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GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE? CHIEFS IN AFRICA AND THE AFRO-CARIBBEAN

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SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND PUBLIC VIEWS ON THEIR POLITICAL ROLE

CHAPTER 3

CHARLES CROTHERS

CHARLES CROTHERS is an associate professor in sociology in the School of Social Sciences, Auckland University of Technology. Earlier positions have included lecturing stints at Victoria University of Wellington and the University of Auckland and five years as professor and head of sociology at the University of Natal–Durban. Charles’s academic work spans social research methods, social theory (especially the theory of social structure), history of the social sciences, social science-based policy, and the political economy and sociology of settler societies.

There is some descriptive literature on the institution of traditional leaders in South Africa, and rather more political debate about their role in society, particularly because of their critical perceived role in *delivering* the rural African vote. There is a particular link between the key role of traditional leaders in relation to the control of land and local authorities that are the level of government most concerned with land-use controls, and perhaps ownership. So it is particularly the role of traditional leaders in local government which is at issue. Indeed, much of the literature (see references) relates to the political role of traditional leaders. However, there is little information on what the social characteristics of traditional leaders are, or on how the public views them.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A crucial ideological point is where traditional leaders might seem to best fit in with a modernizing *new* South Africa. To modernizing purists, traditional leaders clearly appear anachronistic: an affront to democracy and, as public administrators, producing little or nothing of economic value. Worse, since traditional leaders are securely installed without mechanisms of accountability, let alone mechanisms to encourage good performance, traditional leaders are seen as entirely beyond the pale. Even worse, since they are not supervised by any other authority, traditional leaders are open to exploit those under their control, through the charging of fees or demanding of services beyond market value for services which should be performed at cost or even free. This is especially so given the extent to which, by virtue of governmental interference in successions and appointments, the claims to legitimacy flowing from ancestry or from popular support are contestable.

However, the purist position may need to be offset by a closer examination of the full range of costs and benefits involved. By appointing traditional leaders the costs of elections are reduced, and there may be other services towards the achievement of community unity that traditional leaders perform either without recompense, or more efficiently and effectively than alternative mechanisms. The proper role of any social

position cannot be determined by theoretical reflection alone, but deserves careful empirical study.

People are likely to vary in their views about the political role of traditional leaders. It is difficult to predict on theoretical grounds how respondents (and people in general) feel about the political role of traditional leaders. Presumably, as in many other areas of life, people's views are shaped by their interests and also by their ideologies. Traditional leaders are clearly barely salient for the vast range of South African citizens, except perhaps as traditional leaders impinge on people's views about how they see the new South Africa emerging.

But some variation in views will also clearly follow from the social position in which people are placed, especially in relation to traditional leaders. Those more closely linked to traditional leaders are certainly more likely to hold more intense views. Clearly, those occupying land in the dispensation of a traditional leader, and perhaps operating under the traditional leaders' surveillance, are presumably most intensely involved. If they have had bad experiences with traditional leaders or get on poorly with the present traditional leader incumbent, it is possible that they will generalize their concern into a broader negative attitude. However, it is also possible, whatever the exact content of the relationship between a particular follower and their traditional leader, that they will see their traditional leader as a representative of their broader interests as rural blacks.

Attitudes to the political role of traditional leaders may also be influenced by the class situation in which people live. If they see themselves as separated from the interests of their traditional leader, who instead represents the interests of traditional leaders in general, there will be more negative views. It is likely that many traditional leaders portray themselves as representing the interests of their constituents. It is likely, though, at least on some issues, that in practice they also (or instead) represent views which reflect their own particular interest as traditional leaders.

There is a methodological problem with the data collection. The views of most respondents may be influenced by the characteristics of interviewers, but some of those most closely tied in with traditional leaders might also feel that they are not entirely free to express their views in an interview situation, since any critical opinions might come to the notice of their traditional leader, and so they might have hedged their opinions accordingly. This point follows from the more general view that correctly tapping politically-orientated opinions in rural areas through interviews can be difficult.

With the information at hand it is not possible to adjudicate between these various considerations. However, the reader may find them useful in endeavouring to understand the broader patterns that are reported here.

THE SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL LEADERS

In the October Household Surveys (OHS) carried out annually by Statistics South Africa since 1993, some 30,000 households are visited annually. The occupations of respondents (and more generally those in responding households) are coded and in each survey some traditional leaders have been covered. Although the sample is small, I have only used results from the 1995 survey. (Further work pooling the results for several surveys would hopefully validate the findings given here.) The data allows the depiction of traditional leaders in terms of the socio-biological characteristics and also their household structures, dwelling characteristics, education, income etc. In this part of the study, I also make some general comparisons between traditional leaders and other black African households (see tables 1–3 at end of chapter).

