they do not hold official positions or powers within the LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM.

Undoubtedly, Traditional Rulers are integral to the cultural and spiritual fabric of the country. Traditional Rulers/ Authorities are Cultural Guardians - acting as Cultural custodians of cultural heritage, preserving and passing on traditions, customs and oral histories from generation to generation. They also hold "spiritual" roles, overseeing or participating in religious rituals, ceremonies or practices maintaining connections to ancestral beliefs and gaining spiritual matter.

The Role and Significance of Traditional Leaders

While many some school of thoughts, influenced by the evolution of governance and modern democratic ideals, often view feudalism and traditional authority as outdated, empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Traditional leadership continues to play a crucial role in many communities by preserving culture, fostering social cohesion, and promoting unity among the people. Despite the advanced level of modern political systems, traditional authorities retain a unique and enduring place in society, serving as a vital bridge between heritage and contemporary governance.

Rooted in history and culture, Traditional Rulers often serves as Custodians of traditional culture and community values- their influence extends beyond administrative functions, shaping the moral fabric of their communities and fostering Unity. Unlike modern political leaders,

Traditional Authority is often deeply rooted in spiritual and historical significance. Though Traditional Authorities role is not merely ceremonial, they actively contribute to community governance and development. Traditional Rulers act as cultural custodians by protecting the cultural identity and oversee ceremonies of festivals and rituals that celebrate heritage and instill

pride in the younger generation. Their knowledge of oral history ensures that traditions are preserved and passed on.

Traditional Rulers are Mediators and Conflict Resolvers. Their role in communities where access to formal legal system may be limited. Traditional Authorities mediate disputes and maintain harmony within their decisions guided by Customary Law, often prioritising RECONCILIATION over PUNISHMENT. As Development Agents, Traditional Rulers play a crucial role in "mobilising" resources such as Schools, Clinics and infrastructure.

The integration of traditional authority roles must align with Act 936 of Ghana's Local Governance Act, which outlines the pillars of decentralization—administrative, fiscal, and planning. Chiefs can enhance compliance with these pillars by facilitating grassroots participation, supporting fiscal responsibility, and contributing to district-level planning and economic strategies. Moreover, they can play a vital role in resolving boundary disputes that arise from inconsistencies between traditional and administrative demarcations. Their historical insights and community authority position them as trusted mediators, capable of aligning traditional boundaries with modern administrative frameworks.

The Evolving Role of Traditional Authorities.

As societies modernise, the role of Traditional Authorities continues to evolve while some critics question their relevance in contemporary Governance. Many argue that Traditional Authorities complements modern systems in communities where government may struggle to reach rural areas, Traditional Rulers fill critical gaps by providing LEADERSHIP and ensuring stability. As our Governance system evolves, it is important we adopt to MODERN CHALLENGES without losing sight of Traditional Values- our Chiefs remain relevant in rapidly changing societies by embracing Education and fostering INCLUSIVITY.

Today, Traditional Rulers are increasingly involved in Social-Economic Development- they collaborate with Assemblies, NGOs to address issues such as POVERTY, EDUCATION, HEALTH. This partnership ensures that development efforts are Culturally sensitive and Community driven.

Chiefs play a critical role in land administration—a key enabler of economic development. Under Ghana's current land tenure system, traditional leaders are central to land allocation for agriculture, infrastructure, and investment. They are also responsible for managing land disputes, ensuring sustainable land use, and maintaining land banks. These land banks can attract investment, support local development projects, and generate revenue for both traditional authorities and local governments. By leveraging these capabilities, the integration of chieftaincy into local governance frameworks becomes an effective strategy for achieving balanced regional development and resource optimization.

Challenges Faced by Traditional Authorities

Despite their enduring importance, Traditional Authorities face several significant challenges in the modern era. One key issue is the **erosion of authority**; as urbanisation accelerates and communities become more exposed to global cultures, traditional values are increasingly diluted. This shift undermines the influence that Traditional Authorities once wielded within their communities. Additionally, many of these leaders operate in remote or underdeveloped areas, confronting a **lack of resources** that limits their capacity to address the basic needs and aspirations of their people effectively.

Another major challenge lies in **balancing tradition and modernity**. As Ghana continues to evolve under modern governance structures, Traditional Authorities are often required to engage with contemporary systems while safeguarding cultural heritage and practices. This delicate balancing act demands adaptability and innovation, ensuring that traditional leadership remains relevant and respected without compromising the authenticity of age-old customs.

Beyond these challenges, the lack of a clear role in the modern local governance structures besides recognition as the custodians of the land, hampers their role in effective local governance.

Overcoming the Challenges

The future of Traditional Authorities hinges on their ability to adapt and remain relevant in a rapidly evolving world. One key area is **embracing education**, which enables traditional leaders to effectively engage with modern governance systems and development processes. Additionally, **promoting inclusivity**; by giving women and youth a greater voice in community decisionmaking can strengthen their legitimacy and foster unity within their communities.

Moreover, Traditional Authorities can enhance their influence by **leveraging technology**, using digital platforms to communicate, preserve cultural heritage, and broaden their engagement. Finally, **collaboration with local government assemblies** is essential; strategic partnerships between traditional rulers and formal governance structures can lead to improved service delivery and more responsive local governance, ultimately benefiting the people they serve.

District Assemblies that are co-terminus with parliamentary constituencies face challenges such as conflicting development priorities, overlapping responsibilities, and competition for limited resources. These structural issues can be mitigated through improved communication, clearly defined roles, and collaborative planning between constituency and assembly leadership. Traditional rulers can act as neutral facilitators to bridge these divides, ensuring that development efforts are harmonized and community interests are safeguarded.

As indicated earlier, though the 1992 Constitution recognized the importance and significance of Chieftaincy in Ghana's Constitution, the Traditional Authorities role has been subdued and reduced it to a very "passive" role with its functions completely in abeyance. This situation whereby Chiefs are sidelined under the "impression" that Chiefs are banned from engaging in "politics" yet some of the political elites seek regular " COUNSELLING" to solve intractable disputes that politicians have failed to resolve.

Though we have a hierarchical institutional National House of Chiefs with its appendages in the Regional House of Chiefs and Traditional Council, their roles have been limited- there is also the palpable idea that Chiefs/traditional Rulers are not to meddle in "politics".

It is against the backdrop that H.E. John Dramani Mahama's integration of Chieftaincy in the Local Government System must be applauded.

THE EXPECTED OUTCOME OF THE NEW MINISTRY UNDER EI [12025](#).

It is expected that the new ministry would provide or will strengthen Ghana's decentralization framework to ensure that we put in place both the administrative and managerial structures to provide direct support for the chieftaincy and religious affairs in Ghana.

To fulfill the EI[12025](#) objectives, the merged Ministry of Local Government, Chieftaincy, and Religious Affairs could consider the following practical administrative/managerial structure:

It is being proposed that as a matter of urgency, the following action plans should be prioritize as part of the realignment of the EI[12025](#)

Departments:

- Local Government Department: Focus on decentralization, local governance, and district assembly management

- Chieftaincy Department: Handle traditional leadership, cultural affairs, and community engagement
- Religious Affairs Department: Foster interfaith dialogue, promote religious tolerance, and support faith-based initiatives
- Development Planning Department: Oversee development projects, budgeting, and monitoring and evaluation
- Finance and Administration Department: Manage ministry finances, human resources, and administrative services

Key Initiatives:

- Capacity Building: Training programs for district assembly members, traditional leaders, and ministry staff to enhance governance and development management
- Internally Generated Funds (IGF): Strategies to improve IGF collection and utilization at the district level
- Ghana Sustainable Cities Strategy (GSCS): Implementation of sustainable urban planning and development initiatives
- District Assembly Common Fund (DACF): Effective management and disbursement of funds to support local development projects^{1 2 3}

Implementation Framework:

- Clear Guidelines: Establishing guidelines for collaboration between traditional authorities, local government, and ministry officials
- Performance Monitoring: Regular monitoring and evaluation of ministry programs and projects
- Stakeholder Engagement: Engaging with local communities, traditional leaders, and other stakeholders to ensure inclusive decision-making

Funding Allocation:

- District Assemblies: Allocating a minimum of GH¢25 million to each district assembly to support local development projects
- Project Funding: Allocating funds for specific projects, such as market construction, water and sanitation, education, and health infrastructure.

Conclusion

Traditional Authorities play a vital role in preserving culture, fostering unity, and driving community development. The timeless values of wisdom, service, and adaptability that chiefs embody continue to guide and shape communities across Ghana. As custodians of history and culture, traditional leaders are far more than symbolic figureheads; they are active pillars of community life who nurture social cohesion, uphold customs, and promote collective identity.

Despite the challenges posed by modernization and evolving governance structures, the enduring relevance of Traditional Leadership lies in its ability to bridge the past and present. By embracing change while remaining grounded in heritage, chiefs can continue to lead their communities toward a brighter and more inclusive future. Their profound impact underscores the importance of honouring and supporting institutions like the chieftaincy, which remain essential to national unity and grassroots development.

The new Ministry integrating the role of Chieftaincy is timely, with Chieftaincy being an integral part of Local Government offers us the opportunity for the chiefs to full responsibility for their respective communities. It will also stop the current institutional arrangements that do not inform or consult the chiefs in the selection of companies "prospecting" for mining their communities.

The role of Traditional Authorities is crucial, particularly in addressing the ongoing illegal mining/ galamsey as the Custodians of the land. Chiefs can play a significant part in controlling/ eliminating the effects of galamsey. The Traditional Authorities can promote land use as a Chief can ensure that land is used responsibly and in accordance with laws and customs. It is instructive to note that by REGULATING Mining Activities, Traditional Rulers by working with Local Assemblies, chiefs can help regulate mining activities and prevent illegal operations.

This "timely" restructure of the Local Government also offers us the rare opportunity by educating communities about the dangers of Galamsey and promote environmentally friendly practice- the beating of the “*gong gong*” and the use of early morning announcements that the chiefs’ linguist/community spokespersons during early mornings sends undiluted messages to the local community on regular basis.

Undoubtedly, Chiefs can assist in eliminating galamsey by enforcing traditional laws and customs- to regulate land use and prevent galamsey. With their roles and functions now expressed in the new Ministry of Local Government, Chiefs will engage with their respective communities to raise awareness about the danger with galamsey and promote sustainable practice.

There is the need to establish a strong and effective Secretariat that will provide the administrative support to augment the structures put in place to advance the role of the Chieftaincy institutions at the new Ministry. This capacity building must be established in tandem with the re-alignment of the new Ministry of Local Government. Beyond this policy must be reviewed to facilitate the placement or inclusion of traditional authorities clearly within the decentralization framework of the country. The time is now, as the National Decentralization Policy and Strategy (NDPS) is being reviewed amidst ongoing consultations. We have a unique opportunity to change the narrative regarding effective local governance.

Central to effective governance, and by extension local governance is the 24-hour economy policy, which seeks to generate employment and drive inclusive growth. This requires a massive expansion of the agricultural value chain and industrialization; where stool and family lands under the control of Chiefs are pivotal.

The creation of the new Ministry of Local Government, Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs is a timely response that underscores the state’s recognition of the strategic value of traditional institutions in Ghana’s decentralized governance system.

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