

Traditional Leaders and *Modernity*

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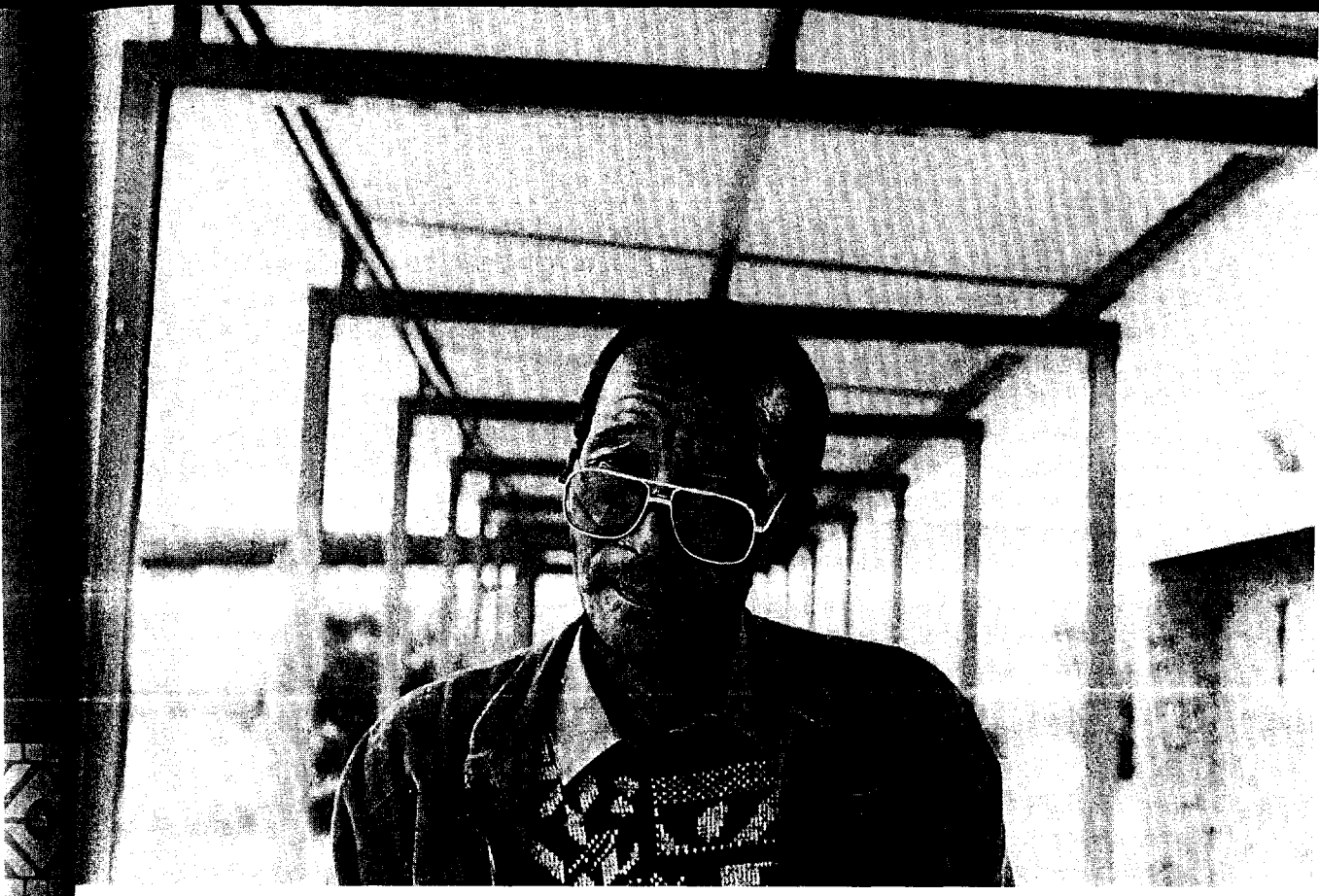
We in South Africa had a unique chance to break new ground in creating a better system of democracy than that which exists in many countries. I say "had," because we seem to have missed or wasted our unique opportunity to create something new in the history of democracy, judging by the decisions that were made by the committees and intellectuals that shaped the current constitution of the country, decisions that were approved by the new parliament.

