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Traditional Leadership, Local Government, and Rural Governance: The Politics of Authority in Motantanyane Village, South Africa

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Abstract

Post-apartheid governance reforms have sought to democratise rural governance through Section 151 subsection 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996), stating that all areas in the country must be governed by municipalities, including those under traditional leadership. Yet, traditional leadership continues to wield significant influence rooted in customary practices, kinship networks, land administration, and community legitimacy. The coexistence of traditional leadership and local government in rural areas has created overlapping mandates, blurred responsibilities, and power struggles over legitimacy. Post-apartheid reforms intensified tensions, particularly in land administration, as traditional leaders resist collaboration for fear of losing authority. This has led to fragmented governance, affecting service delivery, sustainable land allocation, and rural development. Collaborative Learning Theory was used to provide a theoretical guiding lens to the study. This paper aims to examine the dynamics between traditional leadership and local government in shaping rural governance, focusing on the contested politics of authority in South Africa, using a case of Motantanyane Village. Methodologically, the paper adopted a qualitative research approach, drawing on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary qualitative data was collected through in-person interviews with six purposively sampled participants from Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality. Secondary qualitative data was obtained from existing sources, including academic journal articles, books, government documents, and reports. Thematic analysis methodology was used to analyse qualitative data. The findings indicate that rural governance is shaped not only by legal frameworks but also by history, identity, and competing sources of legitimacy. These dynamics often emerge in disputes over land, resources, and state services, affecting local power relations and community cohesion. Tensions between traditional leadership and local government stem from unclear roles, overlapping responsibilities, and contestation over land administration. Therefore, understanding rural governance requires moving beyond simplistic tradition versus modernity to recognise its contested nature. Strong collaborative relationships are essential for sustainable rural development.

Keywords: *Collaborative Learning Theory, Local government, Motantanyane Village, Power contestation, Rural governance, Traditional leadership*

Introduction and Background

Historically, the advent of colonialism and later apartheid in South Africa significantly reshaped the role of traditional leadership. The British colonial administration, followed by the apartheid government recognised and co-opted traditional leaders as intermediaries to control rural populations, thereby consolidating political power while marginalising broader community participation in governance (Parcells, 2022). This historical arrangement entrenched a system in which traditional leadership wielded authority over land allocation, dispute resolution, and community regulation, yet operated under the overarching control of the state (Monama, 2023; Monama & Mokoelé, 2023; Monama & Mokoelé, 2024). During post-apartheid era, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) through Section 151 subsection 1, “the local sphere of government consists of municipalities, which must be established for the whole of the territory of the Republic” (Republic of South Africa, 1996:51), has established a duality in rural governance, which created tensions between traditional leadership and local government (Makhoba, 2020; Marrengane, Sawyer & Tevera, 2021). Makhoba (2020) adds the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) recognises both democratic local government and traditional leadership, reflecting an attempt to harmonise these parallel systems of authority. However, it provides limited guidance on the precise delineation of powers and responsibilities, resulting in ambiguity, overlapping jurisdictions, and frequent disputes over decision-making authority (Mudimeli, 2019; Makhoba, 2020).

Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act (Act 41 of 2003) was enacted to provide a legislative framework for cooperation and coordination between traditional leadership and local government (Republic of South Africa, 2003). This Act outlines mechanisms such as the establishment of Traditional Councils, municipal liaison structures, and the involvement of Municipal Demarcation Boards to facilitate collaboration and conflict resolution (Makhoba 2020; Drummond & Nel, 2021). Whilst the legislation reflects a commitment to integrating traditional governance into South Africa’s broader democratic framework, implementation remains inconsistent, and disputes over authority and jurisdiction continue to challenge effective governance, particularly in rural areas (Mudimeli, 2019; Monama, 2023). South Africa’s experience demonstrates a long-standing and complex discord

between traditional leadership and local governments. This tension is rooted in historical, cultural, and political factors that shape both the authority of traditional leaders and the functions of democratic local governance (Mudimeli, 2019; Makhoba, 2020). Arguably, traditional leadership operates within a system of governance grounded in customary laws, cultural practices, and hereditary authority, with chiefs and kings often serving as the custodians of social order, conflict resolution, and cultural heritage within their communities (Eberbach, Kubera, Okoth & Watanabe, 2017). Conversely, local governments were established to ensure service delivery, infrastructure development, and the implementation of policies aligned with national constitutional mandates (Thapa, 2020). In practice, these dual governance structures coexist but frequently clash, creating confusion over authority and undermining administrative effectiveness (Makhoba, 2020).

