

Chapter Six

Modern Politics: Towards Constitutional Government

This chapter aims critically to interrogate Venda transition from traditional authority to the modern politics of a constitutional government. The point of departure for the chapter will be to look critically at the man who brought the evolution in the Venda traditional and political authority. Patrick Ramaano Mphephu was the sole player in the new transitional Venda political discourse. He was too distant from the era of his forefathers, where the knowledge of “modern politics”¹ was absent in the thinking of *vhothovhele* of Venda polity. P.R. Mphephu was born on 4 February 1925, the year in which his father George Mbulaheni Ramabulana replaced his father, Alidzuli Tshilamulela Mphephu I as the *khosikhulu* of Venda polity. He was the third child of his mother Mushaathoni from Malimuwa, who also had two daughters, namely Muofhe and Denga (Nthatheni Phophi) Mphephu.² Mphephu’s rise to power began in the 1950s and from there he never looked back. He used the opportunity to entrench himself as *khosikhulu* and later, as will be discussed in the next chapter, as life President of the Venda Homeland from 1983 to 1988.

Mphephu’s Childhood and Youth

Before looking at Mphephu’s political life it is necessary to interrogate P.R.³ Mphephu’s childhood and his life before ascending to the throne as *khosikhulu* of Vhailafuri. Venda tradition demanded that *mulaifa* to the throne and his mother had to be sent away from *nnduni ya vuhosi* as a disguise. *Mulaifa* did not have to grow up *nnduni ya vuhosi*. This was the case with Mphephu, who spent most of his life in Tshakhuma and later lived with his *makhadzi* in Vhulaudzi. This was done because community members and other members of

1 By modern politics I imply the way in which traditional leaders were made heads of state by imposing a western-style government a bureaucracy onto an indigenous system.

2 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda “The Great Elephant of Africa”, MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 14.

3 In order to prevent confusion with his earlier ancestors, especially to distinguish him from his grandfather Alilali Mphephu I, the initials ‘P.R.’ are used in order to refer to Patrick Ramaano Mphephu in this chapter.

nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu of the Ramabulana were not supposed to know the identity of the future *khosikhulu*. If his identity was known, his life could have been in danger. Other members of *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana could have attempted to have him *a mile tshivhindi*. *Makhadzi* is credited for moulding the leadership qualities of Mphephu.

Mphephu, like his father, was one of the few *mahosi* of Venda polity who have gone to school beyond primary level. According to Nevondo, P.R. Mphephu went to school until standard six; he attended Siloam Primary School and later Tshakhuma Primary School, both missionary schools, where he distinguished himself in Social Sciences. Nevondo affirmed through his research that Mphephu completed standard six, which was regarded as the highest achievement in school during the time of P.R. Mphephu's youth. The educational background of Mphephu has been questioned by many amongst the Venda community.⁴ There are persistent claims from Venda people that Mphephu was not educated, or at least that he had already left school in standard four and not standard six.⁵

It was very clear that from a young age Mphephu knew what he wanted in life. Besides being educated, Mphephu was also sportsman of note. He was interested in boxing, swimming and playing football and participated in Venda traditional games like *bune*. He was also involved in other traditional activities like *tshikona* dance, *domba* and *murundu*. P.R. Mphephu already showed signs of being a good leader when he started working for the City Council of Johannesburg 1945. Working with other African people from different ethnic groups brought Mphephu to the conclusion that the Venda people were not respected either by the whites or the other African communities in South Africa. As a result, Mphephu felt it his responsibility to

⁴ The issue of education bothered Mphephu to the extent that he lambasted those who claimed that he was not educated. I remember when I was a young high school student in the mid-1980s when I attend Venda National Party rallies and listened to President P.R. Mphephu warning his detractors. The most famous Mphephu retort to those who doubted his level of education was "*Musi ndo yo dalalela khaladzi anga Margaret Thatcher Ingilandi na vharatu vhangani ndi ambelwa tshikhuwa nga vho mme anu?*" Loosely translated into English: "When I visited my sister the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher in England and my brothers in Japan did your mothers speak English for me?" Judging by the way Mphephu managed to destroy his opponents, like the main opposition party in Venda, the Venda Independent Party, before his death, one can conclude that the man was educated and intelligent.

⁵ M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 – 1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 14.

make these people respect him and his people. He formed a football team, Venda Home Defenders, to play against teams from other ethnic groups. Mphephu captained the team and his intention was to show the whites and people from other ethnic groups that Venda people were as good as any other community in South Africa.

Faced with racial, political and ethnic questions, the young P.R. Mphephu in Johannesburg had to show that he had leadership blood in him by leading outside of Venda. He started being vocal about his displeasure with the treatment of blacks by whites. Mphephu realised that whether you were *musiwana* or *mukololo*, did not matter to the whites. This made him hate whites and he started showing that he was *mukololo* by withdrawing himself in most instances. This action by Mphephu contradicts his earlier resilience when he formed the Venda Home Defenders football team to show that Venda people could not be undermined. Withdrawing himself was a sign of a defeated man which was not common to *mahosi* of Venda polity or *mulaifa* to the Venda throne as indicated by the resilience shown by his grandfathers, Makhado and Mphephu I, towards the Voortrekkers before P.R. Mphephu was born. This was ironic because in the beginning of his stay in Johannesburg, Mphephu was very annoyed when some people he worked with called him *Vhamusanda*.⁶ Mphephu became more of a reactionary in Johannesburg and he was against some of the most oppressive policies of the white government. Mphephu had a strong resentment for the racial segregation policy and he also thought the white government did not give full recognition to *vhuhosi*.⁷

It appears that Mphephu's fight for black people and *mahosi* in South Africa was a silent one. His frustration against the government's oppressive policies towards black South Africans went on unnoticed because it never put the young P.R. Mphephu in danger with the law enforcement authorities in South Africa. He was never arrested for his view against the Smuts government, or later, the apartheid government.

