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Analysis of the relevance of traditional leaders and the evolution of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe: A case study of amaNdebele

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Abstract
This article analyses the Ndebele institution of traditional leadership in contemporary Zimbabwe. It traces the pre-colonial Ndebele traditional leadership in order to establish the changes that have occurred as well as their causes. The article highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), especially in leadership which is highly controversial in Africa. Traditional leadership is the indigenous way of leadership which can, in a good way, influence contemporary governance for the benefit of the people. The article takes an Afrocentric approach with a clear understanding of the dynamism in culture. It then proceeds to reveal the problems (and their causes) within the traditional leadership institution in contemporary Zimbabwe. Finally, the article recommends solutions to the problems.
Keywords: Afrocentric; alienation; chieftainship; Christianity; gender; indigenous knowledge systems (IKS); partisanship; politicisation; succession; traditional leaders

Introduction

The political organisation of amaNdebele has changed drastically since the demise of the pre-colonial state and the subsequent disappearance of King Lobhengula in 1893. To understand the contemporary scenario of traditional leadership among amaNdebele, it is crucial to first understand the pre-colonial Ndebele traditional leadership institution, which is the origin and the foundation of the present. Each pre-colonial society had a unique set of rules, laws and traditions suitable for its particular context (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009, 70). These rules, laws and traditions come under one umbrella of customs which govern the way the society handles its issues. ‘AmaNdebele as a state, exhibited a clear system of governance that centred on the person of a king (inkosi)’ (ibid, 74). From the pre-colonial period to the present, Africa has not been and is still not made up of homogeneous systems of governance; it is very heterogeneous. The political set-up among the Shona people is different from that of the Ndebele, Kalanga, Tonga Nambya, Venda or Sotho. These are all indigenous ethnic groups of people found in Zimbabwe. Looking at these groups of people in a combined way is therefore most likely to give a false impression. For amaNdebele, it was clear that the person in charge was the king – first Mzilikazi and then his son Lobhengula. This was before the British colonialists conquered and destroyed the kingdom.

The first part deals with the Ndebele leadership institution during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, by looking at how chiefs were appointed and installed, the succession process, the social and economic status of traditional leaders, and the functions of traditional leaders within the colonial administration. It is followed by the second part which examines the Ndebele traditional leadership in contemporary Zimbabwe.

The Ndebele traditional leadership in the pre-colonial and colonial periods

Appointment and installation of traditional leaders in the pre-colonial society and colonial era

Chiefs among the Ndebele are known as izinduna (singular: induna). In the pre-colonial era, Ndebele chiefs were installed using one system. The king and his regent presided over the installation ceremony. The first king of amaNdebele was Mzilikazi Khumalo, son of Matshobana and Nompele. At Mzilikazi’s death, his regent Mncumbatha Khumalo installed his son Lobhengula as king. Only the king had the power to appoint and to relieve from office a chief or headman in pre-colonial Ndebele society. The king used different criteria in appointing chiefs.

During the pre-colonial period, only men were eligible to be chiefs. Nyathi (2000, 127) points out that ‘the Ndebele society was strongly patriarchal’, meaning that
amaNdebele exalted men above women, thus declaring men the superior gender. This is why the Ndebele terms referring to traditional leaders, *induna* for chiefs and *umlisa* for headman, are masculine. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, 79) alludes to the same fact as Nyathi, that Ndebele governance was characterised by the prevalence of a patriarchal ideology which defined women as minors or subordinate to men until death; they were therefore considered incapable of leading men.

Loyalty and trustworthiness were the other criteria the king used in appointing chiefs. For this reason the Ndebele kings appointed their close friends and relatives, to maintain power and control. King Mzilikazi appointed his closest cousin, Mncumbatha Khumalo, to be his regent. Clarke and Nyathi (2010, 15) assert that Mncumbatha was King Mzilikazi’s closest friend and most trusted advisor. The king needed to trust and have confidence in everyone he appointed to leadership positions. King Lobhengula appointed his cattle-rearing mate and childhood friend, Magwegwe Fuyane, to be chief because he trusted him (ibid, 27). When appointed, chiefs had a servant and master relationship with their people. In turn, through his loyal and trustworthy chiefs, the king managed to keep control of the people. The will to put one’s life on the line to protect the kingdom was a determiner of loyalty. This meant that chieftainship was won also on the basis of bravado and war heroism. As Nyathi (2000, 127) puts it, ‘[c]hieftainship was won on the battlefield’. In the pre-colonial era, amaNdebele survived on raids and thus strong military men were needed. Military prowess thus became a criterion for appointment to chieftainship. King Mzilikazi appointed Mbiko Masuku of Zwangendaba chief based on his military prowess. Mbiko was also rewarded with Princess Zinkabi’s hand in marriage for his war heroism. King Lobhengula appointed Mgandani Dlodlo, who has been praised for his ‘no retreat’ attitude in battle. Because chiefs were commanders of the king’s army, the royal highness needed men with appropriate military tactical awareness.

All the appointments rested on the person of the king, although he was advised by his regent. He appointed and installed chiefs with the help of *izinyanga, izanuse* and *izangoma* (medicine men, diviners and magicians). The king needed the guidance of the ancestral spirits in his appointments, wanting to be sure not to appoint chiefs who would become more powerful than him. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, 136) quotes King Mzilikazi as having once said, ‘I tell my people my words’, meaning that the king held power and influence over his people, and his declaration was final.

**Succession**

In the Ndebele state, power was based on genealogical affinities. Succession only occurred when the incumbent chief died. Nkulumane was an authentic successor of his father, King Mzilikazi. He was banished for trying to succeed his father, who was still alive. Among amaNdebele the ideology in leadership is that *alikho elaphuma elinye lingakatshoni* (no sun rises before the other sets), i.e. succession will not take place while the predecessor is still alive. Lobhengula succeeded his father at his death, which led to civil war in the Ndebele state. Since the fate of Nkulumane was unknown, some
people at the time held the view that he should be traced, since he was the rightful heir to the throne. According to Clarke and Nyathi (2010, 15), some people believed it was despicable for Lobhengula to be king, since he was a son of usomthanyelwana (a maid). Nkulumane was seen as the rightful heir, since his mother, Fulatha Tshabalala, was a Nguni woman and the senior wife of King Mzilikazi. Chiefs were appointed once and ‘only then did it become hereditary on the basis of like father like son’ (Nyathi 2000, 21). Hunter (1979, 384) describes this hereditary assumption of chieftainship as ‘born and not made’. This was based on the belief that if the father was a great leader, his son would be too.

