

SECTION

2

INDIGENOUS
SYSTEMS OF
GOVERNMENT IN
GHANA



GOVERNMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Indigenous and Contemporary Governance in Ghana

Introduction

Dear learner, welcome to another interesting section in the study of government. In this section there are two central approaches to the governance of the Ghanaian state. These are the indigenous and modern governance systems. Ghana has a rich history of indigenous systems of government. The section helps learners to understand the indigenous governance systems. The section specifically looks at four indigenous political systems and how their structural setups are in line with their native customs and laws. The section will further explore the role of traditional leaders in contemporary Ghana. Learners are challenged to apply concepts from this section to real life experiences and topics. At the end of this section, learners are expected to hold the Ghanaian values of respect and cooperation. The section has links with related subjects such as History and Social Studies.

Take time to read the content below.

At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Describe the structure of indigenous systems of government in Ghana I,II.
- Describe how traditional leaders contribute to the Socio-Economic development of Ghana.

Key Idea

Indigenous systems of government in Ghana existed before colonialism. The various ethnic groups were ruled by kings and queens in empires, kingdoms and chiefdoms. The mode of selecting these leaders is through an inheritance system either patrilineal or matrilineal. Ghana now combines modern and indigenous governance systems. The specific features of the indigenous governance systems differ across the various ethnic groups.

THE INDIGENOUS GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

The indigenous government system refers to institutional arrangements used in the administration of a society. Ghana indeed has a rich tradition of indigenous governance system. It is based on local knowledge, customs and traditions. Its existence and use are unique to different ethnic groups and societies. Examples of these groups include Mole-Dagbani, Ewe, Ga-Dangme and the Akans among others.

Characteristics of Indigenous Political/ Governance System

1. The choice of a leader is informed by the possession of some near superhuman qualities, such as behaviour or, intelligence.

The idea that leaders possess near superhuman qualities, behaviours, or intelligence is often associated with indigenous governance systems among various ethnic groups and cultures. These systems are built on the traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices of the people in the community. The customs and traditions shape how leadership is perceived among the members of the community.

Indigenous leaders are mostly believed to have a special connection to the spiritual world. To the indigenous people, leaders are chosen by the gods. For this reason, they may undergo rituals, ceremonies, or initiations to attain this connection, which grants them wisdom, insight, and guidance beyond ordinary human capabilities.

2. Recruitment to the office is based on ascription.

This means that the process of recruitment into the indigenous system is based on clan and lineage relationships. In traditional communities, individuals are chosen for leadership position based on their membership of a royal family deemed suitable for leadership according to the customary laws. This means that succession to the throne or a leadership position is by inheritance. In some cases, traditional criteria such as age, gender, or tribal affiliation may be considered to determine who occupy leadership positions.

3. The behaviour pattern of the leader is seen through tradition, myths and taboos.

Indigenous societies usually have rich oral traditions that are passed down through generations. These traditions include customary practices, rituals, and norms that govern various aspects of human life in the community. Leaders are expected to uphold and protect these traditions, and act as custodians of the culture. Taboos (social or religious prohibitions that regulate behaviour within indigenous communities.) are used to set boundaries of acceptable conduct in the community and often carry spiritual or moral significance. Leaders are expected to adhere to taboos and avoid actions that violate community norms or offend spiritual beliefs.

STRUCTURE OF THE INDIGENOUS SYSTEMS OF GOVERNMENT IN GHANA (MOLE-DAGBANI)

The Mole-Dagbani are in the northern part of Ghana and constitute the second largest ethnic group (18.5%). The sub-groups include the Dagoba, Mulumba, Mossi, and Mamprusi.

