

Pillars of Resilience of Traditional Leadership in Vhembe District of Limpopo Province

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ABSTRACT In this paper, it is reported that traditional leaders in Vhembe District Municipality of South Africa have over the years successfully responded and coped with apartheid and democratic systems. This was observed through a study of 14 villages in nine purposively and proportionally sampled Traditional Leadership Councils. A mixed method exploratory and descriptive study was carried out. Thirteen views on how traditional leadership demonstrated their resilience in combating pressure resulting from changes in government over the years were identified. The most common views were that “the institution is planned by God” and “they are closer to the people than their elected counterparts”. There were no statistically significant differences in perceptions due to age, gender and position of authority ($P > 0.05$). These results revealed that there was considerable understanding of the roles and belief in the importance of traditional leadership in rural community development.

INTRODUCTION

The findings of the study on how traditional leadership in South Africa responded and coped with changes in government during the colonial, apartheid and democratic eras are presented in this paper. First, the meaning of traditional leaders is clarified. Thereafter, evidence on how traditional leadership in Vhembe District Municipality responded and coped with changes in national government is covered. In South Africa, traditional leadership has existed since pre-colonial times. Throughout the period of existence of traditional leadership, the system adapted to colonial, apartheid and democratic systems of governance. Originally, traditional leadership provided societal, political, economic and religious functions for local communities (Dusing 2001). Vail (1989) contends that traditional leaders have been inventive in their efforts to adapt and thrive. Furthermore, their own legacies are ambiguous and historically crusted. Because of this, traditional leadership can be regarded as representing the indigenous form of local governance throughout southern Africa.

Oomen (2005) contends that there are both normative and empirical reasons that have compelled democratic governments to re-recognize traditional leadership. First, there is a belief that indigenous (traditional) institutions are worth recognizing. The traditional system of governance is resilient and is an integral part of the

African socio-political landscape, which can be used to attain democracy. Prior to colonial rule, apartheid and democracies, amongst other forms of governance, Africa did not know any other form of governance besides traditional leadership. According to Dinerman (2001), Chinsinga (2006) and Ntsebeza (2006), although many countries attempted to dismantle traditional leadership upon securing independence from colonial masters, invariably they were eventually forced to re-recognise it in later years of the democratic dispensation. Countries such as Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda were forced to re-recognise traditional leadership in an attempt to increase the participation of the people in rural areas in development and governance.

Today, traditional leadership remains prominent in many countries. In Botswana, Malawi and Uganda, traditional leadership was incorporated into formal governance structures and systems just as South Africa did (Jacobs 2000). However, the pillars of resilience of traditional leadership during colonial and in the democratic dispensation remain not well understood and documented. This subject forms the basis of this paper.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The exploratory study reported in this paper was conducted within the qualitative research

and quantitative paradigms. Nine out of 50 Traditional Councils (TCs) in Vhembe District were purposively and proportionally sampled. This took into account that the TCs were drawn from predominantly Venda and Tsonga-speaking communities. The stratified random sampling technique was used to select 14 villages under the leadership of Headmen in Makhado, Musina and Thulamela local Municipalities. Members of TCs, Headmen Councils and elected leaders in Vhembe District Municipality were the sub-population groups for the research. They were regarded as ideal participants because of the belief that they would provide comprehensive and relevant information required to answer the study questions. Fourteen Ward Councillors leading areas within the sampled villages were located served as respondents as well. Data were collected using focus group discussions and key informant interviews that the principal researcher facilitated. A uniform set of semi-structured interview questions was used to guide the focus group discussions. In total, 112 focus group discussions and 14 interviews were conducted. Apart from note-taking during the interviews and focus group discussions, a tape recorder was used. Respondents consented to its use in writing.

Thematic Content Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to analyse the primary qualitative data. The participants' perceptions were organised into common themes, ensuring that the sources, namely adults (men and women), youth (male and female) and elected leaders were not lost because they provided cursors towards responding to the research questions. Inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to analyse the interview transcripts and field notes. Similarities and differences across sub-groups, namely adults, youth, male, female, traditional leaders, and elected leaders were explored. This involved listening to the tape records, transcribing and translating the interviews, which were conducted in Xitsonga and Tshivenda languages into English. Summaries and matrices of the results were prepared. Thematic sub-categories of views on resilience of traditional leadership were classified taking into consideration the possibility that they would differ due to age group, sex, and between elected and traditional leaders. The statements were coded. Themes were linked and informative

quotes selected prior to writing up the information in a coherent fashion.

