

THE VENDA ARMORY: WARFARE, GENDER,  
AND TECHNOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA,  
1820 TO 1904

By

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the political, military and cultural history of the Venda Confederacy, the last independent Black South African state. As the British empire and Afrikaner Republics jostled each other for control of southern Africa's mineral bounty, the Venda Confederation of dynastic chiefdoms resisted foreign aggression until 1904. This study reconstructs the Venda Armory—a durable security architecture that Venda people synthesized from indigenous knowledge resources and exotic imported technologies. Drawing on archival documents, oral traditions, archaeological artifacts and Tshivenda language literature, it argues that Venda people harnessed the power of embodied rituals as tools of memory and the scaffolding of their political confederation.

From the mid-1700s until the dawn of the colonial era, the Venda state dominated politics, commerce, and military affairs in the Limpopo River catchment, a mountainous region straddling the borders of present-day South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. Within a decade of acquiring muzzle-loading hunting muskets in the 1850s, Venda people integrated firearms into their martial traditions, which emphasized asymmetric tactics and close-quarters mountain warfare. And, when European powers criminalized gun sales to Africans in the 1870s, Venda monarchs reorganized their extensive trade networks to supply arms to their regional allies and clients. Beyond these under-researched patterns of Venda-driven gun commerce, this study examines those facets of Venda martial culture that were woven into the fabric of everyday life. While women from the elite and commoner ranks served as strategists and combatants in war, only senior women of the aristocracy controlled the ritual practices that bound mutually autonomous chiefdoms together into a regional confederation. Known as makhadzi, these royal Venda women orchestrated the sacred rites of dynastic succession that legitimized newly installed chiefs. Thus, even after their most recalcitrant male rulers were exiled in 1898, Venda succumbed to colonial demands for taxes and mine laborers only after 1904, when

British authorities finally stripped makhadzi of their customary prerogatives to select and inaugurate national leaders.

The Venda Armory is the first full-length academic study of the cultural, political and technological underpinnings of the last independent Black polity in present-day South Africa. As an original work of revisionist history in a region often marginalized in South(ern) African historiographies, this project disrupts the standard periodization of Anglo-Afrikaner conquest. According to canonical scholarship, the defeat of the Zulu empire in 1879 marked the end of valiant indigenous resistance to colonial domination of South Africa. Yet, further to the north, Venda people retained their sovereignty for another quarter century. Lastly, by focusing on the roles of women as guardians of ancestral rituals, but also as warriors, the “Venda Armory” challenges the androcentric bias expressed in the studies of warfare during the precolonial era in which violence is conceptualized as a masculine domain.

This dissertation is dedicated to the Steel Tigers of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 77<sup>th</sup> Armor Regiment; the Blue Spaders of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment; and all the men and women of 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division who gave their lives in the service of others.

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## INTRODUCTION

From the start of the mineral revolution in the 1870s until the South African War of 1899, Great Britain and the Afrikaner Republics subjugated each of the indigenous societies within the borders of present-day South Africa, with one exception. This dissertation explores the history of Venda, the last independent Black South African state. Between the mid-eighteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the Venda confederation dominated politics and commerce in the Limpopo River catchment, a mountainous region straddling the borders of present-day South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In the early 1800s, Vhavenda built stone-walled settlements in the jagged cliffs and terraces of the Zoutpansberg mountain range. While these natural fortifications insulated communities from predatory raiders, they also provided dynastic chiefs with ritual seclusion and points of vantage overlooking the hunting grounds of the Limpopo catchment where their expert gamesmen supplied Indian Ocean merchants with pelts, elephants' teeth and rhinoceros horns. Venda hunters acquired firearms beginning in the 1850s. Decades later, when British and Afrikaner authorities criminalized gun sales to black people, Venda dynasts reorganized their expansive trade networks to supply arms and ammunition to allies in South Africa and Shona-speaking clients in what became Rhodesia. As European powers scrambled to secure southern Africa's newly discovered mineral bounty in the 1890s, Venda people mastered the integration of muzzle-loading hunting muskets into a security architecture emphasizing asymmetric tactics and close-quarters mountain warfare. Although Venda people defended their tenure of self-governance for longer than any other precolonial polity—including their highly militarized neighbors in Zululand—South Africanist historians have ignored the social and cultural underpinnings of Venda sovereignty.

This dissertation reconstructs the “Venda Armory,” a hybrid security complex synthesized from indigenous knowledge resources, imported weapons, and repertoires of embodied ritual practice. In response to a long-acknowledge historiographical lacunae, this study is a transdisciplinary project

that draws on evidence recovered from African and European archives, archaeological artifacts, ethnographic texts, oral traditions, and vernacular monographs. In addition to the under-researched patterns of gun proliferation that buttressed Venda confederal defenses, this study examines the gendered compartmentalization of political power woven into the fabric of everyday life. While women from elite and commoner classes served as strategists and combatants in war, only senior women of the aristocracy bore responsibility for the ritual practices that bound these ancestrally located communities into a militarily potent regional confederation.<sup>1</sup> Known as Makhadzi, these royal women orchestrated the rites of dynastic succession that legitimized a newly installed chief. Thus, even after their most recalcitrant male rulers were driven into exile in 1898, the Venda confederacy succumbed to imperial demands for taxes and mine laborers only after 1904, when British authorities finally stripped Makhadzi of the customary prerogative to select and inaugurate national leaders.

#### Historiographical Considerations

“The Armory” enriches our understanding of South Africa’s past in three discrete registers. First, this dissertation is the only full-length academic study of the cultural, political and technological underpinnings of the last independent Black polity in what is now present-day South Africa. Second, as an original work of revisionist history in a region often marginalized in South(ern) African historiographies, this project disrupts the standard periodization of Anglo-Afrikaner conquest. According to canonical accounts, the defeat of the Zulu polity in 1879 marked the end of valiant indigenous resistance to colonial domination of South Africa. Yet, further to the north, Vhavenda did not simply wait for their turn to be conquered. Instead, Venda dynasts equipped regional allies with armaments in direct contravention of colonially imposed gun control until the late 1890s. Third, “The Armory” challenges the androcentric bias expressed in the studies of warfare during the precolonial

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<sup>1</sup> Paul S. Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400-1948* (Cambridge, 2010), 19.

era in which violence is conceptualized as a masculine domain. In contrast, I engage with the gendered dynamics of communal security upon which Venda military sovereignty was predicated. In particular, I explore the role of quotidian activities entrusted to Venda women, such as gardening, divination and rainmaking, which were integral to communal defense.

Although the Venda confederation was only subjugated in 1904, its long tenure of political independence from colonial control is an under researched topic in Southern African historical studies. In particular, the inability of the Anglo-Afrikaner condominium to absorb the Venda Confederacy into its sphere of colonial control had material and political consequences that have not been adequately explored. Venda people used guns to defend themselves. They also served as middlemen in the commercial networks that smuggled firearms and training in their use on both sides of the Limpopo River to allies engaged in resistance to European colonial domination. This multidisciplinary project engages with the gaps in our knowledge by seeking answers to the following questions: First, how did the Venda confederacy resist incorporation into the Anglo-Afrikaner sphere of colonial control? Second, how did Vhavenda integrate firearms into their preexisting repertoires of material and ritual practice? Third, how did Venda women contribute to the mobilization of militarily useful resources? Fourth, what were the internal dynamics of politics and intra-dynastic statecraft among the mutually autonomous chiefdoms that constituted the Venda Confederacy?

The three central arguments advanced in this dissertation substantively revise long-established elements of canonical wisdom in the historiography of South Africa. First, I argue that rituals comprised the scaffolding of a security architecture that Venda people used to retain both their political sovereignty and control over productive resources until the early 1900s. Second, the Venda confederation's long tenure of sovereign independence, which exceeded that of any other indigenous regional state, was neither happenstance nor the product of favorable geography as purported in most mainstream historical literature. Third, Vhavenda served as technological intermediaries insofar as

their commercial networks influence the regional patterns of firearms diffusion in the Limpopo River catchment.

These introductory remarks are arranged into four sections. Part one outlines some of the central features of Venda, a place, and of Vhavenda, a people. Part two identifies the historiographical and theoretical traditions to which the Venda Armory seeks to contribute. Part three outlines my sources and methods. Part four outlines the substantive chapters and offers a roadmap for the rest of this dissertation.

## PART I: Background

### Venda and Vhavenda: A Place and its Peoples

As a geosocial expression, “Venda” encompasses most of Vhembe district, Limpopo Province in present-day South Africa. The people of Venda refer to themselves collectively as Vhavenda (using the plural prefix ‘Vha-’), and individually as Muvenda. The language of Vhavenda is called Tshivenda, or Luvenda. According to the 2011 national census, nearly one million South Africans in Limpopo speak Tshivenda as their mother-tongue.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, as elsewhere, social identities are not fixed; but rather, they are context specific, negotiated, and subject to change over time. Nor do the kinds of ethnolinguistic communities that are legible to the state and its instruments of recognition—the census in particular—necessarily correspond with the lived experiences of people and the communities to which they belong. Nearly a quarter of Vhembe district’s residents speak Xitsonga as their mother-tongue. Since the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Vhavenda and Tsonga peoples coexisted, sometimes uneasily, in the region of Translimpopo denoted by the term Venda. Generations of social intercourse, commerce, intermarriage, and warfare partially explain the dialectical variations of

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<sup>2</sup> South Africa completed its most recent national census in early 2022.

Tshivenda spoken throughout the region. I elaborate on the origins of Vhavenda and that of their language(s) in chapter two of this dissertation.

While “The Armory” recounts aspects of the social, cultural, political, and military history of Vhavenda, it is also a history of a place. That place, once known to Tshivenda speakers *inter alia* as Mutzilinzhe, a term connoting an unbroken chain of mountains that cannot be observed in its entirety from one place, or Munoni/Dzwaini, terms of more archaic origin, and today, more commonly as the Zoutpansberg. Indeed, the indelible connections between people and places is an inherent part of the ways in which Vhavenda remember, recite, and indeed rework their collective and particular pasts. This conception of historicity is expressed in a Tshivenda proverb that runs: *fhungo li ela fobvu, na iwe mune wa tsimu li do u elavho*, which roughly translates: “news of a criminal’s deeds includes the stories of his victims.”<sup>3</sup> In practice, this vernacular axiom is understood by Tshivenda-speakers to mean that momentous events leave their mark upon not only the people involved, but also, the places where those events transpired.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the mountain range now commonly known as the Zoutpansberg was not merely the geographic backdrop within which the momentous events of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries unfolded. Instead, and in a manner consistent with the narrative and epistemological traditions of Vhavenda, “The Armory” integrates the essence of history—the narrative interpretation of human agency in the words of William Idowu—with the essence of the places that shaped “the reasons [people] have for their conduct.”<sup>5</sup>

The praxis between place and human agency at the center of what I describe here as the Vhavenda sense of historicity is expressed in *mutupo*, a term equivalent in meaning to clan, extended

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard Tshikota, *Thalusamaipfi ya Mirero* [Dictionary of Proverbs] (Thohoyandou, 2010), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Wilfred Musetsho Daniel Phophi [hereafter W.M.D], *Nganea dza Linzhelele* [The Stories of Linzhelele] (Swaziland, 1989), iii.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Lemon, *The Discipline of History, and the History of Thought* (New York, 2002), 144. William Idowu, “Post-Colonialism, Memory and the Remaking of African Identity,” *Politikon* 36, 3 (2009), 439.

family, or totemic lineage. In the words of Victor Ralushai, whose 1977 dissertation in social anthropology is still the definitive scholarly work on mutupo in the context of the Zoutpansberg, the totemic names that mutupo connote are inexorably linked to places of origin. In a seminal essay, the early twentieth century Muvenda scholar S.M. Dzivhani wrote that mutupo once constituted a singular familial unit from a specific locality. And, for each “mutupo it is known from what mountain they take their origin.”<sup>6</sup> Ralushai further stated that “every Venda [totemic lineage] has a Thavha,” a Tshivenda word meaning mountain, which features in the delineation of totemic identity a “place that is historically associated with a place of origin.”<sup>7</sup>

It merits mention that mutupo as a foundational unit of social nomenclature is unique neither to Venda, nor even to South Africa. As far north as Midlands in present-day Zimbabwe, Shona-speaking peoples and the mid-twentieth century ethnographers who recorded their histories cited mutupo as a heuristic marker of totemic identity.<sup>8</sup> South of the Limpopo, the same is true of Balobedu, who in Ralushai’s words are “linguistically and culturally closer to Venda than any other group in South Africa.”<sup>9</sup> In her published research conducted among the Balobedu, anthropologist Eileen Krige noted, “the mutupo [are] people of the same totem who by virtue of this fact tend to infer that they are descended from a common forebearer.”<sup>10</sup> Ralushai concluded that Krige’s findings about the role of mutupo in Bolobedu were applicable to the Zoutpansberg.<sup>11</sup> Yet, unlike either their Shona/Karanga speaking neighbors to the north, nor their allies and relatives to the south, it is the

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<sup>6</sup> *Mitupo* is the plural form of *mutupo*. Simon Dzivhani, “The Chiefs of Venda,” Nicholas Jacobus [hereafter N.J.] Van Warmelo, ed., *The Copper Miners of Musina, and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg* (Pretoria, 1940), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Victor Nkhumeleni Ralushai, “Conflicting Accounts of Venda History with Particular Reference to the Role of Mutupo in Social Organization” (Ph.D. thesis, The Queens University of Belfast, 1977), 57.

<sup>8</sup> S2929/77/1 Ministry of Local Government, Division of District Administration, Delineation Report, Belingwe District, National Archives of Zimbabwe.

<sup>9</sup> Ralushai, “Conflicting Accounts of Venda History,” 55.

<sup>10</sup> Eileen Krige, “Descent and Descent Groups in Lovedu Social Structure,” *African Studies* 44, 1 (1985), 38. In the course of my field work in Venda and Lobedu, I found that some among the royal family of Queen Modjajdi identify with the same *mutupo* as the Mbedzi, a totemic lineage that settled the Zoutpansberg prior to the Singo. The Mbedzi and the royal lineages of Balobedu both recognize Malungudzi mountain in southern Zimbabwe as their common point of totemic origin.

<sup>11</sup> Ralushai, “Conflicting Accounts of Venda History,” 55.

singular importance of the mountains as markers of totemic identity that illustrates the relationships between Venda past(s) and the mountains that featured so prominently in their cultural, political and military lives.<sup>12</sup> Although mutupo will be important in chapters two and three, here, it will suffice to note that in Ralushai's assessment, a shared totemic lineage does not correlate with mutual participation into a corporate identity.

Although mutupo does not infer any meaningful degree of social or political solidarity, totemic identities do map onto present-day discourses about belonging and authenticity.<sup>13</sup> In twenty-first century South Africa, those discourses find expression in more abstract questions about which communities can rightfully claim to be the original Vhavenda. At the risk of artificially flattening a more nuanced cultural terrain, aspects of these discourses can be assessed in binary terms. On the one side, there are autochthons, or aboriginal Vhavenda, the descendants of those Karanga-speakers who settled the Zoutpansberg after AD 1500. Some of these peoples identify with and are in turn identified as Ngoni or [plural] Vhangona. Crucially, Vhangona is not a mutupo onto itself, but rather, the term denotes groups who settled Zoutpansberg prior to the Singo from north of the Limpopo, to include: Tavhatsindi, Nda, VhaKwevho, Kwinda, Lembethu, and Nyai.<sup>14</sup> On the other side, there are the allochthons, relative newcomers from the Changamire-Rozvi state in central Zimbabwe, who settled the Zoutpansberg in the late seventeenth century under the leadership of Dimbanyika and later, his successor, Thohoyandou, the legendary founder of the short-lived Singo Venda state.

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<sup>12</sup> Ralushai's formulation of *mutupo* totemic identity in Zoutpansberg encompasses the following six attributes: 1) *thavha* (mountain); 2) *muano* (oath); 3) *tshilwa* (taboo); 4) *kurendelwa* (praises); 5) *kusvitele* (funereal customs); 6) *thevula* or *zvitungulo* (religious services). See Ralushai, "Conflicting Accounts of Venda History," 56.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ralushai explores pre-Singo contributions to Venda culture in two published articles. See, Victor Nkhumeleni Ralushai, J.R. Gray, "Ruins and Traditions of the Ngoni and Mbedzi Among the Venda of the Northern Transvaal," *Rhodesian History* 8, (1977), 1-12. Victor Nkhumeleni Ralushai, "Further Traditions Concerning Luvhimbi and the Mbedzi," *Rhodesian History* 9 (1978), 1-12. For more on the Semitic origins of the VhaLemba see, Noah Miralaine Tamarkin, "(Lost) Tribes to Citizens: Lemba 'Black Jews' Engage the South African State" (Ph.D. thesis, University of California Santa Cruz, 2011), 8.



The Singo were politically ascendant in the Zoutpansberg when Vhavenda entered the documentary record during the second quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> During the earliest phases of the colonial conjuncture, Cape administrators, ethnographers, and other writers relied on Singo informants for insights into the prehistoric era.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the early twentieth century texts chronicling the history of the Zoutpansberg were largely written from a Singo-centric perspective, with the dual effects of legitimizing Singo political hegemony and projecting this version of the ethnographic present into the remote past. For example, in the first of his anthropological publications, state ethnographer N.J. Van Warmelo relied on the oral testimony of Tshamaano Ramabulana, a descendant of a prominent nineteenth century Singo monarch. In his characterization of the initial phases of Singo conquest of the Zoutpansberg, Tshamaano testified that Vhangona “lived like wild beasts” who only learned to control fire under the civilizing influence of Singo overlordship.<sup>17</sup> This representational trope of aboriginal Vhavenda as primitives gained currency by virtue of sheer repetition in subsequent academic literature. One instructive entry in the *Venda Dictionary*—also compiled by Van Warmelo—characterized Vhangona as people of “small stature” and “lacking in knowledge of fire.”<sup>18</sup> Returning to the question about which groups may rightfully claim to be the forebearers of Venda culture, the entry further states that the Vhangona were among “The aboriginal people who occupied the country at the time the [Singo] Venda invaded” Zoutpansberg.<sup>19</sup> The subtextual insinuation of this last passage is the othering of Vhangona and the conflation of Vhavenda identities with those of the allochthonous Singo. Crucially, an abundance of ethnographic and

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<sup>15</sup> Likely in 1836 according to diary of Louis Trichardt, cited in N.J. Van Warmelo, ed., *Contributions Towards Venda History, Religion and Tribal Ritual*, (Pretoria, 1932), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Sekibakiba Peter Lekgoathi, “Colonial' Experts, Local Interlocutors, Informants, and the Making of an Archive on the 'Transvaal Ndebele', 1930-1989,” *The Journal of African History* 50, 1 (2009), 75.

<sup>17</sup> Tshamaano, “History” in N.J. Van Warmelo, ed., *Contributions Towards Venda History, Religion and Tribal Ritual* (Pretoria, 1932), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda – English*, (Pretoria, 1989), 205.

archaeological research published since the second half of the twentieth century, discussed in greater detail in chapter two, has thoroughly discredited the Janice-faced presumptions of Singo authorship of Venda culture and of Ngoni primitivity.<sup>20</sup>

Discourses centering on themes of historical authenticity and cultural authorship are also expressed in more tangible disputes about Venda naming conventions for people, places, the dispositions of indigenous chieftaincy and perhaps most contentiously in disputes over land ownership. Most of the academically trained Muvenda scholars and their lay intellectual counterparts whose insights inform this work recognize the aboriginal Vhavenda as the original ‘owners’ of the land upon which the historical Venda Confederacy was situated. In Venda customary naming practices, the prefix Ne-, when affixed to an honorific family name of non-Singo Venda chiefly lineage, connotes ownership of and political dominion over a designated geographic space. Hence, the family name Netshipse (also rendered NeTshipise or Ne-Tshipise) implies the owners of Tshipise, a region located in northeast Zoutpansberg. While Netshipise does denote a Vhangona surname, like most other rules in Venda customary practice, the role of the Ne- prefix is not absolute.

The ownership of the mountain cluster commonly known as Lwamondo illustrates both the contingent nature of Venda customary law and the limits of the Vhangona/Singo binary formulation. The rulers of Lwamondo, located in southcentral Zoutpansberg, identify with the Laudzi, a mutupo that is neither Singo nor Vhangona. Under the leadership of a potentate named Tshilinde, the Laudzi settled Lwamondo and displaced the aboriginal inhabitants.<sup>21</sup> Though the Laudzi killed many of the Ngoni of Lwamondo, Tshilinde spared the life of their leader, identified in the sources as Mutengwe,

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<sup>20</sup> Ralushai writes, “The contributions of the Singo to Venda culture has previously been exaggerated,” and further asserts that the Singo “owe much of their present identity to the earlier inhabitants of Venda.” See Ralushai and Gray, “Ruins and Traditions of the Ngoni and Mbedzi”, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Isaak Mulaudzi, “Events in Zoutpansberg from 1870 to 1904,” (Unpublished manuscript, Van Warmelo Papers, University of Pretoria Library Special Collections, 1939).

who subsequently served the Laudzi as a rainmaker and ritual specialist. Having established their dominion, Tshilinde and his successors adopted the family name Ne-Lwamondo.<sup>22</sup> The pattern of absorptive conquest at Lwamondo is replicated elsewhere in Venda during the era of Singo colonization of Zoutpansberg, which is explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

From his stone walled settlement at Dzata, Thohoyandou presided over a tributary state that featured a greater degree of political centralization in comparison to the era prior to Singo conquest. Thohoyandou eventually died under circumstances that are still disputed. The scramble among his potential successors devolved into a confrontation that resulted in the destruction of Dzata. Radiocarbon dating of the ruins tell us that this event, recorded in Venda traditions as the *muphadalalo*—a term denoting the scattering of the Singo—occurred between 1750 and 1760.<sup>23</sup> Following the collapse of Dzata, Thohoyandou's descendants organized their followers into three independent Singo kingdoms in west, central and southeastern Zoutpansberg, ushering in the era of confederacy. The names of each of the regions conquered by the Singo derive from the honorific title of an early dynastic ruler, appended with the prefix Ha-. Hence, Ha-Ramabulana denotes the country of the Ramabulana dynasty, while the same is true of Ha-Tshivhasa and Ha-Mphaphuli. Moreover, the honorific titles became the dynastic name for each Thovhele or King of that lineage. The political boundaries that divided these dynastic kingdoms were the subject of the military confrontations that were among the central features of Venda politics for much of the nineteenth century. The role of warfare as a medium of political discourse is the animating theme of chapter four. While most non-Singo rulers sought to expand their respective domains, the Singo dynasts were by far the most active in this regard for most of the nineteenth century. Importantly, the overarching objective that gave

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ralushai, "Further Traditions Concerning Luvhimbi and the Mbedzi", 7. Edwin Hanisch, "Reinterpreting the Origins of Dzata: Archaeology and Legend," in Natalie Swanepoel, Amanda Esterhuysen, Philip Bonner, eds., *Five Hundred Years Rediscovered: Southern African Precedents and Prospects* (Johannesburg, 2008), 128.

impetus to these wars was not necessarily territorial expansion, but rather, the right to exercise influence over the process of political succession in subordinate chiefdoms.

The relationship between rulers and their followers is another central characteristic of the political and social lives of Vhavenda during the century long era of confederacy. Venda society was arranged hierarchically between the aristocracy and commoners. Mahosi (Chiefs), Thovhele (Kings), their relations and descendants are collectively known as vhakololo, or less commonly as vhalanda.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the term vhasiwana describes those of common birth. As a patrilineal society, one in which polygamy was and still is (albeit to a lesser extent) widely practiced, a man of noble blood could marry a woman of common birth. Importantly, the offspring of such an arrangement faced almost insurmountable obstacles in their candidacy for offices of political leadership. While aristocratic women could marry beneath their station, during the nineteenth century, the decision to do so was generally the object of scandal. The class distinctions among Vhavenda, which exist until the present day, also correspond with some of the many linguistic variations in Tshivenda, which existed—as recently as the early twentieth century—exclusively in oral form.

The term Luambo lwa musanda describes the variant of Tshivenda spoken only among the members of royal families.<sup>25</sup> Court speech, as it is described, centers on terms of reference related to the actions and physical disposition of chiefs. Whereas the verb stem -la is to eat for other Muvenda, a chief “works” or -shuma; moreover, the chief does not walk -tshimbila, but rather, travels -enda; a chief does not die -fa, but merely disappears -dzama.<sup>26</sup> This variation of Tshivenda reserved for vhakololo serves at least two purposes. In the first instance, because luambo lwa musanda is generally

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<sup>24</sup> John Blacking, “Initiation and the Balance of Power – The Tshikanda Girls’ Initiation School of the Venda of Northern Transvaal,” in, *Ethnological and Linguistic Studies in Honour of N. J. Van Warmelo*, Government Ethnological Publications, 52 (Pretoria, 1969), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Maitakhole Sengani, *Strategic Discourse in Names - A Critical Discourse Analytical-Interpretation with Special Reference to Tshivenda Naming Practices* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Limpopo, 2008), 26.

<sup>26</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, 7.

unintelligible to commoners or, indeed, anyone unfamiliar with the ways of the musanda or royal palace, it reinforces the ritual seclusion of sacred leaders that is among the central characteristics of Venda society.<sup>27</sup> Second, linguistic variations such as luambo lwa musanda also served a vital security function inasmuch as it afforded leaders with a medium for the secure transmission of secret and compartmentalized knowledge.

Venda chiefs used this and other forms of coded speech in ways that I describe as vernacularized encryption. The archives of the Berlin Mission Society (BMS) include at least one example in which Khosi Makwarela, the heir apparent to the Mphaphuli Singo dynasty, deployed vernacular encryption to deliver politically sensitive intelligence to his friend and diplomatic proxy, the Lutheran Evangelist Carl Beuster, who occupied a mission station in a country of another Venda dynast. Immediately prior to a potentially dangerous face to face parlay with Thovhele (King) Ligege Tshivhasa in early March 1887, Rev. Beuster received a warning from Makwarela's messengers and an offer of safe passage out of Ha-Tshivhasa should the need arise. To ensure that King Ligege's spies did not discover their clandestine oral correspondence, Makwarela's men communicated their chief's words using Tshitavhatsindi, a dialect of Tshivenda particular to the people of the northeastern Zoutpansberg, with which both the Rev. Beuster and Khosi Makwarela Mphaphuli were conversant.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, healers, hunters, iron workers, ritual specialist and others preserved and transmitted their knowledge repertoires using variations of vernacular encryption.<sup>29</sup> And, like the barricaded redoubts that Vhavenda built in the terraces of the Zoutpansberg, the evidence explored in these chapters compellingly demonstrates that coded speech was indeed an element of the repertoires of material and ritual practice that constituted the Venda Armory.

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<sup>27</sup> Moffat Sebola "Sense in the Nonsense: Deciphering the Meaning of *u kumela* in Tshivenda Culture," *South African Journal of African Languages* 41, 1 (2021), 97.

<sup>28</sup> BMS Report 21&22: 1888, 513/300.

<sup>29</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, 7.

## PART II: Historiography and Literature Review

The history of Venda has received less attention from academic historians relative to most other parts of pre-colonial South Africa. Roger Wagner captures the abiding sense of ambivalence about Venda studies among mainstream scholars. In a book chapter published in 1981, Wagner remarks, “old Zoutpansberg seems as seldom visited by academic research as its graveyard is by modern tourists.”<sup>30</sup> To be sure, the marginalization of Venda in the canonical literature has impoverished our understanding of a critical juncture in South Africa's past. While “The Armory” fills a long-acknowledged gap in the literature, it also problematizes and engages with some of the many factual distortions about Venda that have become entrenched in South African historiographies by virtue of repetition in published scholarship. In the first instance, this dissertation revises the conventional timeline and periodization of Black armed resistance to colonialism, a topic addressed in the next section. Second, it disrupts much of the conventional wisdom about indigenous responses to firearms in nineteenth century Zoutpansberg, but also in southern Africa more generally. Third, the Venda Armory interrogates the androcentric biases expressed in the extant literature about violence and warfare in pre-colonial Africa.

Like their neighbors at Balobedu, who succumbed to colonial aggression in 1894, the conquest of the Venda Confederacy was accomplished not through war, but rather, through negotiation and coercion.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, King Mphephu Ramabulana did briefly engage militarily with the forces of the South African Republic in October 1898 before fleeing north into the territorial jurisdiction of the British South Africa Company. The historian Lindsay Braun recently captured the sense of the field

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<sup>30</sup> Roger Wagner, “Zoutpansberg: The dynamics of a Hunting Frontier, 1848-67,” in Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, eds., *Economy, and Society in Preindustrial South Africa*, (Cambridge, 1980), 315.

<sup>31</sup> George Tebogo, *Dithugula tša Malefokana; Paying Libation in the Photographic Archive made by Anthropologists E.J. & J.D. Krige in 1930s Bolobedu, under Queen Modjadji III*. (Unpublished M.A. thesis: University of Cape Town, 2012), 5.

where he argues that Mphephu's confrontation with the ZAR "has long represented the conclusion of a major arc of South African colonial history."<sup>32</sup> Building on Braun's intervention, I argue that the subjugation of the Venda Confederation was not actualized until the early 1900s, when British colonial officials finally compelled Venda potentates to surrender their massive armory of firearms. The disarmament of Vhavenda was significant not merely for its symbolic value as an act of submission, but also for the ways in which it forced Vhavenda of all ranks to come to terms with their new status as colonial subjects.

Insofar as my work explores how the Venda Confederacy retained its sovereignty until 1904, the Armory challenges the standard periodization of Black armed resistance to settler colonialism in South Africa. There were at least two reasons why, for the last half century, professional historians have focused on the late 1870s until the early 1880s as the crucial inflection point in the making of the modern South African state. First, this period marks an intensification of the processes generally referred to as the 'mineral revolution.' Second, it was also during this period from 1877 to 1880, which John Laband poignantly characterized as "three bruising years of warfare," in which some of the most populous and militarily potent indigenous states were conquered in decisive confrontations with White people.<sup>33</sup> Of particular interest was British forces' conquest in 1879 of Zululand in a conflict that South Africanist historians have long regarded as the de facto end of indigenous armed resistance to settler colonialism. Richard Cope contrasts the balance of power between autonomous African polities and the nascent colonial state before the Anglo-Zulu War as after. Cope writes that in the 1870s, "white rule had been precarious over much of South Africa and appeared to be becoming more so...as whites

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<sup>32</sup> Lindsay Frederick Braun, "The Returns of the King: The Case of Mphephu and Western Venda, 1899–1904," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, 2 (2013), 271, also see, Lindsay Frederick Braun, *Colonial Survey and Native Landscapes in Rural South Africa, 1850–1913*, Leiden, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> John Laband, *Zulu Warriors: The Battle for the South African Frontier*, (Hartford, 2014), 10. Price elaborates on the reasons why the Anglo-Zulu conflict enjoys pride of place in British image in the European imaginary, see Richard Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters in the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa*, (Cambridge, 2008), 2-3.

in the interior were losing ground to Africans.”<sup>34</sup> Cope described a radically different dispensation after the 1880s, as “Africans were defeated and disarmed and whites were enforcing their claims to land and taxes.”<sup>35</sup> Importantly, further to the north, the Vhavenda and many of their neighbors in the old Transvaal retained their political sovereignty until the early 1900s.

That indigenous peoples in the old Transvaal districts were politically independent until the mid to late-1890s, in the case of the Balobedu and Bagananwa, or 1904 in Venda, is incongruous with the received wisdom in which African armed resistance to colonial domination had been broken by the early 1880s. In the main, historians have addressed the apparent discontinuity between historiographical narratives and chronological facts by evading the issue altogether. Yet, the trivialization of armed resistance in Venda as elsewhere in the Translimpopo stands out in a historiographical tradition that has, since the early 1970s, valorized primary resistance to colonialism. Indeed, the Anglo-Zulu War has been studied to such an extent that the voluminous literature on this topic constitutes a distinct sub-field within South African historical studies.<sup>36</sup> Venda, in contrast, has, in the words of another scholar, “received less recent attention from historians than its...decades of successful resistance to European settler colonization before 1898 warrant.”<sup>37</sup>

Other scholars have attempted to grapple with the long tenure of political independence among the indigenous polities of the northern Transvaal by adopting a teleological approach to African anticolonial resistance after the 1880s. From this perspective, the eventual conquest of the Venda Confederacy was inevitable, a virtual *fait accompli* following the defeat of the Zulu state in 1879. The words of historian Shula Marks merit citation at length:

Although the Venda and Lovedu chiefdoms of  
the northern Transvaal were only conquered

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<sup>34</sup> Richard L. Cope, *Ploughshare of War: The Origins of The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879*, (Pietermaritzburg, 1999), 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> John Laband, “Anglo Zulu War Studies: Where to from Here?,” *Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society* 12 (2002).

<sup>37</sup> Braun, “The Returns of the King,” 275.



finally on the eve of the South African War, black resistance in the Republic had effectively been broken by the mid- to late 1880s.<sup>38</sup>

Here, the inherent contingency of history is stripped away from the narrative of indigenous resistance. John Wright focuses on this period as an inflection point in the making of modern South Africa because, “by this time most African societies in the subcontinent had been brought or were in the process [my emphasis] of being brought, under the rule of colonial governments.”<sup>39</sup> Importantly, for the Vhavenda living in the last politically autonomous Black polity, “the process” of colonization would have been imperceptible until the late 1890s. The historian Maanda Mulaudzi writes that the Venda Confederacy “effectively retained control over the lands” in the decade that followed the collapse of the Boer settlement at Schoemansdal in 1867.<sup>40</sup> Some White people remained in the Zoutpansberg after the retreat of the ZAR, however, most did so as tax paying subjects of African potentates.<sup>41</sup> Later, Venda rulers frustrated external attempts to survey and rationalize their land for the purposes of determining taxes during the 1880s and 1890s. It was not until the conclusion of the South African War that Vhavenda were ultimately obliged to pay taxes and confine themselves to externally imposed geographic locations—among the most politically significant phases in what Wright described as the process of colonial conquest.

Though neither the British nor Afrikaners possessed the coercive power resources required to exercise hegemony over the Zoutpansberg, Vhavenda and their rulers also played agentive roles in the preservation of their autonomy. By the late 1870s, the Colonial Office in London had begun to collaborate with their diplomatic counterparts in Lisbon to curtail the sale of firearms to Black people

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<sup>38</sup> Shula Marks, “Class, Culture, and Consciousness in South Africa, 1880-1899,” in Robert Ross, Ann Kelk Mager, et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of South Africa 1885–1994, Volume 2*, (Cambridge, 2011), 112.

<sup>39</sup> John Wright, “Working with Southern Africa’s Pasts, 1500-1880,” in Lungisile Ntsebeza and Chris Saunders, eds., *Papers from the Pre-Colonial Catalytic Project, Volume 1*, (Cape Town, 2014), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Maanda Mulaudzi, “U Shuma Bulasi” Agrarian Transformation in the Zoutpansberg District of South Africa, up to 1946,” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 2000), 39.

<sup>41</sup> Mulaudzi, “U Shuma Bulasi,” 39.

in Southern Africa. Importantly, according to evidence recovered from the archives of the Transvaal Republic, Vhavenda were the dominant actors in the clandestine circuits of firearms contraband that connected Indian Ocean merchants to enthusiastic African clients of the Translimpopo catchment. Rulers across Zoutpansberg sent their initiated men south to the mineral works of the Rand and to Indian Ocean merchants to the east, all with the intention of accumulating a vast armory of technologically modern weapons. A report addressed to the British Colonial Office in 1893 claimed that a Venda dynast from western Zoutpansberg imported guns from Portuguese territory via an “organized service.” Moreover, the same ruler, identified in the report as Makhado Ramabulana, “missed no opportunity to trade away the less modern [firearms] to other tribes.”<sup>42</sup> The Balobedu to the south and the Bagananwa to the west were among those allied chiefdoms in Transvaal who received firearms and training in their use from Vhavenda merchants during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

Vhavenda did not mobilize the full measure of their armaments in a climactic and valorous confrontation with foreign and settler forces. Yet, the tens of thousands of firearms that they accumulated during the late nineteenth century were historically significant, in the first instance, as a demonstration of their capacity to wield “conspicuous objects of power and resistance.”<sup>44</sup> And, when officials at the Cape conspired with counterparts in Lisbon and Pretoria to restrict the sale of firearms to Africans from the 1870s, Venda dynasts and mahosi defied colonial prerogatives, and continued to repatriate guns through their clandestine networks. Thus, Vhavenda, I argue, were engaged in a form

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<sup>42</sup> P.A. Ogievie to Graham Bower/London, 16 August 1893, CO 879/39/63. British Imperial Archives [Hereafter PRO].

<sup>43</sup> Tlou John Makhura, “Mercenaries and missionaries in the Boer subjugation of the Bagananwa in the Northern Transvaal, 1894-1895,” *South African Historical Journal* 36, 1 (1997), 210.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Fruehling Springwood, “Gunsclapes: Towards a Global Geography of Firearms,” in Charles Fruehling Springwood, ed., *Open Fire: Understanding Global Gun Cultures*, (London, 2006), 20.

of armed resistance to colonialism that is still generally thought to have been extinguished by the early 1880s.

### Venda and the Historiography of Firearms

This dissertation also makes an intervention into the historiography of the gun in precolonial southern Africa. The role and use of firearms in nineteenth century Venda is well-documented; yet it is also under researched. This paucity of research impoverishes the academic literature and distorts our ability to use indigenous responses to firearms as the basis for other inferences about the trajectory of social change during the precolonial era in southern Africa. My arguments about the chronology of firearms assimilation in the Zoutpansberg region and the various uses to which Vhavenda applied their guns derive from evidence recovered from colonial archives and indigenous literature. This evidence, summarized here and elucidated in chapter two, substantively revises some of the foundational assumptions upon which the extant literature is predicated.

Radical revisionist scholars were among the first academicians to highlight the significance of firearms in Southern African histories. In an introduction to a collection of essays published in a 1971 special edition of the *Journal of African History*, Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore wrote that firearms in South Africa's pre-industrial past "deserved at least one major study."<sup>45</sup> Then, in the introduction to a monograph published nearly four decades hence, William Kelleher Storey signaled his intention to take up Marks and Atmore's challenge.<sup>46</sup> Whereas Storey's book, *Guns, Race and Power in Colonial South Africa* (2008), signaled a second wave of scholarly interest in a once neglected theme, it also signaled the emergence of Science and Technology Studies (STS) as the dominant theoretical influence in the subsequent research on this topic. Alan Cobley reminds historians that

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<sup>45</sup> Shula Marks, Anthony Atmore, "Firearms in Southern Africa: A Survey," *The Journal of African History* 12, 4 (1971), 35.

