

Chapter Ten

Early Twenty-first Century Responses to Venda *Vhuhosivhuhulu* Disputes:

Interviews with *Vhothovhele* and *Magota*

The history of the Venda *Vhuhosivhuhulu* presented in this thesis could only be compiled because over the years members of Venda communities had been willing to convey their knowledge, their memories, their understandings and their expectations to interviewers who captured these on paper. In many cases, the interviewers were representatives of external governments, like N.J. van Warmelo and later, the Mushasha, Ralushai, and Nhlapo Commissions. These experts gave the respective governments the authority to adjudicate and advise on how Venda politics should be practised. In the case of some interviewers, the interest in Venda interlocutors' accounts was more academic, although the academics also carried their own convictions and ideals for the Venda polity into their processes of harvesting information (as we have seen with the allegations levelled against Professor Henry Nemudzivhadi). The interlocutors themselves of course also shared their understanding of Venda history from their particular perspectives. In this chapter I attempt to add another layer to this ongoing process of history-making by displaying (and reflecting on) the information I managed to gather from sixteen *vhothovhele*, *vhokhotsimune* and *magota* from across Venda over the past five years. In order to do justice to the voices of my interlocutors, long quotations are included in this chapter, which I use as point of departure for comparison and critical comment.

I used a qualitative research methodology to collect information for the thesis to understand the reaction and attitudes of male members of the chiefly stratum of Venda society towards the discourse of the *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda. The first and foremost task was to identify my research questions. The structure of questions was almost similar for every interview, except in some cases, where I brought up new questions depending on the person I was interviewing. The research was centered around the understanding of some aspects of the *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda from the perspective of *vhothovhele* and *makhotsimunene*. Their responses were recorded as contributions to historical discourse, and critically analysed.

Two key ethical elements were considered to give the research legitimacy; those were consent and confidentiality. No *thovhele* or *khotsimunene* involved in my thesis was forced to participate against his wishes. I read a consent form to them before the interviews. They were well-informed about what their participation entailed and given a chance to decline responding to certain questions if they felt uncomfortable. Consent was given through signing a consent form and in two cases the consent was given verbally. Being a Venda person myself, helped a lot in my interactions with *vhothovhele* and *makhotsimunene* because they felt that, “*ndi mulanda wavho*”¹ and I was able to share with them their experiences having observed our traditions and customs for a very long time and being a participant to “*u luvha*”².

Context Matters

The following account of my experience while conducting the interviews serve as motivation and justification for my decision to present the information in this chapter, as far as possible, without disrupting the sequence and the format in which it was collected. With this approach I follow the argument that the intention and the meaning of the information collected during an interview cannot be separated from the context in which the interviewee had met with the interviewer.³ This chapter therefore contains primary material harvested during interviews in a very particular context, conveying the responses of some of the 28 *vhothovhela* of Venda with regard to the issue of *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes in Venda, and my critique thereof, at a particular, crucial time in the history of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity.

The point of departure with my interviews was to arrange a set of questions related to the discourse of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity, and to present this to as many of *vhothovhele* as possible. I managed to interact with about thirteen *vhothovhele*, *gota* and two people who

1 *Mulanda wavho* refers to a subject of a king, chief or headman.

2 *U luvha*: according respect to the king, chief or headman by either bowing down on your knees or sending gifts to the royal household.

3 See S. Field, Turning Up the Volume: Dialogues about Memory Create Oral Histories,” *South African Historical Journal*, 60, 2, 2008, pp. 175-194.

represented *vhothovhele* of the particular areas. The first interview was held on 16 February 2015 at Ha-Manenzhe Community in Venda. I was able to interview both *Thovhele Pfareli* William Sofrite Mutele of the Mutele Community and *Thovhele* Takalani Elon Manenzhe of the Manenzhe Community. I interviewed both of them at the Manenzhe Tribal Community Office after they had both agreed to be interviewed there together.

The second day of interviews was on 17 February 2015. I had to go to two different communities, Mashamba and Masakona. At Mashamba Community I interviewed *Vho-Khotsimunene* Takalani Eric Mashamba speaking on behalf of *Thovhele* Tshiitwa Mashamba because *Thovhele* Mashamba had other commitments outside his community. *Thovhele* Mashamba delegated his duties to *Vho-Khotsimunene* Takalani Eric Mashamba because as an elder of the Mashamba community he was reputed as someone who knew the history of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity better than *Thovhele* Mashamba, as the *Thovhele* is not that old. At Ha-Masakona, *Thovhele* Malovhana Cecil Masakona requested that I interview him in the presence of *Gota* Mulondo William Nemaguvhuni, an elder of the Masakona Community.

On 18 February 2015 I had to interview *Vho-Khotsimunene* Tshililo Amos Manenzhe on recommendation of *Thovhele* Takalani Alone Manenzhe. *Thovhele* Manenzhe believed that *Khotsimunene* Tshililo Amos Manenzhe (as was the case at Ha-Mashamba and Ha-Masakona where elders spoke on behalf of *vhothovhele*), was more knowledgeable about the history of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity and *vuhosi* of Manenzhe.

On 21 May 2015, I travelled to Ha-Mashau and Mamvuka to interview *Thovhele* Tshavhayamipfa Ronald Mashau and *Gota* Nthambeleni Hendrick Musekwa of the Musekwa Community. It is important to highlight that I interviewed *Gota* Musekwa, because as it was indicated in the chapter dealing with the abolition of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity, he was the chairperson of the Mphephu Traditional Council at a significant point in the history of the Venda polity. To add to that, *Gota* Musekwa was one of the *magota* who were elevated to the status of *vhothovhele* by *nndu ya vuhosi* of Ramabulana and the decision was later

reversed by the Mushasha Commission of Inquiry as indicated in chapter eight. *Gota* Musekwa was also interviewed to find out how he viewed the latest *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda disputes.

On 22 May 2015, the journey of collecting data on the *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes took me to *Musanda* Ha-Khakhu and *Musanda* Ha-Madzivhandila Tshakhuma. On my visit to *Musanda* Ha-Khakhu, it was brought to my attention by *nndu ya musanda* that *Thovhele* R. R. Khakhu was not well and therefore he was not in a state to talk to me as he was too old. *Nndu ya vuhosi* of Ha-Khakhu advised me to engage with *Gota* Johannes Nkhangweni Makhado who is an elder in the Khakhu Royal Council. I got hold of *Gota* Makhado who, despite bereavement in the family, gave me an opportunity to interview him. In Ha-Madzivhandila Tshakhuma, I was referred to *Vho-Khotsimunene* Wildert Mukandangalwo Madzivhandila, since there was still an issue with the successor of *mutahabvu Thovhele* Madzivhandila. I was told that his son and successor was not yet ready to deal with the serious issue of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity as his knowledge was limited. I got hold of *Vho-Khotsimunene* Wildert Mukandangalwo Madzivhandila at his Tshibevha Motors Garage office in Thohoyandou where he agreed to be interviewed.

On 29 May 2015 I arranged a meeting for an interview with *Thovhele* Midiavhathu Prince Kennedy Tshivhase at a restaurant in Menlyn Mall in Pretoria. We met there and he gave consent for the interview to continue. That was the last interview I conducted in 2015. Due to work commitment and availability of *vhothovhele* or their representatives, I was unable to finish the interview process in that year. On 17 August 2016 I continued where I stopped the previous year, and I managed to conduct a number of further interviews until 19 August 2016. However, by then, the politics around *vuhosivhuhulu* had become tenser and much more publicized. The nature of the responses by the interviewees had subsequently also changed – not necessarily with regard to content, but in as far as their interpretations related to current events. For this reason I decided not to disclose the identity of any of the interviewees approached during the 2016 research trip, even though they have given their consent. The events relayed in the following paragraph also contributed to this decision:

On 18 August 2016 I had an interview with *vhothovhele* from two different communities. However, the procedure was disrupted towards the end when a third *thovhele*, who had agreed to be part of the interview, decided to call *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu, who then instructed the interview to be stopped. At this point the interview with *Thovhele* A and *Thovhele* B had already been conducted and what was left was for them to complete their details on the consent form. *Thovhele* A had already completed his form and he and *Thovhele* B were both requesting copies of their declarations when the whole process was stopped by the intervention of *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu.⁴ *Vhothovhele* A and B were unable to give me back the forms. Consequently, since the conditions under which the information was divulged had changed during the course of the interviews, I feel obliged not to include their identity in my reportage. What had been made very clear through this incident, however, is the continued weight carried by orally transmitted information. The perception continues that the truth is made as it is spoken by the authoritative person. Therefore, at that particular moment in time, it was of utmost importance for (and of primary interest to) the *Khosikhulu* Mphephu to control the divulgence of Venda history. Clearly the authority of what was being proclaimed was vested in the person by whom it was being proclaimed, and *vhothovhele* were not entrusted with their own interpretations on this occasion. Apparently a scholarly investigation held the possibility of upsetting the authority of chiefly-harboured historical truths – perhaps by implication owing to the scholar’s presumed privy to alternative sources of interpretation?

Thursday 18 August 2016 was horrible for me as a researcher because the *khosikhulu*’s spokesperson, Mr Jackson Mafunzwaini ended up calling me asking me to explain the aims of my research and to disclose the names of the *vhothovhele* I had already interviewed. I gave him an answer to the aims and objectives of my research. However, I refused to divulge the names of *vhothovhele* I had interviewed already. The following day, 19 August 2016, *Thovhele* Kutama

⁴ It is pertinent for me to highlight that before I interviewed any *thovhele* of Venda in 2015, I observed protocol and I sent a letter of request from my supervisor, supporting my motivation for an interview with *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu Ramabulana. However, I received a negative response from the representative of *nndu ya vuhosi* of the Ramabulana, Vhavenda David Japan Mphephu Ramabulana. I have thus made it clear from my side that I had no intention to circumvent or ignore the *khosikhulu* of Venda.

called me to say that he went to *Khosikhulu* to explain the aims and objectives of my research, and that things were set right; that *Khosikhulu* had realised that it was not my mistake, but that of *Khosikhulu's* uncle, Vhavenda David Japan Mphephu, who had failed to convey my request to *Khosikhulu* for an interview appointment. *Thovhele* Kutama also said Vhavenda Japan Mphephu accepted the fact that I had consulted him about my intention to interview *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu. However, he added, the circumstances had changed since the High Court in Thohoyandou had granted Masindi Mphephu the court interdict to stop the coronation of *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu. As indicated in the previous chapter, Masindi Mphephu, the daughter of *Mutahabvu* Dimbanyika Mphephu, was contesting the legitimacy of *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu. *Thovhele* Kutama advised me to wait for the court case involving *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu and Masindi Mphephu to be finalized.

Toni Mphephu would have been crowned officially as *khosikhulu* on Friday, 9 September 2016. The then 25-year-old Masindi Mphephu, represented by a well-known Advocate and Chairperson of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Dali Mpofu, secured a high court interdict preventing her uncle, Toni Mphephu, from being crowned *khosikhulu*, pending a review of the decision made by President Jacob Zuma to recognize her uncle, Toni Mphephu, as *khosikhulu*.

On Thursday 15 December 2016 Limpopo Judge President Ephraim Makgoba dismissed Masindi Mphephu's High Court challenge, indicating that he would give his reasons the following year. However, Masindi Mphephu's legal representatives and her supporters had since appealed to the Supreme Court of Appeal in Bloemfontein. *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu and his supporters seemed jubilant with the interim ruling even though the matter was not yet decided.

Consequently, considering that the 2016 interviews had been conducted just when *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu's approaching crowning was interrupted, I decided not to relay the full content of these interviews, so as not to identify these interlocutors, their status or their specific stance on matters. I decided rather to focus on general trends in the way knowledge transfer changed during that turbulent moment. But before getting to 2016, the content of the interviews

conducted in the significantly more relaxed circumstances in 2015, will be relayed in order to give an impression of the popular beliefs about the discourse of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity amongst a variety of *magota* and *vhothovhele* from various *nndu dza vuhosi*.

The Living History of *Vuhosivhuhulu*: the 2015 Interviews

My first interview was with *Thovhele Pfareli* William Sofrite Mutele at Manenzhe Traditional Authority office, where I found him with *Thovhele* Takalani Ellon Manenzhe. The two traditional leaders were coming from Thohoyandou where they had been attending a *Khoro ya Mahosi* meeting with *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu.

***Thovhele-Pfareli William Sofrite Mutele*⁵**

In response to the question: “What do you think is the cause of conflict in the Venda *Vuhosivhuhulu* dating back centuries?” *Thovhele-Pfareli* Mutele replied:

I think it is due to the royal family politics in choosing the rightful heir to the throne. To add to that another reason should be people within the royal family who claim that which does not belong to them.

The next question to *Thovhele-Pfareli* Mutele was whether he approved of the intervention of the government in settling the Venda kingship disputes. His response:

In my opinion I think the government intervention is wrong because the Vhavenda themselves know who is their *Khosikhulu*. I also hold the view that the government might have wrong motives to influence the set-up of the *vuhosivhuhulu* of Vhavenda.

Upon my question who the earliest inhabitants of Venda were, *Khosi* Mutele did not give a clear answer. He seemed to be unsure if Vhangona or Masingo were the first occupants of the Venda land. He was more pronounced in his views on the late Patrick Ramaano Mphephu Ramabulana:

I believe the late P.R. Mphephu deserved to be the life State President of Venda and *Khosikhulu*. The late P.R. Mphephu did a lot for VhaVenda as a nation.

⁵ *Thovhele-Pfareli* William Sofrite Mutele has since passed away (on 26 April 2018).

When asked about the decision taken by the former Venda Military ruler Gabriel Muntheiwana Ramushwana to abolish the status of *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda after his successful coup in 1990, *Thovhele-Pfareli* Mutale responded that: “It was wrong of Ramushwana to have taken such a decision ...”. My next question was related to the restoration of the *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda by the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry, upon which he responded:

In my opinion the commission’s decision to rule that *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda belongs to the senior house of Ramabulana was the right decision as all along *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity was in the house of Ramabulana.

Upon my inquiry about the submissions of other claimants, he responded that “The Tshivhase Mphaphuli, Tshidziwelele and Ravhura were never *mahosimahulu* of VhaVenda” and he added that he considered their claims to *vuhosivhuhulu* as baseless.

***Thovhele* Ellon Takalani Manenzhe**

The second interview was with *Thovhele* Ellon Takalani Manenzhe of the Manenzhe community. I asked *Thovhele* Manenzhe questions similar to those asked to *Thovhele-Pfareli* Mutale. He responded shrewdly and knowledgeably to my question about the cause of the historical and persistent conflicts around the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity:

As the Manenzhe community we do not want to get involved in the politics of Masingo because I hold a view that, Mr Mulaudzi, as a researcher you are giving an impression that the Ramabulana are more superior than the Manenzhe community. It is a well-known fact amongst the VhaVenda community as a whole that the Manenzhe’s arrival in the Vendaland presided that of Masingo.

Thovhele Manenzhe also gave a weighted answer to my question about government involvement in kingship disputes:

It is my view that the intervention of the government in traditional affairs sometimes is good because it makes *vhothovhele* to be united. I also hold a view that the voice of the government to a *khosikhulu* is well accepted by all *vhothovhele* and their subjects as a *khosikhulu* represents the whole *nndu ya mahosi*. I have to emphasize that in the old days the responsibility of making the *vuhosivhuhulu* or *vuhosi* to be stable was an internal *nndu ya vuhosi* matter which involved *makhotsimunene* and *vhomakhadzi* and *vhomalume* and that depended on the powers of those they supported to ascend the throne. The old days of doing things in the house did not strengthen unity amongst different *vhothovhele*, it is for this reason that I support the role of the government,

because when the government engages with *thovhele* and agrees on issues, it implies that the whole community was consulted.

On the question on the Vhangona as the earliest occupants of Vendaland, he replied:

... when we the Manenzhe community arrived in Venda we found the Vhangona, but we were never subjected elsewhere in the authority of another *thovhele* and we were never under the rule of Vhangona, the Manenzhe community are closely related to Vhatavhatsindi. I also believe that we the Manenzhe Community, Vhatavhatsindi and the Netshiavha might be related.

The claims by *Thovhele* Manenzhe that there might be a relationship of sorts existing between the Manenzhe community, Vhatavhatsindi and Netshiavha cannot be corroborated by any written sources available. The Vhatavhatsindi and the Manenzhe communities are, according to written sources probed in the early chapters of this research, the communities that came after the Vhangona and the two groups were later followed by the Masingo. The issue of the Manenzhe community, Vhatavhatsindi and the Netshiavha being related as alleged by *Thovhele* Manenzhe might be far from the truth as the Manenzhe and Vhatavhatsindi are neither Vhangona nor Masingo. As indicated elsewhere in the early chapters of the research, the Vhangona and Manenzhe communities are two different communities who arrived in Venda land over different periods of time. And yet it is most significant that the *Thovhele* Manenzhe reverts to a historical narrative strategy in his effort to affirm the current relationship between the communities. This clearly illustrates the power of an argument that can be anchored in history and affirms the legitimizing role of historical narrative within the community.

Next we moved on to *Thovhele* Manenzhe's perspectives on the late *Khosikhulu* P.R. Mphephu as President of Venda:

I don't think it was proper for the late *Khosikhulu* P.R. Mphephu to declare himself *Khosikhulu* and a life State President of Venda. I'm saying this because the [Ma]Singo elevated some of the *makhotsimunene* to be *vhothovhele* in areas they were allocated by the Singo community when they arrived in Venda. They changed the names of these *mahosi* even though they came from the same house of Ramabulana, for example we have Masakona, Nthabalala, Tshivhase, Khakhu, Ramabuda and Davhana – all these *mahosi* are the Ramabulanas. As we are speaking now the Singo have more than fifteen *mahosi*. It is for this reason that during the old Venda homeland government, *mahosi* who are Masingo held secret meetings in Dzanani to discuss government issues

and they were able to out-vote other *mahosi* who were members of the Venda parliament.

Subsequently he was asked to comment on the 1990 coup and the abolition of the Venda *vuhosivhuhulu*:

I think [the late General] Ramushwana's decision was the right one. It helps to restore the parity of the status of *mahosi* in Venda. I also heard the allegations that the National Party government supported Ramushwana for taking such a decision because the central government realised that the Venda homeland government was collapsing ... so was the role of *mahosi* involvement in the government.

Thovhele Manenzhe gave the following view on the Commission ruling that the *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda should be in the house of Ramabulana?

That outcome of the Nhlapo commission of enquiry has damaged the status of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity instead of coming up with the solutions. During the time of the late P.R. Mphephu, he was a *thovhele* and now the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry has elevated the Ramabulana to the *khosikhulu* status which is wrong. We had a meeting at the old Venda parliament, where we discussed the issue of *vuhosivhuhulu* and it was the time of the conflicts between Ramabulana, Tshivhase and Mphaphuli and that was before the Nhlapo ruling. I raised a concern that during the homeland government our fathers were *vothovhele* and members of the Venda parliament. Our fathers took decisions of authority, but they never discussed the issue of *vuhosivhuhulu*. My views were supported by *Thovhele* Madiavhathu Kennedy Tshivhase of the Tshivhase community. I made it clear in that meeting that Masingo arrived and found the Manenzhe community in the Venda land.

This contemplation on "the conflicts between the Ramabulana, Tshivhase and Mphaphuli" (and also Tshidzuwelele and Ravhura) led me to ask *Thovhele* Manenzhe my next question, about whether the challenge put up by these communities for *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity was justified. *Thovhele* Manenzhe responded also to this question with an argument about a hierarchy based on when the particular grouping had arrived in Venda territory:

It was not justified because all these communities know that when they arrived, they found the Manenzhe community [already] having the status of *thovhele*.

Thovhele Manenzhe's response led me to ask him the follow up question:

Thovhele Manenzhe, tell me: if you were indeed *vhothovhele* ahead of Masingo, why did the Manenzhe community fail to contest *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda with the Ramabulana, Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Tshildziwelele and Ravhura?

Thovhele Manenzhe replied:

We the Manenzhe community are very peaceful people and we were independent *vhothovhele* and not under the jurisdiction of any *thovhele* from other communities.

Khotsimunene Takalani Eric Mashamba

My next interview, on the recommendation of *Thovhele* Tshiitwa Mashamba, was with *Khotsimunene* Takalani Eric Mashamba, a knowledgeable elder of the Mashamba community. The meeting took place on 17 February 2015 at his home in Mukondeni village, Mashamba.

His response to my first question, when taking a long view of kingship disputes, was as follows:

In my opinion I think the cause of conflicts in *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity originates from *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* itself because *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* does not listen to *makhadzi's* advice on the issue of succession. Sometimes *makhadzi* is bribed to appoint the wrong person with the involvement of *makhotsimunene*.

We then moved on to talk about government intervention in Venda politics since 1994, and he retorted:

I do not support government intervention because what is important is to follow the Venda tradition of running the royal disputes.

On the issue of the Vhangona as the earlier settlers in Venda land and its relation to land ownership, his views were as follows:

In my opinion I don't think anyone can dispute the fact that Vhangona were the first settlers of Venda but the problem with them was that they were a very small community and there was no land which we can say belongs to Vhangona. Vhangona lost their hold on the Venda land when they were conquered by Masingo and we the Mashamba community also conquered them at Selabwerana.

On the rule of Patrick Ramaano Mphephu Ramabulana during the homeland era, he commented:

I think it was a correct decision because the Ramabulana were people with authority during that period even though they are related to the Tshivhase and Davhana but they are [a more] senior house to the other two houses.

When it came to my question on the 1990 coup and the abolition of the status of Venda *vhuhosivhuhulu*, his response was:

I do not think it was a correct decision because it shows that there was political motivation for a military ruler to take over the government of Venda and abolish the *vhuhosivhuhulu* status hence the military disrespect for the status of the *vhuhosivhuhulu*.

I also asked him for his views on the seven-year period after the death of *Khosikhulu* P.R. Mphephu during which *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu acted as regent, without any resolution from *nndu ya vuhosi* about the rightful person to succeed *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu.

I think it [the throne having been vacant for so long] was correct in the sense that the royal family needed time to prepare for a successor. The royal council needed to sit in a meeting to decide who should ascend to the throne. However, it was a good decision for *makhadzi* to act for a long period before *Khosikhulu* Dimbanyika Mphephu ascended to the throne. I do not know if Dimbanyika and Toni are biological brothers from the same mother but if that is not the case, it implies Toni was not supposed to be *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity because if Dimbanyika had kids then his kids should succeed him, not Toni Mphephu.

His opinion on the Nhlapo Commission ruling that the kingship belongs to the house of Ramabulana:

I think it was a correct decision because all the time the Ramabulana were the *mahosimahulu* of Venda. If *vhuhosivhuhulu* was not restored to *nndu khulu* of Masingo, it was going to cause more conflicts in Venda.

We then spoke about Masindi Mphephu, the daughter of *mutahabvu* Dimbanyika Mphephu, and her challenge in the Thohoyandou High Court against the decision made by President Jacob Zuma to pronounce Toni Mphephu as *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. On the question whether a woman can ascend to the throne of Venda, *Khotsimunene* Mashamba responded cautiously:

I do not think it is acceptable because it is a taboo according to the Venda tradition. If a woman could ascend to the throne, then the whole *vhuhosivhuhulu* will be lost by

nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu. The woman can get involved with a commoner and bear children who are not of royal blood. I also have a problem with Masindi Mphephu's claim to be *khosikadzikhulu* of the Venda polity using her birth right to challenge the Venda tradition of succession.

Lastly, I prompted *Khotsimunene* Mashamba about the houses of Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Ravhura and Vhangona challenging the legitimacy of the Ramabulana as *mahosimahulu* of the Venda polity at the Nhlapo Commission. His response:

I think what was wrong is, some of the *mahosi* belonging to Masingo were colluding with the Vhangona community to destabilize *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana. One example is *Thovhele* Midiavhathu Tshivhase who did not like *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana restored at all. I believe *Thovhele* Tshivhase was using political influence to claim *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. It is common knowledge that *Thovhele* Tshivhase was an MP of the ANC in parliament until recently and his parents and grandparents were very involved in the ANC politics. Tshivhase took advantage of the Ramabulana's past of being so sympathetic to the apartheid National Party regime. In conclusion, I have to remind you that "*vuhosi a vhu dobiwa ndilani*"⁶.

Thovhele Malovhana Cecil Masakona

After leaving the Mashamba community, on 17 February 2015, I interviewed *Thovhele* Malovhana Cecil Masakona, who preferred to be accompanied by his knowledgeable senior headman, *Vhamusanda* Mulondo Wiliam Nmaguvhuni. We met at *Thovhele* Masakona's *pfamo*. *Thovhele* Masakona is part of *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana and he is a spokesperson for the Ramabulana. He shared the following thoughts on the conflicts around the Venda *vuhosivhuhulu* over the centuries:

In my view, I think our *vuhosivhuhulu* as Venda people was not well documented and, in the end, we depend on oral history. It is for this reason you have this idiom in Venda that "*vuhosi vhunaka nga u lweliwa*"⁷ I think this was the sole reason for conflicts.

Vhamusanda Nmaguvhuni added:

In my view a *thovhele* or a *khosikhulu* is installed by the *makhotsimunene* and *vhomakhadzi nnduni ya vuhosi*. Conflicts are caused when a *thovhele* or a *khosikhulu* has more than one *mutanuni* of *dzekiso* and other common *vhatanuni*. Those whose

⁶ *Vuhosi a vhu dobiwi ndilani* is a Venda idiom which implies that rulership is not cheap.

⁷ *Vuhosi vhunaka nga u lweliwa* is a Venda idiom which translates that the rulership is beautiful when it is contested.

children do not qualify to sit on the throne influence their sons to put up a fight to replace their late father who was a *khosikhulu* or *thovhele*. *Makhadzi* and *makhotsimunene* had to play a role to resolve the disputes by choosing *mukololo* who is the rightful heir to the throne from *nndu* of *dzekiso*.

They then also shared their views on government interference in settling *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity disputes. *Thovhele* Masakona:

In my view *vuhosivhuhulu* is a *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* matter. I do not think the government has to be involved in the affairs of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. The interference of the government will cause *vuhosivhuhulu* to lose its limitations on how far the government can interfere.

Vhamusanda Nemaguvhuni:

In my opinion the apartheid [government] got involved in the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity through force to exercise more control in the traditional affairs. The commission of enquiry was formed to restore *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda people because the apartheid regime never recognized *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. The Nhlapo Commission of Enquiry's work was made easier because about 25 *vhothovhele* of Venda polity supported the pronouncement that *vuhosivhuhulu* belongs to *nndu khulu* of the Ramabulana.

I strongly disagree with *Vhamusanda* Nemaguvhuni's statement that the apartheid government never recognized *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. The truth is that it was the apartheid government which propelled the Ramabulana to the status of *vuhosivhuhulu* when the National Party government allowed *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu to declare himself *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. *Vhamusanda* Nemaguvhuni's statement was more political than factual; he was implying that the ANC-led government was doing what the National Party government had failed to do by recognizing *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity, which is a total distortion of facts.

On the matter of the Vhangona as the earlier settlers in Venda land and their current status, *Thovhele* Masakona commented:

According to oral sources Vhangona and Khoisan are the same people. I would agree with the notion that Vhangona are the first settlers of the Venda land. As for ownership of the Venda land, it is common knowledge that those who emerged victorious in a war becomes the owners of the land; you have the right of ownership of the land through a spear. It was as a result of us Masingos' conquest of Vhangona that

we became the landowners of Venda land. In my opinion Masingo are similar to the Israelites, we are able to draw similarities of *Ngomalungundu* with the Israelites' "*Mbulungelo ya mulanga*" which was carried by six people. It was not supposed to touch down just like *Ngomalungundu* which was carried by six people and it was not supposed to touch the ground as well. One can also draw similarities in the long journey Masingo took from Central Africa to the Soutpansberg in Southern Africa to the journey taken by the Israelites from Egypt to the land of milk and honey. The Singo history has some connections with the bible.

It is interesting that *Thovhele* Masakona used this biblical reference to distinguish the Masingo from the other Venda communities. Comparing Masingo to the Israelites implies that *Thovhele* Masakona was saying that Masingo are the chosen people of God. However, I find no similarities between the Masingo and the Israelites - neither religiously nor in terms of conquest. The Israelites were captives in Egypt and they had to be saved by God through Moses. In contrast there is no evidence which showed that the Masingo were ever oppressed or in need to escape either in Matongoni or in the Soutpansberg. They also relied heavily on their God *Mwali* who was like their ruler as illustrated in the earlier chapters. Another contentious issue coming out of *Thovhele* Masakona's response is his assertion that oral sources refers to Vhangona as the Khoisan. I personally find this statement nonsensical. He did not even name the oral sources he was referring to.

Vhamusanda Nemaguvhuni confirmed that the Masingo easily defeated the Vhangona, but curiously, he did not conflate the Vhangona and the San into a single entity but used the conjunction "and" to explain that both these communities were the "first occupants of the Venda land". Contrary to the two interlocutors' arguments, the Vhangona's defeat at the hand of the Masingo did not disqualify them from land ownership in perpetuity. Vhangona resilience was clearly demonstrated through their successful presentations before the Ralushai and Nhlapo Commissions respectively.

Thovhele Masakona was also willing to comment on P.R. Mphephu's regime and the merits of him declaring himself *khosikhulu* and a Life President of Venda:

In my view, I think it was not correct for *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu to declare himself Life State President of Venda because he was not supposed to take advantage of his

role as a *thovhele* to allow himself to be used by the apartheid government to enter politics as a State President of Venda. It is for this reason today that the *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity is not respected. *Vhuhosivhulu* was disrespected by *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu's involvement in politics because it gave an impression that all *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity are corrupt because Mphephu allowed himself to be controlled by the apartheid government. Some of the *vhothovhele* during the period of P.R. Mphephu's leadership of the homeland were opposed to his dual role as a *khosikhulu* and State President of Venda, but he had the majority support amongst the *vhothovhele*.

Vhamusanda Nemaguvhuni added:

I think P.R. Mphephu got too much involved in politics. I hold the view that he thought that, if he did not accept the apartheid offer of being Venda Homeland President, his authority as a *khosikhulu* would be lost.

When prompted, *Thovhele* Masakona continued as follows on the subsequent events in the 1990s:

I think that *vhuhosivhuhulu* became too involved with politics. I also hold the view that General Brigadier Ramushwana thought the best way was to take over the government and abolish the status of *vhuhosivhuhulu* in Venda to start afresh and bring stability. It was going to be impossible for Ramushwana to govern Venda while *mahosi* still had some autonomous power. What Ramushwana had in mind was a government free of the monarch's interference.

Vhamusanda Nemaguvhuni:

I think [Brigadier] Ramushwana's coup was wrong but I also feel that it was trying to bring unity in Venda.

When asked about *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu's interregnum before Dimbanyika Mphephu ascended to the throne of Venda, *Thovhele* Masakona responded:

It is my opinion to think that the [seven year] period of acting was too long. I also hold the view that *nndu ya vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana was not certain on who to appoint as a successor to the late P.R. Mphephu because of the confusion caused by General Brigadier Ramushwana when he abolished the status of *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. I think it is for this reason the throne remained vacant for too long.

Vhamusanda Nemaguvhuni interjected:

The reality is when “*mativha oxa*”, *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* is big and it is the responsibility of *makhadzi* and *makhotsimunene* to find the rightful heir to the throne hence the long period it took for *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu to act as a regent for that long.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *Thovhele* Masakona and *Vhamusanda* Nemaguvhuni affirmed that the Nhlapo Commission was correct in its finding that “the *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda belongs to the house of Ramabulana” and that “the houses of Mphaphuli, Tshivhase, Ravhura and Tshidzuwelele had no valid claim to the Venda *vuhosivhuhulu*.”⁸

Next, I asked the *Thovhele* Masakona and *Vhamusanda* Namaguvhuni for their opinions on Masindi Mphephu’s challenge and their views on the possibility of a woman ascending to the Venda throne. It was clear that the recent events had prompted the Ramabulana royals to revisit and rethink and for the moment, reconfirm their views. *Thovhele* Masakona:

It is my view that in Venda it is not proper for a woman to ascend to *vuhosivhuhulu*. If we look back to the period of Tindima, Hwami, Dimbanyika and Dyambeu, we never heard a woman leading the Venda nation as a royal head. It is a fact that there are other *misanda* in Venda where a man does not sit on the throne, but the throne is only reserved for women. A case in reference is Tshaulu Tshaha Bohwana, where a woman is the royal head of that community. However, *nnduni ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana, a woman is not allowed to sit on the throne according to Venda customary laws. The Bohwana are Masingo as well but in their family, it is different to the Ramabulana when it comes to succession plans. As for Masindi Mphephu’s claim, it is clear to me that she had some outsiders influencing her. After the death of her father, Dimbanyika Mphephu, she and Toni Mphephu had a good relationship because *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu was also helping her with her studies and everything. It caught the Ramabulana by surprise after the failed challenges of Tshivhase and Mphaphuli that Masindi Mphephu was challenging her uncle’s *vuhosivhuhulu* status in the High Court of Thohoyandou. It surprised the Ramabulana that Masindi Mphephu

⁸ Thovhele Mashau intercepted when Vhamusanda Nemaguvhuni was speaking to further emphasize a point he made earlier, thereby illustrating the lively way in which Venda *mahosi* continue to recall, interpret, and relate history to present-day contexts. “According to Venda tradition when you go beyond the river after the war, you are defeated and you cannot be followed by your enemy. The only people who had a legitimate claim to the Venda *vuhosivhuhulu* were supposed to be Davhana, Rasikhuthuma and Nthabalala because they were all older than Makhado, it is just that they were defeated by Makhado and they left the royal family. I also think for Davhana, Rasikhuthuma and Nthabalala not to pursue their *vuhosivhuhulu* ambitions now they took into cognizance what happened during the royal wars involving their grandparents and they felt it is proper to support the Ramabulana since they never regained the *vuhosivhuhulu* since Makhado drove his elder brothers out of Tshirululuni.”

ran to the High Court before engaging the family about her concerns. We all realised that she might be having people backing her to put up that challenge in court. Those people who are influencing her have vested interest.

Lastly, I asked them if they thought the *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes in Venda had finally come to an end. *Vhamusanda* Nemaguvhuni had an interesting response:

A person who has been given a kingship certificate [sic] in front of every *thovhele* of Venda will never lose *vuhosivhuhulu* because Toni Mphephu has been given the certificate of kingship already. I heard Tshidzuwelele of Vhangona want to revive his challenge, but he will not succeed because he does not have anyone supporting him.

Vhamusanda Nemaguvhuni's last answer about Toni Mphephu having received a "kingship certificate" can be a distortion of facts as his coronation had not happened yet. The symbolic prominence of a textual document, the certificate, as confirmation of finality, (and what it signifies about an "external confirmation" of the kingship as an almost obvious necessity), is significant for this study.

Khotsimunene Tshililo Amos Manenzhe

After my interview with *Thovhele* Masakona I went to Shayandima near Thohoyandou to interview Tshililo Amos Manenzhe, *khotsimunene* of the Manenzhe community. I was advised by *Thovhele* Takalani Manenzhe to interview him since, as an elder of the Manenzhe community, he could add to the information that *thovhele* himself had already given me during my visit to the Manenzhe Tribal Office on 16 February 2015. It was again noted that a *thovhele* relied on the older *khotsimunene* to augment his knowledge and interpretations, and indeed striking that *Thovhele* Manenzhe saw no need to check or sanction his *khotsimunene's* views and interpretations. Subsequently, since *Khotsimunene* Tshililo Manenzhe had divulged his knowledge and understandings to me completely independent of the earlier responses provided by *Thovhele* Manenzhe, I also treated his detailed and nuanced answers as a freestanding interview. Where obvious links or significant differences with *Thovhele* Manenzhe's earlier responses to questions occur, I indicate those.

Khotsimunene Tshililo Manenzhe spoke philosophically about *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes in the past and the present:

In my opinion conflicts are brought by the current situation where you find some *vhothovhele* under other *vhothovhele*. In the olden days *vhothovhele* were independent of each other. Conflicts are always there in every *nndu ya vuhosi* because you find a *thovhele* with more than one *mutanuni*. There is a problem when the eldest *mukololo* is robbed of his birthright.

When I asked *Khotsimunene* Manenzhe whether he approved of government intervention in settling the Venda rulership disputes, he replied, as had *Thovhele* Manenzhe previously, that it had become inevitable in the post-apartheid context: *Khotsimunene* Manenzhe's repeated emphasis on the less hierarchical pre-colonial situation, where the different *vhothovhele* were independent from one another, seems to represent his personal take on matters:

It is my view that the government gets involved in the *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes to bring unity because the government has the administrative powers to bring stability in our country; we are now in a democratic state. The apartheid government of the National Party was the one that elevated the Ramabulana to *vuhosivhuhulu* status after the creation of the homelands. The apartheid government realized that *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu was so co-operative and they gave him *vuhosivhuhulu* status. This was not the case before homelands because *vhothovhele* were independent of each other.

In *Khotsimunene* Manenzhe's response to my question on the Vhangona, he was not as adamant as the *Thovhele* Manenzhe to insist that the Manenzhe had never been subjugated by the Vhangona, but he did apply his knowledge to impress the complexity of settlement sequences on me and to argue against a hierarchy based thereupon:

I think one can concur with the idea of Vhangona being the first people to occupy the Venda land but there were many groups which followed them, Vhadau, Vhanyai and Vhambedzi who came from the north of Limpopo. The Venda of today have evolved from the old Venda which the Ngona first settled.

Khotsimunene Manenzhe did not engage in any speculation on alleged relationships between the Manenzhe, Vhatavhatsindi and Netshiavha as *Thovhele* Manenzhe had in his interview.

Upon my question whether he thought the late P.R. Mphephu's claim to presidency and *vuhosivhuhulu* was justified, *Khotsimunene* Manenzhe used his response to reiterate his stance that "in the olden days *vhothovhele* were independent of each other":

I do not think it was justified because historically there was no title of *khosikhulu* in Venda before. In my opinion Venda had only independent *vhothovhele* and no *thovhele* was above other *vhothovhele*. We the Manenzhe community were not under the jurisdiction of any *khosi*.

He continued when he commented on Brigadier Ramushwana's coup to annex the government of *Gota* Frank Ndwakhulu Ravele:

I think it was motivated by General Brigadier Ramushwana's knowledge of the Venda history and tradition when it comes to the issue of *mahosi*. In the past, we used to know that the Manenzhe and the Ramabulana have their own independent land, so was the Mashamba and Masakona and so forth. None of these *vhothovhele* pays homage to another *thovhele* because they were equal in status. What General Brigadier Ramushwana was doing was restoring the status of *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity which was taken by the apartheid government. The apartheid government found Venda land under the control of *vhothovhele* and used *vhothovhele* to govern the homeland. General Brigadier Ramushwana abolished the status of *khosikhulu* or *thovhele* as a ruler of the government because he did not want two centres of power.

Not surprisingly, similar to *Thovhele* Manenzhe, *Khotsimunene* Manenzhe was critical of the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry's findings:

I cannot say it was the correct decision, but the government was influenced by the fact that since 1979 the Ramabulana were *mahosimahulu* of the Venda polity. The commission did not look at the situation of Venda before 1979 because *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu was not *khosikhulu* then; he was just a *thovhele*.

On the question about the conflicts between Ramabulana, Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Ravhura and Tshidzuwelele, *Khotsimunene* Manenzhe gave a far more detailed response than *Thovhele* Manenzhe had. *Khotsimunene* Manenzhe continued his response from where he left off above:

The Ravhura are elders of Ramabulana according to historical facts, and the Tshivhase are *makhotsimunene* of the Ramabulana, and the Mphaphuli were the traditional healers of Ramabulana. In the early years of Venda, one could become a *thovhele* through the superiority in a war or through the traditional healing powers you had. The Mphaphuli got the status of *thovhele* after they left Dzata to settle at Tshitomboni and then later settled at Mbilwi after he was defeated by the Tshivhase. Mphaphuli

attained his status of *thovhele* through his status as a traditional healer. He later came to Mbilwi to fight on the side of Vhahambubana against Tshivhase and after their victory, Mphaphuli settled at Mbilwi.

Tshidzuwelele's claim to *vuhosivhuhulu* was baseless because he was from the Mphawe group and a Mungona, but there is no place [sic] before and now where you can call it Vhungona, a place which belongs to Vhangona. I think Mungona is Muvenda because there is a saying in Venda which says "*Mungona mubikwa na ive, ive lavhibva Mungona a sala*".⁹ Mungona is not a totem like Singo; we the Manenzhe community have an elephant as a totem, *ri dzi ndou dzaha Manenzhe*.¹⁰

Khotsimunene Manenzhe had a different take than most other interviewees on the seven-year delay in succession after the passing-away of P.R. Mphephu:

I am not a member of the Ramabulana, but I know that the rightful successor to *mutahabvu Khosikhulu* P.R. Mphephu had already passed on, it was Dimbanyika's elder brother. It is for this reason that it took seven years for Dimbanyika Mphephu to succeed his father. The truth was that fate brought Dimbanyika to the throne because he was not by birthright *mulaifa* to the throne of Venda.

Khotsimuneneni Manenzhe had very specific views on gender and rulership:

A woman cannot become *khosikadzi* as per Venda tradition; the reason being that the children of this woman might be *vhasiwana* or *vhakololo* of another *nndu ya vuhosi* and *vuhosivhuhulu* could be lost to another *nndu ya vuhosi* or will just disappear forever. If that was to happen, she will have to sleep with one of her brothers to keep *vuhosivhuhulu* in the original *nndu ya vuhosi*. However, this was considered by Venda to be a taboo.

He concluded:

I think Dimbanyika's daughter was influenced by other people using the current South African Constitution which is in conflict with the traditional beliefs as basis for her claim. The only queen we know is Queen Modjadji of Balobedu, but it was not the case before as there were men who preceded the queens at Modjadji. Masindi Mphephu is exploiting the South African constitution which talks of equality and no one can be discriminated against to be in a position of authority based on his or her gender. She was following the example of the Nwamitwa chieftainship case in the democratic South Africa where the daughter of the late *khozi* used the country's constitution to challenge the legitimacy of her uncle succeeding her father while she was still alive. The court ruled in favor of the late *khozi's* daughter. If we look back at the history of

⁹ *Mungona mubikwa na ive, ive lavhibva Mungona* or *Muvenda mubikwa naive, ive lavhibva Muvenda a sala* is a Venda idiom which implies that a Mungona or Muvenda is a difficult person to convince.

¹⁰ *Ri dzi ndou dza ha Manenzhe*: we elephants of Manenzhe. This how the Manenzhe community praise themselves.

the Ramabulana there was never a woman permanent ruler and this evolution of kingship is brought by modern day government which is democratic.

Thovhele Thavhayamipfa Ronald Mashau

On 21 May 2015 I visited *Thovhele* Thavhayamipfa Ronald Mashau at his *pfamo* in Ha-Mashau. The first question I asked him was the same question I asked the other *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity before him: “What do you think it is the cause of the conflicts in the Venda *vuhosivhuhulu* which dates back to centuries ago?” His response:

I think the cause of the conflicts is the results of disagreement inside *nnduni ya vuhosi*. We all know who is the *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity and we do not have any other *khosikhulu*.

Like several of the previously interviewed *vhothovhele*, he also approved of government intervention in kingship disputes, “because if the government fails to get involved nothing will come right. People will start claiming what does not belong to them and *nndu ya vuhosi* knows what is right and wrong.” Clearly this view on the desirability of government intervention was based on the assumption that Government would concur on who the legitimate royal family was, and acquiesce to the views held by that royal family.

To my question on the Vhangona and the ownership of Venda land, *Thovhele* Mashau echoed the view of most interviewees, that the Vhangona had forfeited their “right to the land ownership when they were conquered by Masingo”, but he opened his response with a more specific answer than most other interviewers: “The land owner is *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu who is the only *khosikhulu* in Venda.”

Thovhele Mashau also had an interesting response to my question on *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu’s regime:

I hold the view that the decision of *Khosikhulu* P.R. Mphephu to declare himself *khosikhulu* of Venda was his birthright and justified because we all pay homage to the Ramabulana in Dzanani. However, I disagree with him being a Life State President. In my view, he should not have gotten himself involved in politics just like the British Queen Elizabeth is doing by leaving politics to politicians.

While he showed understanding for Brigadier Gabriel Ramushwana's coup and abolition of the status of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity:

I think Ramushwana realised that Venda was not stable at that time and people were killing one another. He also realised that President Ravele's government was failing to bring stability to the homeland and some of the people were elevating themselves to *thovhele* status. I think Ramushwana realised that if he allowed the *mahosi* to have more powers that could undermine his government.

... he believed that: "the findings of the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry were a true reflection of the status of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity because it affirmed what all the VhaVenda people know, that *vuhosivhuhulu* belongs to the house of Ramabulana."

Unlike any of the other *thovhele* interviewed, *Thovhele* Mashau speculated that Dimbanyika Mphephu may have been working somewhere and was not ready to ascend to the throne, hence the regency of seven years after the passing away of P.R. Mphephu. He was also the only interviewee who stated that *Vho-Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu was "anointed" by her brother to take over as a regent, which makes it less plausible. It does make sense of course that *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu might have stepped in as a regent since she was the one who ought to preside over the decision about who should ascend to the Ramabulana throne. She could have chosen someone else as regent, but one could argue that she opted to take on the role herself to avoid unnecessary future disputes with a regent becoming too comfortable on the throne to hand it over to the rightful *mulaifa*.

On my question about Masindi Mphephu's court case, he gave the impression that he accepts the principles of the South African constitution but regretted that the Vhavenda could not rather have sorted out the dispute amongst themselves:

According to Venda tradition a woman cannot ascend to the throne in the whole of Venda. I hold the view that the country's constitution is giving women more rights, but our Venda traditions and customs do not allow a woman to sit on the throne. I hold the view that Masindi Mphephu should have resolved the matter inside *nnduni ya vuhosi* first before using the country's constitution. The *nnduni ya vuhosi* would have given her a suitable place within the *vuhosivhuhulu* structures.

Although his recollection of events regarding the history of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity was very sketchy and some of the information he provided seemed unreliable, *Thovhele Mashau* did not mince his words when he was asked to comment on all the *vuhosivhuhulu* claims submitted to the Nhlapo Commission:

It is my view, that the houses of Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Ravhura and Tshidzuwelele were obsessed with the salary packages of kings. Ramabulana was always *nndu khulu ya vuhosivhuhulu* and the claims by the four communities were baseless, it was the issue of money because Tshivhase, Mphaphuli and Ravhura all fled from Dzata and were both from *nndu thukhu* of the Ramabulana. Tshidzuwelele's claim was baseless as Vhangona were conquered by Masingo a long time ago.¹¹

Vhamusanda Nthambeleni Hendrick Musekwa

After the interview with *Thovhele Thavhayamipfa Mashau*, I travelled to Mamvuka village in Dzanani where I interviewed former Mphephu Royal Council Chairperson, *Vhamusanda Nthambeleni Hendrick Musekwa* at his *pfamo* on the evening of 21 May 2015. It is imperative for me to highlight that *Vhamusanda Nthambeleni Musekwa* was one of the *magota* together with *mutahabvu Gota* F.N. Ravele and C.N. Mphephu who were illegally promoted to the status of *vhothovhele* by *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* of Ramabulana during the time of *Gota* F.N. Ravele as a Venda homeland President. However, as the chapters dealing with the Commissions have already highlighted, the promotions were declared null and void by the Mushasha Commission of Inquiry appointed by the then Venda military ruler, Brigadier Gabriel Ramushwana.

Vhamusanda Musekwa's response to my first question was that, in his view, conflicts in the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity were "*ndi mutambo wa vhakololo uri vuhosivhuhulu vhu khwathe hu fanela u vha na dzi khakhathi nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu*"¹². On the ANC government after 1994 setting forth on the apartheid government's path of interfering with traditional authorities, he replied:

11 Ravhura was the senior house of Masingo (as illustrated in the earlier chapters) and he only lost his right to *vuhosivhuhulu* by moving out of Dzata to settle at Makonde.

12 It is the game of the royal princes and for the kingship to be strong there must be conflicts.

It is my view that the government should play an advisory role, not to interfere in the *vuhosivhuhulu* affairs because the *vuhosivhuhulu* belongs to a certain community and it is that community which can decide who is their king.

Unlike most of the interviewees *Vhamusanda* Musekwa: stated:

I do not agree with the notion that Vhangona are the original occupants of the Venda land. We as Vhandalamo of Tshishonga are the original owners of the Venda land because we arrived first in the Venda land.

Vhamusanda Musekwa's version of the Vhandalamo as the first occupants of the Venda land ahead of the Vhangona is a distortion of facts that is not supported by written and oral sources. It is also not supported by any of the *vhothovhele* whom I interviewed before *Vhamusanda* Musekwa.

In response to my statement that P.R. Mphephu had declared himself *khosikhulu* and a Life State President of Venda during his reign, and my question whether these decisions were justified, *Vhamusanda* Musekwa surprisingly responded:

It is my view that *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu did not appoint himself *khosikhulu*. I hold the view that P.R. Mphephu was appointed by the apartheid National Party government. I think the National Party government's decision to appoint P.R. Mphephu as *khosikhulu* was the right decision, "*hovha huu humisela dzembe muvhinini wa lo*".¹³

Vhamusanda Musekwa's response to my next question about the Venda military take over of the government was:

In my view the decision by Ramushwana to take over the Venda government was a good decision to bring stability. The wrong thing Ramushwana did was to interfere with the affairs of *vuhosivhuhulu*, taking over the government was a good idea.

His view on the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry ruling that the Venda kingship belongs to the senior house of Ramabulana, was that:

Vuhosivhuhulu of the Venda polity belongs to *nndu khulu* of Ramabulana; as to the issue of who is the rightful person to sit on the throne, I do not know, it is the issue of *nndu khulu ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana to decide.

13 This is a Venda idiom which means "the restoration of rulership".

As with all the other interviewees, I also asked *Vhamusanda* Musekwa about *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu's regency of seven years until Dimbanyika Mphephu took over the throne. His answer:

What I observed during the time of *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu as a regent, is that she did not have authority. She was influenced by outsiders who wanted to be given the status of *vhothovhele*; that is the reason the transition from *Vho-Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu to Dimbanyika Mphephu took longer.

This was exceptional of this interview; that an account was given of the reasons why it had taken so long for Dimbanyika Mphephu to ascend to the throne. I concur with *Vhamusanda* Musekwa that inside as well as outside influence might have played a role in delaying *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* to reach agreement on who should be the rightful *mulaifa* to *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana. *Vhamusanda* Musekwa had inside information from *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana since he was the Chairperson of the Mphephu Royal Council at that point in time.

Vhamusanda Musekwa was also willing to share his opinion on the claims of Masindi Mphephu to *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity using her birthright and the South African constitution:

In my opinion, I think politics is getting too much involved in kingships. Democracy has spoiled a lot of things with regard to traditional leadership: instead of advising, the democratic state is becoming too involved with kingship. In our Venda tradition and customs, a woman cannot be equal to a man.

Also, on the *vuhosivhuhulu* claims made at the Nhlapo Commission by the houses of Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Ravhura, and Tshidzuwelele for the Vhangona. *Vhamusanda* Musekwa was willing to share his view:

It is my view that it is good when *vuhosivhuhulu* is contested inside *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* which has the legitimate claim for *vuhosivhuhulu*, not by outsiders. Yes, there is an idiom in Venda which says "*Vhohosi vhunaka nga u lweliwa*"¹⁴. However, since the Tshivhase, Mphaphuli and Ravhura moved out of Dzata, the *musanda* of the Venda polity, they forfeited their rights to *vuhosivhuhulu* and *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana was not affected by *makhotsimunene* and *maine* who voluntarily decided to leave Dzata.

¹⁴ *Vhohosi vhunaka nga u lweliwa* is a Venda idiom which means that kingship, chieftainship and headmanship becomes interesting when it is contested by the royal family members.

Vhamusanda Johannes Nkhangweni Makhado

My next interview took place on 22 May 2015, with *Vhamusanda Johannes Nkhangweni Makhado* of Khakhu community, who was representing *Thovhele* Ratshibvumo Robert Khakhu, since he was not well at the time of my visit. I have since heard that “*mativha oxa*” after my visit. *Vhamusanda Nkhangweni Makhado* kindly gave consent to the interview even though his family was in bereavement after the loss of his younger brother. I interviewed him while he was preparing for the funeral. *Vhamusanda Makhado* was quite outspoken about *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes in history and in the present:

There were always conflicts *nnduni ya vuhosivhuhulu* hence the idiom that says “*vuhosi vhunaka nga u lweliwa*”. There were factions within *nnduni ya vuhosivhulu* and the most powerful *mukololo* with the support of *Vho-Makhadzi* and *makhotsimunene* was able to ascend to the throne. The conflicts today are the result of the abolishment of *vuhosivhuhulu* status by the apartheid government of the National Party. The other *mahosi* saw their fathers and those who succeeded them ruling independently from *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu. It was for this reason that the other *mahosi* were reluctant to allow themselves to be under *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu. Another contributing factor is the issue of salaries to a *khosikhulu* and all the benefits coming from the government of today. The *mahosi* did not want to return to the old order of reporting to *khosikhulu* because they have independent authority themselves.

Vhamusanda Makhado’s assertion that the status of *vuhosivhulu* was abolished by the National Party apartheid government is far from the truth. As it was indicated in the chapter dealing with commissions of inquiries into kingships, the status of *vuhosivhulu* in Venda was abolished by the Venda military junta.

Vhamusanda Makhado commented as follows on the relationship between the Masingo and the Vhangona:

I think Masingo are the rightful owners of Venda land because they conquered the Vhangona using their mysterious drum, *Ngomalungundu*. I also accept the fact that Vhangona were the first to arrive in Venda. Today in most places in Venda we find the ruins of Vhangona and even today we are told of these ruins because they used to be Vhangona homes, the other Venda communities are not allowed to build there because it was sacred places.

Vhamusanda Makhado was quite specific in his critical views on P.R. Mphephu's regime and the way he had declared himself *khosikhulu* and Life State President of Venda:

I do not think it was a correct decision because when one is appointed as *khosikhulu*, it is done by other *mahosi*, not one appointing himself. However, I am not contesting the status of *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu as *khosikhulu*, but the issue is: he was not supposed to appoint himself to the status of *khosikhulu*, because Venda tradition and customs indicate that a person should be appointed by people and the reinstatement of a person as a *khosikhulu* has to be done by people as well. I disagree with *mutahabvu* Mphephu being in politics because he was supposed to be just a traditional leader of Venda.

The narrative of Vhamusanda Makhado, that *khosikhulu* is appointed by the other *mahosi* and people, is in contradiction with the Venda traditions and customs which dictate that the role of appointing a *khosikhulu*, *thovhele*, or *gota* is solely the responsibility of *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* or *nndu ya vuhosi* with *makhadzi* and *makhotsimunene* playing a central role.

Vhamusanda Makhado also carefully explained his disapproval of Brigadier Ramushwana's move to abolish the status of *vuhosivhuhulu* in Venda:

I think General Brigadier Gabriel Ramushwana was wrong. In my opinion I think it might have been motivated by then Venda President, F.N. Ravele's application for *thovhele*. I also hold the view that Ramushwana took a political decision and he was influenced by other *vhothovhele* to remove *Gota* Ravele from the Presidency of Venda. The notion that Ramushwana was threatened by the Venda constitution which had a provision that the head of state should be *thovhele* might be far-fetched. In my view, I think any new government is entitled to amend the constitution when it is necessary.

On the Nhlapo Commission findings, Vhamusanda Makhado commented:

It was a correct decision by the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry to restore *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity to its original *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana. It also helps all *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity because they know their problems would be resolved by the royal council of *khosikhulu* and it will stop *vhothovhele* from running to the courts when they have problems.

He also gave a shrewd explanation for *dzinndu dza vuhosi* of the Ramabulana, Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Ravhura and Tshidzuwelele putting up claims for *vuhosivhulu* of the Venda polity at the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry and the High Court in Thohoyandou:

It was caused by the fact that Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Ravhura and Tshidzuwelele were used to having authority in their areas and they realized that the restoration of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity would mean that they would have to pay homage to a *khosikhulu* which for them was a demotion. Another contributing factor was the salaries and benefits of the *khosikhulu*, and this prompted *Thovhele* Tshivhase and *Thovhele* Mphaphuli together with *Gota* Tshidzuwelele and *Gota* Ravhura, to resent the appointment of *nndu ya vuhosi* of the Ramabulana as that of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. Tshivhase and Mphaphuli also realized that the two of them have more land, people and *magota* than the Ramabulana and as a result of that they felt belittled by the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry's ruling.

Vhamusanda Makhado added that Tshivhase's accepting of the Ramabulana as their senior after Mphaphuli had accepted to be under the Ramabulana would, in his view, contribute to bringing an end to conflict, "because [now] all *vhothovhele* are able to meet at one place with their *khosikhulu*".

Vhamusanda Makhado raised a point so far not mentioned by any of the other interviewees, on the question about *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu's seven-year regency before the Ramabulana's decision that Dimbanyika should be P.R. Mphephu's successor:

I think the Ramabulana elders were still disagreeing on who amongst *vhakololo* should be the *mulaifa* to the *vuhosivhuhulu* left vacant when *mutahabvu* P. R. Mphephu died. They also did not want the news to leak to outsiders and it was for this reason that *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu acted for seven years.

Similar to all the previous interviewees, *Vhamusanda* Makhado was not comfortable with the suggestion that a woman might ascend to the Venda throne:

I do not think it is proper according to our Venda tradition and customs not using politics.¹⁵ In Venda tradition and customs, a child might be number ten *nnduni ya vuhosi* but if those who were born before him are girls, that male child can be appointed as a *khosikhulu* or *thovhele*. In our Venda tradition, a male child is an

¹⁵ Implication: According to Venda tradition and custom queenship is not proper; it can only be claimed by using politics; or: It is not proper according to our tradition and custom to use politics to make such claims.

important member of the family, a woman is *khadzi* within *nnduni ya vuhosi*. A *khadzi* is important in royal rituals and if a *thovhele* or *khosikhulu* is guilty of any wrong doings, *nndu ya vuhosi* call a *khadzi* to come and reprimand the *thovhele* or *khosikhulu*. In fact, a *khadzi* is a *thovhele* or *khosikhulu* because she has too much influence in matters that concern *nndu ya vuhosi*. When a *khadzi* speaks, *nndu ya vuhosi* takes her word as that of their ancestral spirits and *khadzi* also has a responsibility of installing a *thovhele* or *khosikhulu*. The issue of Masindi Mphephu: Dimbanyika's daughter's claim might have been influenced by other people within *nnduni ya vuhosi* of the Ramabulana or outsiders. She might have been told that it is possible because Munzhedzi (Modjadji) who used to live in Venda, Tshavhalovhedzi, is a *kgosikadi* at Ha-Modjadji, Bolobedu. However, when Modjadji was still in Tshavhalovhedzi they had men as *magota*. It only changed when they moved to Bolobedu.

Khotsimunene Wildert Mukandangalwo Madzivhandila

On the same day I went to Tshakhuma tsha Madzivhandila to interview *Thovhele* Madzivhandila. Since *mulaifa* to the throne was deemed still too young, I was referred to *Khotsimunene* Wildert Mukandangalwo Madzivhandila, chairman of the Madzivhandila royal council.

On *vuhosivhuhulu* conflicts in the Venda polity, he commented:

All the *vuhosi* of the Venda polity involves conflicts and it cannot be *vuhosi* if there is no fighting within *nndu ya vuhosi* for succession to the throne. In most cases the eldest son of the cattle house should be the next *thovhele* or *khosikhulu*. However, if *nndu* of the *mutanuni mutuku* has taken care of *thovhele* or *khosikhulu*, the elders can take *vuhosi* or *vuhosivhuhulu* to that house.

He was also quite pragmatic about outside interference in the *vuhosivhuhulu* politics:

There is no way, if the government does not intervene, that people will kill each other as they used to do before, through the sword. The intervention of the modern state has helped to end problemsolving through the sword in *vuhosi* or *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes. Now the government has helped *nndu dza vuhosi* resolve their conflicts through negotiations and through courts, not through war.

Yet he was adamant that what had previously been determined by the sword, should remain valid:

In my opinion the owners of the whole Venda are the Ramabulana. I concur with the fact that Vhangona were the first to arrive in Venda land. However, they lost the right to own the Venda land when they were conquered by the Masingo. If you lost in war, you lost everything – that was the case with Vhangona. Today, and even before, Vhangona has no one you can call *thovhele*.

He gave a valuable, lengthy exposition of his insider view into P.R. Mphephu's declaring himself *khosikhulu* and Life State President of the Venda homeland:

I think it was a correct decision because P.R. Mphephu was given a task by all 28 *mahosi* in Venda to unite them. For Mphephu to become a Life State President, it was a political strategy by the National Party government in the central government. The NP government did not want the VIP of Baldwin Mudau to be the ruling party in Venda. I was a member of VIP and we advised *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu to sit at home and not get involved in politics. We assured him that he will be taken care of as *khosikhulu* with a big salary, royal aides ... but he was advised by *mahosi* close to him to turn down our advice as VIP. We won two elections, but we were robbed because the National Party of P.W. Botha was scared of VIP rule and they knew that they would lose their authority in the Venda homeland. To add to that the VIP leader Baldwin Mudau and all VIP leaders and members were aligned to the ANC. The National Party was afraid that Venda would be under the jurisdiction of the then banned ANC through the VIP. In their attempts to neutralise the VIP, Pretoria called the VNP leader, P.R. Mphephu, to work with the VIP leader in the Venda government. Both Mphephu and Mudau agreed to work together, but other VIP MPs rejected Pretoria's proposal. The VIP, after the stolen elections, had no capacity to take up arms against the Mphephu-VNP illegal regime because it had the backing of the militarily strong South African government.

