

Chapter Five

The Period of the Three Venda Rulers and Mphephu's War with the Boer Republic

Makhado was succeeded by his youngest son Maemu as per his death wish. Maemu had the backing of his mother, Nwaphunga, who was alleged to be Makhado's favourite *mutanuni*. She was determined to see her son occupy the throne and she had the support of Stemmer, who was the old war *gota* close to the late *khosikhulu*.¹

Maemu

It was Stemmer's advice that prompted Maemu's mother, Nwaphunga, to move fast to have her son installed as the new ruler of the Ramabulana while the other contenders for the *vuhosivhuhulu* were away. Mphephu was away in Kimberley after his differences with his father and Sinthumule was still in Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) on a diplomatic mission with the British.² Maemu was the only son available and this presented him with the opportunity to fulfil his father's wish of succeeding him. It is imperative to mention that Maemu's passage to *vuhosivhuhulu* was all clear because of his father's pronouncement on succession before the royal council of elders. The majority in the council was not going to dispute the wish of Makhado now that he was dead.

Maemu was finally proclaimed as a new *khosikhulu* by his mother Nwaphunga, Stemmer, and a few others *nnduni ya vuhosi*. Soon after becoming *khosikhulu*, Maemu did the opposite of what would have been done by his late father by immediately subjecting himself and his people to the Boer authorities in Pretoria. It must be mentioned that the ascendancy of Maemu to *vuhosivhuhulu* did not please Nyakhuhu and Funyufunyu,³ and they were not impressed either by the backing Maemu received from some royal elders such as Stemmer. Nyakhuhu and Funyufunyu would have preferred Mphephu to succeed his father as per

1 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 188.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*, p. 189. Funyufunyu was Makhado's lifelong advisor. *Makhadzi* is the title given to *khosikhulu*'s sisters, who are meant to be consulted in the appointment of a new *khosikhulu*. In this instance, however, it refers to Nyakhuhu, the sister of the previous *khosikhulu*, Ravele Ramabulana. together with Funyufunyu and her brother, Madzhe, Nyakhuhu had ensured Makhado's ascendancy to the throne.

traditional demands. The crowning of Maemu was seen by many as undermining the long-held (albeit, as seen in the previous chapters, often contravened) Venda tradition that the eldest son should succeed his father. The developments at Tshirululuni after the crowning of Maemu left Nyakhuhu and Funyufunyu with no other choice but to convene a meeting in the name of saving the Venda customs and tradition.

The private meeting was convened to devise a plan to get Mphephu back from Kimberley. Their reasoning was that Mphephu was the more appropriate candidate to sit on the chair of Ramabulana. This was made clear by one of Makhado's most senior *gota*, Mavhasa Musekwa of Tshihanane, who questioned the wisdom of installing Maemu in the absence of his two older brothers and whilst people were still mourning the passing of their *khosikhulu*. He therefore suggested that Rasivhetshele should have waited for the arrival of *mulaifa* to *vhuhosivhuhulu*, Mphephu.⁴ It could be argued that the actions of Nyakhuhu, Funyufunyu and Musekwa were not motivated by personal aspirations for themselves and that it was their intention to safeguard the long-standing tradition which demanded that the first son should replace his father.

It should however also be considered that the observation of tradition in this instance served as a useful legitimating argument in support of their preferred candidate. The importance of tradition to settle *vhuhosivhuhulu* disputes was over-emphasised because it coincided with and thus strengthened support for their popular choice. The thesis approaches traditions and customs as socially constructed and thus being reconfigured and adjusted over time. It is my view that, if Nyakhuhu and Funyufunyu were supportive of Maemu, it would not have been a problem that he was not the eldest. The issue of the first son tended to have been a secondary matter in the Venda succession battles. The primary issue was power, in this instance both Nyakhuhu and Funyufunyu used their power in the Venda polity to support Mphephu to win the *vhuhosivhuhulu* battle.

4 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 34. (From an Oral Historical Narrative obtained by Nemudzivhadi from Musekwa in 1971).

Nyakhuhu and Funyufunyu were not the only ones who were opposed to Maemu; in another private meeting some royal elders were devising a strategy to bring back Sinthumule from Rhodesia to replace his father. This group felt that Sinthumule was more suitable for *vuhosivhulu* than both Maemu and Mphephu, and they finally resolved to send a messenger to Bulawayo in Rhodesia to call him.⁵

Mphephu and Maemu's War

Sinthumule was the first to arrive at Tshirululuni, before his elder brother. He was met with rejoicing and jubilation because people were still excited about the installation of Maemu.⁶ I have to mention that Sinthumule had no aspirations to become a new *khosikhulu* and replace his father; this was despite the fact that there were many people *nnduni ya vuhosi* (like those who had sent a messenger to call him from Rhodesia) who wanted him to be a *khosikhulu*. In Sinthumule's mind Mphephu was the rightful *mulaifa* to replace their father and therefore he was willing to give his full support to his eldest brother. Sinthumule was supportive of Mphephu to the extent that he decided to send another messenger to Mphephu to alert him about how things unfolded at Tshirululuni after the death of their father. However, the royal elders told him that Mphephu had already been alerted and that he was on his way back to Tshirululuni. Sinthumule was advised by his aunt, Ndalambi of Makwatambani, to remain calm until the arrival of his elder brother, Mphephu.⁷

By the time Mphephu came back home, he had all his plans worked out to dethrone Maemu and take back what was rightfully his. Mphephu had his brother, Sinthumule, as well as Funyufunyu and Nyakhuhu on his side. Together they met at Nyakhuhu's home. It was at this meeting that they had a council of war and a unanimous resolution was taken to declare war on Maemu, his mother Nwaphunga, and all those who supported them. Mphephu was of the view that Maemu should be attacked immediately, before news of the plan could reach him.

5 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 35. (From an oral history account harvested from Musekwa in 1971).

6 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 35. (From an oral history account harvested from Nemauluma in 1971).

7 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 36. (Oral historical account harvested from Mamidze in 1971).

