

Chapter Two
The Venda *Vhuhosivhuhulu* and
Comparable Studies of Rulership Disputes Elsewhere in Africa

This chapter will deal with the broader discourse on African rulership whilst drawing on the literature on the issue in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa to demonstrate that the question of political influence or outside interference is not exclusively a Venda challenge. It is imperative to highlight that though the Vhavenda are the prime focus of the thesis, I will draw on similar cases in other parts of South Africa and elsewhere in Africa to demonstrate that succession disputes within polities have been part of the continent's history.¹

Spiritual Intervention

Important in the discourse of the Venda rulership succession is the significance allocated not only to human but also to spiritual intervention in the early years of the polity, while the Vhasenzi were still based in Matongoni (present Zimbabwe). The Vhasenzi are also known as the Singo people when they migrated from Matongoni and today they are *mahosimahulu* of the Venda people.

In his “vernacular account” published in 1940, E. Mudau explained to the State Ethnologist, N.J. van Warmelo, that when things were not going well in the Venda kingdom, the Vhasenzi spirits, *Mwali*, would always intervene and advise on how the

1 The issue of what historians should call African rulers in retrospect, is a minefield, especially when comparing different precolonial hierarchical constructs – and even more so, the hybrid structures that took shape once colonists started interfering in those. Over time the idea of the “ruler”, and the names used to refer to the ruler – also in English (e.g. king, chief, paramount), did not always change in tandem. As far as possible, I stick to the concepts as used in communities' own languages, and in some cases, as already indicated in the first chapter, I keep the names as decided upon by the scholar whose work is under discussion. I then place the specific term selected by the scholar next to the more generic term as a reminder that none of these actions of “naming” are clear-cut.

vhuhosivhulu should be managed.² He argued that *Mwali* was the guardian of the Vhasenzi in Matongoni and was greatly feared by all his people for he could work miracles with *Ngomalungundu*, the so-called drum of the gods. This early Senzi tradition suggests that the ruler was called by the name *Mwali*, and that he had his right hand man, the high priest, who was known as *Dzomo-la-Dzimu*, or “voice of the gods” (which sheds more light on the perceived nature of *Mwali*).³ *Dzomo-la-Dzimu* was the ruler’s messenger to the people (as messenger he could be seen by the people but it was a taboo for the people to see the “king” / ruler).

Mudau believed *khosikhulu* Senzi was considered sacred by his people to the extent that they treated him as *vhadzimu* (a god or ancestor spirit). This implies that the early *mahosimahulu* of Vhaenzi were not seen as normal “kings” and therefore one can conclude that this group was under the authority of the spirits. This gives a different dimension to the thesis which aims to tackle the issue of the eventual absorption of traditional authority into the modern state. However, the earliest development of the Venda state gives a clear picture of the succession disputes which are the core theme of the thesis. As the next chapter will illustrate in more detail, the problems within the Venda political structure started long before the time of Ravele Ramabula and Ramavhoya in the nineteenth century.

It was generally believed that the Vhasenzi (or Masingo) had some supernatural powers acquired from their *vhadzimu* and it was also believed that these powers were transferred to every new *khosikhulu* of the Vhasenzi to conquer his enemies. The

2 E. Mudau, Ngoma-Lungundu, in N.J Van Warmelo (ed.), *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1940, p. 11.

3 For a thorough discussion on *Mwali*, see A. Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul. The Vhavenda and the Missionaries*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2000, pp. 318-319. According to Kirkaldy, the Berlin missionaries did not realise the connection between the name *Mwali* and the concept *muhali*, which was a form of address used to show respect. He also pointed out that in the 1870s Missionary Beuster failed to connect the *Vhambedzi*’s use of the name Raluvhimba with the broader Venda understanding of *Mwali* as a godly entity. Kirkaldy concluded: “While the missionaries preached about God (the God of the Bible), the Vhavenda were thinking of God (Raluvhimba / *Mwali*) and for years they talked past one another without even realising it. This was even more complicated by the fact that the story of the VhaSenzi migration was so similar to that of the Exodus of the Israelites”.

tradition of using *ngomalungundu* and consulting *vhadzimu* for intervention whenever there was a crisis in the Vhasenzi polity was sustained even after their southward migration across the Limpopo River. This is contrary to what happened from the nineteenth century to this date, when foreigners became the ones to intervene in solving conflicts within the *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda. This too, will be illustrated in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Tradition, Identity and Colonialism

It is fair to illustrate in this thesis that tradition as a phenomenon that is invented, is bound to evolve with time. The old traditions which the Vhasenzi held dearly when they were still in Matongoni⁴ were no exception. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger believed “adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes”. This implies that “old institutions with established functions, references to the past and ritual idioms and practices might need to adapt”⁵ over time. They gave Tihon’s example of the Catholic Church faced with new challenges as political and ideological changes took place in institutions between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries.⁶ They also cited Bahnson’s analysis of changes in traditional practices at German universities after 1848, when students tended to be older and more middleclass.⁷ These are a few examples used by these scholars to demonstrate that old traditions can be integrated into new ones, or adapt. However, it is important to note that old traditions evolve with time and they cannot be viable in the modern era. It is the same with the Vhasenzi tradition of consulting *vhadzimu* for guidance; it was not going to be viable when they encountered new people and new traditions.