The consequences of these conflicts extend beyond institutional friction and significantly affect rural communities. Activist Wangari Maathai's observation that "when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers" (Raymond, 2012:409) aptly captures the impact of governance disputes on rural households. Conflicts between traditional leaders and local governments often result in passive development, delayed service delivery, and reduced public trust in both systems (Makhoba, 2020; Thapa, 2020). Democratic reforms initiated since 1994, which aimed to decentralise governance and empower local governments, inadvertently intensified tensions by formalising a dual system of authority over rural administration, land management, and resource allocation (Mudimeli, 2019). According to Nkosi (2016), the lack of effective collaboration between these governance structures undermines public confidence and hampers the equitable distribution of resources and services. The ambiguity in roles often leads traditional leaders to assert control over areas legally reserved for municipal oversight, further exacerbating conflicts and misunderstandings (Mathonsi & Sithole, 2017). In the realm of policy development and rural governance, the dual governance system continues to pose significant challenges. Makhoba (2020) posits that effective coordination and clearly defined roles are essential for sustainable development, yet the overlapping responsibilities between traditional leadership and local government often hinder the

implementation of coherent strategies for rural communities. Thus, understanding the historical, legal, and cultural dynamics that underlie these conflicts is therefore crucial for improving rural governance. This paper aims to examine the dynamics between traditional leadership and local governments in shaping rural governance, focusing on the contested politics of authority in South Africa, using a case of Motantanyane Village.

Literature Review

Collaborative Learning Theory

The Collaborative Learning Theory provides a guiding lens for examining the dynamics between traditional leadership and local governments in shaping rural governance, in the context of contested politics of authority in South Africa, using the case of Motantanyane Village. According to Huang and Ning (2021), Collaborative Learning Theory is a paradigm from education and psychology that can be applied in multifaceted contexts, including the disharmony between traditional leadership and local governments. This theory emphasises the importance of cooperation, shared knowledge, and joint problem-solving among different parties to address complex challenges and bridge institutional gaps (Michaelsen, Davidson & Major, 2014). According to Dubazane and Nel (2016), traditional leadership often possess unique expertise and governance practices, while local governments operate with their own procedural knowledge and administrative experiences. Such interaction enables local governments to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural, historical, and social contexts of rural communities, while traditional leaders can enhance their familiarity with modern governance structures and policy-making processes. The disharmony often emerges from unresolved issues or competing priorities that affect both traditional leadership and local governments. Through dialogue and joint problem-solving, Collaborative Learning Theory provides a pathway for these groups to identify shared challenges and develop collective solutions (Michaelsen *et al.*, 2014; Schnaubert & Bodemer, 2022), ultimately leading to policies and programs that better serve communities.

Leon-Moreta and Totaro (2022) observe that a collaborative climate between municipalities and traditional leaders strengthens when government practitioners frequently interact through traditional councils

or associations. In rural South Africa, traditional leaders hold substantial control over land allocation and administration, which has historically contributed to issues such as improper spatial planning, land disputes, and inadequate service delivery (Mudimeli, 2019; Makhoba, 2020; Dektar, McConnell & Kasekende, 2021). Consistent with the principles of Collaborative Learning Theory, local government can support traditional leadership by providing resources, guidance, and frameworks to improve sustainable spatial distribution and development. Through collaboration, these entities can co-develop solutions for land and spatial challenges, share expertise, and jointly craft policy frameworks that reflect both traditional and modern governance priorities. The Municipal Structures Act (Act 117 of 1998) formalised the roles of traditional leaders within South Africa's democratic framework, mandating their participation in service delivery (Mathonsi & Sithole, 2017). However, overlapping responsibilities with municipalities have created tensions that may hinder social and economic development (Mathonsi & Sithole, 2017; Makhoba, 2020). Collaborative Learning Theory offers a conceptual framework to bridge this divide by fostering cooperation, mutual respect, shared knowledge, and collective problem-solving. Therefore, through the application of the principles within Collaborative Learning Theory, traditional and local government may harmonise their relationship in rural governance by working together more effectively to address the needs and concerns of the communities they serve.

