

Chiefs and Democratic Transition in Africa: An  
Ethnographic Study in the Chiefdoms of  
Tchivhase and Bali

Jude Fokwang

April 2003

**CHIEFS AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN AFRICA:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY IN THE CHIEFDOMS OF  
TSHIVHASE AND BALI**

By

Jude Thaddeus Dingbobga Fokwang

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

MASTERS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

In the Faculty of Human Sciences  
Department of Anthropology and Archaeology,  
University of Pretoria

7 April 2003

Supervisor: Prof. John Sharp

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT



I wish to thank the following persons for assisting me in this research. First, I express gratitude to Prof. John Sharp for providing me invaluable material support throughout my stay in South Africa, for supervising this thesis in particular and for his contributions towards my intellectual growth in general. I also wish to thank Professors Francis Nyamnjoh and Isak Niehaus who read sections of this thesis and made useful comments.

My research in Venda and Bali was supported by many people and in different ways. Unfortunately, I cannot make reference to all these persons, but a few of them should be mentioned: my parents, for their help in identifying certain key informants, my uncle, Mr Samuel Kona for assisting me in the acquisition of relevant literature on Bali, and Mr and Mrs Peter Sama for their moral support. In Venda, Chief Ramugondo assisted me in gaining access to traditional rulers, civic organisations and other local political actors. For this, I thank him most sincerely.

I also wish to thank my research assistants, Saki and Dema, who assisted me in Venda and Bali respectively. Dema passed away soon after I completed my fieldwork in Bali. His assistance will always remain fresh in my memory. My gratitude also goes to several friends whose ideas were useful during fieldwork and writing up of the thesis. In this connection, I remember especially, Divine Fuh, Lilian Chenwi and Ilana van Wyk. Needless to emphasise that I bear sole responsibility for any deficiency which this thesis may suffer from. Andrea Jordaan's support in printing countless drafts of this thesis should be mentioned and for this, I salute her. Last but not the least, I wish to thank SANPAD for providing the necessary funds towards my fieldwork.

## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree: Masters of Social Science at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at another university.

---

Jude Fokwang

---

Date

## ABSTRACT



**Thesis Title:** Chiefs and Democratic Transition in Africa: An Ethnographic Study in the Chiefdoms of Tshivhase and Bali.

By

Jude Thaddeus Dingbobga Fokwang

**Supervisor:** Prof. John Sharp

**Department:** Anthropology and Archaeology

**Degree for which the thesis is submitted:** Masters of Social Science

---

During the 1990s, most African countries experienced what has been termed their ‘second independence’ (cf. Bratton and Hyden 1992), a period of political upheaval and transformation leading to the introduction of democratic rule. In many countries including South Africa and Cameroon, the process triggered fresh debates about the status and role of chiefs. The popular assumption in ‘struggle circles’ such as the African National Congress (ANC) was that chiefs would be relegated to the background in the democratic era, thus giving room to people’s power and new forms of accountability. But the reality was that the introduction of democracy created a situation whereby many rural people felt excluded economically from the boundless promises of the new dispensation. This dissatisfaction among rural people brought into question the legitimacy of some structures such as the local government even though the ruling ANC continued to enjoy much support among the masses. This in turn provided an enabling environment in which some, but not all, chiefs could make new claims for legitimacy. This is because some chiefs remain discredited by their past association with apartheid authorities. Chief Tshivhase is one of the few chiefs who has successfully associated himself with the ANC both at the national and provincial levels. This has given him space to act decisively in certain ways on behalf of the poor at the

local level, thereby winning credibility among rural people. Thus, his credibility is two-fold – with the national politicians, because he is one of them, and with the people of the chiefdom. Chief Tshivhase's ability to renegotiate his status and gain new legitimacy *as chief* is a particular example of how the game of neo-liberal democracy is played out in post-apartheid South Africa.

In the chiefdom of Bali Nyonga in Cameroon, Chief Ganyonga's career looks rather similar to Tshivhase's in so far as he too has risen to national prominence in the ruling party in Cameroon, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) in the era of democracy. But Cameroon's democratic transition was contradictory in the sense that it introduced the form of democracy but not its substance, leaving the ruling party the ability to manipulate and suppress the opposition and civil society. It was against this background that Ganyonga's prominence in the CPDM contributed to undermining his legitimacy in the eyes of his subjects because they believed that his prominence in the party left them without any shield from the predation and manipulation of the state. Ganyonga was seen to be in 'illicit cohabitation' with a self-serving ruling party, at a time when his subjects wanted to use their newfound rights as citizens to vote the opposition into office. But Ganyonga's involvement in the politics of the so-called 'Anglophone problem' helped to legitimise his participation in modern politics as a chief.

Against this background, this thesis examines why both chiefs used their positions as a springboard into national politics? It also establishes the kinds of legitimacy claimed by these chiefs and to what extent the masses are persuaded by such claims and how the chiefs' involvement in national politics has affected the relationship between them and their subjects.