4 *Matongoni* means the graves that were the place where the Vhasenzi’s ancestral spirits were resting.

5 E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 5.

6 G. Tihon, Les religieuses en Belgique du XVIIIe au XXe siècle, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 7, 1976, pp. 1-54.

7 K. Bahnson, *Akademische Auszüge aus deutschen Universitäts und Hochschulorten*, Dissertation, Universität des Saarlandes, Saarbrücken, 1973 cited in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 5.

Hobsbawm and Ranger emphasized that some invented traditions, like a national flag, national anthem and the national emblem, have been sustained by nations as the three symbols a country uses to affirm its independence and sovereignty, and to demand loyalty.⁸ These three symbols are seen as a force to bind the nation together and they help to foster common identification amongst its people. This has become a universal tradition for nations of the world to have these three national symbols as the respective nation's identity. This argument seems to suggest that as traditions evolve, it is likely that there will be a certain part of that tradition which will be embedded in a nation 'forever'. However, a decade after its publication, Terrence Ranger criticized his earlier analysis of invented traditions in Africa when he suggested "an array of adaptations by both Europeans and Africans, contrary to the unilateral colonial inventions"⁹ that characterized many of the analyses that succeeded his own. In his article on the "Limits of Invention" Thomas Spear also emphasized that not all traditions in Africa have been invented by Europeans, but that they all had to be continually interpreted and reinterpreted over years of complex political as well as economic circumstances.¹⁰

The Venda tradition is not an exception in this case in the sense that the old tradition of no woman ascending to the throne, which has been practised for centuries, is still in place even today. However, Khuba holds a view that Venda can have a male or female *gota* or *thovhele* based on the rules of that *musanda*.¹¹ In essence Khuba is dismissing the notion that no woman can become a *khosikadzi* or *khosikadzikhulu*. There might have been one or two cases where the Venda people have had a woman ruler, but that must have been caused by the fact that there was no male heir in the royal lineage of that community. However, it is important to highlight that this tradition of barring

8 E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, p. 11.

9 T. Spear, Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa, *The Journal of African History*, 44, 1, 2003, p. 5.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 3-6.

11 A.E. Khuba, The Significance of the Musanda Language in Venda: A Diglossia, D Litt & Phil, Unisa, 1993, p. 25.

women from ascending to the highest throne in Venda is currently being challenged in the South African courts. I will deal in detail with this matter in a later chapter in which interviews with current Venda traditional leaders will be discussed.

The thesis will demonstrate that it is not only the Vhasenzi traditions that evolved with time, but also that their identity was affected when they interacted with the Vhangona south of the Limpopo River. The early history of the Vhasenzi polity (to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter) clearly illustrates that old tradition was not sustainable in the long run. The tradition of listening to *vhadzimu* for guidance and for power had been greatly eroded among the Vhasenzi people by the time Dimbanyika was installed as a new *khosikhulu* by Tshishonga. The installation of Dimbanyika saw the return of the magic drum and the charm horn (also see Chapter 3) to the royal house; however, both were no longer useful to the Vhasenzi as they did not possess the magic they had before. The throne was no longer controlled by *vhadzimu*.

The Venda tradition of *vhadzimu* deciding on the appointment of the *khosikhulu* would further deteriorate under colonial influence, and eventually it would no longer be considered relevant in the modern democratic period of the Venda state. It is my opinion that evolution in the Venda tradition came about through a process of interaction with western people and other Bantu-speaking communities south of the Limpopo. It was this interaction that forced the Venda people to adapt to new ways.

One must emphasize the role played by colonialism in shaping new traditions within the Venda polity. Frederick Cooper raised the importance of colonialism in shaping the identities of people in Africa. He argued that “to a greater extent than the forms of domination that preceded it, colonial rule attempted a one-to-one mapping of people with some putatively common characteristic onto territory” under single jurisdiction. He further argued that “these imposed identifications could be powerful, but their effects

depended on the actual relationship and symbolic systems that colonial officials – and indigenous cultural entrepreneurs as well – had to work with”.¹²

Cooper noted that “the colonial era did indeed witness complex struggles over identification”.¹³ His main argument centered on a “key distinction” between “relational and categorical models of identification”. He was of the view that:

... one may identify oneself (or another person) by position in a relational web (a web of kinship, for example, or of friendship, patron-client ties, or teacher-student relations). On the other hand, one may identify oneself (or another person) by membership in a class of persons sharing some categorical attributes (such as race, ethnicity, language, nationality, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, and so on).¹⁴

The arguments presented by Cooper in his study on identification, more so “categorical identification”, has a bit of connection to the Venda issue in the sense that it, too, deals with categorical identification. I will try to elaborate more on this assumption here: at the earlier stage of Venda construction as a community, people self-identified through “relational connectedness”¹⁵. They were the Vhasenzi, Vhangona, Vhalemba or Vhatavhatsindi, to name a few groups amongst the Vhavenda. As the time progressed, these groupings developed some sense of affinity or affiliation, commonality or connectedness to one space and one society. This space became the Venda land south of the Limpopo River and Venda became a form of identity. They stopped identifying themselves as the Vhasenzi, Vhangona, Vhalemba and Vhatavhatsindi, and started seeing themselves commonly as Venda people. However, it is imperative to note that the constitutive entities did not abandon their cultural beliefs and their affiliation to their separate groups; they were still proud of their totems. This sense of affinity and affiliation, commonality and connectedness to one space and one identity gave birth to a sense of “Venda” as a common denominator.