Only a senior wife could give birth to the next chief. In Ndebele culture, being senior did not mean ‘first’ wife. The status of the family and ethnic origin played a huge role in determining seniority among the chief’s wives. Sibanda (1998, 3) outlines the three ethnic groups that comprised the Ndebele state: AbeZansi were the superior group because they belonged to the Nguni clan of King Mzilikazi. AbeNhla are second in the hierarchy as they also came from South Africa, thus they shared the journey with the king. The last group is amaHole – communities indigenous to Zimbabwe and incorporated into the Ndebele state. These hierarchical rankings or classes were very important among amaNdebele, determining the senior wives not only of leaders, but also of all men in society. A woman from the abeZansi class was superior to one from abeNhla and amaHole, while the abeNhla class was superior to the amaHole class. In the abeZansi class, a Khumalo woman was the most superior, as she possessed royal blood. This meant no one could have upstaged Zinkabi Khumalo as Mbiko Masuku’s senior wife, as she was the daughter of a king. Her eldest son was the legitimate heir to Mbiko’s chieftainship.

The woman a man married raised or lowered a man’s prestige, they therefore determined their husband’s status in Ndebele society. According to Clarke and Nyathi (2010, 23), Lozikheyi Dlodlo’s marriage to Lobhengula was to authenticate Lobhengula’s reign. It was a marriage to give Lobhengula prestige and respect as a ruler. In turn, he needed to marry a Nguni woman from a powerful family to gain the undivided respect of his subjects. The marriage also ensured that Lobhengula would have an authentic successor if Lozikheyi gave him a son.

If the senior wife failed to bear a son, the son of the next wife on the hierarchy became eligible. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, 73) explains that in that event the sons of junior wives were considered for the chieftainship. This happened because power had to be passed on, for the nation to move forward. No matter what happened at the death of a chief, there needed to be a successor. An eligible son is by right of his birth chief from the moment of his father’s death and no installation is needed to ratify this (Hunter 1979, 384). Installation is just a ceremony; the son of a chief is born a chief-in-waiting and the instant his father dies, he becomes the chief. Liyabe selitshonile sekumele kuphume elinye (the sun would have set and another needed to rise).

In the pre-colonial era men married as many wives as they wanted and could manage; it was therefore difficult for a chief to die without a son to take over from him. In case it happened, Chief Dr Ndondo (8.2.2011) noted that the brother of the late chief would take
over, just as he did when his own brother Michael died. Chief Nyangazonke Ndiweni (in Lindgren 2000, 27) states that Sinqobile Mabena’s grand-uncle, the late chief’s uncle, was eligible to take over the Nswazi chieftainship. Despite these discrepancies, it is clear that chieftainship had to remain in the family. In the Ndebele culture, family line is maintained by male offspring, therefore succession involved males, not females.

Social and economic position of the chiefs

Being a chief in Ndebele society put someone at a higher political and social standing, but as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, 63) points out, ‘respect for leaders was indeed an important aspect of African pre-colonial societies in general’. Chiefs were highly respected by their people. Power in general resorted in unequal human relations circumscribed in lineage and kinsmen. Social standing was based on class or family status, and those closely associated with central figures. In pre-colonial societies, chiefs usually came from the abezansi, which means they were born with higher status. Becoming chief elevated them to an even greater level. According to Hunter (1979, 384), ‘the chiefs were the wealthiest men in society’. Associating with the king – the supreme being in society – gained one many privileges. War heroes were handsomely rewarded; in such a situation the chiefs, as army commanders, possessed great material wealth gained through their prowess in war. They also attained their wealth from their judicial roles, because people paid for the chief’s time. For a chief’s court to sit, tribute had to be paid. ‘By this chiefs emerged as the richest in society’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009, 86). While the chiefs resorted under the king they did not behave as servants, but rather as assistants. Their powers were secondary to those of the king. They made decisions in their chieftainships and as such were not employees of the king, but his partners in government.

Most wealth in the world comes from the land, and land ownership is a measure of wealth. Nkomo (in Chiwome and Gambahaya 1998, 117) suggests that in the pre-colonial era, as the owners of the land, wealth was in the hands of the chiefs. However, the chiefs distributed land to their people, but did not control people’s property on the land. Hunter (1979, 387) points out that generosity was considered a primary virtue and mark of a chief. As one of their primary roles, chiefs were expected to assist their people in all their needs. Someone without cattle had his fields ploughed by the chief, and those who were starving received food from the chief. In Ndebele society there was isiphalasenkosi (the granary of the king) to which every member of society contributed grain after a harvest. The king and his chiefs were custodians of the grain, kept as insurance for periods of drought (i.e. a form of food security).

‘In spite of the fact that they were the wealthiest men in the country, chiefs always lived very much like their people’ (ibid, 388). The chiefs did not separate themselves from their people: although they possessed more that did not change their lifestyle – they lived the basic lifestyle defined by Ndebele culture. In all families beer was brewed but the chief’s compound had more. Every family slaughtered a beast (livestock) for a celebration but in the chief’s compound a large number were slaughtered. Chiefs had servants but their wives and children worked tirelessly, like in any other family.
in Ndebele society. There was no room for laziness, be it in the chief’s compound or in lesser men’s homes. Chiefs, despite their high-class status, strove to live like their people and share their experiences.

The king and his chiefs boasted a higher social, political and economic position in pre-colonial Ndebele society. People respected and honoured them and those who decided otherwise were liable for punishment. Chiefs returned the respect of their people by being generous with their possessions, helping them in times of drought and protecting them from their enemies. As the next section will show, they had broad functions.

Functions of chiefs

Chiefs assisted the king in governing the state, thus power in the Ndebele state was decentralised. Chiefs ran their villages under a code of conduct set at esigodwene (the king’s capital). The Ndebele state was so big that it could not be managed from the capital alone. Nyathi (2000, 57–58) notes that ‘the king was assisted by chiefs who also exercised ... rule’. The king needed to decentralise his power as he was unable to cover all places, thus the voice of the people reached the king through the chiefs. The chiefs acted as kings in their areas of jurisdiction and kept the power of the king in check (Cobbing 1976, 48), as a way of preventing the king from abusing his power. The role of the chiefs was to rule under the guidance of spirit mediums and council elders (Nkomo, in Chiwome and Gambahaya 1998, 117), who also kept the chief’s powers in check. Therefore, they were watchdogs watching the other watchdogs. Power, although vested in the king and his chiefs, was maintained in the hands of the people, thanks to the spirit mediums.

The chiefs were not only political leaders in the Ndebele state; they were also religious/spiritual leaders (ibid.) who played a dominant role in the religious life of their communities. The chiefs led religious/spiritual ceremonies in their areas, while national ceremonies like inxwala were presided over by the king, because the spirits of the nation lay on the person of the king and his chiefs. Hunter (1979, 392) states that the chief was the father of his people, and since only a father could bless his children, he had the ability to communicate with the ancestral spirits on behalf of his people. Chiefs were seen as closer to the ancestral spirits, which made them automatic religious/spiritual leaders who received obvious assistance from izanuse, izangoma and izinyanga.