Only thirty-two respondents who reported their occupation as a traditional leader were included in the 1995 OHS. The sample is inadequate for generalizing to the whole population of traditional leaders with any degree of accuracy, but should be of a sufficient size to indicate some of their main characteristics. Of these, two considered themselves self-employed and the remainder had their answers recorded as employees. Interestingly, there were two quite separate groupings in terms of industry. Just under one-third of respondents were involved in industry, specifically the mining industry. Others appeared to retain the more traditional involvement in agriculture. This is reflected in their locations: with the rural traditional leaders to be found in Eastern Cape, Northern Province, or KwaZulu-Natal, while the industrial traditional leaders are concentrated in Gauteng. One-sixth of traditional leaders are women: all rural. Two-thirds of the industrial traditional leaders were union members, but nearly half of the rural ones too (it is possible that the latter are involved with associations of traditional leaders). Educational qualifications were spread across a wide range, with a higher proportion of rural traditional leaders having higher qualifications. Industrial traditional leaders are slightly younger on average (forty-six compared to fifty for

rural traditional leaders). Rural traditional leaders reported better incomes: some 50 per cent higher overall than industrial traditional leaders. Also, rural traditional leaders report other income sources other than wages, which helps boost their overall remuneration.

Whereas rural traditional leaders are split between those living in formal dwellings and those living in traditional dwellings, industrial traditional leaders live in hostels. Not surprisingly, most rural traditional leaders own their dwelling, although there is clearly a minority in more complex situations. Rural traditional leaders feel safer than industrial traditional leaders, although there are some rural traditional leaders who do not feel so safe. They do not seem to have been much at risk in terms of crime. While all the industrial traditional leaders are unconcerned with air pollution, some rural traditional leaders clearly see difficulties. A large proportion of rural traditional leaders report that at times during the year they have insufficient income to adequately feed their children. On the whole, traditional leaders are moderately satisfied with their lives. Rural traditional leaders are evenly divided by those who feel that their living situation is better than a year before, whereas the industrial traditional leaders tend to be considerably more optimistic.

There are several interesting points in this portrait:

- not all traditional leaders are rural/agricultural
- not all are elderly, in fact they are only slightly older than most occupational groupings
- while their pay levels are quite high compared to other black Africans, a substantial proportion receive low incomes and (at least in terms of the hunger measure) live in poverty.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES:

In the Idasa post-election survey carried out in 1995, respondents were asked their views about several aspects of the local political role of traditional leaders (see tables 4–6 at end of chapter). The six questions cover:

- the political role of traditional leaders
- whether there is a perceived conflict between tradition and democratic authority
- whether traditional leaders should be in local government
- whether traditional leaders should be awarded a seat or be required to be elected

- whether traditional leaders should be aligned to party views or not
- whether traditional leaders should take public stances or not.

The survey from which this data is garnered is of high quality (for example, its measurement of voting distribution mirrors that of the general election). The questions on traditional leaders are asked within the broad context of many questions of a political complexion. There is quite a large proportion of “don’t knows” on several of the questions, which is an indication that some respondents are not familiar with the topic.

Over the whole sample, the majority (just under three-fourths) saw traditional leaders as playing a political role and one-fifth saw them as playing an important role. On whether there is a conflict between traditional and democratic authority, the sample was fairly evenly spread amongst the five response categories; except that there is a distinct bias towards emphasizing conflict, with over one-quarter perceiving serious conflict and just under 10 per cent perceiving that the two types of authority can easily go together. Some 60 per cent of the sample were supportive of traditional leaders being in local government, with similar proportions arguing that traditional leaders should run for election, and that they should not take public stances. A somewhat higher proportion (75 per cent) opposed the political alignment of traditional leaders. The broad consensus is, on the one hand, to accord traditional leaders a role in public life including in local government, but on the other hand to prescribe that role to “non-political politics” and requiring them to be elected. On the other hand, a substantial minority are prepared to accord traditional leaders a more active politically political role, and to allow them *de jure* political status.