This thesis therefore makes a case for the importance of comparative research on chiefs in the era of democracy and the predicaments they face therein. The thesis argues that contrary to exhortations about the incompatibility of chiefs and democracy, the reality is that political transition in both countries produced contradictions which created space for chiefs to fill but on condition that they were able to draw from different kinds of

legitimacy and had not been discredited by their past or present involvement with the postcolonial state.

**Key Words:** Chieftainship, Democracy, South Africa, Cameroon, Bali-Nyonga, Tshivhase, Legitimacy, Agency, Local government, Postcolonial state

## SAMEVATTING

Gedurende die 1990s het meeste Afrika lande hul sogenaamde tweede onafhanklikheid beleef (cf. Bratton and Hyden 1992), 'n tydperk van politiese omwenteling en gedaanteverandering wat gelei het tot die instelling van demokratiese regerings. In verskeie lande, insluitende Suid Afrika en Kameroen het hierdie proses nuwe debatte oor die posisie en funksie van stamhoofde laat ontvlam. Die populêre aanname binne *struggle* kringe soos die 'African National Congress' (ANC) was dat stamhoofde tot die agtergrond gedwing sou word in die demokratiese era, wat plek sou maak vir *people's power* en nuwe vorme van verantwoording. In werklikheid het demokrasie 'n situasie geskep waarin baie plattelandse mense gevoel het dat hulle ekonomies uitgesluit is van die eindelose beloftes wat gemaak is deur die nuwe bedeling. Alhoewel die ANC steeds populêr onder die massas was, het hierdie ontevredenheid onder plattelandse mense die wettigheid van sekere strukture soos die plaaslike regering bevraagteken. Op sy beurt het hierdie situasie 'n omgewing geskep waarin sekere stamhoofde opnuut aanspraak kon maak op legitimiteit. Ander stamhoofde kon nie deel hê aan hierdie proses nie omdat hulle as gevolg van hulle assosiasie met apartheid outoriteite steeds onteer was. Stamhoof Tshivase is een van die min stamhoofde wat homself suksesvol kon assosieer met die ANC, beide op nasionale en provinsiale vlak. Dit het aan hom die ruimte verleen om op te tree namens arm mense op plaaslike vlak. Sy kredietwaardigheid is dus twee-ledig-met nasionale politici, want hy is een van hulle, en met mense van sy *chiefdom*. Stamhoof Tshivase se vermoë om sy status te heronderhandel en om sy wettigheid as stamhoof te bevestig, is 'n voorbeeld van hoe die spel van neo-liberale demokrasie uitgespeel word in post-apartheid Suid- Afrika.

In die *chiefdom* van Bali Nyonga van Kameroen, lyk stamhoof Ganyonga se loopbaan baie dieselfde as dié van stamhoof Tshivase. Hy beklee ook 'n posisie van nasionale belang in die regerende party in Kameroen (the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement CPDM). Kameroen se demokratiese oorgang was egter teenstrydig omdat dit die vorm maar nie die inhoud van demokrasie daargestel het nie. Dit het dit vir die regerende party moontlik gemaak om die teenstand van siviele samelewing te onderdruk



en te manipuleer. Teen hierdie agtergrond, het Ganyonga se belangrikheid in die CPDM party bygedra tot die ondermyning van sy wettigheid in die oë van sy onderdane. Hulle het geglo dat sy belangrikheid in die party hulle weerloos gelaat het teen die manipulasie en aanvalle vanaf die staat. Ganyonga was dus in 'n posisie waar hy 'illicitly cohabitate' met 'n self-dienende party in 'n tyd wat sy onderdane hulle nuutgevonde regte as burgers wou gebruik. Maar Ganyonga se deelname in die politiek van die sogenaamde "Anglophone problem" het gehelp om sy deelname in moderne politiek as stamhoof te wettig.

Teen hierdie agtergrond bestudeer hierdie tesis hoe beide stamhoofde hulle posisies gebruik het as 'n aanloopbaan tot deelname in nasionale politiek. Die tesis bestudeer ook die tipes legitimiteit waarop hierdie stamhoofde aanspraak gemaak het en die mate waartoe die massas oortuig was deur sulke aansprake. Die stamhoofde se deelname in nasionale politiek en hoe dit die verhouding tussen hulle en hulle onderdane beïnvloed, word ook ondersoek.

Hierdie tesis onderskryf die belangrikheid van vergelykende navorsing oor stamhoofde in 'n demokrasie en die probleme wat hulle daarbinne beleef. Ten spyte van die verwagtings dat stamhoofde onversoenbaar is met demokrasie, toon die realiteit dat demokratiese oorgang in beide lande teenstrydighede geskep het wat ruimte gemaak het vir stamhoofde om te vul. Die voorwaarde is egter dat hulle van verskillende vorme van legitimiteit moet kan trek en dat hulle nie gediskrediteer is deur hul huidige of verlede betrokkenheid met die postkoloniale staat nie.

