

## **Address To The National House of Traditional Leaders**

Ulundi, 3 August 2001

Chairperson of the House of Traditional Leaders;  
Your Majesties and Royal Highness;  
Distinguished Guests;  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for inviting me to this important gathering of our traditional leadership. Our meeting today is part of our ongoing engagements to seek common solutions to the challenges that face our ever-changing society and to confront questions that modern society has thrown up in relation to the role and function of the traditional leadership in the context of our own transformation process.

Indeed, all of us in this room are agents for change. Accordingly, we are engaged in the transformation of our society as a people and leadership whose values and character, I think, should still be informed by the wisdom and benevolence of Hintsa and Moshoeshoe, the courage, the humility, yet dignity of deportment of Sekhukhuni, Ramabulana and Cetshwayo.

Whatever wisdom we ourselves possess, has been transmitted, through generations, from the heroes and heroines of our people, who even in the midst of brutal wars, refused to dishonour the cause of freedom.

We are gathered here today, as this important part of the institution of traditional leadership, that is indigenous to our country and which historically, has been an embodiment of the way of life of our people, as well as a custodian of our customs, traditions and cultures.

Naturally it was important for this institution to be at the forefront of the struggle against colonial invasions, because colonialism sought to subjugate our way of life and destroy our cultures and traditions.

The consequent wars of resistance were, as we know, led by traditional leaders.

The end of formal wars of colonial conquest did not mean the end of the agony of the African people, but rather a legacy of pain, suffering and anger that shaped our country for many years.

As our people sought new ways of regaining our freedom and restoring and defending our cultures and traditions, especially at the beginning of the last century, the traditional leadership occupied its pride of place in taking the struggle to new levels.

Part of the efforts towards freedom was a principled drive for national unity and the defeat of the divisions of parochial and tribal politics.

Consequently, the struggle for freedom reached highest levels, national unity gained salience, and the contribution of traditional leaders confirmed their status as a progressive force.

Thanks in part to the selfless contribution of the traditional leadership as well as the heroic and determined efforts of the masses of our people, we are today a free nation, a free and democratic country.

Yet all of us, as South Africans, are faced with a challenge of overcoming the legacy of apartheid. The institution of traditional leadership has an important role to play in this new struggle of overcoming the legacy of the past and in building and consolidating the democracy that we have all fought so hard to achieve.

We are all aware that the role and function of traditional leadership have been denuded by many years of colonialism and apartheid.

The evil systems of colonialism and apartheid even severed this institution from the lifeblood of our people, including, in a number of instances where some amongst this leadership were seen as being opposed to the quest for freedom for their people.

Since our freedom in 1994, the institution of traditional leadership has been asking government about its status and role in our new society. Needless to say that this has, at times, been a matter of public accusations as to whether government is serious or not about defining this role and status of the institution of traditional leadership.

I think the question is wrongly posed. It is not only the government that should address this question. This important matter must be fully addressed by government, the traditional leadership together with the people of this country.

If we are to give a clear expression of the role of the traditional leadership, we have to do so in the context of our democratic society and the challenges that face all of us.

Both government and the institution of traditional leadership have no monopoly over defining this role. It is important therefore that we begin a national dialogue that will involve all sections of our society in defining the role of this institution.

This should obviously be done taking into account the important role this institution has and continues to play as the custodian of our customs, traditions and beliefs.

Accordingly, government sought to make a modest contribution to this process by putting forward a discussion document, not as a law, but as a basis for discussion by all our people.

The discussion document is not a prescription but a starting point in the dialogue that we think is crucial on this matter.

In the end, the determination of our policy on this matter must reflect the consensus of the entire nation.

I think we are aware that one of the problems we are sitting with today as a result of the colonial legacy, is that some traditional leaders are seen as impositions.

Of course we all understand that this institution does not have an elective base and will not have one.

In government, we are sitting with disputes that sooner rather than later we have to resolve. As part of that process we may perhaps constitute a commission to look at these and other matters.

However, these are issues which traditional leaders would do well to pronounce on - so as to prevent a situation whereby these matters take a momentum of their own.

Chairperson:

We have finally arrived at truly accountable, local government structures that must respond effectively to local needs of the people. These are elected leaders with whom traditional leaders must work hand in hand as partners in development.