The results obtained in phase 1 of the study were consolidated. A matrix that required indication of the areas of agreement or divergence where 1 meant agreement and 0, divergence was developed. The data were stored as MS Excel spreadsheets. Descriptive statistics were obtained using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 22.0 for windows. The analyses of data obtained in phase 2 of the research focused on testing hypotheses relating to the effects of age, gender and type of leadership on perception of how traditional leadership responded and coped with changes in government over the years of colonial, apartheid and democratic rule. Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests were carried out.

RESULTS

Thirteen (13) primary views on how traditional leadership responded and coped with changes in government over the years of different types of governments were identified. The most commonly expressed views were that "the institution is planned by God; they are closer to the people on the ground than their elected counterparts; acted within the laws of each existing government; and that they are knowledgeable about people's needs". The least commonly perceived views were: "most traditional leaders were not on the government pay roll; they were at the apex of the political hierarchy; and that the institution was democratic in nature". In the proceeding paragraphs, these are further explained.

Africans Understand and Believe in the Traditional System of Governance

Approximately, 80 percent of the respondent focus groups indicated that they preferred traditional leaders instead of the elected because the former presided over transparent systems, besides being more approachable and apolitical. The participants indicated that they were not so familiar with democratic systems of governance, which made it difficult to immediately embrace them. Moreover, traditional leadership was preferred because it 'listened' to the villagers' concerns (consultation) and made concerted efforts to settle issues in a timely manner. It was highlighted that one of the major reasons for Africans to believe in traditional leadership

was that they had lived under the same rule for a long time and was renowned for efficient delivery of services, which the democratically elected governing system was failing to match. The following excerpts from a member of a Headman Council in Thulamela substantiated this view:

During the days the Venda and Gazankulu governments ruled the area, roads were always graded because most of the time graders were parked at the traditional leader's residences or public offices. Now roads are graded when important people are planning to visit us. When we ask where the graders are, we are told they are in Polokwane.

The Institution was Created by God

Representatives of all Traditional Councils, Headman's Councils and elected leaders concurred with the view that the traditional leadership was created by God, which explained why all attempts to destabilize it or wish it away would never succeed. When God created the world he elected and anointed kings and rulers, including Chiefs, amongst other leaders. He did this in order to ensure peace prevailed and God's nation was provided with respectable leadership. One member of a Traditional Council in Makhado expressed this view quite eloquently when he said,

We were given this Chieftaincy by God. Whoever wants to abolish it, is actually fighting with God. I never heard of anyone who fought God and won.

Traditional Leaders are Closer to the People than their Elected Counterparts

Traditional leaders were regarded as the only form of leadership at the "coal face" of local realities. This was so because their homes were located in grassroots communities, which made them easily accessible and available at all times. Whenever there was any social disorder or challenge within their communities, traditional leaders received the reports first. In contrast, some elected leaders such as Ward Councillors and other members of the Ward Committees preferred to reside outside their constituencies. This was one of the attributes that imparted the resilient character of traditional leadership. Although male and female youth agreed that traditional

leaders were more in touch with the people than their elected counterparts, older members of the community were clearly more in agreement with this view. Apart from being perceived to be disconnected from their constituents, elected leaders were said to be egocentric, sometimes corrupt and were rarely accountable to the electorate. The prominence of this view is evident in the following excerpt:

There are people elected to represent villages. During election times we see politicians not approaching the elected leaders to arrange meetings with villagers such that they can address them. They come to us for assistance! What does this mean? It is clear that there is nothing they can do without us.

(Headman Council member, Thulamela Municipality)

Traditional Leaders Acted within the Laws of the Land

Over the years various legal instruments that recognised, supported or protected traditional leadership were adopted. They included the Black Administration Act of 1927, Black Authorities Act of 1954, and Venda Pounds Act of 1976, Venda Traditional Leaders Proclamation 29 of 1991 and Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2003, amongst others. In the current study, it was surprising to find that elected leaders believed strongly that most traditional leaders rarely opposed the legal instruments introduced to regulate their functions.

