

Understanding the Dynamics of Social Control in Rural South Africa:  
Traditional Leaders and the Allocation of Development Resources in KwaZulu-Natal

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## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing debate on the role of traditional leaders in the post-apartheid, democratic South Africa. To some commentators, these debates have come as a surprise as it was often believed that the end of apartheid rule would also mean the end for traditional leadership. Over the last five years, however, traditional leaders have secured constitutional protection and have been given some official recognition at the local level. For example, in KwaZulu-Natal, every traditional leader is guaranteed an *ex-officio* position on the rural local government bodies (these are called Regional Councils) resulting in over 260 traditional leaders sitting on seven Regional Councils. Given that they have secured themselves a *de jure* status in the new political dispensation, combined with the *de facto* authority that many still retain in rural areas, it is unlikely that traditional leaders will fade away as a result of “democratization.”

While the authority and influence - or lack of it - of traditional leaders is a topic of much debate, there have been very few studies that have examined traditional leaders since 1994. The current research I am conducting in KwaZulu-Natal tries to fill this gap - at least partially. The general question that guides my research is to examine how power is wielded, both by traditional leaders and other actors, in rural communities in the context of state-building and democratization.

For government elites, the issue of traditional leadership raises an interesting paradox. On the one hand, traditional leaders are a possible threat to the power of newly established state institutions and norms, and thus, decreasing their authority and influence would appear to be the best strategy for state institutions. On the other hand, because the state has limited capacity to deliver much needed resources, traditional leaders are essential for resource delivery, and some at least, seemingly continue to have the respect of their communities. By no means is this paradox novel for South Africa as many African states at independence faced similar challenges. What does make the South African case more intriguing, and more complex, is the perception that these leaders should be devoid of any current legitimacy because of the manner (and degree) in which the apartheid state manipulated the idea of traditional leadership for its own political ends. This perception, whether right or wrong, has led to many of the debates on this issue to be discussed in zero-sum terms. That is, it is suggested that traditional leaders cannot exist side-by-side with democratic institutions, or that if they do, the functions of traditional leaders and other institutions should not overlap.<sup>1</sup> This research, on the other hand, tries to locate the ways in

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in a recent study examining the “legacies of indirect rule,” Mamdani concludes that the process of “democratization” in South Africa will be doomed to failure unless

which power is being shared, or at least, the way in which the interaction between traditional leaders and other institutions can be mutually transforming rather than zero-sum.

In this paper, I explore how the power relations in rural communities and the ways in which traditional leaders try to establish or maintain their authority. I first examine the perceptions some people have of such terms as politics, democracy, and traditional leadership, and I then use two case studies to highlight how traditional leaders are interacting with other social forces. Both examples pay particular attention to the processes of allocating water in tribal authority areas. The allocation of such resources should be seen as “political” in that it affects local power relations and it is utilized by local elites as a way to gain, or maintain, social control. By investigating the allocation of much needed resources, I can examine the emerging power relations between many important actors and institutions in rural communities.

The data for this paper is based on a total of three and a half months of field research in two tribal authorities. Because of space limitations, however, I will only discuss the information that I have collected from one of these tribal authorities - Mvuzane. In Mvuzane, I spent a total of two months engaging in semi-structured interviews, group discussions, and non-participant observation. I have talked to approximately ninety people in Mvuzane as well as various people from Uthungulu Regional Authority and the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Government. In addition to the field research in the tribal authority areas, I have also spent a few months conducting archival research concerning the former KwaZulu government and its relations with traditional leaders. I am planning to conduct similar archival research that will focus on the specific histories of the tribal authority areas that I am conducting my research. While this data is not presented in this paper, it will be an important part of the doctoral dissertation.

## **Theoretical Context**

For many social scientists, “the state,” both as an empirical fact and as an analytical tool, is assumed to be the most important actor in the theatre of political and social change. Some political scientists have pushed this idea to its natural limit and proposed that the state should be seen as the key social actor that determines the extent of social progress.<sup>2</sup> Such theories, however, proved unable to explain social and political change in societies where the state was either weak or simply nonexistent.

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the rural areas are effectively “detrified.” See Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, Peter Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, (eds). *Bringing the State Back In*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

In light of the gap between theory and practice, recent studies have looked more closely at the ways in which different agencies or institutions of the state interact with other social forces. The starting point for this literature is that “the role of the state is itself an object of the struggle” and that the outcomes of such struggles are far from predictable. Further, rather than *a priori* assume that the state, or more specifically, the institutions of the state, are the most powerful actors in society, this framework encourages social scientists to interrogate the relationships between state and society and to explain power relations as they exist rather than how they should exist given a particular legal, social, or economic order.<sup>3</sup>

With this approach, the state is conceptualized as one of many “social forces” that may or may not be the most important or most effective. What often separates the state from other social forces, however, is its overt desire to gain social control over all segments of its population that are within its boundaries. We can think of social control as the ability to articulate, maintain, and enforce a set of rules, norms, sanctions, myths and symbols that people rely upon in their daily lives. Thus, for the state, social control is not only about the ability to enforce state policies but “it is also about securing people’s daily well-being ....and to ensure individuals’ survival strategies.”<sup>4</sup> In some societies this is made more difficult as there are multiple sources of social control - what are sometimes referred to as “weblike societies.”<sup>5</sup> South Africa can be thought of as such a society with traditional leadership having been a major supplier of “survival strategies” for many rural communities.

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<sup>3</sup> Migdal, Joel S. *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988: 14.

<sup>4</sup> Keulder, Christiaan. *Traditional leaders and Local Government in Africa*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council Publishers, 1998: 19.

<sup>5</sup> Migdal (1988): 32.