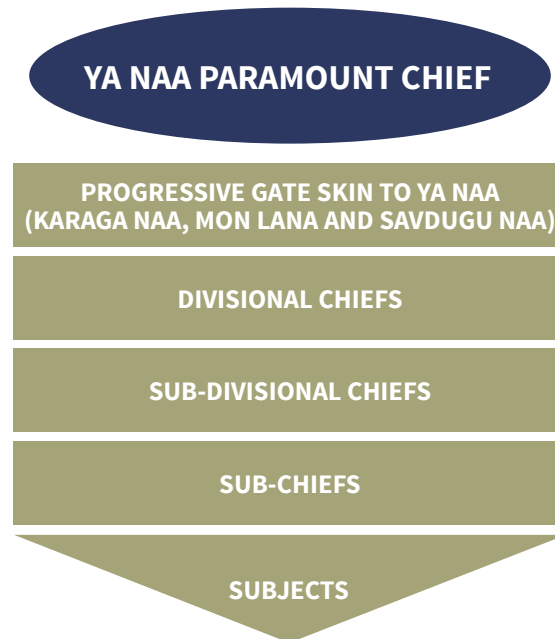


Fig. 2.1: Structure of the Mole-Dagbani

FEATURES OF THE MOLE-DAGBANI

1. A centralised system; power is in the hands of a single individual.

In the Mole-Dagbani political system power is concentrated in the hands of a paramount chief or king, often referred to as the Ya Naa in Dagbon. The system is structured in a manner that the paramount chief is occupying the highest position. Below the paramount chief are the sub-chiefs and other traditional authorities of the various chiefdoms who are all answerable to the paramount chief. The paramount chief makes all major decisions concerning land, governance and serves as the custodian of the indigenous culture

2. The existence of a Council of Elders.

The Mole-Dagbani political system features Council of Elders as a key aspect of the structure of government usually referred to as "Tindaamba" and "Nanima". They play an integral part in decision-making, land allocation, and the overall administration of the community. They are typically older members of the community who have demonstrated leadership, integrity, and knowledge of customs and traditions over time.



Fig. 2.2: Dagbon chief with his council of elders

3. Inheritance by patrilineal social organisation

In Mole-Dagbani society, descent and inheritance are traced through the male line. This means that children inherit their social status, property, and rights from their father's lineage. Leadership positions are often inherited along patrilineal lines. Chiefs, and other rulers, typically come from specific lineages or clans, and leadership succession is often determined by descent from the previous leader.

In all, inheritance through patrilineal social organisation is a fundamental feature of the Mole-Dagbani political system, shaping kinship structures, political leadership, economic practices, and social identities within the society.

4. Symbol of chiefly authority is the Skin

The authority of the chiefs of Mole-Dagbani political system is the animal skin. In the traditional enskinment of chiefs of Mole-Dagbani people in Ghana, a specific skin is used as a symbol of authority and legitimacy. The skin is typically from of a lion, sheep or cow. These are considered sacred and a symbol of strength, wisdom and leadership. The lion skin is used by only the Ya Naa which represents courage, bravery and loyalty. The skin symbolises the chief's connection to the ancestors and the community. It is believed that the chief serves as a mediator between the living and the spiritual world, ensuring harmony and balance between the two realms. Therefore, the skin is not merely a symbol of earthly power but also of spiritual authority and divine mandate.



A Lion skin



A Cow skin

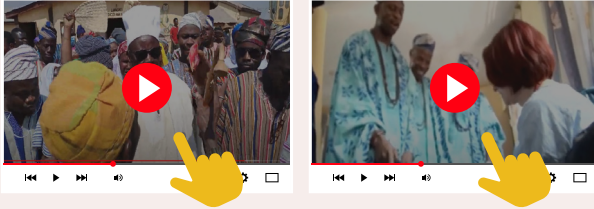


A Sheep skin

Fig. 2.3: The skin as a symbol chiefly authority

Activity 2.1

1. Watch a video or pictures of any ethnic group in Northern Ghana (e.g., enskinment of chief or festivals in the videos below



- a. Based on the video, describe the indigenous governance system of the Mole-Dagbani and share your observations with a colleague.
- b. Engage an elder in your community to speak to you about the main features of the indigenous governance system of your community, sharing firsthand information and experiences with you. Share that in class or with a friend.
- c. Based on your knowledge in activity two and three, discuss with a friend why indigenous governance systems are still important. Use the following to guide your discussion

Discussion guide:

- i. Economic importance
- ii. Religious importance
- iii. Cultural importance
- iv. Social importance
- v. Political importance
- vi. Family values and heritage

NB: Do well to write down your ideas and explanations and share with class or a friend.