This was because Mphephu felt they might have had a traitor in their group. Funyufunyu was given the task of arranging warriors and the war council also reached consensus that whoever tried to escape from the war, would be killed at once – he and his relatives, wherever they might be.⁸

The war between Mphephu and his youngest brother Maemu was also a war between two most powerful women *nnduni ya vuhosi* of the Ramabulana: Nwaphunga and Nyakhuhu. The latter made sure that all the women in their camp rallied behind Mphephu and they were shouting and cheering. Nyakhuhu and her group were so determined to have their men to come out of the war victoriously that they sent a clear, strong message to their men fighting Maemu warriors that if they returned without annexing Tshirululuni, they would never be given porridge by a woman's hand again. This was a serious threat because Venda tradition at the time demanded that a woman should serve her husband meals. When a woman stopped serving food to her husband it meant that the man was no longer fit to sit with other men. In essence it meant that the woman had deprived such a man of the respect from his peers and other members of the community.⁹ Men fighting on Mphephu's side knew what consequence a loss in the war against Maemu's men would hold in for them.

Young warriors used to be strengthened by *vhomaine* before the war as had been the practice for generations. Most royal elders were shocked when Mphephu dismissed this long-held tradition of "doctoring" young warriors, which had always worked for them during their wars with Venda enemies. The war caught Maemu and his supporters off guard because they were not suspecting any imminent attack from his bothers. Maemu believed that his brothers, Mphephu and Sinthumule, were still away and he had no idea that they had joined forces to remove him as *khosikhulu*. Maemu and his supporters only learnt about the war on the day of the first attack by Mphephu and his men. The first attack was on the elder who guarded the entrance *nnduni ya vuhosi*. He was seized to prevent him from raising the alarm to Maemu and warning him that *nndu ya vuhosi* was under siege. Mphephu's war with Maemu

8 M.M. Motenda, History of the Western Venda and of the Lemba, in N.J. van Warmelo (ed.), *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1940, p. 59.

9 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 190.

was a very silent war because of the fact that Maemu's group was not prepared for the war and they were not ready when attacked.

Finally, the war came to an end when there was no one left for Mphephu and his warriors to fight. At the end of the war many survivors on the side of Maemu switched allegiance to Mphephu when they saw him in person. However, Maemu was not going to give up without a fight. He tried with the few men left by his side to regain *vuhosivhuhulu*, but he did not succeed.¹⁰ Mphephu remained popular with many people in Venda despite all the bad things he had done before and which had caused the rift between him and his late father, Makhado. Amongst those who had initially supported Maemu and then changed allegiance to Mphephu after Maemu's defeat, was Ratombo.¹¹

In contrast, Maemu was not so popular amongst the Venda people because many felt that he was preferred over Mphephu and that he was overprotected by Makhado, because he was the son of Nwaphunga, who was Makhado's favourite *mutanuni*. It was therefore assumed by many Venda people that Maemu's ascendancy to *vuhosivhuhulu* was aided by his mother's popularity more than anything else.¹² Maemu did not die in the war; it was alleged that he managed to escape with some of his followers with the help of *Khotsimunene* Raliphaswa. Maemu and his followers fled across the plains and across the Muhohodi River to the Boers' Fort Hendrina. They found sanctuary there and, in that way, they escaped persecution. The *Pretoria*-based journalist Leo Weinthal called the famous border the 'Rubicon' of Makhado's territory.¹³

The Rise and Fall of Mphephu

Mphephu was not going to break a rule set by his father, Makhado, that whoever crossed the Muhohodi River from either side would be immune from prosecution. Another factor which contributed to Mphephu sparing his brother's life was the respect he had for his uncle

10 M.M. Motenda, *History of the Western Venda and of the Lemba*, in N.J. van Warmelo (ed.), p. 60.

11 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 42. (Oral History account harvested from Mavhasa Musekwa in 1971).

12 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 191.

13 R. Wessmann, *The Bawenda of the Speloken*, The African World, London, 1908, p. 148.

Raliphaswa. However, his respect for *khotsimunene* did not prevent Mphephu from attempting to kill him for his role in the protection of Maemu. It turned out that the old man was not afraid of him. It would have been very daring indeed to take the life of one's own uncle. Möller-Malan dramatized the moment by dedicating the following line to her characterisation of Maemu: "you may even kill me now, since I am old and the remaining life is short".¹⁴

The failure to prosecute *Khotsimunene* Raliphaswa made Mphephu more determined to deal with all three *magota* who, with the help of Stemmer, had proclaimed his younger brother as a *khosikhulu*. Stemmer disappeared for the time being, losing his land and *vhugota*, and the second *gota* fled across the Muhohodi River and the other one, Ratombo, went into hiding. It is clear that Mphephu was a vengeful *khosikhulu* and in that sense he took after his father. His father, Makhado, died still looking to see the head of his brother Davhana. This also demonstrated that early *vhuhosivhuhulu* disputes were very bloody. The conduct of Sinthumule in the whole *vhuhosivhuhulu* dispute impressed his brother Mphephu and he was happy about it. For his unquestioned loyalty and honesty, Mphephu appointed Sinthumule as *thovhele* and for a while he kept him by his side.¹⁵

Mphephu was confronted with many challenges in his early days as a *khosikhulu*. First, he had to deal with all those who were supporting *vhuhosivhuhulu* of his younger brother Maemu. Secondly, he was confronted with a serious challenge to mend the relationship between the Venda polity and the Boer Republic. The first indications of Mphephu's first few days as a *khosikhulu* were that he was willing to maintain good relations with the white government. This was reflected by the overtures he made to the government through Field Cornet J.T. Kelly, the acting Native Commissioner of Spelonken. He later decided to send a delegation to the government with a white bull as a gift. The delegation's message was that Mphephu would be obedient to the authority of the government.¹⁶ The report in the local white newspaper, the *Zoutpansberg Review*, illustrated the commitment of the Venda polity under

14 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 191.