⁶ *Vhamusanda* is what Venda people call their chief. Mphephu was taken aback because people from other communities in South Africa did not know the meaning of *Vhamusanda* as they called every Venda person by that name. To him as a *mukololo* to be called *Vhamusanda* was disrespectful.

⁷ M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 – 1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 18.

Prior to Mphephu ascending to the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana, his father George Mbulaheni Ramabulani had already seen that his son had potential as a future leader. However, Mbulaheni Ramabulana was seriously concerned about his son's tendency not to take advice. As an apparent *mulaifa* to the throne, P.R. Mphephu was given a chance by his father to represent him at the most important meetings. One such occasion was in 1947 in Pietersburg (today Polokwane). Mbulaheni Ramabulana had received an invitation to meet the King of England, King George VI, together with his wife Queen Elizabeth and their two children Elizabeth and Margaret, on their visit to South Africa that year.⁸ *Khosikhulu's* health prevented him to attend and he sent his son. By that time P.R. Mphephu was still working in Johannesburg.

Mbulaheni Ramabulana appointed a strong delegation to represent him in the meeting with the British king. Besides his son P.R. Mphephu with his cousin F.N. Ravele, he also appointed *Gota* Ndwakhulu of Songozwi, Mulambilu and George Ramabulana of Louis Trichardt. The meeting with King George VI of Britain would have been P.R. Mphephu's first exposure to leadership duties outside *nnduni ya vuhosivhuhulu*. In that meeting King George VI showered praises on *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana in absentia and the neighbouring *Kgosi* Sekhukhune of the Pedi people. The two traditional leaders were honoured by the British King with mugs bearing the pictures of him and the Queen.⁹ The mugs were indeed a dubious symbol if the British royal family were trying to show respect to the two traditional leaders. Would the British King have honoured any other European King with such trinket-like memorabilia?

What did leave an impression was the fact that of all the Northern Transvaal *vhothovhele* and *dikgosi*, *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana and *Kgosi* Sekhukhune were the only two recognized by the British King. The other *vhothovhele* and *mahosi* or *dikgosi* were just reduced to mere subjects of the British royal family. Yet, the mugs handed as presents were not

8 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 – 1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 14.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

significant to the future relations between the monarch and the African rulers. There were no further developments in relation to *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda and what remains as a legacy of the British King's visit are memories of the mugs presented to *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana and *Kgosi* Sekhukhune as a symbol of power possessed by the British monarch.

The event taught P.R. Mphephu that *mahosi* should be respected and it was at that meeting that he learned that *vuhosivhuhulu* of Ramabulana was the greatest in the Northern Transvaal. The British monarch might have had his own agenda when visiting South Africa back in 1947, but what it did for Mphephu was that it helped to create the leadership of the man who was to become the new *khosikhulu* of the Vhailafuri people three years later. The leadership of the British King impressed Mphephu to the extent that he later modelled his *vuhosivhuhulu* around that of the British Empire. It is important to note that from 1947 to 1950 Mphephu was behaving like a true designated *khosikhulu* in waiting. He was very respectful to the elders and the subjects. Credit should be given to *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene* for keeping a close eye on him and giving him proper guidance.¹⁰

One can conclude that Mphephu's early years and the years prior to him becoming *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity has demonstrated that he was the man made aware that he was going to be the next *khosikhulu* of the Venda people. The four years he spent in Johannesburg also helped a lot in developing P.R. Mphephu's interest in political leadership. It is very clear that Mphephu's period as *khosikhulu* would be a shift from the more traditionally inclined period of *vuhosivhuhulu* which we have become accustomed to for the Venda *vuhosivhuhulu* in the preceding centuries. Mphephu was bringing new dynamics to the Venda *vuhosivhuhulu* and in doing so he paved a way for a modern state for the Venda people.

10 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 – 1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 16.

The Death of Khosikhulu George Mbulaheni Ramabulana – 1949

Early in 1949 the senior royal Ramabulana members called Mphephu home. One can assume that this was to prepare him for the throne as his father; Mbulaheni Ramabulana was on his deathbed. There was a lot of speculation amongst the Venda people about why Mphephu had left Johannesburg. Some people in Venda claimed he was sick, and others claimed he was tired of life in the city. However, there was one reason which most Venda people were made to believe. The Ramabulana indicated that Mphephu was called home to attend *domba* as it was the last and most important school for learning how to prepare your family.¹¹

The royal elders might have used *domba* as a reason for Mphephu's unexpected arrival at home to confuse the Venda people, as they were not supposed to know their future *khosikhulu*. The real reason why Mphephu was called back, was to sit on the chair of Ramabulana when *mativha oxa*. In November 1949, immediately after *domba*, *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana *a zama*. *Mutahabvu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana *vhoswitwa* Songozwi near the town of Louis Trichardt. It is where the *zwifho* of *mahosimahulu* of the Ramabulana are situated even today.¹²

Another Power Struggle for Vuhosivhuhulu of Venda people

The death of *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana started another power struggle in the Venda *Vuhosivhuhulu*. It was hoped that P.R. Mphephu would ascend to the throne without any problem as it was the case with his father when he replaced his grandfather, Alilali Tshilamulele Mphephu I in 1925. However, it was not the case, as P.R. Mphephu found himself in a struggle for the throne with his biological half-brother, Freddy Nkhanedzeni Ramabulana. As had also been seen in the previous chapters, the *mutanuni* who qualified to give *mulaifa* to the *vuhosivhuhulu*, and the role of the "king makers" *nnduni ya vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda, *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene*, are important when installing *khosikhulu* of Venda. Last but not

11 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 – 1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 21.

12 *Ibid.*

the least, the right of *thovhele* or *khosikhulu* is also heredity; the position would descend from father to son – but, subject to certain qualifications.

