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The Role of Traditional Leaders in Fostering Democracy, Justice and Human Rights in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article examines the role of chiefs in fostering democracy, human rights and peace in Zimbabwe. It argues that in the pre-colonial era, chiefs had knowledge of grassroots democracy as they made consultations with their council machinery before taking any decision. It also argues that the pre-colonial chiefs were custodians of peace and human rights. Human life was viewed as sacred and annoyance of innocent people would evoke punishment from the ancestors. With the introduction of salaries and new administrative policies, the office of chieftaincy was compromised in both the colonial and post-colonial periods. Chiefs lost most of their powers and, therefore, lost control of their people. This article argues that chiefs can however use their position, influence and power to transform Zimbabwe into a democratic, lawful and peaceful nation. It invites the current chiefs to borrow a leaf from their counterparts in the pre-colonial era who were guided by democratic principles in their deliberations, who respected the laws of their chiefdoms and ensured that subjects under their jurisdiction were given fair treatment.

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Résumé

Cet article étudie le rôle des chefs dans la promotion de la démocratie, des droits de l'homme et de la paix au Zimbabwe. Il indique qu'à l'époque précoloniale, les chefs avaient connaissance de la démocratie populaire puisqu'ils consultaient leur conseil avant toute décision. Il estime également que les chefs précoloniaux étaient les gardiens de la paix et des droits de l'homme. La vie humaine était considérée comme sacrée et le mécontentement des personnes innocentes entraînait la punition des ancêtres. Avec l'avènement du système de salaires et des nouvelles politiques administratives, la fonction de chef a été compromise aussi bien dans la période coloniale que dans la période postcoloniale. Les chefs ont perdu la plupart de leurs pouvoirs et, par conséquent, le contrôle de leur peuple. Cet article, estime toutefois, que les chefs peuvent utiliser leur position, influence et pouvoir pour transformer le Zimbabwe en une nation démocratique, respectueuse du droit et pacifique. Il invite les chefs actuels à suivre l'exemple de leurs homologues de l'époque précoloniale qui étaient guidés par des principes démocratiques dans leurs délibérations, qui respectaient les lois de leurs chefferies et veillaient à ce que les sujets placés sous leur autorité soient soumis à un traitement équitable.

Introduction

This article examines the institution of chieftaincy in Zimbabwe and its role in fostering peace, democracy and human rights. It studies this institution from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial era in order to determine the extent to which traditional leaders have been instrumental to promoting these values in their areas of jurisdiction. It also examines how the colonial and post-colonial governments have used the institution to achieve their own administrative goals. The final part of the article explains how the chiefs can use their positions and influence to restore justice, democracy and peace in the country.

Chieftaincy in Pre-Colonial Zimbabwe

The institution of traditional chieftaincy represents the pre-colonial prevailing indigenous form of local governance throughout southern Africa. This institution originally provided societal, political, economic and religious functions for local communities (Dusing 2001). The term 'chief', *ishe* or *vashe* in Shona and *induna* in Ndebele, refers to an individual who, by virtue of ancestry, occupies a clearly defined leadership position in an area. Traditionally, chiefs were installed by the most senior headmen in the area in consultation with the spirit-mediums of the chiefdom. The medium acted as the voice of the ancestors in the whole process of the

installation. This procedure was meant to curb any possible dispute that might arise from the people. The involvement of the ancestors in the choice and appointment of the chief made him an important religious functionary. Traditional chiefs could stay in office until death as long as they obeyed the precepts of the ancestors. The Shona proverb, '*Hakuna zuva rinobuda rimwe risati radoka*' (There is no sun that rises before the other one has set), implies that the chief could not be deposed as long as he had the backing of the ancestors. However, chiefs who despised the ancestors and did not rule according to the democratic guidelines given by the ancestors through the spirit mediums risked losing their positions.