<sup>46</sup> William Kelleher Storey, *Guns, Race and Power in Colonial South Africa* (Cambridge, 2008), 1.

historiographical trends seldom change because of a singular piece of scholarship.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the theoretical orientation of Storey's book differed from earlier work in notable ways. The first tranche of literature published between the 1970s until the early 1980s examined African responses to guns through the analytical prism of Marxian materialism and focused on firearms primarily as tools for hunting and weapons of war. In contrast, the maturation of Science and Technology Studies in the early 2000s inspired several academic publications that throw light on the constellation of symbolic meanings that indigenous peoples assigned to their guns. Recent contributions under the authorship of historians Giacomo Macola and Jack Hogan among others are illustrative of this second wave of STS-inspired gun literature, which seeks to highlight some of the cultural considerations particular to precolonial African societies that explain their responses to firearms.

Despite an identification with different intellectual traditions, much of the recent STS literature is beholden to the same theoretical propositions as was materialist scholarship published decades earlier. Those common characteristics inform the decisions that scholars continue to make about which historical circumstances are deserving of attention. Insofar as they relate to the nature of technology and the processes of technological change, these shared propositions also inflect in the kinds of questions that resonate as historically relevant. Crucially, the conceptual continuities between the materialist inspired firearms literature of the 1970s-80s and the more recent STS research is most compellingly expressed in an abiding preoccupation with the Anglo-Zulu War.

No historical conjuncture involving African engagement with mid-nineteenth century gun technology has been examined as exhaustively as that of Zululand during the six months between January and July 1879, when King Cetshwayo ka Mapande's amabutho regiments were decisively defeated in a military confrontation with colonial armies from Great Britain. And, since the 1970s

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<sup>47</sup>Alan Cobley, "Does Social History have a Future? The Ending of Apartheid and Recent Trends in South African Historiography," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, 3 (2001), 621.

until the present, historians have grappled with variations of the same question: why did the AmaZulu not make better use of firearms during their war with British imperial forces? Scholars have proffered any number of answers to this question over time. These answers are important, less for what they reveal about the AmaZulu, but rather, because of what they reveal about the epistemologies and analytical frameworks upon which those responses are predicated.

Jeff Guy was among the first writers to position the AmaZulu deployment of firearms in the British war of aggression at the center of an essay, one that was published in a 1971 special edition of JAH dedicated to the gun in South African history. As early as the 1820s, Zulu Kings demonstrated “a keen interest in firearms,” Guy notes.<sup>48</sup> By the eve of the British invasion, anywhere from 8,000 to 20,000 firearms had been repatriated into Zululand. Smiths from the Sotho kingdom and Delagoa Bay had purportedly been recruited to maintain these armaments, even if their presence would have been entirely extraneous according to any number of informants whose testimonies are recorded in the James Stuart archives.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, Guy writes that many people in Zululand recognized that firearms could be used for military purposes. And, in the years and months leading up to a climactic confrontation with Whites, those with the authority to do so adopted measures ostensibly designed to acquire guns and their technological prerequisites.

Despite what would appear to be a concerted mobilization of knowledge and material resources, Guy concludes that the AmaZulu “failed to evolve tactics by which their guns could be used to best advantage.”<sup>50</sup> To be sure, Guy concedes that Zulu marksmen deployed firearms to good

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<sup>48</sup> Jeff Guy, “A Note on Firearms in The Zulu Kingdom with Special Reference to the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879,” *Journal of African History* 12, 4 (1971), 557.

<sup>49</sup> The skills required to manufacture replacement parts for mid-nineteenth century firearms were widely available within the territory under the control of Zulu Kings according to several of the men who provided testimonies recorded in the James Stuart Archives. C.H. Gilson, *The James Stuart Archive Vol. One* (Durban, 1976) 155. Mabola, *The James Stuart Archive Vol. Two* (Durban, 1979), 7. Malamba, *The James Stuart Archive Vol. Two* (Durban, 1979), 173. Mpatshana ka Sodondo, *The James Stuart Archive Vol. Three* (Durban, 1982), 317. Ndukwana ka Mbengwana, *The James Stuart Archive Vol. Four*, (Durban, 1986), 296. Ngidi ka Mcikaziswa, *The James Stuart Archive Vol. Five*, (Durban, 2001), 81.

<sup>50</sup> Guy, “A Note on Firearms,” 563.

effect on three occasions during the war. Still, as he concludes, “the Zulu could have used [guns] to greater advantage if they had not been subordinate to traditional tactics.”<sup>51</sup> By “traditional tactics,” Guy alludes both to the role of the *iklwa*—short stabbing spear—as the primary weapon of Zulu light infantrymen, but also to Zulu military doctrine, which privileged set piece battles and direct engagement with the opposing force. Crucially, Guy attributes this presumed “failure to adapt” doctrine and fighting tactics to “the cultural conservatism” of the Zulu military establishment.<sup>52</sup>

In his seminal essay, Jeff Guy outlined the basic elements of a discursive formula that other scholars would replicate in later reinvestigations of firearms and their use during the Anglo-Zulu War. In a recent contribution to the canon, STS scholar Jack Hogan reminds us that Guy’s original thesis “has remained the most influential work” in this area four decades after its publication.<sup>53</sup> Hogan’s chapter is published in a multi-author volume which sought to move beyond the “purely instrumentalist readings” of firearms that had informed earlier work on the topic.<sup>54</sup> Consistent with the goals outlined by the book’s editors, to better understand the systems of symbolic meaning with which guns were imbued during the age of empire, Hogan’s chapter situates an analysis of the Zulu use of firearms in the context of their “indigenous discourses about weapons.”<sup>55</sup>

The first of two central claims advanced in his chapter signal Hogan’s attempt to break with the received wisdom that the AmaZulu underutilized their firearms. Citing battlefield accounts from the war, we are told that “Zulu use of firearms...was in specific cases, more effective than commonly

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 569.

<sup>53</sup> Hogan includes Ian Knight and John Laband among the scholars whose conclusions build on Guy’s original findings. See Jack Hogan, “Hardly a Place for a Nervous Old Gentleman to Take a Stroll”: Firearms and the Zulu during the Anglo Zulu War,” in Karen Jones, Giacomo Macola, David Welch, eds., *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire* (New York 2013), 129-30.

<sup>54</sup> Karen Jones, Giacomo Macola, David Welch, “Introduction: New Perspectives on Firearms in the Age of Empire,” in Jones, et al, eds., *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire*, 1, 6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

assumed.<sup>56</sup> Second, Hogan argues that Zulu riflemen deployed firearms in ways that were “constrained by their cultural approach to warfare—one that foregrounded the role of close combat and the assegai.”<sup>57</sup> Hogan recognizes that the AmaZulu “did adapt to changing circumstances” occasioned by their experience with firearms. Yet, it was the cultural imperative to kill an enemy at close range with the stabbing spear that best explains why guns were not used to even greater effect during the war. Ultimately, Hogan arrived at an appraisal of AmaZulu use of firearms that is similar to Guy, but for a different set of reasons. Thus, he concludes that “firearms never replaced the assegai in terms of the Zulu understanding of their own identity.” As a consequence, guns “remained subordinate [to the assegai].”<sup>58</sup>

The idea that Zulu forces made better use of firearms than has been commonly believed is a difference of degree rather than of kind. And, in a manner consistent with the teleological orientation of the field, Hogan replicates Guy’s claim that the guns in the possession of the AmaZulu might have been used to greater advantage had they not been “subordinate” to the assegai.<sup>59</sup> In the articulation of the second point, Hogan highlights another misconception about the trajectory of technological change, one that is also a common feature of southern Africanist firearms literature. To paraphrase, the author notes that guns remained subordinate on the battlefield because they “never replaced the assegai.”<sup>60</sup> The implication is that King Cetshwayo’s forces would have made optimal use of firearms if—and ostensibly only if—they were no longer subordinate to the stabbing spear. In other words, the common thread that links the works of Jeff Guy and Jack Hogan is the proposition that firearms—

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<sup>56</sup> Jack Hogan, “Hardly a Place,” 130.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Guy, 562. Hogan, 148.

<sup>60</sup> Hogan, 148.

in order to be deployed to their full potential—would necessarily have to supplant or even replace the *iklwa* as the primary weapon of the individual AmaZulu soldier.

These arguments share some common flaws. First, firearms possess no inherent qualities that preclude their coterminous use with edged weapons. The use of bayonets by British forces at Rourke's Drift and by other formations in countless other engagements since then compellingly proves the point. Next, in their assertion that Zulus should have made better use of firearms, both traditions subscribe to a positivist or evolutionary paradigm of technological change. The essence of such a paradigm is an understanding of technological transformation as a unidirectional process that necessarily entails improvement. In the words of archaeologist Helen Loney, technical/evolutional modes also presume that technological change “occurs toward the most logical and efficient solution” to a given problem.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, implicit in Guy's assertion that the AmaZulu failed to adopt military tactics to best suit their firearms is the discredited notion that technological change proceeds along predictable and rational trajectories. In contrast, Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law maintain that “innovation is not always inevitable in the face of change.”<sup>62</sup> They further state that technological change often occurs in a direction that has its own internal logics in a process described as “heterogeneous contingency.”<sup>63</sup> What these insights from archaeologists tell us is that guns have no inherent properties that were bound to elicit any particular responses from those who possess them, Zulu or otherwise.

That Zulu troops did not deploy their guns in a manner consistent with contemporary scholars' expectations has been interpreted as a historical problem, one that requires a solution. Invariably, historians of all theoretical orientations have sought their solutions in the milieu of Zulu

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<sup>61</sup> Helen L. Loney, “Society and Technological Control: A Critical Review of Models of Technological Change in Ceramic Studies,” *American Antiquity* 65, 4 (2000), 646.

<sup>62</sup> Loney, “Society and Technological Control,” 648.

<sup>63</sup> Wiebe E. Bijker, John Law, *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, 1992), 17.



culture and rigidly formulated notions of Zulu hegemonic masculinities.<sup>64</sup> Guy attributed their limited use of firearms to the cultural “conservatism” of the Zulu military.<sup>65</sup> Hogan attributed the same to the imperative among Zulu men to dispatch opponents with the assegai.<sup>66</sup> According to John Laband, who is strictly speaking neither a materialist nor STS historian, the “partial and imperfect” adoption of firearms among the AmaZulu was a function of their “heroic military culture,” which countenanced only hand-to-hand combat as worthy of honor.<sup>67</sup> Giacomo Macola has proffered the most developed set of arguments that can be used to account for the partial assimilation of firearms in Zululand and elsewhere in southcentral Africa. Macola frames African responses to firearms as a binary choice between adoption and rejection, and one made not by individuals, but rather by entire communities. Like other scholars, Macola frames the wholesale adoption of the gun as the rational choice. Thus, to “reject” the gun, in Macola’s formulation, was “aberrant behavior,” a phenomenon that he describes as “technological disengagement.”<sup>68</sup>

The insights of our archaeologist colleagues suggest that Zulu use of firearms needed no explanation. There are also analogous historical circumstances that align with Bijker and Law’s findings that technological innovations, cultural, military, or otherwise, have no predictable or necessarily “rational” trajectories. The role and use of firearms in early modern Japan yields insights that underscore the fundamental error that has animated so much repetitive effort related to guns in Zululand between January and July 1879.

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<sup>64</sup> The notion that underlying illogic of Zulu presumed rejection of firearms is illustrative of fallacy that historian Richard Price ascribed to nineteenth century missionaries. In *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa*, Price writes that missionaries who blamed African ambivalence about the Gospels to Satan’s grip on the minds and souls of AmaXhosa as engaging “imperial reasoning.” While no credible historian has thus far blamed Satanic forces for African ambivalence about firearms....

<sup>65</sup> Guy, 569.

<sup>66</sup> Hogan, 147.

<sup>67</sup> John Laband, “Fighting Stick of Thunder: Firearms and the Zulu Kingdom: The Cultural Ambiguities of Transferring Weapons Technology,” *War and Society* 22, 4 (2014), 229, 241.

<sup>68</sup> Giacomo Macola, *The Gun in Central Africa: A History of Technology and Politics* (Athens, 2016), 13, 120.

Firearms were widely available for both military and non-military purposes for the entirety of the Tokugawa Shogunate, which presided over Japan from 1603 until 1876. In the countryside, peasants used guns mostly as agricultural implements to ward off the feral boars and deer that threatened crops.<sup>69</sup> Importantly, peasants seldom used guns as weapons, “even when it might have seemed reasonable to do so,” according to David Howell. In an article that centers firearms “as socially and politically situated objects whose functions and meanings changed over time,” Howell writes that peasants may have brawled amongst themselves, and “killed each other in fits of passion and stupidity...but they did not shoot each other.”<sup>70</sup> To illustrate the point, Howell recounts an incident in which bandits apparently armed only with swords descended on the village of Ryumi in 1864. According to the official record of events, a villager fired a gun in an attempt to summon help, but not to shoot the bandits who ultimately killed at least one of their neighbors who responded to the distress signal.<sup>71</sup> Although persistent attacks from bandits and masterless samurai eventually prompted peasants to reevaluate their attitudes about guns, Howell concludes that there exists “little evidence that they actually went about shooting bad guys.”<sup>72</sup>

To apply the logics of South Africanist firearms literature to the circumstances of early modern Japan is to ask if “technological disengagement” accurately explains the reluctance of Japanese peasants to shoot bandits and gangsters? Were their decisions “aberrant behavior,” or perhaps, illustrative of cultural conservatism? And, were we to burden our analysis with the normative assumptions of the most recent South Africanist firearms scholarship, might Japanese peasants be guilty of “stupidity or blindness,” charges of which Hogan absolves Zulu people only insofar as they

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<sup>69</sup> David L. Howell, “The Social Life of Firearms in Tokugawa Japan,” *Japanese Studies* 29, 1 (2009), 67.

<sup>70</sup> Howell, “The Social Life of Firearms,” 73.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 74, 77.

managed to “adapt to changing circumstances” in a manner consistent with his expectations.<sup>73</sup> Clearly, the analytical frameworks and normative assumptions that have animated South Africanist firearms literature since the 1970s until the present hold little value in the context of analogous historical circumstances. Moreover, I contend that those same frameworks have only distorted our understanding of the very historical conjunctures—nineteenth century Zululand—in which they were originally formulated. Crucially, there is evidence from the well-documented and under-research history of firearms in nineteenth century Venda that substantiates this proposition.

If the Anglo-Zulu War is one of the defining preoccupations of southern Africanist firearms studies since the 1970s, then another is the designation of so-called “gun societies.” Writing in their 1971 seminal essay on firearms, Marks and Atmore declare that “a gun society existed at the Cape from the beginning of white settlement in 1652.”<sup>74</sup> Decades later, Macola identified several other such gun societies in central Africa, which he defined as ones in which “firearms are put to momentous productive use...over a sustained period of time...by a politically or numerically significant portion of the population.”<sup>75</sup> As a term of art, the gun society has even appeared in recent explorations of firearms in West African histories. In his 2018 book, *Guns and Society in Colonial Nigeria*, Saheed Aderinto writes that a gun society, characterized in part by “liberal access to firearms,” emerged in Nigeria at the turn of the twentieth century, “as a result of structural transformations unleashed and consolidated by British colonialism.”<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, Storey alludes to a definitional problem at the heart of the gun society construct, one to which no historian, not Marks, Macola, nor Aderinto, has adequately responded: “At what statistical point can we say, with any accuracy, that a gun society

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<sup>73</sup> Hogan, 147.

<sup>74</sup> Marks and Atmore, 417.

<sup>75</sup> Macola, *The Gun in Central Africa*, 19.

<sup>76</sup> Saheed Aderinto, *Guns, and Society in Colonial Nigeria: Firearms, Culture and Public Order*, (Bloomington, 2018), 4, 7.

exists?”<sup>77</sup> This challenge casts doubt onto Aderinto’s claim that no gun societies existed in Africa prior to the one that emerged in Nigeria after 1900.<sup>78</sup> Placing Storey and Aderinto into dialog on the empirical basis of gun societies also illuminates at least two fascinating historiographical ironies.<sup>79</sup> Nineteenth century Venda was the first historical context to which the ‘gun society’ neologism was applied. And Venda was also among the few conjunctures wherein African responses to firearms can be assessed with any degree of statistical precision.<sup>80</sup>

By the early 1900s, the per capita rate of firearms ownership among ritually initiated Venda men likely exceeded 35%. This provisional calculation derives from two sources. The first is the estimated population of Zoutpansberg that Lutheran evangelists recorded in an annual report on their activities for the year 1906.<sup>81</sup> We also know that at the same chronological conjuncture, Vhavenda had accumulated at least 30,842 guns of all sorts.<sup>82</sup> This second figure reflects the number of firearms surrendered to magistrates’ officials from October 1902 until February 1903, during a campaign to disarm Africans in the old Transvaal. In terms of a provisional contribution to the field, this extrapolation of the data engages with the apparent dearth of qualitative exploration of firearms adoption, which one scholar has decried as a methodological deficiency in the extant literature.<sup>83</sup> These calculations also respond to Storey’s challenge to the empirical basis of gun societies. What quantitative analysis cannot reveal however, is the extent to which Vhavenda shaped the regional pattern of firearms in the Translimpopo catchment and beyond.

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<sup>77</sup> Storey, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Aderinto, *Guns and Society in Colonial Nigeria*, 4.

<sup>79</sup> To be fair, placing these ideas in dialog is also to evaluate Aderinto’s rhetorical proposition about the non-existence of gun societies in Africa prior to 1900—however grossly overstated—to evidentiary standards of an empirical argument.

<sup>80</sup> Pilosof cites the dearth of statistical analysis of firearms diffusion in precolonial Southern Africa as significant methodological deficiency in the relevant literature. See Rory Pilosof, Review: ‘Guns Don’t Colonize People...’: The role in use of Firearms in Precolonial and Colonial Africa,” *Kronos* 35, (2010), 276.

<sup>81</sup> The Duties of our Mission in the Northern Transvaal, *The Reports of August 1906*, 377/700, BMB7.

<sup>82</sup> Schedules of Arms Surrendered by Natives to Native Commissioners/Pretoria, August 1903, SNA 38/1299/11.

<sup>83</sup> Pilosof, ‘Guns Don’t Colonize People...’: 277.

Beginning in the 1860s, hunters, merchants and mercenaries from Venda sold guns to allies and clients in Mashonaland. They also imparted to Shona people the techniques to brandish firearms in defensive combat, the skills to mend damaged guns, and the recipes to manufacture their own gunpowder. Indeed, the “gun society” neologism was introduced into the historiographical lexicon by David Beach to describe the ways in which Vhavenda “revolutioni[z]ed Shona military practice and politics” during the third and fourth quarters of the nineteenth century.<sup>84</sup> I offer this etymology, not to reclaim the “gun society” from Aderinto, or Macola, nor even to cite per capita ownership rates in Zoutpansberg as supplemental evidence of the same, but rather to highlight its truncated utility as a signifier of social and material interactions that have still largely evaded historical inquiry. Despite the various transmogrifications of the gun society in research published since the 1970s, the term’s original coinage alludes to a techno-social complex involving Venda and Shona peoples in a “dynamic assemblage of firearms, circuits, discourses, and practices” that dominated the Translimpopo in the latter portion of the nineteenth century.<sup>85</sup>

Narrowing the focus to the Zoutpansberg mountains, the internal dynamics of firearms adoption and use within the Venda Confederacy defies many of the normative assumptions to which Southern Africanists have adhered in their scholarship since the 1970s. The available sources tell us that Vhavenda were initially exposed to gun technology during the second quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>86</sup> From then until the early 1900s, Vhavenda accumulated a sizeable armory of firearms. Despite their numbers however, the adoption of firearms in Zoutpansberg was neither uniform nor complete. To at least some extent, the pronouncedly idiosyncratic and intensely localized responses

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<sup>84</sup> David Beech, “The Rising in South-Western Mashonaland, 1896-7” (Ph.D. thesis, University College of Rhodesia, 1971), 143, 147.

<sup>85</sup> Charles Springwood, *Open Fire: Understanding Global Gun Cultures* (London, 2006), 24.

<sup>86</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha HaTshivhaya*, [195?] (Johannesburg, 1986) 63. N.J. Van Warmelo, *Contributions* (Pretoria, 1932) 20.

to guns reflected the nature of the Venda polity, which was a confederation of mutually autonomous chiefdoms bound together by mutually intelligible customs, languages, cosmologies, and repertoires of embodied rituals. Accordingly, guns were assimilated into various Venda armories in a manner consistent with the political and cultural terrain of the Zoutpansberg. These variations illustrate the cultural differences that were discernable amongst the various nodes of the Venda confederacy.

From the era of political centralization during the reign of Thovhele Thohoyandou, until the era of fragmentation and confederacy that followed, Vhavenda used the Thondo initiation school as the threshold that ushered boys into adulthood and full participation in social and cultural life.<sup>87</sup> At the Thondo lodge, boys were indoctrinated both culturally and militarily. By the late 1860s, people in Vhuilafuri—an area encompassing the centrally located Nzhelele valley to the western extremity of the Zoutpansberg—had begun to abandon the Thondo in favor of the Murundu, an initiation custom appropriated from the Lemba that involved circumcision. The shift to the Murundu custom in western Zoutpansberg was coterminous with an acceleration in the pace of firearms adoption. Within decades, a regional mythology had emerged that expressed the deepening association between circumcision and firearms. Murundu adherents labeled their neighbors in Vhuphani—located in eastern and southern Zoutpansberg—as Mahihi, a term of derision connoting both cowardice and an inability to handle guns.<sup>88</sup> This tells us that people in western Zoutpansberg believed that they had assimilated gun technology to a greater extent than did their neighbors to the east and south. What the emergence of localized discourses that merged guns with circumcision rites also tells us is that people in western Venda recognized differences between themselves and other Vhavenda in terms of the regional

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<sup>87</sup> The equivalent initiation school for *muwenda* women is the *Domba*.

<sup>88</sup> Mphaya Henry Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado Ramabulana, The Lion of the North, 1664-1895* (Thohoyandou, 2017), 56. Ralushai, *Conflicting Accounts of Venda History*, 49.

patterns of firearms use. These localized responses also challenge the extant paradigm that frames indigenous reactions to gun technology as a binary choice between adoption and rejection.

Notwithstanding the paucity of published (or unpublished) work on firearms in Venda history, most historians who have written on this topic seem to agree that Vhavenda made optimal use of their guns. Nevertheless, there exists little evidence that firearms ever displaced indigenous military technology, which included edged weapons, projectile missile systems such as the bow and arrow, as well as poisons. According to evidence explored in chapter two, firearms were often deployed in conjunction with those elements of the Venda armory that predated the assimilation of the gun. Two accounts of a battle for control of a community located on the borders of Ha-Tshivhasa and Ha-Mphaphuli illustrated the point. BMS evangelist Carl Gerneke recounts an attack on a region known as Tshikundamalema in late 1896. The missionary described the battle as the most recent episode in a much longer war between King Ligegise, the ruler of Ha-Tshivhasa and Chief Makwarela, heir apparent to the Mphaphuli dynasty. The same battle is recounted in a work of vernacular history and written from the perspective of people who defended their village from the invading forces. Having spied their attackers advance, the people of Tshikundamalema sealed the barricades that protected their settlement and took up fighting positions facing the only avenue of approach to their village. The invaders were greeted with a barrage of spears treated with *vhutulu*, a poison that induced incapacitation or death.<sup>89</sup> Their chief, a man identified as Tshiakhatho, also produced two guns and used them to further demoralize the attackers, who were eventually driven from the village in defeat.<sup>90</sup> At an anecdotal level, this reconstruction indicates that some Vhavenda used guns in conjunction with edged weapons and poisons until the eve of colonial conquest. Importantly, the evidence from Venda and elsewhere presented in this section contributes to a larger challenge to the conceptual architecture

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<sup>89</sup> Phophi, *Nganea Dzga Mutale*, (Manzini, 1990), 59.

<sup>90</sup> Phophi, *Nganea Dzga Mutale*, (Manzini, 1990), 60

of firearms literature written in the South Africanist canon. Guns did not displace indigenous technologies, nor did Vhavenda respond to firearms at a societal level.

### Women's Power and the Venda Armory

Returning to the 1896 battle at Tshikundamalema, this vernacularized account also highlights the gendered dynamics of warfare in nineteenth century Venda. With the attackers poised to storm their barricades, Khosi Tshiakhatho is said to have distributed weapons to able-bodied women amongst his followers and positioned them alongside the men in preparation for the battle to come.<sup>91</sup> At Tshikundamalema as elsewhere during the era of confederation, the mobilization of women as combatants in war was common. Indeed, the oral traditions, vernacular histories, and missionary archives that inform the substantive chapters of this project are replete with the stories of Venda women warriors. What those accounts also tell us is that women's prowess and accomplishments in war were afforded the same measure of respect as were those of men. For example, the names of two women, Mudzunga and Nyatshivhiahuvhi—both members of the royal court of the independent Khosi Madzivhandila—are remembered for their valorous conduct in the successful defense of Tshakhuma during the Mbunyu War of 1869.<sup>92</sup> The archives of the Berlin Mission Society contain other accounts of women extolled for their martial exploits. The Rev. Carl Beuster visited Mbilwi, the capital of the Mphaphuli dynasty in August 1886, where he witnessed a feast to celebrate a successful attack on a settlement aligned with the neighboring Tshivhasa dynasty. The evangelist's diary describes how an old woman who "once stoned to death two of the enemy in war," joined the Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo in dance to the accompaniment of the great war drum.<sup>93</sup> In another example drawn from a vernacular source, a senior Makhadzi of the Rambuda lineage identified as Khangale, wielded

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<sup>91</sup> Phophi, *Nganea Dz'a Mutale*, 59.

<sup>92</sup> P.E. Schwellnus, *Ndededzi V*, 43.

<sup>93</sup> War Sketches, Annual Reports of 1886, Reports 11&12, 487/285 BMB2.



her “maiden spear and fought as would any warrior” in one of the culminating battles of the Dzimauli Wars (1883-1896).<sup>94</sup> What these and the many other instances of female militarism reproduced in this study proves is that nineteenth century Venda was among the exceedingly “few examples of direct warrior or military activity by women” in precolonial South Africa.<sup>95</sup>

This study responds to Jennifer Weir’s call for a coupling of “femininity and militarism” in histories of African warfare.<sup>96</sup> Implicitly, such a response demands a reconceptualization of militarism beyond the conventional categories of activity which tend to ignore or erase women’s participation. Siphokazi Magadla decries the “battle centric” orientation of most “orthodox definitions of combat,” which do not “account for the ways in which women participated” in war.<sup>97</sup> In some relatively recent additions to the field of southern African militarism, women’s wartime contributions are circumscribed to that of birthing vessels for “future warriors,” ceremonial specialists, caretakers for homestead agriculture and of caregivers to children and wounded [male] warriors.<sup>98</sup> In keeping with Helen Bradford’s groundbreaking critique of androcentric historiographies, this dissertation pushes back against such approaches by foregrounding women’s political and military power.<sup>99</sup>

Even the title of this project alludes to an attempt to build on the observations of feminist scholars who have called for a less restrictive conceptualization of militarism. To be sure, people in nineteenth century Venda likely did not think of their security architecture in terms of an “Armory.” Yet, as a rhetorical and literary device, the armory focuses attention on a wider spectrum of political,

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<sup>94</sup> Wilfred Musetsho Daniel Phophi, *Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli* [1951] (Johannesburg, 1970), 49.

<sup>95</sup> Jennifer Weir, “Chiefly Women and Women’s Leadership in Pre-Colonial Southern Africa,” in Nomboniso Gasa, ed., *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulder and Cross Rivers*, (Cape Town, 2007), 12.

<sup>96</sup> Jennifer Weir, “I shall need to use her to rule’: The power of ‘royal’ Zulu women in pre-colonial Zululand,” *South African Historical Journal* 43, (2000), 3-23.

<sup>97</sup> Siphokazi Magadla, “Women combatants and the Liberation Movements in South Africa,” *African Security Review* 24, 4, (2015), 391.

<sup>98</sup> Laband, *Zulu Warriors*, 13.

<sup>99</sup> Helen Bradford, “Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and its Frontier Zones, c. 1806-70,” *Journal of African History* 37, 3 (1996), 351-70. “Not a Nongquawuse Story: An Anti-Heroine in Historical Perspective,” in Nomboniso Gasa, ed. *Basus’imbokodo, Bavel’imilambo/They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers: Women in South African History* (Cape Town, 2007), 43-90.

cultural, military and quotidian activities that contributed to the independence of their confederacy.<sup>100</sup>

Historians have uncritically accepted the prevailing narrative that Vhavenda somehow remained free of imperial control for so much longer than their militarized neighbors with recourse to a small cache of stolen muskets wielded by a mythologized band of marksmen known as Swart Skuts or Black Shots.<sup>101</sup> The armory construct therefore seeks to move beyond the reductionist arguments that have dominated the field for nearly half a century. Instead, this project explores the broader spectrum of knowledge and material resources that Vhavenda, men and women alike, mobilized in defense of precolonial South Africa's last independent polity.

When asked to account for the long tenure of political independence in Venda, a preponderance of informants who shared testimonies pursuant to my research identified their “culture” as the lynchpin of the security architecture that buttressed the Venda confederacy. Crucially, women of all social ranks shaped the configuration of those cultural repertoires that constituted the Venda armory. To the extent that the classificatory schemas of western ethnography are applicable, Venda was, in the vaguest sense, a patriarchal society. And, while most nineteenth century kings and chiefs were men, it was the Makhadzi—the senior most woman of each lineage—who legitimized male power.<sup>102</sup> While Makhadzi literally denotes an aunt, it is also an office of public trust, one that is vested with several customary authorities. During the reign of a chief or king, the Makhadzi acts as a check on the dictatorial abuse of power. Even in non-aristocratic families, aggrieved parties call upon the mediation of their Makhadzi. And, after the death of a potentate, the Makhadzi is among the most

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<sup>100</sup> I am indebted to Clapperton Mavhunga, whose conceptualization of “professorates” as elder-led institutions of education and apprenticeship deeply inform my thinking on the mobilization of indigenous knowledge resources. See, Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, *Transient Workspaces: Technologies of Everyday Innovation in Zimbabwe* (Cambridge, 2014), 27.

<sup>101</sup> Wagner, “Zoutpansberg: The Dynamics of a Hunting Frontier,” 330.

<sup>102</sup> Ross explores the historical and contemporary dynamic of *Vhomakhadzi* as it pertains to preservation of biodiversity in Venda. See Kimberly Bernita Ross, “*Traditional Terrain: Land, Gender, and Cultural Biodiversity Preservation in Venda, South Africa* (Ph.D. thesis, Michigan State University, 2017).

powerful officials in the small cadre of personages who selects a successor from the departed leader's eligible heirs.<sup>103</sup> Chapters two, four, and five center on the prominent careers of several such Vhomakhadzi.

Beyond their maintenance of the ritual scaffolding that undergirded confederal politics, women of all ranks contributed much to the material basis of Venda communities. The Zoutpansberg mountains separate the arid flatlands of the Limpopo-Sashi River basin to the north and the more temperate hills to the south. Though the nutrient rich loam of the mountains often supported two harvests per year, the greater Translimpopo catchment was vulnerable to episodic drought and crop failures.<sup>104</sup> Women were central to the repertoires of practice that mitigated environmental crisis. Like their neighbors to the south in BaLobedu, women of the Mbedzi mutupo interceded with ancestral spirits to provide rain.<sup>105</sup> The most powerful of the Mbedzi Venda rainmakers presided over the area known as Tshulu. And, upon their ascent to the throne, each female king of Tshulu inherited the title of khavho ya madi, or "ladle of water" in recognition of her rainmaking powers.<sup>106</sup>

Beyond the ever-present threat of famine, Vhavenda modified their agricultural practices in response to the political upheavals that engulfed much of the subcontinent south of the River Zambezi from the second quarter of the nineteenth century. During the era remembered as the Mushavho or "times of flight," the nascent Swazi and Ndebele states sent raiding parties to pillage Venda crops. Importantly, Vhavenda soon discerned that the majority of these raids occurred when local granaries were full after the May – July harvests. The idiom, khotheni ha zwimange, or "hoeing the cat's face" thus connotes the small-scale gardens that Venda women cultivated and from which they could quickly

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<sup>103</sup> Pfarelo Matshidze, *The Role of Makhadzi in Traditional Leadership Among the Venda* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Zululand, 2013), 13.

<sup>104</sup> Hugh Stayt, *The Baveda*, (Oxford, 1931), 4.

<sup>105</sup> Shadreck Chirikuri, Christopher Mabeza, et al, "Agriculture and Rainmaking" in Mario Scerri, ed., *The Emergence of Systems of Innovation in South[ern] Africa: Long Histories and Contemporary Debates* (Johannesburg, 2016), 114.

<sup>106</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Mafhungo na Nganea dza Tshulu* (Johannesburg, 1991), 4.

gather crops to sustain their children before evacuating settlements for the safety of the mountains.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, women's labor provided for both the material wellbeing and social resiliency of Venda communities.

This interpretation of Venda gardens as a defensive adaptation draws on ethnographic work commissioned by the Department of Bantu Administration and Development. Despite the dubious nature of apartheid-era ethnography, I rely on these and other such materials to reconstruct the repertoires of knowledge and material practices that constituted the Venda Armory. Nineteenth century missionaries also noticed the diminutive scale of Venda domestic agriculture, as did social anthropologists during the interwar years. Interestingly, their attempts to explain the same manifestation of Venda material culture produced conclusions that differed from those of the Bantu Administration ethnographers. The next section outlines the sources of evidence that substantiate my historical claims as well as the methodologies that inform my interpretation of evidence.

### PART III: Sources and Methodology

"The Armory" builds upon the seminal scholarship of other historians, while also addressing a long-acknowledged shortcoming in mainstream academic histories. Philip Bonner highlights the gaps in South African historiography. In the introduction to *Kings, Commoners, and Concessionaires* (1983), a groundbreaking investigation into the origins, development and eventual collapse of the Swazi state, Bonner alludes to the many aspects of precolonial African history that still "await serious academic attention."<sup>108</sup> With respect to Venda, his observations are as accurate today as they were some four decades ago. Raiding Zoutpansberg for cattle and crops was a feature of Swazi King Mswati II's foreign policy for the entirety of his reign from 1840 to 1865.<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, whilst Queen Regent

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<sup>107</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, *Venda Law, Part V: Property* (Pretoria, 1967), 1111.

<sup>108</sup> Philip Bonner, *Kings, Commoners, and Concessionaires: The Evolution and Dissolution of the Nineteenth-Century Swazi State* (Cambridge, 1983), 1.

<sup>109</sup> Bonner, *Kings, Commoners*, 102. Hugh Stait, *The Bavenda* (London, 1931), 71.

Tsandile Ndwandwe's opponents enmeshed the AmaSwazi more deeply into the politics of Zoutpansberg and elsewhere in Transvaal—to the detriment of the Swazi state in 1867—it was Venda that Bonner describes as a scattering of “disunited chiefdoms.”<sup>110</sup> Although Venda lacked a centralized state structure, as Bonner duly notes, its political “disunity” was less historically salient than another fact. Venda chiefdoms were mutually autonomous and simultaneously bound to each other by custom, kinship, religion, and politics in a geopolitical body more accurately characterized as a confederation. Thus, the interior dynamics of Venda, detailed in the substantive chapters of this project, contributes to our ability to recognize the diverse constellation of precolonial African political formations.

Peter Delius also contributed much to our understanding of more loosely configured states in, *The Land Belongs to Us* (1983). Like *Kings, Commoners, and Concessionaires*, Delius's book is a social history, one that chronicles the Pedi polity. There were at least two discernible phases in the political history of the Pedi state. The ascendancy of Thulare in the 1820s marked the “apogee of Pedi power and prestige” under the Moroteng chiefdom.<sup>111</sup> If factional disputes among Thulare's successors weakened the Moroteng grip on power, it was the political upheavals of the difaqane that brought down the chieftaincy.<sup>112</sup> Pedi chiefs eventually liberated themselves from Ndebele overlordship. The formation that emerged under the rule of Sekwati and his successor Sekhukhune “represented a new political system” than the one it had replaced.<sup>113</sup> Whereas the vestiges of genealogical rank and seniority from the pre-difaqane order imbued its successor with some legitimacy, under Sekwati and Sekhukhune, the Maroteng paramountcy existed more so as the first among equals in relation to competing centers of power within the polity.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Bonner, 143.

<sup>111</sup> Peter Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us, The Pedi Polity, the Boers, and the British in the Nineteenth Century Transvaal* (Johannesburg, 1983), 15.

<sup>112</sup> Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us*, 19

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

There are broad parallels in the historical trajectories of Venda and BaPedi. The era known as the *difaqane* among northern-Sotho speakers is remembered as the *mushavho* or ‘times of flight’ among Vhavenda. And, like the Pedi paramountcy, threats of raids from militarized neighbors occasioned a reconfiguration of political power in Venda. Yet, a crucial distinction is that the era of confederation in Venda predated by two decades the arrival of Tsonga, Ndebele, and Swazi raiders whose predations gave impetus to the ‘times of flight’. In other words, the tributary Venda state consolidated during the reign of Thohoyandou had already fragmented into a confederacy by the time that the Ndandwe and Ndebele had smashed the first Maroteng chieftaincy. Notably, Delius writes little about the relationships between the Pedi paramountcy and the Venda confederacy to the north, though Venda sources allude to a more robust network of connections between the two.<sup>115</sup>

The presence of Lutheran evangelists was yet another common facet of BaPedi and Venda histories. Delius uses the documentary record of the Berlin Mission Society to enrich his exploration of the Maroteng paramountcy during the nineteenth century. So too does Alan Kirkaldy in, *Capturing the Soul*, which traces the history of the Berlin Mission in Zoutpansberg. Missionaries arrived in Venda in 1872 and established the first of several mission stations soon after. The book chronicles the first three decades of BMS ecclesiastical work among Vhavenda from the narrative perspective of the missionaries whose journals, annual reports, and personal diaries make up the BMS archives. A collaboration between Caroline Jeannerat—then a doctoral candidate in history and anthropology at the University of Michigan—and Helga Giesecke who descends from the first generation of BMS missionaries in Zoutpansberg, who translated the materials from German to English, produced this archive consisting of nearly 1000 transcribed pages. Like many other missionaries, BMS evangelists were diligent chroniclers. While the progress of their proselytizing mission was a central theme in their

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<sup>115</sup> 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* (Pretoria, 1940), 44-45.

writings, the Lutherans also recorded a wealth of information about politics at the local and confederal levels, warfare, and everyday life. Of course, the missionaries were neither objective observers nor disinterested parties to the events recounted in their papers.

In his at times uncritical acceptance of the missionary's words, Kirkaldy also reproduces their prejudices, which are then represented as historical facts in *Capturing the Soul*. Yet, the few African voices in the narrative, mitigated as they are through the writings of missionaries, he engages with skepticism. For instance, BMS archives include a biographical sketch of a man identified as David Denga, the second Muvenda convert to join the Ha-Tshivhasa mission station. In an interview with the Rev. Beuster, Denga recounted the violence visited upon himself and his Karanga compatriots at the hands of Boer settlers in Zoutpansberg. The Boers' employment of coercion and brutality as the primary means of mobilizing African labor is corroborated in other documentary sources not referenced in *Capturing the Soul*. Denga describes his familiarity with the tactics that Africans employed to escape their captors.<sup>116</sup> "When they were surprised by the burghers, and it was not possible to hide, they stand on their heads with their legs stretched up in the air." Under cover of darkness, the presumably mounted pursuers mistook their inverted forms as "poles and go past them."<sup>117</sup> To Kirkaldy, Denga's account is apocryphal. Interestingly, part of the author's skepticism

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<sup>116</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>117</sup> Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul*, 48. Alan Kirkaldy, "History Teaching in Rural Areas: The University of Venda," *A Journal of Opinion* 24, 1 (1996), 20.