But there are instances where local councillors and traditional leaders do not see eye to eye. In situations where there are misunderstandings, national government will play its role in ensuring mutual collaboration for the benefit of our people.

At the same time, we would like to urge our traditional leaders, themselves, to find a way of bringing these important institutions together. This has to happen because fundamentally, both have at heart the needs of their common constituencies.

It is important therefore that there are joint efforts of engaging in programmes of development by local government structures and the traditional leadership.

We have been involved with all the stakeholders over the Bill that is going to parliament and have formed a special cabinet committee that must liaise with stakeholders. Government is seeking to take this matter further expeditiously.

Already, we are happy to see many traditional leaders working with local government councillors, working hard at the implementation of the integrated rural development programme and being pioneers in rural development.

This is important because although we have a big country, 45% of the population is concentrated in six metropolitan areas which have limited land available and there is large-scale movement of people to these metropolitan areas in search of better opportunities.

Historically, these opportunities have been denied to our people in traditional areas, when the means of subsistence were destroyed. Colonial and apartheid distortions aggravated the conditions of our people and resulted in poverty, landlessness and underdevelopment.

We are therefore faced with a huge challenge to create opportunities in the rural areas and demonstrate that a better life can and will continue to materialise in these areas.

As traditional leaders, I am sure we do recognise the level of responsibility and the huge challenges that, together with government, face us in creating the necessary base for our people to participate in improving their conditions of life.

The opportunity to find a meaningful and practical role to improve the lives of our people has been availed through the integrated rural development programme.

The development of our rural areas is an important and an essential aspect of recovering and strengthening our customs and traditions and our concerted participation in cultural life. In order to reinvent and renew the fabric of traditional life, we must do so in a developmental way.

The biggest threat to our traditional life is not development, but poverty. Our programmes are therefore aimed at helping our people to restore their dignity and their faith in their own customs and traditions.

I am raising the need for all of us to roll up our sleeves and work harder to improve the lives our people, while we continue to debate and discuss the role and function of the traditional leadership in our modern society.

These discussions and the national dialogue on the institution of traditional leadership, should not be a substitute for the work that we must continue to do amongst our people.

We have on a number of occasions spoken about the renewal of our continent. The institution of traditional leadership can and should play a central role in the African Renaissance.

This is because to speak of an African Renaissance is to speak of the coming into being of a new African identity, a new resolve to take our future into our own hands and determine our own destiny.

Part of these efforts is also to provide our people with skills and capacity for self-development, to reduce poverty and inequality and to put Africa on a new and accelerated growth path.

Thus to realise this dream of an African renaissance, of the sustained development of our country and our continent, requires also the renewal of the institution of traditional leadership.

The cohesive efforts of our entire society is needed to enable Africa to face the legacy of the colonial and neo-colonial past and to face the challenges posed by the new millennium.

The African Recovery Programme, which is our programme for the renewal of the continent, also recognises the need for the reconstruction of our identity and the regaining of self-confidence of the African people. Our rich cultural legacy must be part of our future and of our efforts in determining who we are and building a new relationship with our development partners in the rest of the world.

In this context of reconstruction and renewal, I would like to make an appeal to all of us to display the same spirit of sacrifice as that of our forebears.

We should be informed by the selflessness of Makana who acted for the good of all. We should be inspired and guided by the foresight and ingenuity of Shaka, Sobhuza and Makhado.

Many in this room have demonstrated that indeed we are capable of putting the interests of the country and the people before everything else.

The ink of the pens of the students of contemporary history of South Africa has not dried. The annals of that history clearly tell us that at crucial moments, His Majesty the King of the Zulus as well the honourable Minister of Home Affairs Dr Buthelezi, demonstrated exactly what we are talking about, when they put the interests of the country first, as when they refused to accept a fraudulent and treacherous independence.

For this democracy to continue strengthening and to have in place systems and institutions that will help bring about a better life for all our people, no matter where they reside, each one of us would have to be guided by the best interests of these very people.

As we work together to define for our democracy the appropriate role and functions of the institution of traditional leadership as well as other related matters, I am confident that we will succeed, because we are all conscious that whatever conclusions we arrive at, they should be of benefit not to us as individuals but to our entire country and to all our people.

I thank you.