




# Appraising the Evolution of Traditional Leadership in Post-Apartheid South Africa



Stewart Lee Kugara<sup>1</sup> , Sethuthuthu Lucky Vuma<sup>2</sup>   
& Tsetselelane Decide Mdhuli<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Law, The Independent Institute of Education's IIEMSA, Johannesburg, South Africa; Department of Cultural Studies and Political Studies, Faculty of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, University of Limpopo, Sovenga, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Cultural Studies and Political Studies, Faculty of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, University of Limpopo, Sovenga, South Africa.

## ABSTRACT

Traditional leadership was the form of governance for Indigenous communities in South Africa before any interference by the slave trade, colonisation, and apartheid. With the dawn of democracy, traditional leadership is arguably pushed to the periphery of the current political table. Despite its recognition and having laws that govern it, it exists more on paper but is painted as a toothless bulldog on the ground. Against this backdrop, this conceptual paper appraised the evolution of traditional leadership in post-apartheid South Africa in a bid to unearth the relevancy of traditional leadership in the current epoch. This study employed a qualitative, desk-based research methodology. The Sankofa Theory was adopted to ground the write-up. In pursuit of its intentions, the paper provided an analysis of the impact of colonisation on traditional leadership structures, explored the current gender dynamics embraced in traditional leadership, outlined traditional leadership with modern forms of governance, and assessed the debates surrounding its legitimacy. The paper concluded that the current government merely accommodated traditional leadership in principle but side-lined it in real governance by apportioning them unclear roles which are slowly causing a silent death on this indispensable institution. This study enriches scholarship by interrogating the marginalisation and transformation of traditional leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. Grounded in Sankofa Theory, it offers a decolonial lens that reclaims the Ubuntu-based governance traditions, exposes the tension between legal recognition and practical exclusion, and advocates for the substantive integration of traditional leadership within contemporary democratic frameworks.

### Correspondence

Tsetselelane Decide  
Mdhuli

Email:

[Tsetselelane.mdhuli@ul.ac.za](mailto:Tsetselelane.mdhuli@ul.ac.za)

### Publication History

Received:

14<sup>th</sup> February, 2025

Accepted:

9<sup>th</sup> June, 2025

Published:

11<sup>th</sup> July, 2025

**Keywords:** *Constitution, Traditional Leadership, Governance, Apartheid, Democracy, Colonial System*

## INTRODUCTION

Bennet succinctly defined traditional leadership as culturally consecrated positions to spearhead the affairs of indigenous communities.<sup>1</sup> It should be made clear that before the dehumanising intrusion of colonial rule, traditional leaders were the lawful institutions that determined the political, economic, and social structures of communities together with the people they led. Due to the advent of colonisation, the

<sup>1</sup> Bernice McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class," *Gender & Society* 7, no. 2 (1993): 162–82.

institution of traditional leadership was disturbed as some chiefs were removed for opposing colonial rule. The authors argue that the arrival of colonial rule weakened their legitimacy and people were made to believe that the traditional form of governance is devoid of numerous limitations. Consequently, many people were brainwashed to think that traditional leadership is archaic and does not resonate with the modern dynamic world. This successfully made educated elites ignore traditional leaders and occupy the newly created political space to fight colonisation. Unfortunately, after attaining independence, the educated elites did not return the power to the traditional leaders thus, Africa abandoned its governance system in favour of the foreign one.

The background of the evolution of traditional leadership is categorised into three stages:

**Pre-colonial:** Since time immemorial, South Africa has been comprised of different and unique systems of traditional leadership that differed from one indigenous group to another. The traditional leaders were not selected and/or voted into power but inherited the throne through the bloodline. Contrary to what many have been led to believe, the birthright was not the only criterion for hereditary leadership but other indispensable qualities that included leadership skills, wisdom, and bravery. Each indigenous group had its own hierarchy of traditional leaders which was highly respected and honoured. It was through this hierarchy that traditional leadership was able to perform its roles and duties to its people; allocate land, adjudicate conflicts, provide security, and lead spiritual matters. To attend to all these roles and duties, the king and/or chief was guided by a council of elders (traditional council) in a bid to do away with the king/chief doing as he pleases. In view of the latter, the decisions that were made within the communities were based on consensus. Given all this, the authors opine that traditional leaders in South Africa were the authority and governance of the time. Notwithstanding the merits of traditional governance, the Western worldview raised challenges with the way women were limited in governance. Even though the African worldview had its justifications which were reasonable and unique, such were viewed as barbaric.

**Colonial:** The institution of traditional leadership in South Africa was seriously disturbed by the advent of colonial powers, especially the British and Dutch. Their arrival and taking power in South Africa brought about fundamental changes in the way of life of indigenous communities and traditional leadership structures. Existing established traditional leadership and structures were weakened. They were weakened by replacing the existing traditional leaders with colonial administrators or by imposing a new traditional leadership that would follow their dictates. These imposed puppet traditional leaders enjoyed more power in exchange for their allegiance to their colonial masters. This move was well calculated as the ordinary people began to distance themselves from the chiefs. Therefore, this created a vacuum of leadership that was taken up by the educated elites whose ideology resonated with the people.