Kernwoorde: Chieftskap; Demokrasie, Suid-Afrika, Kameroen, Bali-Nyonga, Tshivase, Legitimiteit, Siviele organisasies, Plaaslike regering, Postkoloniale staat

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page No.</b>
Acknowledgement	ii
Declaration	iii
Abstract	iv
Abstract (Afrikaans)	vii
Table of Contents	ix
List of Abbreviation	xii
Table of Illustrations	xiv
Dedication	xv
<b>Chapter One</b>	1
<i>Chieftaincy in Perspective</i>	1
1.1 Problem Statement	1
1.2 Areas of Study	7
1.3 Theoretical Orientation	14
1.4 Research Method	30
1.5 Summary and Organisation of Thesis	32
<b>Chapter Two</b>	35
<i>Historical Background to the Tshivhase Chieftdom, Venda</i>	35
2.1 Introduction	35
2.2 A Political History of the Venda	36
2.3 Chiefs, Government and Politics in Venda	38
2.4 Chiefs and Liberation Politics in Venda	44
2.5 Summary and Conclusion	50
<b>Chapter Three</b>	54
<i>Chiefs and Democratic Transition in Tshivhase</i>	54
3.1 Introduction	54

3.2 Chiefs and Policy Framework in Postcolonial South Africa	55
3.3 Chief Tshivhase and Democratic Change	62
3.4 Chief Tshivhase and Civics in the Democratic Era	70
3.5 Chief Tshivhase and Public Opinion	76
3.6 Discussions and Conclusion	81
<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>88</b>
<i>Historical Background to the Chieftdom of Bali Nyonga</i>	88
4.1 Introduction	88
4.2 A Political History of Bali Nyonga	89
4.3 Galega II in the Post-independence Era (1961-1985)	95
4.4 Fon Ganyonga and Democratic Transition in 1990	100
4.5 Summary and Conclusion	104
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>107</b>
<i>Democratic Transition and Chieftdom Politics in Bali</i>	107
5.1 Introduction	107
5.2 Democratic Transition and Local Politics in Bali	108
5.3 Ganyonga and Fons' Politics in the Democratic Era	121
5.4 Ganyonga and the Anglophone Problem	124
5.5 Ganyonga and Public Opinion	129
5.6 Discussions and Conclusion	133
<b>Chapter Six</b>	<b>139</b>
<i>Chiefs and Democracy in Comparative Perspective</i>	139
6.1 Introduction	139
6.2 Comparisons	140
6.3 Implications for Democratic Transition and the State	152
6.4 Discussions and Conclusions	163
<b>Appendix One</b>	<b>168</b>

Genealogy of Tshivhase Chiefs	168
<b>Appendix Two</b>	169
Structure of Traditional Government in Tshivhase	169
<b>Appendix Three</b>	170
Genealogy of Bali-Nyonga Chiefs	170
<b>Appendix Four</b>	171
Structure of Traditional Government in Bali-Nyonga	171
<b>Bibliography</b>	172
Newspapers	178
Websites	179

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS



AAC	All Anglophone Conference
ANC	African National Congress
BANDECA	Bali Nyonga Development and Cultural Association
BASCUDA	Bali Social, Cultural and Development Association
BCWC	Bali Community Water Committee
BERCD	Bureau for Economic Research, Cooperation and Development.
CODESA	Convention for a Democratic South Africa
CONTRALESA	Congress of Traditional Leaders in South Africa
CPDM	Cameroon People's Democratic Movement
DO	Divisional Officer
DTA	Decentralisation/Traditional Authorities Component
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
MIDENO	North West Development Authority
NAIL	New Africa Investment Limited
NOWEFA	North West Fons Association
NOWEFCO	North West Fons Conference
NOWEFU	North West Fons Union
NP	National Party
PAC	Pan African Congress
RENAMO	Resistência Nacional Moçambicana
SACP	South African Communist Party
SADF	South African Defence Force
SANCO	South African National Civic Organisation
SCNC	Southern Cameroons National Council
SDO	Senior Divisional Officer
SNEC	Société Nationale des Eaux du Cameroun
TLC	Transitional Local Council

TTC	Tshivhase Territorial Council
UDC	Union Démocratique Camerounaise
UDF	United Democratic Front
UNC	Union Nationale Camerounaise
UNDP	Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès
VDC	Venda Development Corporation
VIPP	Venda Independence People's Party
VNP	Venda National Party

## TABLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<b>Item</b>	<b>Page No.</b>
<b>Maps</b>	
Map I: Map of Africa Showing the locations of Tshivhase and Bali-Nyonga	8
Map II: Map of S. Africa showing the location of the Chiefdom of Tshivhase	9
Map III: Detailed map of Tshivhase	9
Map IV: Map of Cameroon showing	13
<b>Photos</b>	
Photo I: Chief Tshivhase dancing <i>tshikona</i> in the village of Mashau	79
Photo II: Group of Boys performing <i>tshikona</i> at an important function	79

## **DEDICATION**

In Memory of  
Ni Dema Tita Nukuna,