In addition, this formulation of state-society relations helps us to move beyond Weber's traditional/modern dichotomy that have tended to dominate the debates concerning traditional leaders. In this traditional/modern framework, it is assumed that traditional leaders derive their authority solely from "tradition" and "myths" while more "modern" institutions derive authority from law, procedure and its ability to deliver services.<sup>6</sup> These categories also carried with them specific connotations with traditional institutions being seen in a negative light and the eventual victory of modern institutions openly expressed. In current South African political discourse, while such explicit statements are rare, the debate has been focussed on the particular functions and responsibilities that "traditional" and "modern" institutions should exercise. One of the seemingly more popular ways to make such a distinction is to argue that while traditional institutions do have some functions and roles relevant for the new South Africa, that these functions and roles are distinct from, and should not overlap with, those areas that fall within the competence of democratically elected institutions. Indeed, even though the African National Congress has sought to appear as enthusiastic as they can for traditional institutions, constitutional protections aside, many of the ANC subsequent policy statements have implicitly adopted the modern/traditional distinction. For example, in the Local Government White Paper, the government states while "cooperative" relationships between traditional leaders and local government should be the goal, there are "natural capacities" for each that need to be recognized.<sup>7</sup> The implication is that while the areas of conflict resolution and maintaining law and order are traditional functions, other areas - such as bringing water, roads, and electricity - are beyond the "traditional" responsibilities of traditional leadership and should fall within the realm of state institutions. This paper invokes the state-society framework outlined above to provide an alternative way to analyse traditional leaders in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **Brief Description of Mvuzane Tribal Authority**

Mvuzane Tribal Authority is located approximately 30 kilometres west of Eshowe. It falls within the boundaries of the Inkanyezi Regional Authority, the Eshowe Magisterial District, and since 1996, the Uthungulu Regional Council (URC). It is bordered by privately held sugar cane farms to its south (land which was not part of the KwaZulu territory during the former dispensation) and by other tribal authority areas to its north, west, and east. The inkosi for Mvuzane is Bhekabelungu Biyela<sup>8</sup> who has been the inkosi for over thirty years. He is

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<sup>6</sup> Presently, it appears that the aims of modernization theory have been repackaged in what is now loosely referred to as the process of "democratization." This process seems to encourage states to adopt the procedural aspects of democracy (ie, elections, bill of rights, minority protections) along with a neo-liberal economic order. Similar to the modernization theorists, democratization theorists assume that traditional leaders will (or should) fade away with the establishment of democratic institutions and norms. See J. Bekker. "The role of traditional leaders in a future South African constitutional dispensation." *Africa Insight*. 24:3 (1993).

<sup>7</sup> The White Paper on Local Government. March 1998: 78.

<sup>8</sup> The name Bhekabelungu means "to watch over the whites" in Zulu. The word inkosi is the Zulu equivalent for "traditional leader." When discussing inkosi Bhekabelungu Biyela specifically, I will use the word "inkosi," and in all other cases, I will use the term "traditional leader."

approximately 62 years old and has had limited schooling. He does not speak any English. Before becoming the inkosi, he worked as a policeman in Durban. While he is one of the few people in Mvuzane that has access to tap water, he does not have electricity, phones, or an automobile. Similar to every other inkosi in KwaZulu-Natal, inkosi Biyela is an *ex-officio* member of the URC. He attends the meetings of this body when they are called (every three months), but he does not hold any other positions in the council nor did he hold any government position for the former KwaZulu government. He is a member of the IFP and regularly attends party meetings and rallies.

The 1996 census approximated that there were 15,000 people living in Mvuzane. There are thirteen wards each having an induna, two traditional councillors, and usually one iphoyisa.<sup>9</sup> The boundaries, and sometimes even the induna in charge of the specific wards, are sometimes contested issues. While the boundaries of the tribal authority unit have been recorded and gazetted by government officials, the ward boundaries are not as formalized. For the most part, people can identify the general area of a ward but there is much confusion concerning the more precise boundaries. The salience of these boundaries - both of the tribal authority unit as a whole and particular wards within it - are becoming much more important as there are more attempts to deliver services such as water, roads, and schools. The elected local councillor is currently conducting his own census of each ward to better facilitate development project applications to the government and to NGOs. He believes that only when he knows how many people live in a particular ward can he estimate how much money can be contributed by the community for a development project. Such detailed information is oftentimes required when applying for development projects.

The elected local councillor that represents Mvuzane is Njabulo (this is not his real name). Njabulo is thirty-five years old and only moved to Mvuzane from a neighbouring tribal authority (Khanyile) after matriculating from Mvuzane High School in the late 1980s (this was the only high-school in the area so many students came from different areas to attend). He has attended classes at University of Natal-Durban in development studies, speaks fluent English, and is a self-described "community worker" who would much rather hold small workshops with members of the community than attend local government meetings in Eshowe or Empangeni. He is an active member of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and also served as a traditional councillor on the inkosi's council up until last year. While he no longer has a "formal" position on the inkosi's council, he is considered by most community members to be the inkosi's closest advisor and confidant. He has the attitude that there are two types of people in the world - those who talk about changing things and those who actually bring change to the community. He likes to think of himself as the latter but he has become frustrated with the decision making processes on local government as he believes there is a priority for talking over that of action. Since its establishment in 1996, the URC has only funded one project for Mvuzane and this is a water project that began in March of this year. While Njabulo does not hold a formal position within the tribal authority hierarchy, he is recognized by the community, izinduna, amaphoyisa, and

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<sup>9</sup> An iphoyisa acts as an assistant to the induna. He (in all the cases in Mvuzane, it was "he") tells people when to report to the induna's court and he is responsible for attending public events such as weddings to "keep the peace." There is usually a fee for this police service and it is mandatory that the iphoyisa is there.

traditional councillors as the inkosi's most trusted and important advisor.