15 *Ibid.*

16 J.W.N. Tempelhoff, *Die Okkupasiestelsel in die Distrik Sounsborg, 1886-1899, Archives Year Book for South African History*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1997, p. 272.

Mphephu to build friendly relations with the Republic. The paper noted vast change in Venda since Mphephu succeeded his father and it was of the view that the government had to show a little tact, to make the most powerful “native tribe” in the Zoutpansberg one of its most trusted allies.¹⁷ The *Zoutpansberg Review*’s report demonstrated that Mphephu was not a monster who was eager to fight the Republic; it showed that he was willing to respect an external authority in order to secure peace in his land.

While Mphephu’s peace gesture to the Boer Republic should be acknowledged as stressed in the *Zoutpansberg Review*, his handling of domestic royal affairs was questionable. His conduct inside *nnduni ya vuhosi* surprised many when he drove away all *magota* from his father’s period, including Funyufunyu who had helped him to remove Maemu as *khosikhulu*. It was this cruel action towards *magota* who were loyal to his late father which contradicted the image of the man of peace that was propagated in the white press. He gave *magota* strict instructions to stay away from *pfamo*. They were told to remain in their own villages and that the affairs of the Venda polity would be his sole responsibility. The new *khoro ya musanda* was comprised of the young men from his own age group. Mphephu chose the council himself and most of them had been with him in Kimberley. Most elders were not happy about the autocratic style of Mphephu’s rule, which they thought was influenced by his stay in Kimberley and they perceived him as evil despite the love they had for him before.¹⁸

It turns out that at first the Boer Republic was not aware of Mphephu annexing power from Maemu. It is very possible that if they had known about the development in Tshirululuni, they would have sent some Boer Republican forces to defend the rulership of Maemu. Mphephu as *khosikhulu* was viewed as the biggest threat to the authority of the Boer Republican leaders. Mphephu was not done with showing his gratitude to his brother, Sinthumule. He decided to give him a large area on the plains to the south and the latter built a large village there. Sinthumule’s stature grew to the extent that villagers felt more comfortable with him than to send their problems to *Khosikhulu* Mphephu. However, they would still present big

17 J.W.N. Tempelhoff, *Die Okkupasiestelsel in die Distrik Sounsberg, 1886-1899 ...*, p. 272. Tempelhoff’s information is from: Redaksionele kommentaar (NB), Makato’s Tribe, *The Zoutpansberg Review*, 1896.03.20.

18 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 192.

cases to Mphephu. The influence of Sinthumule in the village led to some villagers encouraging him to challenge Mphephu for the *vuhosivhuhulu*.¹⁹

Sinthumule Takes on Mphephu for *Vuhosivhuhulu*

The reasoning of these villagers was: “Sinthumule, you have just as much right to *vuhosivhuhulu* as your elder brother. They told him that “the chair of the Ramabulana was never a thing to give away like porridge, but something to fight for”. The support of the majority of the Venda people made Sinthumule to undermine the authority of his elder brother, Mphephu. He was of the view that he could oust Mphephu as *khosikhulu* of the Ramabulana.²⁰ Mphephu got wind of what his brother, Sinthumule, and his followers were planning to do. At first, he dismissed what he was hearing as just rumours that could not be substantiated with evidential truth. The rumours persisted and this prompted Mphephu to summon his brother, Sinthumule, from Tshifhefhe to his *pfamo*. However, the latter refused to go to meet with Mphephu. Sinthumule’s refusal to go and meet Mphephu made the latter very angry with his brother and led him to realise that the rumours must have been true. He immediately sent the army to attack Sinthumule at Tshifhefhe, the village on the plain. Mphephu’s army found his brother and his people ready for them.

In the end Mphephu’s army was far too strong for Sinthumule and his people. They were forced to give way and fled to Luonde²¹ to try and fight from there. Sinthumule and his people were further pushed back and fled again, across the Luvuvhu River to the Muhohodi or the Doorn River – the ‘Rubicon’ over which Mphephu and his men could not pursue them. The defeat caused Sinthumule and his people to lose most of their cattle and many of their followers. The setback Sinthumule suffered at the hands of his brother’s army did not deter him from declaring a war on Mphephu again.²²

19 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 192.

20 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict Between Mphephu and The South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 63. (Oral information harvested from Mamidze Matsa in 1971).

21 *Luonde* is what is today famously known by its Afrikaans name *Piesanghoek*. The area’s current occupants are white banana farmers with one mixed couple, a Mr and Ms Dyer, occupying a plot on the farm. The couple is a symbol of changing times in South Africa, as for most of the twentieth century the area had been a no-go area for a black person, unless as a farm labourer.

22 M.M. Motenda, *History of the Western Venda and of the Lemba*, in N.J. van Warmelo (ed.), p. 60.

Nemudzivhadi held the view that Sinthumule was bitter about the reward given to him by Mphephu for the support he had provided during the succession battle with Maemu.²³ Sinthumule did not need to be persuaded by anyone to support Mphephu; he was prompted by the fact that Maemu had been installed by the very people who had assassinated his father. The other factor was that, according to tradition, Maemu as a younger son was ineligible to sit in the chair of the Ramabulana.²⁴ These were strong motivations for Sinthumule to have helped Mphephu. It is clear that his mission was to avenge the death of his father. It is also important to note that Sinthumule was not interested in the land given to him by Mphephu. His choice had been Malimuwa because it was a fertile land, but Mphephu gave him Tshifhefhe instead. Sinthumule with his people finally decided to go and settle at Tshifhefhe after some convincing from the royal councillors, more especially Mavhasa Musekwa²⁵. Musekwa reminded him that he got the land amongst so many brothers and therefore he ought to be satisfied.²⁶

Mphephu's appearance was described by Nemudzivhadi as dark, brave and seldom with a smile on his face. An interlocutor interviewed in the early 1970s remembered that Mphephu had no time to listen to anybody. He reported that he had the bravery of his father Makhado but lacked his intelligence.²⁷ The reign of Mphephu at Luatame ended the period of peaceful co-existence with the Boer Republic's officials at Fort Hendrina and ushered in the dawn of an era of mistrust and instability, and this brought wars to the land of the Venda people. Mphephu's reign was also felt by three eastern *vhothovhele*, Ligeise Tshivhase, Ranwedzi

23 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 61. (Oral testimony harvested from Nemaulumu on 13 June 1971 and Nwamakhado on 31 August 1971).