12 F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question, Theory, Knowledge, History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005, p. 80.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Another scholar, Paul Landau, in his book *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948*,¹⁶ addressed the discourse on the shaping of identities from a different perspective. He noted that in “ordinary discourse”, groupings of people linked their origins to the deeds of their great chiefs in the past. It has been noted in Landau’s account that some chiefs/rulers gave their names to chiefdoms/rulerships before they died and some of his examples include the amaSwazi, Mmantathisi, bagaKhama and baMonaheng. I must agree with Landau’s observation about African chiefs/rulers naming kingdoms/rulerships after themselves and this cannot be dismissed as a far-fetched theory. However, it is imperative to stress that the story was different in the case of the Venda polity where the *mahosi* did not give their names to the followers. It is also imperative to note that small Venda villages took the names of their *magota* and *vhothovhele*, with examples including the Ha-Mashau, Ha-Rabali, Ha-Nesengani, Ha-Masia and Ha-Mphephu.

As I have indicated earlier on in this chapter, early Venda rulers were regarded as *vhadzimu* (gods or ancestors) by the Venda people. This notion was supported by Landau’s argument that most successful chiefs became *vhadzimu vhaswa* (*new spiritual gods*) taking over from *the vhadzimu vhalala* (*the old spiritual gods*). This assertion implies that a powerful *khosikhulu*, like Makhado of the Venda people, was worshipped by their subjects as *vhadzimu*.

Landau’s study presents us with a very different context of how western civilization viewed God compared to Africans’ perceptions of God. To Africans, Vhavenda included, God meant the spirits of their forefathers and they believed that these invisible spirits had the power to guide and help them conquer their enemies during wars and to end famine by bringing rain. As illustrated in Landau’s study, these Africans were exposed to Christianity after their encounter with missionaries in the nineteenth century.

16 Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

The discourse of “God” compared to “gods” (spiritual beings) was a more complex issue for Africans to grapple with. However, the coming of missionaries in Africa brought some new dynamics into the thinking of Africans. They were forced to abandon their traditional beliefs of their Gods being the only Gods they knew. They also got rid of their widely held perceptions that it was only their Gods who had powers to help them during the war and the power to bring rain. Missionaries managed to convince them that there was only one God who could bring rain and help them with all their needs. This revelation convinced them to end the myth of believing that their rulers were their Gods. The Venda people as well, through their encounters with the Berlin Missionaries and other denominations, were led to the belief that there was only one God. However, it is pertinent to stress that the missionaries were met with resistance from the *magota* and *vhothovhele* in Venda, who felt that their powers were being invaded by foreign forces.¹⁷

Convincing Africans to discard their old beliefs was not easy. This was clearly demonstrated when Dingane, the Zulu ruler proclaimed himself as the only God of his people. Landau noted that Dingane said that his people “had heard about God”, and understood the missionaries well enough, but added that his people “only have one God” and that he was “that God”.¹⁸

Political structures, or “kingdoms”, were created by people who used the power of their Gods to rule over other people. It is therefore not wrong to suggest that all powerful African polities trace their creation to their ancestors or Gods. Jeff Peires had demonstrated the acceptance of rule in the name of a specific ancestor in the case of Tshawe, during the expansion of the Xhosa polity. Peires argued that the limits of

17 See A. Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul. The Vhavenda and the Missionaries, 1870-1900*, Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2005.

18 P.S. Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 85.

Xhosadom were not ethnic or geographic but political. He was of the opinion that all people or groups who accepted the rule of Tshawe (reigning house) thereby became amaXhosa.¹⁹ The Xhosa expansion was believed to have been due to the strong influence of specific ancestors of Tshawe, and it bears similarities to the Venda under the Vhasenzi leadership. This is true in the sense that the Venda polity was created by the influence of their *vhadzimu* from Matongoni. It is therefore proper for me to conclude that the foundation of a powerful Venda polity was largely due to the involvement *vhadzimu* of the Vhasenzi.

Landau highlighted that the coming of colonialism in the nineteenth century brought missionaries, literacy, religion and ethnic divisions to the Highveld. As I have argued previously in this chapter, the interaction of the Venda people with colonialists and missionaries brought about a new way of thinking and of doing things amongst them. One of the most important aspects was to adapt to Christianity, an uneven process that often involved the combination of new, Christian ways with older, familiar, local African thinking. It is important to stress that the colonialists failed in their attempt to dismantle the structure of rulership amongst Africans, Vhavenda included. It is pertinent to highlight that while missionaries may have been able to change the minds of the people in Venda, people still respected their *mahosi*.

