

CHAPTER TWO



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE TSHIVHASE CHIEFDOM, VENDA

Ubukhosi [chieftaincy] is like a two-edged sword. Depending on the person wielding it, it can damage; it can easily be used to injure and cause harm; equally it can be used to defend and therefore build.¹⁶

2.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the historical background to the chiefdom of Tshivhase from the eighteenth century to the end of the apartheid era in 1994. It explores the migration history of the Venda to their present site, their so-called ‘golden age’ under Thohoyandou, and their subsequent disintegration into a multiplicity of small chiefdoms, of which Tshivhase is one. During the apartheid era, Venda was reunified as a homeland under the leadership of Chief Patrick Mphephu who traced his descent to the legendary leader, Thohoyandou. Venda eventually became an independent homeland in 1979, still under Mphephu. The collapse of the Apartheid State in 1994 has triggered a seeming reversion to old identities and renewed emphasis on the independence of each Venda chiefdom. These developments suggest that there is some continuity in chiefdom politics, although it is important to stress that the contexts have changed. This chapter therefore seeks to show how chieftaincy and chiefdom politics in Venda can, in part, be seen as an on-going contest between the different chiefs and chiefdoms. The emergence of Kennedy Tshivhase at the helm of the Tshivhase chiefdom seems to have given an added dimension to this process, as will be seen shortly.

¹⁶ Chief Patekile Holomisa, ‘Ubukhosi the bedrock of African Democracy’ in the *Mail and Guardian* of 11 February 2000. www.mg.co.za

2.2 A Political History of the Venda

While some historical accounts have maintained that the Venda (also called the BaVenda) came from the Congo region, others insist that they migrated from the Great Lakes of Central Africa over a thousand years ago and moved towards the southern part of Africa (BERCD 1979:17). Venda history is complex and the subject of unending dispute among different parties and dynastic groups that inhabit the territory. Given that this thesis is not a historical analysis of the Venda but an anthropological understanding of social and political change in the Tshivhase chiefdom, I will make use of several secondary sources, especially those written by anthropologists such as Stayt (1968) and Ralushai (1977, 1980).

Writing about the 1930s, Stayt argued that the Venda are ‘a composite people’ (Stayt 1968:9). Others have agreed with this view in the 1990s such as Loubser who contended that the Venda ‘do not see themselves as a culturally homogeneous or politically united nation’ (Loubser 1990:13; also see Ralushai 1977:46). Oral tradition suggests that most of the important migrations to the territory known today as Venda came from north of the Limpopo River in the 17th and 18th centuries. Among these migrations, two are particularly significant in the history of the area. The Vhatavhatsinde group arrived first, followed by the MaKhwinde from what is today known as southern Zimbabwe.¹⁷ The latter is said to have found the Ngona group¹⁸ ‘a non-warlike rather disorganized people, who allowed the invaders to settle peacefully among them’¹⁹ (Stayt 1968:10).

After the MaKhwinde migrated to Vendaland, led by their leader Dimbanyika, they soon dominated the entire country and settled at Tshieundeulu, where the

¹⁷ Early ethnographers have showed that one of the major differences between the Vhatavhatsinde and other Venda groups is their method of disposing of the dead. Informants confirmed this practice during my fieldwork, but insisted that today it is restricted to royal families. While other groups bury their dead permanently, the Vhatavhatsinde exhume the corpse after several months and burn the bones in a ritual ceremony after which the ashes are scattered in specified rivers.

¹⁸ It is claimed that the Ngona are the original inhabitants of the territory. After their leader was subjugated by the Makhwinde invaders, the Ngona chief became a high priest of their deity and was frequently invited by their conquerors to serve as a medium between Ngona ancestral spirits and the MaKhwinde invaders.

¹⁹ Loubser (1990) has disputed the depiction of this group by some ethnographers as disorganised and primitive. According to her, this version of history has been projected by the invading groups in order to convey the idea that they had a superior technology and were more ‘civilised’ than the Ngona.

Vhatavhatsinde had established their capital. Dimbanyika placed his sons and other kinsmen as petty chiefs throughout the villages and gradually incorporated the other groups under his hegemony. Dimbanyika's reign did not last long as he died in c. 1720, after subjugating the other groups. Although the manner of his death is highly contentious among the Venda,²⁰ it is undisputed that his oldest son, Phophi, succeeded him and chose to call himself, Thoho-ya-ndou (Head of the Elephant) given that his father, the 'elephant,' had died. He then moved his capital to Dzata, which today is 'regarded as the ancestral home of the BaVenda' (Stayt 1968:12).