From his investigations in the 1960s, Stayt had learnt that *thovhele* or *khosikhulu* could choose *vhatanuni* from anywhere he preferred, and he was not restricted to look amongst women from his own community, but *mutanuni* of his *mulaifa* should always have come from his own *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu*. *Khosikhulu* was permitted to marry persons standing in a degree of relationship prohibited to *vhasiwana*. A good example of this intermarriage amongst royalty was found in the case of *Khosikhulu* Makhado and his son Mphephu I and Mbulaheni Mphephu. Makhado married his father's sister's daughter and she became the mother of Alilali Tshilamulela Mphephu I. Mphephu I, married his brother's daughter¹³ and she became the mother of Mbulaheni Ramabulana. Mbulaheni married his mother's sister's daughter.¹⁴

The Role of *Makhadzi* in the Royal Household

As recorded by Stayt, the mother of the future *khosikhulu* had to have been given to the reigning *khosikhulu* by his father and *lobola* must have been paid with cattle; the reigning *khosikhulu* in turn was supposed to have been the eldest son of *mutanuni* given to his father by his grandfather. In case *mutanuni* designated to bear *mulaifa* happened to be infertile¹⁵ or if she died before bearing *mulaifa*, one of her sisters had to take her place to bear the *khosikhulu*, *mulaifa* to his *vuhosivhuhulu*, otherwise *makhadzi* would provide *khosikhulu* with a second *mutanuni*.

Here we are seeing the important role *makhadzi* played in making a *khosikhulu* and managing the affairs of *nnduni ya vuhosi*. It is very clear from this, as from the previous chapters, that *makhadzi* was the main person *nnduni ya vuhosi*. We have seen that the role of *makhadzi* *nnduni ya vuhosi* was more visible when it was time for *vuhosivhulu* disputes. It was her duty

13 H.A. Stayt, *The Bavenda*, Frank Cass, London, 1968, p. 208.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Male infertility was apparently not presumed as a possibility when articulating tradition.

and that of *khotsimunene* to try and resolve conflicts in a manner that would be satisfactory to all parties concerned. Although it did not always work out in practice, in theory – according to “tradition”, relationships were meant to be traced and every possible factor was meant to be considered to determine who had the right to ascend to the throne.¹⁶ If there was no solution and there was still deadlock, it was *makhadzi* who had the final word and no one was meant to challenge her decisions regarding the one who should sit on the throne. Rambau explained that socially and traditionally *makhadzi* had been like a mediator for the whole family; when disputes arose, she resolved all the problems in the family.¹⁷

There were many reasons contributing to the complex *vuhosivhuhulu* succession procedures. One good example might be that one of *zwileli zwa khosikhulu* might be found to have slept with one of *vhatanuni* who was expected to bear *mulaifa* to the throne. If that was found out, the adulterous wife and her children would not be regarded as royals. The second reason would be if *mulaifa* to the throne was alleged to have slept with one of *vhatanuni*. *Mulaifa* who committed such a crime would be banished or killed. The third reason was when an ambitious *mukololo* in line for the succession would try to ascend to the throne using some powerful *magota* with promises of rewards and high ranks *nnduni ya vuhosi*. Last but not the least would be when a *khosikhulu* on his deathbed, changed his mind and appointed one of his sons who was not the rightful *mukololo* to be *khosikhulu*. In this case, if *mulaifa* to *vuhosivhuhulu* was deemed honourable, the wishes of the dying *khosikhulu* had to be rejected (We have seen

16 H.A. Stayt, *The Bavenda*, Frank Cass, London, 1968, p. 208.

17 V.J. Rambau, *Role of Venda Women in Formation and Operation of Women in Burial Societies*, MA dissertation, University of Venda, 1999, South Africa, p. 78. The argument presented here is disputable since society had become more patrilineal with males dominating females. The role of *makhadzi* would come to be undermined by *khotsimunene*, as will be demonstrated in the ascendancy of Toni Peter Mphephu to the Venda throne in the twenty-first century where *Khotsimunene* David Mphephu had more authority than *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu, deciding the succession disputes. Matshidze contended that *makhadzi* among the Venda seems to be invisible in the new political dispensation because in legislation recently enacted, she was not even mentioned although she was supposed to enjoy equal privilege with her male counterparts. (See P.E. Matshidze, *The Role of Makhadzi in Traditional Leadership Among the Venda*, PhD thesis, The University of Zululand, 2013, p. 43). It is my view that the role of *makhadzi* had been invisible outside the royal family for a much longer time back into history, because she had played her role quietly, within the confinement of the royal house, and thus her traditionally ingrained and affirmed role does not have to be legislated to be legitimated. The point has to be granted, nevertheless, that the side-lining of *makhadzi* during the appointment of Toni Peter Mphephu and the silencing of her role in recently-formulated legislation, overlapped right at a time that some masculine reinvention of tradition seems to be occurring.

in the previous chapters that in practice things were seldom that straightforward). However, it is important to highlight that in all succession challenges *nnduni ya vuhosi*, *makhadzi* was meant to have a deciding voice.¹⁸

Of course, it was also possible that the *mutanuni* chosen to bear *mulaifa* to *vuhosivhuhulu* might bear a female child. In theory the daughter would be the legal *mukololo* to *vuhosivhuhulu* but Venda tradition has so far prevented a female to reign. In that case this daughter, called *khadzi*, may, together with *makhadzi*, appoint one of her brothers to reign in her place. In most cases, that would be her eldest brother from her father's second *mutanuni wa dzekiso*. This arrangement sometimes caused conflicts *nnduni ya vuhosi* because some *khotsimunene* would prefer a different *mukololo* to ascend to *vuhosivhuhulu*, not the one chosen by the *makhadzi* who was supposed to be *mulaifa*. As indicated earlier on in the chapter, the identity of *mulaifa* was kept a close secret. It is for this reason that the *mutanuni* chosen to bear *mulaifa* was sent away when pregnant and the *khosikhulu* acted as if he did not care about her. For many years she would stay with her family or *nnduni* of some *gota*¹⁹

Stayt continued to describe the "tradition" in facets familiar to the practices identified from the history narrated in my previous chapters, and also recognizable in the case of P.R. Mphephu: *mukololo* to *vuhosivhuhulu* would grow up among his brothers and sisters, although secretly protected by one or two trustworthy elders. This would only give him a clue about his destiny. He would never be certain about his future position as a *khosikhulu* until the installation day. On the installation day a meeting would be held by *makhadzi*, *khotsimunene* and *vhatanuni*, although the latter had no say in the meeting. Outside in the *khoro*, *tshikona* dance would proceed to welcome the new *khosikhulu*, in the presence of a crowd of *vasiwana* filled with anticipation.