In this chapter I look at the literature on the history of “kingship”/rulership in South Africa as well as elsewhere in Africa. It is therefore important to emphasize that the issue of rulers and politics has become one of the most sensitive subjects of African politics. As a result, it attracts the attention of many historians and other scholars who want to find out why “chiefs” and “kings” are so important in modern Africa.

19 J. Peires, *The House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of Their Independence*, Raven, Johannesburg, 1981, p. 19.

Traditional Leadership in Modern Africa

Barbara Oomen is one of the scholars who present us with some of the facts assumed to be the causes for post-colonial Africa, including South Africa, still accommodating traditional authorities. Oomen's specialization is in law, and her study dealt first with the laws governing traditional authorities both in apartheid South Africa and the post-1994 era. In her study, she tried to address the question of the interrelation between laws, politics and culture.

Oomen viewed the return of chieftaincy, customs and culture as one of the most surprising features of the post-apartheid South Africa. It appears from her account that, as democracy dawned, support for traditional leaders rose not only in national politics but also in the villages of rural South Africa. This implies that chiefs were no longer seen as relics of the past or puppets of the apartheid regime. Oomen used the Sekhukhune chieftaincy²⁰ in Limpopo as a case study to demonstrate the resurgence of traditional authorities in post-apartheid South Africa and to consider the following questions: What was the relation between the formal legal and political recognition of chieftaincy and its local resurgence? How did the local, national and global interlink in the creation of custom? Why did the liberal ANC (African National Congress) allow the chiefs to retain power over land, local government and custom? What does this teach us about politics in present-day Africa?²¹

The questions posed by Oomen in her study are very important and relevant to my thesis. However, I will pay attention to the questions as terms of reference going forward in this study.

²⁰ *Chieftaincy* is a concept that is believed to have been invented by colonialists to demonstrate some degree of traditional leadership authorities. Oomen's study is concerned with the contemporary, post-colonial situation, and therefore, in discussing her work, I follow her use of the concepts as commonly in use today: chieftaincy and chiefs. The same will apply to my discussion of the contributions in Binsbergen and Pelgrim's book.

²¹ B. Oomen, *Chiefs in South Africa. Law, Power and Culture in the Post-Apartheid Era*, James Currey, Oxford, University KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2005, Introduction.

Oomen substantiated her views about the distaste the ANC had for traditional authorities before 1994 by citing some of the utterances made by prominent ANC leaders and men of social standing before the dawn of the new South Africa. The late ANC stalwart, Govan Mbeki, was quoted in 1964 asking about the relevance of traditional authorities: “If Africans have had chiefs; it was because all human societies have had them at one stage or another. But when people have developed to a stage which discards chieftainship... then to force it on them is not liberation but enslavement”.²² Mbeki made the statement thirty years before there was any dream of a free South Africa. One can only assume that he made this statement bearing in mind that nations evolve with times and that South Africa as a nation was not an exception to that evolution. There was a strong assertion that Africans were capable and desirous of embracing modernity and international respectability.

The statement in 1964 might have been based on Mbeki’s personal observation of the ways in which the apartheid regime managed to use chiefs to oppress the masses of this country and cement their subjugation of black South Africans. The respected clergyman, Bishop Desmond Tutu, hinted in the 1980s at the evolution in people’s reaction to tradition and customs when he stated that “we blacks – most of us – execrate ethnicity with all our being”. Oomen therefore asked: “... if the whole fight had been about attaining a nation in which all citizens would be equal, with ‘one man, one vote’, why were chiefs, customs and cultural diversity once again so important, once democracy had dawned?”²³ Bishop Tutu seems to have spoken about an ideal that is not shared by the majority of South Africans.

Oomen demonstrated that the resentment of the traditional authorities by some of the ANC leaders did not die even after 1994. She cited the incident involving Pallo Jordan, a former Minister of Arts and Culture, and the late Peter Mokaba, himself a former Deputy Minister and a fiery ANC Youth League President. These two top ANC politicians

²² B. Oomen, *Chiefs in South Africa ...*, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*

made their feelings clear about the status of traditional leaders in the new South Africa during the fifteenth ANC National Conference in 1997. According to Oomen, the two politicians held the opinion that the 1994 general election had “entailed a degree of compromise, some concessions and postponements, many of which took account of the enemy’s real strength and untapped power”. They suggested that now that these had been won, the time had come for “swift dismantling of apartheid structures such as the so-called traditional authorities”²⁴. Their position on traditional authorities was totally rejected and they were sternly and publicly rebuked by President Nelson Mandela and the then Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki. The two leaders called for continued respect for traditional leaders.²⁵ The position of Mandela and Mbeki on traditional authorities might have been influenced by their strong ideals for nation building as African renewal and Mandela’s relationship with the AbaThembu royal family. There seems to have been an assumption that African identity was a whole constituted of various “traditional” (“ethnic”, “chiefly” or “tribal”?) parts.

