

## NIGERIA

# Blending the old with the new

Jean-Marc Fleury

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, is undergoing another period of intense political activity. But, almost a decade after the civil war that threatened to break the country apart, it is peaceful politicking. The talk is of development, not secession, of ballot boxes rather than guns. The number of States has been increased from 12 to 19. A new constitution is being drafted. Thousands of councillors have been chosen to direct brand new local government structures. And, more recently, all traditional communities had to nominate chiefs whose solemn faces appeared in the country's newspapers.

According to Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo, head of the Nigerian military regime, all these efforts are aimed at reestablishing democracy on a firm footing in Nigeria before October 1979.

In the midst of all these changes, one reform could interest other African countries according to observers: it is the creation of new regional governments based on the participation of citizens and the collaboration of traditional rulers. The Nigerian military regime has set as one of its priorities the creation of local governments, which will become intermediaries between the traditional authority and the State governments.

The establishment of local governments is an innovation in Nigeria, whose regional administrators were, until recently, modelled on the British colonial system. Each State of the Nigerian Federation was broken down into divisions, each directed by a government appointed District Officer. Divisions were simple administrative extensions of the State government. After independence British District Officers were everywhere replaced by Africans, but there was still no provision for the participation of local citizens.

But now Nigeria has decided to experiment with new regional structures. All divisions and District Officer positions have been abolished and replaced by councils which blend citizen participation and the extension of State authority. Up to 25 percent of the local government's councillors can be nominated by the States, the other members of

the council are directly or indirectly elected by the people. (Indirect elections are decided by consensus). Lieutenant General Obasanjo himself insisted that geographic areas under each local government should bring together a sufficient number of people and enough resources to become an effective agent of development. But at the same time, local government units will remain small enough for the councils to respond to the needs of the local population. Local governments will also work closely with traditional chieftaincies in order to bridge the gap between the modern and the old structures. General Obasanjo has also expressed hopes that the local government elections will become a way of learning the democratic process at the grassroots level, ensuring the success of democratization at the national level.

In preparing all these reforms, the military regime first sought the opinions of the people. The large Nigerian intellectual community responded overwhelmingly by submitting many suggestions to be incorporated in the new constitution. Important among these was the study of the regional governmental structures of three states conducted by a team from the Political Science Department of the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, headed by Professor Eme O. Awa, and supported by the IDRC.

Professor Awa's team reviewed the regional administrative structures of East Central State (which has been divided into two States: Anambra and Imo) and South Eastern State (now Cross River State). The team's reports, published in 1975, before the military regime's own "Guidelines of Local Government Reform" were published in the summer of 1976, included many recommendations for the organization of the new local governments in these three new States.

During the Cross River survey, the researchers first examined the workings of the divisional administrations introduced by the State government. Although these new administrations had just been created when the survey began in 1975, the researchers noted that the Division Officers, the leading government officials in each division, were not fulfilling their role. According to law, each division was responsible for pro-

moting agriculture, encouraging the establishment of small enterprises and helping business. The field study showed, however, that agriculture was generally set aside and that Officers confined themselves to administration routine. Left to their own devices, the traditional communities were initiating many development projects, mainly concerned with services — roads, schools, post offices, hospitals and markets. Traditional rulers often played a first-hand role in these accomplishments, with the result that relations sometimes deteriorated between the Officer and traditional authority.

In general, the study concluded that traditional structures seemed to be more useful to the people than those set up by governments. The researchers therefore felt that any study of local government would need to study traditional institutions before new regional structures could be planned.


The University of Nigeria team, directed in the field by Professor Mazi Ray Ofoegbu, therefore began its study with an in-depth evaluation of traditional authority. In the course of this study, they discovered that some controversy existed about the legitimacy of traditional rulers, although the chiefs still enjoyed considerable prestige. Some of the people interviewed said that the age of chieftaincy had passed. According to them, traditional authority had been devalued because some chiefs were self-appointed usurpers who had profited from the departure of true chiefs as a result of the civil war. Also, before independence a number of rulers had been named by the colonial government, against tradition. And, more recently, some successful businessmen had literally bought the title of chief.