The chiefs were supposed to be the link between the ancestors and their subjects. As the link between the supernatural and the temporal existence of the present, they had extensive religious powers that generated fear, respect and obeisance from their subjects (Vaughan 2003). They were responsible for all religious ceremonies conducted in their areas. In times of drought, famine or any natural disaster, people looked up to their chief. In fact, natural disasters were sometimes blamed on the chief who might have disobeyed the ancestors (Bourdillon 1993; Dusing 2001). Traditional leaders were also responsible for protecting and distributing land among their subjects. Land in pre-colonial Shona was viewed as a sacred commodity, a burial ground and the abode of the living dead. Since they mainly depended on agriculture, the Shona also viewed land as a source of their livelihood. They believed that the land belonged to the ancestors and that the chiefs were its custodians (Gluckman 1977; Bourdillon 1998). Chiefs were also mandated to distribute the land among their people equitably. This implies that they were not supposed to hoard the land that belonged to the community for their personal gain.

Traditionally, chiefs were expected to administer justice and democracy in their areas of jurisdiction. They were not tyrannical leaders who wielded the power of life and death over their subjects nor did they use excessive force to maintain law and order. The ancestral spirits through their human agents, the spirit mediums and the subjects always removed tyrannical rulers from power with the assistance of the neighbouring chiefs. This is the situation in which Chirisamhuru of the Rozvi Empire found himself when he ignored the advice of the ancestral spirits during his rule. His army, with the help of a neighbouring female chief, Nyamazana, rebelled against him. Traditional chiefs would not deliberate alone on the issues affecting their people, particularly those with important political, economic, religious and social dimensions.

Instead, they consulted their administrative machinery which was comprised of councillors, spirit mediums and headmen. As Ayittey, cited by Dusing (2001:77) notes, 'Without the approval of the elder council, a traditional leader was powerless as he neither could pass any legislation nor make political decisions.' The most important injunction was that the chief should never act without the advice and full concurrence of his councillors, the representatives of the people. The advisors were supposed to, *inter alia*, submit important information about opinions and developments in their community; warn early about potential oppositional forces within the chieftdom and to keep a check on the leader's own behaviour, and when he did wrong to warn him and, if necessary, reprimand him. Ignoring the advice of his council was a legitimate cause of his deportation. Therefore, traditional leaders were bound by law to rule with the consent of their people. Many chiefs indeed complied with this requirement. With reference to the Ndebele chieftaincy, Ranger (2001:xiv) says, 'I am yet to meet a Matebele chief who says he makes a decision without consulting the people'. Furthermore, village headman Bhilisa Dude, cited in *Lighting Our Way*, a community publication by the African Community Publishing and Development Trust (2008), commended the late Chief Masuku from Matabeleland, saying:

The late chief Masuku used to effectively reprimand the wrongdoers. He surprised all by keeping aloof and yet he was close to the people he led. He had no friends but loved everybody. He always worked with respected kraal heads and headmen who formed his chieftaincy committee yet this was the very committee that always stood against his excesses and always ensured that he acted within the bounds of sanity.

The role of the chief in this process of community-based decision making was to 'reflect and discuss the opinions expressed in the village assembly and ultimately to suggest and publicly approve a decision of consensus, considering different opinions and interests of involved persons' (Dusing 2001:99). He was quite free to dismiss the council's ruling if it exhibited negative implications and could act as he thought best. However, this was only in theory, as acting against the advice given by the council could lead to his downfall. Therefore, it is plausible to argue that, in general, traditional chieftaincy represented a democratic society whose communal aspirations and values were collectively expressed. Chiefs had a sense of what can be termed as 'grassroots democracy'.

Traditional chiefs also performed religious functions on behalf of their people. The fertility of the land, people and even animals was attributed to the benevolence of the ancestors. As such, the Shona felt obliged to show their gratitude to them through offering and thanksgiving religious

ceremonies where beer was brewed and offered to the ancestors. The chief was responsible for such events. When the community was hit by drought or other natural disasters, the chief was expected to ask for clemency on behalf of the people. The chief would not carry out these duties alone. He would democratically consult with the community elders, his subordinates and spirit mediums. In addition to the religious functions, the chief also settled disputes among his people. He tried all kinds of crimes and disputes, including theft, murder and witchcraft which threatened the peace of his chiefdom (Vaughan 2003).

