

## Chapter 1

# General Orientation to the Interface Between Traditional and Modern Leadership in South Africa

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## Background Information

Primordially, traditional leadership existed, but the white settlers, on their arrival, attempted to use traditional leaders against their people (Williams, 2010). Like most other parts of Africa, South Africa (SA) has a rich, vibrant, and interestingly controversial history of traditional leadership due to its socio-political nature. However, the traditional leadership in South Africa was undermined and underrated by colonialism and the apartheid systems (Kompi, 2018). Khunou (2011) postulates that the arrival and subsequent settlement of the Europeans in South Africa brought about changes in traditional leadership, and various laws were enacted to legalise invasion and deprive traditional communities of their land. The changes brought about by the arrival of the Western intruders had a negative impact on the traditional leadership itself. Thus, colonial powers imposed their control over the oppressed African majority via traditional chiefs, leaders, and governance structures (Gumede, 2019:22). During the colonial and apartheid era, traditional leadership saw traditional leaders imposing authoritarian power on their subjects. On the one hand, the colonial government used chiefs to pursue indirect rule, while on the other hand, the chiefs used their power to oppress their subjects (Gumede, 2019; Ntsebeza, 2020; Baldwin, 2016). Colonial and apartheid systems were similar in converting traditional leaders into agents who managed activities such as land allocation, agricultural affairs, road infrastructure, and suppression of livestock diseases (Rugege, 2003:173). Rugege (2003) further argues that the co-option of traditional leadership by colonial-apartheid systems caused the institution to lose its legitimate power.

Scholars such as Gumede (2019:22) argue that indigenous people were doubly oppressed, first by the colonial governments and secondly by their chiefs and authorities. In this context, it can be argued that during the colonial era, traditional leaders became victims and perpetrators of oppression and manipulation of their people. Those who resisted the siege of colonial and apartheid regimes and laws were subjected to harsh punishment (Holomisa, 2009). Consequently, while some traditional leaders were demoted, deposed, banished and exiled, others were imprisoned or killed (Holomisa, 2009). Koenane (2017) contends that most traditional leaders did not comply simply because they saw that this would affect their people, but others were caught in the web of manipulation.

In South Africa, traditional leaders have been known as the custodians of African culture and heritage (Holomisa, 2019). In rural contexts, communities still respect them and believe in their leadership. Before the beginning of democracy in 1994, traditional leaders provided open authority and leadership within their areas of authority, but this later was contradicted by the apartheid era (Hornsby, 2002:28-29). In the cloud of colonialism, some traditional leaders gave in, while others resisted the intentions of the colonial government, leading to some indigenous people losing interest in their traditional leaders. Communities became suspicious of traditional leaders and as such, the trust people had in them was compromised, while others completely lost confidence when traditional leaders were pressured into becoming the extension of colonial administrations by colonial masters (Mkhwanazi, 2012). Some traditional leaders gave in because they were afraid of being exiled, and some remained faithful to their people. However, South African history depicts that the institution of traditional leadership (*ubukhosi/bogoši*) was resilient when it was tested to the core by the apartheid regime in South Africa (Koenane, 2018). The institution's legitimacy and influence were lost since it was used as a strategy to divide and rule for most African communities. For this reason, the institution was and is no longer what it was before the advent of White dominance (Koenane, 2017). Variably, the apartheid regimes have exerted control over traditional leadership and rural communities through apartheid policies and creating bifurcated systems (Mamdani, 2018) where the dominant system was for the Whites, while a subservient system was for Africans. Apartheid had also expanded its control through the institutionalisation of senior traditional leadership (chieftainship) as the only recognised representative of indigenous communities and the overseers of customary law (Mathonsi & Sithole, 2017). The institutionalisation of traditional leadership worked to apartheid's advantage, as the government could engage with a single structure for traditional community related matters, and resisting chiefs were replaced with cooperative leaders (Baldwin, 2016; Kanyane, 2017). Apartheid used Western laws and legal systems to distort and undermine the customary law as an integral part of imposing its control. The government formalised different customary laws for different ethnic groups, as reflected in the Black Administration Act (1927), and the Code of Zulu Law, archived this control (see Bennett, 2008; Hagg, 2019).

## **Objectives of This Volume**

This volume is underpinned by the following key objectives:

- To conceptualise traditional and democratic leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- To revisit the interface between traditional and democratic leadership for service delivery, governance and rural community development.