Figure 1: Photo image of the Nzelele head-stand dance. Nkhumeleni Ralushai, *Nzhelele: An Ethnomusicological, Historical and Linguistic Analysis* (Unpublished Pamphlet)

stems from a question mark inscribed in the margins of the original hand-written transcript of Denga's testimony.<sup>118</sup> Drawing on what Kirkaldy interprets as evidence that the missionary had his own doubts about the veracity of the Black man's words, he writes, "I am convinced that it [wa]s folkloristic" embellishment, or perhaps a metaphorical expression of Vhavenda desperation to evade the homicidal rampages of their Boer captors.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 49. I have not read the original hand-written archives from which the English adaptation was adapted. Yet, in her notes appended to the corresponding passage, Helga Giesekke alludes the presence of the question mark. In her remarks, Giesekke mirrors Kirkaldy's interpretation as indicative of the missionary's skepticism.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 49. 20



Just as in *Capturing the Soul*, the BMS archives are an important primary source in this project. Crucially, I also rely on other sources, to include ethnographies, oral traditions, and vernacular literature as a counterbalance to the normative biases expressed in missionary writings. These sources enrich my scholarship with insights about the epistemologies and imaginative universe of Vhavenda.<sup>120</sup> The ethnomusicologist John Blacking captured the image in the first plate, which depicts a Muvenda youth, standing on his head with legs extended into the air in a manner not unlike that described in Denga's testimony. In an unpublished pamphlet, Victor Ralushai challenged Blacking's interpretation of the Nzhelele dance as an artifact of male initiation schools in which children were made to stand on their heads to illustrate the proper position of an infant in its mother's womb immediately prior to birth.<sup>121</sup> Citing the tonal difference between Nzhelele as headstand dance vice Nzhelele as a locative, combined with a dearth of evidence that females initiate partook in the practice, Ralushai makes two conclusions that are immediately relevant here. First, given Ralushai's observation about the variety of contexts in which Vhavenda youth partook in the Nzhelele head-stand dance, Denga's testimony deserved no less credence than that which Kirkaldy afforded to the missionary's in *Capturing the Soul*. Second, the "inter-disciplinary approach" that Ralushai employed to test competing interpretations of Vhavenda culture yield "deeper insights than a single disciplinary approach."<sup>122</sup> "The Armory" responds to Ralushai's exhortation to interdisciplinarity.

In the present study, interdisciplinarity encompasses the consultation of evidence from different knowledge domains, but also to the supplemental use of methodologies and interpretive paradigms beyond those that are organic to the discipline of history. I draw on insights from historical

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<sup>120</sup> Kirkaldy elaborates on the tendency among the students he encountered as a Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Venda to attribute historical events to "mythological history." Kirkaldy cites as examples, instances in which "communities were saved by baboons" and "wars won due to supernatural influence." Alan Kirkaldy, "History Teaching in Rural Areas: The University of Venda," *A Journal of Opinion* 24, 1, (1996), 20.

<sup>121</sup> Victor Ralushai met Blacking in 1956 and facilitated the latter's research in Venda.

<sup>122</sup> Victor Ralushai, *Nzhelele: An Ethnomusicological, Historical and Linguistic Analysis* (198?), Unpublished paper in the possession of the author.

linguistics, archaeology, and anthropology to evaluate the epistemological value of non-traditional evidence as the basis of historical claims. As illustrated in the foregoing discussion of recent scholarship that draws on the BMS archives as a primary source, interdisciplinarity enhances the application of the historical method. Like Kirkaldy, a historian, the social anthropologist Hugh Stayt also relied on the words of nineteenth century missionaries in his magnum opus, *The Bavenda* (1931). Still cited as an authoritative analysis of Vhavenda culture, Jeannerat credits Stayt for “a fairly neutral image” of Venda customs. And, with just one exception, she writes that Stayt does “not incorporate[e] any evaluations or judgments” of his subject matter.<sup>123</sup> Though Jeannerat does recognize evidence of Stayt’s biases, his book does reflect the prejudices of the missionaries whose writings supplement his own research. His explanation for the comparatively small size of Venda gardens described in the previous section underscores the values of reading of evidential texts against their own representational grain.

Stayt opines that Vhavenda cultivated small gardens because “the slothful character of the average Muvenda prevents him from doing more than the minimal amount of work necessary to maintain life.”<sup>124</sup> This pejorative interpretation of household agriculture closely resembled that of BMS Rev. Beuster. In a diary entry dated 18 March 1874, Beuster wrote scornfully that it was the “tremendous laziness and stupidity of [Venda] people,” that explains how one might cultivate “a garden the size of his lazy body and think he has done enough.”<sup>125</sup> Whereas the interpretation of Venda gardens as a security adaptation proffered by N.J. Van Warmelo and W.M.D. Phophi aligns with the broader objectives of this study, I find their explanations compelling for more substantive

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<sup>123</sup> Caroline F. Jeannerat, *An Ethnography of Faith: Personal Conceptions of Religiosity in the Soutpansberg, South Africa, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 2007), 128. The one area where Jeannerat identifies Stayt’s bias related to Venda cosmology.

<sup>124</sup> Stayt, 34.

<sup>125</sup> Beuster Report from Ha-Tshivhase, March 1874/BMB0/418/75.

reasons. In circumstances such as this, wherein a researcher is obliged to choose between competing appraisals of the same phenomena, the archaeologist Robert Dunnell suggests that discretion should privilege the argument conferring the “greatest power of explanation.”<sup>126</sup> The sloth thesis originally postulated by nineteenth century missionaries and subsequently refashioned and legitimized as ethnographic fact explained little about those components of the Venda Armory, such as agriculture, that were hidden in plain sight and woven into the fabric of everyday life. With respect to this project, I attempt to cross reference historical and ethnographic texts wherever possible.

Van Warmelo edited several major investigations of Venda culture and history to include the Five Part Venda Law Series, and *The Copper Miners of Musina* (1940). In each of these Native Affairs Department (NAD) publications, Van Warmelo presents both Tshivenda and English translations of informant testimony, a curatorial choice that likely reflected his primary training as a linguist. Perhaps, Van Warmelo’s editorial decisions were also consistent with his intentions to cast his work as “ideologically neutral” representations of the societies under examination.<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, both the political context in which he conducted his work and his own value judgments about Vhavenda are discernible in his writings. For instance, as noted earlier, the Tshivenda word for king is Thovhele. Given his intricate knowledge of the language, African scholars have remarked on Van Warmelo’s tendency to render Thovhele not as king but rather as “chief” in his published works as an indication of the ethnologist’s ideological position that only Europeans were worthy of royalty.

Van Warmelo relied on African informants for much of the data that he published during his decades-long career.<sup>128</sup> W.M.D. Phophi shared co-author credits on many of Van Warmelo’s

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<sup>126</sup> Robert Dunnell, *Systematics in Prehistory* (1971), 39.

<sup>127</sup> W.D. Hammond-Tooke, “N.J. Van Warmelo and the ethnological section a memoir,” *African Studies* 54, 1 (1995), 123-4.

<sup>128</sup> Sekibakiba Peter Lekgoathi, “Colonial’ Experts, Local Interlocutors, Informants, and the Making of an Archive on the ‘Transvaal Ndebele’, 1930-1989,” *Journal of African History* 50, (2009), 61-80.

publications related to Venda. The precise division of labor between the pair of ethnologists is unclear, though some of Phophi's surviving associates indicate that he grew disillusioned with his work for the NAD and the nature of his relationship with Van Warmelo in particular.<sup>129</sup> Van Warmelo recognized Phophi's contributions to the Venda Dictionary, a magisterial project so comprehensive in scope that its contents serve as a concordance for Tshivenda idioms and proverbs. One such proverb may speak to the complexity of Van Warmelo's collaborative relationship with Phophi. *Mudodzi wa ngoma a si mulidzi wayo*, ("The person who greases the drum is not the one who will beat it") connotes a situation whereby "one person does the work [while] another gets the credit."<sup>130</sup>

Phophi was a prolific author in his own right. He penned nearly a dozen Tshivenda language histories independent of his work on behalf of the NAD. Though the original publication dates for these vernacular histories are unclear, most of Phophi's books survive in the personal collections of Muvenda academicians and laypersons, as well as in institutional libraries of several elite North American universities.<sup>131</sup> These texts enrich this project, though their epistemological value as historical sources merits elaboration. The words *Nganea* (stories) appears in the Tshivenda titles to many of these books, while others are categorized as "historical novels." Crucially, I have recovered little evidence from my interviews with his surviving contemporaries and persons familiar with the provenance of his work suggesting that Phophi saw himself as somehow engaged in the production of fiction.<sup>132</sup> For example, he identified by name those persons who supplied the testimonies recounted in his books. And, in at least one instance, Phophi selected informants for his ethnographic research from among the same pool of informants who supplied data pursuant to the NAD's intelligence

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<sup>129</sup> Field Notes, 21 July 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, 202.

<sup>131</sup> In the field, I found some university and public libraries in South Africa possess no more than a single volume of these books. I came to possess a nearly complete set of Phophi's vernacular text via interlibrary loan from the University of Pennsylvania Library, and Yale University Library.

<sup>132</sup> Field Notes, 21 July 2019.

gathering activities.<sup>133</sup> He explicitly stated the purpose of his work as the preservation of information for the benefit of Vhavenda, unlike his research on behalf of the NAD<sup>134</sup> The Nganea phrasing, moreover, is a common feature of the type of vernacular literature that has lost its performative qualities according to Isabel Hofmeyr.<sup>135</sup> Like this study, Hofmeyr's research centered on narrative evidence recovered from communities in what was then known as the northern Transvaal. The loose structure of these knowledge resources does not strip them of their historical value. Like the nonwane literature particular to Ndebele Sotho-Tswana peoples in Hofmeyr's research, I categorize Phophi's work as "oral historical narrative."<sup>136</sup>

While the material collected by Phophi and others are an important repository of evidence in this project, my work also builds on evidence recovered during nearly two dozen interviews with informants in Limpopo, South Africa and recorded between March 2018 and September 2019. In all but four of the interviews, a research assistant augmented my intermediate command of Tshivenda language. I also relied on research assistants as cultural intermediaries with elders, traditional authorities, and informants.

"The Venda Armory" also seeks to contribute to the rather limited historical literature about nineteenth century Venda. Two authors merit mention here, as subsequent scholars have accepted their research as authoritative. The first is Dr. Mphaya Henry Nemudzivhadi. Immediately prior to his

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<sup>133</sup> Phophi interviewed a man who he identifies as Shuruma pursuant his work on Part V of the *Venda Law Series*, published in 1967. Shuruma lived at Ha-Luvhimbi in 1897 when Makwarela, heir apparent to the Mphaphuli dynasty, ordered a raid against the settlement that resulted in the death of Itani, the last of the Mbedzi rainmakers. Shuruma fled to Dzimauli in the aftermath of the attack. In the preface to *Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli*, authored in 1951, Phophi identifies Shuruma among those whose testimonies were included in the book. According to the preface, Shuruma fought on behalf of Tshikhosi's successful forces who reclaimed the Rambuda kingship in 1898. N.J. Van Warmelo, *Venda Law, Part 5: Property* (Pretoria, 1967), 1113. W.M.D. Phophi, *Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli: A History of Rambuda's Tribe, Northern Transvaal* [1955] (Johannesburg, 1970), 7.

<sup>134</sup> Phophi, *Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli*, 5.

<sup>135</sup> Hofmeyr cites examples in which such materials are subsumed under words equivalent in meaning to 'narrative', 'tale' or 'story'. See Isabel Hofmeyr, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom* (Portsmouth, 1993), 9.

<sup>136</sup> Hofmeyr, 4, 9.

death in July 2018, Nemudzivhadi published his 1998 Ph.D. thesis which chronicled the career of King Makhado, lineal head of the Ramabulana dynasty from 1864-1895. With its focus on historical figures at the expense of historical process, Nemudzivhadi's work is emblematic of the prominent aspects of the liberal intellectual tradition in South African historiography. Nemudzivhadi assembled his narrative from oral traditions, archival documents in English, Dutch and Afrikaans, and oral historical narrative such as Phophi's Nganea. To a significant extent, my work is indebted to Nemudzivhadi's scholarship. At the same time, "The Venda Armory" seeks to revise one element of historiographical orthodoxy of which Nemudzivhadi is among the principal architects. More than any other scholar before or since, Nemudzivhadi's research contributed to a paradigm that casts nineteenth century Venda as a unified kingdom under the titular control of the Ramabulana dynasty. It is true that during his reign, Makhado did much to expand the territory under his control. And yet, precisely the same is true of other Singo and non-Singo potentates during the same conjuncture. Many of the primary sources consulted for this project allude to a fact pattern at odds with Nemudzivhadi's extent narrative of Ramabulana dominance—one that is characterized by an ever-shifting constellation of political affiliations with neither permanent alliances nor permanent enmities. The Ramabulana centric orientation of Nemudzivhadi's work reinforced a perception of Western Zoutpansberg as the center of Venda politics. It is true that Voortrekker Louis Trichardt originally attempted to win a dispensation of land from a Ramabulana King in the 1830s.<sup>137</sup> Nearly two decades later, Europeans founded a permanent settlement at Schoemansdal located in the flatlands of Ha-Ramabulana.

Roger Wagner authored the other canonical history of Venda. In a book chapter titled, "Zoutpansberg: The Dynamics of a Hunting Frontier, 1848–67," Wagner investigated the origins of Schoemansdal and the ways in which its founding gave impetus to an intensification of commercial

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<sup>137</sup> J.C.A. Boeyens, *Louis Tregardt en die Oprolgingstryd tussen Ramabulana en Ramavhoya*, *Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Joernaal* 23, (1990), 41-53.

hunting in the Translimpopo.<sup>138</sup> The network of hunters of European and African extractions, itinerant merchants, and commercial circuits linking Schoemansdal's ivory economy to the Indian Ocean world Wagner labeled the *jagtersgemeenskap*, or hunting community.<sup>139</sup> The Schoemansdal hunters entered into clientelist relationships with Africans who they employed to pursue elephant in the tsetse fly region in exchange for a share of the spoils of the hunt. Schoemansdalers also supplied Africans with firearms, a decision that spelled both the ultimate collapse of the *jagtersgemeenskap* and the emergence of a distinctive feature of Venda historical studies. "So many Africans had acquired guns" by the 1860s, Wagner wrote, that "a unique stratum of the *jagtersgemeenskap* arose, composed of *swart skut*," a Dutch term equivalent in meaning to "black shot" or black marksmen.<sup>140</sup> When Schoemansdalers refused to compensate their Black employees in the mid-1860s, these so-called *swart skut* elected to keep for themselves the guns which they had hitherto returned at the end of each hunting season. Crucially, the man who orchestrated this collective response was Makhado, who in Wagner's words, "was himself a *swart skut*."<sup>141</sup>

In the four decades since Wagner's chapter was published, the *swart skut* has become the single most recognizable feature in the historiography of Zoutpansberg. In terms of its various afterlives in subsequent literature, the scant evidence that Wagner references about the *swart skut*, its original coinage and popular use in the mid-nineteenth century cites has obliged other historians to conjure their own narrative embellishments. I interrogate Wagner's claims, to include those related to

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<sup>138</sup> Lindsay Braun previously cited an article that expounds on a conceptualization of Western Venda as a polity onto itself. The same is true of Jan Boeyens' unpublished M.A. thesis, which reconstructs a Swazi and Gaza-Ngoni invasion of 1869 as a war between Whites and the forces of Makhado Ramabulana. Chapter four revisits this military confrontation that Vhavenda remembers as the *Mabunyu War*, as an extension of African rather than European/settler politics. See, Lindsay Frederick Braun, "The Returns of the King: The Case of Mphephu and Western Venda, 1899-1904," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, 2 (2013), 271-291. J.C.A. "Boeyens, Die konflik tussen die Venda en die Blankes in Transvaal, 1864-1869" (M.A. thesis, University of Pretoria, 1990).

<sup>139</sup> Wagner, 315.

<sup>140</sup> Wagner, 330.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

the swart skut in chapter two. Importantly, Wagner and Nemudzivhadi's research exist in a historiographical praxis that continues to shape the hegemonic narrative of Venda during its century-long era of confederal independence.

Finally, my work seeks to build upon the other comparatively recent published and unpublished scholarship about Venda. Maanda Mulaudzi's 2000 doctoral thesis, "U Shuma Bulasi: Agrarian Transformation in the Zoutpansberg District of South Africa, up to 1946" addresses a gap in the historiography of rural agrarian change in South Africa. Neither the Transvaal Republic nor the British crown possessed the coercive powers required to influence the disposition of land in and around Zoutpansberg. For their part, Vhavenda frustrated external attempts to survey their land for the purpose of taxation, the demarcation of native reserves and the reapportionment of land to white speculators. Drawing on oral interviews and government documents, Mulaudzi explored the gradual 'transformation of "Zoutpansberg from a 'native country' into a 'white man's country' during the late-nineteenth century."<sup>142</sup> Braun further developed this theme in *Colonial Survey and Native Landscapes in Rural South Africa, 1850–1913* (2015). The colonial state instrumentalized the production of cadastral maps as an intelligence gathering exercise pursuant to the establishment of colonial rule.<sup>143</sup> Tension between the colonial state's imperative to reorganize indigenous land tenures through the production of maps and the various means by which Black South Africans resisted the rationalization of their possessions are the book's animating themes.<sup>144</sup> To an extent, the same can be said of Mulaudzi's doctoral thesis. And to varying degrees, both pieces of scholarship reconstruct the external forces with which Vhavenda aristocrats and commoners alike were obliged to contend. Importantly, this dissertation attempts to reconstruct the internal political, social, and material dynamics of the

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<sup>142</sup> Maanda Mulaudzi, "U Shuma Bulasi" Agrarian Transformation in the Zoutpansberg District of South Africa, up to 1946," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 2000).

<sup>143</sup> Lindsay Frederick Braun *Colonial Survey and Native Landscapes in Rural South Africa, 1850-1913*, (Leiden, 2015), 2.

<sup>144</sup> Braun, *Colonial Survey*, 8.



Venda confederacy to better understand the security architecture that Vhavenda mobilized in defense of the last Black South African independent state.

#### PART IV: Chapter Synopsis

Chapter one reconstructs the early history of Venda from the late seventeenth century until the third quarter of the eighteenth. Consistent with the ways in which Vhavenda organized and periodize their past(s), this chapter explores several distinct epochs of Venda history. The first synthesizes the published and unpublished scholarship related to the pre-Singo era. The southward migration of the Singo and their Lemba companions in the late seventeenth century is the next phase. Archaeological evidence provides a rough chronology of the destruction of Dzata and the subsequent scattering of the Singos. This era, commemorated in Venda lore as the muphadalalo, marked the earliest phases of political confederation in Zoutpansberg. The final phase in the trajectory of the Venda discussed in this chapter is the mushavho, when predatory raiders forced Vhavenda to abandon settlements in the fertile flatlands in favor of barricaded redoubts constructed in the Zoutpansberg Mountains.

Chapter two explores the early years of contact with Europeans and the Africanization of European gun technology. Chapter three begins with the 1867 collapse of the Afrikaner settlement at Schoemansdal and concludes with the successful mobilization of the Venda Armory during the Mabunyu (naked people) War of 1869, when Vhavenda defeated an invading force of 8,000 soldiers from the Swazi and Gaza-Ngoni states. Chapter four centers on the role of violence and warfare as a medium of political discourse in Venda confederal politics. This chapter also centers on the careers of several Venda women, who leveraged warfare as a means of furthering their own political interests. The final chapter traces the last decades of Venda independence and the confluence of events through which the confederacy was absorbed into the British Empire.

## CHAPTER ONE: Venda Origins, Language, and Material Culture

This chapter traces the origins of Venda language, material culture, and important aspects of Venda identity. Drawing on evidence from several academic disciplines and knowledge domains, this chapter makes three historically oriented arguments. First, Tshivenda language likely developed from an amalgamation of Sotho-Tswana and Karanga (western Shona) influences in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Moreover, the consolidation of Tshivenda generated a distinct impression on the material record of the Zoutpansberg. The temporal pedigree of Tshivenda informs historically oriented discourses about which groups—the aboriginal clans or the more recent arrivals—contributed most to the formulation of Venda identities. The second argument directly engages with these discourses. The available evidence demonstrates that the “newcomers,” under the leadership of the legendary ruler Thohoyandou, fashioned a new political entity in Zoutpansberg from the cultural institutions, language, and customs of the aboriginal Tshivenda-speaking clans. I describe this process as “absorptive conquest.” In contrast to the standard periodization of the Venda past, I argue that the cultural absorption of aboriginal language and customs played out over a much longer time frame than has generally been assumed in the literature. From the early nineteenth century, Venda was subject to predatory raids from Northern Nguni peoples during their northward migrations from Zululand in search of commercial opportunities in the lower Zambezi River basin. The upheavals of the early 1800s are known as the Mfecane or Difaqane.<sup>1</sup> Among Tshivenda speakers, however, this same era is remembered by a different name: the Mushavho, or times of flight. In response to the threat of predatory raids, the allochthonous Vhavenda drew on the traditions, customs, and repertoires of ritual

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Cobbing, The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo, *The Journal of African History* 29, 3 (1988), 487-519. Elizabeth Eldredge, Sources of Conflict in Southern Africa, c. 1800-30: The Mfecane Reconsidered, *The Journal of African History* 33, 1 (1992), 1-35. Norman Etherington, A Tempest in a Teapot? Nineteenth Century Contests for Land in South Africa’s Caledon Valley and the Invention of the Mfecane, *Journal of African History* 45, 2 (2004), 203-219.

practice of the Ngoni peoples to build a confederation, one that was capable of defending itself against external predation.

### Venda Language and Ceramics

The scholarly consensus about the origins of Venda language and identities are closely tied to the sequential emergence of new styles of pottery. Johannes Loubser traces the pedigree of Venda language to the appearance of distinct ceramic expressions. Stratigraphic excavations and radiocarbon dating suggests that Tavhatshena ceramics first appeared in Zoutpansberg in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The people who manufactured Tavhatshena ceramics combined stylistic elements hitherto associated with two earlier styles. The first major influence came from Khami, a ceramic tradition associated with Karanga speaking peoples from north of the Limpopo. The second influence came from Moloko ceramics, which were associated with Sotho-Tswana speaking communities.<sup>3</sup> Loubser argues that the mid-fifteenth century appearance of Tavhatshena pottery found both north and south of the Zoutpansberg reflected an intensification of social relationships and intermarriage between Karanga and Sotho-Tswana speaking peoples. The final element of the sequence is central to Loubser's interpretation. He claims that within a century of its appearance in Zoutpansberg, a new style had superseded and indeed replaced both Tavhatshena and its Moloko and Khami antecedents. This new expression Loubser called Letaba.<sup>4</sup>

Loubser uses Venda language as the bridging argument that substantiates his claim about the nature of the material record. In the discipline of archaeology, bridging arguments are based on analogies between evidence and theory. Bridging arguments are themselves predicated upon the

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<sup>2</sup> Johannes Loubser, "Archaeology and Early Venda History," *Goodwin Series* 6 (1989), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Hamilton, Simon Hall, "Reading Across the Divides: Commentary on the Political Co-presence of Disparate Identities in Two Regions of South Africa in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, 2 (2012), 281.

<sup>4</sup> L. Jacobson, J. H. N. Loubser, et al, "Pixe Analysis of Pre-European Pottery from the Northern Transvaal and its Relevance to the Distribution of Ceramic Styles, Social Interaction and Change," *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 46, (1991), 20.

assumption that if two classes of phenomena are alike in some respects, they are likely similar in other respects.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Loubser argued that the synthesis of Kalanga grammar with Sotho vocabulary that characterizes Tshivenda language are analogous to Tavhatshena and Letaba pottery, which combines decorative and functional elements of Kalanga and Sotho-Tswana culture.<sup>6</sup>

The strength of this linguistic/ceramic analogy turns on the novelty of Tavhatshena and Letaba style ceramics. And it is largely because Letaba was unique neither to the Zoutpansberg area, nor to Tshivenda speakers that scholars have challenged Loubser's chronology. Historians for example cite the use of both Moloko and Letaba pots by the Northern Ndebele of South Africa as a rebuttal to the presumed "link between ceramic style and language."<sup>7</sup> Likewise, archaeologists point to the wider use of Letaba among Tsonga and Sotho speakers across northern South Africa to demonstrate why "it is not sensible to always correlate . . . ceramic styles" with discrete cultural formations.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, this critique confuses a conclusion with a methodological principle. Loubser extends his claims about a link between ceramics styles and linguistic identities to the narrow context of fifteenth- and sixteenth century Zoutpansberg. Nor does Loubser claim that the adoption of this specific form of ceramic expression was exclusive to Vhavenda. In other words, that Northern Ndebele produced Letaba during the nineteenth century does not preclude the probability that this style originally appeared in Zoutpansberg, and that the people who first produced it were speakers of an amalgamated language known as Tshivenda.

Despite the limited scale of his findings and their inapplicability to other archaeological circumstances, Loubser's chronology is still the most serviceable explanation for the origins of the

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Lewis, *Camden: Historical Archaeology in the South Carolina Backcountry* (Belmont, 2006), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Huffman, "Historical Archaeology of the Mapungubwe Area: Boer, Birwa, Sotho-Tswana and Machete," *Southern African Humanities* 24 (2012), 39.

<sup>7</sup> Sekibakiba Peter Lekgoathi, Ethnicity and Gender in Pre-Colonial Ndebele Societies in 'South Africa,'" in Lungisile Ntsebeza and Chris Saunders, *Papers from the Pre-Colonial Catalytic Project Vol. 1* (Cape Town, 2014), 60.

<sup>8</sup> Shadreck Chirikure, *Great Zimbabwe, Reclaiming a 'Confiscated' Past* (London, 2021), 143.

Venda language. It also serves as a useful point of departure for a historically oriented periodization of early Venda history—one grounded in archaeological scales of time. In the first chapter, I alluded to popular and academic discourses about which groups—aboriginal and early arriving Vhavenda or the latter arriving Singo and Lemba—contributed most to Venda cultural identity. The extant archaeo-linguistic consensus does rather compellingly propose a solution to the debate. People in the Zoutpansberg region spoke Tshivenda language as early as a century prior to the Singo migration. Inasmuch as a shared language constitutes one among many possible markers of belonging and identity, the evidence clearly underscores the contributions of pre-Singo, Tshivenda speakers. I return to this question later in this chapter to explore the role of metallurgical knowledge as another marker of autochthonous identity.

#### Making a Singo Elite

The Singo comprise the ruling elite of Venda. Oral traditions and ethnographic literature confirm that the Singo, who migrated across the Limpopo in the 1700s, were a branch of the Rozvi state, which dominated much of central and southern Zimbabwe from the late seventeenth until the early nineteenth centuries.<sup>9</sup> The Singo departed from the area around the Rozvi capital at Danamombe in the company of the Lemba. In Venda sources, the Lemba served the Rozvi as ritual specialists. They also bore the property of their patrons. The most important item that the itinerants brought with them to Zoutpansberg was the legendary “death dealing” drum, *ngoma lungundu*.<sup>10</sup> Still other sources point to their deep involvement in long-distance trade among the central reasons why the Lemba allied themselves with the Rozvi prior to their southward migration.<sup>11</sup> Under the leadership of a potentate

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<sup>9</sup> David Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe, 900-1850: An Outline of Shona History* (New York, 1980), 212.

<sup>10</sup> According to Venda traditions, Venda God Nwali promised the Vhasenzi that they would overcome their opponents in Zoutpansberg so long as they retained control of *Ngoma Lungundu*. Control over *ngoma lungundu* assured the Singo Ernest Mudau, “*Ngoma Lungundu*,” in N. J. Van Warmelo, ed., *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg* (Pretoria, 1940), 18, 29.

<sup>11</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Vhalungunanguvho: Zaidhi (Lemba History)* (Johannesburg, 1982), 32.

identified as Vele Lambeau, the Singo and the Lemba settled in the Nzhelele valley, a natural migratory corridor to the Zoutpansberg mountains. There, the Singo used the stone walled settlement at Dzata as their political headquarters. Recent archaeological research indicates that Dzata was likely built prior to the arrival of the newcomers and that the site was occupied by members of the Kwevo mutupo when the Singo first arrived.<sup>12</sup> Vele Lambeau, also known as Dimbanyika, was eventually succeeded by his nephew, Phophi. Upon his ascent to the kingship, Phophi adopted the name Thohoyandou, which literally means the head of the elephant. Thohoyandou's reign is associated with the height of Singo power in Zoutpansberg. It was during his kingship that the Mbedzi rainmakers of Ha-Luvhimbi and the Vhatavhasindi of Thengwe were originally brought under the control of the Singo. The tributary polity consolidated under Thohoyandou's control was modeled on clientelist structures of the Rozvi state, especially in terms of the apportionment of land to allies and the regulation of trade with [commercial intermediaries embedded in the] Indian Ocean world.<sup>13</sup>

A confluence of internal and external development triggered the collapse of Dzata and the transformation of Venda from a tributary state into a confederation of mutually autonomous chiefdoms of Singo and non-Singo origin. First, the death or disappearance of Thohoyandou triggered a *muvhango*, or succession dispute, among his potential heirs. Other scholars point to the southward reorganization of the coastal trade away from Inhambane and Sofala and towards Delagoa Bay among the proximate causes for the fall of Dzata.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, radiocarbon dating, and oral traditions tell us that Dzata was destroyed in a fire sometime around 1760 AD.<sup>15</sup> In Venda traditions, the dispersal

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<sup>12</sup> Edwin Hanisch, *Reinterpreting the Origins of Dzata: Archaeology and Legends* in Natalie Swanepoel, Amanda Esterhuyesen and Philip Bonner, *Five Hundred Years Rediscovered: Southern African Precedents and Prospects* (Johannesburg, 2007), 122.

<sup>13</sup> Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe*, 261.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Mitchell, *The Archaeology of Southern Africa* (Cambridge, 2002), 340.

<sup>15</sup> Hanisch, "Reinterpreting the Origins of Dzata," 128.

of the Singos is remembered as the Muphadalalo.<sup>16</sup> We will return to this inflection point in the emergence of the Venda confederacy later in this chapter.

#### Gwamsenga's Flight from Dzata in the Construction of Venda Identity

In the process of consolidating his power, Thohoyandou confronted the challenge of cobbling together a coherent Venda identity from discrete lineages and cultural traditions. Unlike other precolonial southern African polities (the AmaZulu, Ndebele, Gaza-Ngoni etc.) where state building projects entailed a measure of political centralization, several factors militated against similar processes in Venda. First, the geography of Zoutpansberg tended to favor a more decentralized confederal model. Second, given their background, it seems likely that the combination of clientelism, and civil and administrative acumen that typified the Rozvi state structures would have held greater appeal for the Singos.<sup>17</sup> Thohoyandou's royal court at Dzata comprised members of the Ndalamo and Laudzi clans, neither of which were Singo.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the majority of those who paid -luvha to Dzata were non-Singo Tshivenda speakers. Yet, in at least one instance, it appears that Thohoyandou dealt with the challenge of a multi-lineal kingship by not dealing with it at all.

To ensure that his powers passed to one of his sons, Thohoyandou banished a senior member of his court.<sup>19</sup> Gwamasenga was a renowned healer who doctored the weapons that Thohoyandou's fighters used during their many wars of conquest across Zoutpansberg.<sup>20</sup> Beyond his ceremonial and political offices, Gwamasenga had a base of popular support that was independent of Thohoyandou.

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<sup>16</sup> N.M.R. Ralushai and J.R. Gray, "Ruins and Traditions of the Ngoni and Mbedzi Among the Venda of the Northern Transvaal," *Rhodesian History* 8, (1977), footnote 9. N.M.N Ralushai, "Further Traditions Concerning Luvhimbi and the Mbedzi," *Rhodesian History* 9 (1978), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Gerald Chikozho Mazaririr, "Reflections on Pre-Colonial Zimbabwe, c.850-1880," in Brian Raftopoulos and A.S. Mlambo, eds., *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-Colonial Period to 2008* (Harare, 2013), 20-2.

<sup>18</sup> Though the Ndalamo mutupo are not Singo, there were nevertheless seen as kingmakers in their own right. See, Mudau, "Ngoma Lungundu," 31.

<sup>19</sup> Magdalena J. Mugivhi, *Gwamasenga na vhana vhawe* (Unpublished Essay, University of Pretoria Special Collections, N.J. Van Warmelo Papers, 1937).

<sup>20</sup> (*Khosi*) Netshivhulana Davhana/Ha-Davhana. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 26 July 2019.

Some of Gwamasenga's followers included his own kin and their familiars. Others, such as those who belonged to the Vhulaudzi clan, recognized Gwamasenga as their leader, though their contemporary descendants insist that their forebearer's links to Gwamasenga were political rather than genealogical.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, neither the importance of his offices, nor his loyal service to the king, nor even the size of his personal following were sufficient for Gwamasenga to retain Thohoyandou's favor. Traditions tell us that Thohoyandou ordered Gwamasenga and his followers to take their leave from Dzata to prevent any of the latter's sons from contesting the kingship.<sup>22</sup> Gwamasenga did as instructed. And, in the decades prior to the fall of Dzata, he and his many followers embarked upon a project of migration, political expansion, settlement and conquest that set the stage for the era of confederation to come.

Gwamasenga, along with his people and a considerable herd of livestock left Dzata in the direction of the Luvhubu river some time before the 1750s.<sup>23</sup> From there, most of the travelers trekked as far south as present-day Pretoria. Having found the conditions not to their liking, Gwamasenga led his people on a circuitous route back towards the north in search of productive land upon which he might establish a dynastic lineage of his own. Over the next several years, the travelers surveyed the fertile flatlands to the south of the Zoutpansberg.<sup>24</sup> There, he and his followers encountered people who appear to have had no prior contact with Dzata or with Singo methods of civil administration. Along their northward migration, Gwamasenga installed several of his sons as rulers over their own countries. In the traditions that chronicle this phase of his career, the birth names of Gwamasenga's heirs have been conflated with the names of the places where they established their

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<sup>21</sup> (*Thovbele*) Calvin Nelwamondo/Lwamondo. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 30 July 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Mugivhi, *Gwamasenga na vhana vhawe* (Unpublished Essay, University of Pretoria Special Collections, N.J. Van Warmelo Papers, 1937).

<sup>23</sup> The sources agree that it was Thohoyandou who ordered Gwamasenga to leave Dzata. Radiocarbon dating of the Dzata ruins indicate that the site was abandoned sometime during the second half of the eighteenth century.

<sup>24</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Nganea Dzata Linzhelele* (Manzini, 1989), 20.



chieftaincies, such as Masia, Tshimbupfe, Tshisaulu and elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Gwamasenga reached the terminus of his trek at a place called Ha-Mutsha. With his favored son Tshipetana as his heir apparent, Gwamasenga established a chiefdom of his own, one that joined Ha-Mutsha with the neighboring chiefdom of Tsianda. And, when Gwamasenga died, Tshipetana ascended to the kingship.<sup>26</sup> Chapter five of this dissertation returns to Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda more than a century later, when the descendants of Tshipetana fought each other for control of the lands that were long ago conquered by their forebearer.

Though the sources are unclear on this point, it is likely that the Vhulaudzi remained with Gwamasenga from the time of his expulsion from Dzata until the end of his itineracy, when he established a chiefdom at Ha-Mutsha. During their many years of migration, the Vhulaudzi fought in the wars waged on behalf of Gwamasenga's sons, against the Vhangona clans who occupied Masia, Tshisaulu, Tshimbupfe and finally, at Ha-Mutsha. Only then did the Vhulaudzi part ways with Gwamasenga. From their traditions, we know that a potentate named Tshilande led the Vhulaudzi from Ha-Mutsha to Makambe, which is located fewer than 10 km (six miles) to the north. Their stay at Makambe was brief however, as Tshilande and his people sought out better lands for themselves at a place called Tshavhakololo. The Vhulaudzi relocated thrice more over the lifetimes of Tshilande's successors, Maphugwi and Radali. We return to Tshilande's descendants during the times of flight—explored in the next section—to reexamine how the Ngoni owners of the land taught the Vhulaudzi to interpret the calls of the sacred baboons of Lwamondo.

Just as the Singo extended a measure of political control over Tshivenda-speaking inhabitants of Zoutpansberg, so too did Gwamasenga, his sons and Laudzi companions expand a form of Singo

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<sup>25</sup> Mphaya Nemudzivhadi, "History of Vhulaudzi of Masia Mbado," *Masia News* (2007), 3.

<sup>26</sup> In her 1937 historical essay, Magdalena Mugivhi describes a sequence of events in which Tshipetana Kingship overlapped with the destruction of Dzata circa 1750-60 AD. See also Mugivhi, *Gwamasenga na vhana vhawe*.

administration across the hills and mountains to the south. The history of these interactions demonstrates the halting nature of Singo conquest. The itinerants linked to Gwamasenga encountered aboriginal communities in the south who still retained control over cultural institutions and repertoires of material practices that would later be associated with Vhavenda identity during the era of confederation. Although they subjugated the autochthonous communities, it was the newcomers who adopted Tshivenda language and culture. And, during the times of flight, discussed in the next section, the newcomers appropriated certain practices of the people whom they subjugated in a pattern of contact that I describe as absorptive conquest.

#### Singo Conquest, Rites of Passage, and Gender Dynamics

The gradual process through which the Singo assimilated themselves into Venda culture are observable in the transformation of initiation rites. In Venda, the rites of greatest antiquity include the Thondo lodge for men and the Vhusha and Domba for women. Girls enter the vhusha at puberty and they must pass through the Domba prior to marriage. The object of the vhusha and domba schools was to train girls for their culturally prescribed adult roles as wives and mothers, but also as the guardians of the repertoires of embodied practice that were woven into the fabric of everyday life in Venda. Likewise, Venda boys were obliged to attend thondo before they could gain recognition as fully fledged men.<sup>27</sup> There, boys were schooled in the standards of masculine conduct that would be expected of them as men, such as discipline endurance and basic military tactics.<sup>28</sup> These rites were organized at the homesteads of chiefs and headmen on a semi-annual basis, but generally not at the same time.<sup>29</sup> Though we do not know when Tshivenda-speaking peoples first began to observe these

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<sup>27</sup> Hugh Stayt, *The Bavenda* (Oxford, 1931), 101.

