Tribal Innovators? Traditional Leadership and Development in Africa

The renowned South African social anthropologist, Isaac Schapera showed in his ethnography, Tribal Innovators (1970), that during the colonial era, Tswana chiefs in southern Africa played an influential role in the socio-economic development of their communities, a project largely understood at the time and certainly today, as the quest for modernity. He showed with lucid conviction that chiefs did not only introduce new taxes and customary legislation, but also actively supported the Europeans whom they admitted into their chiefdoms. Chiefs encouraged their subjects to buy ploughs and other imported goods and to earn money for ‘new wants’ by going to work ‘abroad’ in the mines in Kimberley. That chiefs played a central role in the economic development of their chiefdoms have been acknowledged by the leaders of the communities. I argue that chiefs’ legitimacy, and therefore their ability to spearhead development in their chiefdoms in the contemporary era, is contingent on the contradictions of democracy in a neo-liberal age. Put succinctly, it is the view that the introduction of democratic rule in many parts of Africa ‘held out the prospect that everyone would be set free to speculate and accumulate, to consume, and to indulge repressed desires. But for many, the millennial moment passed without palpable payback’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999:284). Widespread dissatisfaction with the democratisation process or with the pace of access to economic citizenship have made it possible for some old political actors (chiefs) to make new claims about their potential contribution in these conjunctures. Today, it is evident that chiefs are not imprisoned in ‘a tête-à-tête with a mythical tradition’ (Bayart 1989:29), but are conspicuously part and parcel of the modern political landscape. Chiefs have a role to play in both the realms of custom and modern politics. However, it is my view that it is premature to perceive them essentially as ‘innovators’ granting that their ability to act decisively on behalf of the rural poor is a function of the nature of their past or present relationship with the postcolonial state.

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Innovators or reactionaries? The paradox of chieftaincy

During the struggle for the decolonisation of Africa, particularly in southern Africa, there was an emergent view that chiefs were collaborators with colonial regimes and, therefore, inimical not only to the liberation struggle, but also to socio-economic development in their various

WorldPolicy Institute, Arms Resources Center, www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicle/api/apj03/fal/jandy.html

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chiefdoms. Max Gluckman demonstrated how some educated Zulu Christians argued against chieftaincy as an outmoded institution and their description of chiefs as reactionaries who opposed progress (Gluckman 1963). In his book, The Peasants’ Revolt, Govan Mbeki (1984) argued that ‘if the Africans have had chiefs, it was because all human societies have had them at one stage or another. But when a people have developed to a stage which discards chieftainship, when their social development contradicts the need for such an institution, then to force it on them is not liberation but enslavement’ (Mbeki 1984:47). These opinions were by no means limited to southern Africa or to the era of liberation struggle. Indeed, in the early 1990s when the introduction of limited political liberalisation in Cameroon opened up space for the articulation of diverse views, a small but potent voice spoke up not only against chieftaincy but also against their participation in the political process. ‘By their calling and function,’ a contributor to a local newspaper stated, ‘traditional rulers are ultra-conservatives, who misjudge challenges for contempt, consider new ideas as anathema, and are allergic and uptight to liberal changes. Their static mental structure set does not permit any opening to democracy which is a form of modern participatory governance incompatible with their archaic perceptions.’

In Mozambique, FRELIMO accused the chiefs of having facilitated colonialism (through taxation, labour conscription and policing) and also of having benefited enormously from it and accumulated power for themselves. It was against this background that FRELIMO’s victory against the Portuguese was also interpreted as a victory against chiefs (autoridades gentilicas). Chiefs were therefore ‘systematically excluded from positions of responsibility’ in the postcolonial era and replaced with grupos dinamizadores, that is, dynamising groups (West & Kloek-Jenson 1999). Similarly, chieftaincy was abolished under Julius Nyerere’s policy of ujamaa, which perceived and represented chiefs as obstacles to the modernising but contradictory project of socialism with an African face.

For Mamdani (1996), chieftaincy prevails today not as a result of its own legitimacy, but because of its co-operation with (and simultaneous corruption by) the colonial and apartheid states. He belongs to the camp that strongly advocates the eradication of chieftaincy in the postcolonial African state. According to him, contemporary chieftaincy is in many respects a category of ‘decentralised despotism’ (as it was during the colonial era) owing to the withering away of institutionalised mechanisms that served to check the chief against excesses. Prior to colonial rule, he maintains, the chief was the custodian of land not its proprietor and ‘the ultimate popular sanction against a despotic chief was desertion’. But under colonial and apartheid rule, the powers of the chief were systematically strengthened—emphasising the state as the ‘determiner of the consensus’ (Mamdani 1996:45). These transformations led to the bifurcation of the state not only into racialised categories, but also into the categories of ‘citizen’ and ‘subject’. On the one hand the lives of subjects were regulated by chiefs under customary law, and those of citizens by modern law. And the tragic tale, he argues, is that most postcolonial states in Africa succeeded in deracialising but did not democratise the bifurcated state, thereby maintaining the basic framework of ‘decentralised despotism’ to the detriment of the rural peasantry. The foregoing assumptions therefore, maintain that owing to the co-optation and corruption of traditional leadership during the colonial and apartheid era, chiefs may perhaps not accumulate enough legitimacy to act decisively on behalf of the rural poor. Similarly, it follows that their role towards the material development of their communities remains doubtful, if not aimed at exploiting the rural poor.