24 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 44. (The extract is from Nemudzivhadi's interview with Mamidze Matsa on July 1971).

25 *Mavhasa Musekwa* was a very influential *thovhele* in Venda and the Musekwa people used to play an important role, advising *khosikhulu*, in the past. Things have changed now with the current *khosi* of Musekwa, *Malapule Musekwa*, having a rather minimal role in the events at Ramabulana royal house even though he was the Chairperson of Mphephu Royal Council in the early 1990s.

26 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 45. (Information obtained via interview from Musekwa on 12 July 1971).

27 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 47. (The extract is from Nemudzivhadi's interview with Netshiendeulu on 30 March 1973.)

Mphaphuli and Tshikosi Rammbuda. Tshivhase was the one who was very sceptical of peace with the Ramabulanas as long as Mphephu remained a *khosikhulu*.²⁸

Tshivhase viewed Mphephu as an aggressor and more war-like than his father Makhado. Sinthumule was different to Mphephu in the sense that he inherited his father's intelligence; he was brave and kind.²⁹ It can be argued that Mphephu and Sinthumule's contrasting characters were the reasons for their fight later on. The clash in characters made Mphephu and Sinthumule's pact to be short-lived and this created ground for constant hostilities between the two. Sinthumule's aspiration to become *khosikhulu* went contrary to his earlier intention when he came from Bulawayo to help Mphephu dethrone Maemu. However, no one can blame Sinthumule for changing his mind about *vuhosivhuhulu*. The greatest contributing factor to Sinthumule's aspirations for power was mainly the great sympathy shown by Mphephu in honour of the role the former played in the battle with Maemu and another contributing factor was Sinthumule's supporters who encouraged him to go after the *vuhosivhuhulu*.

Sinthumule planned a second attempt to attack Mphephu while he was in *Thovhele* Manavhela's land. His plan was to attack Mphephu when he least expected it. Sinthumule was very unfortunate that he had an informer amongst his warriors who secretly went to warn Mphephu about the looming attack from Sinthumule. This event led to another failure of Sinthumule's plan to defeat Mphephu for the *vuhosivhuhulu*. On hearing the news, Mphephu sent his warriors to surround a hill in Manavhela's land, but the warriors were given strict instructions not to kill Sinthumule. Mphephu did not want to spill his father's blood in Sinthumule. Sinthumule and his men were defeated and he crossed the Muhohodi River with a few of his warriors. Mphephu's men knew that once Sinthumule crossed the river they could not arrest him.³⁰

28 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 47. (Interview with Jack Ramatsitsi on 13 July 1973).

29 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 47. (Interview with Nemauluma on 13 June 1971).

30 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 192.

Sinthumule was allowed to stay at the farm called Commando Boom that was owned by Mr. Gill, but the Government later offered him the land he was given by Mphephu to settle with his people. For a very long time the Republic was not getting involved in the affairs of the Ramabulana. However, their involvement was not far away; it had to come after one treacherous incident involving one of the *magota* under Mphephu's jurisdiction. It was alleged that *Gota* Ratombo, who had been one of Maemu's supporters, was hiding after Maemu was dethroned. While in hiding he was thinking about doing something great that could buy him favours from Mphephu. He ultimately planned one night to attack the Shangaans who were living on a farm called Madrid.³¹ The Shangaans with other communities living on the eastern slopes of the Soutpansberg had of their own accord accepted the Boer Republic as their authority and they regarded the president of the Republic as their father.

Ratombo and his men killed no less than twenty-six Shangaan people who had not provoked them at all and then fled to Mphephu for protection. The attack on innocent Shangaans gave General Piet Joubert a pretext of sorts to act against Mphephu, which he had wanted to do anyway. The Republic's commander sent a messenger to Mphephu requesting that Ratombo should be handed over to the government for punishment. Mphephu's response was very dismissive and he asked General Joubert to come and take Ratombo if possible.³² This response infuriated the Boers who felt that Mphephu's actions of undermining their authority had gone too far for him to be tolerated. The Boer government's intentions were clear: they wanted to subjugate Venda people in order to seize their land and coerce their men into wage labour. The notion that General Joubert did not want war with Mphephu, as Möller-Malan had suggested, was just a pretence. Möller-Malan argued that it was the "attitude" of Mphephu and his "arrogance" which left the government with "no other option" but to find some means of curtailing the activities of the Ramabulana in the Soutpansberg. Here the Boers were portrayed by the author as a peace-loving people with good intentions towards the black communities of the Soutpansberg, whereas they were in fact the ones encroaching on the Venda territory seeking supremacy over them.

31 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 74.

32 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 194.

To control the Ramabulana the government wanted to take a census of the people, survey their land and allow them to live only in reserves allocated according to their numbers. The government sent a delegation of two people, namely Mr. Munnik who was the magistrate of Soutpansberg District, together with the commander and lieutenant at Fort Hendrina, in order to meet with Mphephu. The delegation was given clear instruction to inform him about the plans of the government and request him to give the surveyors and other officials all the help they might require.³³ Munnik was not a stranger to *nndu ya vuhosi* of the Venda polity as he had paid Makhado visits on a number of occasions. He noted that his visit to Mphephu was not as friendly as was the visits to Makhado. He found the atmosphere had entirely changed and was very hostile. This should not surprise us because the Boers had in the meanwhile violently subjugated all the African polities around the Venda people.