<sup>28</sup> Erika Dionisio, Franco Viviani, "Male Circumcision Among the Venda of Limpopo (South Africa)," in G. Denniston, F. Hodges, M. Milos, eds., *Genital Cutting: Protecting Children from Medical, Cultural, and Religious Infringements* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2013), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Van Warmelo, 52.

rites, it is clear that these cultural institutions predated the arrival of the Singo.<sup>30</sup> Dzivhani wrote that when Dimbanyika crossed the Limpopo in the mid-1700s, the Thondo, Vhusha, and Domba were all within the jurisdiction of the Luvhimbi rainmakers. It was only after the Singo established Dzata as their political headquarters that they supplanted Mbedzi leaders such as Luvhimbi as the convening authority for initiation rites.<sup>31</sup>

Although pre-Singo Venda society was divided between commoners and aristocrats, there is scant evidence about how social station shaped the experiences of individual initiates. After they established a state centered on the stone-walled settlement at Dzata, Singo influence brought with it a host of changes to the ways in which aristocrats passed through these obligatory customs at the threshold between the worlds of children and adults. The more comprehensive civil and administrative architecture of the Singo state allowed for a greater coordination of initiation rites. In the words of John Blacking, an ethnomusicologist who conducted extensive research among Vhavenda during the 1950s, the Singo effectively “nationalized” these customary practices that were hitherto organized at the level of families, lineages, and villages.<sup>32</sup> This made a difference for commoners and aristocrats alike because the social standing of women was so closely tied to their relative seniority as fully initiated persons. A Tshivenda proverb elegantly illustrates the point. It is said that “a doctor is still a doctor even in a strange country but a prince who crosses the frontier becomes nobody.”<sup>33</sup> One consequence of the standardization of these rites under the Singo was the increased mobility it afforded to initiated women. Blacking wrote that when a graduate [of initiation] travels to an area where she is not known,

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<sup>30</sup> John Blacking, “Initiation and the Balance of Power – The Tshikanda Girls’ Initiation School of the Venda of Northern Transvaal,” in The Ethnological Section, eds., *Ethnological and Linguistic Studies in Honor of N.J. Van Warmelo* (Pretoria, 1969), 24.

<sup>31</sup> S.M. Dzivhani, “The Chief of Venda,” in N.J. Van Warmelo, ed., *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg* (Pretoria, 1940), 33.

<sup>32</sup> Blacking, “Initiation and the Balance of Power,” 24.

<sup>33</sup> The Tshivenda version of this proverb is: “*Muthu wa nanga u divhea na nda ha shango la hawe shedzi vhubosi a vhu rbiri mikano ya shango la kebosi.*” See S. Lenard Tshikota, *Tshivenda – English Dictionary of Proverbs* (Thohoyandou, 2010), 82.

she can recite elements of the esoteric knowledge acquired in school, known as the milayo, to establish her credentials as an adult woman.<sup>34</sup> This also meant that the seniority that women acquired through marriage, motherhood, and the completion of her initiation schools was therefore transferable to other parts of Venda.<sup>35</sup>

The Singo made two other substantive changes in the rites of passage for women. The first involved the creation of a separate vhusha (puberty school) that was exclusively for aristocrats. Among the principal differences was that vhusha for nobles omitted the nightly recitation of songs that featured so prominently as pedagogical devices in the schools for commoners. Another innovation was the institutionalization of tshikanda, as an intermediate school that graduates of vhusha of all ranks would attend before the domba.<sup>36</sup> Tshikanda afforded noble women the opportunity to acquire the knowledge that commoners would have mastered at vhusha, all without compromising their elevated status as members of the aristocracy. According to Blacking, Singo created tshikanda as a way of assimilating their women into genealogies of ritual practice originally established by members of the aboriginal mitupo, while simultaneously reinforcing their titular claim to cultural hegemony in Zoutpansberg.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Blacking, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Caroline F. Jeannerat, "Invoking the Female *Vhusha* Ceremony and the Struggle for Identity and Security in Tshiendeulu, Venda," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 15, 1 (1997), 91.

<sup>36</sup> Suzel Ana Reily, "The Ethnographic Enterprise: Venda Girls' Initiation Schools Revisited," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 7, (1998), 51.

<sup>37</sup> Blacking, 24.

## The Mushavho: The Times of Flight: 1820s-1840s

As noted in chapter one, the history of the Venda polity is often overlooked in the historiography of nineteenth-century South(ern) Africa. However, neither Venda people nor the material basis of their nascent confederacy were insulated from the massive political, social, economic, and ecological upheavals that swept the region from the Eastern Cape to the Zambezi River catchment area during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In the late 1820s until the 1840s, groups of itinerants from Zululand raided Zoutpansberg in search of commodities such as elephants' teeth, rhinoceros' horns, grain, and cattle. Recent research compellingly suggests that the followers of Shoshangane, Zwangendaba and Mzilikazi<sup>182</sup> sought to insert themselves into the production of enslaved persons for sale at the Indian Ocean ports of Inhambane and Delagoa Bay.<sup>183</sup> Given the evidence, it seems likely that their followers also sought to gather captives from Zoutpansberg, which was a mere fourteen days walk from Inhambane.<sup>184</sup> Despite the much-debated pedigree of the Mfecane or Difaqane, historians still use these terms in reference to the convergence of processes involving militarized politics and predatory commerce that transformed the Southern African subcontinent.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Mzilikazi was chief and military leader under Zwile kaLanga's Ndwande chieftaincy, but eventually switch his alliance to Shaka in the early contests for regional control over what would become the Zulu State. This alliance created opportunities for Mzilikazi to realize his own state-building aspirations and began to absorb Ndebele chieftaincies who had been established in the Transvaal since the seventeenth century. According to Rassmusen, his position under Shaka became untenable. Mzilikazi was unwilling to forfeit to Shaka all the cattle he had raided from the Sotho and others and was subsequently forced to flee Zululand with about 300 followers. Mzilikazi settled in the Transvaal, but never launched raids against the Venda according to Sengani. Mzilikazi continued north of the Limpopo in the late 1830s and eventually established his own Matebele kingdom in lower Zimbabwe plateau. For circumstances of Mzilikazi's departure from Zululand see Kent Rasmussen, "Mzilikazi's Migrations South of Limpopo, c. 1821-1827: A Reassessment," *Transafrican Journal of History* 5,1 (1976) 53.

<sup>183</sup> Linell Chewins, Peter Delius, "The Northeastern Factor in South African History: Reevaluating the Volume of the Slave Trade Out of Delagoa Bay and its Impact on its Hinterland in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 61, 1 (2020), 100; Norman Etherington, *The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815-1854* (London, 2001), xvii.

<sup>184</sup> James MacQueen and Joaquim de Santa Rita Montanha, Journey from Inhambane to Zoutpansberg, by Joaquim de Santa Rita Montanha, *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 32, (1862), 64.

<sup>185</sup> Paul S. Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400-1948* (Cambridge, 2010), 35.

Meanwhile, among Tshivenda speakers, this same conjuncture is remembered by a different name—the mushavho, or “the Times of Flight.”<sup>186</sup>

The constant threats of predatory raids during the mushavho triggered a large-scale reorganization of Venda politics and warfare. Before the early nineteenth century, Venda potentates demonstrated their authority through the provision of security for their followers and their influence over the production of trade commodities for sale to Indian Ocean merchants in Portuguese-run Mozambique. It was also during the pre-mushavho era that Vhavenda tended to build their homes and communities in well-watered areas near the nutrient rich red loam found in the flatlands south of the Zoutpansberg. To escape the violent upheavals of the early 1800s, Vhavenda abandoned their locations in the plains and retreated into the security of the mountains. It was there, in the jagged cliffs and terraces of the Zoutpansberg where leaders reconstituted their authority. Mountain settlements offered several advantages to Vhavenda of all ranks. Because of their inaccessibility, elevated villages offered a measure of security from predatory raiders. Mountain settlements also served “as symbols of royalty,” that provided leaders with ritual seclusion from their followers.<sup>187</sup> Moreover, the ability to surveil the surrounding terrain at distance effectively denied their opponents the element of surprise, at least during the day. To defend themselves from nighttime raids, Vhavenda in some parts of Zoutpansberg integrated the local fauna into their armory of embodied practices. This last element of their security architecture merits elaboration because it highlights the extent to which local responses to external threats during the ‘times of flight’ brought the advanced military and civilian structures of the Singo/Rozvi into more direct contact with indigenous knowledge resources of the aboriginal

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<sup>186</sup> Victor Ralushai, “Conflicting Accounts of Venda History with Particular Reference to the Role of Mutupo in Social Organization,” (Ph.D. thesis, The Queen’s University of Belfast, 1977), 16.

<sup>187</sup> Maanda Muladuzi, “‘U Shuma Bulasi’ Agrarian Transformation in the Zoutpansberg District of South Africa, up to 1946,” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 2000), 44.

Vhavenda. To illustrate the dynamics between newcomers and autochthons, we return to the history of Lwamondo.

#### Absorptive Conquest and The Sacred Baboons of Lwamondo

The region known as Lwamondo is situated in south central Zoutpansberg. The Dzondo river separates Lwamondo from the kingdoms of Netsianda and Mughivhi to the south. To the north, the river Dzindi borders the lands of Ha-Tshivhasa. An escarpment on the southeastern end of the Nzhelele valley separates Lwamondo from its eastern neighbors at Tshakhuma. The dynasty that has ruled Lwamondo since the 1840s belongs to the Laudzi mutupo. Sometime before the fall of Dzata, a Laudzi potentate identified in the sources as Tshilande led his followers to Makombe, located to the south of mount Mafela, the capital and musanda of the ruling Nelwamondo family. When Tshilande died, the Laudzi elders installed his son, Maphugwi as ruler. The traditions indicate that it was Maphugwi who shifted the Laudzi people from Makombe to Tshavhakolo, a move that brought their party into areas under the authority of two Ngoni potentates.<sup>188</sup> At Tshavhakolo, the Laudzi encountered the followers of Mutengwe, who belonged to the Ndou mutupo. The other leader was Tshivhale, whose followers identified with the Kwindi mutupo.<sup>189</sup> The sources suggest that Tshivhale was subordinate to Mutengwe, and that the latter resisted the newcomers' encroachment on his land but was ultimately overpowered by Maphugwi and his people. The Laudzi subjugated the Ngoni of Lwamondo in a manner consistent with the pattern of absorptive conquest that characterized the political ascendancy of Singo vis-à-vis aboriginal Vhavenda that played out elsewhere in Zoutpansberg after the fall of Dzata.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> (*Thonbele*) Calvin Nelwamondo/Lwamondo. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 30 July 2018.

<sup>189</sup> Several names are given in the sources to include, Netshivhale and Neswiswi. See Ralushai, *Conflicting Accounts*, 85. Isaac Mulaudzi/Tshakhuma. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 7 Aug 2015. Isaac Mulaudzi, *Events in Zoutpansberg from 1870 to 1904*, Unpublished Essay, University of Pretoria Library, Special Collections Archive.

<sup>190</sup> Ralushai, "Conflicting Accounts," 84-5.

Instead of killing the vanquished Ngoni, or driving them away, or imposing their language and customs upon the autochthons, Maphugwi made them his vassals. Mutengwe was allowed to keep his chieftaincy, while Maphugwi appointed Tshivhale as tshifhe (priest), a ceremonial role of vital importance as an intermediary between the living and their ancestors. Tshivhale's descendants continued to occupy the office of tshifhe under Mathule, the successor to Maphugwi.<sup>191</sup> Although Mathule continued to accommodate the aboriginal Vhavenda of Lwamondo, several oral traditions tell us that the newcomers ignored the Ngoni's enjoinder not to molest the baboons that inhabited the mountain.

The Laudzi found well-watered and fertile soil at Tshavhakolo. Despite these advantages however, Mathule's followers could not fill their grain pits because the baboons ransacked their harvests. And so, it happened during the early years of their occupation that the Laudzi decided to rid themselves of the baboons over the objections of the aboriginal communities of Lwamondo who regarded the animals as integral to the spiritual ecology of the mountain. Shortly after Mathule moved his headquarters from Tshavhakolo to Tshihwedza, he instructed his people to set the mountain alight to exterminate the baboons by fire.<sup>192</sup> Although the plan accomplished its immediate objective, the Laudzi would soon come to understand the true cost of their decision to ignore the guidance of the aboriginal Vhavenda.

Before the next harvest season, a raiding party of Northern Nguni people fell upon Lwamondo. The invaders seized cattle and grain. The Nguni took women as captives; the sources strongly suggests that male prisoners were put to death.<sup>193</sup> We also know that Mathule's guards escorted him to safety. While the sources make clear that the raid devastated the people of Lwamondo,

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<sup>191</sup> See chapter four for more about the role of priests or *tshifhe* in Venda ritual and political life.

<sup>192</sup> (*Tshibhele*) Calvin Nelwamondo/Lwamondo. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 30 July 2018.

<sup>193</sup> C. L. Harries, *Sacred Baboons of Lomondo* (Johannesburg, 1929), 8.



those sources are less clear about which parties initiated the attack. One account points the finger of blame at Soshangane.<sup>194</sup> According to another account, Zwangendaba was the one “who attacked the people of Lwamondo,” and that the Laudzi “sought refuge in the mountains in fear of him.”<sup>195</sup> The tendency among Tshivenda-speaking informants and writers to summarily label all Northern Nguni-speaking peoples using the pejorative *mabunyu* (naked people) only complicates the accurate identification of the group who forced the Laudzi deeper into the mountains during the times of flight. And yet, we do know that Soshangane and Zwangendaba—leaders in the vanquished Ndwandwe confederacy—were already in the lower Limpopo River catchment area during the mid-1820s.<sup>196</sup> It is possible that either or even both men dispatched their fighters to bring back resources and people from Lwamondo.

There is a Tshivenda proverb that runs, “however wicked, the baboon never eats maize at night.”<sup>197</sup> As the Laudzi regrouped in the aftermath of the raid, Mathule and his Laudzi adherents would come to understand the meaning of this cliché. Mathule reportedly consulted with the *tshifhe*, who explained to the ruler why the hardships that had befallen their community were the result of the newcomer’s belligerent attitude towards the mountain’s baboons. Mathule is said to have pledged to adhere to the guidance of the Ngoni. In time, the vegetation around Lwamondo recovered, as did the population of sacred animals. It was the chief himself who spotted a large female near the summit of Mafela. It is difficult to say for certain how much time had elapsed between the first devastating raid and the next. Yet, according to tradition, that same solitary female baboon began to cry out in the

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<sup>194</sup> Harries, *Sacred Baboons*, 11.

<sup>195</sup> 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* (Pretoria, 1945), 67.

<sup>196</sup> Gerhard Liesegang, “Aspects of Gaza and Nguni History 1821-1898,” *Rhodesian History* 6, (1975), 2.

<sup>197</sup> The Tshivenda proverb runs, *Na vuvhi halo pfene, vbusiku mavhele a lili*. Like most Tshivenda proverbs, this saying has at least two meanings. In the first instance, this phrase is invoked to rebut evidence of other malfeasance, a proof of wrongdoing in another instance. A second more literal reading is explained in the passage above. See S.L. Tshikota, *Tshivenda – English Dictionary of Proverbs* (Thohoyandou, 2010), 83.

predawn hours at an early phase of the harvest season. Having heard the agitated sound, Mathule mustered his people. Although the enemy was not yet visible, Mathule instructed his followers to arm themselves. In either version of the tradition—involving Zwangandaba’s Ngoni or Shoshangana’s Tsonga—the aggressors encountered a well-coordinated defense and were forced into retreat in the direction of the Levubu River to the south.<sup>198</sup> And in either version, the Laudzi of Lwamondo learned to respect the mountain’s sacred baboons just as they aboriginal Vhavenda had taught them. Ultimately, though the animals continued to disrupt harvests, they did so only during the day, as the proverb indicates. As the Muvenda author Motenda observed, the people of Lwamondo “came to understand the different cries of the baboons when they were surprised by people during the night.”<sup>199</sup>

The integration of wildlife into the security architecture of Lwamondo is well documented in oral traditions and textual sources. Yet, like many other elements of the Venda past, the contributions of non-Singo peoples to Venda culture in general and to the armory of embodied practices of their security architecture are understated. For instance, the name Mutengwe, the leader of the Ngoni of Lwamondo, is recorded in just a single source—an unpublished historical essay authored by a Muvenda educator named Isaac Mulaudzi. Born to a chiefly lineage at Lwamondo in 1873, Mulaudzi was in his thirties and married to a woman named Lydia when the Rev. Christoph Sonntag of the Berlin Mission baptized the couple’s youngest child in 1907.<sup>200</sup> In the course of his career, Mulaudzi authored several historical essays, some of which he eventually submitted to State Ethnographer N. J. Van Warmelo. In a 1932 article on Venda origins, G. P. Lestrade cites Mulaudzi’s writing on the history of Lwamondo as an authoritative source.<sup>201</sup> According to the oral testimony of his grandson

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<sup>198</sup> Harries, 12. Motenda, 67.

<sup>199</sup> Motenda, 67.

<sup>200</sup> Christoph Sonntag/Tshakhuma, 1907, BMB 7/387/715.

<sup>201</sup> G.P. Lestrade, “Venda Affinities, Venda Political Organization and Venda Marriage Laws” in N.J. Van Warmelo, *Contributions Towards Venda History, Religion, and Tribal Ritual* (Pretoria, 1950), xxvii.

and namesake, the elder Mulaudzi possessed intimate knowledge of the other more obscure aspects of the relationships between humans and baboons at Lwamondo. Whereas a female baboon saved Mathule's people during the times of flight, the junior Mulaudzi recounted aspects of local lore related to a male known as Tshiendahongolo.<sup>202</sup> For the people of Lwamondo, the appearance of this solitary baboon served as a harbinger of momentous events. The junior Mulaudzi recounted his childhood memories of the events that transpired immediately after his grandfather's death in the mid-1950s. Mulaudzi reported that the people from the royal family of Lwamondo arrived at his grandfather's home in the neighboring community of Tshakhuma even before messengers had been dispatched to notify them. According to his testimony, the appearance of Tshiendahongolo signaled to the people of Lwamondo that they should come to pay their respects. Although "the baboons still come" even today, Mulaudzi noted that after his grandfather's passing, "people no longer understand how to interpret" the messages that they transmit.<sup>203</sup>

Returning to Lwamondo, a man named Maboho<sup>204</sup> succeeded Mathule to become the fourth Laudzi ruler likely in the early 1840s. Shortly after his ascent, Maboho moved his capital to a place called Madefule. His stay there was brief, however. Oral traditions point to the establishment of the White settlement at Schoemansdal in 1848 and the arrival of Tsonga refugees from Gazaland under the leadership of Joao Albasini among the security considerations that prompted Maboho Nelwamondo to move his musanda for the last time, to its current location near the summit of Mt. Mafela.<sup>205</sup> Like his predecessors, Maboho's decisions about where to establish his personal residence

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<sup>202</sup> Ralushai, 189.

<sup>203</sup> Isaac Mulaudzi/Tshakhuma. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 7 Aug 2015.

<sup>204</sup> Identifiable with Maphuphe in BMS archives.

<sup>205</sup> Mphaya Henry Nemudzivhadi, untitled and unpublished notes of historical and genealogical study of the Nelwamondo family in the possession of the author.

reflected a changing constellation of challenges and opportunities that confronted Venda leaders during the era of confederal independence.

#### Mushavho and Material Culture

The threat of predatory raids during the mushavho forced Vhavenda to prioritize security in their decisions about where to live. Access to arable land for farming and animal grazing became secondary considerations to the protection of people, livestock, and crops. The political upheavals that engulfed much of southern Africa during the early nineteenth century also occasioned enduring changes in the material culture of Venda people. Those changes were expressed in a number of related domains of practice. One of these involved not just where Vhavenda lived—in elevated terraced communities rather than in the fertile flatlands as before—but also, how they chose to build their settlements. The sites where Vhavenda built their homes were typically located on “hilltops or precipitous slopes, affording wide view of the surrounding country,” according to the anthropologist Hugh Stayt.<sup>206</sup> Another feature of the post-Mushavho style of settlement building was concealment. Cattle kraals, Stayt further noted, “were erected in the middle of the dense bush.” Indeed, Vhavenda made such “apt use of the natural surroundings that a passerby might go within a few yards of the dwelling unaware of its proximity.”<sup>207</sup> N. J. Van Warmelo and his long-time research assistant W. M. D. Phophi arrived at virtually identical conclusions in their research. Referring to the turbulence of the early nineteenth century, they wrote, mushavho-era settlements “were perched high up in the mountains where no one could see them and nestled in dense forests” where they were “invisible to an enemy.”<sup>208</sup> Their main reason for doing so, the pair argued, “was to keep livestock out of sight.” Indeed, even “if the enemies came, they would not be able to discover where they were concealed.”<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Hugh Stayt, *The Baveda*, 30.

<sup>207</sup> Stayt, 30.

<sup>208</sup> Van Warmelo and Phophi, *Venda Law* (Pretoria, 1948), 1127.

<sup>209</sup> Van Warmelo and Phophi, 1129.

Security concerns also forced Vhavenda to modify their methods of agriculture and cattle keeping. The safety of the mountains placed downward pressure on the scale of subsistence farming. Commoners in particular cultivated small gardens closer to their homes. These changes persisted long after the external threat to their properties and communities had subsided. When the first Christian missionaries established permanent mission stations in Zoutpansberg, they noted that Vhavenda often chose not to maximize the productive capacity of their land. Their writings suggest that the missionaries regarded the reluctance of Vhavenda to invest more of their labor into farming as a rejection of their Protestant work ethic—one in which labor was linked to salvation.<sup>210</sup> In a journal entry dated 18 March 1874, Rev. Carl Beuster wrote ruefully of the effort required “to get people to produce a day’s work” had made “living among [them] a constant torment, yes, even an impossibility.” For Beuster, it was only “because of the tremendous laziness and stupidity of the people, that they do not cultivate a simple and easy to grow crop like the sweet potato.” Why else would “somebody who has planted a garden which is the size of his lazy body then think he has done enough.”<sup>211</sup> Writing nearly a half-century hence, Stayt echoed the missionary’s paternalistic canards. He observed that commoners “have only small gardens,” a fact that illustrated, “the slothful character of the average Muvenda [which] prevents him from doing more than the minimal amount of work necessary to maintain life.”<sup>212</sup>

Phophi and Van Warmelo offered a radically different interpretation of the same phenomena. Their research also elaborated upon the ways in which the mushavho had surfaced pre-existing social distinctions between commoners and aristocrats. They concluded that the diminutive dimensions of commoners’ gardens were a mitigation strategy against both internal and external threats. “The

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<sup>210</sup> Sebastian Conrad, *Globalization and the Nation in Imperial Germany*, (Cambridge, 2010), 85-6.

<sup>211</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhase, 1874, BMB 0/418/75.

<sup>212</sup> Phophi, 1129. Stayt, 34.

commoner's garden in the past had two enemies," Phophi and Van Warmelo wrote. The first was the chief himself." Their informant recounted how it "was a commoner's business to see to it that his garden did not exceed the royal lands" either in terms of size or prosperity. A commoner whose "grain stores exceeded those of the chief" was subject to "false accusations" of witchcraft.<sup>213</sup>

The second threat to the lives and livelihoods of commoners originated from beyond Zoutpansberg. Referring to the times of flight, "all the countryside was continually on tiptoe in expectation of attack."<sup>214</sup> Over time, Vhavenda came to understand that "Zulu and Swazi" attacked their villages not to take ownership of the land, but rather, "to raid cattle and crops." As such, they strategically timed their raids to coincide with "the ripening of the maize." And when invaders suddenly appeared, people were forced "to flee and abandon all, not having tasted even of the green maize."<sup>215</sup> In the words of one informant: "uri naho ndi shavha (even if I flee) I shall have had time to rip off some of the cobs and carry them away tied together to keep my little ones alive."<sup>216</sup> The role

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<sup>213</sup> Phophi, 1111.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Phophi, 1113.

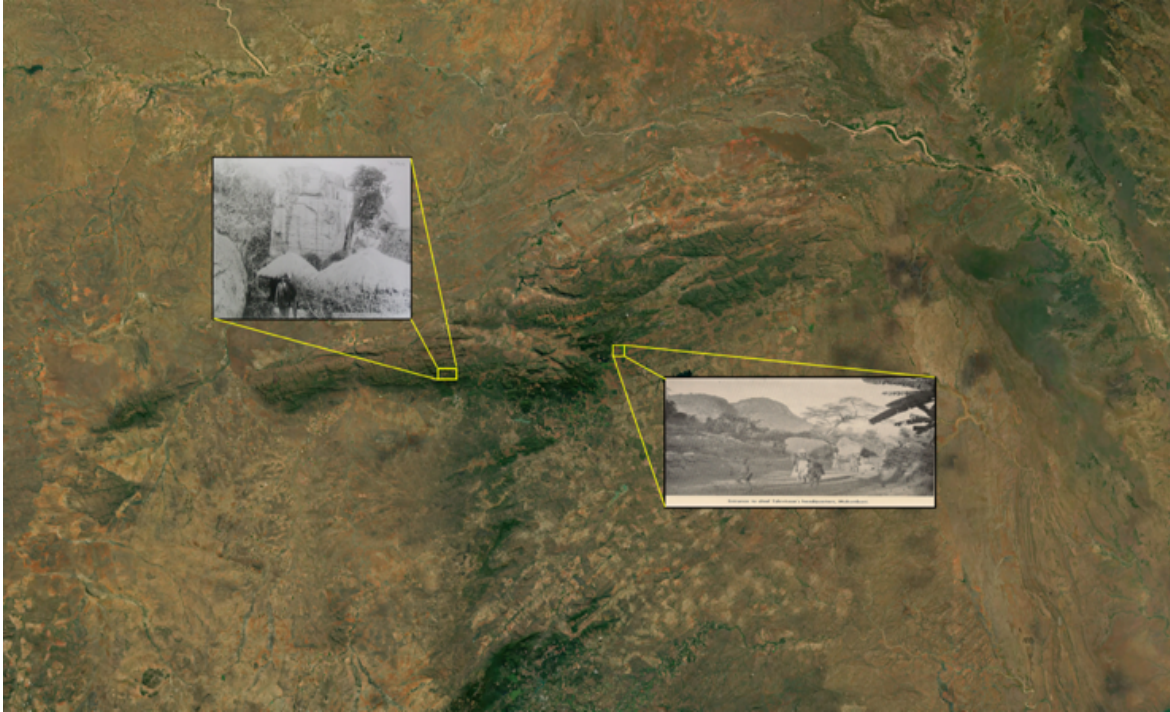


Figure 2: Examples of mutzheo style settlements at Songozwi, Ha-Ramabulana, from National Archives of South Africa, (left) Mukambani, Ha-Tshivhasa, N. J. Van Warmelo, Venda Law Series, Inheritance (1949).

of small-scale gardens as an element of a collective response to the insecurity of the early nineteenth century is captured in another vernacular idiom. To “hoe the cat’s face,” as one of their informants explained, implied the cultivation of small gardens, as compared to larger farms “for the benefit of the raiders.”<sup>217</sup> In stark contrast to the normative judgments of nineteenth-century missionaries or twentieth-century anthropologists, a small garden nearer to one’s home seemed a prudent choice against the backdrop of a regional dispensation in which the difference between life and death, or starvation in the bush, sometimes came down to a foot race with well-armed marauders.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Venda people also introduced a new style of settlement construction specifically designed in response to the intense security challenges of the day. The central characteristics of the mutzheto style, as the archaeologist Jannie Loubser described it, were

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<sup>217</sup> Phophi, 1113.

the use of round boulders and angular rocks set on edge and arranged in interlinking terraced enclosures.<sup>218</sup> From a strictly historical perspective, the introduction of the mutzheto type marks a clear break with earlier settlement patterns. The historical evidence presented in this section tends to substantiate such a reading of archaeological evidence. Loubser's approach sought to combine oral traditions and an extensive survey of ceramics styles and settlement patterns in the Zoutpansberg region.

He notes for example that some of his informants "could meticulously describe these fortified mutzheto villages inhabited by their grandparents."<sup>219</sup> While these new settlements offered protection from other Venda people, his informants also emphasized Vhavenda were subject to attacks "from Nguni and Sotho raiders" during the times of flight.<sup>220</sup>

#### Vuu and Tshimbupfe: Political Dimensions of Iron Production

The smelting and smithing complex at Ngwekhulu in southcentral Zoutpansberg offers yet another opportunity for the productive synthesis of history and archaeology. Here, I draw on Ann B. Stahl's framing of both the challenges and opportunities inherent to research conducted at the intersection of two disciplines, each with its own heuristics, epistemologies, and methods. Stahl cautions that questions and agendas formulated within the aegis of one discipline are not necessarily applicable to research conducted in another knowledge domain. "Archaeology is disabled" for example in "histories that privilege metaphors and discourse."<sup>221</sup> In response to these tensions, Stahl challenges researchers to adopt a "supplemental view," one that is attentive to the areas of incompatibility between sources, frameworks, and epistemologies of either discipline.<sup>222</sup> The research agendas of historians and

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<sup>218</sup> J. H. N. Loubser, *Ethnoarchaeology of Venda-speakers in Southern Africa*, Navorsing van die Nasionale Museum, Bloemfontein, (1991), 183.

<sup>219</sup> Loubser, "Archaeology and early Venda History," *Goodwin Series* 6, (1989), 58.

<sup>220</sup> Jannie Loubser, *Archaeology and Early Venda History*, *South African Archaeological Society, Goodwin Series* 6, (1989), 58.

<sup>221</sup> Ann B. Stahl, *Making History in Banda* (Cambridge, 2001), 16.

<sup>222</sup> Stahl, *Making History in Banda*, 33.



archaeologists often overlap. And yet, practitioners in either field approach the past in different ways. Whereas historians seek out evidence of social change over time, or the narrative interpretation of human agency, archaeologists look to the same past in search of general principles and patterns that guide their interpretation of the material record. Crucially, if the study of earlier human societies is indeed an ongoing and iterative dialog between the present and the past, as Martin Hall has proposed, then a supplemental synthesis of history and archaeology is one that is attentive to the discipline-specific ways in which “the past is created in the present.”<sup>223</sup> Competing claims to the ruins of an iron smelting precinct at Ngwekhulu highlights this principle.

Ngwekhulu rests atop deposits of hematite and magnetite ores that are suitable for smelting. The area also houses the ruins of the late iron age furnace that was in use as recently as the 1880s.<sup>224</sup> This furnace precinct constituted a single node in a regional iron production complex that included the Phalaborwa metal works. There, Venda smiths manufactured a variety of products both for local consumption in Zoutpansberg, but also for external trade. Some of the hoes produced at the Ngwekhulu furnace were sold to other Africans in exchange for grain, livestock, and prestige goods. Among the communities who lived along the Indian Ocean littoral in what was then Portuguese Mozambique and Gazaland, hoes made in Venda furnaces were used as trade goods and as bride wealth.<sup>225</sup> During the 1850s and 60s, hunters and merchants from the Gaza state began to import “superior hoes from Vendaland” for use as commodities “in the immediate Delagoa Bay hinterland.”<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid, 41. Martin Hall, *Archaeology Africa* (Cape Town, 1996) 56.

<sup>224</sup> Mission Director Wangemann/Tshakhuma, 1885, BMB 2/70/242. Late iron age generally denotes the period from 1430-1840.

<sup>225</sup> Abigail Joy Moffett, Tim Maggs, Johnny van Schalkwyk, “Breaking Ground: Hoes in Precolonial South Africa—Typology, Medium of Exchange and Symbolic Value,” *African Archaeological Review* 34, (2017), 11.

<sup>226</sup> Lisa Ann Brock, “From Kingdom to Colonial District: A Political Economy of Social Change in Gazaland, Southern Mozambique, 1870-1930,” (Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern University, 1989), 47.

Today, two Venda communities make historically oriented and overlapping claims of ownership over the genealogies of ritual practice associated with iron production.<sup>227</sup> The Ngona know the precinct at Ngwekulu as “Vuu” a name that denotes the sound of air as it is pumped into a furnace’s tuyeres by leather bellows.<sup>228</sup> Thus, as a locative, Vuu invokes the historical association between autochthons and the production of iron. To the descendants of those Vhavenda who settled Zoutpansberg during the Dzata phase of Singo/Rozvi conquest, the hill, its mines and smelting precinct are associated with the named “Tshimbupfe.” As noted earlier in this chapter, Tshimbupfe was either the third or fourth son of Gwamasenga, who was himself the maternal uncle to Thohoyandou, the father of the Venda state. During the itinerant phase of his career, following his expulsion from Dzata, Gwamasenga appointed his sons as khosi (chief) over each of the communities that he conquered. With the assistance of his Laudzi traveling companions, he also helped his sons to overcome the aboriginal people who already inhabited the area. At the mineral rich hill at Ngwekulu, Tshimbupfe and his followers encountered Thavha ya Vuu (The Mountain of Vuu), where they found Ngona already engaged in the large-scale production of locally manufactured metal products.

Recent archaeological research throws light on the historical origins of the Vuu/Tshimbupfe iron works and its place in the political economy of Zoutpansberg. Abigail Moffett examines late iron age production sites in the Phalaborwa area in a 2016 doctoral thesis that raises questions about the kinds of controls that decentralized polities imposed on mining and smelting activities. She notes that there are “clear social and political connections between Venda and Phalaborwa.” Of the

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<sup>227</sup> Ogundiran and Saunders define “genealogy of ritual practice” in terms of an “understanding of how particular objects were implicated in ritual practices.” In this case, the object implicated is a furnace, while the ritual practices are those related to the smelting of ore into iron oxide. The second component of their definition relates to “the social memories of practices, places, experiences, and events that are implicated in ritual processes, identity formation, and social organization.” The social memories in question here related to historical narratives of the late eighteenth century migration and conquest of autochthonous Vhavenda at the hands of the Singo/Rozvi during the reign of Thohoyandou. See A. Ogundiran, P. Saunders, *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic* (Bloomington, 2014), 20.

<sup>228</sup> Mashudu Churchill Mashige (D.Phil). Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. March 2014.

Vuu/Tshimbupfe precinct, Moffett writes, control over metal production in the “Venda ‘state’” is an important point [that] requires further elaboration.”<sup>229</sup> Although metalworkers at “Tshimbupfe and Musina” fell within the jurisdiction and “influence of the Venda polity,” they “did not produce or exchange directly with or exclusively for them.” It is for this reason that Moffett concluded, “Venda rulers d[o] not appear to have controlled the production of crafts.”<sup>230</sup> Meanwhile, another archaeologist conducted extensive excavation in an around the Vuu/Tshimbupfe precinct. In his published findings, Eric Mathoho rebuts Moffett’s observations and argues instead that Venda potentates did indeed exercise political control of metalworking. While Lemba were closely associated with smelting and smithing copper from the Musina mines north of the Zoutpansberg, at Vuu/Tshimbupfe, iron working was “conducted by a hierarchical grouping of lineages.”<sup>231</sup> The ritual specialists at Vuu acted on the instructions of “lower-level political leaders” who sent at least part of their surpluses as tribute “to paramount Chief Makhado.”<sup>232</sup> Notably, while Mathoho twice references Makhado as the leader most closely associated with the Ngwekulu complex, he also alludes to a longer relationship between this production site and the Ramabulana dynasty. The Tshimbupfe furnaces suppli[ed] the Ramabulana royalty with iron” since the Muphadalalo, referring to the late eighteenth century collapse of the Singo state at Dzata.<sup>233</sup>

The differences between these two archaeologists on the political economy of iron production at Vuu/Tshimbupfe raises fascinating questions, some of which fall into the domain of history and anthropology. In their respective work, Mathoho and Moffett allude to the existence of political structures of the Venda polity. But this dissertation stands out as the first full-length investigation into

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<sup>229</sup> Abigail Moffett, “Phalaborwa Where the Hammer is Heard: Crafting Together the Political Economy of Iron Age Communities in Southern Africa, AD 900-1900,” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cape Town, 2016), 72.

<sup>230</sup> Moffett, “Phalaborwa Where the Hammer is Heard,” 49.

<sup>231</sup> Eric Mathoho, “A Technical and Anthropological Study of Iron Production in Venda, Limpopo Province, South Africa,” *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 51, 2, (2016), 238.

<sup>232</sup> Mathoho, “A Technical and Anthropological Study,” 251.

<sup>233</sup> Mathoho 236.

the dynamics of intra-dynastic statecraft in nineteenth century Zoutpansberg. In this study, I define the Venda state as an assemblage of mutually autonomous chiefdoms bound together into a confederation by a shared language, customs, descent, and repertoires of embodied rituals associated with the selection and inauguration of leaders. This last element holds particular relevance for recent archaeologically oriented work on iron smelting in Zoutpansberg. The prerogative either to appoint or to influence the appointment of subordinate chiefs was among the primary domains through which Venda leaders exercised their powers. Consistent with Stahl's call for supplemental engagement across disciplines, this study maintains that the articulation of political power and influence in Venda likely did not generate a distinct impression on the archaeological record.

In subsequent chapters, this study will elaborate on the variety of relationships that more powerful lineages attempted to forge with less powerful chiefdoms. In some instances, the dominant actors incorporated the subordinate as *mashango a vhutanganywa*, a phrase denoting the lower station of the junior partner. This aptly characterized the status of the Rambuda chiefship that ruled the region of Dzimauli as a satellite of the Tshivhasa dynasty until the 1860s. So too were the rainmakers of Tshulu subordinate to the Mphaphuli dynasty for most of the nineteenth century. In both instances, Rambuda and Netshulu paid *-luvha* or tribute to their respective senior lineages. Moreover, in the event of the death of a *mahosi* or chief, it was also customary to notify the potentate to whom the departed ruler was aligned. In many instances detailed later in this study, Venda rulers seized upon the moment created by the death of a subordinate to insinuate their preferences into the process of selecting a successor. These hitherto unresearched dynamics of power and confederal statecraft chronicled in my work have direct bearing on the questions raised by archaeologist colleagues.

Mathoho correctly points to tribute as the most direct means through which Venda potentates exercised influence over the production of metals. There is also evidence that rulers of the Tshimbupfe

lineage sent “hoes, spears and other implements as tribute” to Ha-Ramabulana.<sup>234</sup> Crucially, there are few instances in the sources consulted for this study in which powerful lineages extracted tribute at confiscatory rates. Nor was it unusual for a subordinate chiefdom to receive material offerings from more powerful neighbors. Several Singo dynasts sent livestock and grain to Mahosi Netshulu during the late 1800s as tribute to ask for rain. Ultimately, the kinds of exclusive and predatory relationships to which both Mathoho and Moffett allude as mechanisms to control the production of metal are inconsistent with the ways in which Venda potentates exercised their power in the context of confederal politics.

## Conclusion

This chapter foregrounded the role of complex historical processes in the formation of Venda identities. Venda language was the product of *longue durée* interactions and acculturation between Sotho-Tswana and Karanga speakers. The generations of social intercourse that produced a distinct language also registered discernible signatures in the archaeological record. Then, in the eighteenth century, the Singo/Rozvi built their homes in a region in which Tshivenda language and material culture were already long established. Instead of imposing their customs onto the aboriginal Vhavenda, the newcomers gradually adopted the language and traditions of the people they encountered in Zoutpansberg and used their customs to fashion a reasonably cohesive political confederacy. This chapter also grappled with the contributions of non-Singo peoples such as the Laudzi, who did as much to expand the influence of the newcomers as the Singo themselves. The microhistories of Vuu/Tshimbupfe and Lwamondo highlighted the ways in which the central elements of Venda identity and culture reflected the gradual process of absorptive conquest.