Stayt (1968) has described Thohoyandou's reign as the *golden age* of the BaVenda. This is because all the chiefdoms were united under his leadership. But after his death, family disputes and 'internecine warfare' precipitated the disintegration and division of the kingdom. Oral tradition holds that at the time of his death Dimbanyika had four adult sons of whom Phophi was the oldest. He had appointed them as petty chiefs in satellite villages: Phophi (Thohoyandou) ruled in Nzhelele, Tshisebe in Makonde, Tshivhase in Phiphidi, and Bele in Vuba. After Thohoyandou's death the other brothers declared their villages independent of the capital. Loubser (1990) estimates that this event may have taken place between 1750 and 1800. Although Thohoyandou's son, Tshikalanga was appointed to take over from his father, Venda was already disintegrating into several, autonomous chiefdoms. This fragmentation was exacerbated by the advent of European invaders and colonialists.

Of the several lines of descent of Dimbanyika, the Mphephu and Tshivhase are the most numerous and powerful. The Mphephu leadership traces its descent from Tshikalanga and has established its capital at Nzhelele where Thohoyandou had ruled before becoming the King of the Venda. Other chiefdoms that were recognised by the colonial and apartheid authorities are the chiefdoms of Senthumele, Khuthama and Rambuda. The Mphaphuli area is the third most populated Venda territory, though its history is shrouded in a web of complexity that I cannot delve into at this juncture (see Ralushai 1980, on the history of the Mphaphuli area).

²⁰ Stayt and others maintain that the death of Dimbanyika is a favourite myth among the Venda. While some accounts hold that Phophi killed his father, others insist that Dimbanyika went hunting in a cave and while he was inside, a rock fell and covered the entrance, thereby entombing him alive.

My thesis is limited to discussions about the Tshivhase dynasty, which has dominated the eastern section of the Venda territory. After the death of his older brother Thohoyandou, Tshivhase declared himself independent. He became a wealthy and powerful chief and was succeeded by his son, Mukesi Tshivhase. Stayt (1968:16) contends that Mukesi's reign was marked by frequent skirmishes with his neighbours, especially Chief Mphaphuli, an independent chief living close to him. When Mukesi died, he was succeeded by his son Legegisa, who moved his capital from Miluwani to Mukumbani - the present Tshivhase capital. His son, Ramaremisa Tshivhase succeeded him and was in turn succeeded by Ratshimphi Tshivhase (circa 1931). Ratshimphi was a powerful and wealthy chief who is, until the present, a legendary figure among the Tshivhase people. Local accounts hold that he resisted Boer encroachment into his territory so resolutely that it cost him his life. Some of my informants maintain that during his reign Ratshimphi joined the Communist Party in the 1930s, and was arrested by the state for fear that he would turn his chiefdom into a communist stronghold. He was incarcerated in Pretoria where he died in 1946 and was succeeded by Thohoyandou Tshivhase, the father of the present chief, Kennedy Tshivhase (see genealogy of the Tshivhase dynasty).

2.3 Chiefs, Government and Politics in Venda (1913 – 1994)

Modern local government began in Venda in 1913, when the government of the Union of South Africa demarcated specific territories as 'reserves' for black people. The Native Affairs Act, 23 of 1920 provided for the establishment of local councils and a Native Commission to advise the South African government on issues that affected black people. The most significant legislation was the Bantu Authorities Act 68 of 1951, which provided for the creation of 'tribal', regional and territorial authorities. As a result of this Act, 25 tribal authorities, three regional authorities and one territorial authority were established in the Venda area (BERCD 1979:41).

Given its obsession with ethnic difference, the apartheid government emphasised that each ethnic group or people was endowed with the inalienable right to become self-governing in its own territory and to mark out the path of its own historical destiny. In the light of this ideology, the Venda were recognised not only as distinct from non-

Venda, but also as a single people, or ‘volk’, which should commence the process of becoming an entity with its own territorial state. This led to the formation of the Thohoyandou Territorial Authority in 1962 headed by Chief Patrick Mphephu. According to this development, two or more members represented each of the 25 tribal authorities in a regional authority, one of whom was the chief or headman. The regional authorities were represented in the Territorial Authority by their chairmen and other members depending on population size and the number of taxpayers (BERCD 1979:42).