### **Perceptions of Politics, Democracy, Development, and Traditional Leadership in Mvuzane<sup>10</sup>**

As I mentioned above, I began my research in Mvuzane with an initial assumption that the traditional/modern dichotomy would not adequately explain present-day political and social struggles in the rural areas. As I started talking to people about politics, democracy, and development, however, I was surprised to learn that the community was drawing similar distinctions between the different roles, duties, and functions of the inkosi and the elected councillor. I was told that the people who solve “problems” in the community were the traditional leaders while the person responsible for development “needs” was the elected councillor. This problems/needs dichotomy articulated by the community appeared to fit with the larger traditional/modern distinction. As I discuss below, however, the problems/needs distinction is filled with complexities and contradictions that became evident as I asked more specific questions. I will try to highlight this point by discussing in more detail some basic perceptions people seem to have in Mvuzane.

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<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, I am still generating the exact statistics for some of the findings mentioned below. If I do not cite exact statistics for a particular finding that is mentioned in the text, it simply means that I have not entered the data into the proper database to generate the exact statistics. Any comments made in the text concerning people's perceptions, however, are accurate as I have checked the data using other methods.

During the interviews, one of the questions I would ask people is what they thought of the word “politics.” Unlike many places in KwaZulu-Natal, over the last fifteen years Mvuzane has been a relatively peaceful area. While there is a perception that instances of crime are rising,<sup>11</sup> it has been spared much of the “political violence” that was often found in other areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Indeed, the only violence that people seem to be aware of in Mvuzane is that which took place between two neighbouring tribal authorities. I was told that while government officials publicly proclaimed this violence as “political,” it was actually a conflict between two IFP-dominated tribal authorities that was initially caused by an altercation between two men from different tribal authorities at a wedding ceremony. The ensuing violence was to last at least two more years and was characterized to me as a “mini-war.”<sup>12</sup> But Mvuzane was not involved in this conflict, and without exception, people told me that it was a “peaceful”<sup>13</sup> place and that the traditional leaders had done a good job at keeping it this way.

Still, despite the fact that Mvuzane was free from political violence, most people told me that politics was a bad thing for the community as it led to violence and killing. When asked if the inkosi should be involved in politics, an overwhelming number of people said no. Again, it was feared that if the inkosi was involved in politics then he would not be an impartial decision maker for the community.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I have not yet been able to confirm this.

<sup>12</sup> Interview in Mvuzane. February 1999.

<sup>13</sup> After a couple of months of trying to figure out why people were simultaneously telling me that Mvuzane was “peaceful” but that crimes - including robbery and murders - were out of control, I finally realized that the word used for “peaceful” (*ukuthula*) only refers to “political” violence (ie, ANC-IFP) or “faction fights” (ie, two or more tribal authorities) and that this word did not apply to everyday instances of crime.

<sup>14</sup> Many people refused to answer any questions about politics claiming they did not “know anything about it” or that they were scared to talk about it. Thus, approximately 37% of the respondents told me that politics was bad versus 2% who said it was good, but an

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overwhelming 45% refused to answer the question. Likewise, 38% of the respondents said that the inkosi should not be involved with politics versus 7% who said he should with almost 45% refusing to comment.



With respect to “democracy,” most people identified it with development. They told me that the success or failure of democratic institutions depended on the ability of such institutions to deliver resources. They often referred to such resources as their needs (*izidingo*). Thus, rather than interpreting democracy as a system of political rules that aims to ensure *procedural fairness* (ie, elections, rule of law, equality among citizens), most people stated that the *substantive* aspects of democracy (ie, improving one’s life economically) were more important. Given this view of democracy, combined with the reality that only three development projects have been started in Mvuzane since 1994 (one by Mvula Trust, one by URC and one by DWAF), it is not surprising that most people believed that democracy had failed in the last five years and that democratic institutions (such as local government) were not doing enough to improve their lives. Some said it was not working because the politicians were not keeping their promises and others claimed that democracy had simply led to the threat of more violence. This is buttressed by the fact that almost 60% of the respondents claimed their lives were worse or are the same as in 1994 versus only 13% that claimed their lives were better.<sup>15</sup> People repeatedly told me that democracy, just like politics, had brought them nothing but more misery and suffering.

When asked who they believed was most responsible for bringing development projects to their community, an overwhelming number of people mentioned Njabulo. Only a small percentage of people mentioned local government by name, but this may be deceiving as most people were aware that Njabulo was their elected local government representative. National government or provincial government were seldom mentioned.

But when asked who the “community leaders” (*abaholi umpakhathi*) were for Mvuzane, almost every respondent mentioned the inkosi and/or izinduna. In comparison, only a few people mentioned Njabulo by name. Similar to previous studies, people confirmed that most important job of the traditional leaders was to solve the problems (*izinkinga*) of the community.<sup>16</sup> When people were forced to label Njabulo with reference to their characterization of inkosi as the “community leader” and problem solver, they would most often describe Njabulo as the “leader of development.” When asked to explain what they meant by this, they would usually tell me that the inkosi let Njabulo make the decisions concerning development issues and that the inkosi only asked to be “consulted” before decisions were made.

