

Chapter 8

Intersection(s) Between Constitutional Democracy and Traditional Mechanisms of Authority in Maruleng, South Africa: Pre-2022 Afrocentric Analysis¹

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Introduction

The subject of traditional leadership in South Africa has been much debated by politicians and scholars (Oomen, 2000; Ntsebeza, 2005; Logan, 2009). It would appear that the institution and processes involved in traditional leadership have been less understood since the arrival of the 3rd wave of democratisation in the 1990s. Gathering from the on-going scholarly and political discourse, the dominant mode of reasoning has been in favour of the need to preserve traditional leadership (Lekgoathi, 2013). Despite this, there is a perception within certain circles that traditional leadership is inimical to democratic culture and practices and therefore, it should be scrapped (Lekgoathi, 2013). The conviction of this line of thought is that traditional leadership should step aside and allow municipal councils to steer political governance and socio-economic development in the rural areas (Williams, 2010). Based on the Afrocentric perspective (Asante, 2003), this chapter's overall aim is to use Maruleng sub-district as a case study to critique the intersection(s) between constitutional institutions of authority and traditional mechanisms of governance in South Africa. Particular attention is paid to Bakone ba Mametja, Banareng ba Mahlo and Banareng ba Letsoalo and their interaction with elected officials of Maruleng Municipality and other government spheres. This study's focus is largely on the period after 1990. Even then, the research for this chapter ends in 2022. The choice of 1990 as a starting point for the research of this chapter was informed by the fact that this year has officially marked the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. Similarly, the study ends in 2022 because South Africa had local government elections in November 2021. In the next section of this chapter, the author describes the location of the study (Maruleng) and invokes the justification for its choice and use as the case study for this research.

Geographic and Political Context of Study Site

The study site for this chapter is Maruleng, one of the sub-districts within the Mopani district in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. This sub-district is made up of 14 wards,

¹ The original version of this work first appeared during 2018 in *Alternation*, 23(1): 266-283

some of which over-lap the boundaries of traditional authorities (Maruleng Municipality, 2016). Since Maruleng sub-district is largely rural, its governance architecture is often characterised by a fierce struggle between traditional leaders and elected leaders (Maruleng Municipality, 2016). On top of the power struggles between traditional leaders and elected leaders in Maruleng are conflicts between different traditional authorities (Letsoalo, 2009; Ramajela, 2011). Squabbles and disputes are also a common feature within the leadership of the same traditional authority. The complexity of the nature of conflictual relations between and/or within traditional leadership and other stakeholders in this domain often renders the existing conflict management and resolution mechanisms redundant.

The conflictual nature of traditional leadership and other governance stakeholders is not unique to Maruleng. It can also be observed in other sub-districts in the Mopani district and other localities that have embraced a governance mode mixed between traditional leadership and elected leaders (Bank & Southall, 1996; Phago & Netswera, 2011). However, the dilemma faced by the institution of traditional leadership in South Africa can best be understood if it is located within the context of the uncritical embracing of liberal democracy by most independent African states (Kapa, 2014). In clarifying the mix up of traditional leadership and elected leadership under the independent African state, Wamba-dia-Wamba (cited in Ramose, 2002:103) cautions that 'the content of democratisation is determined by modes of politics. Its content is shaped by the dominant mode of politics. The transition must, therefore, be redefined in terms of the change from the mode of politics in crisis towards a new mode of politics'. What can be deduced from the foregoing expression is the urgent and pressing need to consider the best ways to re-affirm the role of traditional leaders in the era wherein non-African political and economic systems have been wrongly presented as superior and more effective than others (Shai & Iroanya, 2014). It is the conviction of this chapter that there is no perfect system of organising society politically or economically (Yuhus, 2016). Any political system can be effective and sustained if it dovetails with the social and economic history of the people who practice it (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Khapoya, 2010).

In the case of Maruleng, there are three recognised chieftaincies (a mechanism of traditional authority): Bakone ba Mametja, Banareng ba Mahlo (also known as Sekororo) and Banareng ba Letsoalo traditional authorities. In terms of hierarchy, each of these chieftaincies has a headman. The headman (*Ntona* in Sepedi) plays the role of the traditional leader of a village whereas the chief (*Kgoši* in Sepedi) is the senior traditional leader of the entire community (social group). *Ntona* is appointed by the *Kgoši*, following certain biased criteria and the former is expected to report to the latter in terms of traditional protocol (Lekgoathi, 2013). While skill, age and rank were part of the set criterion for constituting traditional leadership in Maruleng sub-district, Lekgoathi (2013:14) adds that historically 'the chief [including *Ntona*] was drawn from a dominant lineage – royal lineage'.