INDIGENOUS GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS OF THE EWE

The Ewes are in the Southeastern part of the country, predominantly around the Volta River. They constitute the third largest ethnic group (about 12.8% of the population) based on the 2021 population and housing census.

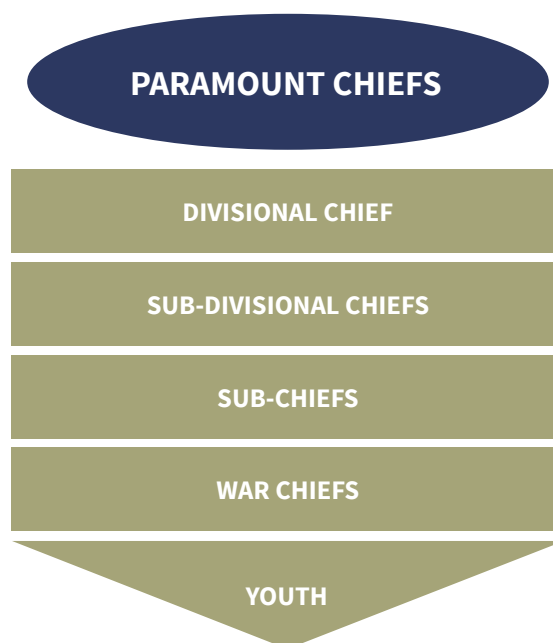


Fig. 2.4: Structure of the Ewe Group

FEATURES OF THE EWE POLITICAL SYSTEM

1. A centralised system: power lies with a single individual.

The Ewe political system is regarded as centralised because authority and decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a central authority i.e. the paramount chief. The paramount chief has influence and control over the subordinate chiefs. They serve as the highest decision makers in disputes resolution, law making, resource allocation and management including performance of rituals which are important to the Ewe culture.

2. Inheritance is patrilineal.

In the traditional Ewe political system, inheritance, and succession pass through the male line of the family. The system places emphasis on family ties in determining social status, rights and responsibilities.

Properties, titles and authority are passed down from fathers to their sons. Male children become a priority for every family as they are celebrated and regarded as a

blessing from the gods. The male child inherits basically everything that belongs to the father ranging from land, livestock, leadership position, and wealth including rights and responsibilities associated with their father's status. This is done to ensure the continuity of lineage and the preservation of the image and heritage. Chieftaincies and other roles of authority; are inherited by the eldest son or another designated male heir upon the death or retirement of the incumbent leader.

3. Symbol of chiefly authority is the Stool.

In the Ewe political system, the Stool is more than just a piece of furniture. In the process of selecting and installation of new chiefs, rituals and ceremonies are centered around the Stool. The newly installed chief sits on the Stool which signifies acceptance of leadership and blessings of the ancestors. The Stool is often passed down through generations within ruling clans.

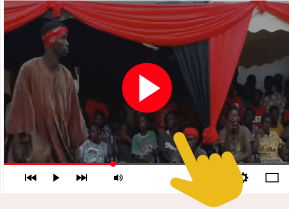
It serves as a symbol of unity among the Ewe group. It represents the authority, identity, and cultural heritage among the Ewe people



Fig. 2.5: An example of a traditional chieftaincy stool among the Ewe group

Activity 2.2

As a whole class, watch a video or pictures of the Ewe group (e.g. enstoolment of chief).



1. Based on the video, describe the indigenous governance system of the Ewe by noting down the main features. Share your observations with a colleague.
2. Now with your knowledge on the indigenous governance system for the Mole-Dagbani and Ewe, copy and complete the table below to show the similarities and differences between the Ewe and Mole-Dagbani systems of governance. Your teacher may ask you to present your findings to the rest of the class.
3. Complete this table to show the **differences** and **similarities** between the Ewe and the Mole Dagbani indigenous political systems

Similarities:

Mole-Dagbani	Ewe
Inheritance system is patrilineal	Inheritance system is also patrilineal

Differences

Mole-Dagbani	Ewe
The symbol of authority is the skin	The symbol of authority is the stool

INDIGENOUS GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS (GA-DANGME)

The Ga-Dangmes are in the southern part of the country (i.e., Accra plains) and make up the fourth largest group in the population about 7% based on the 2021 population and housing census.