The chiefs also played judicial roles in Ndebele society, to maintain law and order (see Hunter 1979). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, 43) concurs that ‘Ndebele leaders were the repository of supreme legislative and executive powers’. They had powers to govern and to pass sentence when a crime was committed. They were trusted to be fair in their judgement as lawmakers and implementers. Only the king, though, could pass the death sentence. In assuming their judiciary roles, the chiefs summoned the help of izanuse, izangoma and izinyanga (Ranger 1999, 45) to pass the correct and proper sentence. The fear was that the chief alone, without the guidance of the ancestral spirits, could pass an incorrect judgement, which would be detrimental: the people would feel let down if a guilty person was set free or an innocent person punished.
The chiefs were also military men, serving as commanders in the Ndebele army. Mbiko Masuku commanded the Zwangendaba army during the reign of King Mzilikazi. Clarke and Nyathi (2010, 26) suggest that chiefs were also responsible for other military matters. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, 1) notes that they were inspirational in war, as the late Chief Khayisa put it, ‘the chiefs then had the power to say and change the lives of their subjects’. Mgangandi Dlodlo commanded the Ndebele army against the white invaders in the final battle of Shangani, before the king disappeared. The soldiers fought gallantly without retreating, while the chiefs led from the front. As army commanders they had their soldiers stationed in different communities – if danger loomed they could protect their people from enemy attack.

**Ndebele traditional leadership in contemporary Zimbabwe**

The preceding part focused on the original structure of traditional leadership among amaNdebele during the pre-colonial era, before the Europeans (whites) forcefully took over control of or conquered Matabeleland. Many changes have occurred in Ndebele society since then, especially in the traditional leadership institution. This section examines these changes and their impact on the institution of traditional leadership. Inevitably, societies and traditions change with the passing of time. In the pre-colonial era, ethnic groups were independent and they had their own diverse leadership structures, where leadership was ethnic and therefore custom-bound. When the British colonised Zimbabwe, traditional leadership ceased to be based on ethnicity. It became a national phenomenon, and thus political. The rules that governed the traditional leadership institution became universal for every ethnic group in Zimbabwe. This meant that amaNdebele, with their monarchy, could not be governed by the coloniser, hence the need to dispose of the king and leave society divided along chieftainship lines. Chieftainship was already a common feature among the Shona, but it took amaNdebele time to get used to life without a king. Robertson (1987, 83) writes that ‘all cultures change but they do so in different ways and at different rates’. Ndebele culture has certainly changed since the annexation in 1893.

**Colonialism and its impact on traditional leadership institutions**

The annexation of Matabeleland by the British Pioneer Column in 1893 took away the nationhood of amaNdebele. King Lobhengula disappeared during the Shangani River Battle, and with this incident leadership among amaNdebele changed drastically. ‘With the loss of their king, the Ndebele lost shield and spear, the pride of the race’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009, 88). Having lost their pride and their state of nationhood along with Lobhengula, the king could not be succeeded because *alikho eliphuma elinye lingakatshoni*. The chiefs, once the most respected, honoured and wealthy citizens of the Ndebele state, were changed from leaders to minor colonial civil servants (ibid, 151): they lost not only their social and economic status, but also their integrity as people. They became subordinates to the colonial master, who was of a different race
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and ethnic group. Structures were created to show the chiefs and their people who was really in charge in the new order. In the reserves where the Ndebele people were resettled, the Native Commissioner was in charge. Nyathi (2000, 89) suggests that to amaNdebele the Native Commissioner became their new king – someone the chiefs and headmen had to submit to. This meant that traditional leaders who wanted to retain their positions had to respect and honour the Native Commissioner; they actually referred to him as nkosi (king). The now subdued chiefs, who had protected their people during the pre-colonial era, sold out their people. In their quest to impress the new king and gain favours from the colonial master, the chiefs ignored the pleas and grievances of their people. They became salaried law-and-order bureaucrats, i.e. spies for the colonial master. They searched for those who broke the law and brought them to the master for retribution. Nkomo (in Chiwome and Gambahaya 1998, 117) notes that those chiefs who conformed to the demands of the colonial master were well cared for, but those who challenged the system were removed or destroyed. There was no room for insolence from traditional leaders in the colonial set-up, as they were under continuous surveillance. Unlike the former king, the Native Commissioner did not regard the chiefs as his assistants but his servants, who were expected to ask ‘how high?’ when commanded to jump. The commissioner did not care what they had to offer, as long as they carried out his commands. Traditional leaders ceased to be the determiners of their people’s destiny, becoming the implementers of the colonial master’s law rather than lawmakers themselves.

Manyukwe (2003) relates how the chiefs were used by the colonial government. They were given radios so they could listen to and pass on the lies peddled by the national broadcaster to their subjects. Appreciating the ‘generosity’ of the rulers, the chiefs were reluctant to question the status quo. They became active participants in a plan to win the minds and hearts of the rural people. For this reason, chiefs such as Jeremiah Chikandiwana Chirau became radio panellists and analysts denouncing terrorism – the term colonial authorities used to describe the liberation movement. This was meant to convince other Chiefs countrywide that they should thwart any spirit of liberation among their people. The Minister of Information of that day, P.K. van der Byl, was later to remark that ‘chiefs were necessary for preventing the rural black people from stepping out of line and getting subversive’. However, those chiefs who did not oblige were deposed. One example is Chief Mangwende, who was deposed in 1960.

One would believe that at independence in 1980 the new government would restore the dignity of the traditional leaders. This was not to be; the manipulation of traditional leadership continues in modern Zimbabwe. Nkomo (in Chiwome and Gambahaya 1998, 117) defends this scenario when he suggests that ‘the whittling away of chiefs’ powers at independence emanated from the distrust of the chiefs among the new leadership as the result of the general perception that chiefs collaborated with the colonial regimes in suppressing African nationalism and liberation struggle’.

By any standards, this is a misguided, obtuse and crass assessment of the situation. At independence the then Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, declared a process of reconciliation among all races and warring parties. If the government was willing to
reconcile with Smith’s forces (which included the brutal Selous Scouts), it should have been able to forgive the black traditional leaders who had also suffered under the colonial yoke and were abused by the colonial regime. The ZANU-PF government knew that the reinstatement of chiefs to their original power would be a recipe for disaster. Empowering the chiefs with the status they had prior to colonisation meant empowering communities with their traditional lifestyles. This would have rendered amaNdebele ungovernable, especially with a Shona-dominated government. Therefore, the abuse and manipulation of traditional leadership continued under the new government. Although colonialism greatly transformed the institution of traditional leadership, the incumbent government has also done much to affect the situation of traditional leadership in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Traditional leaders as custodians of culture

A custodian has a deep knowledge of and protects a certain ideology or shrine. Traditional leaders as custodians of culture are expected to be knowledgeable of the culture of their people. Tylor (in Fiegeleman 1989, 26) defines culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, morals, customs and other capabilities. This means traditional leaders as custodians of culture should be able to interpret the knowledge, beliefs, art, morals and customs of their society. Understanding these components of culture means that traditional leaders such as chiefs and headmen are fully able to represent their people’s interests. This section discusses the success or otherwise of traditional leadership among amaNdebele in safeguarding the Ndebele culture.