In order to examine the pattern of views within the set of attitude items, a factor analysis was carried out. Two factors were extracted and rotated: The first four items are moderately correlated, and the last pair is strongly correlated. What do the two factors mean? The first factor contrasts those who see traditional leaders as having an important role which does not conflict with democratic authority, i.e., who should be in local government and who would be awarded a seat with those who do not see traditional leaders as having an important role; who see conflicts between traditional and democratic authorities; and who think that either traditional leaders should keep out of local government or should be made to run for their seat. The second factor tends not to be correlated with the first. It, unsurprisingly, links political alignment and taking a stance.

However, the overall public of South Africa is likely comprised of a multitude of more specific viewpoints. Presumably, it is black Africans living in rural areas for whom the issue is most salient. But before examining the views of these respondents let us compare them to those of other groupings. Respondents from each of the racegroups do not differ greatly in terms of their support of the role of traditional leaders. Black respondents are slightly more supportive and Indian respondents somewhat less supportive (coloured respondents have the highest proportion suggesting no role at all.) Rural compared to urban respondents are not dissimilar. Similarly there are few differences in views on the conflict (or lack of conflict) between the two forms of political authority, although rural dwellers are a less inclined to see a difficulty. Blacks are much more supportive of a representation of traditional leaders in local government, while coloureds and Indians are less supportive. Rural dwellers give a slight edge of approval to traditional leaders. There is a major difference in terms of the electing of traditional leaders: whereas blacks are split half-and-half on this question, the other race groups are overwhelmingly in support of requiring the traditional leaders to run for office. Rural dwellers are more inclined to support awarding of seats, although over half want to see elections being required. Black Africans are least supportive of traditional leaders being aligned or taking public stances, whereas other race groups and especially whites are more relaxed about this aspect. Similarly, it is rural dwellers rather than urban dwellers who are more keen to see the wings of traditional leaders clipped. In terms of the two broad factors then, blacks (and also rural dwellers) are more supportive of the political involvement of traditional leaders, although they do not particularly stress the importance of this role or see it as less conflictual. Both blacks and rural dwellers are slightly more concerned that traditional leaders play their political role in a “non-party” political way.

In the next section I examine internal differentiation in the views of black Africans living in rural areas. There clearly are some important age differences. The youngest age-group (under twenty-five) is least supportive of an important role for traditional leaders, whereas the oldest age-group (seventy plus) is substantially more supportive. There is a slight tilt, as respondents are older, towards seeing the relationship as non-conflictual. Similarly, support for representation, for awarding rather than requiring an election, allowing alignment, and taking public stances all increase with age (although the pattern is not sharp on several of these).

It might be expected that the age-pattern of views are considerably reflected in terms of education. While this is true, with less educated people more supportive of traditional leaders whereas more educated respondents are less responsive, the

differences are often not especially marked. Where more educated respondents differ most is in their emphasis on democratic criteria (running for elections) and in taking stances.

The housing and employment situations of respondents may be particularly crucial in shaping people's views. Especially in relation to housing, rural black African households may particularly be under the fairly direct control of traditional leaders.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

There is a considerable level of support for the political role of traditional leaders. This support is highest amongst sectors of the population that are clearly most likely to be more generally traditional, older, rural uneducated respondents. But even amongst these core constituencies, respondents are careful. Almost one half suggest that traditional leaders should be elected not awarded a seat, and overwhelming majorities oppose political alignment and the taking of public stances.

Table 1: Personal Characteristics of Traditional Leaders

Industry in which Employed	Traditional	Manufacturing/ Mining
	Col %	Col %
Province		
Eastern Cape	52.7%	
KwaZulu-Natal	16.2%	
Gauteng		92.3%
Mpumalanga	4.0%	
Northern Province	27.0%	7.7%
Gender		
Male	83.6%	100.0%
Female	16.4%	
Highest Level of Education		
None	8.0%	27.6%
Std 2	3.3%	
Std 3	8.0%	
Std 4	8.0%	
Std 5	4.3%	42.4%
Std 6	16.6%	
Std 7	16.1%	30.0%
Std 8 / NTC I	4.0%	
Std 10 / NTC III	28.0%	
Std 10 and Certificate or Diploma	3.6%	
Member of Trade Union		
Yes	40.0%	62.3%
No	60.0%	37.7%

Table 2: Age and Incomes

Industry in which Employed	Traditional	Manufacturing/Mining
	Mean	Mean
Age	50.4	46.5
Total Monthly Salary (Rand)	1,879	1,307
Monthly Income of Employee (Rand)	1,670	1,307

