The incompatibility of traditional leadership and democratic experimentation in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

After a plethora of legislative and policy frameworks have been passed to integrate traditional leadership system into the modern liberal democratic system in South Africa, incompatibilities of the two became increasingly evident, especially in respect of governance. The most protracted challenges of the incompatible governance systems are located in the local government sphere, especially in provinces that are predominantly rural with tribal settlements. Traditional leadership system has been in existence in African communities before imperial and colonial rule, and it had served good purposes for the wellbeing of citizens. Whilst it continued during imperialism and colonialism, it gradually took a form that principally benefited the alien Western ideology. With the attainment of democracy in South Africa, the traditional leadership system was further undermined through successive democratic regimes, albeit there was no overt state intention to demoralise, frustrate and discriminate against traditional leadership. But their exclusion from the mainstream of governance as well as encroachment into their selections and inauguration was palatable. Currently, the role and function of traditional leaders appear to be blurred in the day-to-day activities of municipalities, resulting in undue contestations of powers, jurisdiction and responsibility in local government. This article attempts to examine the reasons underlying incompatibility between the modern democratic system and the traditional leadership, amidst nationally-acclaimed legislative and policy framework provisions for their synergy. The article argues that harmonisation of the two would serve to enhance prospects of achieving good governance for service delivery tribal ruralities in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

While more credit on the attainment of democracy is given to the African National Congress (ANC) as the liberation movement that was at the forefront during the struggle against apartheid, traditional leaders in South Africa cherish the role that they played during the struggle. It is an undeniable fact that traditional leaders had their fair share of contribution towards the fight of the white minority rule (Kompi & Twala 2014). Although there is little recognition of this, traditional leaders continue to play a pivotal role on the well-being of the citizens in rural areas to this day. According to Amoateng (2005), Oomen (2005) and Khunou (2011), the rural communities have always had strong trust in the traditional leadership system due to the role that traditional leaders have been playing in their societies over the years. Traditional leaders served all inclusive roles for the communities, for example, they serve as political, military, spiritual, and cultural leaders, and they were considered as chief custodians of the values in societies (Shapera 1955:68; Bikam & Chakwiriza 2014:145).

However, Bikam & Chakwiriza (2014) also argue that the role of traditional leaders was somewhat taken away by the Section 151 of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996 which established municipalities. This is because communities that were under the custodianship of traditional leaders were going to be officially under municipalities across the country. This became the epoch that ushered in the demise on the roles that traditional leaders have been playing in societies. As democracy was adopted as the popular governance regime in African countries, the traditional leadership system started to dwindle. Thus far, African countries that consider themselves democratic have been attempting to incorporate traditional leadership into their democratic system of governance without much success (Tshehla, 2005:15). In the South Africa, the attempt to co-exist democracy and traditional leadership was set in motion when the White Paper on Local Government was adopted in 1998. However, the attempt did not really materialise since there was no legislative prerogative on the part of the Minister of the then portfolio of Provincial and Local Government. The attempt was after the constitutional recognition of traditional leadership was confirmed. The *White Paper on Local Government,* 1998 established a municipal government system where traditional leaders should play a role in service delivery to communities. As such, the principles of the White Paper are rooted in devising strategies to fast track the delivery of services especially to the poor rural citizens. Khunou (2011:282) posits that it is for this course, among others, that the White Paper attempts to define the role that the traditional leaders should play within the constitutional dispensation of the new local government system. Although, it is argued that the role is broadly defined and it overlaps with the functions of the municipalities.