Thus, when asked general questions about traditional leaders and development, people in Mvuzane distinguish between those leaders who are responsible for their “problems” versus those responsible for their “needs.” This distinction, I suggest, seems to be similar to the more general traditional/modern dichotomy that is often invoked to explain the differences between “traditional” and “modern” institutions. But when asked more specific questions about who makes decisions,

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, although not surprisingly, over half of the 13% who thought their lives were better were the direct beneficiaries of the only water scheme to be implemented in Mvuzane since 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Zulu, P.M. “An Identification of Base-Line Socio-Political Structures in Rural Areas, Their Operation and Their Potential Role in Community Development in KwaZulu.” University of Zululand Publication, 1984; KwaZulu-Natal Traditional Leaders Focus Group Research Project, 1998.

and who should make decisions, both concerning development and other community matters, the distinction between “problems” and “needs” becomes much more ambiguous.

For example, with respect to the role of traditional leaders addressing the community’s “needs”, about 40% of the people were of the opinion that the inkosi must be involved with trying to get development for the area. In some cases, people told me that the inkosi’s role was more than just a person who looked after the community and approved or disapproved of development projects coming to Mvuzane (sometimes referred to by researchers as a “gatekeeper” role). Rather, he should be *actively* trying to get more resources for Mvuzane. There seemed to be a growing perception (which I think is probably incorrect) that other tribal authorities were getting more resources than Mvuzane and that other traditional leaders were doing more for their communities.<sup>17</sup> Thus, people seem to be expecting more from their traditional leaders with respect to development rather than less.

To meet these rising expectations, people told me that the inkosi should do whatever he can to get into contact with government institutions. In contradiction to people’s views that inkosi should not be involved in politics, an overwhelming number of people told me that inkosi should run for office so that he will be closer to government departments, and thus, have better access to resources. There was generally no feeling that the inkosi was too dignified, or that it would somehow be disrespectful for him, to run for office. Only a small percentage of the respondents realized that inkosi was already an *ex-officio* member of Uthungulu Regional Council.

In addition, people were not afraid to tell me about the negative aspects of the inkosi or of the institution of traditional leadership more generally. Some people stated that while inkosi Biyela was a good leader, they also thought that he tended to be too nice and agreeable to people to the point that things did not get done for the community. Others were not so vague and simply stated that inkosi was a good person but that he was lazy, and more importantly, that because of his lack of education that he was unable to help the community as much as they needed.

Despite such statements, however, most people said that the institution of traditional leaders should, and must, continue in the future and coexist with democratic institutions. I was told on numerous occasions that without the presence of the inkosi as leader of the community there would be violence, hardship, and chaos. Still, people were not unwilling to suggest that traditional leadership could be reformed to meet the new challenges. For example, bordering Mvuzane to its south-east is a tribal authority called Kholweni. Kholweni is one of the few tribal authority areas in KwaZulu-Natal where the inkosi is elected to the position.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, when I would ask people how they felt about the inkosi in Mvuzane being chosen through hereditary

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<sup>17</sup> Also, within Mvuzane itself, there is a widespread belief that certain areas are getting development faster than others. In many cases, it is believed that the areas around the inkosi’s and Njabulo’s homesteads are benefiting more from development projects than other areas.

<sup>18</sup> The inkosi in Kholweni was elected seventeen years ago with no subsequent elections being held. The community is in the process of drafting a “constitution” for their area that will set forth in detail the powers and terms of office for the inkosi. They plan to elect a new inkosi in the coming months. I am planning to use Kholweni as an additional research site.

principles, almost everyone I spoke with told me it was the best (and only) system to have. But when I asked people about their opinion of Kholweni, I received different types of answers. A good number of people told me that Kholweni's system was better than the one in Mvuzane because the people could choose an inkosi that was educated and more familiar with development issues. These same people usually told me that they would like to have this system in Mvuzane as well.

My aim in this section has been to introduce some of the perceptions and distinctions that are made by people in Mvuzane. While initially distinguishing between the inkosi and elected councillor in a fashion that fits with the traditional/modern dichotomy, with more detailed questions, this categorization became problematic. Many of the answers to the more specific questions reveal significant contradictions in people's attitudes. With respect to understanding broader power relations within Mvuzane, it is important to recognize and appreciate these contradictions rather than ignore them. In the next section, I use two case studies from Mvuzane to highlight these contradictions in more detail and to explore the implications this has for the maintenance and/or establishment of social control.

## **Establishing and Maintaining Social Control**

### *Conflict Resolution and Water - Example #1*

One of the first water projects to come to Mvuzane after the 1994 elections was sponsored by the Department of Water Affairs (DWAF). The ultimate aim of this project was to set up a scheme that would pump water from the Tugela River to Richard's Bay. To do this, the water from the Tugela would have to travel through tributary rivers until it reached its final destination. One of the rivers that the water goes through is the Mvuzane River which passes through Mvuzane Tribal Authority. Before this project was started in 1996, a representative from the DWAF visited each of the tribal authorities affected by this project and asked for the inkosi's permission to enter "his" area and do the necessary work. In the case of Mvuzane, as probably was the case in other tribal authorities, the project was allowed to proceed only under the condition that the community would receive development benefits from it. For example, DWAF promised that the community would receive additional water supplies - through boreholes and taps - and that certain roads would be tarred and bridges would be built. In addition, DWAF said that the project would also create jobs for people in the community. The project was approved by the inkosi under these conditions and it commenced in 1996.

Unfortunately, the project has not gone according to plan and rather than provide benefits to the community, it has done considerable harm. Even where DWAF seems to have delivered on some of its promises, these too have been incomplete. For example, portions of the main road were tarred but just in those sections that needed to be done in order for the engineers to transport their supplies through Mvuzane. The result being that only limited parts of the gravel road has been tarred. Some bridges were built but they were built too low so that they are not effective when the water level rises. Electricity poles and lines run through a certain section of Mvuzane but these main lines have not yet been connected to any households.<sup>19</sup> Finally,

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<sup>19</sup> I found that the existence of the electricity poles led to the most confusion, and frustration, as people could not understand why they could not get access to electricity given the

according to the inkosi and Njabulo, no jobs were created as a result of the project.