Chieftaincy in the Colonial Era

The democratic structure and function of the institution of the chieftaincy that existed in the pre-colonial period came to an end with the coming of colonial authorities in the country in 1890. The colonial masters introduced administrative structures and legislative laws that reduced the function of a chief to that of a government officer. The chief was no longer answerable to the ancestors in matters pertaining to the day-to-day happenings in his chiefdom but to colonial administrators. His judicial powers were clipped. He was only allowed to try petty cases like disputes among his subjects, while serious cases like murder, fights, thefts and witchcraft were all to be referred to the colonial authorities.

According to Palley (1966), the Rhodesian High Commissioner's proclamation in November 1898 introduced the Southern Rhodesia Native Regulations, which laid down the structures of a Native Department to administer Africans. The Secretary of the Native Affairs who was answerable to the Administrator (who later became the Governor) governed this Department. The country was then divided into Mashonaland and Matabeleland Provinces. Chiefs of the provinces were under a Chief Native Commissioner (CNC). Below him was a Native Commissioner (NC) stationed in each district. He was assisted in his administrative duties by African functionaries including chiefs, kraal heads and messengers. The Native Commissioner took upon himself all the administrative duties for the district, thereby robbing the traditional rulers of all the powers they wielded before the colonial era (Holleman 1969). As a result, the power of the chiefs to allocate land was usurped. In 1910, the Native Commissioner of Inyanga (Inyanga District Annual Report 1910) remarked that he did not advocate the placing of too many powers in the hands of the chiefs. For him, the power must be concentrated in the hands of the Native Commissioner who can be assisted by the chief. The Commissioner of Umtali, now Mutare (Umtali District Annual Report), also echoed the Commissioners' sentiments in

1949. He viewed the Commissioner as the mother and father of the native people in his district while the African policemen and messengers who assisted him were seen as the Commissioner's mouths and ears in the district. These functionaries reported directly to him. Notably, the policemen and the messengers were salaried, so they performed their duties with much zeal. They also disrespected the chiefs whom the colonial had disempowered.

The Native Commissioner also facilitated the installation of new chiefs. He screened the candidates for chieftainship and headmanship to ensure that the right candidates for the posts were appointed. Kruger (1992:64) correctly stated that 'from the time of European conquest, chieftainship and other positions depended not only on inheritance laws but also on the government approval'. It was therefore an offence for a chief or a headman to be installed without the approval of the Native Commissioner. In 1917, Chief Makoni of Rusape was reprimanded for appointing and installing a headman without the approval of the Commissioner (Superintendent of Commissioners 1917). Chief Chimuriwo also clashed with the Native Commissioner of Salisbury for appointing and installing Dzingirai as successor of headman Mandeya who had died.

The roles of the spirit mediums in electing and installing traditional leaders were also eroded. The NC introduced the ballot system in electing even new headmen or chiefs. Just after the death of Chief Chimuriwo of Mutasa, the NC for Umtali called for elections to replace him. Village heads had to line up behind their preferred candidates vetted by the NC. In this particular election, Mukukudzi polled thirty votes against Masawara's six, implying that the former became the successor. The same process was used after the death of Mukukudzi in 1958. Gomwe became the next chief after he garnered fifty votes against Masawara's six votes (Umtali to Manicaland, 1961). The colonial electoral process watered down the religious significance previously attached to the institution of chieftainship in pre-colonial Zimbabwe. The traditional leaders therefore became victims of the colonial injustice and dictatorial rule. They became powerless before their people.

Notably, female traditional authorities who used to have a lot of influence in the Shona Society began to sink into oblivion. The colonial authorities had no respect for female chiefs. Schmidt (1966:99) observes:

African women were 'invisible' to the colonial authorities. Having accepted the idea that women were perpetual minors in society and presumably played no part in public life, administration officials assumed that they had no political function.