The article will discuss a number of issues inclusive of the history of traditional leadership, the challenge of incompatibility between traditional leadership and democratic systems, policy and legislative frameworks on traditional leadership, and the classical model of the Royal Bafokeng governance system. Finally, the article will recommend ways in which integration can be attempted in order for the two systems to harmoniously work together for better governance and improved service delivery especially in rural areas.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA

When considering the historical overview of traditional leadership, it is noted that before the advent of colonialism and imperialism in Africa, traditional leadership served as the backbone of local governance in many parts of the continent as communities were led by sultans, kings, and queens who were assisted by chiefs and headmen (Tshehla 2005:15; Khunou 2011:278; Bikam & Chakwiriza 2014:145; Kompi & Twala 2014:984). However, during the apartheid regime (specifically in South Africa), traditional leadership was utilised to entrench the apartheid policy in rural areas referred to as Bantustans. Van Kessel & Oomen (1997:561) argue that traditional leaders were used as puppets of the Bantustan canon. Traditional leaders who refused to be puppets of the Bantustan system were replaced by other traditional leaders who seemed to submit to the control of the colonisers (George 2010). Khunou (2011:279, 280) fortifies this argument as he observes that traditional leaders were made puppets through the passing and the implementation of the Bantu Authorities Act, Black Administrative Act, and Native Administrative Act that was passed in 1927 which was later changed to the Black Administration Act.

As noted earlier, traditional leaders had a role in the liberation struggle in South Africa, and their role was inherently tied to the strong link that they had with the Ruling Party from its formation. According to Sithole & Ndlovu (2013), there has always been a strong relationship between the ANC and traditional leaders. It is argued that in its formation in 1912, among other delegates that were part of the founding meeting of the ANC, were traditional leaders (Kompi & Twala 2014). For example, one of the prominent erstwhile leaders of the ANC was Chief Albert Luthuli who was a traditional leader. According to Odendaal (1984), traditional leaders and leaders of local and regional organisations gathered on 8 of January 1912 to attend the conference that was convened by *Pixely ka Seme* to discuss the formation of the Movement.

As time went on during the struggle against apartheid, it became important for a congress of traditional leaders to be established to assist in the struggle and also to be the voice of traditional leaders in South Africa. The *Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa* (CONTRALESA) was established in 1987 in order to advocate for the interests of traditional leaders and serve as an outside Parliament opposition movement against apartheid. During the CODESA negotiations, the CONTRALESA advocated for the maintenance of traditional leadership authority and the outlining of the role in the democratic South Africa that was yet to be born (Fokwang 2003). According to Meer & Campbell (2007:7), CONTRALESA campaigned for the role, powers, and status of traditional leaders in the democratic South Africa which culminated in drafting Chapter 12 of the Constitution, 1996 which is about the recognition of traditional leaders.

INCOMPATIBILITY OF TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP AND DEMOCRACY

After becoming the ruling party in 1994, the ANC was confronted with both the task of working together with traditional leaders and also to incorporate in its leadership fold to the governments of the former Bantustans (Kompi & Twala 2014: 983). Unfortunately, since

the advent of democracy, the role and place of the institution of traditional leadership has been fraught with contradiction, confusion and tension, as such, the *South African Local Government Association* (SALGA) frequently receives enquiries from municipalities regarding the participation and remuneration of traditional leaders in municipal councils (SALGA 2012:1).

The study conducted by Kompi & Twala (2014) pointed to the challenges of values and perception between democracy and traditional leadership that are incongruent with each other. While there are similarities in terms of the incompatibilities between democracy and traditional leadership in African democratic states such as South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana, there are notable differences on their level of incompatibilities given the different circumstances of those countries (Dusing 2002). While emphasising the incompatibility between democracy and traditional leadership systems, Meer & Campbell (2007:10-11), argue that it is difficult to incorporate the two systems into a harmonious system of government` since from a democratic point of view, it is difficult to see the relevance of traditional leaders because the two are underpinned by principles, values, and perceptions that are contradictory to each other. For example, traditional leadership is understood to be patriarchal and sexist systems whereas democracy is principled on equal rights and privileges for all (Amoateng 2005:9). Ntsebenza (2004) warns about the possibility of dictatorship and despotic tendencies that are possible in a traditional leadership context, whereas the in democratic context all citizens are subject to the rule of law. Myburgh & Prinsloo (1985) and Selepe (2009:32, 35, 123) argue that the traditional leader is hereditary, as such, the position of a traditional leader is by birth. Sociologists refer to this as an assigned status as opposed to ascribed status. In a democratic system, assigned statuses to leadership positions do not exist. All people stand equal chances to benefit from a democratic leadership commodity (Sithole & Mbele 2010:5). This begins to emphasise the antagonism that exists between democracy and traditional leadership.