Local government and traditional leadership in land-use administration

The conflict between local governments and traditional leadership remains one of the most enduring and contentious debates surrounding land-use planning and allocation in rural communities. This tension stems from overlapping mandates, competing authorities, and the historical and cultural weight attached to land, which makes it a highly political and symbolic resource (Monama, 2023; Monama & Mokoale, 2024). Many African countries, including South Africa, operate under a dual governance framework in which both local government and traditional institutions exercise authority over land-use planning

administration (Mudimeli, 2019; Bakamana, 2021). According to Bakamana (2021), countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Malawi exemplify this dualistic system of governance, where local governments are modern administrative structures rooted in constitutional and democratic reforms, while traditional leadership embodies indigenous systems of governance that are deeply entrenched in community identity and customary practices. However, the coexistence of these parallel systems often leads to tensions, as they operate within competing logics of power, legitimacy, and accountability (Makhoba, 2020; Thapa, 2020). In South Africa, this tension is particularly pronounced. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) recognises traditional leadership and grants them autonomy, yet modern municipal structures frequently undermine this authority (Chigwata, 2016; Bakamana, 2021).

The post-apartheid government's efforts to democratise governance through municipal reforms have inadvertently marginalised traditional leadership, resulting in contestations over land rights, jurisdiction, and community representation (Makhoba, 2020; Marrengane, Sawyer & Tevera, 2021). The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) also struggles with similar conflicts, as traditional leaders remain influential at the local level, with many citizens preferring customary governance over formal democratic structures (Bakamana, 2021). Bakamana (2021) highlights how some perspectives even reject democracy as a superior model of governance, instead valuing traditional leadership as more authentic and community-driven. The struggle for recognition and dominance between these governance systems produces constant conflict, undermining cooperation and creating uncertainty about the long-term role of traditional authority (Drummond & Nel, 2021). In the South African context, Maleka and Rapatsa (2021) argue that the establishment of the local government system under new democratic legislation further exacerbated tensions. Local governments were granted extensive powers over land-use planning and development, authority that had traditionally resided with traditional leaders (Mathonsi & Sithole, 2017). This transfer of power not only curtailed the role of traditional leadership but also altered the way communities related to governance structures. The Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, for example, significantly enhanced the powers of municipalities while failing to clearly define the responsibilities of traditional leaders, effectively sidelining them in spatial planning and land management processes. Nemukula (2019) identifies land ownership, control, and the contradictory mandates

contained in legal frameworks as the central causes of these tensions. These overlaps create a regulatory environment in which both traditional leaders and municipalities claim authority, resulting in protracted disputes over jurisdiction.

Traditional leaders often contend that they should remain the primary custodians of land and community affairs, as their authority is rooted in cultural legitimacy and historical continuity (Nemukula, 2019). This clash of authority has made it increasingly difficult for local government, particularly those operating in areas governed by traditional chiefs, to address pressing social and developmental challenges effectively. The absence of clarity in legislative instruments such as the Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000) and the Municipal Structures Act (Act 117 of 1998) has deepened the conflict. Nemukula (2019), Mathonsi and Sithole (2017) emphasise that these laws fail to adequately recognise the role of traditional leadership in land-use planning and management. Instead of fostering collaboration, they reinforce division by prioritising municipal authority. This legal ambiguity creates fertile ground for disputes, with both institutions claiming overlapping powers. Consequently, land allocation, zoning, and spatial planning become contested arenas rather than coordinated processes designed to serve community interests. Drummond and Nel (2021) observe that in practice, some traditional leaders continue to use land-distribution methods that directly conflict with municipal planning strategies. For example, traditional authorities may allocate residential or agricultural plots without aligning with local government spatial development plans, undermining efforts to achieve sustainable development and efficient service delivery. This disconnect leads to fragmented settlement patterns, poor infrastructure provision, and uncoordinated land use. Accordingly, Makhoba (2020) also notes that such practices contribute to an inadequate spatial distribution system, further complicated by the lack of institutionalised collaboration between municipalities and traditional leaders.