As such, the colonial authorities saw no reason why a female traditional chief had to be replaced by another female candidate. In 1934, headwoman Mupotedzi of Honde Valley died and was not replaced by the administrators. The same happened after the deaths of headwomen Shezukuru and Kanganya of Manica Reserve. The democracy and the rights that the female functionaries enjoyed became a thing of the past. It should therefore be noted that while their male counterparts were losing most of their executive powers to the colonial administrators, women leaders were being phased out altogether (Duri 2002).

According to Bratton (1978), the Southern Rhodesia Order-in-Council of 1898 officially robbed the chiefs of their power to allocate land to their subjects as expected of them prior to the coming of the colonisers. This document together with the Land Apportionment Act of the 1930s approved the forceful removal of Africans from fertile arable lands, paving the way for the establishment of white farmlands. Chiefs Chirumanzu, Mutekedza, Zimuto and Chinhoyi all lost their land as a result. The loss of fertile land forced their subjects to flock into towns to look for employment.

Chiefs were also made to collect taxes for the government from the impoverished communities. In 1913, the government introduced the hut tax, poll tax and dog tax. All had to be levied by the chief on his people on behalf of the colonial government. To make them work hard, chiefs were salaried according to the amount of tax they would have collected from their people. Chiefs were also supposed to provide cheap labour from their communities for the construction of railway lines from Umtali to Salisbury and for road construction as well. Failure to comply with the government instruction implied prosecution (Inyanga District Report 1912).

The colonial government therefore disempowered the traditional chiefs and used them as agents to bolster their control of African territories. They ceased to be champions of democracy as they used to be in pre-colonial times. It is however wrong to blame the colonial administrators totally for the acts of injustice committed by the chiefs against their people. The settler government did not force anyone to become a chief. The people could still not participate in the chieftainship of that time 'if they so wished. Accepting the office of chieftainship also meant that Africans were willing to serve the new government. They became willing participants in the colonial exploitative schemes. It could therefore be argued that the introduction of incentives in the form of money attracted many Africans to the extent of wanting to work for the colonial government at all cost.

Chieftaincy in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe

The ZANU PF government that replaced the colonial regime in 1980 discredited the institution of chieftainship. It further clipped the powers of chiefs, which were already adversely reduced by the colonial government. At independence, the government adopted socialist policies that excluded the roles of the traditional leaders (Bhebe and Ranger 2001). The roles of the chiefs, including that of allocating land, were transferred to District Councils, Ward Committees (WADCOs) and Village Development Committees (VIDCOs). Gwatida¹ (2009) of Chief Charumbira's area said that his father confirmed that, as a chief in the 1980s, he had to consult a district councillor in connection with the distribution of a piece of land. The councillors, village district committees and the village development committees believed themselves to possess exclusive authority over communal land. The sidelining of the chiefs was willed and systematically done by the government. Lazarus Nzarayebani, then MP for Mutare South cited by Ranger (2001:47), said:

At Independence in 1980, we did revolutionarily so well. Ours was change; change in administration of our public affairs and public lives... Some institutions where necessary must simply be allowed to wither away. One of these institutions might be chieftainship.

The statement of the legislator clearly indicates how indifferent the government of Zimbabwe was toward the institution of chieftainship. It should, however, be noted that the freedom fighters enjoyed great support from this constituency during the liberation struggle. Many chiefs during the war got themselves into trouble for supporting them. In the 1970s, village head Amandios Njerema of Shezukuru Ward was imprisoned and tortured for providing food and shelter to the liberation fighters. Chief Makiwa Nyashanu was also deposed for refusing to have his subjects in restricted areas commonly known as 'keeps' that would make it virtually impossible for the guerrillas to access food from the people. However, not all chiefs supported the liberation struggle. Such leaders were abducted and even murdered by the liberation fighters. For example, headmen Kurewa of Mutasa and Chikomba of Chivhu were murdered on suspicion that they sympathised with the colonial government (Duri 2000). Therefore, it could be that the government of Zimbabwe ignored the chiefs because some of them collaborated with the colonial masters.

