

# AFRO BAROMETER

*Working Paper No. 93*

**TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN  
MODERN AFRICA: CAN  
DEMOCRACY AND THE CHIEF  
CO-EXIST?**

by Carolyn Logan

**A comparative series of national public  
attitude surveys on democracy, markets  
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## **Traditional Leaders In Modern Africa: Can Democracy And The Chief Co-Exist?**

### *Abstract*

The role of traditional leaders in modern Africa, especially in modern African democracies, is complex and multifaceted. The debate is defined by “traditionalists” and “modernists.” Traditionalists regard Africa’s traditional chiefs and elders as the true representatives of their people, accessible, respected, and legitimate, and therefore still essential to politics on the continent. “Modernists,” by contrast, view traditional authority as a gerontocratic, chauvinistic, authoritarian and increasingly irrelevant form of rule that is antithetical to democracy. Using Afrobarometer survey data, we can better understand popular perceptions of traditional leaders, how they are formed, and how they relate both to perceptions of elected leaders, and to support for a democratic system of government. Our findings are clear: positive attitudes toward chiefs are not incompatible with democracy – and *vice versa*. Even more startlingly, far from being in stark competition for public esteem, local traditional leaders appear to draw their sustenance and legitimacy from the same well as elected officials. The paper finds that African societies are often quite adept at integrating seemingly incompatible institutional structures, such as traditional institutions. The strongest explanations come from the performance evaluations of other leaders, particularly with respect to trust of local government councillors. Country effects provide the second most powerful category of explanation

## INTRODUCTION

Are Africa's traditional chiefs and elders the true representatives of their people, accessible, respected, and legitimate, and therefore still essential to politics on the continent, and especially to the building of democracies? Or is traditional authority a gerontocratic, chauvinistic, authoritarian and increasingly irrelevant form of rule that is antithetical to democracy?

This debate between the so-called "traditionalists" and "modernists" has been waged for decades in Africa, intensifying in the last two decades as efforts at democratization and decentralization have brought competing claims to power and legitimacy to the fore, especially at the local level. Modernists argue that the institutional forms of liberal democracy are universally valid, and that Africans aspire to democratic systems of rule that look much the same as those in the West. They view traditional political systems as relics of the past that may actually impede democratic development, and which must therefore be overcome. Traditionalists counter that traditional institutions have proved both malleable and adaptable, and that even if they are much changed, they still draw on their historical roots in unique and valuable ways. They see "tradition" – however contested – as a resource to strengthen the community and polity, and to overcome the many failures of the Western liberal democratic model as it has been applied in Africa.

Perhaps one thing that traditionalists and modernists often agree on, however, is that both portray traditional authority and elected political leaders as competitors. The struggle between the two for political power and legitimacy is seen as a zero-sum game. Whatever authority a traditional leader wrenches from the state is treated as a loss for "official" state leadership, and *vice versa*.

One of the essential missing components in this debate, however, has been the lack of empirical evidence concerning popular perceptions of these leaders. African political elites of various persuasions, along with academics, activists, and chiefs themselves, debate the proper position of traditional authorities in society at length. But their claims about the esteem, or lack thereof, with which ordinary Africans regard these leaders are largely unvalidated, or are based on evidence that is often only local or anecdotal. We therefore find that Chief Linchwe II of Botswana can claim that "In Botswana, the people still rally more behind the chief than behind the politician" (1997: 102), while politicians of course claim the opposite, but we have not, in either case, had solid evidence with which to evaluate the validity of these assertions.

Survey data collected in Rounds 1 (1999-2001) and 2 (2002-2003) of the Afrobarometer offer a more concrete basis on which to evaluate the merits of these various claims. The results from over 40,000 face-to-face interviews in 15 countries can help us to better understand popular perceptions of traditional leaders, how they are formed, and how they relate both to perceptions of elected leaders, and to support for a democratic system of government.

Our data indicate that traditional leaders, chiefs and elders clearly still play an important role in the lives of many Africans: only religious leaders are contacted more frequently by ordinary Africans in their efforts to solve their problems or express their views. And in many countries traditional authorities play a pre-eminent role as mediators of violent conflict. There is, however, considerable cross-country variation in these indicators of the status and importance of African chiefs and elders.

Most strikingly, the sharp distinctions outsiders draw between elected local government officials and hereditary chiefs are not made by most of the Africans who live under these dual systems of authority. In fact, far from being in competition with elected leaders for the public's regard, traditional leaders and elected leaders are seen by the public as two sides of the same coin. Overall, popular perceptions of traditional leaders are slightly more positive than those for elected leaders. But popular evaluations of both traditional leaders and elected leaders are strongly linked, and appear to be consistently shaped by

each individual's "leadership affect." Thus, positive perceptions of chiefs go hand-in-hand with positive assessments of elected leaders, and vice versa. And the connection is especially strong between traditional authorities and local government leaders – far from fighting a pitched battle for public support, the fates of each appear to be inextricably linked. In contrast, an individual's level of modernization plays a much smaller role in shaping perceptions of traditional authority than we might have expected. And most significantly for the debate about the "democraticness" of traditional rule, there is no evident conflict between supporting traditional leadership and being a committed and active democrat.

Thus, the sharp contrast often drawn between "modernist" and "traditionalist" approaches may reflect a false dichotomy. Rather than finding themselves trapped between two competing spheres of political authority, Africans appear to have adapted to the hybridization of their political institutions more seamlessly than many have anticipated or assumed. Chiefs and councillors, sultans and MPs, kings and presidents all inhabit the single, integrated political universe that, for better or worse, shapes each individual's life. In the perceptions of ordinary Africans, it seems that democracy and chiefs can indeed co-exist.

### **Overview of the Data**

This analysis draws on data collected in two rounds of the Afrobarometer. Round 1 surveys were conducted in 12 African countries (Botswana, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) from 1999 to 2001. Round 2 surveys were conducted in these plus an additional four countries (Cape Verde, Kenya, Mozambique and Senegal) in 2002-2003. Cape Verde is excluded from this analysis because the country does not have a system of traditional or hereditary leaders.<sup>1</sup> Each country is represented by a randomly drawn national probability sample in which every adult citizen had an equal chance of inclusion. Sample sizes ranged from approximately 1200 up to 3600 respondents per country, although in the descriptive statistics reported here the data are weighted to represent each country equally. Samples of this size yield a margin of sampling error for country statistics of +/- 2 to 3% at a 95% confidence level. Note that Afrobarometer surveys are concentrated in countries that have undergone at least some degree of political and economic liberalization, so the results cannot be taken as representative of sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

It must be noted that both across and often within these 15 countries, there can be wide variation in the details of what "traditional leader, chief or elder" – the phrase most often used in Afrobarometer questions about these figures – actually means. There is variability in what these institutions looked like historically, in what sorts of rules, roles and relationships were imposed on them by both colonial and post-colonial administrations, and in how they have adapted, both individually and collectively, to the many pressures and often competing incentives that they have faced over the years. In the present, there are substantial differences in terms of the extent to which their positions have been integrated into or marginalized from the state bureaucracy, what resources they command, and in the nature and extent of both their official and unofficial roles in governing their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> The Round 2 survey instrument was essentially the same across all 16 countries. In Round 1, however, several different survey instruments were used. In addition, there were sometimes differences in question wording between Rounds 1 and 2, as well as questions that were added or dropped between rounds. These differences sometimes make reporting and/or comparing the results somewhat complicated, and the process of making comparisons across countries, or within countries over time, must therefore be approached cautiously. Particularly for Round 1, we will report on a number of variables that are only available in selected countries, or that vary across countries. Differences in question wording across countries or over time, and identification of countries that were excluded from particular questions, will be noted as necessary.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Afrobarometer, visit the website: [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

But there are commonalities as well. Despite the many ways in which the institution has evolved over the years, for the most part, people know who we mean when we refer to their country's "traditional leaders." And although these authorities are very diverse, they also tend to share common characteristics. They generally occupy their posts by virtue of some sort of hereditary (albeit often contested) claim rather than through elections. But more importantly, they are recognized as having connections to their society's cultural and historic roots in ways that official government figures do not. Thus, some caution is called for in discussing and interpreting the broad cross-country results presented here given the diverse realities that fall under the rubric of "traditional leader." And further disaggregation of these results to continue exploring the ways in which various factors, both historical and current, shape these attitudes at the country level and below will be a productive next step. But the cross-country comparative findings presented here nonetheless offer a valuable first cut at understanding how traditional authorities, as diverse as they may be, are faring in the hearts and minds of the average African, especially in an era of advancing electoralism.

