

**TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP, DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL EQUALITY IN
AFRICA: THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP IN EMBOLDENING
SOCIAL EQUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT

In the recent years in South Africa as elsewhere in Africa, the debate on the legitimate authority to foster democracy, community development and social equality has taken centre stage. Some scholars have argued that modern governments are the rightful authorities while others argue for traditional institutions such as traditional leadership. In this paper, we go beyond either party's position to argue that such a debate is misplaced as focus should be directed on how modern institutions and traditional ones could complement each other in their respective efforts to nurture a harmonious society that promote democracy, community development and social equality for all South Africans and non-South Africans alike.

Keywords: Traditional leadership, bureaucratic governance, democracy, Africa, South Africa

Introduction

The position of traditional authorities in many postcolonial African states remains unclear and their future under the new dispensation is highly contested. In South Africa, the new government under the African National Congress (ANC) recognises and acknowledges traditional leaders but the nature of their role in the advancement of democracy and social equality among other common goods is still largely unclear and in fact underestimated. Although some positive gestures such as the establishment of the Houses for Traditional Leaders (HTL) in most of the provinces, their role and position in community development and advancement of democracy and social equality among citizens remains very much contested. Some scholars view traditional authorities as inefficient, corrupt, patriarchal and

undemocratic (Daphne 1982; Haines and Tapscott 1986; Udit and McIntosh 1988; Ntsebeza 2005) and oppressive to women's views. This is very unfortunate of traditional leadership in South Africa as in many other African countries where traditional leaders have been accused by liberation movements and postcolonial governments of colluding and collaborating with colonial governments for their own personal survival at the expense of the people they often claim to represent (Mawhood 1982; see also Makumbe 1998; Hammar 2005). While traditional leadership has been criticised as undemocratic in some respects, bureaucratic governments have also not been spared. In Zimbabwe, for example, some critics such as Hammar (2005) have criticised Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) and Ward Development Committees (WADCOs) which are arms of bureaucratic governments, for being used as the ZANU (PF) ruling party committees instead of being committees to spearhead democracy and development in rural areas. Hammar (2005: 19) wrote "VIDCOs and WADCOs have remained local ZANU (PF) party committees and cells carried over from the liberation war but whose partisan and authoritarian practices pervaded both popular participation and democratic developmentalism". This is not to argue that the accusations against traditional leadership are unfounded as it also happened in South Africa in the former Bantustans areas that some chiefs were undemocratic and collaborated with the apartheid government. However, it is the view of this paper that such practices need to be understood in the context and circumstances in which they took place. Also, there is need to consider the role traditional leadership in Africa played in pre-colonial era in order to reconstruct and carry forward those positive roles that traditional leadership always had. In this light, we argue in this paper that traditional authorities have a key role to play to foster democracy and advance social equality because of their location at the grass root level: traditional authorities unlike authorities in modern states live in the villages with people. There is need, therefore, for both traditional leadership and modern governments institutions to co-exist such that instead of, for example, government institutions such as the police, as corrupt as they are themselves, traditional authorities could be used to arrest bad modern government leaders in the communities, and vice-versa.

The question of chieftaincy and their future in South Africa's post 1994 come at a time when traditional authorities can no longer hold on to their positions created by apartheid government and their role in the current regime has come under scrutiny because of their associations with colonial powers (see Ntsebeza 2005). The paper is by no means suggesting

that traditional leaders had no short comings or even acted as dictators in their spheres but simply arguing that traditional authorities can play a critical role in fostering development which would lead to a vibrant democracy and social equality. With strong and well recognised chieftaincy, democracy is more likely to benefit postcolonial South Africa because the two organs – traditional leadership and modern government institutions – will police each other. In the current system, government institutions do as they like or wish with state funds because there is no effective independent monitoring mechanism in place besides the opposition parties and non-state actors which are normally out muscled politically. Chiefs are at a much better position to see development or lack thereof in their communities because they live in those communities unlike ward councillors, members of parliament and other such government authorities responsible for community development who mostly reside in towns away from the people they claim to be serving. In fact, as will be demonstrated in this paper, chiefs are directly affected by lack of development and therefore it is in their interest as well to ensure that government delivers on its promises.