The suzerain adopted and implemented laws and policies that saw the dispossession of land from traditional leaders thus, disempowering them as leaders and losing respect from the people. The traditional land tenure was directly attacked and undermined as huge pieces of land were appropriated for the mining and agricultural activities of the European settlers. In a bid to bury the traditional leadership once and for all, Western education was introduced, which ignited questions on the source of the power of traditional leaders. The educated African nationalists took advantage of the way the legitimacy of traditional leaders was being questioned and began to propagate the message of democracy, freedom, and liberty. This placed them at the forefront of the struggle. However, it should be noted that most of the traditional leaders who had been affected by the advent of the European settlers were part of the struggle despite their adventures being ignored and/or silenced in the history of liberation.

**Post-colonial:** A good perspective of post-colonial traditional leadership cannot be given without taking into account the impact of colonialism. The mere fact that colonialism trampled on South African traditional affairs for centuries cannot be underestimated. This process disrupted traditional systems by introducing a form of governance that is hailed today as the epitome of everything. Through Western education, not even an iota of African traditional leadership values and norms was spared in a bid to advance their form of governance. Today, democracy which is seen as the leading form of governance has caused more woes in countries that are regarded as fathers of democracy. All the tranquillity, consensus, and Ubuntu that was advocated by the traditional leadership are demonised.

To date, the impact of colonialism on traditional leadership is still alive and well in most African countries, especially South Africa. All efforts in South Africa to restore and rejuvenate traditional

leadership have been viewed as complicated and have given birth to fights between traditional leaders and some municipalities. The bone of contention has always been around democratic ideals as defined by two differing worldviews, Western and African. The idea of 'mixed government' emerged as traditional institutions were assigned a lower level of power after the government. Even though the South African Constitution of 1996 seeks to 'recognise and protect the institution, status and role of traditional leadership, according to customary law' much still needs to be done to give real power to traditional institutions. This paper, therefore, appraises the evolution of traditional leadership in post-apartheid South Africa in a bid to unearth the relevancy of traditional leadership in the current epoch. This comes in as a corrective measure against the standing colonial statutes, practices and policies that persist in undermining traditional leadership in the contemporary epoch.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Sankofa Theory**

This paper used the Sankofa Theory to critically examine the evolution of traditional leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. Sankofa underpins the ability to go back to African indigenous roots and pick what was lost and embrace it in a bid to meet the present and future challenges.<sup>2</sup> In the process, one should be reminded that South Africa is now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thus, an intelligent way of reviving the past is critical for viable and sustainable solutions.<sup>3</sup> In the presentation of this theory, Sankofa is symbolized as a bird, which is seen flying carrying an egg, with its head looking backwards. This presentation is deep and philosophical: the ideas of the past (egg) need to be taken forward but with the guidance of the genesis of its principles. It is in this idea that the authors argue that the governance system of South Africa should incorporate its culture and not be swallowed by external worldviews. By this, the authors are interested in the genuine preservation of the traditional governance system in the running affairs of the country. In the back of the mind, the authors take note of the fact that culture is not static and it changes depending on various variables. Nevertheless, the authors argue vehemently that influence to change and/or transform the system of governance in Africa ought to embrace African values for the benefit of Africans.

The authors raised African thought through Sankofa to revive African ways of doing things from the past to now. In this regard, the theory states that Africans should go back to the old African ways that were used to deliberately influence advocates for traditional leadership before apartheid in South Africa, to go back to the drawing board and introspect if some strange things did not cripple the long-standing traditional leadership system. Such a concrete stance is indispensable to claim and ground Ubuntu against the malicious dilution of African culture and thought. Before the apartheid system in South Africa, the role of traditional leaders in fostering justice, serenity and tranquillity was respected with no speck of doubt. The system of inheritance of chieftaincy was sacred and followed African dictates, which was unique and done in good faith.

However, this narrative has lost its identity after it was replaced by 'democracy' as a foreign form of governance and has orchestrated the institution of traditional leadership to be rewritten by the same outsiders to show how archaic and backward it is. What a hypocrisy! A system of governance that was passed through generations is now being demonised by a system that came to colonise and exploit Africans of its resources. The authors do not distance themselves from the naked truth that some cultural practices need to be changed but this is better done by the owners of the practice without any duress and misrepresentation. Such a narrative has ignited the authors to adopt this theory in tracing the changes that were adopted post-apartheid in the status of traditional leaders.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative, desk-based research methodology underpinned by conceptual analysis. It relied on a wide range of credible and authoritative sources, including accredited peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, legislative texts, government policy documents, historical archives,

---

<sup>2</sup> Bill Buenar Puplampu, "Return to Africa to Mine an African Understanding of Employee Motivation in Africa: Sankofa," *Africa Journal of Management* 3, no. 3-4 (2017): 213-35.

<sup>3</sup> Nkrumah K Osei, "Issues Confronting Governance and Implementation: Sustainable Development Goals in Ghana," *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 10, no. 3 (2020): 355368.

and critical academic commentaries to interrogate the evolution and current status of traditional leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. This multi-sourced approach enabled a critical synthesis of diverse perspectives, ensuring the study was grounded in both theoretical depth and contextual relevance. Through this methodology, the paper not only appraised the historical trajectory of traditional leadership but also exposed the legal-political marginalisation it faced in the post-1994 era, ultimately advocating for its substantive inclusion in the broader framework of governance and nation-building.