### **The Context: "Traditional" Chiefs in Modern Africa**

The ongoing debate about the proper role of traditional leaders in modern Africa, especially in modern African democracies, is complex and multifaceted, and not one that will be resolved here. But Afrobarometer results speak directly to some of the most contested issues in this discussion. It is therefore worth reviewing the broad contours of the controversy before examining what the specific results of the Afrobarometer can contribute.

The most significant issue, for the purposes of this discussion, concerns the question of whether traditional systems are, at their core, pro- or anti-democratic. Those typically characterized as "traditionalists" cite the accessible and highly participatory nature of many traditional systems. For example, in many pre-colonial African societies, community-wide gatherings known variously as *pitso* (Lesotho), *kgotla* (Botswana), *shir* (Somalia), *baraza* (Kenya), and by many other names, offered an opportunity for a wide array of community members to voice their opinions on community affairs and participate in consensus-based decision making. Traditionalists also note that although heredity often served as the basis for assigning leadership posts, many systems had means for "de-stooling" or otherwise displacing leaders that did not meet with the community's approval (Ayittey 1991: 135-139, Osabu-Kle 2000: 18). And with their absence of semi-permanent hereditary leaders, the continent's more acephalous systems of rule, for example among the Somali and the Neur, might be seen as more democratic still (Lewis 1961).

Keulder (1998) captures many of these features in his description of the "traditionalist" perspective:

For them the institution of traditional leaders and its procedures of governance is not only a simpler form of government, but also a more accessible, better understood, and a more participatory one. It is more accessible because it is closer to the subjects than any other system of government; subjects have more direct access to their leaders because they live in the same village and because any individual can approach the leader and ask him or her to call a meeting . . . ; decision making is based on consensus, which creates greater harmony and unity; it is transparent and participatory because most people may attend tribal meetings and express their views, directly not through representatives; and lastly, harmony and unity prevail because the interests of the tribal unit, rather than an individual or group of individuals, are pursued and expressed. (11)

In contrast, the so-called "modernists" argue that patriarchal traditional systems often silenced the voices of women and youth. Molutsi (2004), for example, contends that in Botswana, "the 'Kgotla democracy' was made up of male tribal elders from senior tribesmen" (162). These systems are also described as

unaccountable, and based on a coercive “demand for consensus,” rather than freely given consent (Mattes, 1997: 5). Critics further charge that traditional authorities rely on deference, place the community ahead of the individual, and that, in fact, “traditional authority constitutes an anti-democratic, or at best a non-democratic form of governance” (Mattes, 1997: 6). Modernists thus believe that these “institutional obsoletes” “impede the development of a virile, prosperous, democratic, and just society, and thus must have no place in any progressive society.”<sup>3</sup>

But the debate is not limited to the democratic credentials, or lack thereof, of historical political systems. Rather, it is complicated by the fact that in the modern context, neither side can deny that the content of tradition, and often the identity of traditional leaders themselves, is very often contested. After decades of manipulation by colonial and post-colonial governments, and response by indigenous leaders, there are many questions about what really is “traditional,” or how historically-rooted so-called “traditional institutions” really are. There is no doubt that the machinations of national leadership, including colonial authorities, have often had deep impacts on both the status, and the very nature of these institutions, for example by intervening in leadership selection processes by naming their own “traditional” chiefs, or endowing these leaders with new powers and responsibilities to collect taxes or produce laborers. Cooptation by colonial governments into the British system of “indirect rule,” for example, could both strengthen and weaken the hand of traditional leadership, sometimes at the same time. And the efforts of modern African leaders to either undermine traditional leaders and allegiances, or to politicize and thereby co-opt these potential “vote brokers” (Lawson, 2002), have further affected their standing.

The need of chiefs and elders to balance their dependence on local populations for “legitimacy,” or at least “respect,” with their desire for the recognition of higher authorities – and the different kind of legitimacy that this implies – may often have produced “Janus-faced” traditional authorities who were simultaneously respected and suspected by local populations (West and Kloeck-Jenson, 1999: 475-6). Most recently, the chieftaincy in South Africa certainly emerged from under the cloud of apartheid with at best a mixed reputation. Some viewed traditional authorities largely as complicit collaborators, while others (including, naturally, the chiefs themselves) sought to paint a more positive picture of their essential importance to the stability, solidarity and dignity of their communities.<sup>4</sup> The shifting allegiances of traditional authorities are sometimes characterized as being primarily self-serving. Van Kessel and Oomen (1997), for example, observe that “chiefs often align themselves, whether wholeheartedly or for tactical reasons, with the powers that seem to offer the best chances of safeguarding their positions” (562). But others suggest that this “ability of chiefs to straddle the state-society dichotomy” and serve as necessary intermediaries for their people is a strength of the institution that helps to explain its survival (Williams 2004: 121).

And of course, the issue is made still more complex by the fact that traditional systems were, and are, extremely diverse, with widely divergent systems often now brought together under the umbrella of a single state. The relatively acephalous systems of the Karamajong and other northern groups are now part of the same Ugandan state that houses the once renowned southern Kingdoms of Buganda, Ankole and Toro. And the relatively consultative and participatory Tswana and Sotho cultures find themselves elbow-to-elbow with the historically much more hierarchical and authoritarian Zulu system in South Africa. This raises yet another critical question: even if everyone were to agree that traditional leaders should have a role in the modern political arena, how can a single, coherent system of involvement be

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<sup>3</sup> Owusu 1996: 330, citing Peter Waterman, “Introduction: On Radicalism in African Studies,” in Peter C.W. Gutkind and Peter Waterman, eds., *African Social Studies: A Radical Reader*, London and New York: Heinemann, 2. See also Mamdani (1996) for perhaps the best known elaboration of the “modernist” point of view on this issue.

<sup>4</sup> Murray (2004) gives a good overview of the debates and accompanying policy changes within South Africa that have sought to define the position and role of chiefs as the country has emerged from apartheid.



crafted that adequately reflects the enormous diversity of the African traditions so often combined within a single state (Crook, 2005; West and Kloeck-Jenson, 1999<sup>5</sup>)?

It is hardly surprising, then, that modern African governments have struggled with how best to relate to these institutions. Traditional leaders have been banned, deposed and jailed, and they have been courted, coddled, and paid state salaries, along with just about everything in between, and sometimes all at the hands of the same governments as they struggle to adapt to their own shifting fortunes. As Lawson notes, “At the end of the day, the state remained dependent upon traditional authorities for access to rural society” (9), so it was not uncommon for new and confident administrations to dismiss traditional leadership in their early days, only to come begging for a boost as their popularity sagged in later years.

The question of how traditional authorities “fit” into a modern political system becomes particularly acute at the local level, where these leaders exert the most influence on the daily lives of Africans, and where the contest with government authorities for resources and responsibilities is most intense. While at the national level traditional leaders are often limited to “cultural,” ceremonial or (frequently undefined) “advisory” roles, at the community level they may be competing with local government officials for real power – over land, tax revenues or other resources, responsibility for dispensing justice, and influence over community activities and decisions, and even votes. This debate has been particularly heated in South Africa, where the chieftaincy, a “ubiquitous feature of local politics,” has been recognized in the constitution and continues to exercise direct authority in many rural areas (Williams 2004, 114-116). Chiefs and local government officials are often perceived as being in direct competition – like “two bulls in a kraal” (Oomen 2000: 14) – in a winner-takes-all battle for the hearts, minds, and resources of local communities.

In reality, though, it can be difficult to make generalizations about the relationship between local government authorities and traditional leadership. Even within a relatively small area of South Africa, for example, Oomen describes traditional authority areas that range from “veritable nations” to mere “backdrops” (Oomen 2000, 62). And it is not difficult to find examples of constructive relationships between local governments and chiefs who have recognized the mutual benefit that may accrue to both from successful cooperation (see Owusu 1996: 340 on Ghana; Oomen 2000: 62 on South Africa).

Regardless of whether one adopts a “modernist” or a “traditionalist” stance, however, it is difficult to deny that traditional leaders have demonstrated remarkable resilience. Their continuing importance in the social and political life of their communities, whether perceived as a positive or a negative, is virtually indisputable. In many places, they still play a major role in managing land tenure, often even in systems that have supposedly privatised ownership rights (Ensminger 1997). Local justice, property inheritance, and the implementation of customary law, as well as conflict resolution, also continue to be important spheres of responsibility. And they are often perceived as the guardians of their communities’ culture, playing an important role in cultural events and rituals.