From Oomen’s study one can deduce that the sentiments of Govan Mbeki, Tutu, Jordan and Mokaba were not the general views of the broad ANC. The decisive action taken by Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki against the distaste for traditional leaders indicated that the ANC wanted the traditional authorities to be respected and be sustained in the new South Africa.

The ANC position on traditional authorities, post-1994, might be viewed as contradicting their position on the same matter during the apartheid era. There is no recorded evidence of the ANC leaders rebuking Govan Mbeki when he made such pronouncements about chiefs in 1964 or distancing themselves from Tutu’s statements about chiefs and customs in the 1980s. The role of chiefs cannot be dismissed as peripheral in the new South Africa, because traditional houses still command respect in their communities and chiefs are still influential over their subjects, hence the ANC

24 B. Oomen, *Chiefs in South Africa ...*, p. 91.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

stance to uphold the status of traditional authorities. There is a strong common view amongst historians that most of the African states have survived because of strong backing they received from traditional authorities. The Botswana and Cameroon cases, as analysed by Francis Nyamnjoh (see discussion below), will be significant examples to draw from in my thesis.

The Oomen arguments will be highly supportive of my argument in demonstrating the resurgence of traditional authorities in the post-apartheid South Africa. *Magota and vhothovhele* of Venda like Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Ravhura and Tshidzuwelele used the opportunity presented by the new South Africa to claim the *vuhosivhuhulu* status and Mphephu used the opportunity to reclaim what he and his supporters considered his rightful position, as *khosikhulu* of the Venda people.

Wim van Binsbergen and Riekge Pelgrim, in their 2003 publication *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law, Essays on Africa and Beyond*, collaborated with a number of scholars to arrange papers on chieftaincy in honour of Emile Adriaan B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, a man who managed to establish himself, nationally and internationally, as 'Mr. Chiefs' because of his increasing success in his research about traditional rulers.²⁶ The contributors to the study mentioned above, collaborated to address certain themes about chiefs and the state which were overlooked by previous scholars who have interrogated the chieftaincy subject in post-colonial Africa. In this thesis, I will draw on the contributions made by Insa Nolte, Nicodemus Fru Awasom and Francis Nyamnjoh.

Insa Nolte reflected on the interaction between chiefs and the state in the colonial and post-colonial periods. She argued that many African chieftainships and the collectives (often conceived in terms of ethnic groups) ruled by them were commonly regarded as

26 W. van Binsbergen and R. Pelgrim (eds.), 2003, *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law: Essays on Africa and Beyond, in Honour of Emile Adriaan B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2003, p. 18.

colonial creations. This view is not new, as most people in the modern state recognize chieftaincy as a colonial creation, and in South Africa chiefs were regarded as puppets of the apartheid government. Nolte presented a most interesting argument: that the beginnings of African chieftainship can be traced back to a more distant, pre-colonial past, under very different political and economic conditions than those under the colonial and post-colonial state. This argument dismisses chieftainship as a myth created by the colonial state. This view is supported by many scholars who concur that chieftainship has evolved fundamentally in the course of the twentieth century²⁷.

Nolte's article examines the encounter between nationalist and traditionalist politics at a local level in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria²⁸. It concentrates on the relationship between two groups of power holders in the west of Nigeria, and on the agency of Obafemi Awolowo, leader of one of Nigeria's nationalist parties. Nolte alleged that Awolowo intervened in the traditional politics of his district in Remo through the cultural organization Egbe Omo Oduduwa as well as through party politics. According to the essay, he was also involved in traditional politics in his hometown Ikenne, where it was alleged that he "manipulated the installation of the Oba²⁹ against considerable opposition"³⁰.

Nolte argued that "Awolowo's activities and the Ikenne dispute were part of an intense struggle in which both traditional rulers and nationalist politicians attempted to gain legitimacy in each other's political arena".³¹ The Nolte essay addresses the issue of the contestation of power between traditional authorities and the state. It also offers the "illuminating image of the modern African state as a scene of struggle between old and

27 I. Nolte, The Interaction between Chiefs and the State in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods, in W. van Binsbergen and R. Pelgrim (eds.), *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law: Essays on Africa and Beyond, in Honour of Emile Adriaan B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2003, p. 20.

28 I. Nolte, The Interaction between Chiefs and the State ..., p. 21.

29 *Oba* is a traditional ruler in Ijebu-Remo, a former district in the West of Nigeria.

30 I. Nolte, The Interaction between Chiefs and State ..., pp. 20-21. Also see p. 51.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

new elites”³². Nolte’s arguments will assist in understanding how this power struggle is being handled in the post-1994 South Africa. I will draw on Nolte’s work to reflect upon the interaction between *vhothovhele* of Venda and the ANC government as well as the issue of legitimacy, raising questions like the following: Does the ANC government recognize *vhuhosivhuhulu* of Venda as legitimate? Do the Vhavenda recognize the ANC government as legitimate? Finally, I will attempt to find out if there is any conflict between the two centres of power, i.e. traditional authority and modern state. All these questions will be dealt with in the later chapters of the study.

