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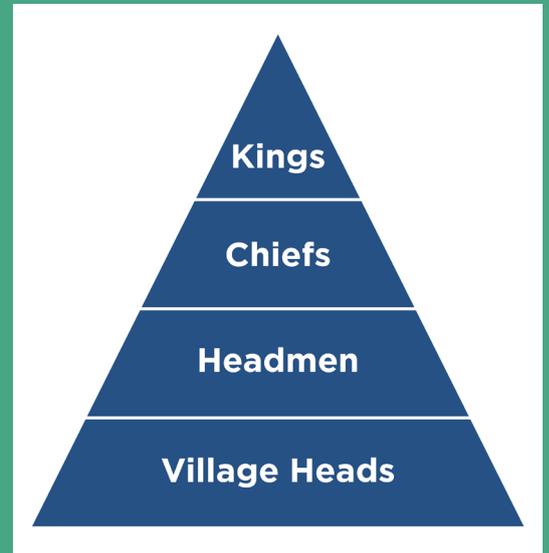
# THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

## Introduction

Almost all countries in Africa have traditional authorities in some form. The most common structures of the institution of traditional leadership are, in order of power and authority, kings, chiefs, headmen and village heads. Because of how they are organised, traditional authorities are the most immediate form of governance in many rural parts of the continent. They perform roles, such as:

- land allocation/management;
- dispute resolution;
- environmental preservation; and
- promotion and preservation of culture and heritage.

With such functions, traditional leaders tend to have more interaction with citizens in rural areas than the modern state institutions. Thus, defining decentralisation within an African context often includes recognising their role that they play at local government level.



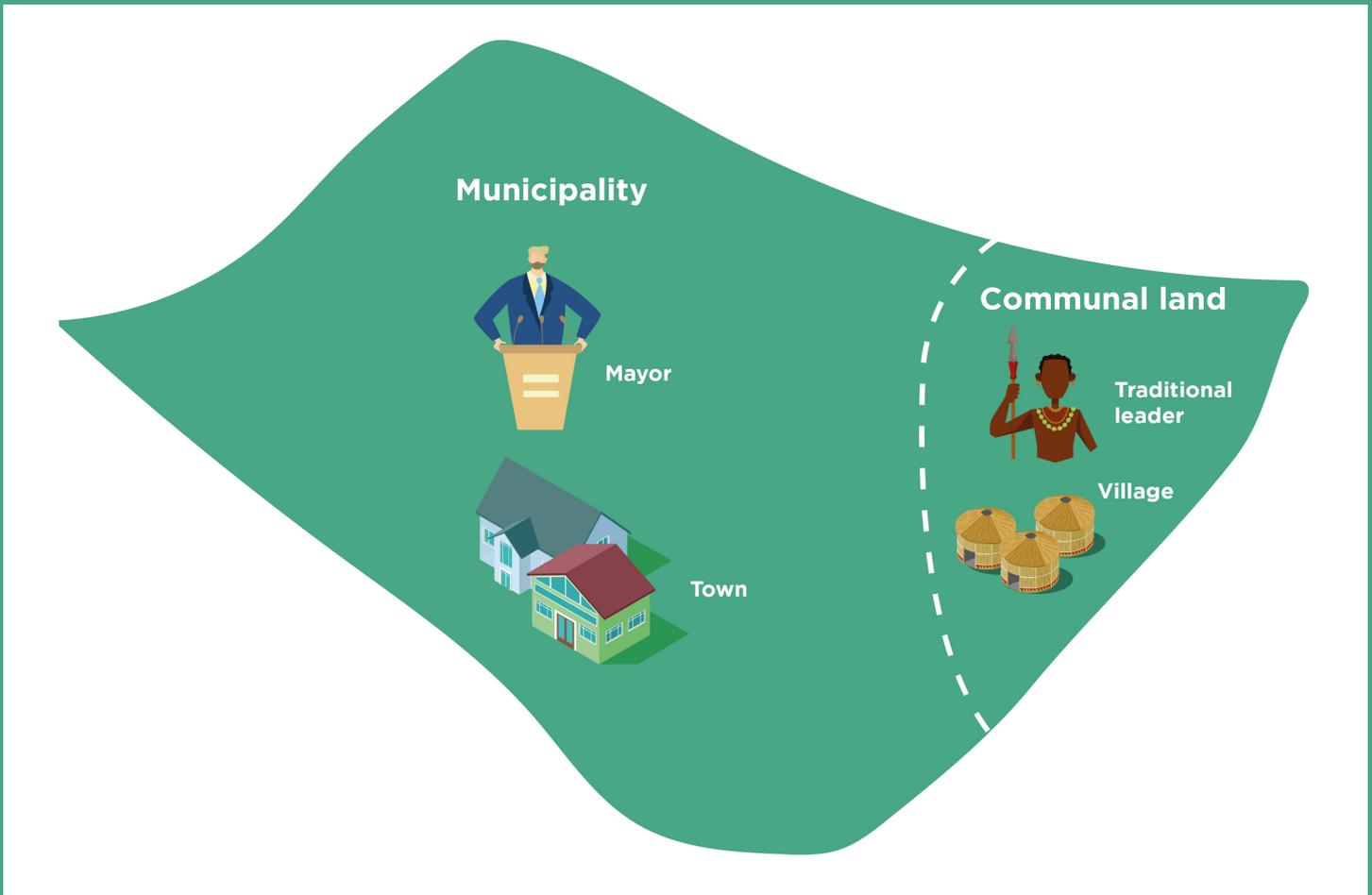
## Traditional authorities during colonial rule