## DISCUSSION

Traditional leadership is often portrayed as a historical and indigenous institution that has preserved a historic authority.<sup>4</sup> The prevailing belief is that this indigenous and historical nature grants it legitimacy. When evaluating the contemporary roles of traditional leaders, it is essential to critically analyse the political history of traditional leadership institutions and their claims of pre-colonial origins. However, it is important to recognize that the concept of traditional leadership is quite flexible, often deriving more authority from its actual historical practices.<sup>5</sup> The perception of traditional leadership has been tainted by its exploitation during the colonial and apartheid eras, leading to associations with primitive and authoritarian practices.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the ongoing debate about the current role of traditional leadership is deeply influenced by this controversial history. Therefore, it is crucial to delve into the history of traditional leadership, spanning the pre-colonial, colonial, and apartheid periods, to better comprehend its place in contemporary political discussion.

In the historical context presented by Mabutla South Africa was governed by a diverse and series of traditional leaders, including the leaders like Shaka, Makhado, and Sekhukhune, who held exclusive political authority.<sup>7</sup> This shows that the authority of traditional leaders (*amakhosi*) (Zulu), *mahosi* (Venda), *makhosi* (Ndebele), *dikgosi* (Sepedi) and *tihosi* (Vatsonga) was reduced from symbolic and ritual backing power. The institution of traditional leadership was an administrative and political centre of governance for rural communities in the Republic of South Africa.<sup>8</sup> This authority was exercised through a hierarchy of regional chiefs, who owed their positions to the favour and endorsement of the ruling monarch. Each chief was obliged to pay tribute and provide service directly to the king or indirectly through his superior in the hierarchy. The highest-ranking chiefs were also expected to attend the king's court when summoned. While this traditional system generally appeared to be accepted, occasional disputes did arise. It was upheld by a combination of myths and rituals, and conflicts were typically resolved according to shared values held by both rulers and subjects. Importantly, as described by Mabutla, this system was not characterized by democratic principles.<sup>9</sup> The current authors argue that it was centred on Ubuntu, a principle presumed to be above democratic principles.

Unlike unfounded claims by Mabutla and Bennett emphasized the role of traditional leaders as paternal figures responsible for the welfare of their people.<sup>10</sup> They had a duty to consult with traditional councils and make decisions that would benefit their community. As tribal rulers, they possessed the authority to allocate land, which was theoretically considered communal property held in trust by the leader. Bennett also noted that the system did not conform to Western distinctions between judicial, executive, and legislative branches of government.<sup>11</sup> Traditional leaders were not subject to oversight by

<sup>4</sup> Moeketsi Letseka, "How Convincing Is the Claim That Coexistence between Traditional African Values and Liberal Democratic Values in South Africa Is a Contradiction?," *Pensee* 76, no. 9 (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Letseka, "How Convincing Is the Claim That Coexistence between Traditional African Values and Liberal Democratic Values in South Africa Is a Contradiction?"

<sup>6</sup> Peter Bikam and James Chakwizira, "Involvement of Traditional Leadership in Land Use Planning and Development Projects in South Africa: Lessons for Local Government Planners.," 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Gansie Mabutla, "The Fate of Traditional Leaders in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *With Aran MacKinnon (State University of West Georgia), Discussant. Session: Changing Identities and Roles: Tradition Reconfigured. Kentucky: Northern Kentucky University, 2007.*

<sup>8</sup> O S Madumo, "Developmental Local Government Challenges and Progress in South Africa," *Administratio Publica* 23, no. 2 (2015): 153–66.

<sup>9</sup> Mabutla, "The Fate of Traditional Leaders in Post-Apartheid South Africa."

<sup>10</sup> Mabutla, "The Fate of Traditional Leaders in Post-Apartheid South Africa"; Chelsea Weyand, Liz O'Laughlin, and Patrick Bennett, "Dimensions of Religiousness That Influence Parenting.," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no. 3 (August 2013): 182–91, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030627>.

<sup>11</sup> James Bennett, Andrew Ainslie, and John Davis, "Contested Institutions? Traditional Leaders and Land Access and Control in Communal Areas of Eastern Cape Province, South Africa," *Land Use Policy* 32 (2013): 27–38.

an independent judiciary. However, the current authors argue that the absence of the separation of powers did not necessarily mean they were despotic as alleged to suit some narratives. They are African leaders and use African systems of governance which ought to be fairly analysed without cherry-picking flaws and views to make noise.

In addition, the historical account presented by Mabutla underscores the dominance of traditional leaders and their hierarchical governance in pre-colonial South Africa, while Bennett highlights the paternalistic responsibilities and powers of traditional leaders within their communities.<sup>12</sup> Both perspectives contribute to the understanding of this traditional governance system in the region. Those who advocate against traditional leadership always raise the dominance of male figures in the system. They indicate that the shortage of women in contemporary South Africa was caused by this. The current authors firmly dispute such parochial views that ignore the role of paternal aunts (*makhazi* (Venda), *hahani* (Tsonga) and *rakgadi* (Sipedi)). The dominance of male figures is critical within African setups and is intended to protect the bloodline in all its essence. So, judging the African standards using Western views will also present adulterated responses. The change in African values by Western-oriented courts has, in our humble respect resulted in the erosion of African values, norms, and traditions. One leading issue in this erosion is to eliminate male primogeniture (in the context of chieftaincy inheritance) based on the fact that it 'perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces patriarchal norms.' The African justifications in this regard are ignored based on democracy, which is foreign to them. However, this is not the focus of this paper but shows one major change in the institution of traditional leadership in the post-apartheid epoch.