Nicodemus Fru Awasom was another scholar who contributed to the book about chiefs and the modern state in Africa compiled in honour of van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal. His chapter “The vicissitudes of the twentieth-century Mankon fons in Cameroon’s changing social order” examined the “vacillating fortunes of twentieth-century Mankon fons” in Cameroon. The essay reflects on “power relations, legitimacy and legality”. Awosom argued that the traditional leaders of Mankon “derived their legitimacy and authority from pre-colonial roots”, while the modern state had been “a creation, and a successor, of the imposed colonial state”.³³ This argument highlights a very interesting point by considering the modern state as a power construct in itself, while at the same time presenting traditional authorities as having some authenticity and legitimacy over the modern state.

Awasom concurred with van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal in his perception of “the evolution of power relations between African chiefs and the modern state as ‘a zero-sum game’, in that the expansion of state power mostly takes place at the expense of that of the chiefs”. Awasom held the opinion that the conclusion by van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal implied ...

32 I. Nolte, *The Interaction between Chiefs and State ...*, p. 22.

33 N.F. Awasom, *The Vicissitudes of Twentieth-Century Mankon Fons in Cameroon’s changing Social Order*, in W. van Binsbergen and R. Pelgrim (eds.), *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law: Essays on Africa and Beyond, in Honour of Emile Adriaan B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2003, p. 101.

... the progressive erosion of traditional authority, their only condition of survival being their ability to adapt to the changing reality both inwardly towards their own people, and outwardly towards the state. Traditional rulers are thus regarded as units that are continuously in the process of satisfying both the state and their subjects, and attempting to strike a balance between the two for their own survival.³⁴

This assertion will be proven correct in the later chapters of the thesis dealing with the commissions of enquiry into *Vuhosi ha Venda*, and interviews with current Venda traditional leaders.

The statement above highlights an interesting point, that the Mankon *fons* survived in the colonial era not because of indirect confrontation with the state, but through the assertion of their traditional legitimacy. Awasom claimed in his essay that they were able to do so by “seeking legal redress through petitions and by using their subjects as a defense”³⁵ for their sustainability. In the post-colonial era, the Mankon successfully managed to “blend modernity and traditionalism by compromising with the constitutional and legislative organs of the modern state and still relying on their traditional support base”,³⁶ namely their subjects.

Awasom reflected that the introduction of multi-party politics in the 1990s have seen the Mankon *fons* lose some credibility and have their legitimacy questioned. The reason for this was their involvement in politics on the side of the ruling party. They were regarded as puppets of the state and people turned against them. The evidence of their involvement in party politics was apparent both when *Fon Angwafo III* of Mankon was appointed as the first Vice-President of the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) as well as with the later appointment of the Prime Minister and Head of the Government. These developments “influenced many Northwestern traditional leaders

34 N.F. Awasom, *The Vicissitudes of Twentieth-Century Mankon Fons ...*, p. 101.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

to support government and to openly campaign for the CPDM".³⁷ Awasom argued that this backfired on the CPDM because *fons* did not represent the general opinion of the people and the polls demonstrated that the opposition was becoming more popular to the extent that they would win the election.³⁸

Awasom concluded by saying that never before was the traditional authorities' legitimacy and their influence on their subjects so threatened as when they were actively involved in party politics. This made them to rethink their position in politics to regain their legitimacy and following. In the end, to regain trust from their subjects and to reconcile with tradition, the *fon* of Mankon had to support the faction of traditional rulers who were opposed to party politics. This was a process which has encouraged an apparent separation of the intrinsically entangled spheres of "politics" and "tradition", or "culture".³⁹

Awasom's essay demonstrates that the *fons*' authority did not merely come from the ballot box, but also from a distant pre-colonial tradition dearly upheld by the people. This point was supported by van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and van Dijk, who both indicated that "chieftaincy cannot do without power from below: if it is to survive it has to be desired by the population".⁴⁰ In this context, Awasom stressed a very important point, that traditional rulers are relevant because they are desired by their people.⁴¹ The *fon* of Mankon, Angwafo III, would thus remain an indispensable symbol of Mankon identity and a unifier of the *fon*-dom, even if the future of chieftaincy were to be in the balance. Awasom's research presents a challenge for me, to interrogate in this thesis

37 N.F. Awasom, *The Vicissitudes of Twentieth-Century Mankon Fons ...*, p. 120.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

39 See Edward Said's argument about culture and politics in the introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Knopf, New York, 1993.

40 F.B. Nyamnjoh, *Might and Right: Chieftaincy and Democracy in Cameroon and Botswana* in W. van Binsbergen and R. Pelgrim (eds.), *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law: Essays on Africa and Beyond, in Honour of Emile Adriaan B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2003, p. 120.

41 N.F. Awasom, *The Vicissitudes of Twentieth-Century Mankon Fons in Cameroon's changing Social Order*, in W. van Binsbergen and R. Pelgrim (eds.), p. 101.

the dangers faced by *vuhosi* of Tshivhase in their active involvement in the politics of South Africa's ruling party, the ANC.