The most serious problem with this project, however, is that water is now released from the Tugela River and travels via the Mvuzane River on its way to Richard's Bay. When the water is released, the Mvuzane is quickly transformed from a little stream into a flowing river. The river reaches such depths that it flows over the bridges onto the roads and fields. People have lost clothes, cows have been killed, and little children injured when the water is released. To make matters even worse, the community is not warned when the water will be released, and it does not occur at regular intervals, so people have no idea when it will start.

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close proximity of the poles. Further, the poles were sometimes placed in the middle of grazing lands or garden areas.

In addition to the loss of property and some injuries, the other effect has been that the river water is now much dirtier than before as a result of the project. The large majority of people in Mvuzane do not have access to boreholes or taps and still collect their water from the river. The water is so dirty now that it is difficult to use for washing and it is dangerous to drink. The community complained to the inkosi about the water situation and the inkosi called a meeting with the representatives of the water project to sort out the problems.<sup>20</sup>

The meeting occurred in February on an overcast and rainy day. Because the tribal court was being used for a memorial service, the meeting took place outside, against the wall of the tribal court. Chairs and benches were arranged along the sides of the tribal court so that people would be protected from the rain. The inkosi, izinduna, traditional councillors, Njabulo, and the representatives from Mhlataze Water Board<sup>21</sup> sat at one of the corners of the tribal court so that people could sit next to the two adjoining walls and still be able to see the main participants. There were about 60-70 people at the meeting with approximately half of the people being women. Most of the people were middle-aged adults, between 45 and 60, with only a few people there who were younger or older than this. Because the representative from Mhlataze could not speak Zulu, and only a few people from the community could speak English, a translator was used during the meeting. The translator was someone who worked for the Mhlataze.

The meeting lasted for about one hour. The inkosi was the first person to speak followed by the Mhlataze representative. The inkosi argued that promises had been broken to the community and that this was unacceptable. He said, "They did not fulfill their promises. They lied to us...we will allow you to continue with the project if you fulfill [your] promises." The inkosi also told the representative that the community was getting the impression that he and his advisors were not taking care of the people's interest. Thus, not only was the project failing to deliver on its promises, but the community was beginning to blame the inkosi for this failure when he claimed it was not his fault. The inkosi told the representative that the situation had to be reconciled immediately; people should be compensated for their lost property and injuries and that DWAF needed to bring the community water services which were promised to them. The river

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<sup>20</sup> This meeting followed earlier attempts by the inkosi to have the matter resolved. Inkosi told the community that he had "sent *my councillor* [Njabulo] to Richard's Bay to talk about this" but that the issue had not been resolved.

<sup>21</sup> Since the project had started, DWAF had subcontracted the implementation services to an NGO called Mhlataze. Thus, the person at the meeting was from this NGO and not from DWAF. He promised that he would be in direct contact with DWAF about the community's complaints.

water, the inkosi said, was now undrinkable but the people had no choice but to drink it and they were getting sick. To emphasize this point, the inkosi had someone go to the river and bring back a glass full of the water. While the representative was responding to inkosi's remarks, the glass of muddy water was placed at the representative's feet. Inkosi interrupted the representative and asked him if he wanted to drink this water - to which the representative just shook his head no.

The representative's first point was that the inkosi and his representatives were doing a "very good job" at representing their interests. The problem, he said, was that the funds had not yet been allocated to complete the project and that is why the community water services had not yet been provided. This, he added, was not the fault of the inkosi. He explained that his organization was not involved in the early stages of the project and had only recently been subcontracted by DWAF. Thus, he could not comment on the previous promises that had been made but he promised that he would "look into them." He repeatedly said that it was "sad that in this day and age, that these things happen...." He also promised that he would send a letter to DWAF outlining the concerns of the community.

At this point, members of the community were given the opportunity to voice their specific concerns to the representative. Numerous people, both men and women, voiced their concerns in quite impassioned and angry tones. The inkosi would occasionally interject in a diplomatic fashion to keep the proceedings from becoming too critical. After about forty-five minutes of discussion, Njabulo asked to be heard. He was one of the last people to speak. He said that he would like to have a copy of the letter that the Mhlatuze was going to send to DWAF. He wanted to see exactly how the community's concerns were articulated. Also, he wanted the representative to arrange for someone to come out and speak with each of the people who had been injured or who had lost property so that they could be properly reimbursed. Njabulo later told me that while he knew these people would not be compensated, he wanted to see how the representative would respond to the request. The representative said he would arrange for someone to come out and then he left the meeting.

The meeting continued and other business was discussed. A few minutes later, however, the representative's translator came over to inkosi and whispered something in his ear and then left. The inkosi then said something to Njabulo and Njabulo left the meeting to go talk with the representative. Apparently, the translator told the inkosi that the representative would not be able to send someone out to speak with the injured people, but instead, that the inkosi needed to arrange for each of the injured persons to write their complaints down and then send them to Pietermaritzberg. Obviously, this was going to be very difficult to coordinate and the inkosi did not feel it was his responsibility to arrange this. As the representative and the translator drove off, the inkosi made his final remarks on the matter. He said that they had already been lied to again by these people and it happened even before they had left the meeting.

### *Conflict Resolution and Water - Example #2*

Around 1993, Njabulo started applying to various organizations for funds to help start a water project. Eventually, he received funds from Mvula Trust for a water project in his ward. The funds were awarded to him and with contributions of 130 rand plus labour from over fifty households, the water project was completed in 1998. Each household continues to pay 50 rand per month for the water. Each of the communal taps are protected with a lock and if the 50 rand

is not paid then the key to the lock is taken away. While there has been some problems with collecting the money, for the most part, people are paying what is required. The money is put into a savings account at a bank in Eshowe and will be used if any of the pipes need repairs.