We always believe that in order to effectively lead the people we need to be guided by the law. Although we know that most of our traditional laws are not written

(Traditional Council member, Makhado)

Knowledgeable About People's Needs

Throughout the study areas in Vhembe District, young and old people of both sexes concurred that traditional leaders were more acquainted with the needs of the people in their areas of jurisdiction in stark contrast to their elected counterparts. It was explained that this was the case because traditional leaders were experienced in leading their communities by virtue of having an intricate system of governance that ramified throughout village life. Also, they

invariably lived with the people at grassroots level and experienced the lived realities of their communities. This was emphasized by a member of the Headman's Council in Thulamela who said that:

We stay with the Headman, we eat with him, and he knows all our problems because we are with him always. He is not like the Councillor who stays in another village where there is better service than here. We, from other villages, when we need services we are told that there is no budget.

Critical Community Leaders by Virtue of Birth

The respondents in all focus group discussions indicated that no traditional leader could be installed if he or she was not born in a royal family or from the 'rightful house'. It was accepted that Chiefs were the link that connected people with the people's ancestors, which earned them considerable respect and the customary right to rule. One of the members of a Traditional Council in Mutale indicated that "*vhuhosi vhu tou bebelwa*", meaning "you are born a Chief". Thus, no one is ever elected to the position of a Chief.

Fought Apartheid from "Within"

Whilst adults believed that traditional leaders fought the apartheid regime, elected leaders and youth disagreed. The latter argued that the fact that traditional leaders agreed to act within the provisions of laws that propped up apartheid meant that they did not oppose the abhorrent system and thus were equally culpable. It was argued out that only a few traditional leaders fought apartheid, resulting in them being deposed. Although viewed negatively, the continued existence of the traditional leadership system in post-apartheid South Africa confirmed its importance in the lives of rural communities as reflected in the following view.

This leadership was central to the liberation of the people. That is why some of the founding members of the ruling party were traditional leaders.

(Traditional Council member, Thulamela Municipality)

Inevitably Relied on to Administer the Affairs of the African Masses

Traditional leaders reliably administered the affairs of Africans was the least common view

with respect to how traditional leadership responded and coped with changing governments during the colonial and apartheid eras. Traditional leaders were said to be not egotistic. Also, they were reported to have the interests of the people they led at heart. There was a general view that they provided integrated services, including the roles that were normally played by government Departments such as Home Affairs, Health and Social Development, Safety and Security, Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Natural Resources Management and Land Affairs, among others. Taking all this into account, it can be concluded that traditional authority was virtually the government in their areas of jurisdiction.

Evidence of the inherent abilities of traditional authority included easily organizing well attended mass meetings, which was a task entrusted to *Vhakoma* (Headmen Assistants). *Vhakoma* were viewed to be very dedicated in performing their tasks, in addition to also commanding considerable respect in their communities. Traditional leadership always tried to ensure that there was effective community engagement and also believed in promoting the cultural practices that imparted a unique identity to the local people. This made traditional leadership difficult to eliminate. In support of this view were the following words echoed by a member of a Headman's Council in Mutale Municipality.

We used to ask people to contribute money for community development and people paid without grumbling because they could see what their money was used for. Most development seen in our communities was achieved when Chiefs and Headman led local government.

Traditional Leaders were not on Government Payroll

The view that traditional leaders were not on government payroll was least regarded as the major reason why they responded and coped with changes in systems of governance over the years. Male adults members of the *Vatsonga* Traditional Councils highlighted this more than their Tshivenda-speaking peers. They revealed that most traditional leaders in the Tsonga areas never received any payments from pre-democracy governments. For this reason, they were believed to be independent and better suited to represent their people without fear or favour. Traditional leaders administered the former Ven-

da government and were paid for their work. One member of a Traditional Council in Thulamela Municipality said the following in support of the assertion that traditional leaders on government payroll would find it difficult to earn the respect and support of the people they led:

It is very difficult to oppose the person who pays your bills. We will not sell the freedom of our people because of a salary.

Experienced given their Apex Positioning in the Political Hierarchy

The research participants in this study argued that there was no justifiable and fair reason for comparing the experiences of traditional leaders and those who were democratically elected. It was reported that this was due to the fact that traditional leadership was the only socio-political and cultural pillar of governance from which experience in how to lead people should be drawn. In support of this assertion, the research participants indicated that traditional leaders led the former Venda government. The implications of this have already been articulated above.