We seem to be prisoners of history in the manner in which we have shaped the relationship between the city and the countryside. This is actually more serious than merely being prisoners of history: We are actually showing symptoms of the terrible disease that has afflicted decisionmakers in

most countries so far, as far as the relation of the city and the countryside has been concerned.

What is this terrible disease I am talking about? The emergence of modern democracy, so far, has been part of the victory of the city over the countryside. The entire process of democratization and modernization, so far, has been a ruthless imposition upon rural people of the values and culture of urban elites.

Modern history has witnessed nothing less than a holocaust conducted by city-based political parties and bureaucracies against traditional values and cultures developed by preindustrial agricultural communities. This holocaust far surpasses the holocausts that usually feature in discussions of Western in-



Teacher and Elderly Leader in Soweto. Photo by Delphine Fawundu.

tellecuals, namely those conducted by German Nazism and the Stalin regime.

The rejection of major aspects of traditional culture is not because it is incompatible with modern science and technology. No, this has been a result of sheer arrogance of power and chauvinism of urban elites. Take, for instance, the memorization of large chunks of epic poetry, such as *Izibongo zaMakhosi* or *zamaQhawe* or the works of Homer, which was routine in education systems rooted in traditional cultures.

Modern urban elites in ministries of education stopped that; yet it was very good for the training of young minds, for mental dexterity, and for fostering sound literary tastes. With the exception of fashion designers in Paris or London, no attempts have been made to work

out a synthesis between important elements of peasant culture and our aspirations of modernity.

This failure has been glaring in the behavior of modern political parties. Driven by urbanites, these parties have been bulldozers mowing down social and cultural forms that have existed for tens of centuries in rural communities—not just the negative aspects, but also positive ones that could be developed to enrich modernity.

If we are wise in South Africa, we should reconsider what we have done and attempt to break new ground in working out an amicable relationship between rural and urban communities, a relationship not conceived and dictated by urban intellectuals and urban political activists, but one conceived and de-

signed jointly, I repeat, conceived and designed jointly, in total equality, by rural cultural and political leaders, on one hand, and urban cultural and political leaders, on the other hand.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the great African-American thinker W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that the "problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line." Yes, the color line still remains a most serious, as yet unsolved, problem of the twenty-first century for the entire world. In Africa and Asia, in which the overwhelming majority of people live in rural areas, and are bearers of rural culture, and are underdeveloped, that is, abnormally poor, the problem of our time, and of the twenty-first century, is the problem of the relation between the city and the countryside.

As believers in democracy, as proponents and preachers of democracy (unless we are big hypocrites), let us apply democratic methods in resolving the problem of the relations between rural and urban people, between government policies toward urban areas and policies toward rural areas.

Who said that city people know best what democracy is and how to design institutions and plans for the implementation of democracy? On these issues, tribal communities and tribal customs surpassed modern literate nations and governments in the amount of wisdom.

We have been made so spiritually and mentally sick by the current urban chauvinism, or prejudice against the countryside and peasant cultures, that we need to be firmly reminded of the true history and sources of the democratic spirit and mode in government and in law.