Despite the growing call for diversity in career paths, gender discrimination in traditional leadership roles remains persistent. This means that men and women in leadership positions face different career challenges when striving for career advancement. Cook argues that men often experience an unnoticed phenomenon known as the stairs case, which enables them to advance rapidly and attain higher positions, even in organisations where women predominate.<sup>13</sup> Heilman opines that this staircase phenomenon reinforces gender stereotypes and creates greater obstacles for women aiming for leadership positions.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, men tend to receive preferential treatment over women in terms of career advancement, securing higher positions and salaries without encountering the same barriers as women. In most cases, women are always undermined in the big position. The authors argue that even though this is true, there have been some changes as men seem to be neglected in preference of women in a bid to correct this narrative.

In contrast, women must confront the pervasive gender bias and stereotypes to shatter the staircase and attain leadership positions within organisations.<sup>15</sup> Even after overcoming this barrier, women encounter additional hurdles rooted in biases and stereotypes specific to leadership roles, including leadership prototypes. Therefore, since many men may not be comfortable with women in leadership roles, women may intentionally face disadvantages in certain situations throughout their careers. Therefore, to be effective leaders, women must persuade men of their leadership capabilities.

### **Traditional leadership vis-à-vis modern forms of governance in South Africa**

The system of traditional leadership before colonialism was constituted by a mobile group, with no fixed or permanent territorial boundaries, that followed a particular chief.<sup>16</sup> During that period, the traditional hierarchy consisted of a chief, a paramount chief, or a king. Below the chief or a king were headmen. Headmen were responsible for looking after a certain unit or portion of the chief or a king's population. In the democratic system, leaders are not born but made and elected by the people in positions of responsibility. The son of a sitting president does not inherit the leadership position of his father when

---

<sup>12</sup> Mabutla, "The Fate of Traditional Leaders in Post-Apartheid South Africa"; Bennett, Ainslie, and Davis, "Contested Institutions? Traditional Leaders and Land Access and Control in Communal Areas of Eastern Cape Province, South Africa."

<sup>13</sup> Alison Cook and Christy Glass, "Women and Top Leadership Positions: Towards an Institutional Analysis," *Gender, Work & Organization* 21, no. 1 (2014): 91–103.

<sup>14</sup> Madeline E. Heilman, "Gender Stereotypes and Workplace Bias," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 32 (January 2012): 113–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2012.11.003>.

<sup>15</sup> Cecilia L Ridgeway, "Gender, Status, and Leadership," *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001): 637–55.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Nicholson, "A Critical Analysis of the Role of Traditional Leadership in Modern South African Law," *Fundamina: A Journal of Legal History* 12, no. 1 (2006): 184–92.

his term of office ends or when he dies. In the democratic system, anyone has the opportunity to be elected in a position of responsibility, irrespective of their family status. As long as voters are happy and confident with their leadership skills, then they can be leaders. The democratic system operates with separation of powers. The state has three arms which are the executive (Cabinet), the legislature (Parliament) the judiciary (Courts of law).<sup>17</sup> Power is decentralised, unlike in traditional leadership, where power is centralised. The government is also divided into levels, namely, the national, provincial and local government. They all have legislative and executive authority in their own spheres and are defined in the Constitution as distinctive, interdependent, and interrelated.<sup>18</sup>

In the context of today's set-up, headmen are responsible for a certain village, and every village that falls under a certain chief or a king will have its own headmen. The headmen will be responsible for attending to local issues, ranging from maintaining discipline in the village, adjudicating disputes fairly, and providing for the well-being of his people. The headmen will report to the chief or a king. It is important to note that, the headmen in the village do not operate in isolation. He/she constitutes his/her own council which will assist in running the village or the unit. The council consists of selected respectable senior members of his/her family and selected, respected members of the village. The local cases will be heard before the council but where there are differences from members of the council in terms of decision making, the headmen can always provide a final word. Their *modus operandi* is to follow each other to arrive at a consensus.

In a democratic government, the scope of chiefs and headmen is occupied by the local government. The elected mayor, together with the council, is responsible for running the municipality. The mayor becomes the political head of the municipality while the municipal manager becomes the accounting officer. The municipal council is the highest governing body of a municipality. The members of the council make all major decisions affecting the municipality. This includes decisions on different forms of service delivery, such as the construction of new buildings, roads, community halls, sports complexes and many other forms of development. The municipality has a section of law enforcement that is responsible for maintaining order in the municipality. But unlike traditional leadership, municipalities do not have courts to deal with community matters. The judiciary is responsible for presiding over courts. There are different types of courts available to deal with community matters. The courts range from Regional Magistrate Courts, High Court Divisions, Supreme Court of Appeal and Constitutional Court. There are also specialist courts such as the Competition Appeal Court, Labour Court, Labour Appeal Court, and Electoral Court. Unlike traditional leadership, the democratic government, has several options to explore in the pursuit of justice.