Bikam & Chakwiriza (2014:143) argue that the role of traditional leaders in local government is not clearly defined, as such, there is an overlap between their role and that of Section 56 managers (*Local Government: Municipal Systems Act,* 32 of 2000) as well as sectional heads, and this creates a conflict between traditional leadership institutions and local government. Besides the argument that policies do not lucidly specify the roles of traditional leaders which creates conflicts in municipalities, it is strongly held that the other source of conflict is of a legislative in nature since the *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act,* 117 of 1998 gives powers to municipal officials to take decisions on matters pertaining to land use planning and development projects in municipalities without stating how traditional leaders should be involved. Ultimately, municipalities perform all the roles and functions with less or no involvement of traditional leaders at all. Traditional leaders themselves feel excluded and neglected by the democratic government in South Africa (Meer & Campbell 2007:2).

Synopsis of Theoretical Approaches to Traditional Leadership System

Theoretically, there are two approaches that are used to study the subject on traditional leadership. The two approaches are utilised to view traditional leadership within the context of this article are *traditionalist* and *modernist* views. Logan (2008) argues that the debate

between the *traditionalist* and *modernists* theoretical approaches on traditional leadership has intensified in the last two decades. According to her, traditionalist theorists believe that traditional institutions are malleable and adaptable, and they draw on their historical roots in unique and valuable ways. Traditionalists argue that tradition is a resource that strengthens communities and assist to overcome failures of the Western democratic model that is implemented in Africa (Logan 2008:1). Modernist theorists consider that the institutional forms of democracy are universally valid, and that Africans aspire to democratic systems of rule that look much the same as those in the West (Logan 2008:1).

Legislative and Policy Frameworks of Traditional Leadership in South Africa

Among many other Acts of Parliament that make provisions around traditional leadership, focus is hereby given to the Constitution, Municipal Structures Act, Traditional Leadership Governance Act, and the Communal Land Rights Act. The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996), recognises traditional leadership institution as a governance institution through Section 212(1) which provides that national legislation may provide for a role of traditional leadership as an institution at local level on matters that affect local communities over and above their role of serving as custodians of customs and tradition (RSA 1996). This gives the traditional leadership institution rights of existence and legislative status of activity.

Regarding the involvement of traditional leaders on the work of the municipal councils, Section 81 of the *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act,* 117 of 1998 provides for a maximum representation of 20% of traditional leadership in municipal council meetings. However, it should be noted that according to legislation, traditional leaders are not members of municipal councils, as such, they do not have legislative powers to vote and take decisions in council meetings (RSA 1998a). They only serve as representatives of their communities and they can only take part in debates that directly affects their communities (SALGA 2005:2). This constitutes a fundamental limitation on the traditional leadership institution. Obviously, traditional leaders cannot be happy with this provision since it limits their powers.

Regarding the *roles* and partnership between traditional leaders and municipalities, Section 5 of the *Traditional Governance Framework Act, 41 of 2003* provides for the partnerships to be entered between traditional councils and municipalities. The Act also provides that traditional leaders should support municipalities in identifying the needs of the communities, and also in the facilitation of the involvement of communities in the *Integrated Development Plan* (IDP) process, as well as in the participation in municipal development programmes (RSA 2003a). This appears to be a positive involvement of traditional leaders. The Act also promotes democratic traditional leadership in the sense that it provides that traditional communities should establish traditional councils of not more than 30 members, and at least a third of the members should be women, and also the recognition of kings and queens. This Act begins to bridge the gap between traditional leadership and democracy, thereby watering down arguments regarding the contradiction on values and principles between the two systems.

With regards to the powers of traditional leaders on land, Section 21(2) of the *Communal Land Rights Act*, 11 of 2004 provides that if a community has a recognised traditional

council, the powers, and duties of the land administration committee of such community may be exercised and performed by a traditional council (RSA 2004). According to Meer & Campbell (2007:6), this gives traditional leaders substantial and unprecedented powers which may be open to abuse, especially because councils have a majority of unelected and hence unaccountable members.