Nevertheless, the University researchers found that 90 percent of the people wanted the chiefs to remain. Even a large majority of State-appointed District Officers were in favour of keeping the chiefs. When asked why chieftaincies should be maintained, a first reason given was the role chiefs could play in the administration of justice and the keeping of law and order. Some said that each community needed a "father figure" and that without it the communities themselves would dissolve. Others said the chieftaincy was an institution that had to be preserved for future generations because it added a human touch to structures of authority and guaranteed the survival of traditions. Still others acknowledged the fact that chiefs combatted corruption, favoured the collection of taxes, and that by obeying them, citizens learned to respect the laws of the country.

The survey also emphasized the role of the chiefs as agents of progress. For example, the agaba ogbusulu (chief) Okechikelu Constantinu Manu, chief of Aku (near Nsukka) since 1938, likes to say that he invited missionaries to come

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## INSTALLATION CEREMONY AND FIRST OFALA OF



### Chief Ezedioramma Ositadimma Umenyiora I *The 1st Igwe Of Ogbunike*

His Royal Highness, Chief Ezedioramma Ositadimma Umenyiora I, The Umenyiora Family, The Installation Committee of the First Igwe of Ogbunike, the entire Ogbunike Community cordially invite all citizens of Anambra Division, Anambra State and the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the Installation Ceremony and the First Ofala of CHIEF EZEDIORAMMA OSITADIMMA UMENYIORA I AS THE IGWE OF OGBUNIKE on Sunday, December 26, 1976, at the Round House, Ogbunike, beginning at 10.00 a.m. prompt. All sons and daughters of Ogbunike at home and abroad are hereby requested to obtain further details from the Ogbunike Progress Union, The Ogbunike Mass Return Committee, The Ogbunike Council of Notables, The Ogbunike Youths Association and of course the Installation Committee of the 1st Igwe of Ogbunike.

**OGBUEFI DR CHUBA OKADIGBO,**  
(Chairman)  
INSTALLATION COMMITTEE,  
IMUERI VILLAGE,  
OGBUNIKE.

*The people's choice: solemn-faced chiefs appear in the country's newspapers.*

and build schools in his city, as early as 1945. He then enacted a policy of free education for everybody. He also remembers mobilizing, through contributions, a sum of 5,000 pounds for the boring of a well. Recently, he supported the construction of a college and launched a number of road construction projects. In the same way, Mr Patrick E. Onwege, Nsukka Urban Council's President, tells how his father, the chief of Mameze (another locality near Nsukka), once gave some of his land for the construction of the university, and invited priests to come to Nsukka to construct a church and a school. In fact, history shows that chiefs often competed with each other to attract missionaries and teachers, and that they were the first to send their children to school. On this evidence, the study concluded that it would be false to think that the chiefs' role was limited to maintaining traditions. They were, and could still be, an important factor in the process of modernization.

To maintain law and order, for example, the chief can enforce customary laws in accordance with modern pre-

cepts in order to settle disputes between husband and wife or quarrels over land ownership. Chief Constantinu Manu says that people prefer to put such problems before him. His assets are his great availability to the people and his knowledge of traditions, that help him to practice a justice more relevant to his people than that enacted by a European-trained magistrate. Candidates to Nsukka's local government, like Mr Lawrence U. Asadu and Mr Jerome Oziodko, also wanted the chiefs to continue to enforce the customary laws. They think, like chief Manu, for example, that chiefs should sit on First Instance Courts to interpret the customary law.