As already indicated above, headmen were responsible for defined geographical areas/ units and reported to the chief. The chief, together with his headmen, constituted a Council.<sup>19</sup> Village members who felt like their cases were not properly handled by the headmen and his council, had the luxury of escalating the matter to the chief. The chief's council was the highest decision-making body and their decision was final. There was no other alternative available to refer a case after it was dealt with at the chief's level. If the council did not agree on a certain decision, the chief would rule on the matter, and no one could challenge his ruling. There is a Sepedi idiom which says "*La Kgošhi gale fetolwe*" which means the Chief's word is final. The chief's role was to maintain order, discipline, respect, tradition, culture, customs, identity, protection, provide for the well-being of his people, and other related issues that would make a conducive living environment for his subject.

Generally, a chief was a highly respected person in the community and his selection was rooted in ancestry.<sup>20</sup> It was believed that the chiefs possessed divine rights and were the mediators between God and their subjects. This belief system made their word final, and it could not be challenged since they were regarded as guided by the upper powers. To empower him to meet his obligations, the chief was

---

<sup>17</sup> Malusi Kenneth Luthuli, "The Roles and Functions of Traditional Leaders (Amakhosi) in the Democratic South Africa with a Specific Focus on Those Falling under Ingonyama Trust: A Case Study of Ugu District Municipality" (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Luthuli, "The Roles and Functions of Traditional Leaders (Amakhosi) in the Democratic South Africa with a Specific Focus on Those Falling under Ingonyama Trust: A Case Study of Ugu District Municipality."

<sup>19</sup> Nicholson, "A Critical Analysis of the Role of Traditional Leadership in Modern South African Law."

<sup>20</sup> Sultan Khan Lootvoet Benoit & Mantzaris Evangelos A, "The Clash between Traditional and Modern Systems of Governance in the Durban Metropolis-a Tale of Two Administrative Civilizations," *Alternation* 13, no. 2 (2006): 174-97.

vested with absolute powers and was granted certain privileges that he was entitled to exercise, such as being a final decision-maker.<sup>21</sup>

Traditional leadership is hereditary. Leaders are born into the role rather than selected or elected and receive a certain form of training like in democratic government.<sup>22</sup> The leadership throne is through the bloodline. As a chief or king, one is born to lead. In a democratic government, no one is born to lead, people decide through elections who must lead them. In traditional leadership, they are no form of separation of powers like in the democratic government, but they are separation of responsibilities. Some leadership responsibilities are delegated to headmen or royal council. The king or chief remains the last man standing in terms of making final decisions. In the democratic government decisions are the collective responsibility of the elected leaders. The delegation of responsibilities does not eliminate the fact that the power is centralised around the chief or the king. There is no term of office for the headmen, chief, or the king, they rule until their last breath of living. In a democratic government, elected leaders in positions of responsibility have a defined term. Presidents, premiers, mayors, and ward councillors have a tenure of office of five years. Their election to leadership positions is not for a lifetime.

Most of the chiefs and kings practice polygamy and have large families. From an African point of view, having a huge family as a man is a sign of power.<sup>23</sup> If one can manage a family of more wives and more kids, then one can simply lead the community without any challenges. For example, Chief Senzangakhona (Zulu Kingdom) married sixteen (16) women while King Mswati III (Swaziland) married fifteen (15) women. Out of these many wives, one will be chosen by the royal council and the *lobola* of that one will come from the contributions of the community, the candle wife. The chosen wife by the royal council must be a princess from another royal family. That princess will then bear an heir to the throne. For example, the current king of the Zulu Kingdom, Misizulu kaZwelithini is the son of King Goodwill Zwelithini's wife, Queen Mantfombi Dlamini Zulu. The late Queen Mantfombi Dlamini Zulu was from Eswatini Royal Palace, she was a daughter of the late king Sobhuza II and a sister of King Mswati III.

The reason for marrying into another royal family is for diplomatic relations as well as to ensure that the heir to the throne has royal blood from both parents. After the birth of the heir to the throne, the child will be taken away and placed away from the royal family. The place in which the heir is placed will remain unknown to the general members of the royal family, only the few trusted members of the royal family will know about the whereabouts of the heir to the throne. The reason for hiding the heir to the throne is because of jealousy from other wives and siblings which may lead to the elimination of the heir before he/ she can even get an opportunity to lead.<sup>24</sup> Leadership role is a contested terrain everywhere and to some extent this contestation leads to conflicts or even assassination by people close to the heir.

Due to this possibility, the heir to the throne becomes highly protected. Some are even taken to their mother's royal palace to be raised there. Misizulu kaZwelithini was raised by his uncle, King Mswati III. In a democratic government, there are no prescribed expectations about the love life of the elected leaders. You can lead a country without a wife or a husband, it is not compulsory for one to be married in order to lead. As already indicated above, leadership is a contested terrain, even in a democratic government, there are disputes and conflicts for leadership. In some cases, they even assassinate each other, and as a result, leaders such as state President, Premiers, Mayors and others are highly protected by South African Police Services (SAPS) and private security companies.