The question that arises is how traditional leaders can be custodians of culture if they themselves are a symbol of a deviation from that culture. In Ndebele society, when a chief or headman dies his successor inherits those things that defined him as a chief. However, in contemporary Zimbabwe, according to Sithole, the District Administrator of Umguza (interview of 4 February 2011), a new gown and hat are presented to the succeeding chief when he should inherit the old gown and hat. Among amaNdebele such an inheritance is a sign of continuity – it is believed that inheriting the late chief’s gear is as good as inheriting his leadership powers and talents.

As traditional leadership ceased to be ethnic when the British took over the land, chiefs are no longer installed according to their culture. It can be argued that during the installation, traditional customs are followed but one thing is forgotten – a Ndebele chief can only be installed by the royal Ndebele ancestral spirits, which can never reside in anyone from a different ethnic group. Currently in Zimbabwe, as Chapter 29.17 of the Traditional Leadership Act provides, the Minister of Local Government installs and appoints chiefs. Any person can be appointed a minister, but the royal ancestral spirits do not abide in just anybody. Having any Minister of Local Government installing Ndebele chiefs is a deviation from and strongly neglects amaNdebele cultural and religious norms. In the Ndebele state, the king installed chiefs. He possessed the royal Ndebele State ancestral spirits. Some ministers may not even be of royalty in their society, so how could they install a chief – more so, a Ndebele chief?
In Ndebele society, not everyone qualifies to be a chief. Women in whatever capacity were regarded as incapable of leading men, but in contemporary Zimbabwe females are being installed as chiefs. Nkomo (in Chiwone and Gambahaya 1998, 118) claims that the appointment of female chiefs represents the democratisation of the traditional leadership institution. This is true, from a political standpoint where the majority rule. Women, being the larger part of the Zimbabwean population, should have their rights observed. However, chiefs are regarded as custodians of culture and not political activists. It is clear that Ndebele culture regards women as perpetual minors (abesintwana) (Guy 1996, 34) who are incapable of leading men. The late Chief Khayisa Ndiweni (quoted in Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace [CCJP] 1997, 23), clearly states that the appointment of female chiefs ‘is not within our customs at all’. In this regard, how does Chief Sinqobile Mabhena claim to be a custodian of the Ndebele culture, to which she belongs, yet she represents a deviation from that same culture? Politicians have been vocal on cultural misnomers. In an interview with Tazzen Mandizvidza on his 81st birthday on 21 February 2005, the incumbent president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, challenged social and cultural issues like homosexuality, prostitution and teenage dress. Yet those who are supposed to be knowledgeable about and protectors of African culture have remained silent. Chiefs have not risen up to stamp down on such transgressions. On 16 March 2011 a certain Tshuma, a social worker, said that in the Bubi area under Chief Mtshani prostitution is prevalent, yet traditional leaders have not deplored this trend. He further alluded to the fact that the chief is more concerned with issues of agriculture, because he has the equipment to boast with when addressing his people. This suggests that empowering chiefs with material wealth has diverted their attention from the pressing cultural issues affecting their people. Instead, they now focus on personal gain. The fact that people are losing their cultural identity is no longer a top priority. Homosexuality existed during the pre-colonial era, but traditional leaders then clamped down on homosexuals, so the issue became almost non-existent. Today’s chiefs clamour for human rights which condone homosexuality and prostitution.

Most traditional leaders are Christians, and Christianity as a lifestyle goes against most Ndebele customs, beliefs, art and knowledge. Christianity postulates that there is only one God who should be worshipped, but amaNdebele believe in a rain god who presumably lives in a rock in the Matopo Hills. People used to go to eNjelele to pray to Ngwali for rain, but nowadays they believe rain comes from God through His son Jesus Christ. Chiefs no longer pioneer traditional Ndebele shrines as the answer to social, economic and even political problems. Chief Mtshani of Bubi belongs to the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA), which may lead people to conclude that he will not consult the grave of Indlovukazi yakoBulawayo (Queen of Bulawayo) (Christianity does not allow divination; consulting a grave is considered to be against the doctrines of the religion). The Whitewater area of Matopo Hills is now under Chief Malachi Masuku. Like him, Chief Michael Sikhobokhobo of Nkayi has a biblical (Christian) name and denotes a bias towards Christianity. In fact, in an interview with Chief Sikhobokhobo on 27 May 2011, he confided to one of the authors
that he now distances himself from Ndebele traditions which are at loggerheads with Christianity. He made it clear that he is now a baptised member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and encouraged everyone to become born-again Christians. From the above it is clear that traditional leaders have deviated from pre-colonial Ndebele traditions and customs. However, since culture is dynamic, traditional leaders are also changing with the times.

Alienation of chiefs from their people

There is a Ndebele saying, *inkosi yinkosi ngabantu* (the king is king because of the people). The chiefs, as leaders of the people, exist because of the people; without people there would be no chiefs. Chiefs, then, are supposed to live among the people and share their experiences in order to understand their needs and wants. In contemporary Zimbabwe, the relationship between the chiefs and their people is not very clear as the chiefs have become alienated from their people. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, 79) the Ndebele considered themselves as a family, *umthwakazi*. The king was the father and his wife the mother of the state. With the demise of the monarchy, chiefs became the fathers of the communities they reigned over.

Contemporary chiefs are no longer seen as fathers. Some chiefs are professionals, such as Chief Sinqobile Mabhena, who is a teacher and is currently working in Botswana. The question that arises is how she can address the problems of her people when she lives far from them. She does not share the experiences of her people, having fled the economic hardships of Zimbabwe to find solace in Botswana. This may lead some to conclude that she has little regard for her people, who supported her when she was appointed against custom in 1996 and when she is alleged to be living in a neighbouring country, and can therefore not be in a position to attend to the day-to-day affairs of her people. In the pre-colonial era chiefs’ homesteads were surrounded by their people’s homes, which meant they lived close to their people. Contemporary chiefs no longer live with their people, nor do they face the same issues as they do. Chief Doctor Neville Ndondo is a resident of Mahathshula, a medium-density suburb of Bulawayo, while his people live in the Fingo area of Umguza District. He has to drive there if he is needed. Chief Mtshani lives on a plot which the government forcefully took over from a white man on the outskirts of Bulawayo, about 100km from his people. The same applies to Chief Malachi Masuku, who lives on a repossessed farm situated about 90km from his people. It is not clear how the villagers get a message to their chief if something happens in the community. Children need their father every day; the people need their chief every day, yet contemporary chiefs are not available because they live far from their people. Pre-colonial chiefs left their people only to go to war or execute raids on behalf of the people. Chiefs no longer share the life experiences of their people. Pre-colonial chiefs were the wealthiest men in society but they shared a common lifestyle with their people. In contemporary Zimbabwe chiefs drive expensive cars, they possess generators and farm implements while their people are struggling to make ends meet. There is nothing wrong with personal wealth, since even pre-colonial chiefs were very
rich, but the change in lifestyle of contemporary chiefs is based on individualism in a society that should be communal.