Only Leadership Institution Africans have known for Centuries

The research participants believed that the genuine history of a Black people would never be complete without making reference to traditional authority. The focus groups of all age and sex-disaggregated groups indicated that traditional leadership in Africa was several Centuries old. As indicated in the following words, this was the most important and stable leadership in African society.

I grew up knowing that if there is no Chief in the community, there will be no peace. (Member of Traditional Council in Makhado).

Respected by Africans

The research respondents revealed that Africans had considerable respect for their traditional leaders. An African child was invariably taught to respect elders, in particular traditional leaders. It was noted in this study that a traditional leader was regarded as the father of his community, which made him command a lot of

respect. An examination of the following views of a Traditional Council member in Mutale Municipality bring out this perception clearly:

Members of the communities come to us in a peaceful way. It is not common that you will hear that the community is up in arms with the Headman. Most of the times when members of the community want to engage with the Municipality, they organise violent strikes.

(Traditional Council member, Mutale)

Institution is Democratic in Nature

More than 80 percent of the participants indicated that traditional leadership was not democratic enough. This originated from the observation that although Traditional and Headmen Councils made decisions after consulting and discussing with the general community, poor representation of women in these key governance institutions was still a great concern. For example, members of all the seven Traditional Councils in Mutale Municipality were male. Females constituted a negligible proportion of the Headmen Councils. Even though there was such poor representation, having females in this governance structure was a major milestone in traditional leadership that should be applauded. Representation of youth in traditional leadership, commonly dubbed an 'old men's hub' was also poor. When members of Traditional Councils were asked to explain why women and youth were not represented in the institution, it was indicated that in general, women and youth believed that old male who had experienced considerable life should take up positions in it. The fact that traditional leadership was democratic in nature was cemented by the following extract from the member of Traditional Council in Thulamela Municipality:

Chieftaincy issues are not handled through votes. People sit down and talk. If they do not agree, they do not say let us raise our hands to see those who agree and those who disagree. Instead of voting, we call another meeting and proceed to discuss the issue until we reach an agreement. We do not consider who you are, what you have or how educated you are. We follow the truth of what you are saying

Another revelation in the current study was that traditional leadership ensured that customary court processes guaranteed that all persons enjoyed the right to fair appeal to any judgment

made and also having witnesses. All procedures in a customary court were reported to be carried out following democratic practice, in stark contrast to the widely held belief that castigated traditional leadership. Below is an extract of what one member of a Headman's Council in Mutale Municipality said.

In our pursuit for truth we do not want lawyers in our court, we need eye witnesses only

In this study, the widely held perception that all members of Traditional Councils were either Headmen or royal family members was found to be inaccurate. Both Traditional and Headmen Councils comprised ordinary community members elected to represent their villages. Some occupied influential positions such as chairperson, secretary and treasurer. A representative of a Headman's Council in Makhado Municipality had the following to say in support of this view.

We believe that anybody can be a community leader irrespective of his/her background, what is important is that he/she must be disciplined and competent.

Inter-interest Group Differences in Perceived Pillars of Resilience of Traditional Leadership

The results of the quantitative survey on the extent to which the research participants agreed with the perceptions on the pillars of resilience of traditional leadership are described here. In general, adult members of Headmen Council areas (villages) agreed far much more than other interest groups with the views that traditional leadership was at the apex of the political hierarchy ($P < 0.05$), "fought apartheid from within" ($P < 0.01$), "the institution is democratic in nature" ($P < 0.001$) and "Africans understand and believe in its governance system" ($P < 0.001$). There were no statistically significant differences ($P > 0.05$) in perceptions between adults and youth with respect to "the institution is planned by God; critical community leaders by virtue of birth; only leadership institution known by Africans since human kind; they are closer to the people on the ground than their elected counterparts; they are knowledgeable about people's needs; Africans respected them; majority of traditional leaders were not in the government pay roll; inevitably relied on to administer the affairs of the African masses; and acted within the laws of each existing government". In the Headmen Councils, male members agreed to a greater extent than females with the perception that "the institution is democratic in nature" ($P < 0.001$) and "were inevitably relied on to administer the affairs of the African masses" ($P < 0.05$). There were no significant differences in perceptions between female members of Headmen Councils and elected leaders with respect to the other causes of the continued existence of traditional leadership ($P > 0.05$).