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<sup>234</sup> Ralushai, 184.

## CHAPTER TWO: Guns and Cultural Change in Venda Zoutpansberg – The Hunting Frontier

On 14 December 1875, The Natal Witness published a report under the headline, “Fatal Experiment – the magic bullet.” The article recounted events purported to have occurred at the musanda or great place of Thovhele Makhado, lineal head of the Ramabulana Singo dynasty, in which several members of the king’s court had been shot to death in an incident morbidly described as “an amusing tragedy.”<sup>1</sup> Carved into a terrace beneath the summit of mount Songozwi, King Makhado’s royal residence at Muhulu overlooked the ruins of Schoemansdal. Seven years earlier, Makhado helped orchestrate a rebellion that forced the Burghers, merchants, and big-game hunters at Schoemansdal to abandon their frontier town, the northernmost white settlement in what would eventually become South Africa. It seems likely that the witness to the events cited as the source of the 1875 article may have been among the handful of stragglers who remained in the Zoutpansberg region after Makhado ordered Schoemansdal razed to the ground in July 1867. To compound the humiliation of having been driven from their homes, the settlers who remained in the area did so as tax paying subjects of Venda potentates. These simmering resentments go some way towards an explanation of the perverse tenor of the article, which is most pronounced in the identification of the party who had murdered the king’s senior advisor and “favorite wife” as none other than Makhado himself. The fatal experiment to which the headline alludes was one in which the dynast had been convinced to test the efficacy of a concoction with supernatural powers believed to have rendered one impervious to bullets.

The basic elements of this story have subsequently appeared in academic and popular literature in the decades since it was first published in the Natal Witness. In an ethnographic essay authored in the 1930s, the Muvenda writer S. M. Dzivhani wrote that Makhado dispatched a headman named Lidzwavho to travel into Mashonaland to seek out the “native doctor” rumored to have mastered a

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<sup>1</sup> “Fatal Experiment: The Magic Bullet,” *Natal Witness*, 14 December 1875.

recipe for the so-called “bullet medicine.”<sup>2</sup> Then, in 1953, Dorothea Moller-Malan described a second excursion to the same healer after the tragic events of the first experiment.<sup>3</sup> Decades later, Mphaya Henry Nemudzivhadi synthesized Dzivhani and Moller-Malan’s accounts while infusing the narrative with additional details based on his own research. In his retelling, the name of the woman who Makhado killed in this ill-fated initiative was Matodzi.<sup>4</sup> Notably, Nemudzivhadi was uncharacteristically critical of Makhado’s judgement in this instance for having placed his faith in “superstitions.” And, like the Natal Witness story from 1875, in which the healer is described as a “necromancer” and a “little of Prof. Anderson,” Nemudzivhadi was similarly critical of Makhado for allowing himself to have been taken by a magician’s “tricks.”<sup>5</sup>

In Africa as elsewhere, the search for spiritual or supernatural defenses against firearms is a recurring historical theme. Compelling parallels exist for example between Makhado’s attempt in 1875 to secure “anti-bullet” medicine and similar efforts among the peoples of southern Tanzania who took up arms in resistance to German colonialism in a confrontation known as the Maji Maji War (1905-7). In the hegemonic narrative of the war, a prophet named Kinjikitile Ngwale inspired fighters to armed rebellion with the promise of the maji medicine that turned bullets into water. And, in most accounts of Maji Maji, the ultimate failure of the prophesied medicine in the face of German military technology is framed as a “transitional moment,” in Jamie Monson’s words, one in which “traditional beliefs collided with and eventually surrendered to the advance of modernity.”<sup>6</sup> Nemudzivhadi’s

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<sup>2</sup> S.M. Dzivhani, “The Chiefs of Venda,” *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg* (Pretoria, 1940), 41.

<sup>3</sup> The bullet-medicine story recounted in Moller-Malan’s book closely resembles one recorded in BMS archives. Given her association with mission work, it seems likely Moller-Malan integrated the BMS version events in her book. See, Dorothea Moller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas* (Johannesburg, 1953), 163-6.

<sup>4</sup> Mphaya Henry Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado Ramabulana, The Lion of the North, 1864-1895* (Thohoyandou, 2017), 150.

<sup>5</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado*, 151. “Professor Anderson” likely alludes to the nineteenth century Scottish performer John Henry Anderson who popularized a bullet catching trick. Interestingly, whereas Makhado was known to Transvaalers as the “Lion of the North,” Professor Anderson also used the stage name, “The Magician of the North.” Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

<sup>6</sup> Jamie Monson, “War of Words: The Narrative Efficacy of Medicine in the Maji Maji War” in James Giblin and Jamie Monson, eds., *Maji Maji: Lifting the Fog of War* (Leiden, 2010), 34.

retelling of the abortive experiment at Muhulu in 1875 is consistent with such a positivist paradigm of which Monson is rightly dismissive. He wrote that Makhado's reliance on "superstitious phenomena in this episode" was emblematic of the "tendency of many Blacks during the nineteenth century," inasmuch as such beliefs "impeded their imagination and creativity."<sup>7</sup> Like the dominant narrative of Maji Maji, Nemudzivhadi positioned the failure of Makhado's bullet medicine as the natural narrative point of departure for a story about how the "traditional" must inevitably give way to the modern. Yet, this teleological approach underscores the ways in which knowing historical outcomes often cripples our ability to envision the daily lives of past peoples.<sup>8</sup> To eschew history "as it turned out" in this instance, and contemplate events as they happened, from the perspectives of the Africans at the center of historical narratives, is to engage with a broader range of analytical questions and interpretive possibilities. For instance, by decentering the outcome of the events that transpired at Muhulu and focusing instead on the specific technological problem for which Makhado sought a medicinal solution, the bullet medicine experiment transforms into something other than a stale narrative of traditions' collapse under the onslaught of modernity.

Divination and healers' medicines were important parts of the knowledge resources that I describe as the Venda "Armory." They were also central to the ways in which Venda potentates and their followers navigated the uncertainty of their own present. Having spent his youth harvesting ivory with muzzle loading muskets supplied by merchants at Schoemansdal, Makhado was already well familiar with the power of firearms by the mid-1870s. His role in the Schoemansdal rebellion further demonstrated that Makhado had learned to make optimal use of guns as weapons of war. Yet, the Ramabulana king had rather less experience from which he might derive answers about how best to

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<sup>7</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado Ramabulana*, 151.

<sup>8</sup> Ann B. Stahl, "Metalworking and Ritualization: Negotiating Change through Improvisational Practice in Banda, Ghana," *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 26, (2015), 54.



protect his soldiers against the newer and ostensibly more technologically sophisticated firearms already in the possession of his military rivals. In this way, his resort to medicines imported from north of the Limpopo are best understood in the context of an epistemological framework the efficacy of which had been tested, refined, and modified over time.

In his elaboration of a cascade model of technological change, the behavioral archaeologist Michael B. Schiffer reminds us that failures are no less important than successes in the life cycle of a given technology, even if history tends to elide the former while emphasizing the latter.<sup>9</sup> In the life cycle of firearms adoption in the country of the Ramabulanas, who controlled western Zoutpansberg, Makhado's initiative represented a recognition of a "performance problem," an inflection point in the ensuing cascade of inventions, innovations and improvisations that respond to an identified technological deficiency. From such a perspective, the purpose of technological experimentation is every bit as much about eliminating impracticable solutions as identifying optimal ones. Though the "magic bullet" experiment claimed a handful of lives, it also likely spared countless more among Makhado's estimated 20,000 troops from the fate that befell those inspired by Kinjikitile's prophesized protection from German bullets during the Maji Maji War.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the bullet medicine episode also offers a glimpse into the regional patterns of firearms adoption during the nineteenth century.

This chapter draws on evidence recovered from archival documents and vernacular literature to explore the role and use of firearms in Zoutpansberg during the mid-1800s. It also explores the economic and clientelist relationships between white hunters, settlers, and merchants at the frontier town of Schoemansdal and the Africans who they supplied with hunting muskets during the 1850s and 1860s. Crucially, because the available evidence is incomplete, the picture that emerges from a

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<sup>9</sup> Michael B. Schiffer, "The Devil Is in the Details: The Cascade Model of Invention Processes," *American Antiquity* 30, 3 (2005), 486.

<sup>10</sup> Fred B. Fynney/Martizburg, 19 January 1875, CO 879/10/272. British Imperial Archives [Hereafter PRO].

close reading of the sources is an imperfect one. There is, however, evidence sufficient to substantiate three empirically grounded claims. First, although Africans across Zoutpansberg accumulated guns in appreciable numbers from the mid-1850s, firearms did not give rise to a discrete stratum of Vhavenda society. This first argument responds to Roger Wagner's influential book chapter on the ivory trade in Zoutpansberg in which he claims that the Vhavenda who harvested elephants' teeth with guns loaned to them by white merchants belonged to a hunting community known as Swart Skuts, or 'Black Shots'.<sup>11</sup> The second argument contradicts two other deeply entrenched elements of canonical wisdom about firearms' use in precolonial Africa. As discussed in the introduction, historians often interpret indigenous responses to gun technology as a binary choice between adoption and rejection. Moreover, firearms adoption is also understood as a collective choice. Yet, in Venda, as elsewhere during the precolonial era, Africans responded to firearms in ways that reflected individual or local decisions predicated upon practical considerations rather than ideological ones.<sup>12</sup> This chapter also seeks to contextualize the power relationships between the Schoemansdal settlers and their African clients that served as the backdrop for local responses to gun technology. The third argument advanced in this chapter draws on the British Parliamentary archives. Evidence recovered from these papers proves the extent to which the Schoemansdalers relied on coercive 'apprenticeship' and slavery as the primary means of mobilizing cheap black labor in Zoutpansberg. Even if their tactics accelerated the adoption of firearms among Vhavenda, particularly in western Zoutpansberg, the testimonies preserved in the parliamentary record cast doubt on the existence of the mythical class of African hunters known as Swart Skut.

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<sup>11</sup> Roger Wagner, "Zoutpansberg: The Dynamics of a Hunting Frontier, 1848-67," in Marks Shula and Anthony Atmore, eds., *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980), 330

<sup>12</sup> See the introduction for a historiographical critique of STS-oriented firearms literature.

## The Historiography of the Gun in Zoutpansberg

For nearly forty years, Roger Wagner's book chapter, "Zoutpansberg: The Dynamics of a Hunting Frontier, 1848-67," has been the authoritative scholarly work on Venda politics, military practice and, most relevant here, the role and use of guns. Yet, Venda people, their politics and their response to firearms are adjunct to the article's central themes which relate to the emergence, consolidation, and eventual collapse of the commercial complex, the jagtersgemeenskap (hunters' community) organized around the town of Schoemansdal. Established in 1848, Schoemansdal was the northernmost white settlement in the Transvaal and the terminus of the so-called Great Trek.<sup>247</sup> In its heyday, Schoemansdal was the center of production for the lucrative ivory trade.<sup>248</sup> In the mid-1850s, its hunters harvested roughly 198,000 lbs. of ivory per annum. Much of the elephant ivory exported through the Indian Ocean port at Delagoa Bay was sent to India for manufacture, while rhinoceros horns were sent to England where they fetched nearly £2 per pound in the 1860s.<sup>249</sup> Ivory production declined by half towards the end of the decade however, as a consequence of over harvesting and the attendant exhaustion of the elephant population.<sup>250</sup> Nevertheless, Wagner argues that big game hunting so characterized the life and economy of this settlement that other Europeans in the old "Transvaal and subsequent historians called the colony of Zoutpansberg, the jagters gemeenskap."<sup>251</sup>

Schoemansdalers recruited Africans to pursue the dwindling elephant population deeper into the tsetse fly belt of the Limpopo River catchment. Other historians have postulated that, "the Boers

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<sup>247</sup> The "Great Trek" refers to the mass migration of Dutch speaking peoples away from Cape colony into the Southern African frontier during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. As a central motif in academic and popular histories, the academic consensus about the causes and consequences of the Great Trek have been the subject of historical debate. See, Eric Anderson Walker, *The Great Trek* (London, 1948). For a more critical engagement and historical contextualization, see Norman Etherington, *The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815-1854* (New York, 2001).

<sup>248</sup> Wagner, "Zoutpansberg: The Dynamics of a Hunting Frontier, 1848-67," 315.

<sup>249</sup> Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, C.1860-1910* (Portsmouth 1994), 14. See also Frederic Jeppe, *Description of the Transvaal Republic*, 1868, CO/879/1/222/230.

<sup>250</sup> Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity*, 14.

<sup>251</sup> Wagner, "Zoutpansberg: The Dynamics," 315.

who hired” African assistants “derived this practice from Mozambique,” where similar relationships were common.<sup>252</sup> Unlike Portuguese-controlled Mozambique, however, where large estate holders enslaved indigenous peoples and then trained their bondsmen to use guns for hunting and warfare, the social and political conditions in the Zoutpansberg militated against such exploitative arrangements. Still, by the 1860s Wagner notes that, “so many Africans had acquired guns” in the Zoutpansberg region “that a distinct stratum of the jagtersgemeenskap arose.” This discrete “stratum,” Wagner labels, the “swart skut.” Crucially, whereas indigenous responses to guns were secondary to Wagner’s appraisal of the hunting community centered around Schoemansdal, his allusion to the swart skut/black shots—a novel social formation—has by far had the greatest impact on the otherwise truncated historiography of Venda. Indeed, historians have so frequently invoked the swart skut in academic literature that the term has morphed over time into a shorthand neatly encapsulating the entirety of Vhavenda responses to firearms in nineteenth-century South Africa. A thorough investigation into the historical and epistemological origins of the swart skut is apropos in the present study, one in which Venda people and their responses to firearms in the nineteenth century are central.

Wagner explained that it was “the transition to foot hunting” as compared to hunting from the saddle that, “occasion[ed] the rise of the swart skut.”<sup>253</sup> Wagner proffered the first-hand accounts of two English traders to illustrate the changing dynamics of commercial hunting in Zoutpansberg. Citing Fleetwood Churchill, we are told “the hunters all go out on foot with six, eight, or ten kaffers [derogative term for Africans]” who generally served as porters, who carried the supplies required for a “hunt [that] lasts from ten to thirty days at a time.”<sup>254</sup> Harry Struben’s memoir offered other insights

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<sup>252</sup> William Kelleher Storey, *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa* (Cambridge, 2008), 109. Also see, Isaacman Allen F. and Isaacman Barbara, *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identities in the Unstable World of South-central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, 2004).

<sup>253</sup> Wagner, “Zoutpansberg: The Dynamics,” 330.

<sup>254</sup> Wagner, 331, citing J. Fleetwood Churchill (Rhenosterpoort), 13 September 1856, 12.

about the role of African marksmen in the emergent hunting culture of Zoutpansberg. In the late 1840s, during “the early days of Schoemansdal, there as a recognized system under Government permits of supplying native hunters with guns [and] ammunition.”<sup>255</sup> Each African hunter, “according to his recognized value” could bring along with “a certain number of carriers to take his truck in and out” of the hunting grounds. This excerpt from Struben’s autobiography also makes clear that the



Figure 3: Sketch of the Schoemansdale settlement. National Archives of South Africa.

arrangement between Afrikaner merchants and black hunters involved some kind of remuneration. The black marksmen “got a percentage of the ivory,” and many “of these men were good elephant shots and made lots of money.”<sup>256</sup>

Wagner’s work emphasizes the role of coercion as integral to the operation of the regional hunting community. And yet, his paper does not prove that Vhavenda were forced into the service of Schoemansdalers either as bondsmen or as hunters. That said, coercion was certainly an important part of the labor recruitment repertoire familiar to Afrikaners and Portuguese merchants alike. When the Portuguese hunter/trader Joao Albasini established himself in the Zoutpansberg, he did so with

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<sup>255</sup> Hendrik Wilhelm Struben, *Recollections of Adventures; Pioneering and Development in South Africa, 1850-1911* (Cape Town, 1920), 86.

<sup>256</sup> Struben, *Recollections*, 86.

the help of Tsonga retainers, who recognized him as a customary chief. To be sure, Goedewensch, his well-fortified stronghold, served as both a hub for his ivory trading activities and the collection and distribution point for slaves that his auxiliaries raided from neighboring peoples, including Vhavenda. For their part, the Boers based at Schoemansdal also made demands for tribute or opgaaf paid either in merchandise or people. Here, the interests of the Schoemansdalers converged with Albasini's. Wagner correctly notes that Albasini placed his "private army" of Tsongas at the disposal of the Schoemansdalers for the specific purpose of 'collecting' opgaaf from Vhavenda and other autochthonous peoples of the Zoutpansberg.<sup>257</sup> Albasini's Tsonga retainers also played their part in the hunt. Furthermore, in a role akin to that of paramount ruler, Albasini exercised the prerogative to appoint and promote chiefs. In the 1850s, those prerogatives were largely a function of that chief's productivity as a hunter.<sup>258</sup> The man who Albasini recognized as the best among his hunters was Nwamanungu wa Ndengeza. Following his appointment as superintendent in 1859, it was Nwamanungu who also led Albasini's private army of hunters-cum-tax collectors.<sup>259</sup>

By the mid-1850s, Albasini had established himself as the most influential merchant in the Zoutpansberg region. Yet, the ivory trade at the Schoemansdal settlement attracted many more Portuguese to the area in search of commercial opportunities.<sup>260</sup> Antonio Augusto de Carvalho was "the second trader to establish himself in the Zoutpansberg."<sup>261</sup> Another was Casimiro Simoes, "among the most colourful and prosperous" store owners, who was both a confidant of Albasini and one of his chief business rivals.<sup>262</sup> Simoes "flourished as a trader because he [purchased] much of the

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<sup>257</sup> Wagner, *Zoutpansberg Some Notes*, 36.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Teresa Ann van Ryneveld, 'Remembering Albasini' (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1998), 66; U. V Pienaar, *A Cameo from the Past: The Prehistory and Early History of the Kruger National Park* (Pretoria, 2012), 159.

<sup>260</sup> Sharmila Karnik, "Goans of Mozambique," *Africa Quarterly* (1998), 38.3, 109-10.

<sup>261</sup> Wagner, 325.

<sup>262</sup> Alfredo P. Lima, *A História De Loui's Trichardt. Lourenço Marques: Minerva Central*, 1964, 49; Ferreira O.J.O., *Diocleciano Fernandes das Neves (1829-1883): His Residence in Mozambique and His Visit to the Transvaal* (Tormentoso, Gordon's Bay and Jeffreys Bay, 2013), 33, 84.

ivory that hunters brought to town.”<sup>263</sup> Like Albasini, Carvalho, Simoes, and most of the other Portuguese in Schoemansdal began their respective commercial careers at Lourenço Marques. Unlike Albasini however, whose parents were born in Europe, Simoes, Carvalho and the others were all either born in Goa, or descendants of the prosperous Goanese diaspora in Lourenço Marques.<sup>264</sup> Some of these Goanese itinerants accumulated followings of Tsongas in a manner similar to Albasini, but the extent to which they mobilized their adherents to raid Vhavenda is a topic requiring additional study. Nevertheless, the relationships that Albasini constructed with his mostly Tsonga supporters were redolent of the kinds of commercial operations that were common in Portuguese territory.<sup>265</sup>

In the southern Zambezi basin, large land grants called *prazo* were awarded to Portuguese subjects, known as *prazero*, who paid small annual sums to the Portuguese government for the privilege. In Mozambique, *prazo* served as bases for slave raiding, while the *prazero* tended to operate in a manner analogous to warlords.<sup>266</sup> Through a combination of kinship (i.e., marriage to African women landowners), alliances and naked force, *prazero* gathered followers onto themselves. Scholars describe these communities of unfree peoples organized around *prazero* as Chikunda.<sup>267</sup> In the context of the *prazo* system, *prazero* typically trained some of their Chikunda to use firearms as both tools of the hunt and weapons of war.<sup>268</sup> Generally speaking, the scholarly literature suggests that

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<sup>263</sup> Pienaar, *Cameo from the Past*, 180.

<sup>264</sup> The Goanese merchant class of Lourenço Marques included 106 families by the early nineteenth century. The Casa da Goa (House of Goa) in Lourenço Marque, (now the National Cultural Museum in present-day Maputo) listed the names of 35 prominent Goanese men. Casimiro Simoes, Antonio Augusto de Carvalho and 23 others enshrined in this register of honor also appear in various primary and secondary documents pertaining to the Portuguese merchants who operated in the Transvaal during the Schoemansdal era. See, Sharmila S. Karnik, “Goans of Mozambique,” *Africa Quarterly* 38, 3 (1998), 95-118. Also see, Marta Vilar Rosales, “The Goan Elites from Mozambique: Migration Experiences and Identity Narratives During the Portuguese Colonial Period” in Charles Westin, Jose Bastos, et al, eds., *Identity Processes and Dynamics in Multi-Ethnic Europe* (eBook, 2010), 221-232.

<sup>265</sup> Following an abortive attempt to unseat Makhado [spelling] as Ramabulana king in the late 1860s, Davhana and his followers sought refuge with Albasini at Goedewench.

<sup>266</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, “Transformations in Slavery: The History of Slavery in Africa,” in Collins Robert O. and Ruth Iyob, eds., *Problems in African History: The Precolonial Centuries* (2014), 76-77.

<sup>267</sup> Alan K. Smith and Gervase Clarence-Smith. “Angola and Mozambique, 1870-1905,” in Roland Oliver and Sanderson G.N., eds., *The Cambridge History of Africa* (Cambridge, 1985), 493-521. Print. The Cambridge History of Africa. 499.

<sup>268</sup> M.D.D. Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London, 1995), 218.

Chikunda exercised a modicum of social mobility within the parameters of the prazo system. Of course, this was entirely compatible with the underlying fact that the relationship between prazero and Chikunda was in practice that of bondsmen and master.

Some aspects of the “labour system of white Transvaal” thought to have produced the swart skut were redolent of the prazo system with which at least some of the actors operating in the Schoemansdal area would have been intimately familiar.<sup>269</sup> Importantly, Joao Albasini’s ability to manage his farm at Goedewensch as though it were a prazo had as much to do with his prior experiences with such enterprises in Mozambique as it did the political disposition of those cleaved to him in a role analogous to Chikunda. The ‘Tsonga who settled in the Zoutpansberg prior to Albasini’s arrival in the 1840s were regarded by Vhavenda as muama-donga, an idiomatic pejorative connoting their status as refugees.<sup>270</sup> Their politically weak position vis-a-vis Vhavenda created the cultural breach into which Albasini readily insinuated himself, specifically in the role of “the white chief of the Tsongas,” an epithet that Albasini eagerly embraced.<sup>271</sup> Indeed, it was because “of their fortuitous alliance with Joao Albasini” that the ‘Tsonga refugees in Zoutpansberg transformed themselves “into hunter-traders in circumstances of relative safety.”<sup>272</sup>

In his work, Wagner recognized “parallels” between Albasini’s operation at Goedewensch—to include his relationship with ‘Tsonga adherents—and “the kind of hunting practiced by the Boer hunter-traders” at Schoemansdal.<sup>273</sup> There is scant evidence however, that Boers reached anything near the structural coherence in their own commercial ventures. More importantly, the eventual collapse

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<sup>269</sup> Wagner, 332.

<sup>270</sup> M.M. Motenda, “History of the Western Venda and of the Lemba,” in N.J. Van Warmelo, *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg: Vernacular Accounts* (Pretoria, 1940), 68.

<sup>271</sup> Henri A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, (New York, 1962), 29. Also see, M.M. Motenda, “History of the Western Venda and of the Lembas,” in N.J. Van Warmelo, ed., *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, (Pretoria, 1940), 69.

<sup>272</sup> Wagner, *Zoutpansberg: Some Notes*, 35.

<sup>273</sup> Wagner, *Zoutpansberg: Some Notes*, 36.



of the prazo system in Mozambique offers another set of historical analogs that partially contextualize the eventual collapse of the jagtersgemeenskap Schoemansdal. Exploitation and coercion had been among the central features of the prazo system since the early seventeenth century. By the mid-1840s, the Portuguese government and even prazeros themselves began to recognize that the coercive discipline required to maintain such a system also tended to erode the profitability of the entire enterprise.<sup>274</sup> In other words, the prazo system collapsed under the weight of its own violent inefficiency.

Meanwhile, the jagtersgemeenskap lacked some of the central characteristics that made prazos so very profitable for nearly two and a half centuries. Though the Boers sought to recreate aspects of the Mozambican estate system—with Goedewensch as their most conspicuous model—they did so rather sloppily and without resort to the institutional memory underlying the Portuguese-operated estates in the Zoutpansberg. In the first instance, Vhavenda regarded themselves as the owners of the land, not refugees requiring the support of white patrons like Albasini's Tsonga followers. Moreover, whereas Albasini actively cultivated his image as a white chief ruling over African adherents, there is scant evidence that any Boers harbored similar aspirations to indigenous chieftaincy. To be sure, while Boers often tried to influence the internal affairs of the Venda confederacy, few members of the Schoemansdal community expressed any real interest in the kinds of hybridized identities that undergirded Albasini's control over his Tsonga followers. And, while the Boers shared Albasini's desire to profit from African labor, few among them were willing to go as far as Albasini did to bring Vhavenda to heel. This explains why some members of the Schoemansdal community found in Albasini a man who was capable of taking on the less desirable tasks required to exploit African labor. Foremost among those tasks was the extraction of tribute, which the Boers described as *opgaaf*. In

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<sup>274</sup> Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identities in the Unstable World of South-central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, 2004), 68.

his book chapter, Wagner contended that at least some of the people who purportedly became swart skut were originally brought into contact with Boers as children collected from their families under the auspices of the opgaaf system.<sup>275</sup> The next section interrogates these claims.

#### Opgaaf and the Origins of the Swart Skut

However tedious, the demands for opgaaf tax that the Boers attempted to impose upon Africans were not entirely foreign to Vhavenda, nor were they beyond the scope of the customary obligations and ritual observances that bound discrete chieftaincies together into a political confederation. For instance, before whites settled in the Zoutpansberg, it was not at all unusual for a subordinate chief to recognize the overlordship of a more powerful but politically unaffiliated neighbor with an offering. In Tshivenda, the verb *luvha* connotes such an offering as homage or obeisance. Crucially, Venda customs recognize the political distinction between *luvha*, paid as a concession to a more powerful entity, versus *muthelo*, which were taxes or levies paid out of obligation either to a dynast or, later, to the government. The practical distinction is that the former acknowledged power while the later indicated a loss of sovereignty. Though some monarchs complied with Boer demands, Venda rulers understood those concessions as *luvha* (tribute) rather than *muthelo* (tax).

During their long tenure of independence, it was also customary for *vhasiwana* or commoners to work without remuneration in the gardens of their chiefs as a form of tribute. While the Boers do appear to have demanded that Vhavenda offer free farm labor, such an imposition simply did not register with Vhavenda as *dzunde*, a term implying unpaid work on royal gardens. While *dzunde* served both social and spiritual functions and was conducted within the context of the mutual obligations that bound chiefs to their adherents, no such relationship existed between Boers and Vhavenda.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Wagner, 332.

<sup>276</sup> Joseph Mphaphuli Gole/Gaba. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 30 July 2018.

Joao Albasini assumed responsibility for the collection of opgaaf from Vhavenda following his appointment to the office of Native Superintendent in 1859. This also meant his Tsonga followers were officially deputized as *gouvernementsvolk* (government people).<sup>277</sup> On its face, it seems fair to surmise that this represented a measure of upward social mobility, especially in light of the low station Vhavenda assigned to the Tsongas who settled among them before affiliating themselves with Albasini.<sup>278</sup> The explicit blessing of the Schoemansdal community thus afforded the Tsonga with free license to raid Venda villages under the auspices of their official tax collecting duties. Having institutionalized what had hitherto been an informal alliance, the combined forces of Boers and Albasini's tax collectors sought to project their power beyond Schoemansdal into central and eastern Zoutpansberg.<sup>279</sup>

Albasini's confiscatory tax collection methods imposed a heavy burden on even the most powerful Venda monarchs. In the early 1860s, the Tshivhasa King Luvhengo sent emissaries to Tshiwawa (a vernacularized play on Joao Albasini's first name) with the object of negotiating a permanent end to obligatory payments of opgaaf. According to the diaries of the Lutheran evangelist Rev. Carl Beuster of the Berlin Mission in Venda, the terms of the arrangement were severe. Albasini demanded cattle, ivory, an unknown number of children and women, to include *vhakololo* or members of the royal family.<sup>280</sup> King Luvhengo met these terms. While the cost was dear, the Rev. Beuster indicates that the Tsongas conducted no further raids for opgaaf in Tshivhasa's country.<sup>281</sup> Moreover, that he retained his sovereignty also suggest that Tshivhasa likely considered his concession to have been *luvha* rather than *muthelo*.

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<sup>277</sup> U.V., Pienaar, *A Cameo from the Past: The Prehistory and Early History of the Kruger National Park* (Pretoria, 2012), 162.

<sup>278</sup> Pienaar, *A Cameo from the Past*, 162.

<sup>279</sup> Boeyens, *Die Konflik Tussen*, 3.

<sup>280</sup> "Document on Johannes Mutshaeni", *New Mission Publications*, 26, 2, (Bookshop of the Berlin Evangelical Mission Society: 1897), 3.

<sup>281</sup> Document on Johannes Mutshaeni, 3.

Meanwhile, in eastern Zoutpansberg, Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo also managed to reach an accommodation with Tshiwawa. What we know about the terms of the settlement comes from the testimony of Makwarela, Ranwedzi's son and eventual successor, who shared his recollection of this conjuncture several decades hence. On 30 July 1906, Makwarela Mphaphuli reported to the office of E.H. Hogge, Native Commissioner for Zoutpansberg. Though the stated purpose of the interview was to collect information pursuant to the apportionment of native reserves, Hogge interrogated Makwarela about a host of unrelated historical topics. For instance, the commissioner inquired if the Mphaphulis "had ever give[n] the Boers any trouble?"<sup>282</sup> Makwarela replied "we have always been on good terms with the Boers ever since the[y] came to this country."<sup>283</sup> Hogge pressed Makwarela for additional details about "when [he] first paid taxes to the Boer government?" Makwarela's response offers some interesting insights about how Venda monarchs interpreted Boer demands for opgaaf during the Schoemansdal era. As the one who personally delivered the tribute to Albasini, Makwarela was better positioned than anyone else to understand his father's intentions.<sup>284</sup> According to the interview transcript, Makwarela explained to Hogge that "we paid Albasini in the shape of picks (iron hoes)," but "I cannot call it taxes." Although recent archaeological research demonstrates that Tsonga people used iron hoes manufactured in Venda furnaces as a form of currency, Makwerela stated that independent Venda dynasts such as his father regarded these concessions "as a sort of tribute."<sup>285</sup>

While the Mphaphuli and Tshivhase dynasties came to terms with Albasini and the Afrikaners on the payment of opgaaf—regarded as tribute by the former and tax by the latter—other

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<sup>282</sup> Native Commissioner/Sibasa. Interview. By Makwarela Mphaphuli. 1907. TAB 16/25/4/12/2.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Makwarela full response reads "my father sent me and this old man sitting to my right to take these taxes to Albasini." The man to his right was not identified, nor was he listed among the witnesses. Native Commissioner/Sibasa. Interview. By Makwarela Mphaphuli. 1907. TAB 16/25/4/12/2.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.; Abigail Joy Moffett, Tim Maggs, Johnny van Schalkwyk, "Breaking Ground: Hoes in Precolonial South Africa—Typology, Medium of Exchange and Symbolic Value," *African Archaeological Review*, 34, (2017), 10.

independent Venda chiefs flatly refused to bow to the presumptions of white interlopers, especially not without a tangible demonstration of their resolve. Two chiefs in particular, Vele Rambuda of Dzimauli and Maboho of Lwamondo invited the Schoemansdalers and their *gouvernementsvolk* to take by force that which would not be given voluntarily. In this way, Vele and Maboho's responses reflected an element of Venda martial ethos encapsulated in the proverb: *n̄owa a i londwi mulindini* (a snake is not followed right up to its hole).<sup>286</sup> In conventional usage, this phrase connotes a warning against the pursuit of an opponent to their home where they are more formidable. Thus, Vele and Maboho practically dared Albasini to come to them and fight in the mountains to collect the taxes they so desired. In February 1863, Albasini dispatched his field commander Nwamanungu to Dzimauli—located in central Zoutpansberg—with instructions to bring khosi Vele Rambuda to heel.

As discussed in chapter one, the violent upheavals of the 1830s taught Vhavenda to prioritize communal security in the construction of elevated settlements. The barricaded *mutzheto* villages that they built to defend themselves against Swazi and Ndebele marauders a generation earlier were still a viable refuge against Tshiwawa and his Tsonga tax collectors in the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>287</sup> Khosi Vele Rambuda's fastness at Dzimauli was typical of the *mutzheto* style, the centerpiece of the Vhavenda way of war. In addition to these natural defenses, many of Vele's people had acquired firearms, which they used to good effect against a persistent attack from Albasini's men under the command of his intrepid general Nwamanungu.<sup>288</sup> From elevated firing positions overlooking the narrow approach to Vele's *musanda* or great place, his marksmen held the Tsongas at bay from the beginning of the battle

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<sup>286</sup> Leondard Tshikota, *Thalusamaipfi Ya Mirror-Dictionary of Venda Proverbs*, (Thohoyandou, 2010), 49.

<sup>287</sup> Johannes Loubser, "The Ethnoarchaeology of Venda-speakers in Southern Africa," *Navorsinge van die Nasionale Museum* 7, (7), 1991, 183; Gerald Chikozho Mazarire, "Defense Consciousness as a Way of Life: 'The Refuge Period' and Karanga Defense Strategies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century." *Zimbabwean Prehistory: Journal of the Prehistory Society of Zimbabwe* 25, (2005), 19-25.

<sup>288</sup> Jan Boeyens, "Die Konflik Tussen die Venda en die Blankes in Transvaal," 1864-1869. *Archives Yearbook for South African History* 53, 1 (1990), 5.

on 16 February until the aggressors were forced into retreat three days later.<sup>289</sup> Then, on 22 September, Nwamanungu led Tshiwawa's fighters in a daytime assault of Lwamondo, located approximately 25km southwest of Dzamauli.<sup>290</sup> And, like Dzimauli, "the only approach" to Maboho's musanda "was a footpath that was kept purposefully very narrow and edged with six foot boulders and thorn branches," according to an account of the battle recorded by one of Albasini's descendants.<sup>291</sup> That same account indicates that Maboho's people easily repulsed this initial attack by rolling boulders and stones—staged in advance for this purpose—down the footpath the Tsongas could only traverse in single file.<sup>292</sup> Oral traditions indicate that the defenders recovered many firearms left behind by the Tsongas who fled in haste.

Unwilling to accept defeat, Albasini ordered another assault to commence under cover of darkness in the early morning hours of 23 September 1865. Khosi Maboho anticipated that Albasini and his Tsonga followers would likely test his mountain's defenses again. For his part, Nwamanungu expected that Lwamondo's defenders were prepared to defend yet another frontal assault from the same narrow corridor of approach. Nwamanungu's calculations were correct. To avoid his previous mistake, the Tsonga commander modified his plan of attack. Bypassing Lwamondo's defenses required a painstaking and coordinated maneuver along a circuitous route, which, if successful, would have afforded his troops the opportunity to capture their objective by stealth. If Nwamanungu and his men scaled the nearly vertical rock face to the west of Mafela mountain, they would have emerged behind the musanda.<sup>293</sup> Written and oral sources concur that Nwamanungu's gambit would have worked were it not for one additional measure of security the Tsonga commander could neither see,

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<sup>289</sup> Boeyens, *Die Konflikte Tussen*, 5.

<sup>290</sup> Mphaya Nemudzivhadi, "A History of Lwamondo," Unpublished Research Paper.

<sup>291</sup> Joao Albasini III, *Joao Albasini, 1813-1888* (1998), University of South Africa Library, Special Collections.

<sup>292</sup> Mphaya Nemudzivhadi, *Historia ya Vhubosi ha Lwamondo*, (Unpublished Research Brief, 1999), 3.

<sup>293</sup> Calvin Nelwamondo/Thoyandou. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 30 July 2019.

nor anticipate. The rock face at Mafela mountain that separated the Tsongas from their sleeping adversaries was also home to the sacred baboons of Lwamondo. Since the times of flight, Lwamondo's human inhabitants had learned to regard the hum or barking of the mountain's baboons as a call to arms.<sup>294</sup> The available written sources indicate that baboons alerted khosi Maboho's sentries affording them time enough to mount a competent defense.<sup>295</sup> And so, despite Nwamanungu's deft tactics, he and his troops were forced to return to Albasini having secured neither khosi Maboho's submission, or, saving that, his head. Nevertheless, the raid did produce 205 cattle along with sheep and goats for their trouble.<sup>296</sup>

Some Africans lacked the manpower and material resources to successfully resist the newcomers. On 8 August 1865, Albasini personally lead an expedition to Mbwenda, an isolated hillock in the plains located 50km south of Lwamondo. The commando consisting of 60 Boers and approximately 1000 Tsonga auxiliaries approached the area for the stated purpose of collecting taxes.<sup>297</sup> Although khosi Magoro's people enjoyed the tactical advantage of defending high ground, the five muzzle loading muskets in their arsenal were no match for the superior numbers and firepower of the commando. Albasini ordered Magoro to come down from his hill and present his opgaaf in person.<sup>298</sup> Despite his promise not to harm the chief, Albasini's people arrested Magoro and confiscated the ransom of ivory and approximately 250 head of cattle. Later that evening, either the Boers or Tsongas murdered Magoro and 300 of his followers.<sup>299</sup> The commando returned to Goedewensch on 13 August to divide the spoils of their operation. The Tsongas accepted the women

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<sup>294</sup> M.M. Motenda, "History of the Western Venda and of the Lemba" in S.M. Dzivhani and N.J. Van Warmelo, *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg: Vernacular Accounts* (Pretoria, 1940), 67.

<sup>295</sup> Albasini, 10.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> J.C.A. Boeyens, *The Entangled Past: Integrating Archaeology, Oral Tradition and History in the South African Interior* (Unpublished Lecture, University of South Africa: 10 November 2011), 12-13.

<sup>298</sup> *Transvaal Argus*, 4 August 1868, 3.

<sup>299</sup> Fred B. Fynney to Lieutenant Governor/Zoutpansberg 31 March 1877, Enclosure 2, CO/879/10/273.

who survived that attack as war captives, while the Boers registered 120 children with the Landdrost as inboekselings or as “apprentices.” The next section explores the role of apprenticeship as the second component of the “white Transvaal labor system” from which the swart skut were thought to have emerged.<sup>300</sup>

This section explored elements of the political milieu that brought settlers and merchants associated with the Schoemansdal settlement into contact with Venda people during the 1850s and 1860s. A close examination of the evidence has demonstrated the rather limited scope of the Boer’s capacity to subjugate Venda people. Those who complied with Boer demands for opgaaf did so in a manner consistent with a political culture that afforded leaders with a great deal of space to maneuver without compromising their sovereignty. Other Venda leaders refused to accommodate the newcomers. In the main, the Boers and their allies lacked the capacity to overcome the defenses of those who ignored their machinations.