Mudimeli (2019) concurs, arguing that the land-use and allocation in rural communities remains inadequately organised and underdeveloped precisely because mechanisms of cooperation are either absent or ineffective. The result is a persistent cycle of conflict, inefficiency, and

uneven development. Whilst the competition between traditional leadership and local government may be inevitable given their dual existence, the inability to establish strong cooperative frameworks perpetuates mistrust and weakens governance in rural areas (Bakamana, 2021). This rivalry not only hinders sustainable land management but also undermines community development, as both systems prioritise institutional dominance over collective well-being. Without clear legislation, mutual recognition of roles, and collaborative mechanisms, the relationship between traditional leadership and local government will remain adversarial. This ongoing conflict has significant implications for rural development, democratic consolidation, and the protection of cultural identity, making it one of the most critical governance challenges facing African states today.

The dilemma in land administration and ownership

Land has become crucial, not only in South Africa but throughout the world, as it provides diverse livelihood alternatives and a sense of security for vulnerable households, particularly in rural areas. Land resources continue to be socially and economically vital; as a result, land has been a root of conflict and contestation in African traditional communities (Kalabamu, 2019; Bergius, Benjaminsen, Maganga & Buhaug, 2020). Kalabamu (2019) asserts that disputes over land in Sub-Saharan Africa have contributed to the numerous inconsistencies that exist today. The extent and frequency of land conflicts appear to have increased in some African countries, *inter alia*, Botswana and Tanzania (Kalabamu, 2019; Bergius et al., 2020). The increased land conflicts have worsened previously existing disparities and given rise to new sources of social injustice and political upheaval (Kalabamu, 2019). Historically, South Africa is among the countries where colonisation has demoralised the spatial setting through confiscation of land, resulting in a huge amount of land, particularly agricultural land, being owned by the white minority (Mokwena & Maluleke, 2020). Notwithstanding that land restitution proceedings have brought some South Africans justice; they have never fully compensated black people for the anguish caused by land dispossession during colonial era.

Land constitutes one of the most fundamental resources in human society, as it underpins social, economic, and political stability. Access to and availability of land resources are therefore indispensable for ensuring genuine and sustainable development, particularly in societies that are

fragile, marginalised, or prone to instability (Kalabamu, 2019). Land is not only a source of livelihood, shelter, and economic production, but it also embodies cultural identity, heritage, and power (Kalabamu, 2019). According to Kalabamu (2019), when access to land is contested or perceived as unfairly distributed, disputes often emerge, which may remain localised or escalate into wider conflicts. While not every dispute culminates in violent confrontation, unresolved or poorly managed disputes frequently become precursors to large-scale land conflicts (Kalabamu, 2019; Nemukula, 2019). The ongoing communal violence in countries such as Sudan and Nigeria exemplifies how localised land disputes, when coupled with weak governance structures and deep-rooted grievances, can spiral into protracted and destructive conflicts (McGregor & Chatiza, 2019). Globally, evidence demonstrates the centrality of land in legal and social disputes. In Bangladesh, for example, Siddik *et al.* (2018) contend that the majority of legal disputes revolve around land ownership and tenure. These conflicts stem from diverse sources, including succession disagreements within families, forcible land occupation by powerful groups, inequitable land distribution by authorities, and fraudulent practices such as the repeated selling of the same plot of land to multiple buyers (Bakamana, 2021; Monama, 2023). Similarly, in many African contexts, land disputes are often entrenched in the interplay between customary and statutory systems of governance.

McGregor and Chatiza (2019) highlight that disputes are especially prevalent in tribal communities where traditional authorities are responsible for land allocation. This situation highlights the fact that conflicts are not restricted to the state or federal level but are deeply embedded within local governance structures. Indeed, many traditional leaders in African countries, including South Africa, are known to allocate the same piece of land to multiple individuals, whether intentionally or due to financial motives, and/or lack of proper record-keeping systems, thereby fuelling tension and disputes (McGregor & Chatiza, 2019; Bakamana, 2021). The governance of land in South Africa illustrates the complexities and contradictions between statutory frameworks and customary practices. Section 151 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) establishes that all areas of the country fall under the jurisdiction of municipalities, thereby

placing ultimate authority over land within the democratic structures of local government (Mudimeli, 2019). At the same time, traditional leaders retain significant influence over land administration, especially in rural areas where customary practices continue to dominate. This duality generates considerable disharmony. Despite constitutional provisions affirming local government, traditional leaders often resist relinquishing control over land allocation, arguing that such authority is central to their role and identity within local communities (Wang *et al.*, 2021). This tension is not merely administrative but intensely political.