Historical background and dynamics of Chieftaincy in South Africa

Historically, the functions of traditional authorities revolved around issues of land allocation, promotion of peace, cultural norms and values, unity, and judicial duties within their villages. The power they had over their people is seen as the means through which chiefs were able to maintain their authority if not even their existence (Daphne, 1982; Haines and Tapscou, 1986). As such, traditional authorities were often seen as guardians of the African values and customs which included ubuntu – a philosophy of humanness that was meant to foster unity, peace and harmony with each other and the environment at large (see Ramose 1999; Mawere 2012, 2014). Yet for the perpetual existence of traditional authority, there is need to hold on to its positions and this meant, over the years and responding to different political dispensations, shifting alliances to fulfilling the needs of the government of the day. Kessel and Oomen (1997) note that sometimes “chiefs often align themselves, whether wholeheartedly or for tactical reasons, with the powers that seem to offer the best chances of safeguarding their positions”. Critiques of the chieftaincy system capitalise on these short comings to argue against the existence of traditional authorities. But others see this as the strength of the traditional institutions. Williams (2004: 121), for instance, argues that the merit of traditional leadership and its institutions lies in the “ability of chiefs to straddle the

state-society dichotomy”. It is commendable for any institution to be flexible enough to act as a mediator but also in a way that guarantees your own continued existence and relevance. Such has always been the characteristic of many chiefs since the advent of European settlers and their colonial administration in Africa. Under apartheid regime in South Africa, for example, loyalties of the chiefs were rewarded by placing them in positions as an indirect rule of the rural people. Kaiser Matanzima of the Thembu people is a case in point. He won the favour of the apartheid regime and was later on awarded with a president status of the former Transkei (Murray, 2004:4). To achieve his ambitions, Matanzima side-lined Chief Sabata Dalindyebo who headed the revolt in the Thembu land. Likewise, in the former Ciskei, Lennox Sebe created a chieftaincy for himself and later became president. Yet, this should not be interpreted that everywhere in Africa and in particular South Africa, chiefs betrayed their people. Also, the betrayal of the indigenous people’s ‘will’ should be understood in the context and circumstances in which this occurred. Besides, there are many African chiefs in South Africa and beyond who sacrificed their lives and offered considerable resistance in defence of their fatherland and their people’s peace. In the then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), for example, Chief Rekayi Tangwena fought thick and thin the European settlers’ discriminatory laws. In Mozambique, Chief Ngungunyani also revolted against the Portuguese racist and segregatory laws.

In South Africa, even during the apartheid regime, chiefs played an important role to the labour supply in the mine industry, commercial farms and industry (Kessel and Oomen, 1997:563). Young men in the villages had to obtain permits which were renewed annually from the chiefs according to the Labour bureaux. Kessel and Oomen (ibid) argue that local government in rural areas was reshaped by the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act, which aimed at self-rule and ultimately independence for the Bantustans. The Act required chiefs to account to the Department of Native Affairs and not to their subjects. Realising that democracy was fast approaching in the late 1980s to secure their future positions, chiefs re-aligned themselves with the ANC. This is in spite of the fact that “from the 1950s the apartheid government came up with strategies to use traditional leaders in contemptuous ways and implicated chiefs more deeply in apartheid government. Chiefs acted as the link between colonial powers and their subjects” (Murray 2004: 3); hence the criticisms offered by some scholars against traditional leadership.

The other core tenet of traditional leadership in Africa is that its authorities are born to their positions and not elected by their subjects but many African systems allowed for these leaders to be recalled or displaced if they fail to meet the needs of their community (Ayttey, 1991:135-39; Osabu-Kle, 2000:18). In pre-colonial Zimbabwe, for example, Chief Chirisamhuru of the Rozvi state of Zimbabwean Plateau was disposed by the woman chief, Queen Nyamazana Dlamini for his unfavourable rule of the Rozvi people (see also Nyathi 2006). Besides this merit of traditional institutions in view of democracy, the other advantage always associated with traditional leaders is that they are more accessible to their people than any other Western mode of governance given that they live in the same community with their people (Keulder 1998:11). Moreover, traditional institutions are seen as more transparent and participatory than Western modes of governance because people can attend meetings and express their views to their leaders and not only through representatives as is the case with modern governance that is western oriented. Thus local communities seem to trust and have more faith in traditional leadership than modern modes of governments especially when it comes to issues of community development and participatory democracy.