#### From Tax Collection to Slave Raiding

The fate of the 120 adolescent survivors of the Magoro hill massacre was emblematic of another central feature of the jagters gemeenskap. As commercial hunting exhausted the local elephant population in the lower Limpopo basin, the Boers at Schoemansdal increasingly resorted to the production of swart ivoor (black ivory), a euphemism for child slaves. Crucially, because slavery was explicitly outlawed in the frontier zone between the Limpopo and Sand Rivers, the Transvaal Republic developed a legal artifice that legitimized slave raiding by other means.<sup>301</sup> Citizens of the Republic could seize orphaned African children. How those children became orphans was immaterial to the

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<sup>300</sup> Boeyens, “The Entangled Past,” 12, 13.

<sup>301</sup> The United Kingdom recognized the Transvaal Republic as an independent entity with the ratification of the Sand River Convention of 1852. Under the terms of the treaty, the Transvaal Republic agreed to abide by a general prohibition against slavery.



process. With the stroke of the Landdrost's pen, Boers converted the children of murdered parents into apprentices or inboekselings.<sup>302</sup>

Scholars presumed that inboekselings occupied an interstitial space between the worlds of their birth and that of the Boers. Apprenticed children were never “fully incorporated into Boer society,” according to Jan Boeyens, yet they “nevertheless became estranged from their societies of origin.”<sup>303</sup> Building on Wagner's seminal chapter, Boeyens alludes to this abiding alienation among the factors that gave impetus to the emergence of the swart skut. Indeed, “a new social stratum” of the jagtersgemeenskap “emerged from the ranks of the apprentices.”<sup>304</sup> To situate the swart skut on more stable historical ground, Boeyens links the black shots to “oorlams,” an ostensibly servile stratum of people of mixed ancestry who were assimilated into trekker society.<sup>305</sup> Crucially, on this point, like most other aspects of the fabricated backstory about the black shots—largely through inference and insinuation—the characteristics ascribed to the swart skut resonate only in the most general of registers, but never in the particular biographical facts of historical actors.<sup>306</sup> Nevertheless, the rhetorical elision linking oorlams to swart skut is a common feature of the historiography of the latter and, by extension, the historiography of the Transvaal hunting frontier. An argument outlined in detail in the next section is that this element of the swart skut trope is inaccurate both in the aggregate and in the particular.

Harvesting enslaved African youth attracted the attention of white missionaries and liberals, which posed a more immediate problem for the Transvaal Republic. By the mid-1860s, the Cape

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<sup>302</sup> Wagner, 332.

<sup>303</sup> Jan Boeyens, ‘Swart Ivoor’: Inboekselinge in Zoutpansberg, 1848-1869,” *Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Joernaal*, 24, (1991), 32. The slavery apprenticeship nexus in the Zoutpansberg is also explored in van Ryneveld, Teresa Ann, *Remembering Albasini*, (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Cape Town: 1998), 123-126.

<sup>304</sup> Boeyens, ‘Swart Ivoor’, 32.

<sup>305</sup> Peter Delius, Stanley Trapido, “Inboekselings and Oorlams: the Creation and Transformation of a Servile Class,” *Journal Southern African Studies*, (1981), 8.

<sup>306</sup> None of the Muvenda hunters identified by name in ‘Zoutpansberg: the Dynamics of a Hunting Frontier’, were child slaves; nor were any among them orphans.

administration could no longer ignore allegations implicating the highest levels of the Transvaal government in slave raiding. Eventually, these allegations reached the desk of Cape Governor P. E. Wodehouse. In a letter dated 29 January 1866, Gideon J. Steyn, of Potchefstroom enclosed to Wodehouse a press clipping from a December 1865 edition of the periodical *De Republikein* detailing the inner workings of the Transvaal-based trade in African children. The column reads that “slave dealing...is fast becoming a lucrative branch of commerce in the face of the Grondwet (constitution)” in which trafficking in persons is expressly prohibited.<sup>307</sup> The editor explains that “whole wagon loads [of black children] are continually being hawked about the country, most of which are procured from Zoutpansberg.”<sup>308</sup> The article enclosed with Steyn’s letter also implicated Africans in the raids designed to produce ‘swart ivoor’. The letter states that “small parties of natives are even fitted out with goods and sent down as far as Delagoa Bay to traffic for “black ivory.”<sup>309</sup> The trade in enslaved children, “becomes in a manner legalized by their being taken before a landdrost and apprenticed for 21 years.” However, according to the editor, who Steyn identified as a Transvaal government official, “it is well known by those who practice it, that apprenticeship is merely giving a respectable name to a disgraceful proceeding.”<sup>310</sup>

Governor Wodehouse brought these allegations to the attention of Transvaal President M.W. Pretorius in a demarche dated 20 February 1866. Citing the letter from Steyn, who Wodehouse described as “a gentlemen entitled to every credit,” the missive invited President Pretorius to respond to claims that “native children” were being trafficked for the purposes of “public sale at

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<sup>307</sup> G.J. Steyn to P.E. Wodehouse, 4 December 1865/Cape of Good Hope and Natal. Correspondence relating to the alleged kidnapping and enslaving of young Africans by the people of the Transvaal Republic., Command Papers, 4141, XLIII.643, Vol. 43 N0 58.

<sup>308</sup> G.J. Steyn to P.E. Wodehouse, 4 December 1865/Cape of Good Hope and Natal. Correspondence relating to the alleged kidnapping and enslaving of young Africans by the people of the Transvaal Republic., Command Papers, 4141, XLIII.643, Vol. 43 N0 58.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

Potchefstroom.” Most damningly, these black children were said to have come “into the possession of the dealers by means of murder of the parents.”<sup>311</sup> Wodehouse stated the Cape government’s position on the matter plainly, that such arrangements, no matter under what name they may be disguised, can only be regarded as a sanctioning of practical slavery, and is therefore a clear violation of the most important stipulations of the convention between the government and that of her Majesty.”<sup>312</sup> Wodehouse alluded to the Sand River Convention, in which the Cape administration recognized the Transvaal Republic as an independent state on the condition that the new government strictly enforce a prohibition of the slave trade.

Taken at face value, Governor Wodehouse’s remarks represented a potential crisis for the Transvaal Republic. If Steyn’s allegations proved to have had merit, the conditions described therein would have placed the government in material breach of the terms of their treaty. The severity of these complications depended on the Cape’s interest in pressing the matter to its logical conclusion. If the tenor of his response was any indication, President Pretorius calculated that neither Wodehouse nor his superiors at the Colonial Office in London took the matter all that seriously. In a letter dated 6 February [1866], Pretorius attempted to neutralize the Governor’s argument which points to a defect in the nature of the Transvaal government by deflecting attention away from the systemic issue of state-sanctioned slavery and focusing instead on the minutia of an ongoing court case involving two rogue elephant hunters. Pretorius begins by acknowledging having already learned “of the illegal abduction of coloured children” during a recent visit to the Zoutpansberg.<sup>313</sup> There, the president familiarized himself with the legal details of C. Schmidt and F. Hoeveit, two German nationals in

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<sup>311</sup> P.E. Wodehouse to M.W. Pretorius. 20 February 1866, Cape of Good Hope and Natal. Correspondence relating to the alleged kidnapping and enslaving of young Africans by the people of the Transvaal Republic. Command Papers, 4141, XLIII.643, Vol. 43 N0 58.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> M.W. Pretorius to P. E. Wodehouse, 6 February 1866, Cape of Good Hope and Natal. Correspondence relating to the alleged kidnapping and enslaving of young Africans by the people of the Transvaal Republic. Command Papers, 4141, XLIII.643, Vol. 43, N0 58.

Zoutpansberg for whom arrest warrants had already been issued. Pretorius writes that “I have ascertained that the means employed . . . to obtain possession of these young Kaffirs was to employ Kaffir elephant hunters to attack and overcome small Kaffirs kraals, then to carry away the children.”<sup>314</sup> Pretorius goes on to offer what seemed only a half-hearted “assurance that acts like these will not be allowed to pass unpunished here.”<sup>315</sup>

If Pretorius estimated that Wodehouse’s inquiries were perfunctory in nature, it appeared that the president miscalculated. The subtext of Wodehouse’s February message made explicit in a letter to Pretorius dated 18 October 1866. In it, Governor Wodehouse wrote, “I have no alternative therefore but to submit again for the consideration of your government” that the Republic’s apprenticeship laws “can only be regarded as a practical sanction of slave trading and slavery.”<sup>316</sup> At the heart of the matter, the governor noted that Transvaal’s regime of apprenticeship was “a complete violation of the convention of 1852, which the British government cannot overlook.” Recognizing that this issue might not be disposed of so quickly, Pretorius changes tact in a reply message dated 14 November. Instead of the “bad apples” thesis of his original response, in which the President focused on the particular cases of Schmidt and Hoeveit, Pretorius pointed the finger of blame in the direction of his African neighbors. He wrote that the Transvaal Republic was surrounded “by native tribes, who frequently go to war beyond the reach of the government.” It sometimes “happens that the children are carried away from one tribe to another.”<sup>317</sup> Under such circumstances, “the government considers it to be its duty to save such children,” with its only recourse “apprenticing them as orphans to persons

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> M.W. Pretorius to P.E. Wodehouse, February 6, 1866.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

duly approved by the government.” Once again, President Pretorius offered his assurances that is “government will oppose anything which may have the remotest resemblance to the slave trade.”<sup>318</sup>

Flouting the terms of the Sand River Convention did eventually attract the attention of Christian liberals at the Cape as well as abolitionists in Britain. In written testimony submitted to the legislative council dated 27 April 1868, the Grahamstown politician Robert Godlonton stated that “a system of slavery has been, and is still, carried on” in the Transvaal Republic, “in spite of a treaty,” that specifically forbade such a practice.<sup>319</sup> According to Godlonton, “wholesale murders are committed, women are deliberately shot down, in order to render their children destitute, and thus afford a pretext for their apprenticeship which here means slavery in the worst form.”<sup>320</sup>

By the late 1860s, intelligence about the trade in children reached the Anglo-Portuguese Mixed Commission, an intergovernmental body established in the 1840s to adjudicate instances of maritime slavery. While its mandate primarily encompassed the western Indian Ocean littoral, abolitionists and political opponents of the Transvaal Republic sought to harness the Mixed-Commission’s legitimacy as a political cudgel against the government. In response to a report submitted to the commission in 1868, which included accusations of official complicity in the sale of swart ivoor, the Transvaal government framed the overrepresentation of orphans among its inboekselings as an expression of civic virtue. In a communique, the Transvaal administration lauded the “Christian humanitarian impulses” of its citizens who absorbed children who would have been left to their own devices were it not for the timely intervention of Burgher commandos.<sup>321</sup> What this obtuse response did not acknowledge however, but which was a matter of public record both in the Transvaal and the Cape,

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Robert Godlonton to Grahamstown Legislative Council, 27 April 1868, Annexure E. Encloses correspondence on the subject of the alleged kidnapping and enslaving of young Africans by the people of the South African Republic.

<sup>320</sup> Robert Godlonton to Grahamstown Legislative Council, 27 April 1868.

<sup>321</sup> Correspondence with British Coms. at Sierra Leone, Havana, Cape of Good Hope and Loanda; Reports from British Naval Forces on Slave Trade: 1868 [4131] LVI.665, 17.

were the circumstances in which the majority of these apprentices became orphaned in the first instance. According to British attorney E.L. Layard, the primary author of the 1868 report submitted to the Mixed Commission, Boer commandos routinely and “ruthlessly shot down” parents in order to substantiate “the pretense” that these children were “thrown upon the government” only to be apprenticed to “the person who brings them in.”<sup>322</sup> Layard concluded that Boer commandos operated in this manner “under the sanction of Transvaal authorities.”<sup>323</sup>

Such allegations were regularly featured in the British abolitionist press. On 2 July 1866, the London-based Anti-Slavery Reporter published an editor’s letter that asserted the existence of “a system of virtual slavery,” disguised under the “plausible pretense of apprenticing orphaned children.” The anonymous writer incredulously dismisses the “denials and evasions” of the “interested government,” while directly implicating the highest levels of the Transvaal Republic. The letter included a direct “challenge [to] President Pretorius to prove that the several young natives in his service were orphans.”<sup>324</sup> What’s more, the writer alleged if even “a fifteenth part of the 4,000 natives sold here” in Potchefstroom “over the last fifteen years” were actually orphans, it was so, only because “they have been deprived of their fathers, and perhaps mothers also, by the bullets of some ruffian of a Boer.”<sup>325</sup> The English language press in South Africa also ran stories alleging the existence of open slave trading in the Transvaal. In one letter to the editor of the Transvaal Argus, dated 30 March 1868, the case was stated plainly that there existed in the Transvaal a system “of slavery carried under the guise of charity and apprenticeship.”<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> ‘Slavery Beyond the Vaal.’ *The Anti-Slavery Reporter: Under the Sanction of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* (London, England), Monday, July 02, 1866; 177; Issue 7.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> *Transvaal Argus*, 29 April 1868, 3.

The form of apprenticeship practiced in the Transvaal was little more than bureaucratic camouflage for slavery. The evidence also pointed to the primary motive animating the collection of child slaves. Governor Wodehouse offered a succinct theory of the case in his February 1866 demarche to President Pretorius wherein he stated, “orphans . . . made so by the murder of their parents can be registered as apprentices for a term of 21 years, and can during that time be sold from hand-to-hand as a marketable commodity.”<sup>327</sup> In Potchefstroom, the most frequently cited point of sale for “black ivory” from Zoutpansberg, the going rate for an African child was roughly 15 shillings according to pastor George T. Jeffreys in an affidavit submitted as evidence in early 1866.<sup>328</sup> By 1868, attorney Layard estimated the price anywhere from 10 to 25 shillings.<sup>329</sup>

If apprenticeship was but a pretense for enslavement, and slavery but a mode of converting children into commodities for sale, the question remains as to which portion of these apprenticed children were raised among the Schoemansdalers, trained to hunt elephant with guns and thereby ‘absorbed’ into the jagters gemeenskap? Wagner reasoned that “on the face of it, it would seem more logical to employ hunt labour under the tribute system, since it was essentially seasonal employment.”<sup>330</sup> Moreover, as apprentices “bound to a particular master technically until majority” were in Wagner’s view “more amenable to the kind of control required of a swart skut.”<sup>331</sup> Thus, he concluded that “undoubtedly some swart skut were apprentices.”<sup>332</sup> Crucially, the evidence simply does not support such a conclusion. Nor is there any evidence related to the identities of any swart skut that are consistent with circumstances described in the literature. In the entirety of his article, Wagner

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<sup>327</sup> P.E. Wodehouse to M.W. Pretorius, 20 February 1866, correspondence on the subject of the alleged kidnapping and enslaving of young Africans by the people of the South African Republic.

<sup>328</sup> George T. Jeffreys to P.E. Wodehouse, 29 January 1866, Annexure E. Encloses correspondence on the subject of the alleged kidnapping and enslaving of young Africans by the people of the South African Republic.

<sup>329</sup> E.L. Layard 15 June 1868, Annex J, correspondence on the subject of the alleged kidnapping and enslaving of young Africans by the people of the South African Republic.

<sup>330</sup> Wagner, *Zoutpansberg: Dynamics*, 332.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

named just three Venda men who he claims were inductees of this distinct stratum of Zoutpansberg society. Yet, none of those individuals were orphans; nor were they child captives. Perhaps most importantly, during their respective tenure as hunters in the employ of whites, each man was a ritually initiated adult.

The most historically significant of the identified men was Makhado, who ascended to the kingship of the Ramabulana dynasty in 1865. Critical to Makhado's succession was the support of the other two supposed swart skut: a Muvhenda identified in Dutch sources as Tromp, whose actual name was Funyufunyu, and another known to whites as Stuurman but known to Vhavenda as Rasivhetshele.<sup>333</sup> According to Tshimaano, the youngest of Makhado's children, whose testimony was recorded by state ethnographer N.J. Van Warmelo in the 1930s, his father began working for a Burgher identified only as "Hans" while still a youth.<sup>334</sup> Interestingly, elements of Tshimaano's testimony suggest that the conditions of Makhado's sojourn as an agricultural laborer on Hans's farm bears at least some superficial resemblance to the terms of *opgaaf*.<sup>335</sup> It was there, while he was still a youth, where Makhado first made the acquaintance of Funyufunyu and Rasivhetshele, described in the testimony as "older men who work[ed] for European elephant hunters."<sup>336</sup> Crucially, according to Tshimaano, Makhado was "already a man" when Funyufunyu and Rasivhetshele invited him "to come with us to hunt elephant as [their] assistant."<sup>337</sup>

Nothing in Tshimaano's account—listed among the sources consulted in Wagner's chapter—substantiated the characterization of the swart skut either as captives or as children. To the same point, the practice among the Boers of hiring Africans to hunt elephant on their behalf also appeared to

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<sup>333</sup> Mphaya Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado, The Lion of the North, 1865-1895* (Thohoyandou, 2017), 26.

<sup>334</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, *Contributions Towards Venda History, Religion and Tribal Ritual* (Pretoria: Govt. Printer, 1960), 24.

<sup>335</sup> Van Warmelo, *Contributions*, 24.

<sup>336</sup> The precise phrasing is "zwima dzindou," *Contributions*, 24.

<sup>337</sup> Van Warmelo, *Contributions*, 24.



have been common knowledge. For example, in a report summarizing a tour of the Transvaal in the late 1860s, the German cartographer Fredric Jeppe described how “as soon as the season comes...the elephant hunters (who are exclusively black) . . . start off on foot . . . equipped with firearms, ammunition and food, supplied by the whites.”<sup>338</sup> Nowhere in Jeppe’s account, nor any in the bevy of diplomatic correspondence between London, the Cape and Pretoria involving slavery in the Transvaal are there even allusions to the effect of child hunters, or enslaved men employed as hunters, saving those Tsonga adherents to Albasini.

Returning to the Transvaal Republic’s response to Governor General Wodehouse’s demarche from 1866, President Pretorius’s oscillating excuses acknowledged two facts that undermine the conventional wisdom about the swart skut. First, Pretorius conceded that he was at least tangentially aware that trafficking in persons did occur within his jurisdiction, whether it be the fault of foreign criminals or war-like Africans. The President’s statements also make the comparatively pedestrian acknowledgment that Transvaalers routinely armed blacks to hunt game on their behalf. Importantly, a common theme in both concessions was President Pretorius’s palpable ambivalence about any difference between black hunters turned slave raiders and the communities that they brutalized in the production of black ivory. Indeed, to Pretorius, all were “kaffirs.” To be sure, that the President declined to use the term swart skut in his written response did not preclude the existence of the same. Nevertheless, if Pretorius was conversant in the minutia of the legal proceedings against two rogue hunters, Schmidt and Hoeveit, the conspicuous activities of semi-autonomous black hunters is unlikely to have escaped his notice, especially if the swart skut were somehow involved in slave trading. No doubt the swart skut had all the makings of a suitably plausible scapegoat upon whom the government could have placed the blame for the apparent contravention in the terms of the Sand

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<sup>338</sup> Frederick Jeppe, Description of the country belonging to the Transvaal Republic, 1868, CO/879/10/222, 9.

River treaty. Yet, given his cavalier attitude about the use of “kaffir hunters” as slave raiding proxies, what reason would Pretorius have had to conceal the existence of all “distinct stratum” (in Wagner’s words) of gun-toting black hunters operating beyond the purview of whites? To a Transvaal administration floundering in its response to a deluge of credible allegations of slave trading, it seems there would have been no cause for evasion were there even the flimsiest shred of evidence about the existence of the so-called black shots. Thus, the most likely explanation for the President’s silence about the swart skut was that there were no swart skut in the first instance.

In his seminal essay, Wagner explains why the Schoemansdalers would have been inclined to use apprenticed children as hunters. Even if reasons do not necessarily equate to evidence, the interior logics of Wagner’s argument betray a more likely scenario. If it was the nearly exhausted supply of elephant ivory that prompted some Afrikaners to resort to parricide as a means of harvesting black ivory, then it also seems appropriate to reconsider the set of incentives those same Afrikaners would have had for deploying inboekselings as hunters. To do so required the Boers to forgo the profits accrued from the sale of black ivory at the Potchefstroom slave market in order to raise children whose parents they had recently murdered. Moreover, using inboekselings as hunters would have also obliged the Boers to equip their wards with guns and then train them to track big game that was increasingly inaccessible even to experienced adult hunters. Beyond all this, the single most profitable component of the “white Transvaal labor system” would have also been the decisive factor militating against the use of inboekselings as hunters: the long-established bargaining tactic employed by some Boers of cheating Africans out of the compensation promised as a condition of their labor.

## The Swart Skut: A Historiography Without a History

Alan Copley cautions historians against the “alluring” but “simultaneously egregious error” of positioning as single scholarly product as constitutive of a “new historiographical direction.”<sup>339</sup> Yet, with respect to nineteenth-century Venda, still an under researched field, Wagner’s 1980 article is the clear exception to Copley’s otherwise axiomatic rule. By virtue of sheer repetition, the swart skut has become an indelible part of the historiography of the Zoutpansberg frontier. The same is true of the contradictions about the social and cultural milieu that was believed to have produced the swart skut. The opaque origins of the black marksmen extend to the provenance of the term itself. If those Africans from the Zoutpansberg who hunted elephant with guns borrowed from Boers at Schoemansdal were called swart skut, the question remains as to who, aside from other historians, called African elephant hunters swart skut in the first instance? Even if the term itself is clearly of Dutch provenance, the citations in Wagner’s published manuscript are vague on this point. Nor are there any contemporaneous sources that Vhavenda used the term self-referentially. Neither of the two Tshivenda nouns equivalent in meaning to hunter carries the connotation of apprenticed children raised by whites and trained to hunt elephant with guns.

The evidence establishes that firearms did not give rise to a distinct stratum of Zoutpansberg society. Yet, the domestication of the gun did occasion subtle shifts in the prevailing regimes of labor and migration in nineteenth-century Venda. Evidence of these shifts are discernible in Tshivenda language. The word tshivhelesana describes “a native porter such as those who used to accompany Europeans”<sup>340</sup> during their elephant hunting expeditions. Poto refers to the muzzle loading muskets most commonly given to Africans for hunting elephant, which required two porters. Another generic

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<sup>339</sup> Alan Copley, “Does Social History have a Future? The Ending of Apartheid and Recent Trends in South African Historiography,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, 3, (2001), 621.

<sup>340</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, 432.

term for gun is tshigidi. Combined with a verb meaning to carry, the phrase farela tshigidi is used in historical text to connote a “gun bearer.”<sup>341</sup> Mupakati describes one who carries something over one’s shoulder such as a firearm. In conventional written and spoken Tshivenda, the words mudzimi and mudzima are used synonymously in reference to a hunter. According to linguistic testimony recovered from mother-tongue speakers during field research, the difference lies in the hunter’s disposition towards the products of the hunt. After an unsuccessful excursion, the only sanction a mudzimi, or casual hunter would experience was a lack of meat for his pot. In contrast, a mudzimba, a professional or big game hunter, who returned home empty handed would be regarded as having transgressed a taboo.<sup>342</sup> Nevertheless, neither noun carries the connotations now associated with the swart skut in terms of enslaved child or apprentice trained to hunt elephant with guns.

The opaque provenance of the term itself as a lexiconic item are but one of the many incongruities that have been smoothed over in the process of fashioning the swart skut into a historiographical trope. Without a clear idea about who referred to the Venda hunters and their Tsonga counterparts as swart skut, historians Hermann Giliomee and Bernard Mbenga simply fill in the blanks, asserting “the Boers in the northern bushveld used the Afrikaans term swart skut” in reference to “mainly Venda, but also Tsonga, who hunted elephant for their ivory.”<sup>343</sup> About the conflict between the Boers and Vhavenda in the mid-1860s, the authors argued that “the swart skut felt they were inadequately remunerated.”<sup>344</sup> While Venda hunters are described as being in the employ of Schoemansdalers in most contemporaneous accounts of the dynamics of the Zoutpansberg hunting frontier, Mbenga and Giliomee write that black hunters “often deserted their Boer masters [my

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<sup>341</sup> Van Warmelo, *Contributions Towards Venda History*, 27.

<sup>342</sup> Daniel Dongale/Dzimauli. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 2 August 2016.

<sup>343</sup> Hermann Giliomee and Bernard Mbenga, *New History of South Africa*, (Cape Town, 2007), 175.

<sup>344</sup> Giliomee, *New History of South Africa*, 175.

emphasis].”<sup>345</sup> Given the apparent frequency with which many among the Schoemansdal hunting community defrauded the Vhavenda who they had hired to harvest ivory, the contention that it was the Vhavenda hunters who “deserted their Boer masters” seems incongruous with the evidence, not merely because it was the Boers who refused to pay the agreed rate having taken receipt of the promised ivory, but also because the Boers never established the measure of hegemony implicit in the master-enslaved relationship.

It remains unclear what it may have meant for Venda hunters such as Makhado, Funyufunyu and others to “return to . . . communities” from which they likely were never estranged.<sup>346</sup> The same was not true of the Tsongas. Implicit in a return to their communities was a repatriation to the Gaza-Ngoni state from which they had fled less than a generation before as refugees. To be sure, when Mbenga and Giliomee allude to a return to one’s community, they are speaking of inboekselings, raised by Boers, trained to use guns, and ultimately reestablishing themselves amongst the kith and kin from whom they were supposedly separated as children. Critically, such a scenario runs counter to evidence pointing to the Potchefstroom slave markets as the most common destination for “black ivory” rather than the farms in the Zoutpansberg. Beyond this, there were few if any incentives for Boers to raise Venda children until they were of age sufficient to handle firearms, and then train them to harvest ivory. Against the backdrop of an elephant population already in precipitous decline by the mid-1860s, the improbable rationale for using apprentices as hunters seems even less likely when Afrikaners often satisfied their labor demands by offering inducements to experienced adult mudzimba that many never intended to honor in the first place. The lengths to which some among the Schoemansdalers were willing to go in an attempt to defraud African laborers is addressed in the next section.

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

Other scholars added embellishments to the narrative of the swart skut, which have had the effect of smoothing over some of the inherent contradictions. For instance, Clapperton Mavhunga writes, “those boys who were captured and apprenticed in the Zoutpansberg were often trained in the use of guns and became slave soldiers who distinguished themselves as swart skuts (black shots).” Like Mbenga and Giliomee, Mavhunga also argues that “some swart skuts deserted [the Boers] and rejoined their societies, bringing with them guns that stiffened local resistance against raiders.”<sup>347</sup> To be sure, while chiefs such as Maboho of Lwamondo were perfectly capable of defending themselves against raiders using only the repertoires and technologies available to them since the times of flight, others such as Vele of Rambuda appear to have acquired guns from sources other than Schoemansdal. Nevertheless, even if neither Makhado nor the men who recruited him to become an elephant hunter were children or “slave soldiers,” it appeared they were indeed the swart skut who, according to Mavhunga “rejoin[ed] their societies.” Ultimately, the most compelling deployments of the swart skut as a narrative motif are those in which the details are left pronouncedly opaque.

The swart skut has also been used to advance revanchist historiographies. In *A Cameo from the Past: The Prehistory and Early History of the Kruger National Park*, historian Uys de Villiers Pienaar reframed the conflict over the firearms that Venda hunters borrowed from their Boer employers as one in which the latter were somehow the victims of the former. As background, in the mid-1860s, a number of so-called swart skut refused to return the firearms loaned to them by the Boers. The German cartographer Frederick Jeppe summarizes the standard interpretations of this dispute in the body of a report submitted to the Cape government following his tour of the Transvaal. Jeppe writes that the “hunters and their employers” could no longer agree as to “the division of the

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<sup>347</sup> Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, *The Mobile Workshop: Mobility, Technology, and Human Animal Interaction in Gonarezhou (National Park), 1850-Present*, (Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 2008) 186.

profits”<sup>348</sup> of the hunt. As a consequence, “a great number of the hunters refus[ed] to return the firearms lent to them.”<sup>349</sup> Jeppe notes the party bearing the preponderance of “blame” according to unnamed but supposedly “impartial witnesses” were the Boers, who were accused of “defrauding the hunters” and “of seizing . . . many hundred head of cattle.”<sup>350</sup> A similar account was published in the *Transvaal Argus* on 12 June 1866, herein the hunters “sent to the jagveld have refused to give up the guns given them by their employers for the purpose of killing game.”<sup>351</sup> Nevertheless, Pienaar argues the central point which “must be remembered” with respect to the collapse of the hunting frontier was that “the swart skuts” commandeered “about 200 rifles, which they refused to return.”<sup>352</sup> Indeed, the crime for which the Boers were most guilty in Pienaar’s estimation was not serial parricide as camouflage for child slavery, but rather, of gullibility as the “people of Schoemansdal trusted their black riflemen far too much.”<sup>353</sup>

Whereas Pienaar portrays the swart skut as untrustworthy, the historian Paul Landau arrives at precisely the opposite conclusion. Landau includes the “swart skut or trusted African gunmen” along with transport drivers and African missionaries among the cultural “intermediaries” in the historical conjuncture between frontiers people and indigenous communities of South Africa.<sup>354</sup> The fuzzy origins of the term and its contemporaneous use has parallels in the dearth of verifiable data about the number of initiates among their ranks. Patrick Harries argues that “Zoutpansberg Boers employed black hunters, called “swart skut” in the hundreds if not thousands” on a credit basis, as

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<sup>348</sup> Frederick Jeppe, “description of the country belonging to the Transvaal Republic, 1868, CO/879/10/222, 9.

<sup>349</sup> Jeppe, CO/879/10/222, 9.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> *Transvaal Argus*, 12 June 1866, 3.

<sup>352</sup> Pienaar, 162.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Paul Landau, “Transformations in Consciousness” in Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K. Mbenga, Robert Ross, eds., *The Cambridge History of South Africa* (Cambridge Press: Cambridge, 2010), 419; Michelle Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens, 2014), 116.

did the prazero of Lourenço Marques.<sup>355</sup> Indeed, historians have employed the swart skut referring to virtually any African from the Zoutpansberg brandishing a firearm.

#### Guns and Cultural Change in Venda

Beginning in the 1930s, the Union Government of South Africa (established in 1910) commissioned the Native Affairs Department (NAD) to investigate the traditions, genealogies, folklore and material culture of black South Africans in an effort to infuse its segregationist ideology and practice with pseudo-scientific legitimacy.<sup>356</sup> The NAD commissioned professional researchers such as state ethnographer Dr. Nicolaas Jacobus Van Warmelo to oversee the collection and curation of anthropological data that satisfied the state's intelligence needs. "Hunting and Trapping" was the sixth of twenty-seven subcategories of information listed on the ethnographic questionnaire that Dr. Van Warmelo circulated in the 1930s to "native experts" around the country to satisfy the NAD's information requirements about the Union's indigenous demography.<sup>357</sup> Scores of African scholars, men, and women alike, submitted hundreds of manuscripts. Van Warmelo and the NAD published only a fraction of these papers and left the balance to languish among the ethnographers' personal papers until his retirement. Of the roughly 206 manuscripts about Venda written in African languages, two in particular elaborated on Venda hunting traditions. Paulo Ngwana's essay *Agriculture, Dress, Diet and Hunting Methods of Venda* is organized into subheadings that correspond with those included in Van Warmelo's ethnographic questionnaire. In the section titled *u zwima nba u rea* (hunting and snaring), Ngwana began with a note that while "all animals were hunted," his essay made

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<sup>355</sup> Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, C.1860-1910*. (Portsmouth, 1994), 14.

<sup>356</sup> Sekibakiba Peter Lekgoathi, "Colonial Experts, Local Interlocutors, Informants and the Making of an Archive," *Journal of African History* 50, (2009), 65. See also Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>357</sup> Paul Ngwana, *Agriculture, Dress, Diet and Hunting in Venda*, University of Pretoria, Special Collections Library, South Africa, N.J. Van Warmelo Collection.



special reference to “elephant, buffalo, giraffe, wildebeest, antelope, eland, kudu and hippopotamus.”<sup>358</sup>

Ngwana also elaborated on Venda ethological knowledge. Vhavenda classified animals into categories based on the propensity of each species to respond aggressively to human predators. In his essay, we are told that the buffalo was inclined to attack until it either kills the hunter, “or is killed itself.”<sup>359</sup> It is for this reason that “one person cannot hunt a buffalo.”<sup>360</sup> Conversely, the species that did not attack hunters were: zebra, kudu, giraffe, and wildebeest. Antelopes were known to attack hunting dogs, but they would also attack “humans, but only if [the antelope] was injured.”<sup>361</sup> Before the introduction of firearms, buffalo were hunted with stabbing spears anointed with a locally fabricated concoction known as vhutulu. According to oral testimony gathered pursuant to this project, vhutulu enters the blood stream and kills the animal without contaminating its flesh.<sup>362</sup>

Ngwana’s essay also detailed the ritualized etiquette of the hunt. For instance, the process of tanning and seasoning elephant and lions’ hides was to be done at the musanda or great place of the chief in whose territory the animal was killed.<sup>363</sup> It was also customary to present the local ruler with a thigh of the elephant. The lion fat belonged to the traditional doctors for medicinal purposes. The author does not specify how lion fats were to be converted into medicine, but Ngwana does note that healers burned the fat of cheetahs for the same purpose.<sup>364</sup> The brains of either lion or cheetah were also rendered into medicines used to treat “difficulties hearing” or for acute ear pain.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Paul Ngwana, 7.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Ngwana, 7.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Robert Thinandavha Manngo/Kubvi. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 19 June 2018. Joseph Mphaphuli Gole and Cassius Madzhuta/Gaba. Interviews. 30 July 2018.

<sup>363</sup> Ngwana, 7.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

Unlike most other land animals, the crocodile was a ritually protected species that embodied discrete elements of ancestral leadership in Venda. As discussed in chapter four, the makhadzi or elder sister of a recently deceased ruler and aunt of the successor orchestrated the rituals of inauguration. Part of this process involved the transfer of the mmbwe, the round pebble found in the stomach of a crocodile that a chief had to swallow upon his succession. Before the 1860s, the death of a chief was a closely guarded secret among the vhasiwana or aristocracy. One practical reason why a departed chief lay in state for as long as a year was to allow the process of decomposition to proceed to the extent that the mmbwe could be recovered and given to the successor to swallow, thereby completing the first phase of the transfer of authority. These rituals also explain why the crocodile features prominently in Luambo lwa musanda, or the variation of Tshivenda that was only spoken at the musanda and therefore unintelligible to commoners or the uninitiated.<sup>366</sup> For instance, the meaning of the proverb ngwena a bvi tivhani, (literally: “a crocodile does not leave its pool”) alludes to the ritual seclusion of Venda chiefs who generally did not leave the musanda. Thus, as Ngwana explained, assassinating a chief with poisons made from the body parts of the crocodile was among the only plausible reasons one would have had for hunting a crocodile in the first instance. Such a person was therefore regarded as a witch and subject to exile beyond the frontiers of the Venda confederation.<sup>367</sup>

Ngwana’s manuscript listed one final customary practice with direct bearing on Wagner’s oft cited inference that Boers employed uninitiated children as hunters. The essay stated, “among boys, only those who had seen their eighteenth year were permitted to hunt.”<sup>368</sup> Even if the Afrikaners were not bound to respect indigenous customs, uninitiated youth were likely not the most effective hunters.

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<sup>366</sup> T.M. Sengani, “Strategic Discourses in Names: A Critical Discourse Analytical-Interpretation with Special Reference to Tshivenda Naming Practices” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Limpopo: 2008) 26.

<sup>367</sup> C.L. Harries, *The Sacred Baboons of Lomondo*, (Johannesburg, 1929). 95-101.

<sup>368</sup> Ngwana, *Agriculture, Hunting and Diet*, 7.

The evidence presented to this point challenges the hegemonic narrative of the Zoutpansberg hunting frontier. Guns did not change Africans, nor did they occasion the rise of discrete classes within Venda society. Instead, the evidence from Venda points to more modest and idiosyncratic processes of technological integration in which black gun users Africanized these exotic artifacts. Some of these changes are evidenced in another vernacular manuscript, *Mafhungo a Kale* (Information about long ago). The author, Isaac Mulaudzi, a lay historian and BMS evangelist, submitted this essay to Van Warmelo in July 1939. The manuscript centered on an ethnographic present that unfolded shortly after that of Ngwane’s paper—after Vhavenda began to hunt with guns. Mulaudzi expanded on Ngwane’s observations about the propensities of particular animals to resist human predation and recognized the rhinoceros as the species that was most inclined to preemptive attacks.<sup>369</sup> The author also noted that Boers “used guns and hunted in groups” during the Schoemansdal era.<sup>370</sup> The most prized game were “elephant, giraffe, hippopotamus and rhinoceros.”<sup>371</sup> Mulaudzi also drew attention to the reality that guns did not necessarily confer an insurmountable advantage to humans in a conflict with nature. Wild animals exacted casualties of their own from the European hunting parties that entered the veld in the early years of the Schoemansdal frontier “because elephants, buffalos, and rhinoceros were known to fight back” especially “if they were shot and wounded” but not killed.<sup>372</sup>

Mulaudzi’s ethnographies also foregrounded examples of how Vhavenda assimilated firearms into their own pre-existing repertoires of embodied practice. Drawing on the recent literature, the process of developing regimes of practice designed to accommodate new technologies described in

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<sup>369</sup> Mulaudzi, *Mafhungo a Kale: Events in Zoutpansberg from 1870 to 1904*. Van Warmelo Collection. (July 1939), 3.

<sup>370</sup> Mulaudzi, *Mafhungo a Kale*, 2.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

Mafhungo a Kale correspond with the formation of “polymorphic skills.”<sup>373</sup> The historian William Storey notes that polymorphic skills refer to the kinds of informed judgments required to deploy “technology while reacting to changing circumstances.” By way of example, if “mimeomorphic skills” refer to repetitive capacities analogous to balancing and pedaling on a bicycle, then polymorphic skills inform judgement about “how fast to pedal or where to turn.”<sup>374</sup> When applied to hunting with muzzle loading muskets, the knowledge resources required to judge distance, wind speed and directions fall squarely within the ambit of the polymorphic.

The kind of guns used for hunting elephant were known as vorderlader, a term connoting muzzle loaders.<sup>375</sup> Because of their size and weight, these cumbersome vorderlader muskets could not be “fired from the shoulder;” instead, they required a makeshift tripod. According to Mulaudzi, the hunter placed their weapon “where two branches join a tree.”<sup>376</sup> The set of practices associated with tactical loading of elephant guns was yet another example of the polymorphic skills developed in response to new hunting technologies. Mulaudzi described the steps required to charge a large bore flintlock musket, which included “loading the [musket] from the mouth” (or muzzle), using a lutatelo or ramrod. Loading these weapons was a hazard unto itself. A skilled hunter prepared their shot from cover, rather than in the open, as buffalo in particular were known to preemptively charge a hunter spied in the open.<sup>377</sup> Finally, if the wide bore vorderlader were suitable for the most dangerous game, the rhinoceros and “giraffe were hunted using a weapon known as poto, a “muzzle-loading” musket that also required two porters.”<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Storey, 137.