After eighteen years of independence, the ZANU PF government made a sudden shift regarding the way they related to the institution of chieftaincy. The then minister of Local Government, John Landa Nkomo, announced in 1999 plans to create new ward and village assemblies that

would be led by chiefs and headmen. Following this announcement, allowances for the chiefs were increased from Z\$2,083 to Z\$10,000 a month. The headmen allowances moved from Z\$680 to Z\$5,000 per month. These hefty increments were followed by President Mugabe's public apology for neglecting the chief since Independence (Ranger 2001). Thereafter, the powers of the chiefs were returned. Chiefs were to be given powers to spearhead development programmes in their areas, including distributing land to their subjects. They were also tasked with the role of promoting cultural values and norms in their communities. The question is: Why this sudden twist?

A top ZANU PF official reported that the promotion of chiefs at that time was necessitated by the birth of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and its impact on the people. Realising that MDC had its strong hold in urban areas, the ruling party decided to stop it from making inroads in the rural areas. For this purpose, they could not afford to ignore the influence of the traditional leaders. Having noted the influence that the chiefs had in mobilising support for the guerrillas during the war, the ZANU PF government decided to co-opt them in their struggle against the opposition. They declared all places in the countryside no-go areas for the opposition. In a bid to win the favours of the chiefs, the ZANU PF government raised their social status by giving them incentives that surpassed those of the most senior civil servants. The chiefs were given brand new trucks and free fuel for personal use. Those who could not drive were chauffeur-driven. The salaries of the traditional leaders were also reviewed from time to time. The chiefs benefited from the beautiful houses constructed for them by the government. The government saw to it that the homes of the chiefs had electricity and that water pipes were put in place. The chiefs were also given the mandate to distribute government food handouts in times of drought. In addition, they benefited from the Land Reform Programme and the Farm Mechanisation Programme. Some of them now own vast tracks of land which they cannot even use effectively. Through the latter programme, they received tractors, seeds, ploughs, carts and fertilizers.

In return for these benefits, the chiefs were supposed to be loyal to the government. Most chiefs rendered their support to the ruling party unconditionally for fear of losing their privileges. In an interview, Chief Gama² of Buhera remarked, "They [ZANU PF chiefs] are eating and we [chiefs] are eating. So let them rule forever". These sentiments were also echoed by chief Chitsa³ of Gutu who likened President Mugabe to God when he remarked, "*Uyu mwana waMwari chaiye*" (He is God Himself). All this is a

reflection of the mentality of most of the chiefs in Zimbabwe who owe their livelihood to ZANU PF. They remained mute when their subjects were suffering inhuman treatment by politicians loyal to the government during election times.

The ZANU PF government instructed them to expel from their chiefdoms members of the opposition party that were branded as 'British puppets'. Some chiefs in Buhera and Muzarabani, for fear of losing their benefits, actually complied with this instruction. In Muzarabani, a chief is reported to have barred the burial of an MDC activist in his area. He openly told the relatives of the deceased to go to Britain and bury their dead. The activist was finally buried in the same area after the relatives paid a bull and vowed that they would not have anything to do with the MDC again. Some chiefs also denied opposition members food handouts. To get the handouts, villagers were supposed to be holders of ZANU PF party cards. The ruling party ensured that no opposition member would benefit from the drought relief food. Some chiefs who, in most cases, supervised the distribution of this food announced that the drought relief was meant for those who support the government, and ZANU PF was the government. One of the researchers who hails from Muzerengwa village in Buhera, a stronghold for the MDC, witnessed the predicament that the villagers in this area went through. Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the MDC had to send truckloads of food to relieve his supporters. However, at times, this food would be confiscated by ZANU PF youth militia in the area. Some chiefs also campaigned for the ruling party in general elections. They allowed the operations of the armed youth militia and the establishment of military bases in their areas. They also sanctioned the beating up and even killing of opposition activists in their area. One MDC activist Itai Masarakuenda was hacked to death by ZANU PF supporters at the instruction of traditional leaders, Chorosi Bika and Chimbare of Buhera. Rabson Tichasima of Muzarabani was also murdered and chief Dambakurima did not take any action to stop his death (The Zimbabwean, 2008). The *Legal Monitor* of 29 June 2009 also reported that chiefs in Bikita and Nyanga Districts encouraged ZANU PF supporters to loot chickens, goats, beasts and other valuables belonging to MDC supporters during the run-up to the June 2008 elections. The animals were slaughtered at the military bases where opposition members were tortured, abused and forced to repent.