Male members of Headmen Councils agreed to a greater extent than elected leaders with the perception that "traditional leaders fought apartheid from within" and that "the institution is democratic in nature" ($P < 0.001$). However, no statistically significant differences ($P > 0.05$) were observed regarding the perceptions that "traditional leaders are inevitably relied on to administer the affairs of the African masses; they were at the apex of the political hierarchy; Africans understand and believe in its governance system, the institution is planned by God; critical community leaders by virtue of birth; only leadership institution known by Africans since human kind; they are closer to the people on the ground than their elected counterparts; they are knowledgeable about people's needs; Africans respected them; majority of traditional leaders were not in the government pay roll; and acted within the laws of each existing government".

Adult members of Traditional Councils agreed more than youth with the views that "the institution of traditional leadership is planned by God" ($P < 0.01$), "they were at the apex of the political hierarchy" ($P < 0.05$), "fought apartheid from within" ($P < 0.01$), "the institution is democratic in nature" ($P < 0.001$), "only leadership institution known by Africans since human kind" ($P < 0.05$), "Africans understand and believe in its governance system" ($P < 0.001$), "they are closer to the people on the ground than their elected counterparts" ($P < 0.05$), "they are knowledgeable about people's needs" ($P < 0.05$), "Africans respected them" ($P < 0.001$), "inevitably relied on to administer the affairs of the African masses" ($P < 0.01$) and "acted within the laws of each existing government" ($P < 0.05$). Adults and youth agreed to the same extent with the perceptions that "critical community leaders by virtue of birth" and "majority of traditional leaders were not on the government pay roll" ($P > 0.05$). Male members of Traditional Councils agreed more than all the other interest groups that "the institution of traditional leadership fought apart-

heid from within" ($P < 0.01$), "the institution is democratic in nature" ($P < 0.001$) and "Africans understand and believe in its governance system" ($P < 0.01$). Male and female members of Traditional Councils held the same views on the other reasons for the continued existence of traditional leadership ($P > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

It was revealed that traditional leadership was created by God, meaning that no human could successfully abolish it. Also, the passing of various legislations over the years justified its existence. Apart from this, contrary to the belief in some circles, traditional leaders abhorred colonialism and apartheid.

In South Africa, it can be argued that people in rural areas were not fully acquainted with democratic systems of governance. This argument emanates from the fact that they lived under traditional leadership for a very long time. Also, the fact that traditional leaders were easily accessible and ever ready to attend to issues facing grassroots communities should be acknowledged. This was possible because traditional leaders' homes were commonly located in the communities under their jurisdiction. Moreover, traditional leaders had been at the helm of service delivery to their communities over the years, which explained why the people they led trusted them. Traditional leadership survived for centuries, which made it highly experienced in administering the affairs of African communities in rural areas. All these facts justified the need to integrate traditional leaders into systems of democracy, especially in rural areas.

In the preceding sections of this paper, it was indicated some of the most commonly perceived views on resilience of traditional leadership were that "it is planned by God; they are closer to the people on the ground than their elected counterparts; acted within the laws of each existing government; and that they are knowledgeable about people's needs." However, the least regarded views were that "most traditional leaders were not on the government pay roll; they were at the apex of the political hierarchy; and that traditional leadership is democratic is a democratic institution in nature".

The findings of this study in Vhembe District were not surprising. Traditional leadership is the oldest and most common form of govern-

ment that African communities, especially in Southern Africa, have known and experienced for Centuries (Sharma n.d.; Rugege 2003; Sakyi 2004; Dodo 2013). This makes it crucial in administering local government affairs.