After the issuing of proclamation R.168 of 20 June 1969, the Thohoyandou Territorial Authority became known as the Venda Territorial Authority. This led to several changes in the form of representation. Each tribal authority was represented at the Territorial Authority by its chief or chairman and another member, elected by the tribal authority from among its councillors. The Territorial Authority was also granted more powers to conduct its own affairs with less direct control from the South African government. This development was further strengthened in June 1971 when the Black States Constitution Act No. 21 was passed. This Act provided for the creation of so-called Legislative Assemblies, one of which was constituted in Venda in February 1973, thereby making Venda a ‘self-governing territory’. The legislative assembly was made up of 60 members, 42 of whom had to be traditional leaders. The remaining 18 were elected by the residents of Venda as well as Venda citizens who were resident outside Venda territory. Eventually in 1979 Venda received ‘independence’ from the Republic of South Africa but the international community refused to recognise this new status (BERCD 1979:42).

Of the 25 tribal authorities that make up Venda, Tshivhase is the most populated and largest in land area. This notwithstanding, there is an on-going contestation among the 25 tribal authorities (each of which constitutes a separate chiefdom), especially between the Mphephu and Tshivhase chiefdoms, which are, in genealogical terms, the ‘senior’ Venda chiefdoms. Although the Tshivhase still engage in some degree of rivalry with the neighbouring Mphaphuli chiefdom,²¹ the relationship between the two is less contentious than that between Tshivhase and Mphephu.

²¹ There is a popular myth among the Tshivhase that the Mphaphuli were previously employees of the

One of the reasons for this rivalry is that the Tshivase perceive the Mphaphu as having been more accommodating to the colonisers than they were. This is a reference both to the Mphaphu role in the wars against the Boers between 1867 and 1899²² and to their collaboration with the apartheid regime. The Tshivase also perceive the Mphaphu group as more ‘acculturated’ owing to their geographical proximity to the white settlements of Louis Trichardt and Schoemansdal. In particular the Tshivase resent the fact that Patrick Mphaphu lording it over their chieftom in his attempt to revive the Venda kingdom during the homeland period. The last factor should be taken into account in order to understand current chieftom politics in Venda. The Tshivase continue to see themselves as the ‘embodiment’ of the fighting spirit of the Venda as expressed in their name - Tshivase, meaning ‘one who burned and conquered the houses of the others’. The relative wealth and prestige of the Tshivase chiefs also contributed significantly to this perception that the Tshivase were the most powerful Venda chiefs. To add to this catalogue is the claim that the grandfather of the present chief was a staunch member of the Communist Party and had personally known Nelson Mandela in the 1940s prior to his death as a captive of the state. The Tshivase therefore claim a legacy of association with resistance and liberation, although some historians have disputed this.²³

It is probable that the main obstacle to Mphaphu’s dream of extending his hegemony beyond his chieftom was the reputation and power of the Tshivase chiefs. It is therefore likely that the sudden death of Chief Thohoyandou Tshivase in 1966 played in Mphaphu’s favour. Although Kennedy Tshivase was installed in 1970 as heir to the throne of the Tshivase, his uncle, John Tshivase was put in place as regent until it was deemed appropriate for Kennedy Tshivase to assume effective office.

Tshivase chief and were entrusted with looking after their cattle. Eventually, the Mphaphuli became very powerful and established their own chieftom not far from the Tshivase controlled area. Whereas Stayt (1968) has a different version of how the Mphaphuli kingdom came about, Ralushai (1979) has disputed this myth in his article, ‘The Mphaphuli Dynasty: A Critical Analysis of Oral Sources and Written Accounts concerning the History of the Mphaphuli Dynasty of the Northern Transvaal, South Africa’

²² See v. d. Heyden (n.d.) ‘The Fighting Tradition of the Venda People’ for details.

²³ V.d. Heyden (n.d.) contends that at the end of the 19th century, the Mphaphuli and Tshivase chiefs ‘surrendered to the colonial conquerors without a fight.’ He argues further that these chiefs also failed

Between 1970 and 1990, Kennedy Tshivhase stayed with his mother and attended school in Polokwane (formerly Pietersburg). While he was away from the chiefdom, major developments took place that changed the landscape of politics in Venda. The most important of these was the independence of Venda in 1979 under the leadership of Chief Patrick Mphephu. Mphephu was a shrewd politician who collaborated closely with the apartheid regime in Pretoria. His Venda National Party (VNP) dominated the political scene in Venda, leaving the Venda Independence People's Party (VIPP) in permanent opposition. During the 1980s, Patrick Mphephu co-opted almost all the major chiefs in the other dynasties including John Tshivhase, the Regent of the Tshivhase chiefdom. Chief Mphephu declared himself president for life of the Republic of Venda. It was popularly believed that he also nursed the ambition of reuniting the entire Venda territory as a kingdom under his leadership. But he favoured the recruitment of his Mphephu subjects into the civil service and it was rumoured that people from other chiefdoms, especially the Tshivhase, were discriminated against. But such discrimination was concealed by the co-optation of influential members of the Tshivhase royal family into his government. One of them was Kennedy Tshivhase's uncle, A. A. Tshivhase, who was appointed to a key ministerial post in Mphephu's government. A. A. Tshivhase had opposed Kennedy's selection as heir to the throne of Tshivhase. By virtue of his influential post in the government, he became the dominant political figure in the Tshivhase family, choosing which direction the family was to follow. Informants recall that during election periods, the Tshivhase Tribal Authority, headed by John Tshivhase, used to campaign for the VNP. Following his death in 1989, Patrick Mphephu was succeeded as President of Venda by Ravele, a close kinsman and ally.