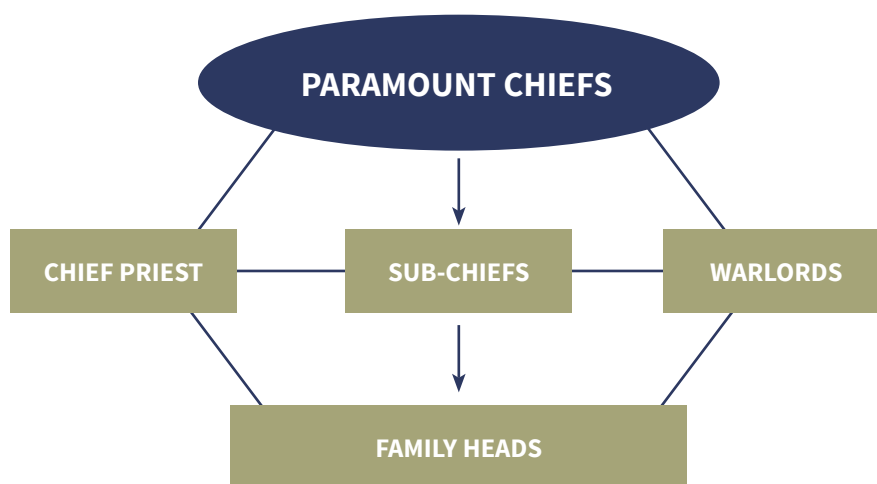


Fig. 2.3: Structure of the Ga-Dangme

FEATURES OF GA-DANGME INDIGENOUS GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

1. A theocratic political system

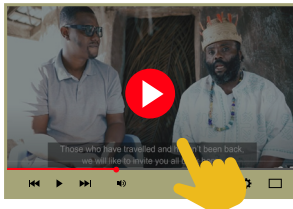
The Ga-Dangme indigenous political system is regarded as theocratic because it is deeply rooted in their cultural and religious beliefs. There are several theocratic elements in the traditional governance structure of the Ga-Dangme group, where spiritual leaders hold significant sway over political decisions.

In the theocratic political system within Ga-Dangme culture, religious leaders, often priests, play a central role in governance. These leaders are considered as the link between the people and the divine realm. The priests interpret religious doctrine and apply it to political matters, thereby shaping laws, customs, and societal norms based on religious principles.



Fig: 2.4: Gborbu Wulomo Shitse – Overlord of The Ga-Dangme State

The link below shows a video of the La Wulomo explaining the Ga tradition



2. Inheritance is patrilineal

Just like the Mole Dagbani system, inheritance in Ga-Dangme is also patrilineal.

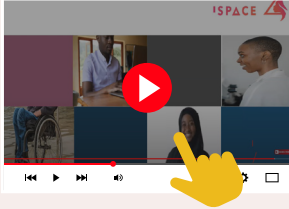
3. Symbol of chiefly authority is the Stool

In many traditional African societies, including the Ga-Dangme people, the Stool symbolises chiefly authority and represents the throne or seat of power. The Stool is not seen as a mere physical object but is believed to carry deep spiritual and symbolic significance. It represents the authority of the chief or king and is often used in ceremonies, rituals, and official functions to signify the presence and legitimacy of the chief's rule.

Engage yourself with the following activities after reading the above focal area

Activity 2.3

Click the links below to watch videos (e.g. enstoolment of chief/festivals any Ga-Dangme ethnic group)



<https://youtu.be/B80orxWnlal?si=sxZvBrL8kClrr98u> (Video isn't available anymore)

<https://th.bing.com/th?&id=0VP.9SJ8K1GblEcRulMXjWt-SgEsDh&w=240&h=135&c=7&pid=1.7&rs=1-> (Photo isn't available anymore)

1. Write down your observations, and use it to explain the indigenous government systems of the Ga-Dangme. Your teacher may ask you to present your findings to the rest of the class.
2. Based on your observations made from the videos in activity one, two and three, or knowledge from the notes above compare and contrast with the indigenous government systems of the Mole-Dagbani and Ewe
3. From the above video, discuss with your friend the structure of the Ga-Dangme Political system.