While Njabulo was the central figure in this project, in theory, the water project was controlled by the ward water committee which was formed by Njabulo prior to getting the funds from Mvula Trust. The water committee consists of nine people of which seven are women. The committee has a chairperson, vice-chairperson, treasurer and secretary. The formal structure of the water committee is one that is not only common throughout Uthungulu Regional Council or KwaZulu-Natal but throughout South Africa as a whole. The government has stated that such committees - that are in theory autonomous - are supposed to serve as the crucial link between state institutions and the community for the delivery of services.

This water committee, as are the other ones in Mvuzane, are directly linked with the traditional leaders. The members of the committees were chosen at a community meeting called by the inkosi, and the induna for each ward serves as an *ex officio* member of the committees. In addition, there is an "umbrella" development committee for the entire Mvuzane Tribal Authority which has a president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and portfolio directors that handle different development needs such as water, education, roads, or schools. The inkosi is an *ex officio* member of this umbrella development committee.

Many water committee members told me that the izinduna were often suspicious of their work and that it was sometimes difficult to get things done because of this. More importantly, the water committees are entirely dependent on the leadership of Njabulo. For example, even though Njabulo has officially "resigned" from his ward's water committee and serves as the "minister" of education on the umbrella committee, both the ward committee and umbrella committee consult with Njabulo before making any decisions. In fact, many of the ward water committees have stopped meeting as they are "waiting for Njabulo" to help them acquire funds.

The water is pumped from a nearby spring to a tank that is located on Njabulo's property.<sup>22</sup> The water is distributed through a gravity pump allocation scheme to fifty households. People access the water through community taps, or if they can afford to spend an extra 50 rand, they can have a tap put directly in their homestead. Only Njabulo's family and the Thandi family were able to pay for "private" taps. Mandla Thandi (not his real name) lives about 300 metres from Njabulo's homestead and is one of the two izinduna for the ward - the other one being Njabulo's brother. To guard against waste, some procedures were agreed upon by the community. The main water supply can be turned on or off from the tank at Njabulo's. It was decided that the water would be turned off at night to prevent people coming from other wards and using the water.

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<sup>22</sup> Njabulo lives with his brother and other relatives in one homestead.

As I mentioned above, this particular ward in Mvuzane has two izinduna. This is not uncommon in Mvuzane or in other tribal authorities. The rationale for having two izinduna is usually that the ward is uncommonly large and that it is better to have two izinduna at different sections of the ward so people do not have to travel too far to have problems resolved. In this case, the two izinduna live right next to each other which implies there is another reason for this arrangement. While I am still trying to find out why this decision was made, I do know that induna Thandi was appointed about five years ago and Njabulo's brother was appointed two years ago. I have yet to find out whether induna Thandi needed help because he was often in Durban searching for work or whether the appointment of Njabulo's brother was some sort of political favour to the family for all the work Njabulo had done for the community.<sup>23</sup>

The conflict over the water transpired in the following way.<sup>24</sup> Induna Thandi was going to be in Durban for about one week searching for work and he told his neighbours to let Njabulo know. After he left for Durban, Njabulo began receiving complaints from people that they were not getting any water from the communal taps. When Njabulo investigated the situation, he discovered that induna Thandi's tap had been left open and that the water was spilling out into his homestead. Because all the water was coming to the Thandi's, the water was not continuing to flow down to the taps that are below Thandi's. Njabulo not only turned off Thandi's tap but decided to disconnect his pipe from the main pipe and thereby not allow him to use his private tap. Induna Thandi returned from Durban to find that his tap had been disconnected. Rather than go to Njabulo to resolve this problem, he went directly to inkosi and demanded that a case be heard to resolve the matter. That Saturday the community from this ward was called to a meeting at the Njabulo's homestead. The inkosi did not attend the hearing but instructed his senior induna (*induna enkhulu*) and his advisors on how the matter should be decided. Everyone present at the meeting, except induna Thandi and his father, supported Njabulo's right to shut off the water versus induna Thandi's claims that this had been done without notice and without proof that he was at fault. Induna Thandi also argued that he had not left the tap on and that someone must have done it after he left. The community, as well as Njabulo, the induna enkhulu and the inkosi's advisors, were also of the opinion that induna Thandi should not have come directly to the inkosi with this matter, but instead, that he should have gone to the ward water committee first. Induna Thandi argued that because he was an induna he was entitled to have the inkosi resolve the conflict and that as the induna he should not have to go to an ordinary person and make an apology.

As these events transpired, Njabulo told me that he thought this was first and foremost a question for the water committee. When it came to development questions or conflicts every person in the community was equal and the induna should have recognized the proper protocol

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<sup>23</sup> I have sometimes asked Njabulo whether he wanted to be induna and why he has not been appointed induna - given the respect he has in the community. He laughs at this suggestion and tells me that not only is he too young to be an induna but that the responsibilities of the induna are more conflict resolution than development, and he would rather be active in the latter than the former.

<sup>24</sup> What I provide here is the interpretation of these events as they were told to me by induna Thandi, Njabulo, and their neighbours.



in this situation. But once the induna did take the matter to the inkosi, according to Njabulo, it then became a matter for the traditional structures to deal with and that he felt the water committee no longer had a role to play.