Policy Provisions on the *Role* of Traditional Leaders

There are two major policies that give a sense of the role of traditional leaders, among others. Priority in this article is given to the 1998 *White Paper on Local Government* and the *White Paper on Traditional Leadership and Governance,* 2003. According to the White Paper on Local Government, traditional leaders should:

- act as head of the traditional authority, and as such exercising limited legislative powers and certain executive and administrative powers;
- preside over customary law courts and maintaining law and order;
- consult with traditional communities through *imbizo/lekgotla*;
- assist members of the community in their dealings with the state;
- advise government on traditional affairs through the Houses and Council of Traditional Leaders;
- convene meetings to consult with communities on needs and priorities and providing information;
- protect cultural values and providing a sense of community in their areas through a communal social frame of reference;
- be the spokespersons generally of their communities;
- be symbols of unity in the community; and
- be custodians and protectors of the community's customs and general welfare.

Furthermore, the role of traditional leaders in the development of the local area and community includes:

- making recommendations on land allocation and the settling of land disputes;
- lobbying government and other agencies for the development of their areas;
- ensuring that the traditional community participates in decisions on development and
- contributes to development costs; and
- considering and making recommendations to authorities on trading licences in their areas in accordance with the law (RSA 1998b).

According to the *White Paper on Traditional Leadership and Governance,* the roles that the traditional leadership institution can plan in governance and development are:

- promote socio-economic development;
- promote service delivery;
- contribute to nation building;
- promote peace and stability amongst the community members;
- promote social cohesiveness of communities;
- promote the preservation of the moral fibre and regeneration of society;
- promote and preserve the culture and tradition of communities; and

- promote the social well-being and welfare of communities (RSA 2003b).

While the two policies attempt to provide roles and functions of traditional leaders in the democratic context, it can be noted that the policies do not indicate how the mentioned roles should be performed (Bikam & Chakwiriza 2014:143). It is also noted that there has not been provisions for the development of implementation guidelines that would spell out exactly what and how the roles should be performed. In other words, the roles are broadly outlined, for example, the role of promoting service delivery warrants to be broken down in order to clearly outline what traditional leaders should do in the promotion of service delivery. This leaves the municipalities with a leeway of performing the roles and functions mentioned above, and traditional leaders feel that their territory is being encroached.

THE CASE OF ROYAL BAFOKENG TRADITIONAL ADMINISTRATION

Thornhill & Selepe (2010) and Horner (2012) analyse the role of the Royal Bafokeng Administration (RBA) in the promotion of service delivery, although the latter emphasised issues of spatial planning on international comparison with areas like Singapore. They considered the history of the Bafokeng people, governance, and administration, incorporation of the Bafokeng Royal Council to the democratic system, as well as their contribution to the provision of services. As their Setswana name *Bafokeng* suggests the *people of the dew*, the Royal Bafokeng Traditional Administration system provides a classical example that serves as antithesis to the argument on the incompatibility between traditional leadership and democracy since they demonstrate good working relationship with their surrounding municipalities. Looking at the précis of the RBA, it is important to note that the Royal Bafokeng Nation comprises of above 300 000 people out of which above 150 000 live in the Province of North West, in Rustenburg Local Municipality in the area called Phokeng (Thornhill & Selepe 2010:164; Horner 2012:2). Without delving into much history of the Bafokeng, it should be noted that in the mid-1940s, the Bafokeng Phokeng people did not have land of their own, however, in the interest of securing a home for themselves, they took a decision to purchase land (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). This was the beginning of building their family empire.