After some deliberation in the *pfamo*, *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene* would address the crowd. Later *mukoma* and some important royal elders would bring *mulaifa*, together with the future

18 H.A. Stayt, *The Bavenda*, Frank Cass, London, 1968, p. 209.

19 *Ibid.*

ndumi and *khadzi*, to the gathering. The three would sit together on the mat made of animal skin covered with karosses to hide their identity. *Makhadzi* would then stand up and announce to the people their *khosikhulu* who had returned. As tradition demanded she would start by praising the new *khosikhulu*. Thereafter a young girl would present a gourd of beer and the karosses would be removed – first from the new *khosikhulu*.²⁰ He would take the gourd and drink, and the kneeling crowd would adore the new *khosikhulu*. After praises and welcoming songs, *makhadzi* would also introduce the new *ndumi* and *khadzi* to the people. They would also drink from the beer, but their welcoming praises would not be as boisterous as those for the *khosikhulu*.²¹ The installation of *khosikhulu* would be a huge ceremony accompanied by the slaughtering of many animals and plenty of beer; it could last for months.

In his first few months the *khosikhulu* was meant to receive gifts (such as cattle, sheep, goats and wives) as well as visits from important people and neighbouring *mahosi*, who would also send their dance and music group to entertain the new *khosikhulu*. This gesture by the neighbouring *mahosi* symbolized their welcoming of and respect towards the new *khosikhulu*. *Khosikhulu* was obliged to accept *vhatanuni* as gifts, but he was also expected to pay *lobola* of four or five herds of cattle for each, since one of the *vhatanuni* would give the new *khosikhulu* his *mulaifa* to *vuhosivhuhulu* when *mativha oxa*.²²

All the challenges of making a new *khosikhulu* cited by Stayt were to present themselves when P.R. Mphephu was chosen to replace his father, Mbulaheni Ramabulana. There were others *nduni ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana who felt that P.R. Mphephu was not the legitimate *mulaifa* to *vuhosivhuhulu* and those who supported him strongly. I shall interrogate the main reasons for the question marks around Mphephu succeeding his father. Fokwang noted that the history of the Venda people is characterized by complexities and unending disputes.²³ This was demonstrated in successive Venda succession processes, dating back to the

20 H.A. Stayt, *The Bavenda*, Frank Cass, London, 1968, p. 209.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

22 *Ibid.*

23 J.T.D. Fokwang, *Chiefs and Democratic Transition in Africa: an Ethnographic Study in the Chiefdoms of Tshivhase and Bali*, MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2003, p. 36.

days of Dimbanyika. Until the present day it has not changed, and it cannot be suggested that the contest for *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity will become less disputed in the future.

P.R. Mphephu's father, Mbulaheni Ramabulana, had a first *mutanuni* named Nyamaanda, who was a Sotho-speaking woman, most probably of Pedi descent. They were students together at Limana High School in Elim. They had a daughter, named Maanda. *Khosikhulu's* second *mutanuni* was Mushaathoni, who was married by *dzekiso*. She gave birth to three *vhakololo*, namely two girls, Muofhe and Denga, and the one son, Patrick (P.R.). *Khosikhulu* also had a third *mutanuni* shortly before his father died; he got married to a new *mutanuni*, Nwamakananisa. Venda tradition dictates that if *khosikhulu* died after taking a new *mutanuni*, the *mukololo* who was going to be the next *khosikhulu*, had to marry his late father's new *mutanuni*.²⁴

Khosikhulu Mbulaheni Ramabulana married Nwamakananisa because she did not have children with his father. Venda tradition further dictates that the children which *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana had with *mutanuni* of his late father, belonged to his father, not himself. Nwamakananisa gave birth to a son, Freddy Nkhanedzeni. It is because of this tradition that Freddy Nkhanedzeni was regarded as a son of Befula Nari (Alilali Tshilamulela, Mphephu I),²⁵ not the son of Mbulaheni Ramabulana. Biologically Freddy Nkhanedzeni was the son of Mbulaheni Ramabulana but traditionally he was the son of Mphephu I. This implied that, according to Venda custom, Freddy Nkhanedzeni was P.R. Mphephu's *khotsimunene* but biologically he was P.R. Mphephu's brother. One can argue that Freddy Nkhanedzeni, just like his great grandfather Makhado, was entitled to sit on the chair of Ramabulana. His claim to the *vuhosivhuhulu* was legitimized by the fact that his mother was married to the late *Khosikhulu* Mphephu I and thus he was, according to tradition, the son of the late *khosikhulu*. It also means that his mother was the first *mutanuni* of the successor *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana

24 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 -1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 23.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

because of *dzekiso* paid by Mbulaheni Ramabulana's father for her and as a result of that she was the one to bear *mulaifa* to Mbulaheni Ramabulana.²⁶

Consequently, after the death of *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana in 1949, there were now two possible candidates to *vuhosivhuhulu*, namely, Freddy Nkhanedzeni and P.R. Mphephu. The three girls, Muofhe, Denga and Maanda were completely ruled out on traditional grounds. There were contradictions in as far as the Venda tradition was applied in the succession struggle. It is clear that P.R. Mphephu was not the first born of Mushaatomu. He was the last born of three children. According to Venda tradition, Muofhe, the eldest daughter and the child of *mutanuni* of *dzekiso*, should be the one to choose the new *mulaifa* to *vuhosivhuhulu* because she could not succeed her father on the grounds of gender discrimination within the tradition.