<sup>374</sup> Storey, 14.

<sup>375</sup> Mulaudzi, 3.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Van Warmelo dictionary, 317.

Elements of Mulaudzi's interpretation of the mid-nineteenth century encounter between Africans and settlers tends to complicate the standard narrative on the rise and fall of the Zoutpansberg hunting frontier. Clearly, the introduction of firearms had the effect of intensifying the pursuit of game animals. And, while guns made hunters more lethal, firearms did not render hunters impervious to the hazards of the field. A subtext to Mulaudzi's account alluded to the possibility that it was a desire to minimize their exposure to the inherent dangers of their craft rather than fear of tsetse borne disease that best explains why many Boers equipped African proxies with guns to hunt in their stead. Other elements of this ethnographic essay challenged Wagner's claims that it was "the transition to foot hunting" that occasioned the rise of the swart skut.<sup>379</sup> One passage in Mafhungo a Kale speaks to both points. When animals such as lion, buffalo or rhinoceros turned the tables on the hunters and pursued their erstwhile pursuers, "the black porters and gun bearers fled on foot while the whites fled from the mount."<sup>380</sup> The more important point, however, is that Mulaudzi traces the proximate causes of enmity between Afrikaners and Vhavenda to the practice among at least some settlers to use their African assistants as bait for aggressive animals. Those simmering enmities boiled over into military confrontations in 1867 and 1869, which are explored in the next chapter.

Born in 1873, Isaac Mulaudzi was just one generation removed from the events detailed in his account. Nevertheless, his specific claims about how the Boers at Schoemansdal used their African hunting assistants as human bait is born out in the firsthand account of Johannes Mutshaeni, the first vhatendi (Christian convert) to join the Lutheran Mission in Venda. Johannes Mutshaeni was born circa 1840 in Tshiheni, a province in the country of king Luvhengo, the second Tshivhasa. According to a narrative account of his early life and conversion published in 1897, the prospect of earning a cow in exchange for twelve months of agricultural work enticed Mutshaeni to seek employment among

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<sup>379</sup> Wagner, *Zoutpansberg, The Dynamics*, 330.

<sup>380</sup> Mulaudzi, 3.

the Burghers during the late 1850s or early 1860s.<sup>381</sup> Before the end of his contract however, Mutshaeni became familiar with the most diabolical features of Boer labor recruitment practices.<sup>382</sup>

Mutshaeni's account states that Burghers customarily ratcheted up the demands imposed upon black laborers towards the end of the year in hopes of driving them to abscond in frustration. To do so, of course, was also to forfeit any claims of compensation for services already rendered.<sup>383</sup> When these tactics failed to produce the desired effect with Mutshaeni—a man of formidable constitution according to the Rev. Carl Beuster—his employer changed tact and announced his intention to lead an expedition into the veld for lion. As an initiated adult, Mutshaeni was presumably aware that lions were dangerous prey, even under the most favorable of circumstances. And if the burgher was able to conceal his true intentions at the outset of their expedition, Mutshaeni would most likely have been alerted to the precarity of his circumstances no sooner than the pair spotted their first lion. The burgher demanded his musket and then ordered Mutshaeni to “walk ahead . . . towards the lion while I shoot.”<sup>384</sup> From the saddle, the burgher took his measure, and fired. The shot landed wide of its mark.

The Rev. Beuster supplied the notes of Mutshaeni's testimony that informed the interpretation of his life published for the BMS's patrons in Germany with the intention of portraying a narrative of Christian redemption and salvation in Africa.<sup>385</sup> Even with these obvious undercurrents, it is remarkable nevertheless that the startled animal charged past Mutshaeni—understandably frozen where he stood—and gave chase to the mounted Boer who afforded himself the advantage of a considerable head start.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Documents on Johannes Mutshaeni, *Booksshop of the Berlin Evangelical Mission Society*, BMA (1890), 4.

<sup>382</sup> Wagner, 332

<sup>383</sup> Document on Johannes Mutshaeni, 4.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> Alan Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul: The Vhavenda and the Missionaries*, (Pretoria, 2005), 40.

<sup>386</sup> Document on Johannes Mutshaeni, 5.

Having evaded the lion, and seemingly now in full command of his own polymorphic capacities, the Boer threatened to shoot Mutshaeni if he did not climb down from the tree where he sought safety during the brief chase. With everything in place, the Boer again trained his sights on the lion. And, once again, his shot missed its mark. This time, betraying his true intentions, the Boer took flight on his horse with what may be presumed to have been the confident satisfaction that a dead African was unlikely to claim the compensation he had been promised nearly twelve months prior.<sup>387</sup> According to Rev. Beuster's interpretation of his parishioner's testimony, "the enormous animal calmly turn its back" on Mutshaeni.<sup>388</sup> With darkness approaching, Mutshaeni found the path leading back to the farm. To the Boer's obvious surprise and consternation, Mutshaeni survived the ordeal. Having literally tried but failed to feed a laborer to the lions rather than honor an agreement, the burgher had no recourse but to "present Mutshaeni with the stipulated cow."<sup>389</sup> Ultimately, if this narrative bears even the slightest resemblance to the events as they happened, and if the conduct of the unnamed Boer in this account was representative, it lends credence to Mulaudzi's observation that the malignant ambivalence of the Afrikaners contributed more than any other consideration to the collapse of the so-called jagters gemeenskap.<sup>390</sup>

The narrative arch of Johannes Mutshaeni's life intersects with other compelling illustrations of how Vhavenda assimilated firearms into the broader social fabric of their everyday lives. Three years after his first harrowing sojourn among the Afrikaners, Mutshaeni traveled to Natal. The men of his age believed that vha-Isimane or Englishmen "were as rich as kings," and, more importantly, the English were thought to "treat their labourers more humanely than did the burghers."<sup>391</sup> Perhaps

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<sup>387</sup> Document on Johannes Mutshaeni, 5.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Mulaudzi, 4.

<sup>391</sup> Document on Johannes Mutshaeni, 6.

most importantly, at Pietersburg (Polokwane today), “it was possible to buy precious guns...for the easily earned money.” According to the editorial voice of the missionaries, “the possession of a gun was the essence of the longing of all Black people.”<sup>392</sup> While the veracity of this observation is impossible to gauge, travel to Pietersburg with the intention of repatriating guns was common enough that the journey generated a distinct linguistic marker. Vhavenda men who traveled to Natal also brought back mugugudou, the Tshivenda name for Mauritius plant whose thorns protected isolated villages and sacred sites. As a consequence, there exists a semiotic correlation in conventional speech between the mugugudou and arduous circuits linking Venda migrant workers and legal opportunities to purchase guns.

As elsewhere, the burdens of migratory work for guns were not the sole responsibility of the migrant; but rather, they were to be shared communally. Thus, it was common during the nineteenth century for extended families to refer to migrants as *muta-shango*, in lieu of given names lest the itinerant become troubled during their journey. While it is a matter of conjecture, if Johannes Mutshaeni desired that his relations observe this taboo in his absence, we might also speculate as to how he would have made sense of his misfortune in his attempt to repatriate a gun from Pietermaritzburg. After many months of labor, Mutshaeni eventually secured the object of his desire. Crucially, because Natal’s laws held no sway in the territory of the Transvaal Republic, Boers confiscated “the guns, gun powder, bullets” and even the horse he and his compatriots purchased with their earnings.<sup>393</sup>

Mutshaeni’s evangelical career was cut short; he died of smallpox in the episodic of October 1876. Known to Tshivenda speakers as *thumba dza magudu*, oral traditions allude to at least three smallpox outbreaks during the nineteenth century. Importantly, in Venda culture, smallpox is one of

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 8.



the diseases regarded as “unpredictable as the wind,” and so feared that “even mentioning it is undesirable.”<sup>394</sup> The principle underlying this taboo was captured in a folktale published under the editorial guidance of Native Affairs ethnographer G.P. Lestrade in 1946. In the story, *Malambatata-kwa-fakwe-nyena*, (The Little Ones Who Died Grinning), the main characters are a group of uninitiated girls who ventured out to a nearby stream to bathe, where they encounter two boys carrying an ominous message. According to the story, the girls are told to return to their own village and inform their elders of an encounter with the ones who *nyena* or grinned. No sooner than they uttered the word *nyena*, the boys collapsed and died. Skeptical that a mere word could produce a death so sudden, some of the girls tested the taboo. The girls said the words and like the boys, they too collapsed and died. Of the original group, only one of the girls survived the trip back to her village. There, she was subject to the interrogation of elders demanding a thorough account of what had become of her missing companions. Unsatisfied with her vague and evasive responses, the elders pressed for details. Fully aware of the consequences, she reluctantly explained that all had perished after saying the word ‘grinning,’ whereupon she also died. By the end of the story, the entire village had been wiped out root and branch all for having transgressed the taboo against speaking aloud the causes of dread disease.<sup>395</sup>

The culture of silence surrounding diseases was obvious even to those missionaries who witnessed the second *thumba dza magudu* in the late 1870s. The Rev. Klass Koen wrote that “disease tends to be kept a secret among [Vhavenda].” However, because the 1877 outbreak produced so many fatalities, “the sorrow overcame the customary silence and the wailing for the dead in the villages cannot be [suppressed].” Indeed, “even the guns, which usually herald joy, were this time fired as an

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<sup>394</sup> Van Warmelo, 364.

<sup>395</sup> Lestrade and Phophi, 29-31.

expression of their sorrows.” It is for this reason, the missionary explains, that “the Vhavenda say ‘the gun is weeping.’”<sup>396</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has revised elements of established historiographical canon inferring the emergence of African gun cultures centered on the hunting settlement at Schoemansdal. According to the dominant narrative of Venda history, the arrival of Afrikaners and Portuguese settlers heralded an era of political and social transformation. But the evidence examined above speaks to a different interpretation of indigenous responses to settler aggression and to gun technology. The merchants and hunters at Schoemansdal were but one of the sources that supplied Venda people with guns. Despite the Schoemansdaler’s mastery of the gun, the evidence demonstrates that the white settlers exercised limited influence in Venda confederal politics, and less still in ways that Vhavenda assimilated muzzle loading muskets into their hunting and martial traditions. Nor does the evidence support the purported existence of a discrete stratum of Venda hunters known as the swart skut. This chapter also adds important new evidence to our understanding of the regimes of bonded and unfree labor that white settlers introduced into Zoutpansberg. During their brief and violent tenure of occupation at Schoemansdal, the settlers captured mostly children from Zoutpansberg and elsewhere in the northern Transvaal and sold them as ‘Black ivory’ at slave markets in nearby Potchefstroom. By the mid-1860s, Venda potentates reasserted their powers and drove whites from their settlement at Schoemansdal.

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<sup>396</sup> Erdmann Schwellnus/Tshkhuma, 1877, BMS 1/489/123.

### CHAPTER THREE: Unbounded Politics and the Mabunyu War, 1865 – 1869

In late March of 1869, two regiments of fighting men from the Gaza-Nguni state invaded Venda. The winter rains delayed the arrival of 1,600 soldiers of Swazi *emabutfo* (regiments), a second wave of reinforcements who joined their Gaza allies in September. Not since the followers of Mzilikazi and Zwangedaba forced Vhavenda to take shelter in the mountains two generations earlier during the *mushavho* (times of flight) had the Zoutpansberg been subject to so large a hostile force from neighboring African states. Yet, unlike the *mushavho*, when itinerant raiders desired only opportunities for seasonal plunder during their northward migration away from Zululand, the combined forces who descended on the Zoutpansberg in 1869 did so in furtherance of objectives that were political as well as predatory. Unlike the 1830s-40s, when Vhavenda were ill-equipped to meet the challenge from their highly disciplined and well-armed opponents, this time Venda men and women were prepared to demonstrate the multifaceted military capabilities of their security architecture—the Venda armory.

In some respects, this months' long campaign between Vhavenda and fighters from neighboring polities was but one among the many proverbial forgotten wars for political and military supremacy over the northern Transvaal. Indeed, even in the most thorough scholarly treatment to date, it was denoted simply as, the *Konflik Tussen die Venda en die Blankes in Transvaal* (The Conflict Between the Venda and the Whites in the Transvaal). As told from the Eurocentric settler perspectives of the Transvaal Republic, this skirmish in the remote fringes of the territory that it would inevitably conquer. For example, Jan Boeyens argued that the Africans who invaded Venda in 1869 were but the proxies of the *Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek* (hereafter ZAR) in its attempt to redeem the humiliating loss of Schoemansdal two years earlier, and of its officials, who sought to punish Makhado

Ramabulana for his role in the destruction of their frontier settlement.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, even with an estimated 7,000 of the subcontinents' most fearsome warriors presumably at their disposal, this conflict accomplished little more than "another ignominious failure" in the words of one contemporaneous English-speaking observer.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, beyond Schoemansdal and the political objectives of the ZAR, this invasion is remembered among Vhavenda more so for the constitution and ferocity of the forces arrayed against them. Indeed, the armies from the Swazi and Gaza-Nguni states who converged on Zoutpansberg in 1869 are colloquially known to Vhavenda as Mabunyu, (literally "naked people,") a pejorative denoting northern Nguni people in popular imaginations of Tshivenda-speakers to the present.<sup>3</sup> This chapter reconstructs the Mabunyu War by mining local oral traditions, Tshivenda literature, and the archival papers of the Berlin Mission in Venda, which established the first of its evangelical stations in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. Considered together, these sources tell us that the Gaza-Nguni and Swazi forces who invaded Venda in 1869 did so not merely at the behest of Transvaal officials seeking vengeance for the destruction of Schoemansdal in 1867, but also in response to the instability that engulfed the Tshivhasa dynasty from the late 1850s. To be sure, the ZAR and its functionaries played at least some role in the Mabunyu War and Afrikaners were relevant in the conflict. But that is only part of the story. Ultimately, how the war was fought and the locations where the most intense battles occurred all tend to substantiate this chapter's central argument that the conflict itself was more so an extension of intra-African politics rather than a war between settlers and the Ramabulana family.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Boeyens, *Die Konflik Tussen die Venda en die Blankes in Transvaal, 1864-1869*, (Unpublished M.A. thesis: Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, 1985), 62.

<sup>2</sup> "The Transvaal Native Policy" reprinted from the *Argus, Natal Witness*, April 13, 1869.

## Dynastic Politics and Succession Wars in Central Venda 1865-1867

At the center of the Mabunyu War of 1869 was a *muvhango*, a contested succession among the eligible heirs of a deceased Venda ruler, king Luvhengo Mukhese, the first Tshivhasa. Although Luvhengo Mukhese died in 1865, what destabilized his country and set the conditions to which the invading armies most directly responded were a sequence of events set in motion by the Tshivhasa King himself during the last decade of his reign. Here, just as in Ha-Mphaphuli in the late 1870s, and in Ha-Ramabulana in 1895, the greatest threat to the internal cohesion in Ha-Tshivhasa was the attempt on the part of its ruler to designate his successor.

King Luvhengo had no fewer than seven sons born to wives of royal houses, each of whom had at least a theoretical claim to eventually accede to the kingship and assume the mantles of the second Tshivhasa. Of these princes, Luvhengo appointed five as headmen at their own provincial territories. Tshivhenga was installed at Tshi~~n~~apfene; Masiagwala was given Maungani; Ravele was sent to rule Mapate; and Petamashango was appointed headman at Duthuni. Finally, there was Liholimana, the eldest of Luvhengo's eligible heirs and successor designate, who the king installed at Tshivhungululu.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, if these appointments were designed to temper the most vulgar ambitions of princes deemed suitable for the role of mukoma or headman, but perhaps not for that of Thovhele, the extent of Thovhele Luvhengo's miscalculation was clear when word arrived that the heir apparent, Liholimana, had been assassinated by poisoning.<sup>5</sup>

As the one with the most to gain from the sudden liquidation of Liholimana's position, Tshivhenga immediately fell under suspicion. While competition among potential heirs was common in nineteenth-century Venda, the resort to poisoning to dispatch a rival claimant was regarded as

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<sup>4</sup> Liholimana's appointment was symbolically significant because Tshivhungululu was once the site of the *musanda* at Ha-Tshivhasa during the reign of Luvhengo's father Mukhesi.

<sup>5</sup> Nenguda Dowelani, *The History of Tshivhasa Chiefs at Mukumbani* (Unpublished Honors thesis: University of Venda, 1990), 12.

sorcery, and therefore unbecoming of the aristocracy.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the act itself, Tshivhenga's tactics ran afoul of the principles of dynastic succession expressed in the proverb: "a dog that eats one of its kind does not fatten." This axiom means that one who brings about the undoing of another does not profit by the deed.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Tshivhenga could not be allowed to benefit from his treachery. Thovhele Luvhengo assembled the khoro of senior advisors at the musanda. The sources are unclear as to whether Tshivhenga was in attendance, but Luvhengo is said to have excoriated his son before the assembly of elders at Mukumbani. While the other three adult princes were allowed to stay on in the lands to which each had been appointed, the king decried that Tshivhenga should be deposed as headman at Tshinapfene and sent into exile, posthaste. Perhaps Luvhengo had some sense that his own end was nigh, as the king demanded to learn that Tshivhenga had been turned out from Ha-Tshivhasa "while I am still alive."<sup>8</sup>

Not only did Luvhengo's original succession plan fail in its primary design, resulting in the early death of his chosen successor, Lihalimana, but it also accelerated the destabilization of Ha-Tshivhasa for years after the passing of the king in 1865. Returning to the assassination and its immediate aftermath, Thovhele Luvhengo expelled Tshivhenga and then turned his attention to a more immediate concern: the designation of a new successor. Tshivhasa Luvhengo informed the khoro (council of elders) assembled at Mukumbani that "upon my departure, the one that I put after my own heart is the youngest among all my children: Ligeise."<sup>9</sup> The new heir-apparent was the son of Nyamutshenuwa, the elder sister of Nyamuṭonga. Both women were born to the royal house that ruled Manenzhe in Folovhodwe and both were married to king Luvhengo Tshivhasa. Nyamuṭonga

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<sup>6</sup> To assault or otherwise neglect one's father, or to engage in an affair with the junior wives of one's father were among the infraction for which a succession candidate could legitimately be disinherited from the bequest of a living chief.

<sup>7</sup> "Mmbwa ya la imve a i noni." N.J. Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda to English*, (Pretoria: 1962), 199.

<sup>8</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha Dza Hatshivhasa*, (Johannesburg, 1950), 64.

<sup>9</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 65.

bore the third of Luvhengo's sons, Makhavhu, born after Lihalimana and Tshivhenga, but before Masiagwala. Whereas the other adult princes were given territories to rule, Makhavhu is said to have lacked the ambition to establish himself as a headman and was therefore allowed to remain at the musanda along with Ligegise, who was not yet of age to govern.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, both Makhavhu's mother Nyamuṭongawa and Ligegise's mother Nyamutshenuwa were sisters to Makhuga Ratshiṭanga, the commander of all the armies of Ha-Tshivhasa.<sup>11</sup>

To spare Ligegise the fate that befell his elder brother, the king decreed that the young prince should be secreted away from the musanda and raised in anonymity in the province of Vhulaudzi, located 40 km west of Mukumbani.<sup>12</sup> There, the boy's mother Nyamuṭongawa would see to his needs and supervise his grooming for the demands of the kingship. As an added measure of security, the only member of the royal court permitted to have any further contact with the prince was his uncle, Luvhengo's trusted general Ratshiṭanga. Vhulaudzi was also deemed to have been a suitable location to secure the heir apparent because Ligegise would enjoy the protection of Nyatema, the senior makhadzi of the Tshivhasa lineage who also ruled as khosi at Vhulaudzi. Interestingly, Nyatema was a blood relative to neither king Luvhengo, nor to Nyamuṭongawa, the mother of the king in waiting. Despite the political seniority attached to her role as makhadzi, Nyatema was considerably younger than her king, and perhaps only a decade older than the prince with whose security she had been entrusted. Indeed, at the time of her birth—likely in the late 1840s—the original name given to the one who would later occupy so lofty a station was not Nyatema, but rather, Muofhe, a name that means “the one who fears.”<sup>13</sup>

Oral histories tell us that, as an infant, Muofhe was suddenly overtaken by a disturbance of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 55.

unknown origin but manifested primarily in the form of irrepressible wailing. The mother, a woman of noble blood, sought the assistance of the elders at her home in Makonde. In turn, they presented both the beleaguered mother and the inconsolable infant to King Luvhengo, who was no more than a decade removed from his own installation as the second Tshivhasa. Ultimately it was the tableau of bones—central to the intercessory repertoires of healers, diviners, and rain makers—which revealed both the origins of young Muofhe’s distress and the vital station to which she had been called. The healers identified the listless spirit of Nyatema—makhadzi to Ralusweilo, father to Luvhengo the first Tshivhasa—as the source of the child’s irritation. Nyatema was childless at the time of her death in 1833. The healers determined the ancestral spirit of the great aunt would be appeased if the child took up the role as makhadzi that Nyatema occupied during her own life.<sup>14</sup> According to the sources, Muofhe’s despondent cries fell silent no sooner than she was addressed by her new name, Nyatema.<sup>15</sup> Sometime later, Muofhe Nyatema was installed as ruler at Vhalaudzi, the same office held by her namesake two generations earlier. And so, when Luvhengo Tshivhasa addressed the assembly of elders at Mukumbani, the king instructed the senior makhadzi Muofhe Nyatema to use her own discretion as to the most secure location in Vhalaudzi to protect the new heir apparent.

Thovhele Luvhengo took ill shortly after this assembly of the elders in late 1864 or early 1865. Just as an ailing Luvhengo labored in vain to orchestrate a smooth transfer of power following his own impending demise, the Tshivhasa king was drawn into a rapidly intensifying succession dispute among the heirs to the Ramabulana dynasty. Whereas Tshivhasa’s country encompassed the central and southern Zoutpansberg, King Luvhengo’s half-brother Ravele ruled over the area west of the Nzhelele valley. When Ravele died in 1865, his eldest son Davhana usurped the mantles of the kingship

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas M. Sengani, *Strategic Discourses in Names – A Critical Discourse Analytical – Interpretation with Special Reference to Tshivhenda Naming Practices*, (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis: University of Limpopo, 2018), 53, 257.

<sup>15</sup> When a *makhadzi* is designated through divination in her youth, she is said to have “cried for her name.” Madzunga Mphidi/Tshakhuma. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 6 August 2015.



and designated himself the second Ramabulana. Critically, Davhana's presumptions lacked the endorsement of either Madzhie, the khosimunene (Ravele's younger brother), or Nyakhuhu, the makhadzi of Ha-Ramabulana. Both of these influential members of the Ramabulana family threw their support behind another candidate, the youngest of Ravele's children, the former elephant hunter named Makhado.<sup>16</sup> For his part, Makhado enjoyed the backing of Funyufunyu and Rasivhetshela, also known as Tromp and Stuurman respectively to the whites at Schoemansdal, among whom both had earned notoriety for their prowess as elephant hunters. And so, in early 1865, as Luvhengo convalesced in an attempt to recover his flagging strength, a delegation of Makhado's messengers arrived at Tshivhasa's royal residence at Mukumbani bearing an urgent request for succor.

While Singo rulers such as Luvhengo Tshivhasa sought to choose their own successors, ultimately, the overarching principles of dynastic succession in nineteenth-century Venda were captured in a pair of related proverbs. The first runs: *vhuhosi a si vhuswa*, (the chieftainship is not porridge) which means that the right to rule could not be apportioned as though it were food. Although *vhasiwana* or commoners played no role in the formal politics of chiefly succession, among the *vhakololo* or aristocracy, the expectation that an aspirant would have to demonstrate his mettle is captured in a second proverb: *Ha sa vhangwa, avhu lalami*, which means that a ruler who does not have to fight for his position is not long for the throne.<sup>17</sup> Consistent with these ideals, the substance of the message delivered to Mukumbani was an appeal for every able-bodied soldier that Luvhengo could contribute in support of Makhado's campaign to secure by force that which his departed father Ravhele could not dole out like portions of sour porridge.

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<sup>16</sup> Roger Wagner, "Zoutpansberg: The Dynamics of a Hunting Frontier, 1848-67," in S. Marks and A. Atmore, eds., *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1981), 335.

<sup>17</sup> Leonard Tshikota, *Thalusamaipfi ya Mirero: Tshivenda - English Dictionary of Proverbs* (Thohoyandou, 2010), 76.

Makhado's request for military aid presented Luvhengo with something of a conundrum. While Makhado was a duly installed king in his own right, he was still in no position to dictate to Thovhele Luvhengo Tshivhasa. By the same coin, to deny Makhado's request was in effect, to refuse an overture of an alliance. Moreover, with his own health in decline and the disposition of his conniving son Tshivhenga unknown, consummating this alliance could prove disastrous to Luvhengo's carefully laid succession plans. The king presented the matter to his advisors. Ultimately, the khoro resolved to support Makhado under the rationale that Ramabulana might eventually be obliged to reciprocate should the need ever arise. Volunteers were mobilized from across Ha-Tshivhasa to include both uninitiated boys and experienced veterans alike. With general Ratshiṭanga in command, the contingent from Tshivhasa's country departed for Vhuḏogwa, located some six days walk from Mukumbani. The sources disagree as to whether the Tshivhasa war party gave battle at Vhuḏogwa, or if Makhado's troops subdued the Sotho forces on their own. Perhaps tellingly, there is no record of casualties among the war party from Ha-Tshivhasa. One particularly well-positioned informant was adamant that the forces from Ha-Tshivhasa only arrived at Vhuḏogwa after the fighting had concluded.<sup>18</sup> Regardless, the order to march given in response to the request from Makhado Ramabulana was to be Thovhele Luvhengo's last official act in his capacity as ruler of Ha-Tshivhasa.

Having satisfied their commitments to Makhado, Ratshiṭanga led the war party back to Ha-Tshivhasa via Vhulaudzi. There, general Ratshiṭanga was received by makhadzi Nyatema, who delivered the news that king Luvhengo had died sometime during the war party's deployment to Vhuḏogwa.<sup>19</sup> When exactly the king had expired Nyatema could not say. While it was custom that information of this nature would be restricted and compartmentalized among the khoro, to intern

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<sup>18</sup> Kennedy Tshivhasa/Thohoyandou. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 17 March 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 68.

Luvhengo's remains among his predecessors at Vhulaudzi without notifying the senior makhadzi in advance constituted a serious breach of protocol. If the exclusion of makhadzi Nyatema from burial rights for the departed king was suspicious, that the news of Luvhengo's death somehow managed to reach the wayward son Tshivhenga contributed to the air of a conspiracy. Makhadzi Nyatema informed general Ratshiṭanga that in his absence, Tshivhenga had breached yet another taboo by declaring himself the rightful successor and assumed the mantles of the third Tshivhasa, in direct contravention of Luvhengo's expressed wishes.<sup>20</sup> Worse still, Tshivhenga made this declaration prior to the performance of the funerary rituals. In response to these troubling developments, Makhuga Ratshiṭanga resolved to ensure the will of the king who he had served as both confidant and military advisor was carried out in full.

According to king Luvhengo's final set of instructions, general Ratshiṭanga would lead the king's troops into battle at Vhudogwa, while those of his sons appointed to headmanships across Ha-Tshivhasa would remain behind as a rear guard of sorts. Even if makhadzi Nyatema was undoubtedly loyal to Luvhengo, the limited details that she disclosed to Ratshiṭanga were not sufficient for the general to determine either the numerical strength or the geographic disposition of Tshivhenga's supporters and partisans. Who among the princes: Masiagwala, Petamadungo, and Ravele, had cast their lots with Tshivhenga the pretender? The answer to these questions obliged Ratshiṭanga to gather additional intelligence.

Although the war party suffered no casualties during the Vhudogwa campaign, the soldiers would nevertheless require time to recover from the 120 km march back to Ha-Tshivhasa. The general ordered his army to recuperate at Vhulaudzi. He also ordered the slaughter of a portion of the cattle captured as booty—which would have otherwise been delivered to the king—and the meat roasted as

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<sup>20</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Mafhubngo na Nganea dza Tshulu*, (Johannesburg, 1991) 19.

reward for the troops. Road weary and starving men would be of little help if Tshivhenga was prepared to fight in defense of the kingship he had already stolen. As for the general himself, Ratshitanga set off on a fact-finding mission to the border provinces of Ha-Tshivhasa. His first stop was Thononda, located in the northeastern corner of the Nzhelele valley, a mere days' walk from Vhulaudzi. From there, the general's next stop was to the Vhangona people at Tshithuthuni, located more than 150 km to the northeast, on the border of Ha-Mphaphuli.<sup>21</sup> There, Netshithuthuni also mobilized his people in support of Ratshitanga and the young prince Ligegise. Upon his return, Ratshitanga ordered that more cattle should be slaughtered in honor of the combined forces gathered from across the breadth and width of Ha-Tshivhasa, but also in recognition of the hospitality to which the army had been treated at Vhulaudzi.<sup>22</sup>

Ratshitanga returned to Vhulaudzi to find that Ligegise had reemerged from seclusion in Tshiṭavha, but also that the heir apparent had come of age in his absence and was now prepared to assume the mantles of the kingship. And so, with everything in place, Ratshitanga and a seasoned war party escorted Ligegise from Vhulaudzi to the royal residence at Mukumbani, located 40 km to the east. As discussed in chapter two, it was Luvhengo who relocated the musanda to Mukumbani from its previous location at Tshivhungululu in the 1840s, an era remembered as the *mushavho*, or times of flight.<sup>23</sup> Built in the mutzheto style on the southern slope of Luaname mountain, the site of the royal village at Mukumbani was selected with security in mind. In the event that a hostile force managed to penetrate the maze of trenches, dense thorn shrubs and ritually fortified talismans that promised

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<sup>21</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Phunḁhaphunḁha dḁa Hatshivhasa*, (Johannesburg, 1989), 69.

<sup>22</sup> Phophi, *Phunḁhaphunḁha*, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Victor Ralushai, *Conflicting Accounts of Venda History with Particular Reference to the Role of Mutupo in Social Organization*, (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis: The Queens University of Belfast, 1977), 16.

to confuse invaders, a secret footpath called Luvhangavhangane provided the king with a discrete avenue of egress into the thickets surrounding the musanda.<sup>24</sup>

Surely, Luvhengo's confidant and the commander of his forces was among the small number of people aware of the security architecture at Mukumbani that was designed to protect thovhele, the embodiment of an ancestral link to 'Thohoyandou, the father of the Venda kingdom. Under cover of darkness, Ratshiṭanga staged men at every possible point of escape. Finally, with everyone in position, the general called out to 'Tshivhenga, the usurper, with an offer to escape with his life. We have only secondhand accounts of the events of 1867. These scant details tell us that Ratshiṭanga identified himself as the commander of the army just returned from a successful campaign against the Sotho of Vhuḍogwa. He also recounted the flagrant transgressions of which 'Tshivhenga stood accused. "You declared yourself king, a role for which you are deemed unsuitable." In the name of the departed Luvhengo, Ratshiṭanga warned that if 'Tshivhenga did not use this, his only opportunity to collect his wife and flee, the forces arrayed around the musanda were all too eager to breach the stone walls of Mukumbani "to bring you down."<sup>25</sup> In response, 'Tshivhenga reportedly requested nothing more than safe passage out of Mukumbani.<sup>26</sup> For his part, general Ratshiṭanga granted this request. It seems incomprehensible then, that a man such as 'Tshivhenga—amenable to fratricide to satiate a thirst for power—would have done nothing to consolidate control over his ill-gotten gains. It seems plausible that Thovhele Luvhengo recognized this wanton lack of foresight among the character deficiencies that disqualified his second born son, 'Tshivhenga, from consideration as a possible successor.

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<sup>24</sup> Nenguda, *The History of Tshivhasa*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Phophi, *Phunḵaphunḵha*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

## The Inauguration of Ligegise the Second Tshivhasa

There was jubilation at Mukumbani following Tshivhenga's departure. Except for King Luvhengo's death in 1865, there was much that the Tshivhasa royal family had to celebrate. In the first instance, the last wishes of the late dynast had finally been fulfilled, as the chosen successor, Ligegise, was now in position to assume the kingship. There was also the resounding success of their armies during the campaign at Vhudogwa. The last of the livestock seized from the Sotho were slaughtered in recognition of the army's return to Ha-Tshivhasa. Among these, one cow was designated phaladza-maanga or the "vulture-scatterer" and slaughtered to signal the commencement of a carefully orchestrated series of rituals preceding the coronation of a new king.<sup>27</sup> Commoners and aristocrats alike were invited to the musanda, not only to partake in the inaugural feast, but also to bear witness to the formal presentation of the new dynast. Yet, because of the insular nature of khoro politics, the coronation rituals for the new king were likely the first indication to many among the common classes of Ha-Tshivhasa that "the pools were dry," euphemism in Tshivenda court speech meaning that Luvhengo was dead.<sup>28</sup>

While the makhadzi presided over the rituals of investiture, by custom, it is the khotsimunene who called the proceedings to order.<sup>29</sup> As the maternal uncle to the successor, that responsibility fell to Makhuga Ratshitanga. As the ceremony began, Ligegise was positioned at the center of an expansive enclosure and seated atop a mat made of reeds. To conceal his identity, he was also cloaked beneath a layer of cheetah and lion skins. Under normal circumstances, the younger brothers of the successor designate would have been seated to his left and right.<sup>30</sup> Yet, these were hardly normal circumstances,

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<sup>27</sup> According to ethnographic research conducted during the 1940s, the meat from this animal is prepared in pots and is eaten with great quantities of porridge cooked from the maize supplies left by the deceased. See N.J. Van Warmelo, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, No. 23, *Venda Law: Part 4: Inheritance*, (Pretoria, 1949), 713.

<sup>28</sup> Leonard Tshikota, *Thalusamaiḽfi ya Maidioma*, (Thohoyandou, 2010), 32.

<sup>29</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, *Venda Law: Part 4: Inheritance*, 713.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

least of all because Ligegise was the youngest of Luvhengo's sons. Beyond this, it was not at all clear who among the other surviving princes backed Tshivhenga, or, worse still, harbored their own designs on the throne. Nevertheless, it was Ratshitanga who removed the royal vestments to formally introduce the person of the new king, Ligegise, the third lineal head of the Tshivhasa dynasty.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, to consecrate his station as the living embodiment of ancestrally located community, the elders of Ha-Tshivhasa conferred upon Ligegise the name "Ramarumo," connoting the king installed at the point of the spear.<sup>32</sup>

While the coronation ceremony formally established Ligegise Ramarumo's symbolic authority as successor, the Venda kingship was also a political office. Without drawing too fine a line between the spiritual and the secular, in the main, the governing authorities entrusted to the Venda kingship could not be deployed dictatorially. This is especially true of a dynast such as Ligegise, who had only just begun his reign.<sup>33</sup> To an extent, these constraints were a function of design. By custom, kings and chiefs were installed at the same time as two other senior officials: the makhadzi, or senior aunt, and a deputy, or ndumi. Little is known of Ligegise's deputy, aside from his name: Maṭhase.<sup>34</sup> The other senior official and governing partner was a familiar figure. Indeed, the elders of Ha-Tshivhasa decided that Muofhe Nyatema would be an ideal makhadzi to the king who she had had a hand in grooming for the station he now occupied. Crucially, in the years to come, Makhado Ramabulana's expansionist ambitions would soon put the relationship between Ligegise and his makhadzi to the test.

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<sup>31</sup> Although he was the third dynastic ruler, he was the second to bear the title Tshivhase.

<sup>32</sup> Sengani, *Strategic Discourses*, 333., Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 74.

<sup>33</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Law: Part 4: Inheritance*, 835.

<sup>34</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 74.

## The Unravelling

Two years lapsed between the death of King Luvhengo Tshivhasa in 1865 and the coronation of his successor. Despite the uncertainty preceding the installation of Ligegise Ramarumo as Thovhele, the constellation of threats that arrayed against Ha-Tshivhasa in the first two years of his rule threatened to topple the young dynast and undermine the independence of the entire Venda confederation. The most dangerous among these involved Tshivhenga. Neither the humiliation of his disinheritance, nor expulsion from Mukumbani in 1865, were sufficient to disabuse Tshivhenga of his designs on the kingship. With no real support at home however, Tshivhenga endeavored to cultivate alliances beyond Ha-Tshivhasa, with the goal of raising an army capable of driving Ligegise out of Mukumbani. The first potential patron that Tshivhenga sought out was the man known to Vhavenda as Tshikhovhokhovho, whose Christian name was Coenraad de Buys, likely the eldest son and namesake of the notorious frontiersman.<sup>35</sup> Prior to his disappearance in the early 1820s, the elder de Buys established a settlement for his extended family and adherents near Mara, located in the western extremity of the Zoutpansberg. To the whites of Schoemansdal, the Buy's descendants were known as the Buysvolk.

Before Tshivhenga's nascent alliance with the well-armed Buysvolk could materialize, some of King Ligegise's disgruntled brothers gave voice to their grievances. The first among these was Makhavhu, the prince who declined an appointment as headmen in order to remain at the musanda. Perhaps it was his exclusion from the coronation for his younger brother that awoke in Makhavhu the ambition he lacked during his father's reign.<sup>36</sup> Alternatively, the sources implicate his mother,

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<sup>35</sup> A. Schoeman, *Coenraad de Buys: The First Transvaaler*, (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Pretoria: 1938), 80; M. Frank Mamadi, *History of the Sebola (Tshivhula) People*, in N. Van Warmelo, ed., *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, (Pretoria, 1940), 99.

<sup>36</sup> G. Radzilani, *Kubvele Nzhalele (The Exodus from Nzhalele)*, N.J. Van Warmelo Collection, University of Pretoria Library, Special Collections.



Nyamutonga, as an agitating agent of Makhavhu's disquiet. In any event, when Nyamutonga articulated her desire to see her son installed in Ligegise's stead, the elders of the Tshivhasa dynasty expelled both mother and son from Mukumbani. In their exile, Makhavhu and Nyamutonga sought refuge at Ha-Ramabulana.<sup>37</sup>

At nearly the same time, Ligegise's brother Masiagwala declared his intention to secede from Ha-Tshivhasa and rule Maungani as an independent chief. The sources are unclear as to whether force was required to dislodge Masiagwala. Nevertheless, it seems that he quit Maungani and sought refuge at Tshakhuma, under the protection of the ruler Raluthaga Madzivhandila.<sup>38</sup> Then, Petamashango of Duthuni also declared his independence. Shortly thereafter, he too was deposed as headman.<sup>39</sup> So, as Tshivhenga cultivated his connections with the Buysvolk—the descendants of the notorious frontiersman Coenraad de Buys who stayed near Mara in the western extremity of the Zoutpansberg range—Ligegise Tshivhasa neutralized opposition from three of his brothers in short order. Yet, further to the north, Ligegise's most implacable opponent interpreted the disorganization at Mukumbani as the signal that the time was nigh to advance his own agenda at the expense of the Tshivhasa dynasty.