According to Nkosi (2016), traditional leaders fear becoming irrelevant if they share or cede powers of land administration to local government. As a result, they continue to serve as autonomous centres of governance, adjudicating land-related affairs within their jurisdictions, even in the face of democratic reforms. (Nkosi, 2016) This reluctance to collaborate has deepened divisions between traditional leadership and local government, creating a schism in governance that undermines coherent land management. The consequences of this schism are evident in policy processes such as the formulation of the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act 16 of 2013 (SPLUMA). Drummond and Nel (2021) note that traditional leaders were largely reluctant to participate in SPLUMA's development, reflecting their broader resistance to integrating customary governance systems into statutory land-use planning frameworks. In the mist of rural governance, duality systems of authority has bedded several implications, which include creating uncertainty and inconsistency in land tenure, and undermining the efforts to implement uniform and sustainable land-use planning, which is critical for addressing pressing challenges such disaster hazard risks, *inter alia*, flooding (Poswa, 2019; Poswa, 2023). The rivalry between traditional leadership and local government exacerbates existing tensions within communities, especially where land is scarce or highly contested. Ultimately, the failure to reconcile these systems perpetuates land-related disputes, weakens governance, and hinders development.

Challenges and constraints for sustainable rural development

Traditional leadership was the only known form of government among indigenous people, predating both the colonial and apartheid regimes in Africa. Africans have their own democratic vision that is fundamentally different from Western liberal democracy, in contrast to the present political and economic trend that devalues traditional leadership

(Koenane, 2018). According to Koenane (2018), many people who live in rural African communities still value traditional authority as a reliable institution for government. However, since the country's independence in 1994, the controversy over whether traditional leadership is still significant and relevant has raged in African nations like South Africa, and society is divided on the subject. Many people, particularly in rural areas within Africa countries, continue to believe that a chieftainship system of government run by traditional chiefs is superior to municipal government, which is corrupt and ineffective in changing lives and providing services in tribal communities (Bakamana, 2021). The provision of services has been a serious problem, making many rural areas in Africa vulnerable and underdeveloped, despite the importance of traditional leaders in rural communities.

In the context of rural South Africa, many communities, including those under traditional leadership rely on local government for development and service delivery provision, *inter alia*, shelter, water and electricity, sanitation facilities, and waste disposal (Makhoba, 2020). The institution of traditional leadership is bestowed with the lack of resources to satisfy the basic needs of the communities in their jurisdiction; however, lack robust collaboration with local government to achieve sustainable spatial development. Drummond and Nel (2021) add that traditional leadership acts autonomously on issues of land administration and uses its own methods for spatial distribution, without involving local governments. As a result, local municipalities tend to be unable to deliver services and infrastructure development in spatial setting that mismatches their planning (Drummond & Nel, 2021). The autonomous operation between these two institutions has acerbated their tension, and brought about underdevelopment in chieftain-controlled areas. Sim *et al.* (2018) add that the embrace of informal spatial development systems utilised by traditional leaders impede service delivery provision to the point where local governments are unable to bring about development due to fragmentation and distortion. Most of the traditional leadership in rural South Africa endures challenges of literacy, professional skills and knowledge for land use planning and management (Makhoba, 2020; Qumba, 2021).

Methods and Materials

Research approach

This study used a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics between traditional leadership and local government in rural South Africa. Following Davis and Van Der Merwe (1996), the researcher observed activities and interviewed residents, providing detailed insights into actions and representations that shape local governance and contested authority.

Study area

This study was conducted in Motantanyane Village, located in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province, northeast of Zebediela within the Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality. Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, one of four local municipalities in the district, that is predominantly rural, covering 3,464 hectares (16% of the district) and comprising 94 communities across 30 wards, with 95% of the land under traditional leadership (Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, 2022). Motantanyane Village has approximately 201 households and 800 residents (Machemedze, Kerr & Dorrington, 2020), and falls under the Lebeso Royalty. Residents follow traditional norms, reporting to the chief for community matters. The village is characterised by traditional land-use planning and allocation, small agricultural plots, and fragmented housing, which have contributed to challenges in spatial growth, rural development, and service delivery (Monama, 2023).