On their arrival the Boers were met outside Mphephu's *pfamo* and taken to the meeting place with a request from the *khosikhulu* that Munnik and the commander should leave their guns outside. However, the two government officials refused to leave their guns outside. They were of the opinion that leaving their guns would be signing a death warrant because they did not trust Mphephu.³⁴ This suspicious reception of the government officials by Mphephu was more strategic on his part. His intention was to demonstrate to General Joubert that as a *khosikhulu* he would not be pushed around in his land. It was also a sign that Mphephu was ready to engage the Boers in a war.

The meeting took place in front of Mphephu's *pfamo*, and the talks nearly collapsed because Mphephu took time to meet Munnik and the commander and when he finally arrived where they were sitting, he opted to parade up and down admiring the view from his *pfamo* as if he had not seen it before. He never said a word to the visitors while parading and this incensed Munnik who was not impressed by what he perceived as disrespectful behaviour. He asked the commander to stand up so that they could leave without delivering the message from Pretoria. Mphephu was just showing the government that he had the power in his land and that outsiders had to abide by his rule and subject themselves to his authority. Finally, he came to the meeting after Funyufunyu had convinced him to meet the government officials.

33 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 194.

34 *Ibid.*

The meeting did not yield any positive results as Mphephu's strategy of impressing his enormous power onto Munnik and the commander was interpreted as arrogance. The letter was read to Mphephu, but his response was contemptuous, showing disrespect to the President. He instructed Magistrate Munnik to go and tell "Paul"³⁵ that "I will have none of these things. No white man shall enter my territory without my permission!"³⁶ Munnik decided, after listening to what he regarded as the most disrespectful utterances by Mphephu, that he had heard enough of the humiliation and took leave through his interpreter.

Getting the Boer delegates to stay took a lot of convincing from Funyufunyu, who had in the meanwhile been reinstated as *ndunakhulu*³⁷ after initially having been sacked immediately after Mphephu's ascendancy as *vuhosivhuhulu*. Funyufunyu convinced the magistrate and the commander to stay because he realised the importance of the meeting. Möller-Malan alleged that he went down on his knees and begged Magistrate Munnik not to go, because their message affected all their people. He also requested the magistrate not to take Mphephu seriously as he was still a young hawk trying out his wings. He promised to engage Mphephu to make sure the meeting would happen.³⁸

Funyufunyu talked to Mphephu, asking him not to allow those government officials to leave like that. The attitude of Mphephu changed again after some deliberation with Funyufunyu and he decided to go after the government officials and offer them something to eat. He said to them: "You must be hungry after coming so far. I will have an ox killed and prepare some meat for you so that you may eat".³⁹ Magistrate Munnik and his colleague declined the offer. To the Venda people and *khosikhulu* the refusal of Munnik and his colleague to stay and have something to eat was viewed as most insulting. According to the custom it was expected that one should accept food when offered.

35 Mphephu called President Kruger by his first name, Paul, as a sign of disrespect to the man who held the highest office in the Boer Republic. It was also a demonstration of power and authority by the Venda ruler and he was sending a clear message to President Kruger that he had more authority than him.

36 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 194.

37 *Ndunakhulu* is the king's right-hand man in Venda.

38 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 195.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

The attitude of Mphephu towards the Boers was not wrong because they were encroaching on the Venda land; the Boers did expect African rulers to respect them and subject themselves to them. Perhaps Funyufunyu was shrewd and he realised that being diplomatic was more important for the Venda people than being right. Funyufunyu also knew that affronting the Boers would only give them a pretext to justify why the Venda people deserved to be attacked by them.

The Decision to Isolate Mphephu from the Rest of the Venda Chiefs

The Boer government realised that engaging Mphephu was a waste of time. Their next option was to engage other *vhothovhele* in Venda and the motive behind this action by the government was to isolate Mphephu from other *vhothovhele* in his area. Boer Commandant-General Piet Joubert was very calculated about this and used the Berlin missionaries as his agents in this 'divide and rule' strategy.⁴⁰ Mphaphuli, who ruled all the land around Sibasa, was also targeted directly: the Boer commander who accompanied Magistrate Munnik, sent a trusted constable to him. The request to Mphaphuli was for him to send somebody to Pretoria who was wise and could be trusted, because Pretoria wanted to discuss an urgent matter which had to be conveyed to Mphaphuli.⁴¹ A man by the name of Mmbidi was nominated by Mphaphuli. Mmbidi's mission was to represent the Mphaphuli community in Pretoria. Mmbidi was a *gota* in one of the Mphaphuli villages and it is assumed that he had known Hendrik Potgieter and Stephanus Schoeman for a very long time, since his days as a small herd boy. These two generals were most respected Boer leaders in the Northern Transvaal and they were highly regarded in the Soutpansberg.

The government's intention was to show Mmbidi the military power possessed by the Boers and to demonstrate to the Venda people that any attempt to provoke war against the Republic would be committing suicide. In Pretoria, Mmbidi was taken on a tour to the government arsenal storage and shown all the cannons and rifles and ammunition. At the end

40 For a detailed discussion see A. Kirkaldy, *An Examination of the Role Played by Berlin Missionaries in Internal Conflicts in the Vhavenda Polity and in Conflicts between the Vhavenda and the ZAR, c. 1870–1900*, in H. Stoecker and U. van der Heyden (eds), *Mission und Macht im Wandel politischer Orientierungen*, Franz Steiner, Stuttgart, 2005, pp. 373-378.

41 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 196.

of the four-day visit, Mmbidi was asked, “Do you think Mphephu can withstand all this? Do you think he really means to bring matters to a fight?” Mmbidi acknowledged the fact that what he saw was great and nobody could withstand those weapons and ammunitions. However, he also told the government officials that Mphephu wanted war and his fighters were more than ready to face the Boer army. The intentions of the government to show one of Mphaphuli’s *magota* their ammunition prowess was clearly a sign that the government was weary to take on Mphephu in a war. The government also realised that a war would also invite the interference of the British in Rhodesia, who had a good military pact with the Ramabulana dating from the time when Makhado was still alive. Suffice also to say that the British intentions were not genuine. The British had the same motive as the Boers: supremacy over African polities. They tolerated them and collaborated with them just as long as it served this purpose. During the course of the 1890s Cecil John Rhodes’s forces defeated the Ndebele people and the Shona people in the then Rhodesia.