In his essay, "Mighty and Right: Chieftaincy and Democracy in Cameroon and Botswana", Francis B. Nyamnjoh tried to take further the issue of the rebirth of chieftaincy in post-colonial Africa. He reflected on modernization theories which were critical of all traditional institutions, chieftaincy in particular, for having been appropriated or created by colonial, apartheid and post-colonial states for various purposes, including repression and the creation of divisions into 'citizens' and 'subjects'.⁴² He argued that these theories regarded the authority of chiefs as resting more on 'might' than 'right', and have called for chieftaincy to be abolished and ignored, to make room for citizenship based on the individual as an autonomous agent.⁴³

Nyamnjoh demonstrated in his essay that the future envisaged for Africa has excluded institutions and traditions assumed to be "primitive, repressive and unchanging in character". Modernisation theorists made predictions in the 1950s and 1960s that chieftaincy would be eroded and replaced by bureaucratic structures. Nyamnjoh highlighted that the "underdevelopment and dependency 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".⁴⁴ However, there was actually a rebirth of the chieftaincy and some of the chiefs started to take central roles in modern politics. Nyamnjoh cited South Africa as example of the renaissance of chieftaincy. He argued that in post-apartheid South Africa, active 'retraditionalisation' has been observed through "claims to chieftaincy by historically marginalized cultural communities seeking recognition and representation".⁴⁵

42 F.B. Nyamnjoh, *Might and Right: Chieftaincy and Democracy ...*, p. 121.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*

In Nyamnjoh's account, chiefs and chiefdoms are no longer seen as relics of the past or puppets of the colonial or apartheid masters, but rather as the extensions of post-colonial governments, 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".⁴⁶ Nyamnjoh used Cameroon and Botswana as case studies to demonstrate that the era of chieftaincy is far from over. He noted that the two countries, like others in Africa, have been quick to recognize the "merits and limitations of liberal democracy, because of their lack of might under global capitalism and because of the sheer resilience and creativity of their cultures".⁴⁷ This has resulted in a "quest for creative ways of marrying tradition and modernity, ethnicity and statehood, subjection and citizenship, might and right".⁴⁸

Nyamnjoh argued that the examples of Cameroon and Botswana show that Africans are far from giving up chieftaincy or allowing it to be overtaken by modern institutions. The Cameroon and Botswana case studies will be a good reference in this thesis to demonstrate similarities with the Venda historiography.

Chieftaincy as a "Gateway to the State"

Fraser McNeill, in his study of *vuhosi* of Venda as a prelude to his book on AIDS and music in the Venda region,⁴⁹ critically analysed the co-existence of the traditional authorities and the democratic state in the new South Africa. He also touched on how *vuhosi* of Venda was useful to the apartheid government during P.R. Mphahlele's time as a *khosikhulu* and President of the Venda homeland. McNeill also addressed how *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda was contested in post-1994 South Africa. However, it is important to note that McNeill's version of the Venda historiography was based only on

46 F.B. Nyamnjoh, *Might and Right: Chieftaincy and Democracy ...*, p. 123.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

48 *Ibid.*

49 F.G. McNeill, *The Battle for Venda Kingship*, in *AIDS, Politics and Music in South Africa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 26-73.

his meeting with *Thovhele* Kennedy Midiyavhathu Tshivhase and his people in Mukumbani, and therefore it cannot be regarded as giving a detailed Venda historiography.

McNeill has noted that in the apartheid period, as well as post-1994, “a legally sanctioned politics of tradition has coexisted in South Africa with a bureaucratic state and planning apparatus”.⁵⁰ Quoting from Mahmood Mamdani,⁵¹ he has shown that the “political and legal construction of tradition, in the guise of rural traditional leadership, resulted from its molding by colonial forces into a form of ‘decentralised despotism’ in a ‘bifurcated state’ in which African people could be citizens outside of the homelands but remained subjects within them”. According to McNeil, “this presented an attempt to reinforce the legitimacy of the chieftaincy as one of the most reliable gateways to the state.”⁵²

McNeill explained that “apartheid policy was designed to cement ethnic identity and justify a programme of segregation”. He argued that in the democratic South Africa, the “politics of ethnicity has taken a different turn”. According to him, “culture, tradition, and ethnicity are no longer propagated as barriers to engaging with the outside world”. In his opinion they have become “platforms upon which traditional leaders seek legitimacy in a democratic setting”.⁵³ The sentiments echoed by McNeill cannot be dismissed. However, one is tempted to say that traditional leaders’ legitimacy in the new democratic setting surpassed what they had expected at the dawn of the new South Africa. I can also argue in this chapter that the new democratic setting in South Africa did not erode the element of ethnicity within the different South African ‘traditional’ communities, especially Zulus and Vendas.

50 F.G. McNeill, *The Battle for Venda Kingship ...*, p. 29.

51 *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996.