Population and sampling

The study involved municipal officials from Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, specifically those overseeing traditional affairs, rural development, and land-use planning. Their responses provided insights into the dynamics between traditional leadership and local government in rural governance and contested authority in South Africa. Using purposive non-probability sampling, 6 participants were selected based on the researcher's judgment.

Data collection

At the outset, a desktop-based methodological approach was used to collect secondary qualitative data from literature sources, including academic journal articles, books, government documents, and reports. This paper employed unstructured interview method to collect qualitative data from municipal officials at Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, particularly those overseeing traditional affairs, rural development, and land-use planning and management. Interviews were guided by key questions to explore the interactions between traditional leadership and local government in rural governance, with a focus on the contested politics of authority in South Africa.

Data analysis

This paper employed thematic analysis to examine primary qualitative data from participants in Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, guided by the research questions and objectives. Thematic analysis, defined as identifying and interpreting patterns within data (O'Leary, 2014:300), was used to examine the dynamics between traditional leadership and local government in shaping rural governance, focusing on the contested politics of authority in South Africa. Data were systematically coded, categorised, and analysed to generate themes, with direct participant quotations incorporated to ensure accuracy and avoid misinterpretation.

Validity and reliability

Reliability and validity are key criteria for research quality. Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure, while validity concerns its accuracy (Roberts & Priest, 2006). Triangulation strengthens research by integrating multiple perspectives, designs, and methodologies, enhancing the robustness of findings. In this study, a comprehensive literature review and qualitative data from multiple primary and secondary sources were used. Data collection instruments and methods, including interviews and literature-based research, were applied consistently, with thematic analysis for interpretation, ensuring valid and reliable results.

Participants were assured of trustworthy procedures, and interviews were self-administered to maintain smooth and ethical data collection.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Approval was obtained from the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee at the University of Limpopo (Ethical Certificate Number: TREC/32/2023: PG), and permission to collect data was granted by the Tribal Office in Motantanyane Village and the Municipal Manager of Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality. Participants received an introductory letter outlining the purpose of the study and their right to voluntary participation. Interviews were conducted respectfully, with sensitivity to cultural practices, beliefs, and norms, ensuring no harm, coercion, or invasion of privacy. Participants remained anonymous, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. The research was carried out with professionalism, transparency, and commitment to ethical reporting of findings. The research respected copyright through proper citation and referencing of all sources. This paper was scrutinised through “Turnitin” software to ensure compliance with the plagiarism policy, and maintain a similarity index below 15%.

Results

This section interprets and analyses the qualitative data acquired during the interviews. Interviews were conducted with municipal officials from Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, particularly those responsible for municipal management, rural development, land-use planning and management, and traditional affairs. The study included six participants, who are classified as follows, for ease of data analysis and interpretation: Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, Participant E, and Participant F. Furthermore, direct quotation was made to avoid misinterpretation of qualitative data collected from the participants.

The relationship between local government and traditional leadership

Maleka and Rapatsa (2021) assert that there is a lack of institutionalised interaction between traditional leadership and local administration, which has the potential to stifle future development.

According to Participant F, the Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality has strong relationships with the majority of chieftains, particularly those that allow municipal officials to enter the area. Some traditional leaders, on the other hand, are difficult to work with and rarely attend municipal meetings when invited. Participant F articulated the idea in the following way:

“Some of Mantona (headmen) do not attend municipal meetings because they do not see a need, and this somehow affects development in their area of jurisdiction. Embarrassingly, the Mantona have a tendency of demanding remuneration whenever municipality wants to initiate projects in their areas, especially when such projects require some resources from the area. When municipality is unable to make those remunerations, they reject proposed project.”

Due to absenteeism at municipal meetings where community development-related concerns are addressed, this may signify a lack of cooperation between traditional and local governments. The results also indicate that certain traditional leaders are likely to act as a barrier to development and service delivery since they hope to personally gain from the municipal future development for their communities. According to Maleka and Rapatsa (2021), the establishment of a local government system in South Africa as a result of the passing of new democratic legislation led to a lack of cooperation between municipalities and traditional leaders. For instance, the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 enhanced local governments' authority yet avoiding defining the roles of traditional leadership. Nemukula (2019) added that the main causes of the unsatisfactory relationship between traditional and local governments are land ownership and control, as well as the vaguely conflicting and overlapping responsibilities that legislative and policy frameworks give to both institutions.