In an interview, Mabhena said that in Bubi, some people fail to plough their fields because they cannot raise money to fuel the District Development Fund (DDF) tractor, which has been set out to plough public fields. This is abysmal, as the chief who should be helping them according to Ndebele customs, owns a tractor. There is a huge difference in lifestyle between the chief and his family, and the rest of the families in his community. According to the Umguza District Administrator, on 4 February 2011 Sithole stated that ‘the chiefs are being empowered with vehicles, tractors and generators’. Some of these chiefs have hired drivers who use these cars as taxis to ferry the local community to and from town. As there is shortage of transport in most rural areas, these drivers take advantage of the situation to rip off their passengers, before handing the money to their employers, the chiefs. The government, in a quest to incentivise chiefs to gain maximum support from the people, have driven the alienation process and encouraged mistrust.

The Chiefs and Headsman Act, 1982 was replaced by the Traditional Leaders Act, 1998. Chapter 29:17 of this Act provides for the appointment of village heads, headmen and chiefs, the establishment of a chiefs’ council, village ward and provincial assemblies and also defines their functions. Due to commitments to the council of chiefs and the senate, some chiefs are hardly ever home. These commitments take the chiefs away from their people for long periods of time. Chief Lucas Mtshani of Bubi, the Deputy President of the Chiefs’ Council, is barely seen in his district, as he has become more of a national chief. He addresses national issues, while issues concerning his district exclusively are sometimes not addressed. The chiefs’ participation might be good for national unity, but it alienates the chiefs from their people. Assessing the scenarios one may conclude that the alienation of chiefs from their people has led to mistrust and disrespect, as alluded to by Chief Ndondo in an interview on 8 February 2011. People therefore conclude that their chiefs are furthering political ideologies and the interests of the ruling party, at the expense of the people’s socio-cultural ideologies and interests. Respect for leaders was indeed an important part of African pre-colonial societies, and it seems no longer to be the case in contemporary Zimbabwe.

**Politcisation of succession and installation of chiefs**

Every aspect of Zimbabwean life is dominated by politics, but it seems partisan politics has taken over people’s lives. Every function conducted by a politician is an opportunity for furthering a partisan political interest, be it in a funeral, cultural function or wedding. During the installation ceremonies of chiefs, politicians utter statements to further their political ideals. As the dominant delegation during such ceremonies, politicians have a golden opportunity to push their party’s political ideology and interests. This is seen by the fact that one party’s members (usually the ruling party) dominate these ceremonies. Other political parties’ members do not attend, to avoid cultural clashes.

The Traditional Leadership Act, Chapter 29.17, allows the incumbent Minister of Local Government to direct the succession and installation process. As the supreme
authority in the ministry, the whole traditional leadership in Zimbabwe submits to the minister. The minister may not be well versed in the cultural aspects of every ethnic group in Zimbabwe, therefore his decisions are made on political grounds and generally in support of his political party, in the contemporary case, ZANU-PF. During installation ceremonies he is more likely to call for the support of the chiefs for the ‘revolutionary party’ (ZANU-PF) which gave them their land back. Says Chief Fortune Charumbira (quoted at a constitution outreach meeting held at 2 July 2010): ‘As chiefs who had lost their lands and were displaced by the colonial regimes, it was only natural for them to support a party which championed their cause, the restoration of their lands.’ In normal situations chiefs ought to be apolitical, i.e. they should represent everyone regardless of their political affiliation. Due to the politicisation of traditional leadership, chiefs are biased towards a political party where there is personal benefit. Politicians know that politicising the installation ceremonies sends a bold statement to the in-coming chief about who is in charge. In essence, installation ceremonies have become campaign rallies for ZANU-PF. In an interview on 8 February 2011, Chief Ndondo confirmed that indeed political statements were uttered during his installation ceremony, with people being told to work with the chief in safeguarding the gains of the liberation struggle. ZANU-PF has a way of manipulating non-political ceremonies and turning them into political rallies where they chant their slogans and spread their ideas and propaganda.

It is not only the installation that is politicised but the succession of chiefs too. According to the Daily Agenda of 19 January 2011, there was a succession wrangle for the Mabhikwa chieftainship with ZANU-PF pushing for one of its cadres to be the next chief. If political parties get involved in succession wrangles it diminishes the status of traditional leadership.

In Zimbabwe, the Chiefs’ Council looks into chiefs’ problems and grievances. It also addresses the concerns of the people, which chiefs bring from their districts. The Chiefs’ Council is not free from political interference, as the President and the Minister of Local Government attend some of the meetings. Politicians bypass the Chiefs’ Council when it suits them. The late Chief Khayisa Ndweni (quoted in CCJ 1997, 25) noted that ‘there is a house of chiefs in this country … if there is something that goes against tradition we discuss it. Why did they bypass the house of chiefs?’ This was when the first female Ndebele chief, Sinqobile Mabhena, was appointed and subsequently installed in 1997. The politicians ignored the concerns of other Ndebele chiefs when they installed a woman – as noted, the phenomenon of female chieftainship goes against Ndebele custom and the issue should have been settled in the Chiefs’ Council, before the politicians weighed in. Whether or not it was done with the blessing of the people of Nswazi, the installation of Sinqobile Mabhena was political, not customary.

The Traditional Leadership Act, Chapter 29.17 provides that chiefs are not allowed to be partisan. However, due to political interference in succession and installation, and thanks to the monetary gains availed to them by the government, chiefs end up submitting to politics. They become civil servants on a payroll. The politicisation of traditional leadership has given birth to a mistrust and disrespect of traditional leaders. On 8 February 2011, Chief Dr Ndondo alluded to the fact that due to the continual
government involvement in issues concerning chiefs, the public and the media view the chiefs as puppets of ZANU-PF. Although there is the pretence that traditional leadership is apolitical, clearly ZANU-PF has continued to involve itself in the succession and installation of chiefs, to garner maximum support from the people. In Ndebele society people belong to the chief, and if ZANU-PF has the chiefs, it also has the people on its side. This shows that the new, independent government simply inherited certain colonial systems, where a chief was imposed on the people and had to make sure that the people did not undermine the government. In fact, chiefs cannot choose to be against a government policy – they have to be seen to sympathise with the government of the day.

Gender in the Ndebele traditional leadership institution

Gender issues have rocked the world since the turn of the century. Women, through feminist movements, have pushed for equality between the sexes. Kornblum and Smith (1991, 448) suggest that women’s movements began in the 1960s but achieved significant victories in the 1970s when they changed the way men and women think about gender roles. Connell (1987, 119) defines gender as the study of the relationship between men and women. Gender roles are culturally determined, as different ethnic groups assign different roles to men and women. Kornblum and Smith (1991, 432) concur, noting that gender refers to a set of culturally conditioned traits associated with maleness and femaleness. Among amaNdebele leadership roles were meant for men, but in contemporary Zimbabwe women have been appointed as traditional leaders. This phenomenon has been accepted with mixed feelings.