In the case of P.R. Mphephu and Freddy Nkhanedzeni, *Khadzi* did not play a key role in determining who should be the future *khosikhulu*. The task of resolving the dispute was left to *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene*. In the end *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene* came with a verdict in favour of P.R. Mphephu. They dismissed Freddy Nkhanedzeni's claims on traditional grounds. They said because he was traditionally the son of Befula Nari (Mphephu I) and his mother was originally *mutanuni* of the late *Khosikhulu Mphephu I*, he could not ascend to *vuhosivhuhulu*. The verdict made Freddy Nkhanedzeni feel isolated and he had no support *nnduni ya vuhosi*.²⁷

In contrast, P.R. Mphephu, the last born from his father's second *mutanuni* emerged as a favourite candidate as he had the support of *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene*. The Venda people accepted the decision made by *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene* to crown P.R. Mphephu as a new *khosikhulu* and people rallied their support behind P.R. Mphephu. The contradictions of Venda traditions and customs appear here in the sense that *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene* failed to apply the ruling in the Davhana and Makhado *vuhosivhuhulu* disputes to this case. One can be

26 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 – 1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA Dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 24.

27 *Ibid.*

tempted to believe that politics *nnduni ya vuhosi* might have played a part in selling *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana to *mukololo* who was not the rightful *mulaifa* to the throne. It can be argued that despite P.R. Mphephu having been sent by his late father to represent him in Polokwane (formerly Pietersburg) in a meeting with the British monarch, Mphephu may not have been *mukololo* chosen by his father to succeed him.²⁸ (The symbolic significance acquired by this audience with a white outsider ruler for the affirming of the *vuhosivhuhulu* process within, should not go unnoticed!)

What complicated the crowning of P.R. Mphephu was that *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana did not seem to have nominated a successor before his death in 1949. All that we can say about the matter will be speculations since we do not have the core evidence to support our hypotheses. With all factors hindering Mphephu's claims to *vuhosivhuhulu* out of the way and with massive support he had from *Makhadzi* Mulongoni and *Khotsimunene* Toni²⁹, there was nothing stopping P.R. Mphephu from being installed as a new *khosikhulu* of Venda.

South African Government Involvement in the Installation of Patrick Ramaano Mphephu as a Venda *Khosikhulu*.

The coronation of P.R. Mphephu took place *nnduni ya vuhosi* in Dzanani on 24 February 1950, just a few months after his father's death. The event was fully endorsed by white colonial officialdom, attended by senior government dignitaries from Pretoria, namely the Commissioner-General of South Africa, the Chief Supervisor of Black Education, and the Chief Native Commissioner from Pietersburg, who was the guest speaker. Others who attended were the Commissioner of Tshivhase District, and another Commissioner who acted as the programme director of the coronation. Neighbouring traditional leaders who attended were *Kgosikgadi* Modjadji II of Bolobedu, the neighbouring Shangaan *Hosi* Adolf Sunduza Mhinga and

28 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 -1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA Dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 25.

29 *Khotsimunene* Toni should not be confused with the current illegitimate *Khosikhulu* Toni Peter Mphephu.

Mhlava and other *mahosi* and *vhothovhele* of Venda polity such as Davhana and Lucas Ratshalingwa Tshivhase.³⁰

The ceremony to crown Mphephu was well attended by people from all over the Transvaal and Venda. He was finally crowned by the Commissioner General of South Africa, Mr Daan De Wet Nel, who told the gathering that he was very proud to crown P.R. Mphephu as a *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. He told the Venda people that Venda was like an empty boat in the ocean floating without direction after the passing of *Khosikhulu* Mbulaheni Ramabulana. He held the deceased leader in great esteem, and he felt that the Venda people would be lost without his leadership. However, he acknowledged that he was relieved that *Vhailafuri* of Nzhelele had a new ruler in P.R. Mphephu. He urged the *Vhailafuri* to cooperate with the new *khosikhulu* and show him respect.³¹ It is my view that the crowning of P.R. Mphephu was the beginning of the subjugation of the Venda people by the apartheid government and it was also the first step into the total separation of Venda from South Africa. As had been illustrated in the previous chapters, P.R. Mphephu was not the first *khosikhulu* of the Venda people whose coronation involved white people.

It is important to note that P.R. Mphephu's coronation was totally controlled by white officials. The role of *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene* or any other royal family member ended when they were choosing *mulaifa* to *vuhosivhulu*. At the coronation they were just minor players with the centre stage taken by apartheid masters. It is very ironic that P.R. Mphephu who, during his time in Johannesburg was alleged to hate white men, would be the one having no problem with them crowning him, which was against the long-held Venda tradition of installation of the new *khosikhulu*. One might suspect that Mphephu's chance encounter with the British king a year earlier might have made him to be more appreciative of the whites in general.