52 M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject ...*, p. 29.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Recently there has been a sense of being proudly Venda and being proudly Zulu amongst the people of these traditional communities. A noticeable number of Vhavenda people are now embracing their old homeland symbols like the Venda flag of green, yellow and brown colours and the motto “Shumela Venda”⁵⁴ which they display proudly on their cars and through their social networks. Vhavenda women and more especially, young Vhavenda women, are seeing publicly wearing *minwenda* (Venda traditional attire). It is also the case with Vhavenda men wearing shirts inspired by Venda traditions in weddings and formal gatherings. Young Vhavenda women and men are no longer ashamed to say proudly in public that they are Vhavenda when interacting with people from other ethnic groups in South Africa or when interacting with foreigners. In displaying this confidence, Venda people now seem to draw on a popular history that emphasizes that the Vhavenda were originally a brave and confident community, as demonstrated by the bravery and confidence shown by Makhado and his son Mphephu I in their resistance against the Voortrekkers in the nineteenth century.

People have worn “100% Zulu” T-shirts in support of Jacob Zuma’s presidency, and across social networks like Twitter, Facebook and elsewhere there has been a resurgence of this spirit of “Zuluness” amongst many people self-identifying as Zulu. Zulu men are now proud to wear the animal skin ribbon in their head even in corporate offices. These examples of reinventing ethnicity may be viewed as a way of marketing and commercializing ethnicity and culture just like the “African Renaissance” concept brought about by former President Thabo Mbeki. According to McNeill the concept allows communities to succeed in reconstructing themselves around “tradition, legacy, and heritage, around the values and relationships that characterized pre-colonial institutions” and this rhetoric can be traced back to the African nationalism of Marcus Garvey.⁵⁵

54 *Shumela Venda* means work for Venda, implying that Venda people must work for their own “nation”.
55 F.G. McNeill, *The Battle for Venda Kingship ...*, p. 30. McNeill quotes from T. Lodge, *Politics in South Africa. From Mandela to Mbeki*, David Philip, Cape Town, 2002, p. 230 for his argument about reconstructions after precolonial institutions.

The Venda and Zulu examples make it difficult for the concepts of “African Renaissance” and “African Nationalism” to be a reality and it is difficult to re-evaluate African history and culture away from its colonial construction. As I have indicated in the paragraph above, the Venda ‘traditional’ community is trying to rebrand itself in the democratic South Africa and cement its identity. The rebranding of the Vhavenda started a long time ago with the advertisement of Venda as “Africa’s Eden” or “Land of Legends” on billboards by the roadside, and the former motto is now adopted as Limpopo Province’s new motto.

John and Jean Comaroff, in their book *Ethnicity, Inc.*, address “the rise of ethnic awareness, ethnic assertion, ethnic sentiment, ethno-talk; this despite the fact that it was supposed to wither away with the rise of modernity”.⁵⁶ The Comaroffs supported their claims of ethnicity becoming more corporate and commodified by listing several examples. One of those was the Bafokeng in Phokeng, Northwest Province, who reinvented themselves under the Royal Bafokeng brand name in the new South Africa as they became involved in corporate enterprises.⁵⁷ They also highlighted an attempt by the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Government in rebranding the province with the billboard of a “Zulu maiden, wreathed in a mass of colourful beads. Her sparkling-white teeth shine against the sunlight, mouth wide open in a seductively, knowing smile.”⁵⁸ They continue:

In the background are the hills of her native land; as far as one could tell, they are the heights above *eMakhosini*, the Valley of the Kings, birthplace of Shaka, site of the death of a number of his successors, and sometime capital of Southern Africa’s most celebrated indigenous monarchy.⁵⁹

As I indicated elsewhere in this chapter, the Venda national identity is being reconstructed by young people on social networks like Twitter, Facebook and others.

56 J.L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009, p. 1.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

59 *Ibid.*

However, it is still ignored by the Limpopo Provincial Government politicians and the Vhembe District Municipality. My observation is supported by the fact that there is no sign or billboard on the N1 to Musina after Botlokwa in Polokwane that you are about to enter the Venda Kingdom like it is the case with Kwazulu-Natal and Phokeng, which have been advertised respectively as The Zulu Kingdom and The Royal Bafokeng Tribe.

There are many reasons why Venda remains 'behind' in commodifying its ethnicity. The first factor is that Venda was involved in *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes after 1994 and the second factor is that "*Khosikhulu*" Toni Mphephu has played a minimal role in the politics of the new South Africa. It is also important to state that things have been changing since (now former) President Zuma announced Toni Mphephu as *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. He is now getting involved in corporate business and in overseeing major mining deals in Venda. However, it is important to highlight that the status of Toni Mphephu both as *khosikhulu* of the Venda people and his role in South African political landscape hangs in the balance since his alleged involvement in the VBS (Venda Building Society) Bank looting scandal and the Supreme Court of Appeal ruling declaring his *khosikhulu* status invalid. This matter will be dealt with in detail in the last chapter of the thesis.

To conclude this chapter, one can assume that modernity has taken over from traditional beliefs, and ethnicity has now become a rich weapon of the traditional authorities and they are willing to sell the ethnicity product to the highest bidder. Traditional authorities are no longer regarded as puppets of the apartheid government. but they are now regarded as equal business partners of the current government.