In Ndebele society, as Couville (1994, 35) puts it, ‘women occupied the domestic domain and men the public domain and because power and authority was vested in the public domain women had de facto lower status than men’. This is why, when the first female Ndebele chief, Sinqobile Mabhena from Nswazi, was appointed and subsequently installed, most Ndebele chiefs expressed disapproval. Lindgren (2000, 24) states that ‘to have a woman as a chief is against Ndebele culture and tradition’, adding that a meeting was held to try and overturn the appointment, with the chiefs agreeing that in the Nguni sub-tribe to which the Mabhena clan belongs, Mabhena was not the hereditary chief – one of her father’s uncles should have been appointed. The appointment of Mabhena and other female chiefs changed Ndebele culture, in that power relations, marriage customs and division of labour were reversed. When women became eligible for chieftainship it meant that the process of ukwenda was reversed, because now a man has to leave his own home area to go to where his wife is chief. In Ndebele culture men are regarded as inhloko yomuzi (the head of the family); how can a man be the head of the family when his wife is the head of the whole community? Female chieftainship not only threatens power relations, but also the entire way of life of amaNdebele.

According to Nyathi (2000, 127), Ndebele society was strongly patriarchal, whereas nowadays it is gender sensitive. Men and women are seen as equal contributors to society. If the sexes are equal, then leadership roles should cease to be awarded on gender grounds. Levin and Spates (1990, 373) point out that ‘the modern world
is markedly different from the world that existed only a few decades ago’. Male-dominated Ndebele society ended long ago, now it is about how one contributes to society. According to Meldrum (1997, 7), Mabhena knows her people do not approve of her appointment as a chief, but she is determined to prove to them that she can work as hard as other male chief. Chieftainship in contemporary Zimbabwe is also no longer based on military exploits, but rather on development exploits in which the women participate with excellence. Democracy pushes for equal opportunity in all sectors, without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity or age. This requires a change of culture, which is about benefits. Culture is dynamic, therefore Ndebele culture is not immune to change – it has accommodated female chieftainship, but with this change the politicians benefited. To gain support from the majority (i.e. women), the government has facilitated the appointment of female chiefs.

Connell (1987, 119) suggests that the study of an institution (in this case, the traditional leadership institution) requires a gendered paradigm. The gender regime amongst amaNdebele has seen changes in the succession process in traditional leadership. The rise of women into traditional leadership positions has seen succession wrangles erupt between men and women. In Chief Mthhe’s area in Gwanda, a succession wrangle occurred involving a brother and sister. The sister had been appointed to act as chief on behalf of her brother who was young, but after enjoying the pleasures of the throne the sister refused to let go. As the eldest child she is qualified to be chief if Sinqobile Mabhena qualifies to be chief. While the new post-colonial government allows women to ascend to chieftainship, not all amaNdebele accept the phenomenon. At present Zimbabwe has five female chiefs. Three are from Matabeleland and two from Mashonaland. The three, all from Matabeleland South province, are Chief Sinqobile Mabhena of Umzingwane, Chief Ketso Mathe of Gwanda and Chief Nonhlanhla Sibanda of Insiza. In Mashonaland, there are Chief Charехwa and Chief Chimukoko, both from Mutoko. Married or not, a woman can still take over the chieftaincy, but if she is married, she must revert to her father’s surname. It is still not clear who will succeed a female chief – her first-born son or her brothers? If it is her son, will he also shun his father’s surname and revert to his mother’s surname? These are questions which everyone is currently silent about, but they will invariably be cause for concern in the future.

Agrippa Masuku (quoted in CCJP 1997, 48) says that ‘it is not a matter of what I think but what culture says’. Culture is dynamic and evolves as human beings produce their means of livelihood (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru, in Chiwone and Gambahaya 1998, 79), so what culture was in the days of King Mzikazi and King Lobhengula is different from what it is in contemporary Zimbabwe. Gender equality is a phenomenon that is with us; it is irreversible and inevitable. The phenomenon of female chieftainship should be accepted as part of contemporary Ndebele culture. However, there is also the question of the name induna. The word is masculine, and can only refer to a male chief. The stem of this noun is –duna, which means ‘male’. With female chiefs it is improper to continue using that word. The Ndebele people now have to either coin a new term or find a new word which is unisex. It is a misnomer to refer to a female person as an induna.
Impact of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities on Ndebele confidence

Confidence is a characteristic that pushes people to act without fear. To take that away from a people is to leave them worthless. The *Gukurahundi* atrocities (1982–1987) that took place in Matabeleland and Midlands, stripped amaNdebele of confidence. Once a proud nation full of prowess, they were reduced to mere trash by the Fifth Brigade during the atrocities. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008, 192) *Gukurahundi* is a Shona term used to refer to the first rain storms that wash away the chaff of the previous season. The North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade, assigned to deal with the problem of dissidents in Matabeleland and Midlands, masqueraded under the code name *Gukurahundi*. What boggled the minds of those who saw *Gukurahundi* and heard of it, is that if the dissidents were from ZAPU, why did they terrorise the people who supported and sympathised with them? ZAPU’s stronghold was in Matabeleland and Midlands where the dissidents presumably operated. Bhebhe (1989, 35) defends ZAPU when he says a main objective of ZAPU was to foster the best values in African culture, with a view to developing a basis of desirable social order. It is clear, through the *Gukurahundi* saga, that ZANU-PF had no desirable social order in mind. It wanted social chaos. This section is not about the *Gukurahundi* but rather about the atrocities and their impact on Ndebele confidence.

The colonial government used violence to instil fear in blacks, and the ZANU-PF government inherited that at independence. ‘The brutality of the state in suppressing the few rebels in Matabeleland and Midlands regions left deep scars amongst its victims’ (Raftopolous and Mlambo 2009, 185). The government, fearing the power of amaNdebele, felt it had to trample them down and kill their confidence in order to make the country comfortable for Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF to govern. The victims of the *Gukurahundi* were not rebels but Ndebele-speaking people of Matabeleland and Midlands who were presumed to be supporting an opposition party, ZAPU, and its so-called dissident father, Joshua Nkomo (Mugabe, in CCJP 2007). ZANU-PF sent the Fifth Brigade to terrorise amaNdebele and instil fear in them. When people begin to fear they lose confidence in themselves. Fear still exists in contemporary amaNdebele, even among the traditional leadership. It is not that the traditional leaders do not want to stand up and challenge certain issues; it is because they fear what might happen. The scars of the *Gukurahundi* still exist, hence fear still surfaces when controversial political decisions are made disfavouring the Matabeleland region; their insecurity hinders their reaction to the decisions.

The *Gukurahundi* had no respect for the traditions and customs of amaNdebele. They disrespected sacred shrines that were the pride of amaNdebele. In killing someone’s faith, one kills the confidence of that person and the *Gukurahundi* was out to destroy everything the amaNdebele took pride in. In a discussion with some elderly women in Siganda, on 26 February 2011, it was revealed that the Fifth Brigade had violated the grave of Queen Lozikheyi Dlodlo. This was a way of telling the Ndebele their gods meant nothing. If the state disrespected the departed ancestors, what could it do to the living? Raftopolous and Mlambo (2009, 185) assert that the Fifth Brigade was almost entirely Shona, and that it justified its violence on political and ethnic
terms. The violence was political (against PF ZAPU) and ethnic (against amaNdebele). Destroying Ndebele religious shrines would leave amaNdebele with nothing to find solace in. Such disrespect implied disrespect for the traditional leaders, as custodians of the shrines.