30 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 -1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA Dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 25.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

The other neighbouring *mahosi* and *vhothovhele* were also given opportunity to wish the new *khosikhulu* well in his duties in leading *vhailafuri*. *Kgosikgadi* Modjadji urged P.R. Mphephu to live and die protecting his people and land and she also appealed to the *vhailafuri* to have faith in Mphephu and give him a chance to prove himself. *Kgosikgadi* Modjadji's words were a clear illustration that not everyone amongst the *Vhailafuri* was excited about the crowning of Mphephu. It is true that an impression was given that his contender for *vhuhosivhuhulu*, Freddy Nkhanedzeni, was isolated and no one was supporting him, but the words of *Kgosikgadi* Modjadji revealed that divisions around the choice of P.R. Mphephu as a new *khosikhulu* still existed within *nnduni ya vhuhosivhuhulu* of Ramabulana.³²

Thovhele Lucas Rashalingwa Tshivhase, as an experienced *thovhele* in Venda, also had words of advice to *Khosikhulu* P.R. Mphephu. He advised him to stay out of trouble and listen to the demands of his people and seek advice from the old people within his land. Maanda Mphephu was appointed a new *khadzi* and Mphephu's brother Kutama Mphephu was appointed as a new *ndumi*.³³ It is not clear who Kutama Mphephu was; he was never mentioned in any of the written sources about the Ramabulana.

It is my view that, from the beginning of P.R. Mphephu's reign as *khosikhulu* of the *Vhailafuri* it was evident that the new *khosikhulu* aspired to be recognized as the sole *khosikhulu* of the Venda people. It was clear that the involvement of whites in the Venda affairs was to help him have absolute powers. It was clear that Mphephu intended to take Venda to a different direction which was not encompassed by traditional values only but with the feel of modern values in his envisaged idea of an independent Venda. Mphephu's idea of Venda self-determination is located within his early hatred for white domination over the blacks. Mphephu felt that if he managed to have *Vhavenda* achieve self-control without the whites he would be doing a huge favour to his people.

32 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 -1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA Dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 27.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

However, this was not what the apartheid authorities had in mind. Involvement in inaugurations of black traditional rulers was part of the apartheid government's bigger plan to control black people in South Africa. Under the pretence of independent rule for black people within the South African state, black leaders, more so traditional leaders, were to endorse the government policy of separation, where a black man would not live in an area reserved for white South Africans. The apartheid government saw an opportunity to introduce Bantu Authorities. Learning from their involvement in the installation of traditional leaders, the white government officials decided that traditional leaders were too obsessed with positions of authority that it was unlikely for them to decline the government proposal of Bantu Authorities. The government made no secret of their plan when Mangosutu Gatsha Buthelezi was inaugurated as a Zulu *Enkosi* on 6 September 1957. In his speech the Chief Native Commissioner, A. Turton, was quite open about the expectation that that 'chiefs' ought to be the pioneers of the Bantu Authorities and he emphasized that the government realised that Buthelezi could be trusted to succeed.³⁴

As from 1953 the National Party government made sure that no traditional leader who opposed their plan was installed by the Governor General. It was irrelevant whether that person was the heir to the throne according to birth right. Any person who was supportive of the government policy was elevated to the status of a traditional ruler and those who were resentful were stripped of their crowns even after inauguration. The two notable examples of traditional rulers deposed were *Thovhele* E.M Ramabulana of Maelula in Venda and *Enkosi* Albert Luthuli of the Amakholwa in Kwazulu.

P.R. Mphephu broke away from the Venda traditional system when he introduced constitutional political structures in Venda. This statement does not imply that the traditional system of doing things was bad for Venda people as a community because there were not always prescribed rules for them in the past. Venda people were able to survive under the guidance of *khosikhulu*, *thovhele* or *khosi* without any written rules for them. Just because the

34 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 -1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 28.

lore of succession and rulership was not written down, it was not less binding in earlier Venda polities. Good governance does not require a written constitutional document. In fact, as will be shown in P.R. Mphepu's case, a written constitution can be ignored just as easily, or even more flippantly, than tradition, lore and practice invested in the social memory of a polity.

Apartheid Policy and the Creation of a Venda Homeland

The plan of real separation started to take shape in 1948 when the National Party came to power under D.F. Malan as a Prime Minister. The Department of Native Affairs was seen as the ideal department to speed up the launch of apartheid, but it was not possible with the department still under the control of the defeated Smuts government's officials. The Smuts government did not regard the African problem as a priority at that time. Therefore, they were not in a hurry to implement the policy of apartheid to deal with blacks. Their main priorities were administrative problems, the rehabilitation of the reserves and shortage of housing in locations. This prompted the government to appoint the Tomlinson Commission to investigate the socio-economic problems of the reserves with a view to increase their human capacity.³⁵ However, the Tomlinson Commission's recommendations were rejected by the Malan government who were preoccupied with imposing an apartheid policy.

The first step towards achieving that was to insert the new government's men and women into the Native Affairs Department and get rid of the Smuts ideology. Malan thought of no one else for the job but Dr. Hendrik French Verwoerd as the new Minister of Native Affairs. Verwoerd openly rejected the recommendations of the Tomlinson Commission. It was not surprising because he had also disapproved of the appointment of the commission. Verwoerd had different ideas about how to solve the "African problem". Firstly: the stream of Africans from the reserves to 'white' areas had to be stopped; secondly, Africans in the reserves had to be

35 R.H. Du Pre, *The Making of Racial Conflict in South Africa: A Historical Perspective*, Skotaville, Johannesburg, 1992, p. 83.

discouraged from coming to 'white' areas and the last part of his plan was that those already in white areas had to be encouraged to return to the reserves.³⁶

Verwoerd saw all the cities, urban areas and white farms as white areas. Verwoerd's plan included the economic development of reserves in order to discourage the migration of Africans to white areas and more so, to the cities, in search of employment. To make his plan succeed, Verwoerd introduced a very costly project he called the Homelands Programme. Nine homelands for the nine 'tribal' groups which he identified in South Africa were created. The homelands were designed around the following 'tribes': Tswana – Bophutatswana, Xhosa – Ciskei and Transkei, Shangaan and Tsonga – Gazankulu, Swazi – Kangwane; Ndebele – KwaNdebele; Zulu – Kwazulu; North Sotho – Lebowa; South Sotho – Qwaqwa; Venda – Venda. These homelands were going to be formed in small tracts of land previously reserved for Africans as stipulated in various Acts dealing with Africans since 1913.³⁷

The Verwoerd plan for the homelands went through different stages from territorial authorities to self-governing territories. Venda became one of the four self-governing territories who opted for independence. The first homeland to attain independence was Transkei on 26 October 1976; Bophuthatswana followed on 6 December 1977; Venda was the third homeland to gain independence on 13 September 1979 and the last homeland to accept independence was Ciskei on 4 December 1982.³⁸ The independence of the four states further enhanced Verwoerd's well thought-out and planned scheme of grand-apartheid. It entailed total separation of the black people of South Africa. Apartheid denied Africans an opportunity to become part of the national scheme. This was achieved by denying Africans a source of identity in their own country. Verwoerd and his NP masters made homeland leaders like P.R. Mphahlele to have an illusion that they were running foreign countries within South Africa.