Ravele took over power at a time when there was increasing demand for an end to apartheid rule and the abandonment of the homelands. The rise of civic associations in villages, advocating an end to the homeland system, had enormous impact on the stability of the government in Venda. In 1989 - 1990 witchcraft accusations and murders became the order of the day in Venda, and Ravele's failure to quell the murders or maintain peace triggered a general sense of anger. Furthermore, his failure

to assist the Mphephu chiefs in their fight against the Boers due to rivalry among the chiefs. (p.12)

to pay civil servants and his poor management of the state led to a military coup in 1990, led by Brigadier Gabriel Ramushwana.

Ramushwana was a controversial figure. Some informants described him as a ‘two-edge sword’. On the one hand, he was believed to be an ANC-aligned leader. Although there was no definite proof of his affiliation to the ANC, the fact that he had been in exile was interpreted as an indication of his covert membership. On the other hand, he had been a soldier of the South African Defence Force (SADF), and was therefore connected to the apartheid regime. Given this background, he was viewed with ambiguity by both those who supported the ANC and clamoured for change, and those who had vested interests in the homeland system and therefore preferred the status quo.

It appears that Kennedy Tshivhase made strategic use of this climate of political upheaval to stage his entry into the public sphere. It is recalled that he printed thousands of T-shirts, bearing his image surrounded by the colours of the ANC. This tactical appropriation of the ANC’s colours was generally interpreted among the youths as an indication of his affiliation to the liberation movement and, consequently, his desire for change and the introduction of democratic government. It was also during this period, which saw the eclipse of A. A. Tshivhase’s political fortunes, that supporters of Kennedy Tshivhase launched the battle to reclaim the leadership of the Tshivhase people.

In the early 1990s, the Tshivhase Royal Council was divided into two camps: those who supported Kennedy’s right to the throne and those who ardently opposed it. Informants recall that under the influence of the notorious A. A. Tshivhase, the Regent and his close allies embarked on a campaign to distort history, and present Kennedy Tshivhase as an upstart who desired to usurp power from the elders through unorthodox means. A significant number of headmen opposed Kennedy Tshivhase’s claim to the throne, especially those who owed their position to the apartheid system and the Venda government in particular.²⁴

²⁴ The dispute was based on the claim that Kennedy Tshivhase’s mother was not the proper woman

Meanwhile, although Kennedy Tshivhase did not publicly identify himself with the ANC, he was known among the youth and the civics as the legitimate heir to the throne and a comrade. Those who supported his return made strenuous efforts to spread the notion that Kennedy was simply reclaiming what was rightfully his. A photograph of the 1970 installation was available to prove that there had been no distortion of historical fact. When he eventually won the legal suit against his uncle and assumed office in 1993, popular conjecture about his political affiliation was confirmed. Both the military leader, Gabriel Ramushwana and the ANC stalwart, Walter Sisulu were conspicuously present at his installation in Mukumbani. Sisulu was given an opportunity to address the people. By 1993 it became clear that Chief Kennedy Tshivhase was an ANC member who had played his cards cleverly in the 1980s.

Contrary to expectations that he would seek to depose the headmen who had opposed his struggle for the throne, he called instead for peace and unity among the Tshivhase people. He also appealed to the divided Royal Council to bury the hatchet and unite to build a strong chiefdom. Though royal informants were reluctant to discuss with me how far the healing process had gone, it was rumoured during my fieldwork that major differences continued to exist between competing camps of the royal family.

Kennedy Tshivhase also extended a hand of reconciliation to the Mphephu dynasty. Informants recall that Kennedy Tshivhase was quite friendly with Dimbanyika Mphephu, Patrick's successor as chief. This did not stop him launching a legal suit to reclaim a number of Tshivhase villages that had been incorporated into the Mphephu territory during Patrick Mphephu's presidency.²⁵ When Dimbanyika Mphephu died in a car accident in 1998, Chief Tshivhase participated actively at the funeral and delivered a speech. He disapproved of Dimbanyika's successor, however, and this has strained relations between the two major Venda dynasties once more.

who should have given birth to the heir.