Spatial development plans of local government and traditional leadership

Land use planning and management are governed by a number of legal frameworks, including the Municipal Spatial Development Framework

(MSDF) and the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (No. 16 of 2013) (Republic of South Africa, 2013; De Villiers, 2020). Traditional leadership and local governments now have a wide gap and discord as a result of the implementation of SPLUMA. According to Makhoba (2020), this Act did not support the participation of traditional leadership in the formulation of any sensible decisions about the management and planning of land. Input from Participant C was as follows:

“It is challenging for the municipality to interfere with the patterns of allocating land because traditional leaders serve as the land custodians in rural areas. Nonetheless, some land management Acts give more power to local governments, thus, it is even risky to inform traditional leaders of such laws, especially since we are still trying to sympathise with them in order to maintain good ties. If not, the municipality will endanger the relationship with traditional communities that it is trying to build.”

The use of incompatible spatial development or planning systems may depict that traditional leadership and local government independently manage land. On the other hand, the legal frameworks that are currently in place in South Africa speak less about the role of traditional leadership in modern democratic dispensation. Dubazane and Nel (2016) emphasise that chieftains have used traditional spatial distribution methods, such as the customary patrilineal approach, which have been in place since the 1800s. These historic land use and management systems are not compatible with current municipal plans, which has a likelihood to lead dual rural government systems to operate autonomously. Participant A noted that traditional authorities in Motantanyane Village allocated land using their own ad hoc methods. The following is what participant D stated:

“Mantona allocate land without taking into account its economic benefits, which could lead to land infringements. This justifies that they lack understanding and partial knowledge of how sustainability works, as to use indigenous knowledge systems to distribute land”

The findings could imply that traditional leadership is not well informed about the importance of sustainable land development, and as a result, they tend to allocate land without a solid formal plan and without considering the social, economic and environmental outcomes. McGregor and Chatiza (2019) and Bakamana (2021) stated that

traditional authorities tend to allocate land to its people in areas that are not habitable such as wetlands, flat plains and land designated as agricultural land. Participant A mentioned that the Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality's MSDF recognises traditional leadership as the custodians of the land and nurtures strong relationships with them to promote rural development. The conflicting research findings may suggest that the discrepancy originates in the domain of land administration where traditional and municipal systems converge, which has the potential to impede rural development. Participant F stated the notion as follows:

“Traditional leaders confuse municipal planning with land ownership, resulting in conflict between the two institutions in land administration. We have a good working relationship with most of traditional leaders, but some do not understand how we operate.”

The results may suggest a lack of institutionalised interaction between the two governmental systems, which could explain why they fail to comprehend one another, particularly when it comes to how land should be used and distributed to the populace. It is evident that the chieftains of the rural communities in Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality independently distribute and manage the land in accordance with their own methods. This could imply that municipal systems, such as MSDF and SPLUMA, are not truly functional in chieftain-led rural settings, particularly in terms of land use and management. Although traditional leadership do not use municipal spatial planning systems, the Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality appears to be committed to cultivating beneficial relationships with chieftains in rural areas under their control in order to support sustainable rural development.

Implications of non-practices of municipal spatial development plans

Makhoba (2020) states that traditional leadership has been criticised for being ignorant about municipal land use planning and management, unaware of environmental management principles during land allocation. It is believed that chieftains ignored efforts to promote sustainable

spatial development, which are supported by municipal legislations. Accordingly, this could be the result of a lack of cooperation with the municipality or an ignorance of the appropriate spatial legal policies. This is how participant C stated the idea:

“In many rural communities within our municipality, Mantona do not consider all social and environmental issues that might benefit or damage the nearby community and the future of the area before allocating land for development purposes,”

Meaning that traditional leadership is under-informed about the value of sustainability, and as a result, they frequently distribute land without a written plan that is well-thought out and without taking into account its social, economic, and environmental effects. In the Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, Participant D claimed that the presence of chieftains hinders development in many rural areas. The majority of traditional leadership has a tendency to plan independently, and some of their ideas are incongruous with municipal planning, making it challenging for municipalities to put their plans into action. Participant D expressed the following view:

“An established of municipal spatial development plans and the IDP tend to be fictitious without implementation as a result of noncompliance traditional leaders”

This could imply that chieftain-controlled areas rarely allow for the implementation of recently passed municipal development plans like the IDP and MSDF. As a result of incompatible practices, the municipality, particularly in rural areas, was unable to provide services in accordance with the established IDP. It is evident that traditional government methods are problematic for municipal planning, especially when it comes to concerns with land use and management. The results would suggest that the municipality has its own detailed spatial development plans for rural development, but some of these plans are challenging to put into practice in regions ruled by chieftains. Rural development in chieftain-controlled areas is a goal that local governments, in particular the Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, have a long way to go in achieving. In order to persuade traditional leadership to collaborate closely with them on issues of land use and management, local government has to put into place crucial measures.