The colonial systems of government view the traditional leadership structures from a Eurocentric perspective and reduce African systems of governance as being backward, undemocratic, autocratic and barbaric. Africans do not deny the right of Eurocentric perspective in viewing the world from its cultural centre but, the European view must not be imposed as universal. What is required is mutual respect for each of these systems. African leadership system needs to be respected and reclaim its own space to operate without being suffocated. Indigenous forms of governance and their integration into modern

<sup>21</sup> Nicholson, "A Critical Analysis of the Role of Traditional Leadership in Modern South African Law."

<sup>22</sup> Carolyn Logan, "Selected Chiefs, Elected Councillors and Hybrid Democrats: Popular Perspectives on the Co-Existence of Democracy and Traditional Authority," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no. 1 (2009): 101–28.

<sup>23</sup> Logan, "Selected Chiefs, Elected Councillors and Hybrid Democrats: Popular Perspectives on the Co-Existence of Democracy and Traditional Authority."

<sup>24</sup> Logan, "Selected Chiefs, Elected Councillors and Hybrid Democrats: Popular Perspectives on the Co-Existence of Democracy and Traditional Authority."

systems of government have thus far proved to be a challenge, not only in South Africa but in almost all African states.<sup>25</sup> Constitutions throughout most African states refer to Indigenous systems but, in practice these institutions are marginalised, side-lined, serving merely a symbolic rather than a functional role. More importantly, these institutions are known to be inconsistent with democratic principles of governance, despite their presence long before colonial rule. Democratic principles find it difficult to co-exist with traditional leadership principles. The democratic system bullies the indigenous systems.<sup>26</sup>

According to democratic government in the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 41 of 2003, traditional leadership is responsible for land administration, promotion of peace and stability, facilitating service delivery and building sustainable social cohesion in rural communities, among others.<sup>27</sup> However, these roles are not clearly specified anywhere, and the effort from the government to ensure that traditional leadership plays these roles smoothly is not evident.

### **The Impact of Colonisation on Traditional Leadership Structures in South Africa**

During the pre-colonial era, traditional leadership was the known and acceptable political system for Africans. Africans operated under this political system, it was their system and they understood it better. However, during the period of colonialism, they were reduced to almost nothing. They became the secondary political system in South Africa and to some extent were recognized when they were beneficial to the colonisers. The colonial administrations were reluctant to recognize the authority of traditional leadership because tribal government was regarded as primitive, despotic, and barbaric. The effects of colonialism and apartheid have had long-lasting, significant impacts on traditional leadership.<sup>28</sup> The colonial system subjugated traditional leadership structures intending to weaken it, for their own political dominance. Colonialism had less respect for African systems, be it the political system, economic system, or any other. Their white supremacism made them strongly believe that it was their way or no other way. Their project of eliminating ways of doing things from an African-centeredness goes beyond the issue of traditional leadership.

The impact of colonialism on traditional leadership remains one of the dominant contested topics in post-apartheid South Africa. This is despite the fact that Chapter 12 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa accords the traditional leadership recognition under the new democratic government.<sup>29</sup> However, the bone of contention on such recognition is the role that traditional leaders should play in the new political dispensation. They are recognised only on paper without well-defined practical measures in place. This exposes how the western systems and standards do not respect African traditions. The roles and functions of traditional leadership have been reduced into a playground, by redefining it into different stages of history, from colonialism to apartheid and from apartheid to democratic South Africa. There has been a lot of interference in the system of traditional leadership by the colonial administration.

Colonialism destroyed many South African kingdoms and chieftaincies. Kings and chiefs who refused to collaborate with colonial systems became victims, they were brutalised, tormented and killed. The system also strived through divide and rule, kingdoms and tribes were divided by colonial forces for their own narrow selfish interests. That was done to weaken African resistance against colonialism. Some kings and chiefs became collaborators and turned against their own subjects because of fear of colonisers, and some because of patronage and other benefits that came with being a collaborator. The struggle against colonisers was compromised, Africans were infiltrated and in the process, a lot was lost in the hands of colonisers. Some defeated African tribes, their leaders were killed, and strangers with no trace of royal blood took over. In some tribes, with internal squabbles for leadership, the colonisers came in and sided with whoever pledged support and loyalty to them, without considering the African systems of

<sup>25</sup> Khan Lootvoet Benoit & Mantzaris Evangelos A, "The Clash between Traditional and Modern Systems of Governance in the Durban Metropolis-a Tale of Two Administrative Civilizations."

<sup>26</sup> Khan Lootvoet Benoit & Mantzaris Evangelos A, "The Clash between Traditional and Modern Systems of Governance in the Durban Metropolis-a Tale of Two Administrative Civilizations."

<sup>27</sup> Mocheudi Martinus Selepe, "The Role of Traditional Leaders in the Promotion of Municipal Service Delivery in South Africa" (University of Pretoria, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Luthuli, "The Roles and Functions of Traditional Leaders (Amakhosi) in the Democratic South Africa with a Specific Focus on Those Falling under Ingonyama Trust: A Case Study of Ugu District Municipality."

<sup>29</sup> Republic of South Africa, *National Road Traffic Act, No. 93 of 1996* ( Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996); Thuto Thipe, "The Boundaries of Tradition: An Examination of the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act," *AFR. STUD* 507 (2013): 518.

installing a chief or a king. Traditional leaders lost their land, traditions, customs, and identity as a result of colonialism. Traditional leadership was pushed into the periphery and the centre stage was given to colonial systems.