Table 3: Household/Dwelling Characteristics

Industry in which Employed	Traditional	Manufacturing/Mining
	Col%	Col%
Main Type of Dwelling		
Formal dwelling/separate house	44.3%	7.7%
Traditional dwelling/hut	45.6%	
Formal dwelling in backyard of another house	10.1%	
Room in hostel or compound		92.3%
Ownership		
Single dwelling owned by household/fully paid	83.8%	7.7%
Single dwelling owned by household /partly paid	2.6%	
Dwelling owned by household/fully paid	9.5%	
Free (co benefit)		92.3%
Free (other)	4.1%	
Physical Safety in Neighbourhood		
Very safe	41.8%	7.7%
Rather safe	42.4%	92.3%
Rather unsafe	8.4%	
Very unsafe	7.4%	
Victim of Crime		
Yes	3.3%	
No	96.7%	100.0%
Smoke and Pollution		
Very difficult	5.3%	
Difficult	15.7%	
Slightly difficult	15.1%	
Not difficult	63.9%	100.0%
Money to Feed the Children		
Yes	42.7%	
No	57.3%	100.0%
Satisfied with Life These Days		
Very satisfied	8.3%	
Satisfied	38.9%	42.4%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	20.3%	57.6%
Dissatisfied	19.5%	
Very dissatisfied	13.0%	
Compared to One Year Ago		
Things better	15.6%	42.4%
Things about same	68.0%	57.6%
Things worse	16.3%	

Table 4: Questions About the Political Role of Traditional Leaders.

	Count	Col %
Q74: Role of Traditional Leaders		
No role	590	28.5%
Some role	1064	51.3%
Important role	419	20.2%
Q75: Conflict Between Traditional and Democratic Authority		
A serious conflict	559	27.3%
A minor conflict	427	20.8%
Unsure	414	20.2%
Can go together	463	22.6%
Can easily go together	189	9.2%
Q76: Preferred Role of Traditional Leaders in Local Government		
Should be in local government	1207	61.1%
Should not be in local government	768	38.9%
Q77: Should Traditional Leaders be Elected?		
Awarded a seat	716	38.5%
Run for election	1145	61.5%
Q78: Should Traditional Leaders be Aligned?		
Yes, should be aligned	507	26.4%
No, shouldn't be aligned	1413	73.6%
Q79: Traditional Leaders take Public Stances?		
Yes, should take stances	766	39.7%
No, should not take stances	1161	60.3%

Table 5: Factor Analysis**Analysis number 1****Pairwise deletion of cases with missing values**

	Mean	Std Dev	Cases	Label
VAR 1540	1.91720	.69299	2073	Q74 Role of Traditional Leaders
VAR 1550	2.65687	1.33256	2052	Q75: Conflict Between Traditional and Democratic Authority
VAR 1560	1.38864	.48757	1975	Q76: Preferred of Traditional Leaders in Local Government
VAR 1570	1.61519	.48668	1861	Q77: Should Traditional Leaders be Elected?
VAR 1580	1.73576	.44104	1920	Q78: Should Traditional Leaders be Aligned?
VAR 1590	1.60265	.48948	1927	Q79: Should Traditional Leaders take Public Stances?

Correlation Matrix

	VAR 1540	VAR 1550	VAR 1560	VAR 1570	VAR 1580	VAR 1590
VAR 1540	1.00000					
VAR 1550	.32030	1.00000				
VAR 1560	-.46645	-.31284	1.00000			
VAR 1570	-.32061	-.19503	.37482	1.00000		
VAR 1580	-.04613	-.11446	.20594	.01759	1.00000	
VAR 1590	-.19567	-.09527	.29836	.02572	.55867	1.00000

Initial Statistics

Variable	Communality	Factor	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %
VAR 1540	1.00000	1	2.22621	37.1	37.1
VAR 1550	1.00000	2	1.39485	23.2	60.4
VAR 1560	1.00000	3	.80654	13.4	73.8
VAR 1570	1.00000	4	.67066	11.2	85.0
VAR 1580	1.00000	5	.49800	8.3	93.3
VAR 1590	1.00000	6	.40374	6.7	100.0

Factor Matrix

	Factor 1	Factor 2
VAR 1560	.78341	-.14962
VAR 1540	-.68922	.33815
VAR 1550	-.55262	.24823
VAR 1570	.52641	-.46313
VAR 1580	.47725	.73317
VAR 1590	.57201	.66669