Discussion

The research findings reveal a complex and often strained relationship between local government and traditional leadership, particularly in rural areas within Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, specifically in the Motantanyane Village. Maleka and Rapatsa (2021) note that the absence of institutionalised collaboration between local government and traditional leadership often hinder development, as cooperation between these two governance systems is inconsistent. Evidence from Participant F indicated that while the Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality maintains strong relationships with some chieftains who allow municipal intervention, other traditional leaders are resistant to engagement. This resistance is often manifested in their absence from municipal meetings and demands for remuneration before allowing development projects, which can delay or prevent the implementation of initiatives. Such dynamics suggest that certain traditional leaders may act as obstacles to development when personal or financial interests override communal benefits. The legislative context exacerbates these challenges: the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 enhanced municipal authority without clearly defining the role of traditional leadership, creating ambiguities that fuel tension and inefficiency (Nemukula, 2019). Issues of land ownership and overlapping responsibilities between local government and traditional leadership further contribute to unsatisfactory relations.

The research further highlights significant discrepancies in land-use planning. Legal frameworks, including the Municipal Spatial Development Framework (MSDF) and the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA), are intended to guide sustainable development and land management (Republic of South Africa, 2013; De Villiers, 2020). However, traditional leadership often maintains autonomous control over land allocation, rooted in long-standing customary practices such as the patrilineal system (Dubazane & Nel, 2016). Participant C emphasised that municipal efforts to regulate land allocation can be delicate because infringing upon traditional authority risks straining relationships, which are critical for facilitating rural development. Participant D reinforced this, noting that some traditional leaders allocate land without considering its economic potential or

environmental sustainability, relying instead on indigenous knowledge systems that may not align with modern planning principles. This misalignment demonstrates a gap in awareness or understanding among traditional authorities regarding the importance of structured and sustainable land-use planning, potentially resulting in land being assigned to areas unsuitable for habitation or agriculture (McGregor & Chatiza, 2019; Bakamana, 2021).

Whilst the MSDF acknowledges traditional leadership as custodians of land and seeks to foster collaboration, the findings suggest that municipal planning frameworks, such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and MSDF, are often difficult to implement in chieftain-controlled areas due to the independent decision-making of traditional leaders. Participant F noted that conflicts often arise from misunderstandings of municipal authority versus land ownership, underscoring the need for clearer communication and institutionalised mechanisms for cooperation. Participant D further highlighted that traditional practices frequently undermine municipal efforts, rendering some spatial development plans effectively symbolic rather than actionable. The implications of these findings are substantial for rural development. Non-compliance with municipal spatial development plans by traditional leadership can obstruct the delivery of essential services and hinder economic, social, and environmental progress. Participant C and Participant D consistently pointed out that the lack of alignment between municipal and traditional systems not only complicates land management but also reduces the overall effectiveness of governance in rural areas. Sustainable rural development requires active engagement and cooperation between these governance structures, yet the current context reflects persistent challenges in harmonising traditional authority with municipal planning frameworks. For municipalities like Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, achieving meaningful rural development will necessitate targeted strategies to educate traditional leaders about sustainable land use, establish formal collaboration mechanisms, and foster trust to ensure that both local government initiatives and customary practices can coexist productively.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the research findings highlighted a strained and complex relationship between local government and traditional leadership in Motantanyane Village, Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, which

significantly impacts rural development. Conflicting roles, unclear legislative guidance, and the autonomous control of land by traditional leaders create challenges for implementing municipal planning frameworks such as the IDP and MSDF. Misalignment between customary practices and structured land-use planning often results in inefficient land allocation and stalled development projects. These highlight the need for formalised collaboration, clearer communication, and educational initiatives (Collaborative Learning Theory) to align traditional leadership with local government, thereby fostering sustainable rural development and effective service delivery.

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