²⁵ See <http://www.anc.org.za/anc/newsbrief/1994/news1025> of Tuesday 25 October 1994 in which Tshivhase promises to lodge a land claim with the Northern Transvaal local government and land Ministry in Pietersburg. Chief Patrick Mphephu had incorporated the said land into his territory in 1981.

2.4 Chiefs and Liberation Politics in Venda

The ‘colonising structure’ according to Mudimbe (1988) did not consist only of the domination of physical space, but also of the reformation of ‘native’ minds as well as the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective. This was achieved through various means, one of which, to borrow from Mamdani (1996) was to co-opt chiefs into a system of decentralised despotism. Chiefs were therefore implicated in the colonising structure at different levels and in different contexts, as illustrated by Maloka (1995) and Mamdani (1996).

In Venda, it is likely that the colonisers chose the Mphephu dynasty not simply on the grounds of their pliancy (as the Tshivhase would want one to believe), but also because of their seniority, which was undisputed by the other descendants of Dimbayika. The apartheid context also envisaged a reunification of the entire Venda under the leadership of Mphephu, so it is understandable that he sought to control and manipulate the events in other chiefdoms, especially in Tshivhase. But in the course of this venture, he provoked the wrath of many subjects, especially those in Tshivhase, whom it was commonly believed were discriminated against regarding recruitment into the civil service. Mphephu’s co-optation of John Tshivhase and A. A. Tshivhase into his government permitted him to penetrate even deeper into the administration of the Tshivhase chiefdom, for instance by influencing the appointment of headmen who supported him and his party, the VNP. Consequently, a significant number of headmen in Tshivhase and other chiefdoms owed their position to the apartheid system and to Patrick Mphephu in particular. Most of these traditional rulers became unpopular not only because they had got into office through dubious means, but particularly because they were charged with the execution of unpopular policies. The chiefs also made use of their office to engage in various forms of ‘primitive accumulation’, which did not escape the notice of the subjects especially the youth.

As a result, grievances against chiefs rose by the day. Chiefs in Venda were known to exact taxes and tributes of all kinds especially from migrant workers as a form of thanksgiving to the chief for looking after the migrants’ families while they were away. Besides, migrants resented the law that compelled them to obtain permits from

their chiefs before going to the city to work. When the pass laws were abolished in 1986, chiefs lost a major source of income and resorted to even more dubious forms of exploitation and exaction through the imposition of taxes. Reasons advanced for the imposition of new taxes ranged from the need to build new schools or clinics to the construction of post offices. Moreover, taxes were demanded to pay for the chief's legal advice where the chief or village was involved. Also, chiefs imposed taxes as contributions towards their marriages, the cost of royal funerals, and sometimes as payment for charges after consulting a rainmaker. If taxes were not demanded, free labour was imposed as a mode of exploitation. The usual victims were, more often than not, women and children. Free labour of this nature constituted working in the chief's khoro or on his farms, which most young women resented. Most men detested the chiefs because they could not hold any meetings without permission from them and were hardly consulted about decisions affecting their lives. Thus the assumption among migrants and other subjects that taxes benefited chiefs' private activities, not the good of the commonweal. Chiefs were accused of using tax money to build new houses for themselves or to buy new cars and repair old ones. Anger against the chiefs accumulated to such an extent that, by the 1980s, many rural dwellers seized the opportunity of UDF militancy to call for the overthrow of traditional institutions and chiefs.

In August 1983, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed to fill the institutional vacuum left by the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC). The UDF provided a national 'political forum' for popular struggle amidst calls by the exiled ANC and SACP (South African Communist Party) for mass protest, formation of township organisations, ungovernability and the establishment of people's power (Houston 1999; van Kessel 2000). More precisely, the UDF was an 'alliance of a broad range of autonomous organisations of differing class origins and with differing political and ideological agendas which came together having identified a common cause - opposition to the apartheid system of domination and exploitation' (Houston 1999:5). Its primary aim was to mobilise existing movements throughout the country to participate in the liberation struggle. As a result, over 500 organisations were said to be affiliated to the UDF and united in 'unshakeable conviction' to dismantle the structures of apartheid and create a 'non-racial, unitary state in South Africa undiluted by racial or ethnic considerations as

formulated in the bantustan policy' (Houston 1999:105).