However, there is an emerging body of research, which reveal remarkable similarities to the developmental role of chiefs compared to what Isaac Schapera observed among the Tswana during the colonial era. The contradictions of neo-liberalism in South Africa or the stalled political transitions in Cameroon, for example, have made it possible for certain chiefs to make new leadership claims by espousing the discourse of development (Nkuna 2002; van Kessel & Oomen 1997). My own research in Venda, South Africa, shows that some chiefs have acted decisively on behalf of their subjects, particularly in an era when many rural poor feel excluded from the boundless promises of the new South Africa (Fokwang 2005). Upon his accession to the throne in the early 1990s, Chief Tshivhase of Venda for instance introduced new legislation allowing access to land to women (who formerly could do so by proxy only). His formation of a Tshivhase Development Trust enabled the employment of a few rural youth, thereby raising his credibility and popularity among subjects. Above all, he joined forces with his subjects to oppose the newly established democratic local council from introducing its market-oriented policies in his chiefdom, thereby serving as a protector of the rural poor.

In Cameroon for example, Nyamnjoh (2002) has shown that since the reintroduction of multiparty politics, chiefs have successfully made it to the forefront of national politics, sometimes in competition with other chiefs and chiefdoms. By actively and openly supporting the ruling Cameroon Peoples’ Democratic Movement (CPDM), many chiefs in the grassfields of Cameroon have ‘mobilised themselves under various lobbies to demand more recognition and resources from government’. However, many of these chiefs claim to represent ‘tradition’, but at the same time the state uses them to further ‘modern projects’ (Geschiere 1993:152). Consequently a good number of chiefs remain unpopular with their subjects especially in the North West Province where most chiefs are involved in party politics on the side of the ruling party, whereas most of their subjects are militants of the powerful opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF). Despite themselves, by articulating the discourse of development, many chiefs have played important roles in attracting state-sponsored development to their chiefdoms, or introduced customary legislation that has earned them some measure of legitimacy. In Bali Nyonga for instance, the chief has introduced legislation curtailling the official mourning period of widows from a year to three days only. And what is more, this new legislation now applies to both widows and widowers more or less.
equally, much to the relief of pressure groups within and beyond the chieftdom that had advocated the abolition of abusive widowhood practices.

The fact that chiefs are custodians of land in many parts of Africa means they could play crucial roles in the socio-economic development of their chieftoms. Fisiy (1995) argues that in order to understand chiefs’ role properly, it is important to examine the relation between their control over people and over resources, the most important of which is land. For most rural people, he argues the control and management of land is at the heart of control over people (Fisiy 1995:50). The introduction of new legislation permitting access to land to women, as observed in the case of Chief Tshivhase, could be appreciated in the above light.

Conclusion
This paper is not arguing that all chiefs should be perceived as vital channels through which socio-economic development could trickle down to the rural poor. In fact, West and Kloeck-Jenson’s conclusion for Mozambique is probably true for most of colonial and postcolonial Africa, namely that ‘chiefs at all levels have occupied positions betwixt and between their populations and higher authorities, implicating them all in a history of extraction and violence larger than all concerned’ (West & Kloeck-Jenson 1999:475). It follows that chiefs do not essentially work in the interest of the rural poor and should not be seen as innovators or protectors of their subjects in a postcolonial context. Their ability to do so is contingent on various factors. I argue that legitimacy for chiefs today and furthermore, their roles in the developmental process, are dependent on factors which must be clearly isolated for analysis. Their legitimacy and therefore ability to act decisively on behalf of the rural poor stem largely from the contradictions of democracy in a neo-liberal age. However, not all chiefs can claim this legitimacy because some have been irreparably tainted by past association with apartheid in the case of South Africa, or perceived as too involved in partisan politics on the side of the ruling party, as in the case of Cameroon or Ghana (cf. Boafo-Arthur 2001). Chieftaincy in Africa has demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of dramatic social transformations. There is no doubt whatsoever, that despite its contradictions, the institution of traditional leadership will make meaning to ordinary Africans in so far as ‘it relates to the social experiences of Africans and how far it serves their social needs’ (Ake 2000:75).

Notes
2. Such as the payment of monthly rates of R12 to the municipal council authorities in return for services such as the removal of garbage, provision of water, etc.

References

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