

Prologue

In August 2005, I participated at the Pan African Anthropological Association's 15th anniversary conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon. This conference was unique because it devoted a special session on the much-debated question of traditional leadership in Africa, and perhaps unprecedentedly, invited a select number of chiefs from different regions of the continent to share their experiences with scholars researching chieftaincy issues. Three chiefs from the National house of Traditional leaders in South Africa including its chairman flew in for the conference. Chiefs from Benin, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon also attended. The session was chaired by Fon Ganyonga III, the traditional leader of the Bali Nyonga chiefdom in the North West province of Cameroon. Fon Ganyonga III is one of the two chiefs examined in this monograph. This event provided an opportunity for traditional leaders to respond to criticisms by scholars dissatisfied with the ways in which some chiefs have positioned themselves in the multi-party era, sometimes at variance with the wishes or interests of their subjects.

Although the session lasted only two or so hours, it achieved in my opinion what its organisers had intended; it enabled the chiefs to engage with scholars and of course provided a continental platform upon which chiefs could interact with each other in addressing issues of common interests. Fon Ganyonga III took the opportunity to invite his South African counterparts to his palace in the chiefdom of Bali Nyonga. During the session, the chiefs re-echoed the claim that they were indeed the true "leaders" on the continent even if they had been pushed to the sidelines of national and continental politics. Whether their rule was legitimate or popular was not the subject of debate, they insisted. They argued instead for the respect of traditional institutions of government and called on national leaders to bring them on board. To this end, they prepared and delivered a motion calling for the establishment of a continental House of Chiefs to complement the existing African Parliament. The importance of a continental House of Chiefs, they argued could not be overemphasised because chiefs can play important roles in the design and implementation of policies that influence the lives of their subjects, particularly rural residents who feel the direct impact of their leadership. Some conference participants responded to this motion with scepticism, choosing instead to raise once again the central question of their legitimacy and relevance in a context of democratisation. The question many had on their mind and that begs to be answered was: what can traditional leaders offer that current democratic models have failed to provide? Put differently, given Africa's desperate attempts to lift its people out of poverty, oppression and corruption, what can chiefs do differently that would contribute to the attainment of people-centred democratic structures and the eradication of poverty? Many see chiefs as part of the problem rather than the solution. In many rural areas across the continent, stories abound of people's lives irreparably scarred by the high-handedness of chiefs determined to get their way at everyone's expense. Others argue that chiefs are worse than politicians because they are not voted into office and therefore cannot be held accountable or voted out,

especially in the present dispensation when customary means of curtailing chiefs' powers have waned or been abolished.

Despite these concerns, many chiefs and their supporters maintain that there should be space for them in postcolonial government structures on account of their first-hand knowledge and interaction with rural people. Others have also insinuated that existing plans to inspire an African Renaissance – (however vague the idea) without bringing on board traditional leaders is doomed to fail. What we have noted however, is that since the early 1990s many chiefs across the continent have positioned themselves in the multiparty democratic dispensation as alternative sites of “power” armed with the know-how and legitimacy to seek and defend their people's interests. The resurgence of chiefs – (when many thought their powers would diminish) has been described by some as evidence of “re-traditionalisation” – interpreted possibly as the claim that Africa seems to be under a perpetual spell of tradition and lacks the capacity to dispose of its past – a dark past often associated with monarchical rule that occasionally defies the sophistication and appeal of modernisation. Similarly, others have argued that current dictatorships in Africa and the prolonged stay in power of some leaders such as Omar Bongo, Paul Biya, Robert Mugabe etc - is partly inspired by the monarchical structures embedded in chieftainship. Hence, progress, according to this school of thought is doomed if the question of chieftaincy is not resolved for good – by which they mean its complete eradication. I argue in this volume that it is premature to declare the eradication of chieftaincy and naïve to treat all chieftaincies as embodiments of oppression. Case studies, particularly those that have a comparative framework have the merit of showing the internal logics of these socio-political structures and the ways in which they undermine or contribute to existing democratic structures.