In Africa, traditional authorities were transformed during and after the transition from traditional to modern state institutions. Before colonisation, traditional authorities were the only governance structure. With the coming of colonial regimes, their roles changed and varied across regions. While establishing modern state institutions, the colonial empires governed conquered territories in different ways. For instance, the British adopted indirect-rule in countries such as Nigeria. This involved the use of traditional authorities to govern local communities. The French, on the other hand, adopted direct-rule in countries such as Senegal.

Colonial regimes modified and corrupted the institution of traditional leadership. Fearing the loss of power and/or bought off lured by the colonial regimes, many traditional authorities implemented colonial policies. As a result, some traditional authorities no longer enjoyed the support of their communities when countries won independence. They were particularly resented by liberation movements, who accused them of working with the colonial regimes to oppress the black population. This explains why liberation movements such as the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and FRELIMO in Mozambique, both of which gained political power after independence, initially chose to marginalise the countries' traditional authorities.

## Traditional leaders today

Traditional authorities have remained powerful and relevant, particularly in the absence of the formal state. They thus serve as alternative centres of power in many rural areas. This uncomfortable situation forced many governments to bring them to the governance table.



The compatibility of traditional authorities with modern democratic norms remains a subject of debate all over the continent. Their vulnerability to corruption and propensity for autocracy, as well as for the continued marginalisation of women are some of the concerns. However, in many parts of the continent, traditional authorities still command respect and support, and have retained considerable legitimacy because they perform key governance functions in the absence of the modern state. Thus, they can play a role in development and in fostering peace, particularly in rural areas. These considerations demand that they be acknowledged and accommodated within government structures. The question as to how remains a thorny issue, however.

### Recognition and role of traditional authorities



Countries have accommodated the role of traditional authorities differently. In Zambia, traditional leadership is recognised in the Constitution, which also grants traditional leaders voting powers in local councils. In Zimbabwe, their role is recognised in the Constitution and a selected number of traditional leaders serve as *ex-officio* members of local councils with no voting powers. A similar approach has been adopted in South Africa.



Whether or not their roles have been formally acknowledged, traditional leaders often continue to serve as an important link between the state, particularly local government, and the citizens. They provide services such as dispute resolution, land management and the coordination of response to natural disasters, which the modern state often fails to do due to its limited capacity. In short, in the absence of the state, they effectively become the state.

## Traditional authorities and democratic local government



In many counties there is deep contestation for power and resources between formal local governments and traditional authorities. The allocation and management of land is perhaps the major bone of contention. This is often the result of a lack of clear demarcation of responsibilities between the two structures. The absence of mechanisms that would ensure that the two structures cooperate can be the cause of conflict. However, sometimes it is just that neither the formal local governments, nor the traditional leaders are comfortable with having a 'competitor' in their respective jurisdictions. Traditional leaders also fight amongst themselves for territory as they seek to increase their scope of influence.

Traditional leaders are the bearers of culture and tradition, and this role is more effectively exercised if they are politically neutral. However, many traditional leaders openly advance the cause of certain political parties, particularly ruling parties of the day. Like their colonial predecessors, ruling regimes also do not hesitate to corrupt and use traditional leaderships for political ends.

There is no doubt that there are several challenges associated with traditional authorities. However, traditional forms of governance cannot simply be wished away, given their continued relevance in modern day Africa. Traditional authorities have been around for millennia and are likely to stay in place well into the future. Thus, it is important that decentralisation laws and policies include ways of accommodating traditional leaders – particularly at local level – for the benefit of communities.