At the end of the day, the decision, as passed from inkosi to the induna enkulu, was that this was a matter for the water committee to decide. If induna Thandi wanted to have his water turned back on, he would have to address the water committee (ie - Njabulo). It was up to this organization to decide if and when the pipes would be reconnected. In other words, the meeting resolved nothing except the jurisdictional issue of who should decide. In this case, it was decided that the matter was better left to the development committee.

When I left Mvuzane in March, the matter had yet to be resolved. Induna Thandi told me that he would not apologize to the water committee or Njabulo and that he was looking for permanent work in Durban so it did not matter. In fact, one of the communal taps is only 30 metres from his homestead so his family still has easy access to water. The issue, so it seems, is one of pride more than convenience. Njabulo told me that he was surprised he had not heard from the induna about the matter and that he would like the induna to send him a *written statement* outlining his position. As far as I know, this has not been done.

### *Conflict Resolution and Water - Analysis*

While these two case studies raise many interesting issues, I want to focus on how they inform our understanding of the dynamics of maintaining and/or establishing social control in rural communities and how these struggles are actually played out. Specifically, there are two related points that I want to discuss in this section. The first is that the inkosi does not limit himself to addressing only the “problems” of the community, but is quite capable, and willing, to take the lead on issues that concern the community’s development “needs.” These examples suggest that any initial distinction made by the community between “problems” and “needs” becomes much more fluid once real conflicts arise. The second point is that the value of traditional leadership to the community, and the authority it wields, cannot be entirely equated to its functional capacities to deliver services or to its “gatekeeper” status. Traditional leaders are quite capable, and in some cases expected, to be actively involved in the process of delivering resources. There is no question that the inkosi wields the most authority in Mvuzane but this authority is not limited to only “traditional” functions such as resolving specific disputes or allocating land. Indeed, the key to his authority is precisely that he is not limited to one sphere of influence and that he can justify his participation (or his lack of participation) in a wide range of community affairs.

In each example, the issue facing the community was about development. In one case, the development project failed and in the other case there was initial success followed by a dispute between two powerful neighbours. Given the issues involved in each case, it is difficult to argue persuasively that one case was more about the “needs” of the community while the other case was more about “problems.” For example, one might interpret the first case to be more concerned with “needs” than “problems” because it was about the government failing to deliver community water services. With this interpretation, we might be surprised to see that the inkosi, rather than Njabulo, played the leading role at the meeting. On the other hand, one could argue that the injuries inflicted on the community, the loss of property, and the dirty drinking water represent serious “problems” that are usually handled by the inkosi. The same sorts of interpretation issues

arise in the second example. Do neighbourly disputes that arise from the delivery of resources, like water, belong more to the class of issues the community would label “needs” or is it simply a “problem” like fighting or boundary disputes?

Obviously, there are no “right” answers to these differing interpretations and the point of juxtaposing these two cases is to highlight the fact that the distinction between “problems” and “needs” - which I argue is similar to the traditional/modern dichotomy - is ambiguous and contestable. More importantly, we can only expect such conflicts to become more frequent as development resources are allocated to dispersed, rural communities. Rather than being isolated from such issues because of his “traditional” status in the community, the traditional leader will most likely be at the center of any decision making process.

As I discussed above, social control can be conceptualized as the ability to secure people’s daily well-being and to “ensure individuals’ survival strategies.” Collecting and using water is an important daily activity for people in Mvuzane. Any changes to this process, especially when the changes result in new conflicts, can be confusing. In this way, the question of social control is really about who people will go to when there is an issue concerning these changes. While the assumption is that the traditional leaders will either act as a “link” between the community and democratic institutions, as the “gatekeeper” to approve development projects, or that they will fade away because they will prove to be ineffective, it is often ignored how traditional leaders might actually seek to reestablish their authority directly over development issues.

Implicit in these assumptions is the idea that the authority of traditional leaders is generated primarily from its *functional capabilities*. Given the unlikelihood that traditional leaders will be capable of actually delivering development resources, it is assumed that *if* traditional leaders were to have any influence concerning development projects, it would be limited to their role as “gatekeepers.” Thus, once the inkosi approves of a development project in “his area,” his role would be over and the power would then shift to other institutions such as local government, provincial/national government, or development committees. These democratically based institutions will thereafter make important decisions concerning the allocation and distribution of resources.

While functional capabilities are important for the establishment and reestablishment of authority in society, there are other issues that need to be considered as well. Indeed, even if we assume that the South African state will reach a point of effectiveness where it can deliver such resources, we should not too quickly assume that the authority of traditional leaders will necessarily decline as a consequence.<sup>25</sup> These two case studies demonstrate the other ways in which power is exercised in tribal authority areas which might compensate for the functional deficiencies of traditional leadership. One of the more important ways the inkosi exercises power in Mvuzane is his ability to *define* the nature of the problem, and thereby, control how it is resolved. In fact, the process of defining the issue at hand is paramount to suggesting which rule or norm should thereafter be followed. These two case studies demonstrate how the process of

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<sup>25</sup> I have conducted research in a tribal authority area within the Durban Metro boundaries (KwaXimba) that has received numerous development projects. Even in this area, however, people do not want traditional leaders to be “replaced” by other institutions.

defining the issue is one of the ways in which the struggle for social control is manifested in rural areas.