The Boer government gave Mmbidi a uniform, with a helmet and sword and he was instructed to go and meet Mphephu at his mountain stronghold and tell Mphephu what he had witnessed on his visit to Pretoria. This was done in the hope that it would dissuade Mphephu from taking the Boer government to war. Mmbidi met Mphephu in his *pfamo* at Tshirululuni, but it turned out that his visit to Mphephu did not achieve its intended goals, as Mphephu and his councillors dismissed him as a cowardly old man and a stooge of the government since he was wearing their uniform. Mmbidi’s mission had failed and he left Mphephu’s courtyard in fear and in disgrace.⁴²

It cannot be disputed that Mmbidi was old and that he could not fight anymore. Yet Mphephu and his men’s decision to dismiss him without taking his warning seriously, was their biggest mistake. Had they been willing to sit with him, they would have managed to stop the message from Pretoria from being conveyed to other *vhothovhele* in Venda. Mmbidi went ahead and informed the other *vhothovhele* about what Pretoria had shown to him and also about his meeting with Mphephu at Tshirululuni. He also warned them that the war was coming since Mphephu could not listen to the warning of the government. He appealed to the other

42 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 196.

vhothovhele to have no part in the war that was coming. The Berlin missionary advised Tshivhase and other *vhothovhele* to prepare white flags and put them along the mountain road leading towards Nzhelele, which marked their boundary when the war started. The plan was to make it possible for the armed forces to see and recognise the area outside of Mphephu's jurisdiction. The road was named "The Witvlag Road" and even today that area is known as Witvlag. This development left Mphephu and his people in Nzhelele totally isolated. War was inevitable and it was clear that Mphephu was going to find it difficult to defeat the Republic's forces without the support of other *vhotovhele* of Venda. The Boer government had succeeded in dividing the Venda people to enforce their authority. The first provocation of war by the government was to send surveyors to work on Mphephu's land. The work started from Mara, which was the far side of Mphephu's area.⁴³

The Beginning of Mphephu's War with the Republic

It was not long after the work had started when the surveyors were confronted by a strong army of Mphephu's chosen warriors who drove them away. Mphephu's actions showed that he was not going to allow Venda people, more especially those in his area, to be under white supremacy. After Mphephu had chased away the government surveyors, the Boer government was able to argue that war was inevitable as Mphephu would not capitulate.⁴⁴ According to Nemudzivhadi, there were several factors which forced the Republic to take action against Mphephu. These reasons were expressed by General Piet Joubert in his address to the commandants at Rietvlei on 15 November 1898, the day before the final attack was launched. Joubert referred to the way the Venda people had destroyed the "civilisation" which the Boers had once established and which had flourished in the early days in the Soutpansberg.⁴⁵ From the statements by Joubert it is clear that the Boer government had not forgotten what had happened in Schoemansdal when the white families living there were forced to evacuate after an attack by Makhado in 1856. The Boer government was still bitter that they were unable to deal decisively with Mphephu's father and they felt that it was time

43 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 197.

44. *Ibid.*

45 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 102. (The extract is from the weekly newspaper *The Pretoria Press*, 15 November 1898).

for the son to pay. To the Boer government officials, the defeat in Schoemansdal would remain a sore in their history and for that reason they were determined to defeat Mphephu.

Another major cause of the war, according to Nemudzivhadi, was the continuation of the relationship between Mphephu and the British in Rhodesia. Mphephu believed and trusted that the British in Rhodesia would protect him. Perhaps that fortified his defiance of the Boers. Mphephu probably hoped that the British would take over the Transvaal again as they had done in 1877. To the Republic the relationship between Mphephu and the British in Rhodesia posed the biggest threat to their total authority in the Soutpansberg. The only way to prevent any threat from the British in Rhodesia was to attack Mphephu when he least expected it. Nemudzivhadi noted that General Joubert complained in his official report about the “resistance and disobedience” of the Ramabulana and their *vhothovhele* to the laws of the South African Republic.⁴⁶

Mphephu’s objection to paying taxes to the government was highlighted by many scholars as the main cause of the war. This notion has been advanced by Tempelhoff, Nemudzivhadi and Mouton and is based on the opinion that Mphephu was not willing to pay taxes and showed his disgust at their imposition by threatening other *vhothovhele* and other communities in the Soutpansberg. Mouton mentioned that tension between Mphephu and the Republic reached a boiling point when the former openly started hostilities by sending a commando of riders and infantry to Rev. Hofmeyr’s post at Kranspoort in order to stop the post’s natives, more especially the Buys community, from paying taxes to the government.⁴⁷

Nemudzivhadi also came to Mphephu’s defence when he claimed that like his father Makhado, he would not have attacked the Republic’s men as long as they were settled across the Muhohodi River. This sentiment was supported by the article written by Leo Weinthal of

46 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 105. Nemudzivhadi was referring to Commandant-General Piet Joubert’s official report on what the Boers referred to as the Mphephu War of 1898.

47 J.A. Mouton, *Generaal Piet Joubert in die Transvaalse Geskiedenis, Archives Year Book for South African History*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1957, p. 154. Mouton also used extracts from Commandant-General Piet Joubert’s report on the expedition against Mphephu, as well as *De Zoutpansbergen en de Bawenda Natie* (The Zoutpansberg and the Bawenda Nation) by J. Flygare, pp. 14-15. Also see *De Volksstem*, (Newspaper) 1898.10.01 and 1898.11.05; *Land en Volk*, (Newspaper) 1898.09.28 and G.G. Munnik, *Kronieke van Noordelike Transvaal*, SAB, Pretoria, 1922, pp. 132-135.

the Pretoria weekly paper *The Press*, after visiting Makhado in 1894. He wrote that, “a peaceful solution of the problem is still within the range of probability. The Boers residing in the Spelonken below the Berg have worked themselves up to a considerable state of fear, for which there as yet seems to be no tangible reason”.⁴⁸ The statement in the newspaper contended that the main cause of war was the Boers who were stationed at Fort Hendrina.