As a result of the impact of colonialism, South Africa in post-1994 was faced with an endless number of traditional disputes and claims. Due to colonialism and apartheid, some traditional leaders were demoted from being leaders for different reasons, such as defying the colonial government. Proxies were scouted and deployed as traditional leadership without having royal blood. They came in and ruled according to the will and wishes of the coloniser. In the post-1994, traditional leaders who were harassed, silenced, and demoted by the apartheid system started to come forward and plead with the African National Congress (ANC) led the government to constitute a commission of enquiry which will investigate some of the Chieftaincies and Kingdoms that are ruled by those who are not the rightful leaders. The aim was to correct the injustice of the past, created by the apartheid government, and restore the integrity and legitimacy of traditional leadership.

### **Debates surrounding traditional leadership and its legitimacy**

As a result of interference, disruptions, and confusion were brought about by colonisation which impacted the traditional leadership at large in South Africa. In 2008, the parliament of the Republic of South Africa resolved to form the Commission of inquiry which focused on issues of traditional leadership disputes and claims under Professor T Nhlapo.<sup>30</sup> The commission was established in terms of Section 23 of the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 41 of 2003. The mandate of the Commission is located in Section 25 of the Act. The Commission had the powers to investigate issues related to the institution on its own accord, or as requested by person(s) where there was doubt as to whether a kingship, senior traditional leadership, or a headmanship or headwomanship was established in terms of the relevant customary law and customs, Section 26 of the Act empowered the Commission to make a decision, which had to be communicated to the President of the Republic of South Africa where the position of a King was affected, or to the Premier of the relevant province where any position lower than that of a King was affected. This was the effort of the government to deal with disputes of traditional leadership disputes in the country. Unfortunately, the government employed the tactics and strategies of the system that created all these problems. Our government wanted to use western systems and standards to solve African problems. Modern courts became the centre of traditional leadership, the case of *Shilubana and others v N'wamitwa* (CCT03/07) is one of the examples amongst others. The traditional leadership is now subjected to western standards and every time there is a dispute or any challenges, they resort to government structures in an attempt to fix them.<sup>31</sup> The independence of the traditional leadership is lost. This has a huge impact on the relevancy and identity of the traditional leadership. Commissions and courts are now used to determine the faith of traditional leadership, which is problematic.

### **CONCLUSION**

From the foregoing analysis, the authors have argued that African indigenous communities have historically shown that their own government system which was composed of chiefs, headmen, elders and traditional councils was able to resolve conflicts and foster peace and security. Despite such indigenous norms and models being different from community to community, they can be arguably presented as having been participatory and governed by societal consent similar to the tenets of democracy. A sea of change was witnessed by the advent of colonialism and apartheid. A Western style of governance was imposed and replaced the traditional institution. Even after the independence of South Africa, Western governance paradigms continued due to development that followed the Western patterns, global political-economic order and the accepted modernity. Even though the Western style of governance took over, in most rural communities the traditional institution still dominates most grassroots thus, introducing dualism.

---

<sup>30</sup> Thipe, "The Boundaries of Tradition: An Examination of the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act."

<sup>31</sup> Talia Meer and Craig Campbell, "Traditional Leadership in Democratic South Africa," *Durban and Cape Town: Democracy Development Program*, 2007.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper has shown that the evolution of traditional leadership in post-apartheid South Africa has brewed a hybrid governance. Against this backdrop, the authors call for the exploration of South Africa's mixed governance model rather than continuing to force Western governance principles as one-size-fits-all even when it is not applicable due to history, context, and the local reality. As a result, the hybridity of governance requires research. The trajectory of hybrid governance in South Africa is evitable and is already in existence despite the denial which is noted. As such, a surgical and objective approach is called for in a bid to customize this unique governance to embrace its advantages and deal with the complications it carries.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

- The authors are grateful for the funding offered to Dr (Adv) Stewart Lee Kugara, by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (NRF). This work is based on research supported wholly by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Numbers: 151774). The Grantholder acknowledges that opinions, findings and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in any publication generated by the NRF-supported research are that of the author(s) and that the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.
- The authors also express profound and honest gratitude to the Head of the Department of Cultural and Political Studies (Professor Kgothatso Shai) and the entire membership of the department who arranged for the writing retreat at Fusion Boutique Hotel where the write-up of this paper was finalised.
- Also, the reviewers and editors are appreciated for devoting their precious time and effort to giving comments, which highly contributed to improving the article for publication.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barnett, Bernice McNair. "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class." *Gender & Society* 7, no. 2 (1993): 162–82.
- Bennett, James, Andrew Ainslie, and John Davis. "Contested Institutions? Traditional Leaders and Land Access and Control in Communal Areas of Eastern Cape Province, South Africa." *Land Use Policy* 32 (2013): 27–38.
- Bikam, Peter, and James Chakwizira. "Involvement of Traditional Leadership in Land Use Planning and Development Projects in South Africa: Lessons for Local Government Planners.," 2014.
- Cook, Alison, and Christy Glass. "Women and Top Leadership Positions: Towards an Institutional Analysis." *Gender, Work & Organization* 21, no. 1 (2014): 91–103.
- Heilman, Madeline E. "Gender Stereotypes and Workplace Bias." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 32 (January 2012): 113–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2012.11.003>.
- Khan Lootvoet Benoit & Mantzaris Evangelos A, Sultan. "The Clash between Traditional and Modern Systems of Governance in the Durban Metropolis-a Tale of Two Administrative Civilizations." *Alternation* 13, no. 2 (2006): 174–97.
- Letseka, Moeketsi. "How Convincing Is the Claim That Coexistence between Traditional African Values and Liberal Democratic Values in South Africa Is a Contradiction?" *Pensee* 76, no. 9 (2014).
- Logan, Carolyn. "Selected Chiefs, Elected Councillors and Hybrid Democrats: Popular Perspectives on the Co-Existence of Democracy and Traditional Authority." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no. 1 (2009): 101–28.
- Luthuli, Malusi Kenneth. "The Roles and Functions of Traditional Leaders (Amakhosi) in the Democratic South Africa with a Specific Focus on Those Falling under Ingonyama Trust: A Case Study of Ugu District Municipality." University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2015.
- Mabutla, Frank Gansie. "The Fate of Traditional Leaders in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *With Aran MacKinnon (State University of West Georgia), Discussant. Session: Changing Identities and Roles: Tradition Reconfigured. Kentucky: Northern Kentucky University, 2007.*
- Madumo, O S. "Developmental Local Government Challenges and Progress in South Africa." *Administratio Publica* 23, no. 2 (2015): 153–66.