THE INDIGENOUS SYSTEMS OF GOVERNMENT (AKAN)

The Akan constitute the largest ethnic group in Ghana, i.e., about 45.7% (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021) and are predominantly located in the Southern and Middle belt of the country. The Akan is divided into many groups including the Nzema, Fante, Akyem, Akuapem, and Asante.

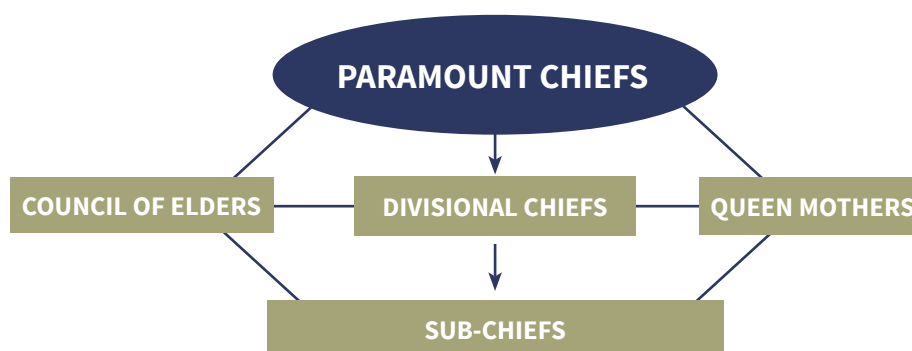


Fig. 2.5: Structure of the Akan

FEATURES OF THE AKAN GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

1. Centralised political system

The Akan indigenous governance system is hierarchical in nature with the paramount chief often called ‘Omanhene’ or ‘Amanhene’ on top of the structure. The paramount chief holds significant power over the entire Akan nation with a centralised decision-making authority. This means that, major decisions concerning the Akan nation as a whole are often made by the paramount chief or a council of chiefs and elders representing different regions. Resource mobilisation ‘taxation’ and distribution are also done by the central authority headed by the paramount chief. The paramount chief and other chiefs are the custodians of the Akan culture and traditions.

2. Inheritance is matrilineal

Inheritance among the Akan people in Ghana is traditionally matrilineal, which means children born of Akan parents inherit properties, titles and social status from their mother. The Akans are made up of individuals who trace their ancestry to their mothers. Chiefs and elders, may pass down their titles and responsibilities to their sister’s sons or other male relatives on the maternal side.

3. Symbol of chiefly authority is the Stool

The Stool plays a significant role in the Akan traditional system. It holds the power of dignity of the king who sits on it. It is usually carved and designed with various symbols representing the history, culture and values of the indigenous Akan people. The symbol symbolises leadership and is believed to connect their chief to the ancestors who once occupied the position of a chief or a king. The ancestral connection solidifies the king’s authority and legitimacy. It represents continuity of leadership from a generation to the next.



Fig. 2.6: Example of a stool commonly used in Akan communities symbolising chiefly authority

4. The existence of a Council of Elders

The Council of Elders is an important institution in the Akan indigenous political system and is common among the Akans in Ghana. The rich culture of the Akans is transferred from one generation to the next through the help of the Council of Elders who are regarded as custodians of the Akan culture and customs. The Council of Elders plays a crucial role in governance, conflict resolution, and the preservation of societal values of the Akan group as they are respected for their wisdom, experience, and knowledge of customary laws and norms.

Take part in the following activities after carefully reading the notes above

Activity 2.4

1. Watch the video in the link below, note the main characteristics of the structure of the Akan indigenous political system, and participate in a whole-class discussion.



2. With your peers, read the note above (and any other reading provided by your teacher) and prepare a presentation on the Akan indigenous system. Your teacher may ask you to present to the rest of the class.
3. Visit any Akan community or contact an elderly person who is knowledgeable about Akan culture and governance to share their insight about the Akan indigenous political system with you

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE INDIGENOUS SYSTEMS OF GOVERNMENT

Similarities

1. The indigenous governance systems are composed of a hierarchy of positions.

The indigenous governance systems are composed of a hierarchy of positions which refer to the traditional leadership structures and organizational guidelines used by indigenous communities to manage their affairs. These systems often include a series of roles and responsibilities that are linked together with each position having specific duties and authority.