In fact, some analysts even suggest that traditional institutions are experiencing a resurgence or revival in the era of democratization. As elected governments must increasingly respond to demands for services with limited resources, they have in some instances come to rely upon traditional authorities as a resource

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<sup>5</sup> West and Kloeck-Jenson, 1999, offer a detailed analysis of how all of these issues have played out in Mozambique both during the country’s long civil war, and in the democratic rebuilding afterwards, as the country has struggled to define an appropriate role for traditional authorities. Among other things, they make the case that “the ‘issue’ of ‘traditional authority’ must be dealt with . . . [in] . . . local contexts, using terminology with greater geographical and historical precision” (457). They warn against ignoring the “complex and, often, contradictory history” of these institutions as we seek to understand, and perhaps integrate them into “modern” systems of governance (484). See also de Sousa Santos, 2006.

for communicating with and mobilizing populations (Oomen 2000: 63; see also Englebert 2002; de Sousa Santos 2006; West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999). Murray (2004), reviewing recent developments in South Africa, goes so far as to note that:

To an important extent, the realities of the transition to democracy are in fact on the side of the chiefs. The new local governments have battled to get on their feet and in rural areas few have developed the capacity to provide services. They often have a single bare office and just one member of staff. . . . Traditional authorities, on the other hand, have what Oomen has described as “the material legacy of fifty years of governance-through-chiefs . . .” (14, citing Oomen 2000)

It may not have hurt, either, that the benefits of political liberalization apply to chiefs as well. De Sousa Santos (2006) notes a “growing activism” on the part of traditional authorities in Mozambique (67), and they too have the opportunity to form interest groups (such as CONTRALESA in South Africa<sup>6</sup>) that can advocate on their behalf.

Traditional leaders may also be valued because they provide a sense of continuity and stability in an era of great change. Williams (2004) suggests that they can serve as intermediaries to “ensure that change occurs in an orderly and familiar way” (121). Yet at the same time, chiefs have also displayed impressive flexibility, adapting to meet the needs of the day in an effort to preserve or enhance their position within local communities (Van Kessel and Oomen 1997: 561). In South Africa, for example, Oomen (2000) cites “vehement discussions” about allowing women and youth “access to the shade under the thorn tree” (69), while Williams (2004) notes the adoption of more participatory rules and practices as chiefs “responded to pressure from local populations, local government institutions, and development agencies” in an effort to preserve their legitimacy in the era of democratization (115-116). In fact, Williams suggests that even as chiefs “have sought to direct and redirect the democratisation process,” the institutions of traditional leadership and democratic electoral politics may actually be interacting in a “*mutually transformative process*” that causes each to shape and reshape society’s interpretations and understandings of the other (113, emphasis added). As in the past, “tradition” continues to be a moving target.

I will close this part of the discussion by questioning the commonly used terms of the debate with which I opened it. As indicated, this debate is typically cast as being between “modernists” and “traditionalists,” or, in even more evocative terms, as between “trivializers” and “romanticizers” of traditional authorities. Noting that the debate is (unhelpfully) “cast in dichotomies,” Oomen (2000) describes the conventional vision of trivializers as those who “see . . . traditional leaders as leftovers from a time that is swiftly fading,” while romanticizers “nurture parochial images of traditional leaders as shepherds of coherent communities who still live off the land and follow traditional norms and customs” (16).

Certainly there are those who do offer the “all that is traditional is good” argument, who are countered by those who argue unequivocally that either traditional leaders must go, or democracy will. Ayittey (1991) and Mamdani (1996) perhaps best represent these extremes. But there is an increasingly lively debate that occupies a middle ground between these two poles. A growing school of “pragmatic traditionalists” recognizes first that the continuing role and influence of traditional leadership is a given; traditional authority is not, by any means, in the process of “withering away” as the modernists both hope and predict. They further acknowledge that “traditional authorities” and all that they encompass have many weaknesses and imperfections – sometimes great ones – but that they also may embody strengths that might be built upon as well, not least of which is the legitimacy that they still seem to enjoy in many

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<sup>6</sup> The Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa, which actually formed in 1987 as an ANC-aligned organization. See Murray (2004).

communities. Thus, they essentially take the view that we must account for the role of traditional leadership and institutions as part of or alongside of democratization processes not because these authorities are in some way inherently good, but because, for better or worse, they are there, and they are clearly an important exerciser of “public authority” on the ground in much of Africa (Lund 2006). The perspective of these pragmatic traditionalists is perhaps best captured by de Sousa Santos (2006) speaking about the duality between the traditional and the modern that he observes in Mozambique’s legal system. Noting that “The question of how to articulate this dual legitimacy feeds one of the most intractable debates in Africa today,” he cites the argument of those who believe the two spheres must be kept entirely separate, and then goes on to say that:

According to another argument, this separation, even if correct – which is debatable – is *impossible to sustain*, given that individuals cannot keep their multiple identities watertight and ‘uncontaminated.’ It is better, therefore, to assume that contamination and hybridization between codes is a “natural” condition. (61-62, emphasis added)

Working in this pragmatic-traditionalist vein, a number of analysts have thus sought to document the complex efforts of various African societies and governments to come to terms with this reality and explore ways in which the institutions of traditional authority can be effectively blended with the needs of the state, and the principles of democracy (see for example West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999 and de Sousa Santos 2006, on Mozambique, Englebert 2002 on Uganda, or Murray 2004 on South Africa). Perhaps, as de Sousa Santos suggests, this integration may lead not to a “non-modern alternative to Western modernity,” but to “the expression of a claim to an *alternative modernity*” (61, emphasis added).

But there is still much that we do not understand about traditional leaders, their roles and the public perceptions of them that could contribute to the efforts to come to terms with the reality of chiefly importance. As Lawson puts it: “Who are these chiefs, custodians of tradition and colonial collaborators, inherently conservative yet extremely adaptable, encapsulated yet uncaptured, lacking in formal political function, yet broadly accepted as legitimate?” (2002: 10). There is still too little in the way of structured analysis that can really tell us where chiefs fit in the socio-political constellation of their publics. Are women itching to escape their chauvinistic influence? Is support for a chief inherently anti-democratic, as the modernists would suggest? Does their continuing legitimacy threaten the consolidation of democracy?

We will now turn to looking at what the Afrobarometer data can contribute to this debate.

### **Turn Back the Clock?**

We will begin with what is in some senses an “extreme” measure of public attitudes toward traditional leadership: the question of whether or not there is any public sentiment in favor of turning back the clock, abandoning democracy and restoring the central leadership role of traditional chiefs and elders. In Afrobarometer Round 2 (2002-2003), the question was posed to respondents as follows: “There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternative: all decisions are made by a council of chiefs or elders.”

Note that, for reasons discussed in the previous section, there are several obviously problematic aspects to this question. How, for example, would such councils be composed in multi-ethnic countries with widely divergent systems of traditional rule, all of which have been changed and remade numerous times during the colonial era and beyond. As a number of countries have experimented over the years with creating non-elected national Houses of Elders, controversy has frequently erupted over who should have access to seats in these assemblies, how their successors should be chosen, and how these leaders can be held accountable. And these bodies have been primarily symbolic, wielding little real power and controlling

few, if any, concrete resources. Moreover, while traditional institutions and leaders still play important social, political and economic roles in many places, the capacity of such systems to manage a modern state is by no means clear. Thus, the actual feasibility of installing a traditional system of rule is certainly in question in most, if not all, countries.

Nonetheless, the question provides an indicator of public attitudes toward traditional political systems as an alternative to an electoral model of democracy. In addition, we also asked respondents their views about several other alternative systems, including a one-party state, military rule, and presidential dictatorship, so we can also assess the relative nostalgia for traditional rule in contrast to these other systems.

Table 1 reveals some perhaps surprising findings. While traditional rule is rejected by a majority of 54% of all respondents across 15 countries in Round 2, it is considerably less distasteful to the public than one-party rule, which is rejected by two-thirds (66%) of respondents. And both military and strongman presidential rule are dismissed by much wider margins (77% each). About one in three respondents (31%) say they would actually approve of a return to rule by traditional leaders (15% neither approve nor disapprove, or don't know).

