

## ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a critical narrative of the history of the conflicts around the *vhuhosivhuhulu* (“kingship”) of the Venda polity over the last three centuries, with a stronger emphasis on events as from the second half of the twentieth century, and specifically the way history had been employed in the political arena. The point of departure was to critique and revise the views of scholars who had previously focused solely on the Venda history in their attempt to ascertain what the motives of the disputing parties were. My argument had been that academic research on a discourse as complex as the Venda history ought also to consider the role of external forces in the making of the *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity.

The first chapter introduces the most prominent scholars in the making of historical narratives about the Venda polity. The second chapter frames the study within a broader discourse on rulership disputes in postcolonial Africa. The next three chapters provide a long view of external interferences in Venda succession disputes as extracted from major historical narratives.

The last section of the study investigates power struggles amongst the Venda ruling houses within the context of the shaping of the modern South African state, through apartheid and into the post-1994 democratic dispensation. It illustrates how the fate of traditional leadership was treated in the investigations and findings of three successive commissions, popularly referred to as the Mushasha, Ralushai and Nhlapo Commissions, respectively.

A chapter is then dedicated to perspectives on the issue of *vhuhosivhuhulu* as expressed by *vhothovhele* and *magota* of the Venda polity in interviews. The outspoken frankness of the interlocutors revealed a lot about the significance of *vhuhosivhuhulu* in current South African politics, and the contending parties’ knowledge of, selection from, interpretation and employment of popular as well as scholarly historical narratives within this context.

The study is concluded at a time when two contenders within the Mphephu-Ramabulana family (one of them, for the first time in history, a woman) are unleashing the full potential of the South African legal system (Councils of Traditional Leaders, Supreme Court of Appeal, Constitutional Court) to assert their right to the *vhuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity.

**Keywords:** *vhuhosivhuhulu*, Venda, South Africa, Mushasha, Ralushai, Nhlapo