Where, in truth, did the democratic ideas of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries come from? It was actually the coming into Europe of knowledge of the tribal life of so-called American Indians. One

American scholar, Felix Cohen, spent years researching this topic, particularly the influence of American Indians on the new American colonies and on their search for a more perfect form of government. The American form of government, American federalism, was largely a copy of the form of government that existed among the Iroquois. The Iroquois Confederacy exerted a direct influence on Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and other colonists whose minds were preoccupied by these issues in 1744, 1754, right up to the debates leading to the adoption of the final constitutional framework of American federalism. Listen to Cohen:

For it is out of the rich Indian democratic tradition that the distinctive political ideals of American life emerged. Universal suffrage for women as well as for men, the pattern of states within a state that we call federalism, the habit of treating chiefs as servants of the people instead of as their masters, the insistence that the community must respect the diversity of men and the diversity of their dreams—all these things were part of the American way of life before Columbus landed.¹

The jury system, as practiced in America, has its roots in the system and custom of trying cases in Indian communities. This is the same system and custom found in traditional African communities, where "your peers" in the community participated in the hearing on the case.

The point I am making is that traditional culture of tribal peoples contains precious jewels and wisdom, which should be sifted, saved, preserved, and injected or synchronized with the new in our efforts to create a new society.

The wholesale dismissal of, and desire to destroy, all traditional and tribal cultures is worse than barbarism itself. The most pre-

cious aspects of modern civilization come from preindustrial cultures, which have their ultimate source in peasant culture.

Who are we then to refuse to give rural, traditional people a right to participate as equals in providing ideas and plans for the creation of the new African society?

Let me say a word on elections. Modern elections are an effort to ensure decency, humaneness, and democracy on the part of the modern state in the treatment of human beings. Modern elections emerged as a new form of asserting representativeness in modern cities, where age-old communal, traditional bonds had died out.

The essence of modern cities is impersonality and anonymity. Areas of residence no longer coincide with kinship and clan boundaries. Note that originally location and residence in cities was along clan boundaries, later along occupational group boundaries and religious group boundaries. In all these cases, the community, the group, was prior to the individual in significance. Elections did take place in traditional societies, but following different rules from elections in modern times as dictated by modern city elites and activists.

In modern cities, clan and kinship boundaries melted away. Community, group boundaries lost legitimacy; there began the worship of the individual, at its worst, individualism, which reigns in the modern city. Lack of feeling, suspicion, even hostility, characterize relations between individuals in modern cities.

Modern elections emerged in this context. In such situations, the only way of asserting representativeness is through elections, preceded by competition and haggling of candidates over votes, in a manner very similar to market competition for customers, only worse, in that it involves in many cases painting the competitor in negative light.

The situation is different in preindustrial rural areas, still existing in most of Africa.

There, residential areas still coincide with clan and kinship boundaries. The election principle still applies, but with a difference. Criteria such as age, proven leadership talents, royal lineage largely determine who is chosen for leadership posts. In such cultures, competition and haggling in public of individuals over votes may seem vulgar, ugly, and unbecoming.

In this situation, election is likely to be through consensus or sufficient consensus.

We must stress, of course, another saying, another piece of wisdom from traditional society: Money is the seed of evil/sin!

The point here is that with the increase in the significance of money in social life and class distinctions, even in rural areas, corruption became a problem to be faced and dealt with even in the traditional framework.

This is no reason, however, for abandoning the entire framework, for throwing out the baby with the dirty bathwater.

The main point here is that modern, urban-bred modes of expressing representation or democracy may, therefore, be misplaced in rural culture, much as rural-bred modes of representation may be misplaced in modern cities. We need to be resourceful and untiring in search for more perfect modes of asserting democracy in both urban and rural areas.

I propose, therefore, for all levels of government, a legislative assembly with two chambers, one elected through universal franchise and the second nonelected.

The first chamber, the elected one, would satisfy the needs of modernity for democratic representation through elections.

The second chamber, the nonelected chamber, would satisfy the need of tradition for representation and would also be an attempt to improve the quality of modern democracy.

The second, nonelected, chamber would consist, in part, of Amakhosi (Zulu chiefs) and also, in part, of other members of society deemed worthy through wisdom, experience,

or education, by an independent commission, of participating for a specified term in the legislative body in the interest of society.