The researchers largely endorsed chief Manu's suggestions, and recommended that the modern chief assume a broad range of responsibilities not only in the judiciary, but also in the political, sociocultural and economic spheres. The economic responsibilities of chiefs, for instance, would be assumed in close collaboration with local administrations because it had been found in the past that the support of the traditional rulers had often made the difference between

success and failure. As an example, Professor Ofoegbu tells the story of a road project that was on the verge of being stopped because of a lack of fuel oil for the equipment. Neither the District Officer nor the President of the Regional Council at that time could find oil. As a last resort, the people went to the Obi, the village's chief. Two hours later, two barrels of fuel oil were delivered. He best knew the resources of his people!

The researchers, however, believed that despite its importance, the institution of chieftaincy was not adequate to undertake many of the development projects needed in modern Nigeria and that its limited resources could not guarantee the success of large-scale projects. The creation of a structure grouping many communities, situated between the traditional authority and the State government appeared to be essential. In some regions, mainly in the North, it was true that populous traditional communities coincided with regional divisions, but most of Nigeria's traditional communities could not gather enough resources to become powerful agents of development.

The University team therefore recommended that another structure, to be called Local Government, should be established to bring together many communities. According to the researchers, that structure should bring together from 50,000 to 200,000 people, a large enough grouping, but not so large that contact with the citizens would be lost. They also recommended in their report that the Local Government should make a considerable effort to obtain the collaboration of the traditional rulers.

The military regime adopted these recommendations in its "Guidelines of Local Government Reform" by officially recognizing the institution of chieftaincy. Each community was asked to choose a chief, in its own way, and the government declared that each chief would receive an annual salary of 1200 nairas (\$2,000). In return, the government now expects that chiefs will continue to support development projects and collaborate with the new local governments.

Established at the end of last year, these Local Governments are those recommended in the University report, gathering from 150,000 to 800,000 people, a bracket brought down to 100,000 and 350,000 in Anambra and Imo States, where people are used to living in smaller communities. But while Nsukka's political scientists had recommended that the new local authority be a two-tier government — the first tier being the regional council and the second, the rural or urban communities — the Federal government decided on a single tier Local Government in which the communities are subordinate to the Local Government Council because it

felt that this integration would ensure an even closer collaboration between the old and the new structures. Traditional rulers will, in fact, be mainly ad hoc councillors in different matters, for example, to the First Instance Courts and to Local Governments for the undertaking of economic projects.

In Nsukka, one colleague of the researchers compared the new Local Government to the urban communities that are being established in European countries. In Nigeria, the Local Governments will be responsible for health centres, primary education, the implementation of new agricultural techniques, water and sewer mains, roads, and the collection of taxes. Initially, it was expected that some of these responsibilities would be assumed by the State Governments. However, immediately after their establishment, some Local Governments had already started to collect taxes and to dispense primary education.

Concerning tax revenue for the Local Governments, the federal government guidelines went further than the researchers' recommendations, giving the Local Governments rights to all taxes collected on properties, motor vehicles and liquor permits.

According to Professor Ofoegbu, the opportunity given to the people to organize themselves is perhaps one of the most important aspects of the Local Governments. To show that the new structures were to play an important role, the federal regime voted credits totalling 100 million nairas (\$166 million) to the Local Governments' first year of operation. A large part of this sum will pay the salaries of councillors, set by the regime between 7200 and 4500 nairas.

The military regime had stated that all Local Government councillors had to be chosen before the end of December 1976. Each traditional community then had to elect a ruler, according to its own traditions, before the end of March 1977. In many States some criticized the nomination of a percentage of the councillors by the government, but elections were widely held, and even influential people sometimes lost. According to observers of the Nigerian scene, these two nationwide campaigns for selecting chiefs and electing LG councillors were considered a great success. They are a landmark in the reconciliation of Nigeria with one of its oldest traditions, the chieftaincy, while being the starting point of a completely new system of regional authorities.

Professor Ofoegbu is proud that many recommendations made by his group were implemented in the Guidelines. "One has to admit that it is still not democracy from top to bottom," he says, "but before everybody was only talking about war. Today we are arguing about a constitution and elections. This is already an important progress."

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