Institutions of the African Public Sphere: The case of Rural South Africa

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Introduction
Public drinking places such as taverns and beer halls, and shebeens as they are known in South Africa have been historically used as places where urban people come to relax, but at the same time share ideas on issues that affect their daily lives. But not much is known about how the people in the countryside interact with each other, that is the nature of the rural South African public sphere.

In places which are regarded as public spheres, people find themselves in a very democratic environment where they can express their ideas without censor and or fear. In such spaces, people experience the freedom and liberty to talk among themselves informally but constructively without having to account to the sphere of public authority. The issues talked about in such places have no boundaries. They range from social, economic, political and cultural to religious matters. The German Jürgen Habermas, in his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, explains that a public sphere is any place where people gather for one reason or another and mentions hair salons as one example. In a nut-shell, a public sphere represents a form of participation for many in issues that affect their daily lives. It represents places where people can enrich their experiences and understanding in ways most conducive to their ways of understanding issues. In these “forums”, discussions have neither the introduction nor the conclusion, but represent a continuum of life itself.

Drinking places have a history of producing even political movements as exemplified by Hitler’s movement in Germany in the 1930s. Hitler is known to have started the Munich political march organised from a beer hall in Munich. The movement grew to bring him to power. The people that gathered in that beer hall were or became frequent patrons of the place mainly to drink, but also to listen to the latest news about what was happening in their country and developed certain ways of understanding their environment. The demands, including those of land issues as expressed in the quest for *lebensraum* were critically debated. These were genuine issues which affected the German people but which they had no means to express as the sphere of public authority was too concerned about honouring the Treaty of Versailles.

The mass media also represent particular public spheres where people air their views. Ideas are exchanged through letters to the editor and conversations over the internet for example are very popular means through which the ordinary people channel their ideas in this age.
Public spheres are historically areas of interactions for the ordinary people to air their satisfactions, frustrations and hopes about their conditions including their futures. This paper will provide an analytical understanding of the institutions of the African public sphere as it is found in rural South Africa.

**Counterpublics**

The emergence of what has come to be regarded as counter publics, results from the fact that societies are divided along class, ethnic and gender lines among other things. The poor, women and the aged represent those sections of the society which are marginalised and therefore excluded from greater debates in their socio-economic settings. Equally, the rural and urban are divided by the issues that matter to each category. Whereas the people in rural areas would be more interested in issues that help diversify economic risks in order to safeguard their livelihoods, the urban would be more interested in issues that will ensure better wages and secured employment for example. Consequently, the rural people have their own settings where they address issues that matter to them and where all those that identify with them can take part on equal basis. Nancy Fraser (1992) then calls this a counterpublic, and Habermas himself came to describe this as oppositional public sphere. In our view, public spheres as they are obtained in rural settings represent the interests of the participants as much as the bourgeois public sphere represents the interests of its own class. In fact, however we choose to view the debate around the public sphere; it will always come to one thing: interests. People take sides on issues because they have specific interests. It may serve little or no purpose for a poor peasant to want to be part of the class of landlords who debate how best to exploit the poor. But it would serve the poor peasant better to associate with those of the same class in order to discuss and find solutions to their exploitation. In that situation, the poor peasant becomes a “reasoning rather than a consuming” being as Habermas would put it. Fraser’s concept of a counterpublic, just like Habermas’ initial thinking, assumes that there is only one ‘genuine’ public sphere, the urban male bourgeois one. It would be better maybe to speak of interests groups that represent other excluded people. An interest group may not necessarily oppose the mainstream group but may only be demanding recognition and or inclusion in the main politics. Colhoun (2005) has this to say in this regard:

*In any society—and certainly globally—there are always multiple publics, many associated with particular groups or interests, and some*
in opposition to others. Some analysts speak of multiple public spheres, but I find it better to think of multiple publics, using public sphere in the singular as we use civil society in the singular, even though there are many different groups, arenas of activism, and social networks in civil society.

To this end, we can only refer to these as other publics rather than counter or oppositional publics, that is, besides the urban bourgeois public sphere.

**The other public sphere**

The otherness of the rural public sphere merely acknowledges the fact that there are different publics shaped along interests. It is not meant to denigrate the rural inhabitants, instead it simply demands that the rural people have a right to be heard. Benhabib (1992) states that

*The public sphere comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and cultural norms of action engage in a practical discourse – there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates.*

Otherness therefore would mean that the urban bourgeois public sphere is not the only public sphere because the national issues that get into general public domain cannot be restricted to urban areas and the bourgeois only. As much as there are numerous debates, so with spaces where the affected are found. In short, one need not be in an urban area to be able to take part in national debates. Were it so, democracy would be severely challenged.

The rural African public sphere is generally inclusive. People respect only their place in terms of peer groupings. The youth and the adults usually do not mix while at the same time gender divisions are very noticeable. But again, these divisions should not be interpreted to mean that these groups are antagonistic towards each other. It is mainly that people have different roles in society. Because the public sphere as discussed here is shaped more by such roles, discussions take place as people work. However, where the work is done collectively regardless of gender, discussions will still continue though in a gender sensitive manner. Here then we find the difference between the rural South African public sphere and the public sphere as it is understood in the (urban) West. In this regard, Guidry and Mark (2003) point out that the public sphere (as understood in the West) evolved to the exclusion of women,
non-whites, youth etc. The public sphere was a preserve of the white middle-class males. This is what led Habermas to label this public sphere a bourgeois one.