**Table 1: Rejection of Alternatives to Democracy**

	Round 2 (2002-2003)			
	Reject Rule by Traditional Leaders	Reject One-Party State	Reject Military Rule	Reject Presidential Dictatorship
Mozambique	29	42	53	41
Mali	34	71	65	66
Senegal	45	76	75	77
Namibia	46	55	51	58
Uganda	48	54	85	90
Lesotho	49	61	85	82
Malawi	49	66	84	78
Botswana	50	68	79	85
Kenya	59	75	92	90
Nigeria	61	80	69	72
Zimbabwe	62	58	80	80
South Africa	63	67	77	73
Ghana	69	79	83	82
Tanzania	72	62	86	86
Zambia	72	72	95	90
<b>15-country mean</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>77</b>

*There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: all decisions are made by a council of chiefs or elders; only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office; the army comes in to govern the country; elections and the parliament/national assembly are abolished so that the president can decide everything. (% disapprove/strongly disapprove)*

But cross-country variations are sizeable. In seven countries less than half of respondents reject a traditional system of rule. They are led by Mozambique, where the role of traditional leadership became a significant issue in the civil war. FRELIMO officially abolished the institution of chieftaincy shortly after taking power in an effort to “liberate” society from what it saw as “‘feudal’ and ‘obscurantist’ institutions.” In contrast, RENAMO was “in some places, greeted with open arms by discontented

populations coordinated by disgruntled ex-chiefs” (West and Kloeck-Jensen 1999: 456 and 460). Today, just 29% of Mozambicans think restoring traditional rulers would be unacceptable. Not only did “traditional authorities” survive FRELIMO’s efforts to dispense with them, but FRELIMO itself has been forced to come around on this issue, acknowledging, as the civil war came to a close, that traditional authority had a role to play in Mozambican society.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, in Mali a mere 34% feel this way, followed by 45% of Senegalese. In Botswana, where many regard the government as having successfully integrated the traditional leadership system into the modern political arena, just 50% reject this “step back in time.” In contrast, nearly three-quarters (72%) oppose restoration of traditional rule in both Tanzania and Zambia. The relentless efforts of Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere to nationalize individual identity at the expense of sub-national ethnic identities may have helped to diminish allegiance to local traditional leaders. Kenneth Kaunda’s similar, if less aggressive, efforts to do the same in Zambia appear to have yielded comparable results.

As is evident from Table 2, the “modernization thesis” appears to hold up. Younger people and urbanites are somewhat more likely to disapprove of this alternative, while education differences are pronounced. Gender differences are smaller, but still statistically significant in the large-N pooled sample. But rather than being more eager to abandon the male-dominated traditional leadership hierarchy, women are instead slightly more supportive of it. Women appear to value chiefs’ role as “guardians of culture” or sources of stability more than they feel concern about a lack of equal voice in their communities.

**Table 2: Attitudes Toward Restoration of Traditional Rule, by Socio-Demographic Group, Round 2**

	<b>Approve</b>	<b>Disapprove</b>
<b>Age</b>		
18-30 years	30	56
30-45 years	30	55
46-60 years	33	53
More than 60 years	38	49
<b>Location</b>		
Urban	25	61
Rural	35	50
<b>Education</b>		
None/Informal only	42	38
Primary only	34	52
Secondary only	25	62
Post-Secondary	17	70
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	31	56
Female	32	52
<b>TOTAL</b>	31	54

(%)

### **Traditional Leaders: How Important are They?**

How much of a role do traditional leaders still play in the daily lives of their subjects? Who do ordinary Africans turn to in order to meet their personal or community needs? Table 3 indicates that traditional

<sup>7</sup> Working out the details of what that role should be and how it should be manifest remains a complex and highly contested issue. See West and Kloeck-Jensen (1999) and de Sousa Santos (2006) for a detailed examinations.

leaders still play a prominent role in the lives of their constituents. We asked respondents “During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons for help to solve a problem or to give them your views.” Across 15 countries, only religious leaders are contacted more frequently on these issues, while government and political leaders at both the local and national level are approached far less often.

Once again, we see considerable cross-country variation. Traditional rulers were the most frequent target of contacts in Lesotho and Malawi. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of all Basotho had made contact with their local chief within the past year to solve a problem or express their views, and more than half of Kenyans and Malawians have done the same. In Lesotho, traditional institutions appear to have maintained a particularly strong foothold. The Basotho chieftaincy may benefit from the country’s ethnic homogeneity, since national identity does not necessarily compete with ethnic identities and allegiance to ethnically-based chiefs, as may be the case in more ethnically diverse societies such as Tanzania. In 10 countries traditional rulers are contacted more frequently than local government councillors. In Tanzania, on the other hand, we again see evidence of the lower standing of the traditional leadership. Only representatives to the National Assembly are less important to the public’s daily lives. And in Uganda, we see evidence of the success of President Museveni’s promotion of an accessible, multi-tiered decentralized government structure: traditional rulers are the targets of less than one-third the number of contacts that are made to local council officials. This is even true – in fact, more true – among the Baganda, whose traditional leadership was restored with much fanfare in 1993: just 11% of Baganda had contacted a traditional ruler, compared with 70% who had contacted local government officials. Apparently, in the long interregnum (1969-1993), the Baganda learned how to survive and thrive without the intervention or guidance of their traditional leadership.

**Table 3: Contacts with Political and Community Leaders, Round 2**

	<b>Traditional Ruler</b>	<b>Religious Leader</b>	<b>Local Govt. Councillor</b>	<b>Political Party Official</b>	<b>Official of Govt. Ministry</b>	<b>Member of Parliament or National Assembly</b>
South Africa	10	31	16	13	4	4
Uganda	21	66	71	9	16	16
Botswana	22	35	24	16	18	14
Ghana	28	42	15	15	9	12
Tanzania	28	57	43	35	33	19
Mali	32	34	26	17	4	8
Namibia	32	38	17*	17	16	5
Nigeria	32	50	17	21	14	6
Zambia	33	67	24	16	15	18
Senegal	37	47	27	22	10	10
Mozambique	39	40	17	12	7	4
Zimbabwe	39	55	42	23	20	19
Malawi	50	44	22	22	13	17
Kenya	54	61	30	16	26	19
Lesotho	62	43	25	17	12	11
<b>15-country mean</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>12</b>

*During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons for help to solve a problem or to give them your views. (% only once/a few times/often)*

*\*This result excludes the 57% of respondents in Namibia who do not have a local government councillor.*

As suggested earlier, the arena of conflict resolution is indeed one in which the public still accords a particularly prominent role to traditional leadership. We asked respondents “To whom would you turn for help to resolve a violent conflict between different groups in this country.” Across 14 countries,<sup>8</sup> fully one out of four of the substantive first responses (i.e., excluding “don’t know” and “no one”) to this question identified traditional chiefs, elders or mediators (Table 4).<sup>9</sup> Another 4% identify traditional courts. Among government institutions, the public is most inclined to rely on the security forces (police and military); local government officials are considered less reliable mediators, and representatives of the national government are even less likely to be called upon. Again, Lesotho and Malawi top the list, with more than half of all respondents identifying traditional leaders as the best hope for resolving problems. Tanzanians and Ugandans, on the other hand, would again turn first to the local administration, rather than traditional leaders.

**Table 4: Who Helps Resolve Violent Conflicts, First Response, Round 2**

	<b>Traditional chiefs/elders/mediators</b>	<b>Armed forces/police</b>	<b>People involved in the conflict</b>	<b>Families, friends, neighbors</b>	<b>Local administration</b>	<b>Traditional Courts</b>
Malawi	56	15	2	9	1	8
Lesotho	52	15	6	14	0	3
Mali	38	9	11	10	14	3
Botswana	30	8	10	3	4	8
Kenya	27	16	10	6	17	2
Senegal	25	8	22	12	9	2
Ghana	24	32	8	10	5	5
Zambia	23	26	6	15	4	5
Mozambique	19	13	12	21	4	8
Nigeria	17	28	8	5	2	3
Namibia	12	36	9	18	2	4
Tanzania	12	11	8	9	28	2
Uganda	6	15	10	6	23	3
South Africa	4	39	20	8	2	2
<b>14-country mean</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>

*To whom would you turn for help to resolve a violent conflict between different groups in this country. (%)*

As mentioned, in many countries traditional leaders also continue to play a critical function in controlling access to land. This is obviously a central concern to the majority of Africans who still rely directly on their land for survival, as well as to many urban Africans who continue to maintain roots in rural communities, in part by retaining access to a piece of land, the closest many have to an insurance policy or pension plan. Management of the continent’s land resources has long been a controversial topic. On the one hand, many economists have called for massive and immediate privatization of ownership in order to rationalize investment in agriculture. Others argue that traditional tenure systems, usually managed by local chiefs, may be better aligned with African cultural and social norms, and more protective of the most vulnerable in rural communities. A number of studies have suggested that even where privatization has been introduced, many communities have, to varying degrees, ignored or circumvented modern tenure systems and continued to rely on traditional tenure norms (see, e.g., Ensminger 1997).

<sup>8</sup> The question was not asked in Zimbabwe.

<sup>9</sup> Respondents were allowed to give up to three responses. Figures reported exclude “Don’t know” responses, as well as 28% of respondents for whom the question was not applicable because they had indicated on the previous question that they thought violent conflicts “never” arise between groups within their country.