The politics of democracy and social equality in contemporary South Africa

The debate on the future role of traditional leaders in post-1994 – the post-apartheid government – in South Africa led to the birth of two new schools of thought around issues of governance, namely the so-called modernists and the traditionalists. The modernists are concerned with issues of gender equality, non-sexist and call for an overhaul review of the traditional institutions which are fundamentally patriarchal (Khunou 2009:105). They argue that traditional leaders make every attempt to silence the voices of women and youths which downplay their supposed role as architects of democracy and community development in the areas they live. Molitsi (2004:162) found that in Botswana “the Kgotla democracy was made up of male tribal elders from senior tribesmen”. Furthermore, Mattes (1997:5) contends that traditional institutions are unaccountable, and are based on a coercive demand for consensus rather than freely given consent. Mattes (1997:6) further states that these leaders place the community ahead of the individual (such as women) needs, and “traditional authorities constitute an anti-democratic, or at best a non-democratic form of governance”. Additionally, modernists “view traditional authority as a gerontocratic, chauvinistic, authoritarian and increasingly irrelevant form of rule that is antithetical to democracy” (Logan 2008: iii). It is

for these reasons, therefore, that this school of thought feels that traditional leaders must be done away with in progressive society. On the other hand, traditionalists view Africa's traditional authorities such as chiefs, traditional leadership council and other such traditional institutions and personalities as the true democratic, representatives of their people because they are seen as accessible, respected, and legitimate, and hence are still seen as essential to the politics on the continent (Logan, 2008: iii). Khunou (2009), for instance, observes that traditionalists are of the view that chieftaincy including other traditional leaders are at the centre of rural governance, political stability and rural development. Khunou (2009: 105), thus, maintains that "...a traditional leader act as a symbol of unity to maintain peace, preserve customs and culture, resolve disputes and faction fights, allocate land".

The above is contrary to views by some scholars such as Lungisile Ntsebeza who argues against the move by the African National Congress (ANC) of embracing and recognising traditional leadership and institutions as modes of governance. Ntsebeza (2005: 256-58), thus argues, that by recognising traditional leadership institutions, the African National Congress (ANC) has compromised the very existence of the democratic project it fought for. For him, traditional institutions and the democratic agenda cannot exist simultaneously because the former are born to the throne and not elected by the people. In fact Ntsebeza is shocked by the fact that the ANC seems to embrace the institution of traditional leaders despite the notorious record chiefs have in working hand in hand with apartheid government for their own survival (see p. 258). One question that scholars like Ntsebeza fail to answer in their arguments is: "Why despite the fact that many chiefs were used by colonial governments have they maintained their legitimacy?" Udit and McIntosh (1998) attempt to respond to this question though the answer they offer is unsatisfying in many respects:

Where chiefs have been able to maintain local legitimacy, they have needed to do so owing to the weakness of their positions and their need to secure their authority by building local consensus. Given, the weak economic base and the concomitant institutional vacuum existing within such areas, it is suggested that the strengthening of the powers and capacity of chiefs by higher authorities is likely to increase corrupt and authoritarian practices (p: 28).

From Ntsebeza and McIntosh's view of chiefs as anachronistic in their arguments above, there is no doubt that the duo hate traditional institutions especially traditional leadership. In

view of this observation, we argue in this paper that Ntsebeza, Udit and McIntosh's abhorrence for indigenous practices blind them to acknowledge the fact that traditional leaders, unlike modern government representatives, live in the villages with the people and therefore are in a better position to see to it that development does happen in their communities. This is because chiefs like their subjects are equally and directly affected by underdevelopment in their respective communities. We further argue that in South Africa today corruption is at its highest, negatively affecting development and economic growth both at community and national level due to the peripheral roles that traditional leadership has been granted to ensure equity and community development. In view of this argument, we concur with Keulder (1998:6) when he argues that modernists and traditionalists agree that the institution of traditional leaders, its composition and function must change in order to adapt to the changes in the new constitutional, social and political environment of post-apartheid South Africa. Chiefs are better placed to monitor government expenditure at local level and see to it that development happens to the benefit of the community as a whole. This argument finds support from Sandra Dusing's (2002) research on traditional leadership in southern Africa as well as empirical evidence from the Afrobarometer survey conducted in 15 African countries between 1999 and 2003 which shows that democracy and chiefs can co-exist (Logan, 2008:2). The studies by Dusing and Afrobarometer reveal that traditional authorities, chiefs and elders still play a critical role in the daily lives of many Africans with only religious leaders who are consulted more frequently by ordinary people in their attempts to solve personal problems. The study further reports that elected political leaders seem to be scared of the competition traditional authorities bring especially at the local level where the latter might have a strong support base.