In a democracy, a public sphere as we understand it should be inclusive, and participants should have the freedom to say that which they value in every subject that is of public concern. In this regard, physical space becomes of little consequence. What is paramount is that people are able to debate public issues wherever they are. These may be at leisure or at workplace as shown by Sivaramakrishnan (2003) in a study that involved forest workers in West Bengal, or Breckenridge (1998) with regards to mineworkers in South Africa.

**The South African rural public sphere**

The South African rural public sphere represents what Benhabib (1992) and Fraser (1992) refer to as not only political but essentially social and cultural participation of citizens in the common affairs of their country and hence an institutionalised arena of discursive interactions. This must be so because the actions of the State do not only affect the people of middle-class in urban areas but they also affect those of other classes including those who live in rural areas. In this case, Crossley and Roberts (2004) say that *politicalisation of everyday life begins with the State colonising everyday life* ... Therefore; the rural areas cannot be left untouched by national issues. Rural areas also constitute the ‘colonised’ territory as part of the same state.

Although there may be no solutions, issues are discussed without introduction or conclusions, as they work people talk and as they talk they work. By the end of the day, the news has spread throughout the villages. Everyone knows what has happened and have an idea of what needs to be done. Each day people wake up to a ‘new life’. Given the limited access to newspapers and telephones, the rural people in South Africa find themselves greatly disadvantaged when it comes to responding to issues of interest. Their views are hardly heard in the corridors of power save the fact that today we have democratically elected councillors functioning side-by-side with the traditional authorities. In the democratic South Africa, this is how their views get taken up by the State as contribution to national development. Having said that, we are to be cautious in taking for granted that the issues people debate on get heard by councillors who in most instances come to the people when they have their own agendas.
Risse (2003) states that “communicating about the same issues at the same time is a definitional requirement for a public sphere”. Risse further argues that a public sphere exists if people talk about the same issues at the same time and are aware of each other’s viewpoints. And because the settings are democratic, participants see each other as equals rather than thinking that someone else’s view are superior to those of others.

The rural people of South Africa, in their social gatherings as discussed in this paper; engage in national discussions relating to for example the slow pace of land reform, the alleged Zuma scandal of rape and criminal charges against him relating to the arms deal as well as lack of progress in the finding of a viable cure to the problem of HIV/AIDS. In this sense, there can be no argument against the existence of public sphere in rural South Africa. As Risse suggests, the Zuma issues for example again have both the ingredients of contestation and controversy. A public sphere therefore exists when issues discussed are of concern to a large section of the population, the village population included.

In a way, the African public sphere in rural South Africa is like information session. To miss a particular gathering is akin to missing an important meeting because then people loose out on the latest news and events that they would otherwise wish to get clarity on. This becomes evident as they would ensure that at least they find someone who had been there to hear what is new. The question that arises is: do these discussions have any political effect nationally? If the discussions are prompted by what transpired at the local chief’s place, people get an opportunity to test their views before presenting them to a public sphere of authority. But if these are what they get from the radio, they are unlikely to ever make an impact because no one would ever come to solicit their views, but nonetheless, they would know what is worth knowing about the issues. That the rural people do not get to effectively influence the polity of the country could in some sense be alluded to what Ferguson (1994) calls the anti-politics machinery. Rural South Africa is highly depoliticised by the presence of chiefs (lately referred to as traditional leaders). Nothing leaves rural South Africa without first going through these traditional institutions of governance. In that sense, rural South Africa is unable to participate in national matters that shape their lives as urban people would do through newspapers and internet.

Although gender is a defining issue, there exist areas where both sexes meet without regard to gender. Such are occasions as when people come together to assist each other do the work
faster without expecting monetary payment (*ilima/ letsema*). Almost every task can be completed using this form of labour assistance. Whether it is building a house, or working in the fields for example. During these occasions, people talk about a variety of issues that affect their lives. They do not have to sit down in order to talk. They talk as they work and work as they talk. In many instances work is accompanied by songs. Individuals join in as they arrive and are briefed by those they happen to sit or stand next to them. When time arrives to leave, they excuse themselves without asking for finalisation of the issues under discussion. They do not necessarily have to make resolutions, but they become better informed and can make informed decisions if they are called upon to do so.

Therefore, places where the rural South Africans meet represent social settings where meanings are negotiated, and as Habermas would prefer, these settings are characterised by not considering a person’s status, issues that are discussed are rationally decided and those that were hitherto unquestioned are also problematised. In this way, rural people get to participate in discussions that they would otherwise be unable to air their views on. These social gatherings are in essence a representation of democratic interactions for those that are removed from the platform of political engagements though they are not able to shape national public opinion or give direct expression of their needs and interests, a point Kellner(1986) raises.