Kwame (2012) argues that Chiefs are close to the people. If accorded the necessary recognition and encouragement, they can properly discharge local government responsibilities. From time immemorial, traditional authorities in Ghana have always encouraged and invited the people under their rule to participate in dealing with issues that affected them. In the current study in Vhembe District, it was observed that traditional leaders always lived with the people they led. This explains why they were so knowledgeable about local development issues. Thus, it is not surprising that they have survived for Centuries even when there were considerable changes in the forms of government over the years. Apart from this, physical and emotional distance often exist between democratic governments and the people they are supposed to lead (Oomen 2005). Williams (2010: 93) contends that "Traditional leaders have stressed that they were actually closest to the people and that the Chieftaincy should be recognised as a formal tier of government". This contention seems spot on because traditional leaders have been executing local government functions, amongst others for Centuries (Rugege 2003). Ntsebeza (2002) cements this view by arguing that the democratic dispensation in South Africa introduced a system of local government which resulted in the administrative and some governance functions being moved from traditional leadership to a municipal Council that champions developmental local government.

In the current study, it was highlighted that traditional leaders were integral components of rural communities and understood rural life much better than elected leaders. Furthermore, it was argued that this was so because the former lived within and with the grassroots communities. This finding resonates well with the statement of South Africa's North West Province Member of Executive Council of Local Government, Manketsi Tlhape, who on *Live Mag News* of 13 August 2013 said that "Traditional leaders should be directing government programmes as they are better placed in the communities". She further said that "Government should be taking the lead from traditional leaders as they know and

understand the needs of their communities". These views are an admission of the fact that traditional leaders command considerable respect in rural areas and also remain well placed to foster community development, arts and culture, amongst others.

The fact that the governed had direct access to traditional leaders at any time was one of the major observations in this study. Because the leaders resided with the people and faced the same challenges made them more eager than the usually non-resident elected representatives, to have development concerns addressed. Koebler (2005) reports that one of the interviewees in his research in the Eastern Cape remarked that "when you talk to the Chief, something will happen; when you talk to the Council, you know nothing will happen". This view suggests that traditional leaders are more reliable and trusted than their elected counterparts.

Van Rouveroy et al. (1996) point out that African states have failed to eliminate traditional leadership. These scholars attribute this to the intricate relationship between contemporary leadership in African countries and traditional authority. This suggests that democratic society should recognise indigenous African institutions and values. By so doing, its legitimacy and connection with grassroots communities is likely to be strengthened. Presumably, this complementary role of traditional leadership would enable democratic states to address their own administrative weaknesses.

The findings of this study in Vhembe District resembled those of Lund (2006). He revealed that traditional leadership remained intact because it had always exercised public authority at grassroots level in much of Africa. In post-colonial Africa, redefinition of the powers and functions of traditional leaders has invariably accompanied the changes in national government. Various legislations have always been introduced to achieve the goals of the new governments. Lund (2006) points out that traditional leadership has always successfully resisted the shocks and thus continued to exist. Khunou (2009) and Mngomezulu (2009) confirm this when they point out that traditional leaders have always been at the apex of the political hierarchy which dates back to the time when Africans switched from being nomadic to settled community life. For example, in Ghana Chiefs have remained an integral part of the political landscape

for centuries. In the pre-colonial era, the Chief was the political, social, economic, legal and military head of the traditional state. Being the political head, the Chief maintained good order in the state (Dapila et al. 2013). Taking this into account, it can be argued that traditional leaders are experienced in governing and contributing to the realisation of democratic practice.

Quite often, Chiefs have opposed the elimination of traditional leadership with little or no support from the people they govern. Their powers and functions have been diluted even though during the struggle against colonialism and apartheid, governments of the day enlisted the support of most of them in fighting liberation movements. In South Africa, legislations such as the Black Administration Act of 1927; Black Authorities Act of 1954; and Venda Traditional Leaders Proclamation 29 of 1991 were enacted to empower traditional leaders in order to create an impression that they were responsible for governing the people living in the areas under their jurisdiction. May be, this is why post-colonial and post-apartheid governments were so determined to destroy traditional leadership. However, over time it became obvious to the new governments that effective and efficient service delivery, especially in rural areas, could not be achieved without involving the traditional leaders. Despite arguments to the contrary and irregularities such as nepotistic tendencies, it was revealed in the current study that traditional leadership was democratic enough and had a proper administrative system that could be used to ensure effective referrals and handling appeals. This view resonates well with Ake (2003) and Njoh (2006) who argue that traditional leadership is fundamentally democratic.