Afrobarometer data on attitudes toward the role played by chiefs in this critical sector is limited to just three countries in Round 1, but the widely divergent results across these three countries confirm that this issue is contentious and remains unresolved. In Mali, Nigeria and Tanzania, respondents were asked whether they agreed more with the statement that “In rural areas, land should be owned by the community and allocated by the traditional rulers,” or with the statement that “People should be able to own their own land, including buying and selling it, even in rural areas.” Large majorities in Nigeria (75%) and Tanzania (77%) agree with the second statement. In fact, significant majorities “strongly agree” (57% in Nigeria, 63% in Tanzania). In Mali, on the other hand, attitudes are almost exactly reversed: 76% agree with the first statement, and 64% “strongly agree.” These responses are generally consistent with the pattern evident in other results. Malians have shown themselves to be among those who are still most attached to their traditional leadership systems, while Nigerians and especially Tanzanians have indicated some of the lowest levels of support for these systems.

### Performance Evaluations of Traditional Leaders – Round 1

We now turn to the principal focus of this analysis: public assessments of the quality of traditional leaders relative to elected leaders and other government institutions. The most detailed assessments of traditional leaders are found in the seven Southern African countries (Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe) in Round 1 (1999-2001). But we will begin with a brief overview of performance evaluations for the other Round 1 countries (Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Tanzania<sup>10</sup>), before delving into these Southern African results in more detail. The next section will review and analyze the more limited, but more consistent and comparable, results from 15 countries in Round 2 (2002-2003).

#### *Trust in Traditional Leaders in East and West Africa*

The patterns of institutional trust evident in Table 5 for four East and West African countries are consistent with the trends already observed. Malians are very trusting of their traditional leaders. Fully 84% express confidence in them, surpassing any other institution by a considerable margin, and doubling the level of trust expressed in political parties and courts of law. In Tanzania, on the other hand, traditional leaders rate lowest. They are trusted by only a slim majority (52%), falling far behind the president, the National Assembly, and even the police and political parties.

**Table 5: Trust in Chiefs, East and West Africa, Round 1**

	<b>Ghana</b>	<b>Mali</b>	<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>Tanzania</b>
Chiefs	68	84	58	52
President	--	72	78	90
Parliament/National Assembly	70	55	58	91
Local government	58	65	57	79
Political parties	61	42	51	66
Army	64	80	37	94
Police	49	49	29	62
Law courts	58	43	54	72

*Ghana: How much do you trust the following institutions: chiefs?*

*Mali/Tanzania: How much do you trust the following institutions: traditional rulers?*

*Nigeria: Do you trust the following institutions: traditional rulers?*

*(All: % “somewhat” or “a lot”)*

<sup>10</sup> The questions were not asked in Round 1 in Uganda.



### ***Southern African Perspectives on Traditional Leaders***

The Round 1 data for the Southern African countries offers the most detailed and extensive results on attitudes toward traditional leaders. But this data is also limited in one critical way. Most questions about trust in leadership institutions were asked of all respondents. However, the questions about traditional leaders were *only* asked of those respondents who first answered a filter question indicating that they do “have a traditional leader, chief or headman” in the affirmative – about two-thirds of all respondents in these seven countries.<sup>11</sup> This ranged from a low of just 19% (408 cases) in South Africa,<sup>12</sup> to a high of 99% in neighboring Lesotho (Table 6).

**Table 6: Have a Traditional Leader Sub-Sample**

	Total respondents	No. “yes” (i.e, do have a traditional leader)	% yes
Botswana	1200	892	74
Lesotho	1177	1159	99
Malawi	1123	1123	93
Namibia	1183	781	66
South Africa	2200	408	19
Zambia	1198	661	55
Zimbabwe	1200	683	57
<b>Total</b>	<b>9366</b>	<b>5707</b>	<b>63</b>

*Do you have a traditional leader, chief of headman?*

For those who do have a traditional leader, the survey then went on to ask about that leader’s interest in his constituents, his or her trustworthiness, and to what extent chiefs or traditional leaders are involved in corruption. Respondents were then asked similar questions about their national president, members of parliament, and their local government. All of the results presented in this section only include the subset of respondents who have a traditional leader.

Not surprisingly, this filter introduces some bias into our sample. Those who indicate that they have a traditional leader are disproportionately rural, older, and less educated. For example, 82% of those with a traditional leader are rural, compared to 63% of the total weighted sample. And 58% of this group never advanced beyond primary school, compared to 48% of the total sample. The age bias is smaller: 31% of those in the sub-sample are over 45 years, compared to 27% of the full sample. Thus, the results presented here for each country, and for the region, cannot be taken as completely representative of those of society at large, nor can they be directly compared to those from other Round 1 countries, or with Round 2 results, where all questions about trust in leadership were asked equally of all respondents.<sup>13</sup> But they are representative of all those who live directly under the aegis of a traditional leader. With this caveat in mind, let us now turn to the substantive findings, starting with the reported perceptions of traditional leaders.

We began by asking respondents how attentive traditional leaders are to their problems: “How interested do you think your local chief is in what happens to you or hearing what people like you think?” An average of 63% say traditional leaders are either “interested” or “very interested” in their concerns, with

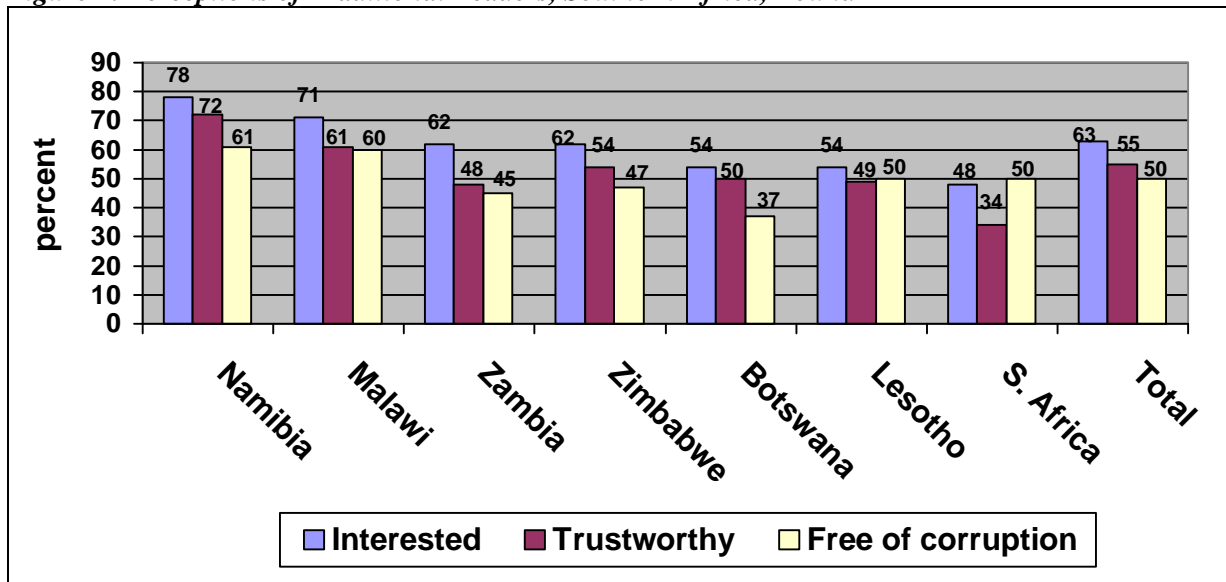
<sup>11</sup> The “yes” cases comprise 66% of the weighted sample.

<sup>12</sup> Note that this figure of 19 percent living under the authority of a traditional leader in South Africa is far lower than those commonly cited, which are usually in the range of 40 to 45 percent, or even higher. See, for example, Murray (2004), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> It is also important to keep in mind that the margin of error is higher for the smaller country samples, especially in the case of the smallest sub-sample in South Africa (+/-5%).

one in three (33%) saying they are “very interested.” Namibians show the greatest confidence in the good intentions of their traditional leaders; fully 78% credit them with a real concern for the people. And Malawians are not far behind. South Africans, on the other hand, once again occupy the opposite end of the spectrum; just 48% (of the already relatively small sub-sample) think their traditional leaders are interested in their constituents’ needs and concerns. Surprisingly, the Basotho, who have elsewhere shown themselves to be strongly attached to their traditional leaders, do not express a great deal of confidence in the seriousness with which their chiefs take their communal responsibilities.

**Figure 1: Perceptions of Traditional Leaders, Southern Africa, Round 1**



*How interested do you think your local chief is in what happens to you or hearing what people like you think? (% interested /very interested)*

*How much of the time can you trust your local chief to do what is right? (% most of the time/always)*

*How many chiefs or traditional leaders are involved in corruption? (% some, a few/almost none, none)*

The question that followed asked respondents “How much of the time can you trust your local chief to do what is right?” Southern Africans who live under these leaders have moderate levels of trust in their chiefs: 55% say that they trust them “most of the time” or “always” to do the right thing, while just 12 % say they never trust them. Again, South Africans are least trusting (35%), and Namibians (72%) and Malawians (61%) are most.

