



Traditional leadership Gone and forgotten?

The debate about the relevance of traditional leadership and governance has displayed the glaring absence of factual information so sorely needed to inform public policy with regard to the role of this institution. Fortunately, writes YAW AMOATENG, new evidence has emerged that could further inform discussions on this topic.

THIS INFORMATION is contained in the 2005 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Questions on this topic were included in a much broader South African Attitudes Survey, and although it does not provide all the answers, it certainly provides a basis for more such empirical studies on whether the institution of traditional leadership is still relevant in twenty-first century South Africa.

This is all the more important in view of the fact that interrogation of the data has served to debunk several of the myths that have led to the previously inescapable conclusion that traditional leadership has outlived its usefulness and as such must be consigned to the dustbin of history.

Specifically, the survey ascertains the public's opinions and attitudes towards several issues and institutions in the country, including the four levels of governance,

namely national, provincial and local government on one hand, and traditional authorities on the other.

This is pertinent to the debate on traditional leadership, which essentially revolves around the question as to whether traditional governance is compatible with the ethos of liberal democracy which underpins the country's Constitution. The detractors of traditional leadership have suggested that *participation* under traditional governance is

Figure 1: Level of trust in traditional authorities by gender and residence

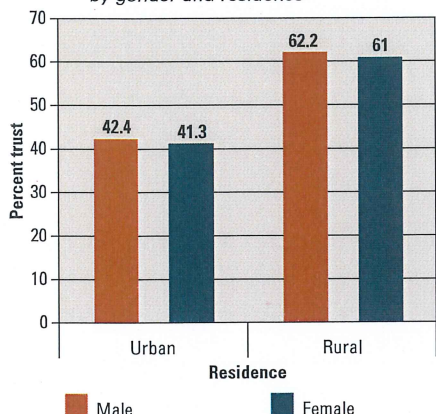


Figure 2: Trust in traditional authorities by age

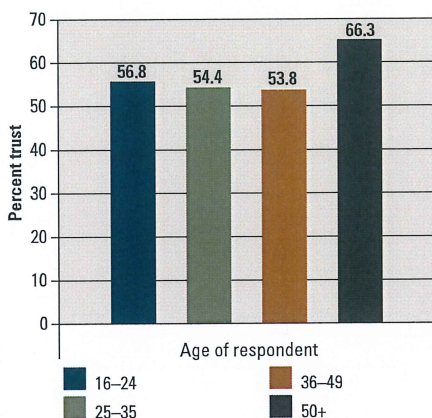
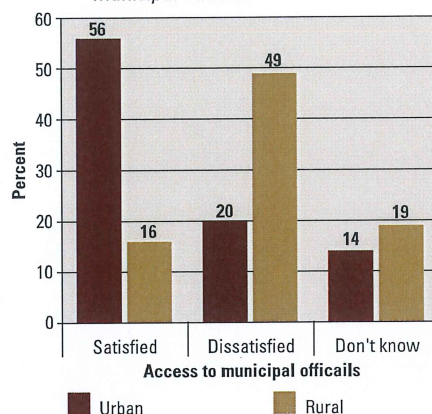


Figure 3: Satisfaction with access to municipal officials



limited to a few, especially older males, in the polity. In other words, in the distribution of societal resources under traditional governance, the youth and women are discriminated against.

According to this line of thinking the institution of traditional leadership is sustained by the idiocy of rural life which is essentially patriarchal. This survey shows that the resilience of traditional leadership may be due to the institution's flexibility with regard to change, and the increasing rate at which chiefs and their retainers are being educated.

Such changes may have largely contributed to the transforming attitudes towards the institution. For example, the study showed that in the minds of black Africans there is no distinction between traditional authorities and local government, while they perceive the provincial and national governments as representing one structure. With the exception of the Eastern and Northern Cape Provinces, the level of trust in traditional authorities was higher than that for local government, with the level of trust ranging from 52% in the Eastern Cape to 68% in Limpopo.

Even in the Western Cape and Gauteng, where there are no traditional authority structures, the level of trust in traditional authorities was 44% and 41% respectively; in fact, in the Western Cape the level of trust in traditional authorities was higher than that in both provincial and national governments, a situation which could be reflecting in-migration from traditional authority provinces into two of the country's economically dominant provinces.

In terms of rural/urban residence, while the level of trust in traditional authorities was expectedly higher among rural residents, slightly more than four out of every ten urban residents trusted traditional authorities.

Table 1: Relationship between province and trust in levels of governance in South Africa

Level of governance	Province (%)									
	WC	EC	NC	FS	KZN	NW	GT	MP	LP	Total
Traditional authority	44	52	25	63	64	59	41	63	68	57
Local government	24	80	42	54	53	52	39	59	48	53
Provincial government	36	86	50	73	74	64	50	71	71	67
National government	37	95	72	74	74	77	67	78	72	76

Source: 2005 South African Social Attitudes Survey

And most significantly, there were no gender differences with regard to the level of trust in traditional authorities among either urban or rural residents.

As far as age is concerned, even though persons aged 50 years and over were more likely to trust traditional authorities (65%), significantly, almost six out of ten (55%) young adults, aged between 16 and 24, said they trusted traditional authorities; interestingly, young adults' level of trust in traditional authorities exceeded those of the middle generations.

In short, what the survey shows is the resilience of the institution of traditional leadership and hence the reality of the dual nature of the institutional culture in the country. The fact that there was more trust in traditional authorities than local government is significant in the light of the historical claim by traditional leaders that 'they are the local government'.

In fact, in a related question about 'satisfaction with access to municipal officials', while almost six out of ten (56%) urban residents said they were satisfied with access to municipal officials, less than one out of five rural residents (16%) said they were satisfied.

...what the survey shows is the resilience of the institution of traditional leadership and hence the reality of the dual nature of the institutional culture in the country

This information is hardly surprising in view of all the service delivery protests we have witnessed in recent months.

It would be helpful if our intellectual energies were employed in generating the sort of factual knowledge to help identify a model that would accommodate traditional governance in both the design and implementation of policies and programmes that seek to address the needs of the ordinary citizenry. ●

Professor Yaw Amoateng is a research director in the HSRC's Child, Youth, Family and Social Development programme. He is currently leading a project on Dynastic Families in Africa and consulting for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa on a project to harness traditional governance for service delivery in southern Africa.

HSRC review

www.hsrc.ac.za **5** VOLUME No. | NOV
04 | 2007

TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP
Gone and forgotten?