The hierarchy may include positions such as:

- **Chiefs or Leaders:** Highest authority figures responsible for making important decisions and representing the community.
- **Elders:** Respected individuals who provide guidance, wisdom, and cultural knowledge.
- **Council Members:** Representatives elected or appointed to assist in decision-making and governance.
- **Clan leaders:** Heads of specific family or clan groups within the community.
- **Spiritual Leaders:** Individuals responsible for religious and spiritual guidance.
- **Youth Leaders:** Representatives of the younger generation, often involved in community development and outreach.

These positions work together to maintain social order, resolve conflicts, and make decisions for the well-being of the community, while also preserving cultural traditions and values.

2. Each of the indigenous governance system has a symbol of chiefly authority, i.e., Stool or Skin.

In indigenous governance systems, symbols of chiefly authority are objects that represent the power, legitimacy, and cultural heritage of a chief or leader. These symbols vary among communities, but often hold deep spiritual and cultural importance.

In Ghana, for example:

- Stools represent the seat of power and authority for Akan chiefs.
- Skins are mostly by chiefs, for example, among the Mole-Dagbani as a symbol of their office and status.

These symbols are often:

- a. Inherited or passed down through generations
- b. Considered sacred or spiritually important

- c. Displayed during important ceremonies and events
- d. Respected and revered by community members.

The stool or skin serves as a physical representation of the chief's authority, connecting them to their ancestors, the land and the community. It includes the history, values, and traditions of the people, supports the chief's role as a guardian of cultural heritage and a leader of the community.

5. A common element is the existence of rules and procedures (customary laws and conventions) for the decision-making process.

In the context of indigenous governance systems, the existence of rules and procedures refers to the established customs, laws, and conventions that guide the decision-making process. These rules and procedures are often deeply connected in the community's cultural traditions, values, and beliefs, and are passed down through generations.

Some key aspects of these rules and procedures include:

- a. **Customary laws:** Unwritten laws based on cultural norms and practices.
- b. **Conventions:** Established practices and protocols for decision-making.
- c. **Consensus-building:** Reaching decisions through collective agreement.
- d. **Respect for elders:** Deferring to the wisdom and experience of elder community members.
- e. **Consultation:** Seeking input from various stakeholders and interest
- f. **Transparency:** Openness and accountability in decision-making processes.
- g. **Accountability:** Responsibility for actions and decisions taken.

These rules and procedures ensure that decision-making is inclusive, fair, and responsible, and that the community's interest are considered first. They provide guidelines for resolving conflicts, managing resources, and addressing social and economic issues and finally maintaining social unity and balance.

Differences

1. The position and role of females (Queen mothers and priestesses) in the indigenous system differ from one ethnic group to the other.

The position and role of female leaders, such as queen mothers and priestesses, vary across different ethnic groups in indigenous societies. While their specific responsibilities and authorities are different, they often hold important cultural, spiritual, and political influence. Here are some examples:

- a. **Queen Mothers:**
 - In Ghana, among Akans they hold political and spiritual power, playing a key role in the selection of chiefs and resolving conflicts.
 - Among the Ewe, they Serve as spiritual leaders, mediating between the living and the dead.

b. **Priestesses:**

- Serve as spiritual leaders in their communities, providing guidance and wisdom to their followers.
- Serve as links between the spiritual and human worlds, communicating with the ancestors and deities on behalf of their community.
- Serve as healers by using their knowledge of herbs and spiritual practices to heal the sick etc.

In general, female leaders in indigenous societies often:

- a. Hold spiritual and cultural authority.
- b. Play key roles in conflict resolution and mediation.
- c. Ensure the continuation of cultural traditions and practices.
- d. Provide guidance and counselling to community members.
- e. Hold important political influence, often behind the scenes.

It's important to note that the specific roles and responsibilities of female leaders vary greatly across different ethnic groups, and are shaped by the unique cultural, historical, and social contexts of each community.

6. The eligibility and installation of the political sovereign (king/chief) varies among the ethnic groups and societies.