Finally, we asked “How many chiefs or traditional leaders are involved in corruption?” Fifty percent of respondents believe that the ranks of traditional leadership are relatively free of corruption, responding either that only “some, a few” or “almost none/none” are involved in these illegal activities. Less than one in four (23%), on the other hand, believes that all or most of them are corrupt, while another quarter (25%) say they haven’t heard enough about them to say. In Botswana, where traditional chiefs are most integrated into the “modern” political system, we also see the lowest levels of confidence expressed in the integrity of these leaders. Just 37% think they are relatively free of corruption; however, a surprising 46% say they haven’t heard enough about them to say, while just 14% think that many are corrupt. Does this lack of knowledge or an opinion on the matter suggest that Batswana are not as closely linked to their traditional leaders as Chief Linchwe II and others would have us believe? Or have Botswana’s chiefs, by being integrated into the political system to an unprecedented degree, also been tainted by that system in ways that ordinary Batswana are uncomfortable admitting?

Factor analysis indicates that responses to these three questions about the quality and integrity of traditional leaders all draw on the same dimension of attitudes or perceptions about traditional leaders. A single factor can be extracted that explains 62% of the total variance.<sup>14</sup> The three can therefore be combined into a single, 5-point Perceptions Index for Traditional Leadership that ranges from 1, equivalent to very negative perceptions of traditional leaders, to 5 for very positive perceptions, with 3 reflecting a neutral attitude.

As indicated in Table 7, the mean value of the index across all seven Southern African countries is 3.4; those who live under traditional leaders thus give them a somewhat positive rating overall. South Africans give them the lowest ratings in the region, with a mean of 3.0; in other words, on average, those South Africans who live under traditional leaders (just 19 percent of all South Africans) sit on the fence in their attitudes toward them, evenly balanced between negative and positive views. In contrast, Namibians, some two-thirds of whom live under traditional authorities, give these leaders a strong positive rating with a mean score of 3.9.

**Table 7: Perceptions Index, Traditional Leaders**

	<b>Mean Perceptions Index, Traditional Leaders</b>
Namibia	3.9
Malawi	3.6
Zambia	3.4
Botswana	3.4
Zimbabwe	3.3
Lesotho	3.2
South Africa	3.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.4</b>

### ***Traditional Leaders vs. Elected Leadership***

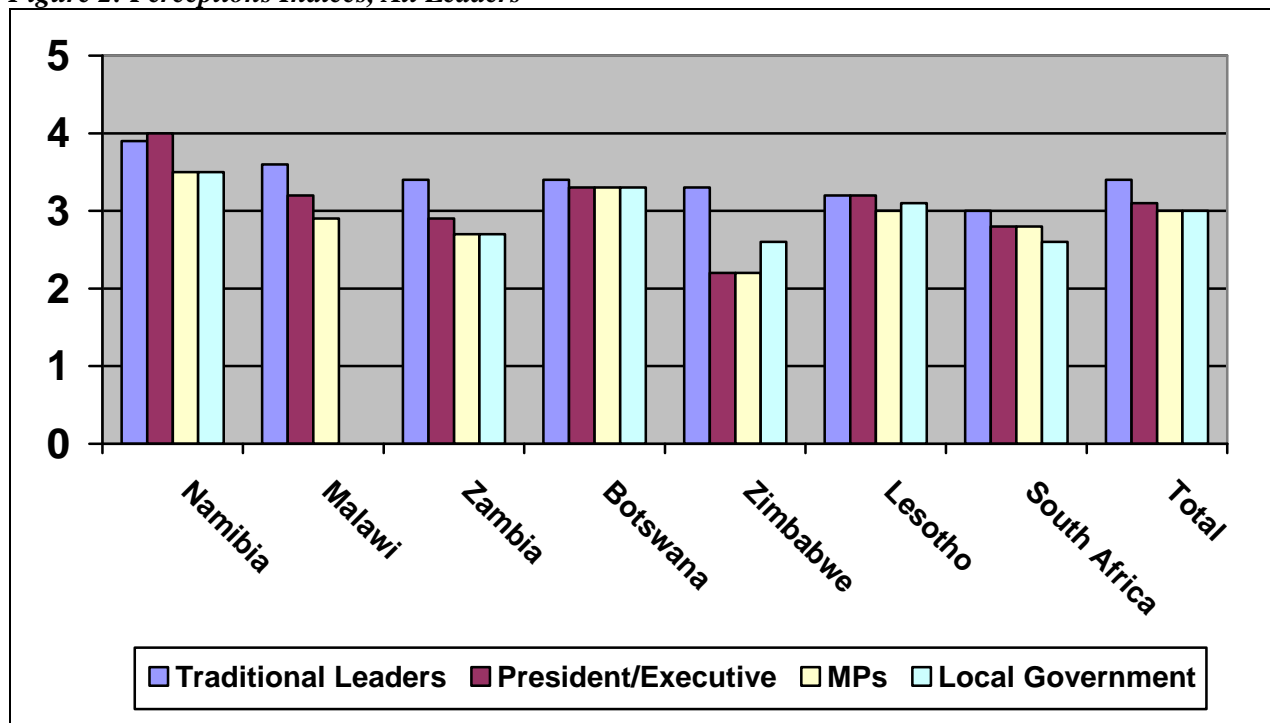
How do these moderately favorable perceptions of traditional leaders among those who live under their authority compare to those for Southern Africa’s democratically elected government representatives? Based on the same three questions about corruption, levels of trust, and interest in the people, perception indices were created for local government (except for Malawi, and parts of Namibia, which do not have local government bodies), members of parliament, and the president and the executive branch.<sup>15</sup> The results are shown in Figure 2.

Comparing the mean values of these indices reveals that across seven countries, respondents give traditional leaders moderately but consistently better ratings (seven-country mean of 3.4) than any of their elected officials: local government councillors (mean of 3.0), members of parliament (mean of 3.0), and the president and executive branch (mean of 3.1). While the differences are quite small in Botswana and Lesotho, they are much larger in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe; in the latter, a full point separates traditional leaders from parliamentarians and the president. Only in Namibia does any branch – the executive – score higher than traditional leaders, and even then it is only by one-tenth of a point.

<sup>14</sup> Eigenvalue = 1.861, Cronbach’s alpha = 0.690.

<sup>15</sup> For the perceptions index for the executive, one factor was extracted with an Eigenvalue of 1.991 that explains 66% of the variance; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.746. For the perceptions index for parliamentarians, one factor was extracted with an Eigenvalue of 1.928 that explains 64% of the variance; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.721. For the perceptions index for local government, one factors was extracted with an Eigenvalue of 1.963 that explains 65% of the variance; Cronbach’s apha = 0.735.

**Figure 2: Perceptions Indices, All Leaders<sup>16</sup>**



The very minimal differences between traditional leaders and elected officials in both Botswana and Lesotho may reflect the extent of integration of the traditional leadership into the “modern” political system in both of these countries, deliberately in Botswana, perhaps more by default in the case of Lesotho. As discussed, both are ethnically relatively homogenous societies, and have not experienced the degree of competition between national and local allegiances that may have undermined traditional leadership to some degree in countries like Zambia and Tanzania. It appears that in such environments, ordinary citizens may make less of a mental distinction between the government and the traditional leadership.

It is worth noting that while South Africans were most critical of their traditional leaders among the seven countries, it turns out that they are even more critical of their elected leadership. Conversely, Namibians are generous not only in their assessments of traditional leaders, but in their evaluation of elected leaders as well. It is possible that the sizeable difference between these two countries with respect to evaluations of traditional leadership may not reflect vastly different perspectives on traditional leaders specifically, but rather more (South Africa) or less (Namibia) critical inclinations toward leadership in general. We will return to this question in the following section.

### **Explaining Perceptions of Traditional Leaders – Round 1**

We can formulate several possible hypotheses about what might explain overall perceptions of traditional leaders. The most obvious, of course, is the supposition that an individual’s level of modernization will be a good predictor. We might expect that younger, more educated, and urbanized individuals will be

<sup>16</sup> Like the figures for traditional leaders, the indices for president/executive, MPs and local government presented in Figure 2 are calculated including only those who live under a traditional authority. Note, however, that when all respondents are included in the calculation of these indices, the differences are very small, 2 percent or less in all but two cases. Thus, there is little difference in evaluations of the executive, parliament and local government between people who live under traditional authorities and those who do not.

more likely to endorse the vision of traditional leaders as representatives of a bygone, backward, and pre-democratic era, and hence will evaluate them more negatively. Furthermore, the male-dominated institution of traditional leadership is regarded by many as detrimental to the interests of women; hence, we might also expect men to register higher levels of support for traditional leaders than women (although we have already seen evidence that this may not be the case). But beyond these initial hypotheses, what else might explain these leaders' ratings?