These members of society, other than Amakhosi, could be selected by an independent commission in the same manner as members of our Constitutional Court, or the SABC board, or the Independent Election Commission were selected, interviewed, and recommended for appointment by the president.

The elected chamber would have the same number of members as the nonelected chamber. Each member of the elected chamber would be elected by and represent a specific constituency.

Both chambers would have equal powers: The responsibility of both chambers making up our parliament should be to debate government policy and affairs of state in general, to propose, debate, amend, approve, or reject, legislation. I emphasize: The nonelected chamber should be an equal partner of the elected chamber.

The coexistence of the elective and non-elective principle seems wise as an attempt to synthesize tradition and modernity.

Along with the positive, modern elections have a negative aspect. The essence of modern democracy is political parties addressing and manipulating masses of people in efforts to win votes. The problem is that issues besetting modern societies are complex, and individual members of society no longer have the space and correct spiritual atmosphere conducive to thinking properly. The crowds addressed by politicians consist of people at varying levels of education and sophistication; indeed, the largest layer of the typical crowd in a typical election is at the lowest level of sophistication and education.

The inevitable tendency, then, is for extreme simplification of these complex issues. The German scholar Georg Simmel noted,

"The reason is that large masses can always be animated and guided only by simple ideas."

A psychological factor also enters to complicate the matter. Given inequality, poverty, unemployment, misery, and the fears and anxieties rooted in modern social life, any mass audience consists of people suffering from varying levels of anxiety and anguish.

Again, the largest layer of any typical mass audience in a typical large election is beset with very high levels of anxiety and anguish, which must be addressed by the politician. The average politician often turns to demagoguery, playing to the emotions of the audience, taking the shortest route from simple ideas to the anxieties and emotions of the audience.²

The other problem is that elections are expensive. This has often placed parties and politicians under the power of money, giving the wealthy and business companies/corporations enormous power over politicians, therefore over government policies.

Thus, the influence of money, corruption, and the ups and downs of public emotion often make it very difficult for the average politician to be guided by the strength of his or her own convictions and independence of mind on any important issue. A certain sickness then falls upon most politicians, namely, the fear or hesitation to speak one's mind honestly on certain major issues, the fear of the truth, the tendency to want to conform to the particular emotions of the particular moment on a particular issue. These factors considerably lower the quality of democratic politics and of modern democracy.

This, in my view, is the advantage of having a nonelected chamber within parliament. Entrance to this chamber shall not depend on shaping one's views and personality to suit the emotions and desires of voters and wealthy financial donors.

This should allow a sizeable proportion of these members to express views and propose policies uninfluenced to a large extent by temporary fashions of public opinion.

It should also free these members from the tendency of politicians to simplify issues for easy mass consumption and approval. In other words, a significant number of members of the nonelected chamber should be able to belong to what I call the "Party of Truth." We are told, for example, that very valuable changes in bills passed by the House of Commons in England are made by members of the House of Lords, precisely because members of this nonelected chamber are generally not restrained in their public utterances by fears of the electorate.

England does have a parliament with two chambers, one elected (House of Commons), the other nonelected (House of Lords). This is the manner in which the English were able to reconcile the needs of tradition and modernity.

We must realize, however, that this state of affairs in England was reached through

conflict. In other words, both forces of modernity and forces of tradition mobilized and waged a political struggle, and the result of that struggle was the compromise of the two chambers. The House of Lords, of course, has lost considerable power in relation to the House of Commons, but that is another issue.

I suggest that we seriously consider and debate the merit of having a legislature with two chambers, one elected, the other nonelected, with equal powers, at all levels or tiers of government. That, I think, shall meet the needs of modernity, as well as the wisdom of retaining the precious elements of tradition, as well as vastly raise and improve the quality of modern democracy.

Notes

1. Felix S. Cohen, "Americanizing the White Man," in *The American Indian: Past and Present*, edited by Roger L. Nichols and George R. Adams (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1971), p. 32.

2. See Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation."