

Conclusion

This thesis offered a critical narrative of the history of the conflicts around the *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity by looking at a few events over the last three centuries. The point of departure was to critique and revise the views of scholars who had previously focused solely on the Venda history in their attempt to ascertain what the motives of the disputing parties were. My argument had been that academic research on a discourse as complex as the Venda history ought also to consider the role of external forces in the making of the *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. The study is comprised of ten chapters looking at different stages of the *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity disputes, as well as contributions made by *vhothovhele* and *magota* of the Venda polity who gave their perspectives on the issue of *vhuhosivhuhulu*.

I will first give an overview of Chapter One, in which the literature relevant to the thesis was reviewed. Here I tried to give a critical analysis of the work of anthropologists, historians, linguists and other scholars who played the most important role in creating what is known today as Venda history. It is important to note that, before the arrival of the Berlin Missionaries in the Soutpansberg (today Limpopo Province), not much was written or known about Venda history outside of the communities themselves. Scholars like Van Warmelo, Nemudzivhadi, Wessmann, Lestrade, Stayt, Tempelhoff, Huffman, Hammond-Tooke, Schapera, Fish and many others worked hard to ensure that the history of the Venda people would be written up, mostly based on the accounts from the Venda communities themselves. These scholars paved the way for the new generation of scholars like Kirkaldy, McNeill, Makhari, Matshidze, Nevondo and myself to start adding more research to work already done by the earlier generations of scholars. However, it is imperative to highlight the fact that the new generations of scholars relied heavily on the knowledge imparted to them by the older generations of scholars. One cannot dismiss the fact that the new generations of scholars added more to what was already written on the Venda history to try to modernise the history of the Venda people by covering events in the post-independent Venda and the post-1994 period in South Africa.

A new perspective on history was created by including the period of the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity in apartheid South Africa and in the democratic South Africa. Chapter One deals extensively with the issue of state power and traditional authorities and how the latter switched allegiance to the government of the day to fit into the new political discourse in South Africa. The role of the state in shaping and reshaping traditional authorities in South Africa was critically analysed in this chapter.

Chapter Two dealt with the broader discourse of kingship and it also drew on the literature on kingship in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa to demonstrate that the issue of political influence or outside interference is not exclusively a Venda issue. It is important to highlight that the case of the Vhavenda was the prime focus of my study. However, I drew attention to similar cases in other South African communities as well as other communities elsewhere in Africa to demonstrate that polities' succession disputes have been part of African history for a very long time. The discourse on the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity succession revolves not only around human intervention but also the spiritual intervention in the early stage of the *vuhosivhuhulu* while the Vhasenzi were still based in Matongoni (present Zimbabwe). In this chapter I also looked at the question of invention of traditions to highlight that traditions, like culture, are not static and do evolve with times. Some traditions are phased out in communities while others are entrenched in those same communities.

The thesis drew on some examples from around Africa to make a comparative study of chiefs and the modern state in post-colonial Africa and post-apartheid South Africa respectively. I referred to Insa Nolte's study, which examined the encounter between nationalist and traditionalist politics at a local level in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. I also looked into Nicodemus Fru Awasom's study, in which he gave a contrasting view on the power of the traditional leaders of the Makon, who credited pre-colonial roots for their legitimacy and authority and, therefore, dismissed the modern state as a creation, and a successor, of the imposed colonial state. Awasom regarded the relations between African chiefs and the modern state as "a zero-sum game" in that the expansion of state power mostly took place at the expense of that of the chief. In this chapter I also examined the

erosion of traditional authorities with the advent of multi-party politics in Africa. As Awasom put it, the introduction of multi-party politics in the 1990s in Cameroon has seen the Mankon fons lose some credibility and their legitimacy being questioned.

The chapter also critically analysed Francis Nyamnjoh's study which looked at the rebirth of chieftainship in Africa. His focus was on Cameroon and Botswana and he highlighted that the future envisaged for Africa had excluded institutions and traditions assumed to be primitive, repressive and unchanging in character. He argued that many theorists did not give chieftaincy much of a chance to survive as it was seen as lacking in ability to mobilize social and political change. However, it was surprising to see a rebirth in chieftaincy after the end of colonial administration, and to see some of the chiefs starting to take central roles in modern politics.

According to Nyamnjoh's account, chiefs and chiefdoms are no longer seen as relics from the past or puppets of the colonial or apartheid masters, but as the extensions of many a post-colonial government, and as 'vote banks' for politicians keen on cashing in on the imagined or real status of chiefs as 'the true representatives of their subjects'. However, Nyamnjoh admitted that presumed representatives and accountability of chiefs to their communities are still being questioned. One can conclude that question marks arise because the role the chiefs play in representing the interests of their subjects and their attempt to play a part in the modern state leave them conflicted.

In the case of South Africa, I used Fraser McNeill's study, in which he analysed the co-existence of the traditional authorities and the democratic state in the new South Africa. McNeill's study exposed how the apartheid government in South Africa used *vuhosivhulu* of the Venda polity to advance its homeland and racial segregation policies. The chapter also touched on modern *vuhosivhuhulu* contestation in Venda in the post-apartheid South Africa. McNeill used the case study of the *vuhosi* of the Tshivhase community as an example of the relations between *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity and the current ANC government. *Thovhele* Kennedy Midiyavhathu Tshivhase, the traditional leader of the Tshivhase community, got himself involved with ANC politics to the extent that he became

MP and MPL. The study concluded that *Thovhele* Tshivhase might have tried to use his political connections with the ruling party to his advantage in his *vuhosivhuhulu* battles with the Ramabulana and Mphaphuli. In the end the chapter highlighted the similarities of events in political and traditional affairs in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa.

Chapter Three gave a critical overview of Venda rulership disputes prior to the twentieth century. In giving a proper background to the emergence of the Venda *vuhosivhuhulu*, it was imperative to draw from the seventeenth century when the Masingo, or Vhasenzi, crossed the Limpopo River to the Soutpansberg. The chapter also offered a genealogy of *mahosimahulu* of the Venda polity under the Singo people. However, I must emphasise that the study is not necessarily about the Singo history as that was the focus of other scholars before me. In this chapter the first incident of disputes was introduced. This occurred during the time of Bele-la-Mambo as *khosikhulu*, when there was tension between him and his cousin Tshishonga.

Chapter Four provided the study with a critical analysis of the disputes over the Venda rulership from the time of Dimbanyika in 1688 to that of Mpofu in the 1800s. The chapter continued analysing the discourse of rulership disputes and it also shed some light on the first foreign interference in the internal affairs of the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. The chapter also highlighted the *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes between Tshivhase and Mpofu, also known as Munzhedzi. I went on to interrogate the bloody battles of Munzhedzi's sons Ravele Ramabulana and Ramavhoya and the involvement of the Batlokwa and Louis Trichardt in the *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes. The chapter concluded with the disputes between Makhado and Davhana which ended Davhana's short-lived reign as a *khosikhulu* and paved the way for Makhado to become *khosikhulu*, which culminated in his victory over the Boers in Schoemansdal in 1856. The chapter also looked into Makhado's resistance against Boer control in the Soutpansberg.

Chapter Five focused on the battles of three of Makhado's sons: Maemu, Mphephu and Sinthumule. The chapter also investigated the time when both of Makhado's sons were *mahosimahulu*, with Maemu succeeding his father Makhado as per his wish and Mphephu

toppling him after Maemu's brief reign as *khosikhulu*. The chapter finally looked at Mphephu's war with the Boers of the South African Republic from 1895 to 1899, which coincided with the time Sinthumule was made *khosikhulu* by the South African Republic's authorities. The chapter took the narrative up to the time of Mphephu's return from exile in Rhodesia (currently Zimbabwe) until his death at Dzata II.

The aim with Chapter Six was to interrogate the Venda transition from traditional authority to the modern politics of constitutional government. The point of departure for the chapter was to look critically at the man who brought about this evolution. That man was P.R. Mphephu, who became the sole player in the new Venda discourse on political authority, which was rather distant from the era of his forefathers and their thinking as Venda rulers. In the end this chapter also established how P.R. Mphephu helped to revive the Venda *vuhosivhuhulu*, which had eroded after his grandfather Alilali Tshilamule Mphephu was defeated by the South African Republic in 1899.

Chapter Seven critically analysed the period of P.R. Mphephu's transition from Chief Minister of Venda to President for Life and *Khosikhulu* after the 1979 Venda elections. The chapter acknowledged that Mphephu's self-promotion to the position of Life President of Venda was a remarkable rise of the traditional leader from being a *khosi* of a small Vhailafuri clan to the most powerful politician and *khosikhulu* in Venda. These events catapulted Mphephu into a status above every *thovhele* and commoners in Venda. In conclusion the chapter gave a brief summary of the last days of Venda homeland rule under Frank Ndwakhulu Ravele as President, and the military takeover which led to the process of abolishing the status of *khosikhulu* in Venda.

Chapter Eight provided the study with a detailed analysis of the findings of the Mushasha Commission of Inquiry into Venda *Vuhosi* Affairs. The Commission was appointed by the former Venda military ruler, the late Brigadier Mutheiwana Gabriel Ramushwana on 18 May 1990. The chapter found that the Commission was necessitated by the fact that the Venda Constitution did not allow anyone except a *thovhele*, *gota* or a *khosikhulu* to be the political ruler of Venda. The Chapter also interrogated the irregularities picked up by the Commission

in the conduct of the Ramabulana royal family in extending the territories of other *magota* and promoting *magota* to *mahosi*.

Chapter Nine critiqued the way in which the post-apartheid South African government tried to rearrange the position of traditional leaders (specifically those of the Vhavenda) in South Africa after 1994. The Chapter also looked at how the *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity was restored by the post-apartheid government after 1994. This was done through the appointment of Commissions of Inquiry to help the government address the negative aspects in the role of traditional leaders which were brought about by the apartheid government's policies. The focus of the chapter was on two Commissions of Inquiry at the centre of the restoration of the *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. The Commissions in question are the Ralushai Commission of Inquiry and the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry. My methodology in this chapter was a close reading of the Commissions' reports, with regular reference to the findings arrived at in the previous chapters of this thesis.

Chapter Ten gives a critical analysis of the data collected during the interviews with some of *vhothovhele*, *magota* and *makhotsimunene* of the Venda polity who were able to make themselves available. The aim of the chapter was to try and ascertain their views on the *vhuhosivhuhulu* disputes. This helped me to reach a conclusion about the range of perspectives on the *vhuhosivhuhulu* discourse from the stakeholders amongst the Vhavenda themselves. In the end some rather contrasting views transpired from within the ranks of *vhothovhele*, *magota* and *makhotsimunene*. One thing that could be established was the common acknowledgement from amongst them that the beauty of *vhuhosi* or *vhuhosivhuhulu* comes to the fore "when it is fought for". This is still reflected in the ongoing dispute for the Venda throne between Toni Mphephu and his niece Masindi Mphephu.

The matter of who should be the legitimate *khosikhulu* of the Vhavenda was heard in the Supreme Court of Appeal (hereafter SCA) in Bloemfontein on 17 May 2018. The outcome has far reaching consequences for the Vhavenda community – and it was damning for the Ramabulana. It set aside the decision of the Ramabulana Royal Council to appoint Toni

Mphephu as *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. The matter was referred back to the Thohoyandou High Court and both the Limpopo House of Traditional Leaders and National House of Traditional Leaders were given an opportunity to sort out the *vhuhosivhuhulu* of Venda polity disputes together with *nndu ya vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana and advise the High Court of their decision. The matter is still not resolved despite the SCA ruling declaring the appointment of Toni Mphephu null and void. I think the failure of the Ramabulana to reach out to Masindi Mphephu could spell doom to the whole *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. I must emphasise that I have no problem with Masindi Mphephu being the first *khosikadzikhulu* of the Venda polity as it will rewrite the history of patriarchal beliefs amongst the Ramabulana. However, the danger is that the Ramabulana are likely to lose the *vhuhosivhuhulu* to another *nndu ya vuhosi* should Masindi Mphephu decide to marry someone outside *nndu ya vuhosi* of the Rambulana.

The outcome of the SCA ruling can result in prolonged *vhuhosivhuhulu* disputes which might yet end up in the Constitutional Court in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. In principle, the SCA did not declare Masindi Mphephu as *khosikadzikhulu* of the Venda polity. However, it agreed with Masindi Mphephu's thinking that the declaration of Toni Mphephu as *khosikhulu* of the Vhavenda Community was unlawful and unconstitutional and it then set that declaration aside. I hold the view that the SCA ruling is partially a victory for Masindi Mphephu.

If the National House of Traditional Leaders and the Limpopo House of Traditional Leaders are able to untangle the mystery of whether a child born before a parent becomes a King or Queen can be a successor to the throne, and whether a *ndumi* can be *khosikhulu*, then there will be no stopping to Masindi Mphephu making history by being the first Vhavenda Community *khosikadzikhulu*. The biggest losers in the SCA order are Toni Mphephu, the Ramabulana Royal Council, the Premier of Limpopo Province and the President of the Republic of South Africa. In conclusion one can boldly say that the end is not near for *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity to be settled and one can only hope it does not end up in a bloody battle as in previous cases in the history of *vhuhosivhuhulu* disputes. It is now in the hands of *nndu ya vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana to avoid further humiliation in

courts and do the right thing, which is to allow Masindi Mphephu to ascend to the Vhavenda Community throne as *Khosikadzikhulu*. The National House of Traditional Leaders and Limpopo House of Traditional Leaders have since upheld the SCA ruling that Toni Mphephu is not the *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. On 4 July 2020 Toni Mphephu's legal team announced that they will be turning to the Supreme Court to set aside the SCA's judgement.¹

¹ Anton van Zyl, Toni fights back, *Limpopo Mirror*, 4 July 2020, p. 1.