Democracy and social equality in South Africa: Settling the disturbed waters

This paper starts from the premise that no model of governance is absolutely perfect whether traditional leadership or Western bureaucratic (or the so-called democratic model). Post-1994 posed a number of challenges for the position of chiefs especially in terms of their roles as architects of democracy and equality yet this is a period where the so-called disturbed waters (or the abused roles of traditional leadership and other such institutions) should have been settled once and for all. Udit and McIntosh (1998: 28) have even gone to the extent of suggesting that where chiefs have been able to maintain local legitimacy, they have needed to

do so owing to the weakness of their positions and their need to secure their authority by building local consensus, given, the weak economic base and the concomitant institutional vacuum existing within such areas, it is suggested that the strengthening of the powers and capacity of chiefs by higher authorities is likely to increase corrupt and authoritarian practices. We underscore that these are the kind of negative attitudes those who do not fully appreciate the value of indigenous practices hold about anything originally African. And for such anti-traditional institution partisans, no attempt is made to align the roles and operations of chiefs in modern governments; hence they argue for getting rid of traditional leadership which they perceive as bad and undemocratic.

Contrary to McIntosh's argument above, we argue that chiefs have a key role to play but the role needs to be redefined for the current environment and socio-economic and political dispensation. In fact, the debate on whether traditional authorities are pro-or anti-democracy is misplaced: if and where they, in the past, chose to be pro-government traditional authorities were normally used by such governments as puppets and because they wanted to secure their own positions allowed their people to be exploited as was the case with many chiefs during apartheid in South Africa. What complicates the status of traditional leaders is, therefore, how such leaders assumed their positions in apartheid period in Africa (Logan, 2008:4). In South Africa, for instance, traditional authorities were no longer only born to their posts but over the years apartheid government elected their own African leaders into such positions as being chiefs. Such leaders were no longer accountable to their subjects but to their employers. No wonder some scholars like Logan (2008:4) opine that the debate on traditional authorities is not limited to the democratic credentials or its absence but "is complicated by the fact that in the modern context, neither side (that is traditionalists and modernists) can deny that the content of tradition, and often the identity of traditional leaders themselves, is very often contested. After decades of manipulation by colonial and post-colonial governments, and response by indigenous leaders, there are many questions about what really is "traditional," or how historically-rooted so-called 'traditional institutions' really are". Thus for Logan (2008:5), "the question of how traditional authorities "fit" into a modern political system becomes particularly acute at the local level, where these leaders exert the most influence on the daily lives of Africans, and where the contest with government authorities for resources and responsibilities is most intense". Yet the fact that most of what chiefs did during colonialism and the apartheid era in South Africa was largely determined and dictated by the

government of the time should always be highlighted in order to understand why most of the chiefs behaved the way they did. Mine workers had to, for example, get permission from their chiefs and if he wanted he could easily deny renewals until bribes were paid simply because such a situation was created by the apartheid regime. In fact, if traditional leaders were to be democratic and foster social equality they could be easily challenged and disposed of by the government concerned. Thus while the ideal is that at best the more appropriate stance for chiefs was to remain true to their values and strive to be as neutral as possible or at least revolt on behalf of their people, the truth is that the apartheid government in South Africa did everything in its power to force chiefs to do as they wished.

Even in view of the possible criticisms that could be levelled against traditional leadership in colonial and apartheid South Africa, the role of chiefs in modern day South Africa should not be underestimated as these could still be used to expose corruption in government as well as help explain government processes to their respective communities. We maintain that some of the strikes we have seen across South Africa are purely based on frustration because people feel short-changed and their social equality compromised: people do not know what the government is planning for their areas. Because communities trust their chiefs, the latter if allowed to exist side by side with modern government institutions could help expedite community development, explain the reasons for the slow turning wheels of government and avoid unnecessary destruction of property and loss of lives during strikes; the need to find a balance to calm down the disturbed waters at local and national levels is key to move beyond the struggle for power between traditional and government institutions.

Conclusion

This paper has made a critique of the debate between pro-traditional institutions (the so-called traditionalists) and pro-modern government institutions (the so-called modernists). Based on empirical research elsewhere in Africa and our experience of community governance in Southern Africa and South Africa in particular, we have demonstrated the utility and viability of traditional leadership in fostering community development, democracy and social equality. This demonstration has not been done to nullify and downplay the role played by modern South African government to foster the same, but to promote the working together of the aforementioned as complementary institutions that can enrich each other in their respective efforts to foster democracy, community development and social equality.

And, given that the debate in question is not based on empirical evidence but largely on fears of the unknown and perhaps hatred of each other (by partisans of either institutions), we maintain that traditional institutions such as traditional leadership and modern government institutions should not work in isolation but co-exist and complement each other in their efforts to foster democracy, social equality and community development.

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