As quoted in Thornhill & Selepe (2010), King Leruo Molotlegi of the Bafokeng nation argues that traditional leadership does have links with the democratic system. This is emphasised by the fact that within the Bafokeng traditional leadership system, a democratic aspect of electing particular community representatives was introduced. Another democratic aspect of people representation is practised across the 29 villages that constitute the Bafokeng nation where there are partitions into above seventy (70) wards that are regulated by headmen and their wives are made, and those headmen are assisted by at least four ward men who represent communities in decision-making fora which is one aspect that typifies democratic governance, among others (Thornhill & Selepe 2010:165; Horner 2012:2). The Royal Bafokeng nation is represented by the executive council of 39 members, out of which twenty-nine (29) are elected by community members and 10 are appointed by the King using

his prerogative (Thornhill & Selepe 2010). The executive council has the status and functions that are similar to those of a municipality in a democratic context as defined in South African legislation that is applicable to municipalities with committees that are responsible for functions like community development, health, and education. Whenever important decisions affecting the entire community need to be made, the King convenes the supreme council of the Royal Bafokeng nation which consists of the executive council, headmen, and traditional councillors. The highest ranking decision-making body in the nation is called the supreme council (Thornhill & Selepe 2010:165–166).

Horner (2012:3) argues that the Bafokeng governance system is both a tribal authority as well as Western style democracy. From a governance point of view, Thornhill & Selepe (2010) argue that the Royal Bafokeng administration utilises the *kgotla kgothe* system which is a general meeting that serves the public participation purpose which is common in a democratic regime. The *kgotla kgothe* general meetings are held twice a year to discuss issues that culminate into the mandate of the King. Typical of a practice in a democratic context, the King's proposals can be overturned and his input and views can be amended by the general meeting. When decisions are ultimately taken following the consultation process, such decisions are implemented by the Royal Bafokeng Administration (RBA), which is effectively the nation's civil service. According to Thornhill & Selepe (2010), the Royal Bafokeng civil service employs a staff of almost 400 people to serve as the public service for the Bafokeng nation. With regard to the fiscus for service delivery, the RBA is funded by the Royal Bafokeng nation with revenue derived from royalties and dividends received from mines operating on the nation's land. As quoted in Thornhill & Selepe (2010), Molotlegi (2007:6) argues that an estimated R2billion of this money has been invested in infrastructure and services for the community since 1996.

Another democratic aspect noted in the RBA system by Thornhill & Selepe (2010) is that the Royal Bafokeng system of governance embraces mechanisms for ascertaining that people's concerns, opinions, and ideas are integrated into policy-making system of the Bafokeng nation, and also, there are checks and balances in place that ensure that there is no branch of the Bafokeng traditional system that work in isolation of others. Consistent with the democratic practice that knows no gender divides but affords both men and women equal opportunity to be in power, the introduction of election village councillors saw more women in positions of authority than before. As a traditional administration, the Royal Bafokeng Administration relies on indigenous law and traditional forms of conflict resolution to mediate in possible conflicts at local traditional authority level. Thornhill & Selepe (2010) argue that democracy is implemented in the initiative called *Dumela* Phokeng, where the King and his representatives visit each of the nation's 29 villages in weekly meetings at the beginning of each year to enable the King to keep in touch with the community and afford villagers an opportunity to share ideas with him.

With regards to cooperation between the Bafokeng traditional leadership and government for service delivery, the Royal Bafokeng Administration signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Rustenburg and Moses Kotane local municipalities as well as with the Bojanala Platinum District Municipality. This MoU is signed in order to establish a joint infrastructure development initiative and to forge partnership between the municipal councils (government) and the RBA where the two parties will be responsible for infrastructure development and service delivery (Thornhill & Selepe 2010:173). As a

matter of strengthening the relationship between the two, the municipal councillors and the Royal Bafokeng councillors reside in Phokeng which is the capital of the Royal Bafokeng nation, and there is regular interaction among the councillors (Thornhill & Selepe 2010; Horner 2012). Among other services provided by the Royal Bafokeng Administration are building roads, health centres, and schools in addition to the expenditure of R140 million for the construction of the Royal Bafokeng Sports Palace (stadium) that was used during the 2010 Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) World Cup tournament. The government made a contribution of R40-million toward the same project. Besides that, there is a joint venture road project between Sun City and Phokeng, and the national government contributed R53 million whereas the Royal Bafokeng Administration contributed R53 million towards the same project. The supply of water, electricity, refuse removal, and sanitation services are the responsibility of the Royal Bafokeng Administration (Cook 2005:127-130; Thornhill & Selepe 2010:173).