To ensure that the right candidates for chieftaincy posts were chosen, the government assumed the role of appointing and anointing chiefs. It tasked the Ministry of Local Government and Community Development

with this duty. To qualify for the post of a chief, one had to satisfy two requirements, namely, allegiance to the party and a clean criminal record. People opposed to the rural party did not qualify for the post. Nevertheless, the definition of crime for the ZANU PF government sometimes excluded crimes perpetrated in favour of the ruling party. Thus murder, torture and harassment committed for the good of the party were not considered criminal. At times, the government installed well-known criminals and murderers as long as they ardently supported ZANU PF. Notably, during the liberation struggle, ZANU PF opposed the appointment of chiefs by the colonial regime, citing the abuse associated with the practice. They argued that the involvement of the government in appointing chiefs was a way of silencing chiefs on the gross human rights violations perpetrated by the settler regime. Ironically, the ZANU PF government adopted the same way of silencing chiefs on issues of democracy and justice it uses. Chiefs are used to oppress their own people, and so, most of them are hated by their subjects.

Nonetheless, although many chiefs supported ZANU PF, a few stood their ground and refused to partake in the repression of the people. Some defended their subjects by simply ruling that they would not tolerate political violence in their chiefdoms. To restore justice and democracy in the country, others supported the struggle initiated by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). By so doing, they risked losing their status as chiefs and even their lives. Chief Makuvise of Buhera was stripped of his traditional regalia, humiliated before his subjects and murdered in broad daylight for supporting the MDC. One of his sons reported that the chieftaincy has since been given to a member of the next family who supported the ruling party. Chief Mutambara is another chief who opposed ZANU PF and supported the opposition party. Before the harmonised elections in March 2008, a man claiming to be an uncle and spokesperson of Chief Mutambara told the MDC supporters at a rally that the chief had disowned Auther Mutambara, the president of an MDC faction for supporting ZANU PF. The spokesperson of the chief presented a huge sheep to Morgan Tsvangirai as a gift from the chief. However, some chiefs did not come out in the open due to fear of victimisation. They remained silent and watched in grief as their subjects were hacked and abused for political reasons. There is no doubt that the chiefs in Matabeleland encouraged their people to support the opposition parties. The results of the elections since 2000 clearly indicate that most places in this area are no-go areas for the ruling party. Most of these chiefs witnessed the massacre of their subjects during the Gukurahundi

era of the early 1980s. According to CCJP and LRP, more than 20,000 people perished during this period. As a result, they never supported ZANU PF and its leadership.

The Power and Influence of the Chiefs in the Fight for Justice and Democracy in Zimbabwe

Traditional leaders still remain influential political actors in contemporary Zimbabwe, especially in rural local government, despite their manipulation by politicians during the colonial and the post-colonial periods. Although some chiefs have lost much of their legitimacy as they formed part of the colonial and post-colonial government machinery, others did maintain the traditional system of accountability and consultation in their areas of jurisdiction. They still command respect and dignity from their people. Most of these are elderly people who, by virtue of their social and moral standing, deserve reverence and obedience from the people. In rural areas where people are still influenced by African traditional religions, the chief is viewed as the link between the spiritual world and the people. The people look up to him in times of difficulty, including drought and other natural disasters, just as in the pre-colonial period. For these reasons, chiefs are very influential in their communities. The question is: If the chiefs are so influential, can they not participate in restoring justice, democracy and peace in the country? We have noted that some chiefs successfully mobilised their supporters to vote for the government of ZANU PF. Can these chiefs not use their influence and power to champion human rights? This article challenges the chiefs in Zimbabwe to borrow a leaf from their counterparts in the pre-colonial period. As we have noted before, traditional chiefs respected the laws of their communities and did not take decisions that affected their people all alone. They made necessary consultations. The chiefs could be the voice of their people and should defend them against any form of injustice from the government in power. They have the means and the much needed power to influence the democratisation process in Zimbabwe.