- Meer, Talia, and Craig Campbell. "Traditional Leadership in Democratic South Africa." *Durban and Cape Town: Democracy Development Program*, 2007.
- Nicholson, Caroline. "A Critical Analysis of the Role of Traditional Leadership in Modern South African Law." *Fundamina: A Journal of Legal History* 12, no. 1 (2006): 184–92.
- Osei, Nkrumah K. "Issues Confronting Governance and Implementation: Sustainable Development Goals in Ghana." *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 10, no. 3 (2020): 355368.
- Puplampu, Bill Buenar. "Return to Africa to Mine an African Understanding of Employee Motivation in Africa: Sankofa." *Africa Journal of Management* 3, no. 3–4 (2017): 213–35.
- Republic of South Africa. *National Road Traffic Act, No. 93 of 1996*. Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996.
- Ridgeway, Cecilia L. "Gender, Status, and Leadership." *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001): 637–55.
- Selepe, Mocheudi Martinus. "The Role of Traditional Leaders in the Promotion of Municipal Service Delivery in South Africa." University of Pretoria, 2009.
- Thipe, Thuto. "The Boundaries of Tradition: An Examination of the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act." *AFR. STUD* 507 (2013): 518.
- Weyand, Chelsea, Liz O’Laughlin, and Patrick Bennett. "Dimensions of Religiousness That Influence Parenting." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no. 3 (August 2013): 182–91. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030627>.

## ABOUT AUTHORS

Doctor (Advocate) Stewart Lee Kugara is a Y2 National Research Foundation (NRF) rated scholar – Law and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. He is a former Senior Lecturer (African Studies and School of Law – UNIVEN) and former adjunct lecturer Monash University, South Africa (Now IIE MSA). He is a former Postdoctoral Fellow: University of Limpopo – DSI/NRF Innovation Postdoctoral Fellowship (2021-3) and The Department of Science and Technology (DST) – National Research Foundation (NRF) Centre in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (CIKS) – UNIVEN – 2020. He is an interdisciplinary, intradisciplinary and multidisciplinary author with academic publications straddling the following areas; African indigenous law, intellectual property, traditional leadership, African traditional health and beliefs, knowledge management, African conflicts management, cultural astronomy, human rights, indigenous customary law, poverty and development studies, African philosophy and cultural philosophy, heritage studies and medical anthropology. He possesses excellent experience in customary legal issues (indigenous knowledge systems), research, community engagement and teaching.

Sethuthuthu Lucky Vuma is a holder of a Doctor of Philosophy in History from University of Limpopo. He is currently working at University of Limpopo as a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, Department of Cultural and Political Studies. His field of research interest is Liberation History, Student Activism, Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS), and South African Historiography. He published a number of journal articles in accredited journals and also presented a number of papers in academic conferences. He produced and continue to supervise honours, masters and PHD students at University of Limpopo. He is also an external examiner for University of Venda, University of Zululand, and Walter Sisulu University. He is a provincial Chairperson of Oral History Association of South Africa (OHASA), Limpopo Chapter and Deputy Chairperson for Limpopo Archives Council (LAC). He is also former chairperson of Sports in the SRC at University of Limpopo. He spend most of his time analysing politics of the world, kept updated with current affairs and researching about new developments in his field of his research interest. Being born and live his life in Limpopo province, South Africa, instilled in him a respect for diversity and a burning desire to be a well-grounded academic. This goal has been his main reason for his stay in academia and he is determined to work hard in order to achieve this goal.

Tsetselelani is an Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Senior Lecturer at the University of Limpopo. She holds the following degrees: a Doctor of Philosophy in African Studies, Master’s Degree in African

Studies, (Hons) Degree in Gender Studies, BA in International Relations and Post graduate Diploma in Higher Education. She is an author in the following areas: Indigenous Knowledge system, African philosophy, gender and indigenous studies and African conflict management. Poverty and African resolution, research and community engagement.