

Chapter 10

A Theoretical Review of Traditional Authority and Modern Leadership Through Feminist Lenses

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Introduction

In his inaugural address as the first president of post-apartheid South Africa in 1994, Nelson Mandela emphasised the importance of gender equality and women empowerment, arguing that freedom could not be attained unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression. He urged all to 'take this on board that the objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) conditions of women in our country has radically changed for the better, and that they have been empowered in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society'. The social context attaining during the democratic transition was one of a society characterised by an overwhelming majority of the population, predominantly Black Africans, which was deprived of their dignity, democratic rights and a better life. While Black Africans, irrespective of sex, age, religion, or class, were generally subjected to socio-economic and political exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation, Black African women suffered at many levels. Not only were they, alongside their male counterparts, denied their freedom and choices in the broader scheme of apartheid; they were also marginalised and discriminated against by patriarchal norms, stereotyping and skewed values. In the chapter providing the historical overview of the institution of *amakhosi*, the argument that capitalism in all its different manifestation and forms (imperialism, colonialism, and apartheid) is based on social differentiation in which race and gender allocate power and access differently, often placing women at the bottom of the pyramid of any society that is proposed. Traditional authority continues to be largely patriarchal, making it difficult for women to thrive (Khonou, 2011; Sithole, 2010). In chapter two of this book which focuses on a historical review of the institution of traditional leadership, the point is emphasized that the lack of a post-1994 theory on the role of *amakhosi* built on a lack of a sociological re-imagination of the institution as it evolved without imperial disturbance, is at the heart of the poor appreciation and provision for the institution by the state and society. This chapter addresses two broad objectives of exploring 'the legitimacy of traditional leadership in South Africa' and examining 'the approaches, models and philosophies for reforming traditional and democratic leadership'. This chapter benefits from exposure to *amakhosi* and the traditional leadership fraternity in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province of South Africa that spans more than two decades as well as the review of relevant literature and reports on the subject.

Background

The issue of women in traditional leadership raises much discomfort in a society that has embraced and cemented patriarchy as its organising motif in the way resources, power and authority are organised and distributed. The fact that the concept and image of a woman chief (*inkosi*) in KZN is still an exception rather than the norm in South Africa, making gender a differentiator in general conversations about 'approaches of traditional and democratic leadership (and) traditional and democratic leadership reformation' must be understood in the historical context of the evolution of the institution of traditional leadership (*ubukhosi*). In their paper on the incompatibility of traditional leadership and democracy, Mathonsi and Sithole (2017) point out that in the South African context, traditional leadership is understood to be a patriarchal and a sexist system whereas democracy is principled on equal rights and privileges for all (Amoateng, 2005:9). Ntsebenza (2005) warns about the prospect of dictatorship and despotic tendencies that are possible in a traditional leadership context, whereas in a democratic context all citizens are subject to the rule of law. In considering the institution of traditional authority using feminist lenses, the historicity of its evolution will also be articulated.

In traditional society, prior to colonial intrusion, as much as the traditional head was always male, females, wives and the princesses (*oNdlunkulu*), and the aunties (*oMkabayi*) played a significant role in the social and spiritual aspects of governance. In his book tracing eight kings of the Zulus, from Shaka, Laband (2018:28) argues that 'Zulu society may have been overtly patriarchal, but subtle power was exercised from *isigodlo* (the headquarters/the palace) by the king or chief's female relations, his wives, and the widows of his predecessor'. For example, Mkabayi was celebrated for her 'honest, incorruptible ability to resolve her adherents' problems and for her success in confronting any evil forces that might threaten Zulu power ...' (Laband, 2018:28). Shaka placed women from *isigodlo* as dependable representatives to govern their most important heads (*amakhanda*) as extensions of the royal household (Laband, 2018:29) meaning that women played a significant role in the running and governance of the kingdom.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Arguments for and against the inclusion of *ubukhosi* as a governance institution in the post-1994 dispensation are often based on several assumptions and positions about the post-1994 dispensation that are problematic at best and weak at most, sketched below.

- (i) It is often assumed that the transition in 1994, represented the ushering in of a post-apartheid dispensation for which the Constitution is then accepted without question.