To say that traditional leadership is not democratic may be true if the western perspective of democracy is embraced. Quite often, outsiders ignore the underpinnings of African democracy and *Ubuntu*. Mudenge (1988) provides evidence of this when he says, "[T]he dare was not such a democratic assembly as it has sometimes been made out to be, for women were not allowed to attend unless they were specifically invited to do so, ...clear evidence of discrimination and oppression". It is true that true democracy in a western perspective means the involvement of women and youth in all leadership structures. However, in an African context issues of tradition and culture cannot be ignored because there

are meetings and structures where women and youth are not allowed to attend or occupy leadership positions.

In the current study, it was confirmed that traditional leadership was sufficiently democratic. The perception that all members of the Traditional Councils were either Headmen or members of the Royal family was found to be incorrect. There was no policy that governed who could or could not be a member of the Traditional or Headman's Council. Thus, the respondents in the current study wanted this wrong perception rectified. They argued that this was the reason why conflicts arose when some community members deemed unfit to occupy positions in the Council were nominated. It was also revealed that in all Traditional and Headmen Councils there were community members who the people at grassroots level elected as their representatives. Some held responsible positions such as Chairperson, Secretary or Treasurer. Furthermore, women and youth were represented in Traditional and Headman Councils. Even elected leaders concurred with traditional leaders that one of the main reasons the latter institution survived changes in government and persecution over Centuries was because they acted within the laws of the land.

Another fundamental reason why traditional leadership survived despite changes in government was that they fought apartheid from "within". Traditional leaders such as Makhado were cited as perfect examples in support of this argument. Makhado was a king and commander of the Vhavenda people's army from 1864 to 1895. He resisted the Trekboers' encroachment on his people's land and payment of taxes that settlers imposed on locals. His disinclination to accept oppression by the Trekboers earned him the name "Lion of the North". Mngomezulu (2009) contends that the continued existence of traditional leaders in post-colonial Africa resulted from waging a protracted struggle in the interests of their people. Mzimela (2012) extends this argument and advances the view that traditional leaders were an integral part of the struggle that led to the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and colonialism in many African countries. In the current study, the respondents indicated that not all traditional leaders were on the payroll of government during the apartheid era. In support of this argument, it was revealed that traditional leaders governed the former Venda

homeland. One had to be a Chief to be considered for a Ministerial position or any other higher post in the then government structure. Also, Khunou (2009) argues that in the then Bophuthatswana government traditional leaders were made ex-officio members of Parliament and received salaries or stipends. All the traditional leaders who opposed and fought the apartheid regime were not on government payroll.

Traditional leadership is "here to stay" was a popular view echoed in the current study. Both traditional and elected leaders expressed the belief that traditional leadership could not be simply done away with. Ntsebeza (2002: 5) supports this view, pointing out that "regardless of whether traditional authorities are perceived as legitimate, what cannot be disputed is that the institution and its incumbents have survived from pre-colonial times, right down to the post-colonial African world". Also, Dapila et al. (2013: 6) confirm that traditional leadership is resilient when they say, "Traditional authorities are therefore some of the most enduring traditional institutions in Ghana, which have displayed remarkable resilience from pre-colonial through colonial to postcolonial times". The findings of this study have highlighted the need for developing strategies that would strengthen the institution.

CONCLUSION

It has been revealed in this paper that various changes, including the passing of legislations that defined and managed the roles that traditional leaders should play were introduced over the years. The changes made during the colonial and apartheid times were meant to dilute or sabotage the effective execution of traditional leaders' roles and responsibilities. As a result, in some areas traditional leaders lost the respect and trust of the people they led, and also gave ammunition to newly elected leaders in the new democratic dispensation to push for the total abolition of the system. Apart from this, it was revealed that traditional leadership did not have a "backbone", mainly due to the fact that it easily adapted to change and worked with any government administration of the day. Despite the poor picture revealed above, this study confirmed that traditional leadership was not withering away. This was in stark contrast to the hopes and predictions of modernists. Thus, overall, the results of the current study justify

the conclusion that traditional leaders do not impede the development of a prosperous, democratic and just society. For this reason, if properly recognised and supported, traditional leadership might play a very significant role in the struggle for better life in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for developing appropriate, well-informed strategies for strengthening the relationship between elected and traditional leadership institutions. Such strategies should be developed with active involvement of multiple interest groups.

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