36 R.H. Du Pre, *The Making of Racial Conflict in South Africa: A Historical Perspective*, Skotaville, Johannesburg, 1992, p. 84.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

38 *Ibid.*

The homelands also became known as “Bantustans” because the aim was to make each of these territories ethnically homogenous and to use them as the basis for setting up ‘autonomous’ nation states for indigenous South Africans. This was the background to the setting up of the Venda homeland for Venda people.³⁹ The homelands were not autonomous states as they were purported to be.⁴⁰ This is so in the sense that the apartheid government still supplied these states with economic, manpower and judiciary support. This was clear from the second session of the first Venda Legislative Assembly Report which highlighted the nature of arrangements between the apartheid masters and Bantustan’s leaders.⁴¹ The homelands were like the puppet Soviet Socialist Republics like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; they were independent in name only.

Verwoerd’s policy of separate development, which was sometimes interpreted as separate freedoms, was attractive to *vhothovhele* and *magota* of Venda because it promised to give them respect, power and dignity.⁴² However, one can argue that respect, power and dignity were enforced on the Venda people through oppressive means. In essence, Verwoerd’s policy of separate development helped to deepen divisions amongst the ethnic communities, and the homeland leaders in turn were hated by their own people. Almost all *vhothovhele* and *magot* of Venda at the time favoured the apartheid policy because of Venda’s isolated location in the far Northern Transvaal, where *vhothovhele* and *magota* had been able to maintain their traditional systems of government better than elsewhere. According to Paul Maylam, they were less affected by external influences promoting rapid modernization.⁴³ This assertion might be true because it helped the traditional leaders to reinforce their authority over their people using the new powers bestowed on them by the apartheid policy as it will be indicated below in P.R. Mphephu’s case.

39 P.E. Matshidze, *The Role of Makhadzi in Traditional Leadership among the Venda*, PhD thesis, University of Zululand, 2013, p. 90.

40 In fact, the ‘-stan’ in *Bantustan* mockingly referred to the puppet states of the Soviet empire, like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Like the ‘Bantu homelands’, these too, were independent in name only.

41 *2nd Session of first Venda Legislative Assembly Report*, 1979, p. 105.

42 C. Dazinger, *A History of Southern Africa*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1983, p. 94.

43 P.A. Maylam, *History of the African People of South Africa*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1986, p. 171.

For P.R. Mphephu, the Verwoerd plan presented what he had always wanted since his days in the Johannesburg City Council. He wanted the Africans to take the lead in their daily lives and be freed from exploitation by white South Africans. He was of the view that Africans could determine their own destiny without the help of the whites. However, his ideology was not possible even when the homelands were created. Ideologically the homeland supporters were in the same camp as the Afrikaner nationalists: what they shared was the idea of separation and segregation. In 1951 the Mphephu Tribal Authority was formed with P.R. Mphephu as the first chairman and it had all the *magota* from the Nzhelele area.⁴⁴ It did not take long before the South African government convinced Mphephu to enter politics – just a year after his inauguration. This illustrated that Mphephu was obsessed with power to the extent that he was manipulated by the government plan of Africans controlling their own affairs in their own areas.

In 1959 Regional Authority was formed in Venda and it was called the Ramabulana Regional Authority; P.R. Mphephu became its chairperson. His two assistants were *Thovhele* Kutama and *Thovhele* Sinthumule and the powers of the Regional Authority were broader than the Tribal Authority powers. The last step of the South African government to implement the independent homeland of Venda was to create the Thohoyandou Territorial Authority in November 1962. This was in accordance to the Black Authorities Act No 68 of 1951 which was introduced in Venda.⁴⁵

The Act called for the establishment of twenty-seven Tribal Authorities and one Territorial Authority. P.R. Mphephu was again appointed unopposed to lead the most powerful Thohoyandou Territorial Authority. Those who participated in the elections were mostly *vhothovhele* and *magota*. It was also apparent that the Chairperson would come from the royal family since there were no commoners allowed to participate in the structure.⁴⁶ P.R.

44 N.M. Makhari, A Biography of President Patrick Ramaano Mphephu, BA Hons essay, University of Venda, 1991, p. 19.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Mphephu's role as a chairperson of the most powerful Thohoyandou Territorial Authority was the beginning of his super power status as *khosikhulu*⁴⁷ and a political leader of the Venda people. His rise to *thovhele* in 1950 was not seen as more powerful than his position as a chairperson of the institution that controlled the whole of Venda territory. All *vhothovhele* and *mahosi* of Venda were politically under his authority. He was given powers to form an executive body.