Another scholar, Ncube, considered Venda-Boer relations to have been secondary in terms of creating a war climate. He felt it was the internal strife in Venda’s domestic politics that was the actual underlying cause of the war.⁴⁹ This assumption by Ncube was supported by Nemudzivhadi and some of the people he had consulted. The root of the problem according to Nemudzivhadi, lay in the Venda people’s failure to formulate laws (and dare I add: then abide by these invented traditions) of succession. He claimed that the ruling *khosikhulu* was not meant to designate his successor as the decision to appoint a new ruler ought to lie in the hands of *makhadzi* and *vhavenda*, or *khotsimunene*.⁵⁰ Nemudzivhadi held the view that even this custom automatically divided the Venda people, as various groups had their own candidates.⁵¹ Nemudzivhadi might have a point about the damage caused by the conflict between Venda tradition and practice. However, I dismiss the argument that this was the reason for the Republic declaring a war against Mphephu. I strongly believe that the main reason was a power struggle between Mphephu and the Republic.

The Beginning of War in Spring 1898

The defiance of Mphephu, his refusal to submit himself to the authority of the Republic, shows that he was a very brave and militant leader who was not going to be bullied by the Republic without his demands being met. The Republic meanwhile knew that Mphephu was prepared for war. In the spring of 1898, after Mphephu and his warriors had attacked the

48 R. Wessmann, *The Bawenda of the Speloken*, pp. 144-145, in M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 106.

49 A.N. Ncube, *The Venda and Mphephu War of 1898*, Salisbury, 1972, p. 6.

50 The king’s younger brothers. This has been discussed in detail in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Also see H.A. Stayt, *The Bawenda*, London and Edinburgh, New Impression, 1968, p. 195. Stayt referred to the concept not as *vhavenda*, but as *khotsimunene*.

51 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 107.

surveyors, it took General Joubert a month to reach Fort Hendrina to start preparing for war. He brought along with him several cannons as well as a fort, named Fort Henning, which was transported on heavy lumbering wagons. The General then waited for other commandos from the different Boer districts to join him in the Soutpansberg. During that period, Mmbidi, the *mukoma muhulwane*⁵² of Mphaphuli, who had previously warned all *vhothovhele* about the imminent war, accompanied them one by one to render their submission to General Joubert in person. This development shows how Mphephu was being isolated in his war with the Republic. All *vhothovhele* were assured by General Joubert that their people would be safe from Boer aggression; no matter what their attitude towards the Republic may have been in the past.⁵³

It was soon after all *vhothovhele* had pledged their support to the Republic that the commandos started arriving.⁵⁴ The assembling of commandos from every corner of the Transvaal to face Mphephu was a clear indication that the Republic viewed him as a big threat to their authority. The commandos, under the leadership of General Joubert, strategically took their positions towards the south-east, south and south-west of Mphephu's stronghold. Joubert himself had his camp on the hill south of the village where Mphephu's father Makhado used to receive his visitors. Mphephu's spies monitored every movement of the Commandos. Mphephu's plan was to have the Republic's commandos attacked before they were ready and when they least expected it.⁵⁵

Möller-Malan described how Mphephu's men grouped themselves in a "horn formation" with each of the two horns encroaching from a different direction, under the impression that their movement was concealed by the dense bush. It was very unfortunate for Mphephu and his men that Joubert and his commandos were able to see them; the plan backfired. Joubert and his commandos were ready for them and they were just waiting for them to come within shooting range. For Mphephu's men it was like walking straight into a death trap and they were shot and killed by the commandos who were shooting from long distances.⁵⁶ The Boers

52 *Mukoma muhulwane* is a senior headman in Tshivenda.

53 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 197.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 198.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*

also bombarded the lower village of Tshirululuni and the cannon flames set the whole place with its grass thatches and wooden palisades on fire.⁵⁷ Soon Mphephu's councillors and *magota* were no longer keen to have the war continue because they had realised that the Boer forces were too strong for them.

The End of the War and Mphephu's Flight into Exile in Bulawayo

The war continued because Mphephu was brave and refused to accept defeat. On 15 November 1898 Mphephu and his people were alerted that the Boer forces would be making the final attack at the royal headquarters, Tshirululuni, the following morning. This attack would prove to be the last throw of the dice by Mphephu because it became too fatal for him and his people. In the end Mphephu and his people conceded defeat by running away to save their lives. Möller-Malan described the flight of Mphephu as that of the hawk who knew it was time to leave his perch and fly away. The women and cattle were sent ahead before the hawk could fly for his life.⁵⁸ It is very important to mention that Mphephu's downfall was hastened by his *vhothovhele* who sold his fighting strategy to the enemy.⁵⁹

In the end Mphephu managed to cross the Limpopo River with some of his subjects. Möller-Malan made an important point: that the departure of Mphephu did not end the influence he had on his people South of the Limpopo River. It was alleged by Möller-Malan's sources that many of those who had been left behind remained loyal to Mphephu and they kept sending him a yearly present to enable him to live according to his royal status. The departure of Mphephu led to the name of Tshirululuni being changed to Louis Trichardt, in honour of the first Voortrekker to settle in the area. Sinthumule was proclaimed the new *khosikhulu* of the Venda people to replace his brother and in reward for the role he and his followers played in the war when fighting on the side of the Boer Republic's forces. The Shangaans were meanwhile promised a reserve of their own.⁶⁰ However, before this promise could be fulfilled,

57 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 198.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 200.

59 R. Wessmann, *The Bawenda of the Spelonken*, p. 121. In his book, Wessmann stated that General Joubert wrote letters to Mphephu's 'sub-chiefs' threatening them that bloodshed would be on their heads if they would not come to him with information. The threat worked as the 'chiefs' handed the information about Mphephu's war strategy to Reverend Wessmann, who sent the information to the General Joubert.