Part of the crisis in Zimbabwe has to do with deep-rooted problems of nationhood, identity, history, memory and heritage (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009, 189). This crisis emerged from the Gukurahundi atrocities, hence amaNdebele participate with fear and lack of confidence in the general development in the country. Traditional leaders were also scarred by the Gukurahundi atrocities. Their quest is to protect themselves and their people from what might happen if they cross the path of Robert Mugabe and his cronies. The Ndebele chiefs’ support for the ZANU-PF government is not because they agree with their style of governance, but because history and memory play their part and they are opting to prevent history from repeating itself, thus avoiding the second Gukurahundi. In this way the chiefs may be playing their role in protecting their people somehow; however, it could just be an excuse, as some of them may be supporting ZANU-PF wholeheartedly.

The Fifth Brigade consisted of malicious young men who lacked self-respect and respect for others. One victim of the Gukurahundi (in CCJP 2007) said that the members of the Fifth Brigade were not normal, that the drugs they used to gain the confidence to carry out their massacres made them malicious. The soldiers humiliated amaNdebele by raping women and girl children in front of the men, to prove to the Ndebele men that they were powerless and could not protect their own. According to Sithole (1956, 13), a Ndebele man’s favourite things are beef, beer and, of course, his women – thus, raping a man’s woman was (and is) an effective way to prove to him that he is nothing; worthless. The Fifth Brigade not only challenged Ndebele manhood by defiling their women, they also castrated men. An infertile man lacks respect in amaNdebele society, and many lost their respect due to the atrocities. It appears that AmaNdebele were a threat to Shona dominance, therefore they had to be reduced to a small fraction of the Zimbabwean population. The castration of Ndebele men was one way of controlling that population, but the main success of the Fifth Brigade lay in reducing the Ndebele population through mass killings. Phathisa Nyathi (in CCJP 2007) states that when someone wants to kill he has to justify it first, to clear his conscience. The Fifth Brigade justified the massacres in Matabeleland and Midlands as revenge for what Mzilikazi did when he upstaged the Shona and settled in Matabeleland and Lobhengula’s raiding of the Shona when he succeeded his father. Taking revenge for the actions of former amaNdebele leaders is to take revenge on current Ndebele traditional leaders, who are supposed to uphold the standards of leadership set by their two kings (since most of the early legitimate chiefs are descendents of Chief Mtshani of Bubi and Chief Madliwa of Nkayi). To disregard the prowess and power of the Ndebele kings is to disregard amaNdebele as a whole, including traditional leaders.

ZANU-PF, under the tutelage of Robert Mugabe, wanted to create a one-party state (CCJP 2007) and the obstacle to that dream was PF ZAPU. Yet, this was not the only reason for the atrocities. Mugabe and ZANU-PF wanted to create a single ethnic group
state where everyone would subscribe to Shona culture and speak Shona. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (in Zewde 2008, 192) suggests that

[1]he crack North Korean Fifth Brigade that committed atrocities in the Matabeleland and Midlands region of Zimbabwe operated under the code name Gukurahundi … their Shona ethnic origin and indiscriminate violence against any Ndebele person as well as their attempt to Shonalise Ndebele-speaking communities...

The quest of the Fifth Brigade was to instil Shona culture and language on amaNdebele, and those who resisted had to die. Most amaNdebele failed to learn Shona, thus they ended up dead in mine shafts, shallow mass graves and caves. Although the quest to Shonalise amaNdebele failed, some aspects of Shona culture still exist amongst contemporary amaNdebele.

The Gukurahundi atrocities indeed ate away at the confidence of amaNdebele. When a people lose confidence, the nation is doomed. The proverb inkosi yinkosi ngabantu means that what happens to the people also happens to their leader – in this case, the chiefs and headmen. When the people lost confidence due to the Gukurahundi their traditional leaders lost confidence too and failed to protect their people.

Chiefs: Agents of ZANU-PF?

An agent represents someone at certain forums and negotiates on their behalf. The colonial government used the chiefs to get to the people. The conclusion of this article is that the incumbent government employs the same style on traditional chiefs, using them as their grassroots representatives. The state manipulates its powers over the chiefs to impose its ideologies and interests on the people. On 8 February 2011, Chief Doctor Ndondo alluded to the fact that chiefs can rightly be called puppets, as they do what the ZANU-PF government tells them to do. The government manipulates them through a facade of generosity, supplying farm machinery, vehicles, electricity for the chiefs’ rural homes, farms and generators to keep chiefs faithful – they have generally succeeded. With such sentiments as VaMugabe rambai muchitonga kusvikira madhongi ava menyanga (Mugabe will rule until donkeys grow horns) (Chief Serima of Gutu, quoted in the Financial Gazette, 3 July 2003), Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF have the strong support of their agents or puppets, the chiefs.

The Financial Gazette (ibid.) states that ‘ZANU PF’s manipulation of chiefs is a striking, yet sad, illustration of how sometimes history repeats itself’. This same strategy was used by the colonial regime to gain access to the people. Despite articulations of the law (which ZANU-PF made) that traditional leaders should not be partisan, the party has the chiefs to thank for its ‘success’ in elections. Sensing imminent defeat in the 2000 parliamentary elections, the party suddenly remembered the chiefs. It awarded them allowances, installed electricity in their homes and periodically increased their allowances without them having to lift a finger – history was repeating itself. Again, grateful for this generosity, the chiefs have since helped to make rural regions no-go areas for opposition parties (ibid.). The chiefs have, in effect, become the political agents of ZANU-PF. They
have seats in the senate and, prior to the inclusive government, had seats in parliament. *The Zimbabwean* (13 April 2010) notes: ‘Chiefs have used their legislative numbers to tilt voting power in favour of the ZANU (PF) regime.’ It is clear, then, that chiefs are agents who are furthering ZANU-PF ideologies and keeping the party in power. The article does not aim to discredit the government, but seeks to highlight anomalies in the traditional leadership institution. Ngugi (1993, 44) suggests that post-colonial regimes’ attitudes to culture is what is officially pervaded as ‘authentic African culture’, which is virtually a duplicate of colonial culture. Contemporary societies in Africa yearn for a return to their customs, not realising that the colonial master made sure that it destroyed most of that culture. ZANU-PF learnt the behaviour of the colonial regime and knows the chiefs offer a way to the people. Appreciating the generosity of the rulers, the chiefs were reluctant to question the status quo and became active participants in a plan to win the hearts and minds of the rural people. Whether the chiefs are being manipulated and abused by ZANU-PF as they were by the Rhodesian Front during the colonial era, and whether they are backing ZANU-PF willingly, the analysis has established that they are being manipulated. The chiefs work for the government, since they are on the government’s payroll.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

To understand traditional leadership in contemporary Zimbabwe, the pre-colonial Ndebele traditional leadership institution was explored in the first part of the article. The appointment and installation process, succession, social and economic status and the functions of chiefs were also discussed. In pre-colonial Ndebele society traditional leadership was very clear, with the king and his chiefs handling the executive, judiciary and legislative roles. Governance was participatory and people-oriented. Gender relations were essentially patriarchal.