The eligibility and installation of a leader (King/Chief) vary among ethnic groups and societies, referring to the different ways that leadership is created, recognized, and legitimized. This includes:

- Selection processes: Different methods of choosing a leader, such as inheritance, election, or divine appointment.
- Installation ceremonies: Unique rituals and rites that mark the beginning of a leader's rule, like formal ceremonies.
- Legitimacy sources: A leader's authority, such as divine right, ancestral lineage, or popular support.
- Symbols of offices: Different symbols, attire, or objects that represent the leader's power and status.
- Role and responsibilities: Different expectations and duties associated with the leadership position.

Example: Among the Akans in Ghana, Chiefs are selected based on matrilineal inheritance, with the queen mother playing a key role in the selection process.

These variations reflect the unique cultural, historical, and social contexts of each society, highlighting the diversity of indigenous political systems and leadership practices.

Activity 2.5

1. In pair or small group, conduct a project to understand the main similarities and differences in the indigenous systems of governance in Ghana. This could be based on a field trip, interview, reading or internet research (to be agreed with the teacher). prepare a presentation on your findings.
2. Explore the internet and read other related materials on indigenous systems of governance in Ghana. Make notes for further discussions in class with a colleague on reasons for the similarities and differences among the indigenous systems.
3. Ghana practices a modern system of government. Why is it necessary to have traditional governance alongside? Speak with an expert (historians, governance experts, and traditional authorities). Your teacher may ask you to lead a discussion in class.

ROLES OF TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF GHANA

Traditional leaders in Ghana play significant role to contribute to Socio-Economic Development of the country. The following are main the roles;

1. Adjudication or settlement of disputes

Traditional leaders in any Ghanaian community serve as arbitrators in resolving disputes that may arise within their communities. They mostly possess deep knowledge of the customary laws and practices of the community, which allows them to resolve conflicts effectively. When disputes are resolved peacefully and successfully, social cohesion and stability is achieved in the community. These are contributing factors for economic development. Further, the involvement of traditional authorities in conflict resolution reduces the burden on formal legal systems, making justice more accessible to community members.

2. Mobilisation of resources for development

Traditional leaders in Ghanaian communities serve as a symbol of unity. This authority enables them to mobilise resources for development through various means such as community contributions. Through the leadership of traditional rulers, community members are called on to contribute their time, money, materials and labour towards initiatives such as infrastructure development, agriculture, healthcare, and education.

3. Education and awareness creation

Traditional leaders mostly use gatherings such as festivals, funerals, and naming ceremonies to educate and create awareness on government policies and programmes among community members. Other community initiatives and activities that improve social wellbeing such as sustainable agriculture, conservation of the environment and health education are also made known to the members for the betterment of the community. Opportunity is given to the members of the community to voice out their grievances for redress.

Activity 2.6

1. Visit a chief, Queen Mother or an elderly person within your community to provide information and knowledge on the modern role of traditional leaders in Ghana. Alternatively, appeal to your teacher to invite a chief, Queen Mother or elderly person to speak to the whole-class.
OR
2. Arrange an interview with a traditional ruler or expert in Ghanaian culture and governance. Ask them about the contributions of traditional rulers to the socio-economic development of Ghana
OR
3. Write a story or poem about the role of traditional leaders

Review Questions

1. Discuss how the indigenous government system in Ghana has adapted to modern political structures. What challenges and benefits arise from this integration?"
2. Analyse the hierarchical structure of the Mole-Dagbani indigenous government. How does this structure ensure effective governance and conflict resolution within their communities?"
3. Evaluate the role of traditional leaders in the Ewe indigenous government system. How do these leaders balance customary laws with national legal frameworks?"
4. Compare and contrast the functions of the Mantse (chief) in the Ga-Dangme indigenous government with those of elected officials in modern Ghanaian governance. What are the implications for community leadership?"
5. Assess the significance of the council of elders in the Akan indigenous government system. How does this council influence decision-making processes and the maintenance of social order?"
6. Identify and discuss the key similarities and differences between the indigenous government systems of the Akan, Ewe, Ga-Dangme, and Mole-Dagbani peoples. How do these variations reflect the unique cultural and social contexts of each group?"

Extended Reading

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Ghana Education
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