With respect to the second case study discussed, the most obvious point to be made is that it was the inkosi who decided this was question for the water committee to resolve and not the water committee itself. In a social context where there is a general distinction made between “problems” and “needs,” the inkosi was able to defer this issue to the water committee under the guise that it concerned “needs” more than “problems.” While I still do not know the additional underlying reasons why the inkosi left this issue to the water committee,<sup>26</sup> there is no question that the inkosi could have resolved this issue himself if he wanted. Indeed, I suspect that for the community a different decision by the inkosi would have been just as “commonsensical” as the decision that was made. For some, however, the inkosi’s decision came as a surprise as they suspected this issue was surely one that inkosi should resolve. In this case, it was induna Thandi who misinterpreted the nature of the conflict - even though he claims that his interpretation was consistent with how other “problems” are usually solved by the community.<sup>27</sup>

The second case study also demonstrates how “democratic institutions” are utilized by the inkosi to maintain his authority. The inkosi is aware that it is important for the community to see him working with new institutions and allowing these institutions to help address the needs of the community. The water committees in Mvuzane offer an excellent example of this. They are the bodies that are supposedly most responsible for bringing development to the community.<sup>28</sup> But rather than being an independent, democratically elected body, the water committees in Mvuzane are intimately linked to Njabulo and the traditional leaders. The inkosi’s decision to allow the water committee to resolve the conflict between should not be interpreted as an abdication of authority, but rather, as a sign that he believes the water committee is not a threat. Or more precisely, that the water committee is an extension of traditional leadership into a new area of concern.

It is also important to realize that while the inkosi “publicly” decided that this was a matter for the water committee to decide, to the parties involved, the inkosi was effectively deciding the

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<sup>26</sup> I have heard from some of the people who live next to Njabulo and induna Thandi that there had been tension between the two families in the past over the fact that Njabulo’s brother was made an induna two years ago.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with induna Thandi after the community meeting on the issue. March 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Njabulo. February 1999.

issue in a manner that supported Njabulo's interpretation of the incident. There is no question that induna Thandi feels that inkosi's decision to send the matter to the water committee was meant to resolve the issue in favour of Njabulo.<sup>29</sup> In addition, given the close relationship between Njabulo and the inkosi, it is likely that the ultimate decision taken by Njabulo to resolve the matter will first be discussed with inkosi. His close relationship with Njabulo ensures that he will be "consulted" before any decision is made by the committee.

While the question of who defines the problem is more subtle in the first example, it is nonetheless still there. The inkosi's insistence that the issue was one of trust and broken promises, versus one of bureaucratic delays and misunderstandings, was meant to frame the subsequent discussion concerning how the matter was to be resolved. The implication being that if the issue was indeed one of broken promises, then immediate restitution and action was warranted. If the problem could be defined otherwise, then other resolutions were possible. Interestingly, as if anticipating the representative's own argument that Mhlatuze was not responsible for the problem, the inkosi told the representative and the community that he had sent "his councillor" (ie, Njabulo - who is actually the councillor for the entire Uthungulu Regional Council area) to Richard's Bay to address the issue and that he had contacted the URC, but that the issue was still unresolved. In this way, the inkosi could claim that even after following the required bureaucratic procedures, the matter was left unresolved. In addition, this example shows how the inkosi was able to utilize his authority not only as "the inkosi," but also as an *ex-officio* member of the Uthungulu Regional Council, and lastly, as a local citizen who called upon his elected representative to address this problem.

More importantly, the exchange itself between the inkosi and the representative over how the problem should be defined and resolved was an exercise in social control. The inkosi and the representative had differing interpretations as to what rules or norms should apply (trust versus expected bureaucratic delay) and how the matter should be resolved. The community meeting was the forum in which these two interpretations were played out. While it may appear obvious that in this situation the community would agree with the inkosi's argument, we should not overlook the fact that such encounters are crucial for the maintenance of social control. As I suggested above, some members of the community believe the inkosi is too "soft" or "lazy" and that his lack of education means that he cannot interact effectively with government officials. These types of meetings, where the community can witness first-hand the interactions between their "community leader" and other actors, help people to establish, or reestablish, opinions and perceptions of the inkosi. In a context where many traditional leaders feel threatened by outside forces, these types of meetings give the traditional leaders an opportunity to show the community that they are still capable of securing their daily well-being.

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with induna Thandi. March 1999.

It is interesting to note, however that it was Njabulo, and not inkosi, that was able to suggest a course of action within the representative's own definition of the problem. The fact that Njabulo asked for a copy of the letter that was going to be sent to DWAF and asked for the Mhlatuze representative to send someone out to Mvuzane to record the complaints of the injured people in Mvuzane seemed to surprise the representative.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, his initial acceptance of this arrangement, that was hastily revoked once he left the meeting and could talk with his translator, suggests this point. Njabulo understood how the administrative process worked and wanted to make sure the community's complaints were handled correctly. The inkosi, who was not familiar with these processes, could not make this suggestion. This demonstrates how important Njabulo's presence is for both the community and the inkosi.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to offer a preliminary assessment as to how authority is wielded by traditional leaders in rural areas, and the limits, if any, that are placed on this authority. I wanted to directly confront some of the distinctions and contradictions articulated to me by the people in Mvuzane and situate my analysis, as much as possible, within this framework. In this way, we can appreciate the different methods used by both the inkosi, as well as Njabulo, to maintain authority. We can also understand how something so apparently benign as a water project can heavily influence power relationships in the community. We can only expect sharper lines of difference to emerge in the future as controversial decisions concerning the allocation of much needed resources are made. We can also expect that at the center of these decisions we will find traditional leaders as well as elected councillors.

At a theoretical level, I have argued that we should conceptualize the institution of traditional leaders as a social force that is "struggling" to maintain its authority and relevance in the new South Africa. Such an approach allows us to transcend debates that conceptualize the interaction between traditional and democratic institutions as being a zero-sum affair. Thus, we can analyse and appreciate the significance of traditional leadership - not as a "traditional institution" - but as a social force that is capable of utilizing a variety of different methods that enable communities to make sense out of what would otherwise be a "bewildering world."

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<sup>30</sup> I have not yet had a chance to interview this representative but I plan to do so in the near future.