This ethnography revisits the above theme by focusing on the stories of two highly-placed chiefs in two African countries – Cameroon and South Africa. It presents in detail the socio-economic and political contexts in which their leaderships have prevailed and precisely, the kinds of legitimacies they claim for themselves in a post-apartheid context for South Africa, and multi-party era in the case of Cameroon. Analysed as agents, the ethnography depicts the chiefs as social actors endowed with the ability to negotiate multiple kinds of competing relationships with their subjects, local and national governments as well as with other chiefs. Although their socio-economic and political contexts are clearly different, the experiences of both chiefs belie the “re-traditionalisation” thesis espoused by some scholars as a framework for understanding the re-emergence of chiefs in the era of multi-party democracy. Rather, this monograph argues that their actions are informed and mediated largely by existing socio-political realities characteristic of all cultural communities.

Preface

During the 1990s, most African countries experienced what has been termed their 'second independence' (Hyden and Bratton 1992), a period of political upheaval and socio-economic turmoil that led to the introduction of democratic structures across the continent. In many countries including South Africa and Cameroon, the process triggered fresh debates about the status and role of chiefs. The popular assumption in 'struggle circles' such as the African National Congress (ANC) was that chiefs would be relegated to the background in the democratic era, thus giving room to people's power and new forms of accountability. But the introduction of democracy created new conditions where many rural people felt excluded economically from the enchantment and boundless promises of the new dispensation. This dissatisfaction among rural people brought into question the legitimacy of new democratic structures such as the local government even though the ruling ANC continued to enjoy tremendous support among the masses. This in turn provided an enabling environment in which some, but not all chiefs could make new claims for legitimacy. This is because some chiefs remain discredited by their past association with apartheid authorities. Chief Tshivhase of the Tshivhase traditional area in Venda is one of the few chiefs who has successfully associated himself with the ANC both at the national and provincial levels. This has given him scope to act decisively in certain ways on behalf of the poor at the local level, thereby winning credibility among rural people. Thus, his credibility is two-fold – with the national politicians, because he is one of them, and with the rural residents of his chiefdom. Chief Tshivhase's ability to renegotiate his status and gain new legitimacy *as chief* is a particular example of how the emergent game of neo-liberal democracy is played out in post-apartheid South Africa.

In the chiefdom of Bali Nyonga in Cameroon, Chief Ganyonga's career looks rather similar to Tshivhase's insofar as he too has risen to national prominence in the ruling party in Cameroon, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) in the era of multiparty democracy. But Cameroon's democratic transition was contradictory in the sense that it introduced the form of democracy but not its substance, leaving the ruling party the capacity to manipulate and suppress the opposition and civil society. It was in this context that Ganyonga's prominence in the CPDM contributed to undermining his legitimacy in the eyes of his subjects because they believed that his prominence in the party left them without any shield from the predation and manipulation of the state. Ganyonga was seen to be in 'illicit cohabitation' with a self-serving ruling party, at a time when his subjects wanted to use their newfound rights as citizens to vote the opposition into office. However, Ganyonga's somewhat covert involvement in the politics of the 'Anglophone problem' helped to legitimise his participation in modern politics as a chief.

Against this background, this book examines why both chiefs used their positions as a springboard into national politics? It also establishes the kinds of legitimacy claimed by these chiefs and to what extent the masses are persuaded by such claims and how Tshivhase and Ganyonga's involvement in national politics has affected the relationship between them and their subjects.

This ethnography therefore makes a case for the importance of comparative research on chiefs in the era of democracy and the predicaments they face therein. I argue that contrary to exhortations about the incompatibility of chiefs and democracy, the reality is that political transition in both countries produced contradictions which created space for chiefs to fill but on condition that they were able to draw on different kinds of legitimacy and had not been discredited by their past or present involvement with the postcolonial state.

This study will contribute to existing debates on chieftaincy in Africa, particularly with respect to the sort of relationships they have with their subjects in contexts of socio-economic and political uncertainty. I argue that the institution of chiefship will continue to remain relevant for a range of reasons, not least because of the multiple uses to which it is put by chiefs themselves, the rural masses, local and national politicians and regional elites.