The lesson that can be drawn from the Royal Bafokeng classical example is that partnership between traditional leadership and government is possible. It also learnt that the Royal Bafokeng is such a small nation, thus it is able to manage its governance and service delivery responsibility with ease. One other lesson from this example is that the RBA has its own revenue which brings along as it engages in partnership with the municipalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It should be noted that traditional leaders are re-asserting themselves in the democratic South Africa, as such, they are here to stay (Tshehla 2005; Kompi & Twala 2014:281-282). This makes it imperative for the government to start considering the recommendations from the debates and literature around the subject of incorporating traditional leadership to democracy to form a mixed democratic governance system. Sklar (1999:115-121) coined the concept *mixed government* to suggest the acknowledgment of traditional authorities, whether through constitutional or extra-constitutional approach. It is argued that the incorporation of traditional structures into democracy could improve governance of African states (Englebert 2002:346). In addition to this argument, Sithole (2005) does not see traditional leadership as antagonistic to democracy, but rather as complementary to democracy, therefore, this serves as the basis for the recommendations of this article below.

The article recommends the following:

- Ways of incorporating the two should be forged since according to the discussion above it is noted that both of them are important for the wellbeing of citizens both in rural and urban areas in South Africa.
- A consultative summit should be held with traditional leaders in order to note inputs that can be extensively debated and discussed for refinement before such inputs can be considered for the amendment of the Traditional Leadership Governance Framework Act.
- The government should further clarify the role of traditional leadership in a democratic context. This can be done through the amendment of the Act and also by developing implementation guidelines that can simplify day-to-day responsibilities of traditional leaders in municipalities.

- Government should set aside funds in the budget that will assist in the work of traditional leaders. *Firstly*, to pay them sustainable monthly salaries and *secondly*, to assist in the partnerships that they will have to enter with various municipalities for service delivery and development initiatives for the rural citizens in their areas of jurisdiction. This can be done in the form of signing memoranda of understanding between them and municipalities.
- Government should also develop a curriculum/training programme that can assist traditional leaders in the understanding of good governance in order for them to be able to play an effective role in democracy. This will have a positive impact since traditional leaders command a significant amount of respect for the millions of citizens residing in rural areas.

Kompi & Twala (2014:988) raise an important issue that should be considered before politics can take advantage over the issue. They argue that there are concerns that some traditional leaders are treated differently from others. Some traditional leaders are complaining that traditional leaders in the KwaZulu-Natal are better treated than those in other provinces in terms of the social status accorded to them as well as with regards to allowances accompanied by their social status. This should serve as an eye opener before protests or litigation cases against government occur regarding the *unequal* treatment of traditional leader. It will be important for subsequent studies to be conducted around the issue of incorporating traditional leadership to democracy in South Africa in order to examine how far the country is making progress regarding the matter. The studies can be conducted in regular intervals of years to make comparative analysis over time. It will be important to also consider international best practices around the incorporation of traditional leadership to democracy.

CONCLUSION

This article does not claim to have absolute answers to the challenge of incompatibility experienced between traditional leadership and democracy. However, it argues that positive progress can be made regarding the co-existence of the two especially at the local government level. The article starts off by providing the historical review of the traditional leadership, where discussion is held of how traditional leaders were in charge of communities before the colonial and imperial epoch. The article demonstrated how much the developmental changes in the governance systems weakened the powers of traditional leaders especially in the local government level. It acknowledges that the local government sphere of government is the most dynamic spheres of the three where if the battle of governance is lost, the entire governance system of the country gets destabilised. Policy and legislative framework on the traditional leadership were discussed to give a sense of how traditional leadership should be incorporated to the democratic regime in South Africa. However, challenges regarding the incompatibility of the two which are causing problems for both are discussed. The classical example of the Royal Bafokeng Administration in Rustenburg, North West is provided in order to draw a model of practice for the co-existence of the two. Recommendations that can be considered to turn the situation around are provided.

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