Foremost among these affiliated organisations were civic associations of various kinds. Generally, civic associations mobilised and organised people around issues that affected their daily lives especially with regard to resources, rent and bus-fare increases. Many civic organisations emerged after the 1976 Soweto riots and grew in popularity thereafter (Houston 1999:105). In the townships, civic associations began to link local concerns with demands for the resignation of town councillors, the release of detainees and political prisoners, as well as the unbanning of political organisations.

News of these activities in urban areas diffused to rural areas and the homelands through the media, migrant workers, urban youths who attended local schools and boys who visited family and friends in the townships or who found temporary employment in the cities. Consequently, they carried news of their experiences as observers of or participants in the growing insurrection in townships and cities (Delius 1996).

Fed with the ideologies of prominent liberation fighters and the ANC, most youths 'set out to identify the forces of evil which were supposedly subverting their struggle' (van Kessel and Oomen, 1997:565). The apartheid state also suffered both internal and external pressure to abandon its oppressive and discriminatory system and chiefs lost state support due to their inability to curtail rebellious youths and adults within their chiefdoms. For example, the abolition of the pass laws meant that chiefs could not punish rebellious subjects by withholding labour permits and travel documents. Chiefs were therefore seen as a category ripe for eradication. In 1986 the UDF even alleged that democratically elected village councils were replacing tribal authorities and that it was only a matter of time for chieftaincy to be relegated to the annals of history (Van Kessel 2000:75).

Ironically, young people arrogated to themselves the very chiefly powers they had purported to eradicate. Youths set up people's courts, beat up old men who failed to comply with their orders, and passed judgement on those they perceived and labelled as enemies of the 'struggle'. This insurrection also merged with witchcraft

accusations and violence against many persons. Venda became the heart of witchcraft violence as a result of the revolt (see details of the Ralushai Commission, 1996). A chief recounted to me how he and some of his fellows were taken hostage by violent youths and how several of his colleagues even received death threats in the late 1980s. A number of chiefs were chased away from their villages and others sought refuge at the police station in Thohoyandou. In Tshivhase this violence was exacerbated by the inability of the unpopular acting regent, John Shavhane, to quell the unrest. Even police officers who were sent to several villages were reported to have failed to arrest any culprits as a way of registering their contempt for John Shavhane.

However, the emergence of a chiefs' organisation which adopted the same rhetoric like the liberation fighters changed the tide of things for many chiefs in the homelands. The organisation first emerged as a result of several chiefs' fight against the scheduled 'independence' of the KwaNdebele homeland in 1986. In September 1987, the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) was launched with a membership of 38 chiefs and headmen mainly from KwaNdebele and the Moutse district of the Northern Transvaal. The new organisation had the lofty objective of uniting all traditional leaders in South Africa to fight for the abolition of the bantustan system, and among other things, to 'school the traditional leaders about the aims of the South African liberation struggle and their role in it.' It also spoke of winning back 'the land of our forefathers and share (sic) it among those who work it in order to banish famine and land hunger.' Above all, they pledged to fight for a unitary, non-racial, and democratic South Africa (Race Relations Survey 1987-1988, 922).

News of its launch stirred a lot of shock and confusion among *progressive* circles who began to ask what they were going to do with chiefs who shared the same agenda as they did. CONTRALESA made strategic use of the rhetoric of *struggle* and advertised itself as a 'progressive grassroots and community based organisation.' This appeared contradictory given that chiefs were the ones who had opposed (and some were still opposing) the formation of the civic associations, which were *par excellence* grassroots movements. Notwithstanding, chiefs reminded the people of the individual and collective efforts of chiefs to keep colonialists at bay and to resist apartheid. Thus, despite the initial suspicion, CONTRALESA gained legitimacy following the ANC's

remarks that it was a sign of the ‘chiefs coming back to the people’ (Zuma 1990:65). It was as a result of this moral support and alliance with progressive forces that CONTRALESA was able to lobby its way into the talks towards a democratic South Africa.

After the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, CONTRALESA’s membership increased to over a thousand. Many chiefs saw the organisation as the best forum to safeguard their interest in a future ANC-led democratic government. Besides, the ANC was keen on co-opting traditional rulers in order to pre-empt alliances between the National Party (NP) and bantustan leaders. It should be noted that the Inkatha party of Buthelezi had very little popularity in Venda. Thus, chiefs were seen as occupying the middle ground between the ANC and the NP government in terms of the possibility of their support swinging to either side (van Kessel and Oomen 1997:571-2). ANC’s bid to win over the chiefs, though highly controversial in many circles, was seen as a major success.