Using multivariate regression analysis, we can both further test the modernization hypothesis, and explore other possible explanations. Additional categories of explanatory factors that have been tested include:

- Performance evaluations – Do popular evaluations of the democratically elected government, its leadership and its performance on key issues affect assessments of the relevance and reliability of traditional leaders? If, for example, a person rates elected leaders highly and/or sees the elected government as doing a good job in managing the economy and handling land access issues – traditionally a central realm of chiefly influence – is he or she more likely to see the traditional leadership system as irrelevant, and rate it negatively?
- Trust – Do individuals who express higher levels of general trust in their compatriots also tend to trust traditional leaders more?
- Democratic and electoral attitudes – Are those who support democracy and believe in the principle of elected leadership more likely to reject the institution of hereditary chieftaincy? And conversely, are those who are willing to accept non-democratic forms of government more favourable towards what some regard as the authoritarian institution of the chieftaincy? And do people who believe that voting can really make a difference in the quality of leadership, or who engage directly in electoral campaigns or rallies, have lower regard for non-elected traditional leaders?

We will also test for fixed country effects.

Table 8 shows the results of multivariate regression analysis, with the Perceptions Index for Traditional Leaders as the dependent variable. The key findings can be summarized as follows:

- Overall, our model explains about 14% of the overall variance in perceptions of traditional leaders, so it offers at least a reasonable start in explaining perceptions of traditional leaders, but there is much that remains unexplained.
- The modernization hypotheses does not hold up particularly well, making only a very small contribution to the overall model (adjusted block R square = 0.008). Perhaps surprisingly, neither age, gender, nor urban-rural habitation have significant effects. Education, in contrast, has significant effects, and they are in the (negative) direction expected. But the magnitude of the effects is relatively small.
- By far the most powerful set of explanatory variables is performance evaluations (adjusted block R square = 0.108). But neither perceptions of government handling of the economy nor of land access, are significant. Rather, it is the three other perception indices – for the executive, parliament, and local leaders – that offer considerable explanatory power. But note the direction of these effects: perceptions of traditional leaders are *positively* linked to perceptions of all other leaders. Moreover, the relationship is strongest with respect to what many describe as traditional leaders' closest "competition": local government officials. In fact, the index of perceptions of local government officials is the single most powerful explanatory variable in our model. In other words, not only are

traditional leaders not in competition with elected government at the national and especially the local level – recall the image of “two bulls in a kraal” discussed earlier – but in fact, the two appear to be *mutually reinforcing*.

We can propose several possible explanations for this finding. One is that, as suggested above with respect to Namibia and South Africa, individuals may display a leadership disposition or “leadership affect” that is more or less positive, more or less critical, towards all types of leaders – and potentially towards other ordinary citizens as well. Alternatively, whether their role is explicitly recognized or not, this finding may suggest that the public does essentially regard traditional leadership as part of the government apparatus, and hence evaluates them based on the same criteria as elected leaders. That is, if they are happy with the government and its performance, then they are happy with traditional leaders as *part of the government*, and *vice versa*. Finally, a related but nonetheless distinct explanation is that the public views traditional and elected leaders through the same lens because, to ordinary citizens, they are all among the “big men,” elites and patrons of society.

- The first of these explanations is further supported by the effects of generalized trust, i.e., the feeling that “most people can be trusted.” The positive sign on this variable is consistent with the suggestion that evaluations of leadership are based more on an individual’s general disposition toward leadership – and towards society at large – than on specific evaluations of each category of leaders.
- We find that for the most part, an individual’s democratic attitudes – whether pro-democracy, or pro- (or at least tolerant of) authoritarianism – are quite poor predictors of leadership evaluations (adjusted block R square = 0.018). Those who support democracy as the best system of government, and those who reject authoritarian alternatives, are neither more nor less likely to have positive views of traditional leaders. The clash that modernists perceive between traditional rulers and electoral systems of government are not evident to average Africans. And when it comes to engagement with elections, the effects are the *opposite* of what modernists would predict. Those who believe in elections, stating that how one votes actually matters to the quality of governance, are actually *more* likely to have positive perceptions of traditional leaders, as are those who have worked for a candidate or party. There is thus no evidence to be found here that traditional leadership and democracy are in opposition to one another. Contrary to the leading criticisms of the “modernists,” support for democracy readily co-exists with support for traditional leadership.
- Patterns of civic engagement are surprisingly unhelpful in predicting attitudes toward traditional leaders. Of particular interest, though, is the surprising sign on campaign work. While we expected that participating in a group that looks after the community might suggest traditional affiliations, we predicted that such a “modern” and democratic behavior as working for a candidate or party would suggest modern, pro-democratic – and anti-traditional – tendencies. But in fact, the sign on this variable is positive; those who worked on election campaigns were slightly more likely to offer a positive evaluation of traditional leaders. This is consistent, however, with the finding that there does not appear to be any inherent contradiction, in the minds of ordinary Africans, between being pro-democracy (and pro-elections) and supporting traditional leaders.
- Finally, we note that the second most important category of explanatory factors (adjusted block R square = 0.058) are the fixed country effects, particularly for Namibia.<sup>17</sup> All of the countries except

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<sup>17</sup> Note that at the time of the Round 1 survey, Malawi did not have local government institutions, so the country drops out of the analysis when the Index of perceptions of local government is included. However, re-running the model either with this index excluded, or with all missing cases in Malawi and elsewhere coded to the midpoint value of 3, has few substantive effects on either the significance or the direction and relative influence of the other

South Africa (and Lesotho, where the effects are not significant) tend to be more positive about traditional leaders than Botswana. This is somewhat surprising given Botswana's reputation for providing the paradigm of well-integrated traditional and modern political systems. It is consistent, however, with findings reported elsewhere that integration of traditional leaders into a political system may enhance the legitimacy of the system as a whole, while undermining the standing of the traditional leaders themselves. In such situations, traditional leaders may suffer both from their greater potential exposure to corruption and rent-seeking opportunities, and due to the greater distance (both literal and figurative) that their new governmental roles may place between them and their home communities (Logan 2002).

**Table 8: Explaining the Perceptions Index for Traditional Leaders. Round 1**

	<b>B (unstandardized)</b>	<b>Beta (standardized)</b>	<b>Adj. Block R square</b>
(Constant)	2.117***		
<b>Socio-demographic/ Modernization</b>			<i>0.008</i>
Age	0.002	0.023	
Education	-0.031*	-0.049	
Urban or rural (1/0, rural excluded)	-0.090	-0.033	
Gender (1/0, male excluded)	-0.046	-0.022	
<b>Performance Evaluations</b>			<i>0.108</i>
Government handling of economy	0.020	0.028	
Government handling of land	-0.016	-0.022	
Index of perceptions of executive	0.065**	0.069	
Index of perceptions of parliament	0.069**	.069	
Index of perceptions of local govt.	0.200***	0.204	
<b>General Trust</b>			<i>0.018</i>
Most people can be trusted	0.070**	0.050	
<b>Democratic Attitudes</b>			<i>0.018</i>
Support democracy	0.005	0.003	
Index, rejection of authoritarian alternatives	-0.013	-0.012	
Vote matters	0.024*	0.039	
Attend an election rally	-0.005	-0.006	
Work for a candidate or party	0.047*	0.049	
Understand government	-0.013	-0.015	
<b>Country (1/0, Botswana excluded)</b>			<i>0.058</i>
Lesotho	-0.051	-0.019	
Malawi	--	--	
Namibia	0.471***	0.147	
South Africa	-0.136*	-0.043	
Zambia	0.187**	0.067	
Zimbabwe	0.184**	0.067	
<b>Adjusted R square, Full Model</b>	<b>0.143</b>		

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

variables (although the adjusted R square for the model which drops the local government index is, not surprisingly, reduced).

## Performance Evaluations of Traditional Leaders – Round 2

In Round 2, only one question evaluating traditional leaders was asked: that of trust. But it was asked across 15 of the 16 countries included in Round 2 (all but Cape Verde), and it was asked of all respondents in each country. It therefore provides a broader basis for evaluating perceptions of traditional leaders, and an opportunity to test the initial model of perceptions developed using the more limited (in scope) Round 1 data. Ratings of trust in traditional leaders compared to other elected leaders, as well as several key government institutions, are shown in Table 9.

We see that once again, traditional leaders fare relatively well in comparison to elected leaders in a number of countries. They get the highest rating across these four groups in eight of the 15 countries. On the other hand, we continue to see that they receive the lowest ratings among the four in South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. The biggest surprise, however, is Namibia: for reasons that are not clear, traditional leaders now rank a distant third to the president, in contrast to the neck-and-neck status of the two in Round 1.