Final Statistics

Variable	Communality	Factor	Eigen value	% of Variance	Cumulative %
VAR 1540	.58938	1	2.22621	37.1	37.1
VAR 1550	.36701	2	1.39485	23.2	60.4
VAR 1560	.63611				
VAR 1570	.49160				
VAR 1580	.76530				
VAR 1590	.77166				

Rotated Factor Matrix

	Factor 1	Factor 2
VAR 1540	-.76377	-.07766
VAR 1550	.74396	.28747
VAR 1560	.69172	-.11453
VAR 1570	-.60028	-.08170
VAR 1580	.01713	.87465
VAR 1590	.13272	.86836

Factor Transformation Matrix

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Factor 1	.84861	.52903
Factor 2	-.52903	.84861

Table 6: Political Role by Population – Group/Settlement Type**Q74 Role of Traditional Leaders**

		No Role	Some Role	Important Role
		Row %	Row %	Row %
Q96 Race				
Asian	VAR1840A			
	Urban	35.6%	55.4%	9.0%
	Rural		100.0%	
Black	VAR1840A			
	Urban	33.7%	45.3%	21.0%
	Rural	23.2%	55.0%	21.8%
Coloured	VAR1840A			
	Urban	33.5%	50.2%	16.4%
	Rural	47.2%	38.5%	14.3%
White	VAR1840A			
	Urban	25.4%	54.3%	20.3%
	Rural	38.6%	47.5%	13.9%

Q75 Conflict Between Traditional and Democratic Authority

		A Serious Conflict	Minor	Unsure	Can Go Together	Can Easily Go Together
		Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %	Row %
Q96Race						
Asian	VAR1840A					
	Urban	13.9%	28.7%	38.1%	16.8%	2.4%
	Rural	100.0%				
Black	VAR1840A					
	Urban	28.3%	21.8%	20.3%	22.0%	7.6%
	Rural	24.0%	19.0%	18.1%	26.4%	12.4%
Coloured	VAR1840A					
	Urban	37.5%	18.4%	17.3%	9.9%	16.9%
	Rural	29.8%	23.1%	24.3%	9.7%	13.2%
White	VAR1840A					
	Urban	28.0%	21.7%	23.9%	22.5%	3.9%
	Rural	44.2%	25.0%	15.9%	13.5%	1.5%

Q76 Preferred Role of Traditional Leaders in Local Government

		Should be in Local Government	Should not be in Local Government
		Row %	Row %
Q96 Race			
Asian	VAR1840A		
	Urban	50.0%	50.0%
	Rural	100.0%	
Black	VAR1840A		
	Urban	59.1%	40.9%
	Rural	67.0%	33.0%
Coloured	VAR1840A		
	Urban	54.6%	45.4%
	Rural	36.5%	63.5%
White	VAR1840A		
	Urban	61.8%	38.2%
	Rural	42.3%	57.7%

Q77 Should Traditional Leaders be Elected?

		Awarded a Seat	Run for Election
		Row %	Row %
Q96 Race			
Asian	VAR1840A		
	Urban	2.7%	97.3%
	Rural	100.0%	
Black	VAR1840A		
	Urban	44.7%	55.3%
	Rural	51.4%	48.6%
Coloured	VAR1840A		
	Urban	19.5%	80.5%
	Rural	8.7%	91.3%
White	VAR1840A		
	Urban	15.9%	84.1%
	Rural	12.6%	87.4%

Q78 Should Traditional Leaders be Aligned?

		Yes, Should be Aligned	No, Should not be Aligned
		Row%	Row%
Q96 Race			
Asian	VAR1840A		
	Urban	25.6%	74.4%
	Rural		100.0%
Black	VAR1840A		
	Urban	24.6%	75.4%
	Rural	23.2%	76.8%
Coloured	VAR1840A		
	Urban	37.4%	62.6%
	Rural	26.5%	73.5%
White	VAR1840A		
	Urban	37.9%	62.1%
	Rural	27.7%	72.3%

Q79 Traditional Leaders Take Public Stances?

		Yes, Should Take Stances	No, Should not Take Stances
		Row %	Row %
Q96 Race			
Asian	VAR1840A		
	Urban	35.7%	64.3%
	Rural	100.0%	
Black	VAR1840A		
	Urban	35.9%	64.1%
	Rural	33.0%	67.0%
Coloured	VAR1840A		
	Urban	50.5%	49.5%
	Rural	40.8%	59.2%
White	VAR1840A		
	Urban	61.3%	38.7%
	Rural	51.6%	48.4%

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