Gender issues are handled in particular ways as women are very conscious of their vulnerability. Young maidens, as they go about their tasks of collecting firewood and water, talk about issues that matter to them as specific part of society with specific interests. Rural women and girls talk about issues that affect their work which mainly consists in fetching water, collecting fire wood and working in the fields. Places where they fetch water or collect fire wood serve as meeting spots. They ‘invite’ each other and their trips become a norm. Rather than being a counter public sphere, they merely represent a particular public sphere.

Similarly, young men also gather in the rivers to wash. They talk about issues that matter to them. National issues such as exploitative employment in rural towns and lack of sustainable livelihoods are discussed as imposing in their wishes to lead better lives. In these settings, they discuss contacts that might be useful in helping them migrate to the cities due to lack of meaningful employment opportunities nearby.
Both groups are therefore engaged in public debates that relate to high levels of unemployment and poverty, but they do so in their own ways. Their understanding of issues is shaped by their social environment and the means by which they become exposed to greater national issues.

When men sit in the kraals eating and drinking where someone has slaughtered an ox for example, they raise issues of importance that have impact on their own lives and livelihoods. They speak democratically about how government policy on livestock for example affects their livelihoods. During these discussions, as much views as possible are expressed and ‘evaluated’ in very transparent and democratic manner. They would point out for example that farm evictions have meant an increase of the population in their lands so that space reserved for growing crops is fast disappearing as the new ‘migrants’ occupy farm land through the chiefs. They would complain that the chiefs are only interested in lining their own pockets instead of looking after the welfare of their subjects. They would point out at the effects of drought and how unhelpful the government has been in assisting them while it ‘pumps’ a lot of money to the similarly affected commercial farmers who in many instances happen to be white in South Africa. And they would therefore debate whether they are not catered for because they are not white or simply that the government cares less about them.

In our view, these are issues of national transformation in South Africa. When rural people speak about shortages of land, farm evictions, and their inability to farm and feed their families and ‘sectarian’ assistance to the farming communities, they speak directly to one fundamental land issue. The bourgeois public sphere raises similar issues but being class specific. Quoting the ANC’s Freedom Charter, Guidry and Mark (2003) observe that the clause “South Africa belongs to all who live in it” in the Charter represents false liberal alternatives to a situation where people have been dispossessed of their lands. The rural people debate such issues, and they will often point out even in their songs that the land is in fact theirs. Through songs, they will raise all sorts of issues including injustice.

With very limited access to the digital forms of democratic participation and widespread levels of illiteracy, rural South Africa depends much on State media, chiefly the radio, to connect with the world. In this regard, the radio acts as the key force in shaping the role of the public sphere in contemporary politics. And because the radio is largely State-owned, it goes without saying that the rural people are mainly exposed to the ideas of the ruling party
which dominates current affairs radio programmes. We should also hasten to add that in the modern era, no one individual or group can claim immunity from the influence of the media corporations (Kellner 1989).

Music also represents a kind of public sphere where the rural South African people express themselves freely. Music cassettes are listened to and used to raising debates because songs, as form of orality, are still a form of expression (Lwanda 2003). One of the popular songs, *Imbizo* (meeting) (Phuz’ ekhemisi and Khethani 2004)\(^1\) expresses this form of participation (and protestation) in national issues. The song briefly goes like this:

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\begin{align*}
&Si\text{yabizwa emakhosini} \text{ (We are called at the chief’s place)} \\
&Njalo-\text{nje kukhon’ imbizo} \text{ (There’s always a meeting)} \\
&Nithi siyi\text{ythathaph’ imali} \text{ (Where do you think we get money?)} \\
&Ningasiboni siphila kulomhlaba \text{ (Don’t see us living in this land)} \\
&Siyawukhokhela \text{ (We pay for it)} \\
&Bathi ngikhokhel’ inja yami \text{ (You ask me to pay tax for my dog)} \\
&Inja yam’ ise\text{benzaphi?} \text{ (Where is my dog employed?)} \\
&Iyithathaph’ imali? \text{ (Where does it get money?)}
\end{align*}
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This is in contrast to people in urban areas who are exposed to a variety of media and therefore can choose and compare how issues are presented to them, making it easy for them to take informed positions and or decisions. In rural areas, the public sphere is characterised by discussions that are informed by government position. At the same time, their participation in the discussions is severely limited because the overwhelming majority have no access to a telephone in their homes. Lack of access to democratic forms of modern communication makes rural South Africa vulnerable to a one-sided view of events. It is therefore not surprising that these areas, amid unemployment and poverty, are politically marginalised and ‘peaceful’. But through the public sphere available to them, they do manage to make sense of situations that affect them.

\(^1\) These artists play a kind of music called Maskandi which is largely regarded as rural music in South Africa.
Conclusion
In a rural setting such as South Africa’s, we would like to see the otherness of the public sphere as a form of social capital, a wide network through which individuals make contact with others. In this instance, the rural public sphere acts against isolation and vulnerability which are characteristic of our rural areas. The South African rural public sphere, as interpreted here, offers the only major ‘space’ where the rural people can democratically share information, be exposed, and get to interpret the ‘outside world’.

References