It is encouraging to note that some started the process of restoration and healing way following the violent elections of 2008 before the inauguration of the Government of National Unity. It is reported that Chiefs Chimombe and Chiwara, both from Gutu in Masvingo Province and Nyashanu of Buhera District in Manicaland, ordered their people to return the property that they looted during the run-up to the June elections of 2008, without instructions from the politicians. Thus, they have taken a lead in the process of national healing which the Unity Government is failing to accomplish despite the commitment they made

(Global Political Agreement 2008). Other chiefs could be encouraged to follow this good example. In spite of the benefits that they are receiving from the government, chiefs should be non-partisan and administer their duties impartially. They could also emulate some of their counterparts who observed the laws of their communities. Traditional leaders were not above the law. As Chirenje (1982:21) rightly points out, 'The law of the community was obeyed by the common village resident as well as by the chief himself...'

The chiefs could get some guidelines for democracy, justice and peace-building from the traditional wisdom, especially the Shona proverbs. The proverbs proffer discourses on leadership, sovereignty, freedom of expression and accountability, which all amount to good governance. This article draws examples from the Shona proverbs which could guide chiefs in the execution of their duties. The proverbs *ishe itsime* (a chief is like a well) and *ishe ihumbarota* (a chief is like a rubbish pit) point to the idea of justice which characterizes the institution of chieftainship. Traditionally, anyone was free to draw water from a well whenever he or she was thirsty. Also, one could freely throw waste in a rubbish pit even if that did not belong to him. So also, the chief was expected to attend to all cases brought before him fairly and without partiality. The need to be non-partisan is reinforced by Article xiv of the Global Political Agreement which both the ZANU PF and the MDC formations agreed to: (a) commit themselves to ensuring the political neutrality of traditional leaders and (b) call upon traditional leaders not to engage in partisan political activities at national level as well as in their communities (Global Political Agreement 2008:9). The proverb *mhosva haitongwi nepfumo* (A case is not settled by a spear) reminds the traditional leaders that they should not use violence in dealing with cases. Chiefs should inspire confidence in their subjects. This is only possible if the chiefs are just. There are proverbs that remind traditional leaders to respect the people under their jurisdiction, such as *ushe varanda* (chieftaincy depends on the subjects) and *ushe vanhu* (a king depends on the people). These wise sayings stress the view that chiefs owe their status to the will of the people. His mandate to rule rests in and is dependent on his subjects. The people therefore are the ultimate source of the king's authority. Ramose (1999:144) accurately notes that 'to be a king is to accede to that position because of the consent of the people and to remain so for as long as the people have not withdrawn their consent.' Lastly, traditional leaders can be exemplary to the politicians by accepting that they must step down when their term of office expires. The proverb *ushe madzoro hunoravamwa* (chieftainship

is like a cattle-herding roster, you take it in turns) helps them to distance themselves from the despotic political leaders who want to cling to power, regardless of the will of their people.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the roles of chiefs in the pre-colonial period, colonial period and post-colonial period. We have demonstrated how the colonial regime abused the office of chieftaincy to achieve its political goals. After independence, the ZANU PF government, instead of uplifting the social status of the chiefs, ignored them and introduced its socialist ideals that excluded the chiefs. It was only after the rise of the MDC party that the ruling party decided to co-opt the traditional leaders. Had it not been for the rise of the strong opposition party, the chiefs would have sunk into oblivion. The chiefs were instrumental in helping the ZANU PF party to remain in power. Nevertheless, some chiefs resisted being used by the party. It was argued that the chiefs as traditional leaders could take an active role in restoring democracy and justice in Zimbabwe. This is possible because of the power and influence they wield in their communities.

Notes

1. Interview with Gwatida Solomon, Bondolfi, 12 March 2009.
2. Interview with Chief J. Gama, Buhera, 25 August 2008.
3. Interview with Chief M. Chitsa, Gutu, 5 August 2008.

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