Following the reintegration of Venda in 1994 into the Republic of South Africa, the tribal councils have continued to function as they did before, although their powers have been curtailed significantly by the Municipal Structures Act of 1993, as well as by recent legislation as will be seen in the next chapter. After the creation of the Thulamela Municipal Council (formerly Thohoyandou/Malamulele), 14 of the 25 tribal authorities (including Tshivhase) were integrated into the municipality while the others, including the Mphephu chiefdom, were incorporated in different municipal areas.²⁶ The Tshivhase Tribal Council has continued to play a major role in rural local government, more often than not, in serious conflict and rivalry with the new municipal authorities at Thohoyandou. An interesting insight to this aspect (which will be examined later) is the fact that the mayor of the municipality is a headman under Chief Tshivhase.

²⁶ See www.demarcation.org.za for details. It is possible to interpret the exclusion of the Mphephu chiefdom from the main municipal council in Venda as a form of exclusion in the new democratic dispensation. Besides, the Mphephu chiefs have also been sidelined in the new politics of the current era, granting that they do not hold similar influential roles in the ANC like Chief Tshivhase.

The Tshivhase Tribal Council continues to function as the supreme judicial and administrative arm of government in the chiefdom. However, since the coming into office of Kennedy Tshivhase, there have been several changes in its organisation. At present, each village elects a delegate to accompany its chief to the grand meetings that are held four times a year. Once every five years, an executive council of the Tribal Council is elected composed of four chiefs and three commoners. A chairman runs the weekly activities of the council and reports regularly to Chief Tshivhase. The chief also has the discretion of appointing five additional persons to the executive council. But the most significant change is in its name. Formerly known as the Tshivhase Tribal Council, today it is officially called the 'Tshivhase Territorial Authority'. Although the reasons for this change are not obvious, it seems that Tshivhase has done this to emphasise the distinction and autonomy of his chiefdom from other Venda chiefdoms.

Furthermore there seems to be an on-going attempt by the ruling elite (led by Chief Tshivhase) to transform the chiefdom into a 'kingdom'. During my research, minor chiefs and other commoners frequently referred to Chief Tshivhase as 'King' although the government has given recognition to no king in the Limpopo Province. In the light of these developments, some of his influential headmen are now known as 'chiefs.' The Tshivhase do not only speak with extreme pride about their numerical strength when compared to other Venda chiefdoms, but also about the number of villages that make up the chiefdom. Tshivhase has 74 villages and consequently 74 headmen. It is against this background that Chief Tshivhase aims at building a powerful 'Territorial Authority' that could be recognised by the government as a kingdom. His claim to 'kingship' in Tshivhase, some informants observed, definitely excludes any claim over other Venda chiefdoms in contrast to Patrick Mphephu who is still resented for having used his dominant role in the homeland government to attempt a revival of the ancient Venda Kingdom.

2.5 Summary and Conclusion

The central object of this chapter was to locate the chiefdom of Tshivhase in historical perspective and to show how the present dynamics in the chiefdom are a function of its interrelationship with other Venda chiefdoms since the 18th century. By means of

historical presentation and analysis, I have argued that current trends in Tshivhase reveal substantial continuities although the contexts have changed in the last 200 years. These contexts could be classified into three broad divisions, the pre-colonial, colonial/apartheid and postcolonial era.

The pre-colonial era showed the migration of the different groups to the present area known as Venda and the eventual crystallisation of the Venda kingdom under the leadership of Dimbayika and later, Thohoyandou. During his reign, Thohoyandou was able to maintain a high degree of internal coherence, thereby uniting the several chiefdoms under his leadership. This unity was short-lived granting that the kingdom soon disintegrated into small autonomous chiefdoms following his death between 1750 and 1800. This fragmentation continued into the colonial era, which started in the late 19th century. However, three chiefdoms emerged more powerful than the rest, that is the Mphephu, Tshivhase and Mphaphuli chiefdoms. Whereas the Mphephu chiefdom claimed direct descent from the legendary leader, Thohoyandou, the Tshivhase maintained that although their founder had been a brother of Thohoyandou, they owed their vast territory to their ‘fighting spirit’ and the relative wealth of their chiefs. These claims led to rivalry between the two senior chiefdoms and continue until the present.