The powers of this institution were further increased seven years later with legislative and executive powers. The Executive Council with six councillors was formed with its sole mandate being administration of government departments. The Executive Council saw for the first time Venda having a more Western style of government, which was contrary to their more traditional system of leadership which preceded the period of P.R. Mphephu. The Thohoyandou Territorial Authority was disbanded on 1 July 1971 and was replaced by a Legislative Assembly which had the Executive Council with P.R. Mphephu as Chief Councillor. Members of the Legislative Assembly would be comprised of only Venda speaking people and the Cabinet Ministers had to be Venda people.⁴⁸

Venda Becomes a Self-governing State

The South African government declared Venda self-governing territory within the borders of South Africa on 1 February 1973. The Venda Legislative Assembly was formed immediately after the self-governing proclamation. It consisted of sixty members and to show that the homelands system was created with the sole purpose of discouraging revolutionary politics, *vhothovhele* were central figures of the policy of preserving apartheid in South Africa. As a result of that, it was not surprising that 42 members of the Legislative Assembly had to be traditional leaders. Among those 42 traditional leaders, 25 were *vhothovhele*, two were *magota* of Regional

47 Mphephu was seen as a Paramount Chief of Venda by the National Party government.

48 N.M. Makhari, A Biography of President Patrick Ramaano Mphephu, BA Hons essay, University of Venda, 1991, p. 27.

Authorities and 15 persons appointed by the Chief Council. The 18 remaining members were appointed by voters of the three constituencies.⁴⁹

After the elections members of the Legislative Assembly elected a Chief Minister who had to be *thovhele* or *gota*. The Chief Minister was then tasked with the duty of appointing five Cabinet Ministers and three had to be *vhothovhele*. The Legislative Assembly then elected a Speaker and a Deputy Speaker of the Legislative House. The electoral system allowed all Venda over the age of 18 years living within and outside the homeland a right to vote. There were 25 000 Shangaan and North Sotho living in Venda during the period of Venda being proclaimed by the South African government as a self-governing state. All these people were regarded as Venda citizens as they met domicile requirement and were therefore eligible to vote. The first election was held between 15-16 August 1973 with only one official party contesting the election namely the Venda Independent People's Party (VIPP), led by Johannesburg based sociologist Mr Baldwin Mudau. The VIPP nominated 18 candidates for the first general election in Venda. P.R. Mphephu, who was the Chief Councillor of the Venda Legislative Assembly, led the traditional leaders who did not have a political party for the elections. Mphephu and his traditional leaders also nominated 18 candidates to contest the election.⁵⁰

The remaining nine seats were contested by independent members. The process was flawed from the beginning and it became clear that the traditional leaders would take most of the Ministers' posts regardless of whether they emerged victorious or lost in the election. The first Venda election was held on 15 and 16 August 1973.⁵¹ The election was a big sham, but it was what the apartheid masters wanted and planned for. The election results showed a resounding victory for VIPP. They won 10 of the 18 seats, traditional leaders under P.R. Mphephu got only five seats and three went to the independent candidates. The turnout for the Venda election in 1973 was 72 percent.⁵² People who voted in Venda were 110 000 and 39 000 voted in what was

49 T. Malan and P.S. Hattingh, *Black Homelands in South Africa*, Africa Institute of South Africa, Pretoria, 1976, p. 232.

50 *Ibid.*

51 Anon, *The Republic of Venda*, Chris van Rensburg Publications, Johannesburg, 1979, p. 72.

52 N.M. Makhari, *A Biography of President Patrick Ramaano Mphephu*, BA Hons, University of Venda, 1991, p. 38.

regarded as white areas of South Africa. There were also 4 900 voters who lived in “emerging Black states”.⁵³ These states would have been Gazankulu and Lebowa, because they were the two neighbouring homelands to Venda. All parties that contested the elections wanted Venda to have absolute independence from South Africa. However, the VIPP differed with the traditional leaders when it came to their role in the democratic or western style of government. The traditional leaders wanted to preserve the powers and privileges of the *vhothovhele*, *magota* and other traditional rulers of Venda. In contrast, the VIPP wanted *vhothovhele* to stay away from politics. Therefore, they called for modernization and westernization of the socio-political system of Venda to the greatest possible degree.⁵⁴

The position of the Venda Independence People’s Party on the path that the new Venda government should take was not only going to cause conflicts between the party and Mphephu traditional leaders. It was also going to put the party in serious trouble with the apartheid leaders who created the ideology of homelands with traditional norms and values at the centre of any homeland government. The apartheid architects did not want any homeland leader to think beyond what was arranged for them. The VIPP proposal was going to make apartheid more difficult to implement. The National Party wanted none other than *Thovhele* P.R. Mphephu to become the new Chief Minister of Venda.

It was not surprising that Mphephu arranged a trip to Nwanedi for *vhothovhele* and *magota* prior to the elections. The excursion to Nwanede was intended to give *vhothovhele* and *magota* a clear mandate to vote for Mphephu as a new Chief Minister. The assumption cannot be backed by tangible evidence, but it is evident that it was not a mere vacation for the *vhothovhele* and *magota*. After the results were confirmed P.R. Mphephu was elected as the new Venda Chief Minister. The support he received from nominated traditional leaders played a huge role in Mphephu becoming Chief Minister.⁵⁵

53 Anon, *The Republic of Venda*, Chris van Rensburg Publications, Johannesburg, 1979, p. 72.

54 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 – 1988 “The Great Elephant of Africa”, MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 69.

55 Anon, *The Republic of Venda*, Chris van Rensburg Publications, Johannesburg, 1979, p. 72.

It is important to highlight that in a normal democratic process Mphephu would not have been elected a Chief Minister of Venda as he did not belong to the political party. With the results confirming VIPP winning with a resounding vote of 10 seats of 18 in the election, under a democratic constitution they should have been the one to form a new government. There is another scholarly thought that the VIPP won 13 seats of 18 available and this would have meant a landslide victory. It would also mean that the traditional leaders did not attain five seats as other scholars had us believe.⁵⁶In chapter seven I'm going to look at P.R. Mphephu's transition from being a Chief Minister of Venda to becoming the life President of Venda and *khosikhulu* to entrench his power in Venda politics and to entrench his power as a main traditional leader of the Venda community after the 1979 Venda general elections.

⁵⁶ M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925 – 1988 “The Great Elephant of Africa”, MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 69.