**Table 9: Trust in Leaders and Government Institutions, Round 2**

	<b>Traditional Leaders</b>	<b>President/ Prime Minister</b>	<b>Parliament/ National Assembly</b>	<b>Local Government</b>	<b>Army</b>	<b>Police</b>	<b>Courts</b>
Senegal	79	73	52	51	82	70	68
Mali	78	71	62	51	79	63	50
Malawi	68	48	38	33	72	64	61
Mozambique	62	75	54	42	48	50	59
Lesotho	58	58	49	49	50	51	58
Tanzania	55	79	69	60	72	51	54
Botswana	54	44	37	34	60	57	57
Ghana	54	65	48	38	54	51	45
Zimbabwe	53	46	37	39	55	52	55
Zambia	51	46	40	16	52	42	49
Kenya	49	70	53	36	58	27	37
Uganda	47	61	48	77	51	43	51
Namibia	42	76	47	31*	50	48	42
Nigeria	31	18	11	17	21	11	12
South Africa	19	37	31	20	32	35	39
Total	53	58	45	38	56	48	50

*How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% a lot/a very great deal)*

*\*Excludes 60% of cases with no local government body.*

We conducted a second multivariate regression analysis using essentially the same model as that developed for the Round 1 Southern Africa data above, but this time applied to all respondents in all 15 countries, and using trust in traditional leaders as the dependent variable.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Because of differences between the two Rounds in the questions that were included, there are some differences in the two models. In particular, as with traditional leaders, the specific questions asked about the leadership attributes and performance of the president, members of parliament and local government councillors varied in Round 2. Thus, rather than the condensed indices developed in Round 1, we replace these three indices with a set of 7 variables that separately measure trust, performance and corruption among these leader. In addition, the “generalized trust” variable was dropped because the question was not asked in Round 2. The democratic attitudes block was also modified, but it still includes measures of support for democracy, rejection of authoritarian



Table 10 shows the results of this analysis. These can be summarized as follows:

- Overall, the findings strongly confirm our initial model. The signs and significance of the key explanatory variables, and the relative importance of the performance, democratic attitudes and country blocks are quite consistent between the two models. The most notable difference is that sociodemographic factors have stronger overall explanatory power in the Round 2 model with all respondents included, offering somewhat more support for the modernization hypothesis than provided by the Round 1 model. Other things being equal, younger, urbanized and more educated Africans are less likely to trust traditional leaders than their older, rural and less educated counterparts. But performance remains a much more powerful basis for explaining trust in traditional leaders.
- With a more varied sample that includes all respondents (not only those with traditional leaders), the Round 2 model does a considerably better job of explaining the variance in trust in traditional leaders, with an Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.268$ .
- We again see that the strongest explanations come from the performance evaluations of other leaders. And once again, we find that it is the ratings, particularly with respect to trust, of local government councillors that act as the most powerful predictors. This provides valuable confirmation of the thesis suggested above, that perceptions of traditional leaders are developed largely in conjunction with those of other elected leaders, including *especially* local leaders, rather than in contrast to them.<sup>19</sup> The central tenet of the modernist school of thought, which argues that traditional leadership and democratically elected leadership are by definition antithetical to one another, does not hold up.
- This model also confirms the findings of the Round 1 model that there is no contradiction whatsoever between commitment to democracy and confidence in traditional leaders. The explanatory power of democratic attitudes is virtually nil. Even holding a strong belief that elections are the best way to select leaders does not decrease trust in traditional leaders.
- As a group, country effects again provide the second most powerful category of explanation. These are significant in all countries except Zambia. There are few surprises, although in slight contrast to Round 1, most countries are more negative about traditional leaders than Botswana. Only Malawi, Mali and Senegal are more positive, which is consistent with the other observations that identify these three countries as home to the staunchest supporters of traditional leadership. Likewise, Uganda and South Africa are, not surprisingly, strongly negative relative to Botswana.

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alternatives, and understanding of government, as well as an indicator of whether respondents rate elections as the best system for selecting leaders.

<sup>19</sup> We note the negative sign on the indicators for presidential and MP performance, but these effects are small, and moreover, they are negative *only* when we already control for the much stronger effects of trust in the president and MPs. If the trust variables are removed from the model, for example, the effects of the performance indicators are all positive.

**Table 10: Explaining Trust in Traditional Leaders, Round 2**

	<b>B (unstandardized)</b>	<b>Beta (standardized)</b>	<b>Adj. Block R square</b>
(Constant)	1.650***		
<b>Socio-demographic</b>			<i>0.080</i>
Age	0.003***	0.026	
Education	-0.067***	-0.096	
Urban or rural (1/0, rural excluded)	-0.159***	-0.055	
Gender (1/0, male excluded)	-0.022	-0.008	
<b>Performance Evaluations</b>			<i>0.172</i>
Trust the president	0.073***	0.074	
Trust Parliament	0.132***	0.127	
Trust local government	0.216***	0.209	
Performance of president	-0.024**	-0.022	
Performance of MP	-0.007	-0.007	
Performance of local government councillors	0.035***	0.032	
Corruption in office of president	-0.020*	-0.017	
Corrupt among elected leaders	0.007	0.006	
<b>Democratic Attitudes</b>			<i>0.005</i>
Support democracy	0.005	0.003	
Index, rejection of authoritarian alternatives	0.008	0.005	
Understand government	-0.013	-0.011	
Elections best for choosing leaders	0.011	0.010	
<b>Country (1/0, Botswana excluded)</b>			<i>0.138</i>
Ghana	-0.205***	-0.034	
Kenya	-0.260***	-0.059	
Lesotho	-0.211***	-0.035	
Malawi	0.432***	0.070	
Mali	0.398***	0.067	
Mozambique	-0.156**	-0.026	
Namibia	-0.551***	-0.058	
Nigeria	-0.372***	-0.085	
Senegal	0.571***	0.093	
South Africa	-0.692***	-0.156	
Tanzania	-0.296***	-0.049	
Uganda	-0.568***	-0.129	
Zambia	0.068	0.011	
Zimbabwe <sup>20</sup>	--	--	
<b>Adjusted R square, Full Model</b>	<b>0.268</b>		

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

## Conclusions

There are no simple solutions to the question of how to define the role of chiefs and elders in African political systems circa 2007. De Sousa Santos (2006) describes the real, on-the-ground relations between the parallel worlds of traditional authority and the “official politics of recognition and control” as “an

<sup>20</sup> Zimbabwe is dropped from the analysis since several of the variables utilized in the regression were not included in the Zimbabwe survey. However, dropping these variables so that Zimbabwe remains in the analysis does not significantly change the results.

intense and chaotic web of interlacings among different legitimacies, local powers, legal cultures, and legal practices” (66). It is not surprising, then, that Oomen (2000) and others have described how difficult and politically sensitive “carving out a role for traditional authority within democracy” has turned out to be, both in South Africa and elsewhere in the region (10). And our findings tend to confirm West and Kloeck-Jenson’s contention that these debates must be grounded in local context and even terminology (1999: 457).

The modernists have an important point: systems of traditional rule sometimes exhibit characteristics that are profoundly un-democratic, especially, and most obviously, in terms of leadership selection. But we have demonstrated here that the pragmatic traditionalists are also right in arguing that the importance and, often, legitimacy of these leaders is a *fact* that must be grappled with, not swept under the rug in the name of promoting “true” democracy. Owusu (1996) has argued that they are such an important part of the local political fabric in Africa that we cannot talk about democracy from below, from the grassroots, without talking about the chieftaincy (329). And Oomen (2000) has argued that if either participation or “the ability to debate one’s destiny” can be regarded as essential to democracy, then traditional administrations may often be more democratic than the elected local governments with which they supposedly compete (64).

The good news for modernists may be that, contrary to their fears and warnings, the resilience of traditional leaders does not automatically foretell the failure or demise of democracy. Our findings are clear: positive attitudes toward chiefs are not incompatible with democracy – and *vice versa*. Even more startlingly, far from being in stark competition for public esteem, local traditional leaders appear to draw their sustenance and legitimacy from the same well as elected officials. We see strong evidence that African individuals tend to have an orientation toward leadership – a *leadership affect* – that shapes their perceptions of both elected and non-elected leaders similarly.

It appears, then, that Williams (2004) was correct in his contention that “communities seldom believe that they must make an either/or choice concerning democracy and the chieftaincy,” (122) but rather that they see it as “‘commonsensical’ that the institution of the chieftaincy and democratic elections can, and should, coexist” (113). The evidence in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, is that societies are often quite adept at integrating seemingly incompatible institutional structures. Citizens in the European and Asian monarchies have been doing it for decades or even centuries, so perhaps we should not be surprised to see that the same may be happening, albeit often on a more local level, in Africa.

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