The colonial/apartheid era orchestrated a reconfiguration of chiefdom politics in Venda. This led to the reunification of the different chiefdoms under the leadership of the Mphephu dynasty, thereby defeating the efforts of the other chiefdoms to maintain their autonomy. Mphephu’s collaboration with the apartheid regime favoured his dominance in the homeland politics and his eventual emergence as the president of the ‘independent’ Republic of Venda. Although the apartheid era favoured the pre-eminence of Mphephu, his ambition to revive the old Venda Kingdom under his leadership (by means of manipulation and intrigue) instead triggered hostility towards his rule. The demise of the apartheid state and consequently the abolition of the homeland government led to the re-assertion of the autonomy of individual chiefdoms.

In the postcolonial context, the chief of Tshivhase has emerged as the new dominant figure. His emergence has been accompanied by the sidelining of the Mphephu chiefs

by the postcolonial state. The exclusion of the Mphephu chiefdom from the Thulamela Municipal area can be seen as a case in point. Nevertheless, while Chief Tshivhase has become involved in regional and national politics (as the late Mphephu was during the homeland period), the present chief of the Mphephu chiefdom has become less and less influential similar, to the status of the regent of the Tshivhase during the apartheid era.

From the above, we see that although the contexts have changed there is continuous contestation and rivalry among the Venda chiefs especially between the Mphephu and Tshivhase dynasties. We see from the historical trends that the main stuff of this rivalry has been the struggle between unification of several chiefdoms under one leader and the emphasis of each chiefdom's autonomy as a separate and independent entity. One can also deduce from the foregoing that in conditions of the above nature, new forms of inclusion invariably lead to exclusion. Whereas the Mphephu dynasty emerged as the dominant lineage during the apartheid era, the Tshivhase have emerged as dominant in the present democratic dispensation.

Be that as it may, I wish to return to some important questions posed in chapter one and to establish the extent to which this present chapter has provided relevant answers in this respect. The questions are: why has Chief Tshvhase used his position as a springboard into national politics? Why has he become involved in the political structure of the ruling party? Based on secondary sources and my own findings in the field, this chapter has answered the above questions by recounting in chronological order, the emergence of Chief Tshivhase at the helm of the Tshivhase chiefdom and his subsequent role in local and national politics. Among the evidence produced in the chapter, the following factors account notably for Tshivhase's rise and involvement in national politics.

First, he had the fortune of being a minor at his installation thus he did not have to grapple with the problems which he would otherwise have faced under Mphephu's presidency. The fact that he effectively assumed office towards the end of the homeland period means that he emerged untainted by the stigma associated with other chiefs in the Venda area who had participated in various ways to propagate the

apartheid system. But fortune in itself is not enough to account for Chief Tshivhase's involvement in post-apartheid politics on the side of the ruling party.

He also associated himself with liberation fighters who were well known among the masses. This was evident during his re-installation in 1993 when the renowned ANC member, Walter Sisulu was given an opportunity to address the masses. He was also close to Gabriel Ramushwana, the military leader who had overthrown Patrick Mphephu's handpicked successor as president. Thus, it is evident in the chapter that Tshivhase had laid the groundwork for his eventual rise into the ranks of the ANC and, consequently, national politics.

It should also be borne in mind that hereditary elites tend to benefit or suffer from the actions of their forebears. In this particular instance, there is evidence that Tshivhase benefited from the legacy of his legendary grandfather, Ratsimphi who had been involved in the Communist Party in the 1930s and, through such association, had known Nelson Mandela. Tshivhase claims that Nelson Mandela still has fond memories about his grandfather not only because of his resistance against the 'Boers' but also for his involvement in the liberation struggle in the ranks of the Communist Party. Kennedy Tshivhase could be seen as taking over from the legacy of his grandfather and therefore deriving legitimacy of some kind in this respect.

Last, the chapter has shown that the ANC sought to co-opt chiefs in general and 'progressive chiefs' in particular into its ranks in order to pre-empt possible alliances between the chiefs and the NP. It was also against this background that few chiefs such as Kennedy Tshivhase quickly gained prominence and prestige in the ANC, and therefore his involvement in national politics. Thus a combination of the above points account for Tshivhase's popularity not only at the local level but also at the provincial and national levels.

This chapter has also set the stage for a broader understanding of the changes that have taken place as will be seen below. This chapter has demonstrated the unpopularity of the homeland system in Venda, and the chiefs who were at the helm of this system. This generated hostility towards chiefs in general and certain prominent chiefs in particular such as Chief Mphephu. It was against this background

that many civic activists anticipated the demise of chiefs in the post-apartheid era. But as will be seen shortly, the introduction of democratic rule ushered in new contradictions, which again, have permitted chiefs to play a role. But the reality is that not all chiefs have the legitimacy to play this role in the neo-liberal context. In the next chapter I will show what changes have resulted from the introduction of democratic rule and the new role played by Chief Tshivhase in this process.