The second part of the article explored the traditional leadership institution in contemporary Zimbabwe. From what was highlighted in the preceding section, clearly the traditional leadership institution has undergone many changes since King Mzilikazi established the Ndebele State. The violent take-over of Matabeleland from King Lobhengula in 1893 by the British Pioneer Column marked the beginning of the modification of the amaNdebele traditional leadership institution. Although the reign of King Lobhengula was different from that of his father, a nation builder, he did not deviate from his father’s leadership style. His disappearance during the Shangani River battle of 1893 marked the demise of the Ndebele State, hence the end of the original leadership style amongst amaNdebele.

Colonialism played a significant role in shaping the current state of the traditional leadership institution. The incumbent government, which inherited its governing skills from the colonial master, continues to manipulate traditional leaders. Mugabe’s segregation is different from Smith’s in that his is not open, yet it does exist – Smith’s was very clear. The *Gukurahundi* saga is a sign of Mugabe’s segregatory intentions. He unleashed violence on amaNdebele and destroyed their confidence as a people, reducing
them to mere trash with the use of the Korean-trained Fifth Brigade. The operation was a pretence to stamp out rebellion by some ex-ZIPRA combatants, yet it was aimed at wiping out amaNdebele and their culture. Sithole (1999, 37) suggests that these ethnic atrocities began with ‘the grand nationalist split of 1963 that saw the birth of ZANU as splinter party from ZAPU which initiated the mobilisation of ethnicity that characterised the whole liberation struggle and beyond’.

Gukurahundi impacted greatly on the Ndebele traditional leaders, as they felt they had let down their people. Now they do not want to cross swords with ZANU-PF, for fear of a second Gukurahundi. AmaNdebele need to get over this atrocity and start to rise and map out their destiny. Ndebele traditional leaders need to mobilise amaNdebele to stand up and be counted, rather than fearing the unknown. Gukurahundi is in the past, and it should strengthen not weaken unity in Ndebele society. Therefore, amaNdebele need not to hide behind the excuse of Gukurahundi but should participate in the development of their communities.

For the region of Matabeleland and Ndebele-speaking parts of Midlands to develop, chiefs need to put their people, culture and beliefs first. If they stand by their people and stop being manipulated by ZANU-PF they can acquire the respect and honour their pre-colonial counterparts enjoyed. The Zimbabwean (13 April 2010) notes:

As long as Chiefs continue to be legislators; they will surely have an obligation to play partisan politics at National level by voting for either party in the Senate. The logical and practical way to ensure that chiefs do not meddle in politics at National level is by removing them from their legislative role as Senators.

This is a true assessment of the situation in Zimbabwe, but removing the chiefs from the Senate will not distance them from partisan politics. It is up to the chiefs to remember who they are and what their culture demands of them. Culture changes, but ubuntu – i.e. Africanness – should not be absent from society. Dhlamini (2006, 4) suggests that an Afrocentric view entails the rehabilitation of African societies, and calls upon Africans to regain their essential space in order to transform their societies in ways that tally with their needs. Traditional leaders, whether in the senate, Chiefs’ Council or in ministerial positions, need to advocate for the needs of their people – that is what is significant. Chiefs during the pre-colonial era dealt with governance issues, which means they can deliver a political dispensation that is good for their people in contemporary Zimbabwe. Chiefs should participate in policy formulation but not partisan politics. They must carry the pleas and grievances of their people, not serve their own personal interest. They should represent their people despite differences in political affiliation.

What should not be forgotten is that traditional leaders live among their people, although it has been established that some currently live far away. They need to understand the grievances and pleas of their people better than politicians do. Zimbabwe, as a nation comprising different ethnic and racial groups, should decentralise its government, to help people establish their cultural identity and appreciate, even more, the cultural diversity of the country. Traditional leadership is different for each ethnic group because it is culture bound. If power is decentralised, amaNdebele will have their own governance
systems that uphold Ndebele culture yet reach out to other ethnic groups in the country. Each ethnic group should have its own Chiefs’ Council to counteract the cultural dominance that now occurs in the National Chiefs’ Council, where Fortune Charumbira has been the head for more than a decade. If amaNdebele have their own council, issues of neglect (in terms of cultural issues) and alienation from their people will be a thing of the past. The chiefs will be able to map out the destiny of their people based on a common culture. Biko (1976, 96) states that ‘[b]lack culture … implies freedom on our part without recourse to white values’. Therefore, Ndebele culture implies freedom on the part of amaNdebele, without recourse to the values of other ethnic groups. Ndebele traditional leaders should solely map a survival strategy for umthwakazi.

Ndebele chiefs should appoint regents to preside over installation ceremonies, following the death of an incumbent chief. This, to minimise political interference in the installation. The regent could ensure that Ndebele customs of succession and installation are followed properly, to strengthen unity among amaNdebele. Chiefs will regain the respect of their people, as they will be installed without political favour. The chiefs should be agents of their own people, and they can only do that if they exert their power on the demands of culture, rather than partisan politics. Culture is dynamic and it has seen the rise of women into leadership roles in business, religion and politics. Gender equality is a phenomenon that exists in contemporary Ndebele culture, acknowledging that women can perform as well as men in any role – including leadership. Traditional leadership is no exception, thus it is laudable that women now can become chiefs. Men need to shelve their sexism and insecurities, and allow capable and eligible people to foster a Ndebele identity. If modern culture deems women eligible for chieftainship, then gender should not be an issue. However, as outlined earlier, the issue of succession should be more clearly outlined to avoid skirmishes in future.

It is clear that cultural change has occurred, but the change of traditional leadership as part of Ndebele culture is due to the infiltration of other cultures (British – colonialism and Shona – Gukurahundi). A tradition is any ritual, belief, practice or object passed down within a society, yet still maintained in the present, but with its origins in the past. Since the chiefs are diverting so much from tradition, maybe they should no longer be referred to as ‘traditional leaders’. Only the Ndebele traditional leadership in contemporary Zimbabwe can redress such infiltrations and plot the course of their people’s lives going forward. When cultures come into contact they influence each other, exchanging ideas and systems. However, this should happen with mutual respect. All in all, there may also be a need to redefine what a chief is, based on the changing roles of the position. Many chiefs are now Christian, they are partisan, some are female chiefs, and some of their duties have been taken over by police, district administrators and provincial administrators. Others, such as the late Chief Khayisa Ndiweni, advocated for a federal system of governance which will put more power in the hands of local government than national government. This idea has continued to surface in numerous outreaches conducted countrywide by the Constitutional Select Committee. Most chiefs from Matabeleland continue to carry forward Chief Ndiweni’s vision for such a devolution of power.
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