Khotsimunene Madzivhandila added that, in his view:

Ramushwana was wrong to abolish the status of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. Ramushwana's decision was not influenced by the constitution of Venda which states that the President of Venda should be a *thovhele*, that was the biggest mistake by Ramushwana. Ramushwana was more influenced by politics of that time.

Khotsimunene Madzivhandila affirmed that he agreed with the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry "because *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity always belongs to the Ramabulana and no other

nndu ya vuhosi in Venda”. He dismissed the challenges to the legitimacy of the Ramabulana brought up by Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Ravhura and Tshidzuwelele (who is Mungona) as “just politically motivated because some of them were influenced by some politicians in the African National Congress”. He concluded that: “The decision of the four traditional leaders contesting to withdraw their claims to challenge the Ramabulana was the right thing to do so that there is unity in Venda”.

While he described *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu’s seven year-long regency as “politics within *nnduni ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana”, he responded to Masindi Mphephu’s claim to her father’s throne with his opinion that “in Venda there is no *khosikadzikhulu*.” He continued:

I do not know about the Ramabulana, but I do not think in the history they ever had a woman sitting permanently on their throne. However, in some small communities such as Tshaula tsha Ha-Bohwana in Venda they have women sitting on the throne. It is alleged by those from those communities that if a man was installed as *thovhele*, he did not live for more than a year, he just died, and it is also a taboo for those communities. Masindi Mphephu is being influenced by outside forces to bring confusion in the Ramabulana. It was understandable if Masindi was a male child of the late *Thovhele* Dimbanyika Mphephu. The issue of the Republic of South Africa constitution has no role in the Venda tradition and customs because she is using it as her reference for her case to be strong. However, it is against how the Ramabulana install their *khosikhulu*.

Free as anyone is to express their views on how the Ramabulana used to and ought to install their *khosikhulu* according to tradition, the South African constitution is of course as valid and binding in Venda as anywhere else in the Republic.

Thovhele Midiavhathu Prince Kennedy Tshivhase.

On 29 May 2015 I met *Thovhele* Midiavhathu Prince Kennedy Tshivhase of the Tshivhase community for an interview while he was on a business trip in Pretoria. He responded as follows to my question on the history of *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes amongst the Vhavenda:

There is an idiom in Venda that says “*vuhosi vhunaka nga u lweliwa*”. It is likely that within *nndu ya vuhosi*, there might be a male *mukololo* born to be a *thovhele* or *khosikhulu*, but because he is not a “*muhaga*”, *nndu ya vuhosi* will consider the *mukololo* who is the most powerful. One example is Makhado, who was not supposed

to be *khosikhulu*, but using his power and the support he had *nnduni ya vuhosi*, he toppled the rightful heir to the throne, his elder brother Davhana.

On government involvement in disputes amongst the Venda royals, he reflected as follows:

In my opinion it is not proper for the government to get involved in the *vuhosivuhulu* disputes of the Venda polity or any other kingship of other South Africa communities. The problem with the government involvement is that you find some of the officials are bribed. As Masingo we can resolve our own disputes because we are all equals but when the State gets involved they take sides in the matter of kingship because of bribery. The involvement of the state causes conflicts in the whole concept of kingships in general.

On the matter of the Vhangona, *Thovhele* Tshivhase gave a similar answer as given by most other interviewees:

I agree that Vhangona were the first to arrive in Venda. However, we conquered them in every war, when you are defeated you are now subjects of the conquerors and this implies that Vhangona lost any rights they had to the land before the arrival of us Masingo.

Moving closer to recent times, *Thovhele* Tshivhase reflected as follows on the regime of P.R. Mphephu:

It is my view that all the problems in Venda were started by the NP government. The Apartheid government mobilized all the *mahosi* and bought them suits to be like whites in order to create homelands. The next step was appointing *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu as a *khosikhulu* to lead all *vhothovhele*. and later he was made State President of Venda. If my father was still alive in 1967, the appointment of P.R. Mphephu would not have happened. The whites used *mahosi* to control Venda through Mphephu. It is for this reason that today in the Tshivhase land you will not find any white farms. All we did was to accept missionaries to stay in our land without any title deeds. We allowed them to stay in Siloam, Maungani Beuster and Donald Frazer. It is also my view that Mphephu was not supposed to get involved in politics as he was *khosikhulu*. I also think that *khosikhulu* could have stayed away from politics and give somebody who was not a *thovhele* or a *khosikhulu* to be the State President of Venda. The VIP had many intelligent and educated people. At the same time, it was aligned to the ANC and the apartheid government did not want them to govern despite winning two elections in Venda. Amongst the VIP leaders were Baldwin Mudau, Gilbert Bakani and Khosi Ligege.

I found Thovhele Tshivhase thinking that, had his father been alive 1967 he would not have allowed the NP government to upgrade Mphephu's status to that of *khosikhulu*, to be just a wish. *Thovhele* Tshivhase knew very well that the apartheid machinery would have crushed his father had he tried to question the implementation of the Grand Apartheid plan. He would have been easily killed or arrested and face treason charges. Nothing was going to stop the NP government from elevating Mphephu to the status of *khosikhulu*.

On the Ramushwana coup and his abolition of the *vuhosivhuhulu*, Thovhele Tshivhase spoke frankly:

It is my view that Ramushwana took the right decision because he was not a *thovhele* who ruled another *thovhele*. As the Tshivhase people we used to rule over a number of communities who are now *vhothovhele* today, such as Mutele, Manenzhe, Tshikundamalema, Rammuda, Nethengwe and others. It is also true that we the Tshivhase are the largest community in Venda and we have many more *magota* than the Ramabulana. During the time of President Thabo Mbeki, he sent the Minister of Local Government Dr Sydney Mufamadi to tell us that all Masingo are equals and we must sort out our problems but politics of stomach prevented us from taking our rightful place in Venda. Another contributing factor to the Venda problems was the minerals. The mines in the Ramabulana area helped the elevation of Toni Mphephu to the status of a *khosikhulu*. It is also important to note that the Venda tradition and customs do not allow *ndumi* to be a *thovhele* or a *khosikhulu* but in the case of Toni Mphephu, despite being *ndumi* he became a *khosikhulu*, which is not allowed. In fact, the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity was lost when the late P.R. Mphephu became *khosikhulu* because the rightful *mulaifa* was George Ramabulana his elder brother.

The claim by *Thovhele* Tshivhase that *vhothovhele* like Mutele, Manenzhe, Tshikundamalema, Rammuda and Nethengwe were under Tshivhase jurisdiction is debatable, because the historical sources used in this thesis do not concur with *Thovhele* Tshivhase's claim and neither do oral sources. All *vhothovhele* he cited were independent *vhothovhele* historically, as alluded to by *Thovhele* Manenzhe in my interview with him. The assertion that minerals played a part in the Ramabulana being given the status of *khosikhulu* is perhaps rather an interesting complication after the fact. The Ramabulana was given the title of *khosikhulu* based on their seniority in the community of Masingo. There was also historical evidence as demonstrated in the early chapters of this thesis that the Ramabulana never lost their seniority and were never subjugated by Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Ravhura or Davhana at any point in history.

Thovhele Tshivhase was also willing to share his views on the Nhlapo Commission:

According to our analysis as the Tshivhase people, the final documents of the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry's findings were saying that the Ramabulana and the Tshivhase are the *mahosimahulu* in the Venda polity. In our tradition and customs, Toni Mphephu, as a *ndumi*, was not supposed to be a *khosikhulu*. During the reign of *mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu the Commissioner from the South African government wrote to P.R. Mphephu in 1954 that "Mr Patrick Ramaano Mphephu, I am coming to install you as a chief". This process was facilitated by another Ramabulana who was a policeman in Louis Trichardt. This implies that the *vuhosivhuhulu* belongs to *nnduni* of George Ramabulana. There is a Venda idiom which says "*thangu a dzo ngonni fara*"¹⁶, that was the case with the late P.R. Mphephu regarding the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity.

Thovhele Tshivhase's account of the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry is distorted because the Commission did not say the Tshivhase and the Ramabulana are equals. As indicated in their final findings, the Nhlapo Commission ruled that the Venda kingship belongs to the house of the Ramabulana.

On the reasons for the challenge to the status of the Ramabulana as the *mahosimahulu* of the Venda polity after the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry ruling, Thovele Tshivhase had the following to say:

Ravhura is Tshivseve and he was elder brother to Raluswielo. We were together at Dzata and there were conflicts between Ramabulana, Tshivhase and Ravhura. Mphaphuli was a *tshileli* at Dzata and he moved out of Dzata with the Tshivhase to take care of their cattle. Mphaphuli was also a great *maine* and he is of Ndebele origin, he is not a Singo. For example, when Mphaphuli praises himself, he does not say 'Tshavhungwe', he says 'Kutame'. Mphaphuli started his own community after he was defeated by us Tshivhase; after Mphaphuli was defeated at Tshilwamiseve, Ngovhela, by Tshivhase. He fled to Mbilwi, Gambani (Sibasa), and it is for this reason in their traditional *tshikona* dance, that they praise themselves in this way: "Ahey Mandebele ahey", and even today Mphaphuli does not know his history. Mphaphuli got to be a *thovhele* because they marry from Masingo, but the status of their *vuhosi* is less important compared to Tshivhase and Ramabulana. The Tshidzuwelele are Vhangona and they were never *mahosi* and their claims were baseless.

As for us, the Tshivhase, we said: since Raluswielo left Dzata and rule the whole vast of land in Venda up to the Vhembe River (Limpopo), the Ramabulana do not have

¹⁶ *Thangu a dzo ngonni fara* is a Venda idiom which means a royal prince is not next in line for the throne.

the land, the Ramabulana were brought to Dzata by the whites and the land belongs to Mamuhoyi. Raluswielo or the Tshivhase community was never under the Ramabulana.

Thovhele Tshivhase is contradicting himself here because he seemed to concur with written and oral sources that Tshivhase is part of the Ramabulana and he stayed at Dzata at some point with the Ramabulana as brothers, but at the same time he is dismissing the blood relationship which exists between Tshivhase and the Ramabulana. He does not contest the fact that Mphaphuli was not part of the Ramabulana or Singo. It is disingenuous of *Thovhele* Tshivhase to imply that the Ramabulana do not have land when he knows very well that the Ramabulana, being *nndu khulu ya Masingo*, have the rights to ownership of the whole Venda of land.