60 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 201.

the Boers were themselves caught up in the whirlwind of the Second Anglo-Boer War, today preferably called the South African War.

Nemudzivhadi highlighted the fact that the followers of Mphephu were not to know peace while their *khosikhulu* was exiled in Rhodesia. The Republican forces rounded up Mphephu's leading *vhothovhele* and arrested them. Mphephu's younger brother Kutama was arrested together with others.⁶¹ The number of people loyal to Mphephu arrested was estimated to be 160 and they were mostly women and children. The charges they faced were those of disturbing the peace of the Republic and they were detained and made to wait for the decision of the Executive Council, in accordance with Article 13 of Law number 5 of 1885.⁶² Nemudzivhadi was of the view that the South African War saved these prisoners because when it started they were all released. However, it is not clear what had happened to *Gota Ratombo*, who was charged with murder for having killed Shangaans in October 1896. Nemudzivhadi failed to elaborate further on whether Ratombo was killed for the crime he committed before the start of the South African War.

It was believed that by the time the war ended there were 550 casualties on the side of Mphephu and only three people on the side of the Republic, with nine men having been wounded.⁶³ The action taken by the Republic against Mphephu's followers was a clear demonstration that the Republic's leaders wanted to finish off any influence he had on his people. Mphephu maintained tabs on what was happening in his land from exile, and he remained influential and powerful even after the war. He knew that the outcome of that war was not decisive because of the threat to the Republic from the British, who were close allies of himself and his people. Möller-Malan alleged that Mphephu advised his people from Rhodesia that they ought to support the British in a war with the Boers. He advised his people

61 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 164.

62 *Ibid.*, The extract is from the information provided by the State Attorney to the Chief of Prison on 8 February 1899.

63 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p 166. Reference is to an extract from the newspaper *The Star*, 5 December, 1899. However, the number given by *The Pretoria Press (Weekly Edition)* was 200 and it was the same number given by General Joubert in his war report. The *Press* figure and that given by General Joubert contradict the figure of *The Star*, which seemed highly exaggerated.

to aid those with the red complexion, since they were the ones who had been kind to their *khosikhulu*. I think it was more of an issue of interest than kindness.

The Return of Mphephu to the Venda Throne

Soon after Mphephu had gone into exile in Rhodesia, the British defeated the Boers, took over the government of the Transvaal and also the administration of the African communities. This gave Captain H.J. Taylor of the British forces an opportunity to bring Mphephu back to Tshirululuni for him to take back the *vhuhosivhuhulu* from Sinthumule. All those who were involved in the killing of Makhado with poison, including Stemmer, were condemned to death by the court held by Captain Taylor.⁶⁴ It was claimed that Mphephu had to intervene to save his two brothers, Sinthumule and Maemu, as both were facing death for betraying him.⁶⁵

The assertion of Mphephu saving his own brothers from being killed had been contested by some of Nemudzivhadi's interlocutors, who held the view that Sinthumule and Maemu escaped death themselves without Mphephu's aid. Nemudzivhadi alleged that the killing of Mphephu's enemies did not please the Boer leaders and when they heard the news, they arrested Mphephu. This account of Mphephu's arrest contradicts what was reported in Möller-Malan because it was quite evident that when Captain Taylor sentenced to death those who had betrayed Mphephu, the Republic's leaders were no longer in full control of the events in the Soutpansberg. Mphephu's arrest was never reported in the accounts of Möller-Malan. During the alleged arrest of Mphephu the role of *khosikhulu-pfareli* went to Rammbiyana for the time being.⁶⁶

The new Government gave Mphephu and his people a new settlement area in the valley of the Nzhelele River, which pleased Mphephu.⁶⁷ The British felt that the area had to be more easily accessible than the mountain stronghold of Tshirululuni. But one can deduce that

64 D. Möller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1953, p. 201.

65 This event was described by unknown informants in M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 167.

66 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 168.

67 S.M. Dzivhani, *The Chiefs of Venda*, in N.J. van Warmelo (ed.), *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1940, p. 42.

Mphephu did not resist the suggestion to move his royal headquarters to the Nzhelele Valley because the land was fertile and peaceful and to his liking. Another contributing factor to Mphephu accepting the move to the valley was the fact that he no longer lived in fear of an attack from the Boers because he had cemented his relationship with the British who, after all, were the ones who had brought him back to his land from Matongoni.

It was in the Nzhelele Valley where Mphephu organized a circumcision ceremony for his eldest son, Mbulaheni.⁶⁸ Mbulalahemi George Ramabulana was the potential successor to his father's *vhohosivhulu*. Nemudzivhadi acknowledged the fact that Mphephu was the most influential *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. He gave his two brothers, Sinthumule and Kutama their own location to rule independently from him. Mphephu died in 1924 and, by this time, colonial rule of over two decades had left a mark: Venda was divided amongst seven *vhuhosi*, each independent of the other: Mphephu, Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Rammbuda, Sinthumule, Nesengani and Kutuma – and the whole country was open to white occupation.⁶⁹

It was attested by Nemudzivhadi that Mphephu remained the most influential *khosikhulu* of the Venda people after his return from exile. He had also earned respect from the white people because of his resilience after the war with the Boers in 1898. One can deduce that the division into seven *vhuhosi* was to allow peace to prevail in his land. To the Venda people Mphephu remained their *khosikhulu* and no one was thought to be above him when it came to power and authority. One scholarly view of the events in the Venda polity after Mphephu was brought back by Captain Taylor, could be that the Republic might have succeeded in sowing division in the Venda polity by having seven *vhothovhele* who were independent, ruling their own territories. It was the events prior to Mphephu's death in 1924 which had a serious impact on the question of *vhuhosivhuhulu* in Venda in the twenty-first century. This issue will be dealt with critically in the chapter that deals with Commissions of Enquiry into the Venda kingship disputes.

68 M.H. Nemudzivhadi, *The Conflict between Mphephu and the South African Republic (1895-1899)*, MA dissertation, Unisa, 1977, p. 168.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 169.