I then asked: “*Thovhele* Tshivhase, do you think the Venda kingship disputes are over [now that] you agreed to serve under Toni Mphephu?” *Thovhele* Tshivhase replied:

It was a difficult decision to make, it came to a point where the politicians were involved and some of the *magota* and *vhothovhele* under our control were alleged to be doing some wrong things destabilizing *vuhosi* of the Tshivhase community. As a result of that, to bring stability to my community I withdrew our challenge to the *vuhosivhuhulu* and decided to work under the Ramabulana. I’m the only one who did not sign the register at the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry meeting held with 28 *mahosi* endorsing Toni Mphephu as a *khosikhulu*, I stand up and say we are prepared to fight.

It is clear to me that *Thovhele* Tshivhase’s withdrawal from the *vuhosivhuhulu* claim was motivated by his quest to safeguard his own throne which was under threat from some of the *magota* in his community who have been infiltrated by some politicians, as *Thovhele* himself put it. *Thovhele* Tshivhase was losing control of authority in his community with his continued *vuhosivhuhulu* claim.

Next, I asked: “*Thovhele* Tshivhase, what do you think was the reason for *Vho-Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu to act as a regent for seven years before Dimbanyika Mphephu ascended to the throne?” *Thovhele* Tshivhase then continued:

It is for this reason I am saying that, if you are not meant to be a *thovhele* or a *khosikhulu* you cannot sit on the throne, it is a reality. *Mutahabvu* P.R. Mphephu had only one son who was a soldier and he died. His death brought more pain to the late P.R. Mphephu Ramabulana.

I appreciated the way in which *Thovhele* Tshivhase shared his views, much as my research had led me to a rather conflicting interpretation. The fact that *mahosi* of the Venda polity had the confidence to speak so freely about history and tradition, indicated that in 2015 the discourse was taking place in a far more open and tolerant environment than in the days of the Venda homeland. I must state categorically that the thesis has nothing to do with the allegations made by *Thovhele* Tshivhase that *mutahabvu* Mphephu had only one son who passed on before P.R. Mphephu's death in 1988. This remains internal affairs of *nndu ya vuhosivhulu* of the Ramabulana and as a researcher I cannot dwell deep into a matter which has nothing to do with *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes.

Thovhele Tshivhase was also willing to share his views on the first woman asserting her right to reign as a Venda monarch under the democratic South Africa's constitution:

According to Venda tradition and customs we have this idiom "*muvhuya nga dzanga kholomo*";¹⁷ we take this woman who is the first-born *nnduni ya vuhosi* to choose any of her brothers to be a new *thovhele* or *khosikhulu*. This is because "*khuhu ya phambo a i bvumbi mutsho*".¹⁸ The decision by Masindi Mphephu to put up a challenge to the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity was not accepted by the Venda tradition and customs but the Republic of South Africa's constitution allows her challenge, just like the success of the Nwamitwa chieftainship where a woman claimed [based on] her birthright and the Republic's Constitution to be the traditional leader of that community. I advised the Ramabulana that Toni Mphephu should consider going to bed with his late brother, *Thovhele* Dimbanyika Mphephu's wife to give birth to a *mulaifa*. We call it "*masia ndo itwa*".¹⁹ It is allowed by the tradition and custom of the VhaVenda as a nation, however, my proposal was rejected.

I asked *Thovhele* Tshivhase if he thought that, now that he, Mphaphuli, Ravhura and Tshidzuwelele have accepted the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana, Venda would be stable.

17 *Muvhuya ngadzanga kholomo* is a Venda idiom which implies that the cattle which marry the first-born of the royal family who is a female child can marry a wife for her brother who can take her position as a traditional leader and the first-born princess is given a chance by the royal elders to choose one of her brothers to sit on the VhaVenda throne on her behalf as a ruler.

18 *Khuhu ya phambo a i bvumbi mutsho* is a Venda idiom which means a woman cannot be in a position of authority.

19 *Masia ndoitwa* is the Venda idiom referring to a son born between a wife and a younger brother of the late ruler who died without a male child to succeed him.

He replied:

In my opinion the *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes are not over. We as elders, we are just compromising, but I think our children will revive these conflicts for the *vuhosivhuhulu* in the future.

This statement made by *Thovhele* Tshivhase, that their kids will revive the conflicts of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity, clearly demonstrates that the current peace settlement in the *vuhosivhuhulu* is not sustainable going into the future.

In conclusion to our interview, I asked *Thovhele* Tshivhase about his relationship with *Khosikhulu* Toni Mphephu at that moment in time: He confirmed that:

Our relationship is very cordial, and we can sit down and talk, and I am able to advise *Khosikhulu* on how to behave as a *khosikhulu* of the Venda community.

The Living History of *Vuhosivhuhulu*: the 2016 Interviews

As already mentioned, I could not finish all the interviews in 2015 because of time constraints and availability of some of the 28 *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity. I resumed my interviews on 17 August 2016, just at the time that Masindi Mphephu was about to obtain a court interdict against the imminent crowing of Toni Mphephu as *khosikhulu*. While the interviewees did not necessarily provide any information contradicting what their counterparts had offered during interviews in the previous year, a few striking observations can be made.

With their responses to my first question, all the persons I interviewed in 2016 confirmed the trends already observed during the previous year: they all repeated different varieties of the same, generally-held argument: that the Vhangona's claims to land or *vuhosivhuhulu* in Venda were null and void because they had been conquered during precolonial wars. While some interlocutors were reluctant to express themselves too strongly about the legitimacy of Toni Mphephu's *khosikhulu*,²⁰ there was little dispute about the status of the Ramabulana as the

20 To the question "Do you think a *ndumi* can be a king?" I received the reply: "Let me not answer that question."

dominant *nndu ya vuhosi*. None of the interviewees were ready for the idea that a *khosikadzikhulu* might rule over the Vhavenda.

Compared to the previous year, the interviewees seemed to be taking more care when considering and commenting on the veracity of the information they offered and the statements they made. The source of information was more frequently contemplated. While one commented:

If you do not read books you will not understand the history of Venda and the ownership of the land....

... another carefully stated:

What I'm going to say is what I got through oral sources within *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu*. We are the new generation which is not highly informed about the history which is too distant to us and therefore we rely on the elders to inform us about the history. When it comes to the issue of *vuhosivhuhulu*, there is always conflicts *nnduni ya vuhosi*.

Another fused the two arguments, stating that what may have been forgotten of the knowledge of the elders, have been written down and can now be read on paper, rendering some claims futile:

In my view the people in these conflicts realised that the elders who were knowledgeable about the history of the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity are no longer here with us. Their problem was that, the history of the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity was documented and that makes their claims baseless.

Another, however, affirmed that final authority lay with the elders:

Once the elders pronounce on their chosen *mulaifa*, their word is final, and no one can contest that.

Apparently, in light of the forthcoming court case and Masindi Mphephu's claims, the interviewees were quite outspoken about the relationship between the national government and the traditional authorities. According to one interviewee:

In our Venda tradition and customs, we do not follow the South African Constitution. ... In the case of Masindi Mphephu, the High Court in Thohoyandou will have to listen to what the Ramabulana are saying.

Markedly, one cited the Bible to make this point:

There is a verse in the Bible which indicates that kings must be given what is due to them. You look at the rights of the kings and chiefs are not the same [sic]. The government interference undermines the status of *vhothovhele* and *khosikhulu*. The government is trying to kill the traditional leadership by making other chiefs to be politically aligned to the ruling party because they put a dangling carrot to some of the chiefs, but some of us, we realised that this is what we were born to be, so we decided to stay away from politics. The aim of the government as the state, is to erode the traditional authority bit by bit.

Opposed to that, another *thovhele* stated:

I hold the view that the government interferes as a mediator. I also hold the view that it is proper for the government to get involved. If you look at the current government, they respect kings and chiefs. The government cannot do anything without the assistance of *magota* or *vhothovhele* and *khosikhulu*.

One interlocutor stoically phrased the matter as follows: “the conflicts are the games of the throne”. This statement, which also echoes the views of *vhothovhele* interviewed in 2015, may very well summarise this chapter.

Conclusion

There is no contestation amongst *vhothovhele* and *makhotsimunene* of Venda that the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity belongs to the Ramabulana. There was a division coming from the interviews as to who amongst the Ramabulana should sit on the throne. I noted that *vhothovhele* who are closely related to the Ramabulana through blood were slightly biased towards Toni Mphephu as the *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. In contrast, others like Tshivhase, Manenzhe, Mphaphuli and Mashamba were skeptical about the legitimacy of Toni Mphephu as the *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. The issue of Vhangona was a sensitive issue in the interviews and there were general feelings amongst *vhothovhele* and *makhotsimunene* that it is not disputable that Vhangona are the original settlers of Venda land and that they forfeited their rights to the land after being conquered by the Masingo. It was also evident from the perspective given by *vhothovele* and *makhotsimunene* I interviewed that the Vhangona lifestyle was different to that of other Venda communities like Masingo, Vhatavhatsindi, Vhandalamo,

Vhambedzi and Vhanyai. It was also surprising that some of the people I interviewed saw the intervention of the state in traditional affairs as a means to bring stability rather than causing further divisions. The issue of a woman ascending to the throne was addressed based on patrilineal assumptions, where men feel that women have no power to rule over men. It is for this reason that *vhothovhele* and *makhotsimunene* I interviewed hid behind traditions and customs to dismiss Masindi Mphephu's claim to the throne.

I hold the view that in the end the interviews add more information to the historiography of the thesis, and they did capture some of the perspectives not covered in the early chapters. The interviews did confirm the notion that Venda had *vuhosivhuhulu* before and it still has *vuhosivhuhulu* today. However, I need to emphasise in closing that the interviews did not help to close the chapter on *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes as it seems the end is still far ahead of us even with Masindi Mphephu's case since having been decided at the Supreme Court of Appeal in Bloemfontein. I need to highlight that the Supreme Court of Appeal ruling does not imply that we have come to the end of the *vuhosivhuhulu* conflicts in Venda.

In the end I did not interview all 28 *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity or the Vhangona leaders because of their unavailability. One can conclude that the information gathered in the interviews might be reflective of the views of the remaining chiefs as it was indicated elsewhere in the chapter that all 28 *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity had accepted that the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity belongs to the Ramabulana.