Even if the turbulent first years of Ligegise Tshivhasa's reign were typical in the context of a dynastic transition, at least some allied rulers of more firmly established chieftaincies regarded the protracted carping among Luvhengo's children as evidence of a dynasty in decline. This was particularly true of Tshivhasa's elder cousin, Vele, lineal head of the Rambuda dynasty that ruled the region of Dzimauli. Vele was the son and successor of Phophi (1830-1851), the younger brother of

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<sup>37</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 75.

<sup>38</sup> Madzivhandila is a dynastic title associated with the Dau lineage at Tshkhuma. There, Masiagwala's son became a prominent early member and "native assistant" evangelist at the Berlin Mission station at Tshakhuma established in the early 1870s.

<sup>39</sup> Nenguda, 14.

King Luvhengo, the first Tshivhasa.<sup>40</sup> Phophi helped his brother displace the Vhangona at Phiphidi in the 1830s, during the times of flight.<sup>41</sup> Then, with Luvhengo's blessing, Phophi and his followers struck out beyond Phiphidi with the goal of expanding the reach of the Tshivhasa dynasty to the lands north of the Mutale River. Using a hunting expedition as pretext, Phophi ingratiated himself with Nyafhasi, the female king of Dzimauli. Phophi abused the hospitality that Nyafhasi extended to the party of weary hunters in order to ease the security measures of her mountain fastness. Shortly thereafter, Phophi and his followers returned to Dzimauli, this time under cover of darkness and took Nyafhasi's settlement by surprise. Nyafhasi and those of her people who survived the raid took refuge with her brother, Ravhele, the ruler of Makonde. Having scattered the previous inhabitants, Phophi established himself using the dynastic title Rambuda.

The nature of Phophi's relationship with his brother Luvhengo Tshivhasa illustrates the social and cultural ties that bound dynastic lineages and subordinate chiefdoms together into a political confederation. As ruler of Dzimauli, Phophi was independent. Yet, he continued to u *luvha* or pay homage to his brother Luvhengo at Mukumbani. The Tshivenda phrase *mashango a vhuṭanganywa* connotes the political relationship between a "satellite" chiefdom and its more powerful dynastic neighbor.<sup>42</sup> When Phophi died in early 1851, he was succeeded by his son Vele, who continued to pay homage to Luvhengo, thereby reaffirming the status of Dzimauli as an independent chiefdom of the Rambuda dynasty, that was also a satellite state of Ha-Tshivhasa.

Vele Rambuda's reign at Dzimauli was firmly established in 1865 when the death of his uncle Luvhengo created a leadership vacuum at Mukumbani. However speculative, it may have occurred to

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<sup>40</sup> Both Luvhengo Mukhesi and Phophi were sons of Ralusweilo (1795-1830). And so, while Ralusweilo is regarded as the progenitor of the lineage that would later adopt the dynastic title Tshivhasa during the reign of his son and successor Luvhengo. While Venda sources project the name back in time to describe Ralusweilo, to do so appears to be an anachronism of sorts. It also merits mention that the name convention used in this dissertation (i.e., first Tshivhasa, third Mphaphui) is applied here for the sake of chronological precision, as it does not appear in vernacular sources.

<sup>41</sup> Nenguda, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, 471-72.

Vele that Tshivhenga would not have had occasion to defile the throne at Mukumbani had Luvhengo not sent his most competent military men on errands at the behest of Makhado Ramabulana, who was himself a former servant of the whites at Schoemansdal. Whereas Luvhengo appeased the whites in the 1850s and Makhado in the 1860s, as discussed in chapter two, Vele had little tolerance for either. Indeed, when Makhado and a party of his followers visited Dzimauli seeking recognition of his claims of paramountcy over all of Venda, the Ramabulana king encountered Vele Rambuda's eldest son and heir apparent, Bele. Even in his Ramabulana-centric interpretation, Mphaya Nemudzivhadi writes that Bele insulted Makhado by "refus[ing] to acknowledge" his pretenses to royalty a "denied [Makhado] his rightful praise."<sup>43</sup> Thus, even if Vele was inclined to preserve the historic relationship between the Rambuda and Tshivhasa families in the interregnum following Luvhengo's death, it was nevertheless unclear to whom u luvha homage should be directed. Was it Tshivhenga who installed himself to play at king; or, perhaps to Ligeise, who was but a boy too young for the Thondo (initiation school) when Vele was installed as the second Rambuda? Unlike Masiagwala or Petmashango who declared their independence, Vele Rambuda allowed the already withering relationship to die of itself and simply stopped offering u luvha to Mukumbani.

Meanwhile, back at Mukumbani, just as Ligeise contemplated how he might draw Dzimauli back into his domain, Tshivhenga made his return, this time, with the well-armed patron Tshikhovhokhovho in toe. Although the Buysvolk were relatively few in numbers, their arsenal of firearms was a fungible resource that they often converted into political power. In particular, the Buys family had access to a cannon that was known to Vhavenda as Nwanngulu. In Venda traditions, Tshikhovhokhovho's field gun is remembered as a weapon "of great magic." When fired, Nwanngulu inflicted mass casualties. Indeed, Venda traditions further state Nwanngulu's shot could "consume the

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<sup>43</sup> Mphaya Henry Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado Ramabulana, The Lion of the North, 1864-1895: The 19th Century African Royalty in the Face of Teutonic Imperialism*, (Thohoyandou, 2017), 50.

enemy's bullets."<sup>44</sup> Enticed by Tshivhenga's lavish promises, Tshikhovhokhovho led a commando consisting of calvary supported by his famous field gun. The Buys contingent established a temporary camp at Duthuni, a strategic location situated just 10 km from their objective, the musanda at Mukumbani. Duthuni was also the designated rally point where the Buysvolk planned to rendezvous with what they likely presumed were Tshivhenga's local supporters. Crucially, as Tshikhovhokhovho would soon learn, Tshivhenga had no other supporters.

While Tshikhovhokhovho and his people waited in vain at Duthuni, he and his lieutenants considered their options about how best to capture the fortified stronghold. While mounted riflemen were best suited for combat in the flatlands, calvary would not be able to breach the wooden stockades that surrounded Mukumbani. Light infantrymen armed with bow, arrow, stabbing spears, battle axes and shields were better suited to such a task. As none were forthcoming, Tshikhovhokhovho elected to rely on superior firepower.

On the evening of the attack, Buys reorganized his horsemen into three patrols to surround the musanda from the east, south and west. The sound of the field gun Nwanngulu served as the signal for each of the patrols to pepper the musanda with three volleys of musket fire. When Tshikhovhokhovho's guns fell silent, Tshivhenga called out to his brother the king, to offer a sardonic reminder of the stark reversal in their respective fortunes. "You chased me away in the night with your uncle," referring to general Ratshitanga "and disparaged me as a witch." "Today is your day," he continued, "and now it is your turn to come down just as I had."<sup>45</sup> When Tshivhenga finished, Tshikhovhokhovho fired his field gun to signal another volley of musket fire, with an expectation that the onslaught would trigger a headlong flight from the stone-walled settlement, where the three patrols were already in position to finish off any survivors. Indeed, it seems that neither Tshikhovhokhovho

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<sup>44</sup> Phophi, *Phubzaphunzha*, 110.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 79.

nor Tshivhenga had any intention of taking prisoners. After the second volley, the entire troop converged on the musanda, where they likely anticipated finding the macabre human flotsam of Nwanngulu's handy work. Instead, inside the walls of the royal village, Tshivhenga, Tshikhovhokhovho and his horsemen were greeted with silence, as the king and all his followers had already made their escape to the north via the secret passageway, Luvhangavhangane. Perhaps, Tshivhenga failed to familiarize himself with the natural security features of the mutzheto settlement at Mukumbani during his brief and illegitimate reign.

Having found the village empty, Tshikhovhokhovho razed Mukumbani to the ground in a conflagration that purportedly smoldered for days.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, after escaping the immediate danger, Ligegise and a small party of his followers fled to the southeast across the Mutshindudzi River, the informal boundary separating Tshivhasa's country from Ha-Mphaphuli. While Ligegise enjoyed a cordial relationship with Ranwedzi-Ngolo, the fourth Mphaphuli, like most Singo royals, the two dynasts also shared some convoluted familial ties. Prior to her marriage to Luvhengo Tshivhasa, Ligegise's mother Nyamutshenuwa was the senior wife to Madadzhe, the second Mphaphuli. Since that union produced no surviving children before Madadzhe's death in 1847, Nyamutshenuwa was therefore free to marry Luvhengo, the first Tshivhasa. Yet, despite their relationship, Ligegise Tshivhasa was nevertheless obliged to adhere to protocols expressed in a proverb which runs, "while a doctor is still a doctor even in a strange country, a prince who crosses the frontier becomes a nobody."<sup>47</sup> Unlike the preponderance of Tshivenda riddles and proverbs, this expression communicated a comparatively straight forward reminder that a king or a chief was but a guest in the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> The Tshivenda expression is *Hu ambuwa vhunanga; vbakololo a vbu ambuvi*.

country of their host.<sup>48</sup> Consistent with those protocols, Ligegise dispatched messengers to Ranwedzi's musanda to alert the king of his presence at Miluwani, the sacred burial site of the Mphaphuli kings.<sup>49</sup>

It merits mention that the sources say little if anything about how the vhasiwana or commoners of Ha-Tshivhasa responded to the tumult and palace intrigues playing out at Mukumbani from 1865 until 1867. We may presume that commoners were included among the rank-and-file of the army that Ratshitanga led into battle against the Sotho of Vhudogwa. Moreover, commoners were almost certainly among the tshikhona reed flute players who heralded Ligegise's coronation. Yet, the silence of the sources with respect to the non-aristocratic classes at Ha-Tshivhasa illuminated some of the ways that Singo families managed their internal affairs. Writing in his capacity as an ethnographer for the Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs, W.M.D. Phophi proffered a theory as to why commoners likely distanced themselves from aristocratic politics. "The status of royal wives and the circumstances of their marriages," which were often central in the deliberations about dynastic succession, "were not generally known to commoners," Phophi wrote.<sup>50</sup> "As a consequence, most [ordinary people]," he continued, "kept well out of a contest over succession for fear of backing the wrong man" and exposing themselves to "reprisals at the hands of the victor."<sup>51</sup> Yet, as Ligegise would soon learn from the Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo, the most arcane genealogical details were often a mystery even to the dynasts themselves. Nevertheless, if Phophi's observations contained at least a kernel of truth, it must suffice to note that vhasiwana would have observed that a duly inaugurated king had been driven into exile following the destruction of the royal village at Mukumbani.

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<sup>48</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, 463.

<sup>49</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Vhuhosi Vhu Re Venda: Vhutevhekani Na Maga* (Chieftainship in Venda: Successions and Biographies), (Unpublished Notes, 19??), 45.

<sup>50</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Law: Part 4: Inheritance*, 1027.

<sup>51</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Law*, 1027. The perspectives of Vhasiwana may be preserved in songs of the initiation schools conducted during the first half-decade of Ligegise's reign as Tshivhasa.

Just as soon as word of Ligegise's arrival reached Ranwedzi-Ngolo, the Mphaphuli king assembled his entourage and traveled to Miluwani to welcome his friend and political ally. Having received the story as recounted by Ligegise, Ranwedzi reassured the young Tshivhasa monarch that his stay in Ha-Mphaphuli would be brief indeed. Ranwedzi recounted his own formative experiences "on the run as a refugee in Bunyai," referring to the times of flight in the late 1830s, when his father Ratsibi was forced into exile in Matabeleland where he forged a military alliance with the ruling Khumalo family.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, just as Ratsibi returned to Venda and assumed the mantles of the third Mphaphuli in 1848, so too would Ligegise be restored to the kingship at Ha-Tshivhasa. Beyond these glad tidings and commiserations, Mphaphuli also recounted some family history of which even Ligegise was almost certainly ignorant, but which would ultimately tilt the playing field decidedly back in their favor.

Ranwedzi Mphaphuli was confident in his ability to drive a wedge between Tshivhenga and the Buysvolk. The reason, as he explained to Ligegise, was that the Mphaphuli king and the Buys' leader were in fact in-laws. Ranwedzi was married to a woman named Matsheketsheke, who bore two daughters. To forge an alliance with the Buysvolk, Ranwedzi arranged a marriage between the eldest of those two daughters and Tshikhovhokhovho. While Ligegise had had no personal interaction with Matsheketsheke's older daughter—wife to the man who had just destroyed his home—the young Tshivhasa king was intimately familiar with her younger daughter, Mutshekwa, to whom Ligegise was married.<sup>53</sup> Thus, Ranwedzi reasoned that Tshikhovhokhovho would not have aligned himself with Tshivhenga had the Buys leader understood his genealogical relationship to the duly installed Tshivhasa king.

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<sup>52</sup> Julian Cobbing, "The Ndebele Under the Khumalos, 1820-1896," (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, 1976), 29.

<sup>53</sup> Sengani, *Strategic Discourse*, 307.

Having reassured Ligegise with his words, Ranwedzi outlined the details of a plan to restore his guest to the throne at Mukumbani. Years earlier, when Ranwedzi proposed a marriage alliance with the Buysvolk, the Mphaphuli king took the unusual step of offering two bulls from his own herd to Tshikhovhokhovho. Ligegise explained that he had no cows as he and his followers barely managed to escape the Buys' deadly field gun Nwanngulu. Yet, his two initiated sisters of the same house, Mutshinyani and Masindi Nyatshiṭahela were among the party of companions with whom he fled the assault on his musanda. In consideration of his guest's circumstances, Ranwedzi agreed to contribute cattle from his own kraal. After the two kings settled on their strategy, Ligegise assembled his khoro. Because the sources do not indicate that either Mutshinyani or Masindi Nyatshiṭahela were consulted, we may reasonably presume that they were not. Yet, there is evidence that Mutshinyani came to resent the terms under which she was cleaved to Tshikhovhokhovho. More than anyone else, the resentments she harbored were directed at Ligegise.

With the consent of the khoro (but likely not that of Ligegise's sisters) Ranwedzi dispatched messengers to Duthuni, where the Buys army's supplies of food ran nearly as low as did their patience with Tshivhenga, who had yet to make good on any of his exuberant promises. We might presume that these circumstances partially explain Tshikhovhokhovho's enthusiastic response at the arrival of Ranwedzi's messengers who escorted Mutshinyani and Masindi Nyatshiṭahela along with four bulls—a much welcomed inducement from the kraal of his father-in-law. The commander of the Buys contingent ordered two bulls slaughtered at once and the meat roasted to feed his cavalymen. Of the remainder, Tshikhovhokhovho instructed the messengers to return one as “thanksgiving to king Ranwedzi,” while the other should be given to his new brother-in-law so that Ligegise and his followers had provisions when they returned to Mukumbani.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 84.



The alliance with Ligegise rendered moot the Buys' arrangement with Tshivhenga, who they summarily dismissed along with his meager following. When the messengers returned to Miluwani to deliver word of Tshikhovhokhovho's positive response to their overture, Ligegise and Ranwedzi reveled in the success of their collaboration. Just as he had promised at the beginning of this crisis, only a few days passed before Mphaphuli escorted his honored guests back to the Mutshindudzi river, the border between Ha-Mphaphuli and Ha-Tshivhasa, where the two kings bid each other farewell.<sup>55</sup> Crucially, neither the alliance between the Mphaphuli and Tshivhasa dynasties, nor that of the armistice between the later and the Buysvolk would see the end of the decade. As for Tshivhenga, the collapse of his brief collaboration with the Buysvolk did little to dampen his inclination to recruit foreign allies with hollow promises. Having been cast out of Mukumbani for the third time, Tshivhenga resumed his quixotic hankering after a kingship from which he had been roundly rejected. When Tshivhenga returned to Ha-Tshivhasa in March 1869, he did so with the backing of some 7,000 warriors from the Swazi and Gaza-Nguni states in a military confrontation recorded in Tshivenda traditions as the Mabunyu War.<sup>56</sup>

#### Causes for the Mabunyu War

The Muvenda ethnologist W.M.D. Phophi consulted sources offering divergent accounts of Tshivhenga's whereabouts following the disintegration of his partnership with the Buysvolk. In his published collection of Venda oral traditions, Phophi indicates that Tshivhenga traveled east, towards the Indian Ocean. There, he was said to have propositioned "the Bodogisi" people, a Tshivenda term denoting Africans from Portuguese territories in Mozambique. In this context, we may presume that the Bodogisi people to whom Tshivhenga directed his entreaties were the followers of Gaza-Nguni

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Boeyens, *Die Konflik Tussen*, 96, 100.

ruler Mzila.<sup>57</sup> We are told that while the Nguni were favorably disposed to Tshivhenga's request for military assistance, Phophi writes that Mzila and his people ultimately declined this invitation, citing ongoing succession disputes of their own.<sup>58</sup>

In an unpublished manuscript, Phophi reproduced the testimonies of sources claiming that Tshivhenga sought out the assistance of the AmaSwazi rather than the Gaza-Nguni. According to his informants, "Tshivhenga, through his restlessness, again left home to seek further aid from the Swazis."<sup>59</sup> Just as with the fleeting alliance with the Buysvolk back in 1867, Tshivhenga won the support of the Swazis with promises to compensate his new allies "with so many herds of cattle."<sup>60</sup> Ostensibly, Tshivhenga swayed the Swazis with his appeal, even if those same sources are silent as to the identities of those in the Dlamini royal family of Swaziland who gave audience to Tshivhenga and his solicitations.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, when they arrived in Ha-Tshivhasa in June 1869, Phophi writes that the Swazis used Tshilapfene and Tshivhungululu as staging areas in advance of a full-scale assault on Ligegise's capital at Mukumbani. After at least one failed raid, Phophi writes that the Swazi's exhausted their provisions.<sup>62</sup>

Just as Tshikhovhokhovho had learned two years prior, so too would the Swazi mabunyu come to understand that Tshivhenga "possessed nothing of his own," with which to make good on his promises to reward them with cattle wealth.<sup>63</sup> Just as Ligegise broke the alliance between Tshivhenga and the Buysvolk, the Tshivhasa dynast employed a similar strategy to untether the Swazi from Tshivhenga. In both his unpublished ethnographic work and published vernacular histories,

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<sup>57</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 86.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Phophi, *Chieftainship in Venda*, 16.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> For reasons that shall be explained later in this chapter, it is likely that the amaSwazi encountered Tshivhenga after they had already arrived in Venda. Importantly, the evidence suggests the amaSwazi arrived in Zoutpansberg in October 1869.

<sup>62</sup> Phophi, *Chieftainship in Venda*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Maibungo na Nganea dza Tshulu*, (Johannesburg, 1991), 19.

Phophi wrote that Ligegise dispatched a delegation to the Swazi encampment, likely under the leadership of Makhuga Ratshitanga, bearing both gifts and a proposal for a truce. Ratshitanga delivered two bulls, beer and bananas to the famished amabutfo.<sup>64</sup> In his remarks to the Swazi commander, Ratshitanga encouraged these thoroughly famished men to “eat well, so that you recover your strength.”<sup>65</sup> Even if Ratshitanga delivered these provisions in an attempt to make peace with the invaders, Ligegise was still negotiating from a position of strength, as the Swazis had not been able to breach the stockades of Mukumbani. Thus, Ratshitanga taunted the Swazis that “we can carry on with the battle after you have had your fill, so that when you are defeated, you will not say that it was because you were hungry.”<sup>66</sup>

In Phophi’s account, the Swazis accepted these much-needed supplies as well as Tshivhasa’s proposition of a truce. Consistent with what had become a familiar pattern for Tshivhenga, the Swazis abandoned their erstwhile ally. Yet, unlike the Buysvolk, who were content to drive Tshivhenga from Ha-Tshivhasa, the Swazis were inclined to punish Tshivhenga for drawing them into a conflict under false pretenses. To adhere to the taboo against spilling the blood of Venda aristocracy, Ratshitanga interceded with the Swazis to spare Tshivhenga’s life.<sup>67</sup> The Swazi’s accepted this council and allowed Tshivhenga to live with his disgrace.

#### Exploring Tshivenda-Language Accounts of the War

In Phunzhaphunzha Hatshivhasa, Phophi implicates Ligegise’s elder brother Tshivhenga as the party bearing the most responsibility for the invasion of 1869. Phophi suggests that Tshivhenga encountered the Swazis only after his return to the Zoutpansberg following an unsuccessful attempt to solicit

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<sup>64</sup> Phophi, *Chieftainship in Venda*, 16-17.

<sup>65</sup> Phophi, *Phunzhaphunzha*, 87.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Strangulation was a culturally acceptable means of dispatch for a member of the aristocracy. See E. Mudau, “Ngoma-Lungundu,” in N.J. Van Warmelo, ed., *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, (Pretoria, 1940), 25.

support from the Gaza-Nguni. Crucially, if we are to accept Phophi's vernacularized narratives as reliable accounts of oral traditions, both his sources and collection methodologies deserve elaboration.

Although Phophi was a Lemba, he effectively leveraged his standing as an educator and his professional credentials as an anthropologist to collect oral testimonies from knowledgeable informants.<sup>68</sup> As other Muvenda scholars have noted, it was their positionality as cultural insiders which gave purchase to questions posed in the course of their field work in the Zoutpansberg.<sup>69</sup> Beyond his cultural affinities with informants, Phophi conducted his research in a manner consistent with the methodologies that distinguish hearsay and conjecture from oral traditions as evidence for historical work. Phophi alludes to the long-term relationships cultivated with informants over time across the oeuvre of his writings.<sup>70</sup> For instance, in an ethnographic text published in 1967, Phophi recounted a raid on the village of Ha-Luvhimbi that occurred in 1897, in which the independent khosi and rainmaker Itani Luvhimbi was killed.<sup>71</sup> The events as described were reconstructed from the memories of one of khosi Luvhimbi's followers—a Muvenda named Shuruma—who survived the attack and fled to Dzimauli in the aftermath. War followed Shuruma to Dzimauli in 1898, where he

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<sup>68</sup> Phophi elaborates on his positionality as a Lemba researcher in the preface to *Vhalungunangunho: Zaidhi (Lemba History)* (Johannesburg, 1989), 1-2. Also see, Sekibakiba Lekgoathi, "Colonial Experts, Local Interlocutors, Informants and the Making of an Archive on the 'Transvaal Ndebele', 1930-1989," *Journal of African History* 50, n. 1 (2009), 75.

<sup>69</sup> In his seminal study of Venda *mutupo*, Ralushai concedes that the historical relationship between his progenitors and the royal family of Ha-Mphaphuli affording him access to informed interview subjects. Conversely, in other parts of Venda, Ralushai was known as a research assistant to white scholars, such as the ethnomusicologist, John Blacking, an affiliation that did not necessarily advance Ralushai's independent doctoral fieldwork. See, V. Ralushai, *Conflicting Accounts of Venda History with Particular Reverence to the Role of Mutupo in Social Organization*, (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis: The Queen's University of Belfast, 1977), 8-10. Like Ralushai, Maanda Mulaudzi is also a Muvenda scholar. Of his experiences conducting field work nearly a half-century after Ralushai, Mulaudzi writes that his "two decades of political exile and...status as an academic in training" transformed him into a "a marginal insider" in the eyes of some potential informants. Yet, in those parts of the present-day Vhembe district where Mulaudzi and his family are known, he writes that it "was far easier to gain access to potential informants and conduct interviews." See, 19-20 Maanda Mulaudzi, "*U Shuma Bulasi*" *Agrarian Transformation in the Zoutpansberg District of South Africa, up to 1946*, (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis: University of Minnesota, 2000), 20-21.

<sup>70</sup> J. Vansina, *Oral Traditions as History*, (Nairobi, 1985), 62. Crucially, Van Warmelo acknowledges Phophi as the author and primary collector of the material in the Venda Law Series. See N.J. Van Warmelo Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, No 23: *Venda Law: Marriage* (Pretoria: 1948), 9.

<sup>71</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, Department of Bantu Administration and Development Ethnological Publication No. 50, *Venda Law, Part 5: Property*, (Pretoria, 1967), 1113.

saw combat in the final stages of a sixteen-year proxy war in which the Ramabulanas and Tshivhasas supported competing claimants to the Rambuda kingship, the dynastic lineage that ruled Dzimauli since the 1840s. Phophi cited Shuruma among the informants whose testimonies inflected in his Tshivenda-language history of the Rambuda dynasty in the most widely circulated of his vernacular manuscripts, *Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli* (1951).<sup>72</sup> Although Phophi appears to have originally interviewed Shuruma in the 1950s pursuant to his historical work, he consulted Shuruma again in the 1960s, this time acting in his capacity as a state ethnographer. Phophi alluded to his reliance on those informants with whom he had cultivated a similar measure of rapport in the prefaces to many of his other Tshivenda-language manuscripts.<sup>73</sup> Assuming that Phophi consistently applied this research methodology—and there exists ample evidence that he did—then we might also assume the accounts of the invasion of 1869 recorded in his works were reliable reproductions of oral traditions recovered from vetted and well-informed sources.

While Phunzhaphunzha HaTshivhasa proffered the most detailed account of Tshivhenga's role as the principal instigator of the Mabunyu War, other early twentieth-century writers preserved alternative interpretations of the events believed to have occasioned the Swazi and Gaza-Nguni invasion. Notably, many among these Tshivenda-language accounts focus less on Tshivhenga and his designs on the kingship as the singular cause of the invasion and more so on the Tshivhasa dynasty and its legion palace intrigues. Another common feature in these alternative accounts of the Mabunyu War were King Ligeigise Tshivhasa's desire to annex the chiefdom of Lwamondo.

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<sup>72</sup> The research for *Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli* was likely conducted a decade prior to that of the Venda Law Series. One of my research partners, a Muvenda named David Mulaudzi reported that *Phusuphusu* was used as a historical text in Mission schools during the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>73</sup> This is true of *Maibungo na nganea dza Tshulu* (Information and Stories of Tshulu), Johannesburg, 1991. *Maibungo A Mbilwi: HaMphaphuli, Bugu ya 1* (Information of Mbilwi: The Country of the Mphaphuli's, Volume 1) Johannesburg, 1989.

In the 1930s, the Muvenda author Ernest Mudau wrote that Mzila dispatched his regiments to Zoutpansberg, “having been summoned by Tshivhasa.”<sup>74</sup> The motives that Mudau assigned to Ligegise Tshivhasa solicitation of foreign military assistance was “to help him against Nelwamondo,” referring to Khosi Maboho, the ruler of Lwamondo.<sup>75</sup> Paul Ngwana submitted a historical essay to the N.A.D. also during the 1930s in which he advanced a similar theory of the case. Ngwana wrote that “the people from [Ha-]Tshivhasa” traveled to Mzila’s capital at Tshamatatshama “to request an army to help them fight the people of Lwamondo.”<sup>76</sup> Mzila purportedly accepted this invitation and dispatched his regiments to Venda to fight along with Tshivhasa. When Nelwamondo and his followers repelled as many as three incursions against their fastness in the course of the war, Ngwana noted that the outcome registered as a defeat for both “the Mabunu and the people of Ha-Tshivhasa” alike.<sup>77</sup> In yet another account, this one published under the auspices of the N.A.D., the headman Khosi Tshikalange of Ha-Makuya asserted that “Tshivhasa got the Mabunyu to help him attack Lwamondo,” with the object of replacing Khosi Maboho with a headman who would govern Lwamondo as a satellite of Ha-Tshivhasa.<sup>78</sup>

Considered together, the overwhelming consensus expressed in Tshivenda-language accounts of the Mabunyu War is that the Tshivhasa family and its internal dynamics gave at least partial impetus to those regiments from Gazaland and Swaziland that invaded the Zoutpansberg in 1869. Yet, these perspectives of cultural insiders whose testimonies center on the politics of Ha-Tshivhasa are all but

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<sup>74</sup> Ernest Mudau, “The Dau of Tshakhuma” in N.J. Van Warmelo, ed., *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, (Pretoria, 1940), 77.

<sup>75</sup> Mudau, “The Dau of Tshakhuma,” 78. Mzila and Ligegise were contemporaries.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Ngwana as recounted by Neluvhulani, *Mzila*, (Unpaginated) in N.J. Van Warmelo Papers, University of Pretoria Library, Special Collections.

<sup>77</sup> Ngwana, *Mzila*.

<sup>78</sup> Ha-Makuya is situated in the northeastern region of the Zoutpansberg. Separately, even if the heuristic ethnonym “Mabunyu” obscures the identity of Ligegise’s proxies, *Khosi* Tshikalange’s testimonies align with what we know about the outcome of the invasion inasmuch as “...the Mabunyu attack miscarried.” See Tshikalange, Nathaniel Lalumbe (Trans.) “History of Ha-Makuya,” in *Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs Ethnological Publications*, (Pretoria, 1944), 59.

ignored in the only published scholarship in which the Mabunyu invasion is assessed—a single book chapter drafted under the authorship of Mphya Henry Nemudzivhadi, a historian who was himself a cultural insider.

#### Whose War Was It?

Mphaya Nemudzivhadi hints at the orientation of his analysis of the Mabunyu War and its political origins in a chapter instructively titled “Makhado Resists Attempts by the Boers to Return to Venda, 1868-9.”<sup>79</sup> Unlike Phophi’s work which drew upon original interviews with Muvenda informants, Nemudzivhadi fashions his narrative largely from archival papers and secondary literature recorded in English and Afrikaans.<sup>80</sup> Unlike most Tshivenda language sources that allude to the primacy of intra-African politics among the root causes of the Mabunyu War, Nemudzivhadi argued that the Swazis and Gaza-Nguni invaded Venda at the behest of Stephanus Schoeman, the Diplomatic Agent of the Z.A.R., and Joao Albasini, the one-time colonial Native Superintendent at Zoutpansberg (see chapter two).<sup>81</sup> Nemudzivhadi writes that “Schoeman approached Mzila through messengers” perhaps as early as 1867, with an offer of land upon which he and his people might settle, “should he [Mzila] and his white allies succeed in subjugating the Vhavenda.”<sup>82</sup> It was Albasini, we are told, who “invoked the assistance of the Swazi[s].”<sup>83</sup> Nemudzivhadi writes that the Transvaal Republic “plan[ned] to subjugate Makhado by using Ngoni and Swazi mercenaries.”<sup>84</sup> Crucially, most of the battles during the Mabunyu invasion occurred in the eastern and southern regions of the Zoutpansberg. From March until November, the Swazi and Gaza-Nguni were driven from the field at Mukumbani, Tshipwarapwara,

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<sup>79</sup> M. Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado Ramabulana, the Lion of the North 1864-1895: The 19<sup>th</sup> Century African Royalty in the Face of Teutonic Imperialism*, (Thohoyandou, 2017), 108-129.

<sup>80</sup> Nemudzivhadi collected oral testimonies pursuant to a doctoral thesis submitted to the History faculty at Potchefstroom in 1998, and upon which his 2014 published manuscript derives.

<sup>81</sup> Nemudzivhadi, 114.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 122.

Lwamondo, and Tshakhuma, before very nearly overrunning the defenses of the Ramabulana capital in September 1869. Yet, Nemudzivhadi describes the outcome of the war in which the Mabunyu were finally driven from the Zoutpansberg as “Makhado’s victory.”<sup>85</sup>

Nemudzivhadi’s appraisal of the 1869 conflict is consistent with the orientation of his book in which the history of the Zoutpansberg during the latter half of the nineteenth century is narrated from the perspective of the Ramabulana family and that of its second lineal head, Makhado. Importantly, this abiding preoccupation with important personages is emblematic of the liberal intellectual tradition in South African historical studies. Yet, the narrative strategies that Nemudzivhadi employed both in his appraisal of the Mabunyu War and of the nineteenth-century history of the Zoutpansberg writ-large belied another set of socio-political and historical exigencies. By positioning Makhado at the center of the history of pre-conquest Zoutpansberg, Nemudzivhadi reinforces what the anthropologist Caroline Jeannerat characterized as “a successful trope” of the Venda past, one in which the Ramabulana dynasty presided over a unified and culturally homogenous polity.<sup>86</sup> Even if this understanding of a unified Venda past had its origins in the ethnographic literature of the early 1900s, by the 1950s and 1960s, Patrick Mphahlele skillfully leveraged these historically oriented claims of dynastic supremacy to consolidate Ramabulana control over the political structures of the Venda Territorial Authority and, later, the Venda bantustan (“homeland”) of the apartheid era.<sup>87</sup> Of course, it is also plausible that Nemudzivhadi took measure of the source material preserved in Tshivenda

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Caroline Jeannerat, *An Ethnography of Faith: Personal Conceptions of Religiosity in the Zoutpansberg, South Africa, in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 2007), 178.

<sup>87</sup> Jeannerat, *An Ethnography of Faith*, 175. In an interview at the home of Mphya Nemudzivhadi at his home near Thohoyandou on 8 August 2015, the historian alluded to the political and professional consideration that may have inflected in his approach to the past and the write-up of his own field work. Nemudzivhadi offered these remarks in the context of his subsequent appointment as Director General in the Venda Homeland Department of Education in 1979. Also see, Kimberly Bernita Ross, *Traditional Terrain: Land, Gender, and Cultural Biodiversity Preservation in Venda, South Africa*,



language, in which the Mabunyu War is understood as an intra-African affair, and simply evaluated the evidence as less than compelling.

Interestingly, Nemudzivhadi would have found ample support for his interpretation of the war as a confrontation between whites and the Ramabulanas on the editorial pages of English language periodicals in the years and months prior to the invasion. As noted in chapter two many opponents of the Transvaal Republic, including white Cape liberals, missionaries, abolitionists and even the government's own disaffected bureaucrats, used the press to discredit the Z.A.R. To the extent that the commentary published on the pages of English language press reflected popular sentiments at the Cape and Natal, the loss of Schoemansdal in 1867 was yet another example of the Z.A.R.'s feckless leadership. In a letter to the editor of the *Natal Witness* published on 13 April 1869, one commentator decried the "disgraceful abandonment of Schoemansdal" as illustrative of administrative incompetence. The same writer noted that "the troubles of the Zoutpansberg had their origins in the [Z.A.R.] government," which had adopted the "wrong policies towards the natives."<sup>88</sup> Worst still was its ineffectual response to Makhado's provocations. In an 1868 letter to the *Natal Witness* newspaper, a commentator pointed the finger of blame at "Paul Kruger, who with such a very strong force, could not progress even so much as to make an attack upon" Makhado, who was described as "an inferior chief."<sup>89</sup> What a "very great pity" it was, the letter continued, "that such a fine district as Zoutpansberg should be entirely left in the hands of natives and lost to European improvement . . . for nothing else than bad management."<sup>90</sup>

Most damningly, according to another letter published in the *Natal Witness* on 14 April 1869, was the news of "a commando of Zulus" on their way to the Zoutpansberg for the purposes of

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<sup>88</sup> "The Transvaal Native Policy," *Natal Witness*, 13 April 1869.

<sup>89</sup> "Zoutpansberg," *Natal Witness*, 4 August 1868.

<sup>90</sup> "Zoutpansberg," *Natal Witness*, 4 August 1868.

“engaging with the mountain Kaffirs,” to do for us “what we failed in doing for ourselves.”<sup>91</sup> Then on 19 September 1868 an article in the same newspaper lamented that “free license had been given to the Zulus by our Government, to attack the Zoutpansberg Kafirs.”<sup>92</sup> In the minds of many white settlers, there were few meaningful distinctions to be drawn between the Swazis, the Gaza-Nguni and the Zulus, particularly in terms of their preferred mode of warfare. Consistent with popular stereotypes in white discourses, some writers warned that these “dogs of war” had made it their custom to unleash wanton violence for the purposes of “extermination,” which was “invariably their aim.”<sup>93</sup>

Some abolitionists seized on the tumult in the northern Transvaal to amplify their demands that the British government take action against the Z.A.R. One writer notes his pleasure that a report authored by F.W. Chesson, Secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society, was “arousing public attention in England.” Beyond this, the writer was hopeful that an unidentified but “influential member of Parliament will bring the questions of commandos against the natives and slavery before the House of Commons.”<sup>94</sup> To successfully graft these more recent concerns about war in the Zoutpansberg onto long-standing objections to the government’s complicity in slaving, the Z.A.R.’s critics portrayed Vhavenda as militarily effete victims of Boer aggression. The presumed docility of the Vhavenda stood in contrast with well-worn tropes of so-called Zulus as the embodiment of violent African martial prowess. These divergent characterizations found expression in an article published in April 1869, in which a commentator “denounced the policy of pitting...powerful and warlike tribe[s] against weak and helpless mountain kaffirs.”<sup>95</sup> Another writer warned that the Zoutpansberg

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<sup>91</sup> “The Transvaal Native Policy” reprinted from the Argus, *Natal Witness*, 13 April 1869.

<sup>92</sup> “News from The Transvaal,” *Natal Witness*, reprinted from the Argus, 19 May 1869.

<sup>93</sup> “News from The Transvaal,” *Natal Witness*, reprinted from the Argus, 19 May 1869.

<sup>94</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 6 April 1869.

<sup>95</sup> “The Transvaal Native Policy” reprinted from the Argus, *Natal Witness*, 13 April 1869.

would “soon be the theater of horror over which angels might weep” if the Swazis and Gaza warriors were set against the Vhavenda.<sup>96</sup> To avert such a calamitous outcome and to “spare these miserable creatures from being utterly exterminated,” the author of one such article called for an immediate moratorium to be placed on any intervention involving “warriors, or rather native bloodhounds” from the Swazi and the Gaza-Nguni states.<sup>97</sup> Ultimately, there would be no moratorium. More importantly, whether the Mabunyu invaded Venda at the behest of the Z.A.R., or Ligegise Tshivhasa, or even his brother, Tshivhenga, the outcome of this battle for military supremacy in the northern Transvaal would not be decided on the editorial pages of the *Natal Witness*, but rather, in the mountain fastnesses of the Zoutpansberg.

#### The Mabunyu Invade Eastern Zoutpansberg

The opening moves in this latest contest for control of the Zoutpansberg belonged to Gaza Nguni ruler Mzila. The 5,000 soldiers that he mobilized for the Venda expedition were organized into two regiments under the overall command of Magidjane Tavedi, Mzila’s “prime minister.”<sup>98</sup> We may assume that Mzila’s brother Mpissane commanded the more seasoned of the two regiments, while a military officer identified in Venda sources as Muyakayaka commanded the other.<sup>99</sup> It was either late February or early March when both regiments of the Nguni war party converged on their first target at Thengwe. Located in northeastern Zoutpansberg, Thengwe was incorporated into Ha-Mphaphuli during the reign of the third Mphaphuli Ratsibi (1848-60), the father of the fourth, Ranwedzi-Ngolo

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<sup>96</sup> *Natal Witness*, 13 March 1868.

<sup>97</sup> *Natal Witness*, 13 March 1868.

<sup>98</sup> Gerhard Liesegang, *Notes on the Internal Structure of the Gaza Kingdom of Southern Mozambique, 1840-1895*, (Unpublished Paper, University of Zimbabwe Archives), 194.

<sup>99</sup> A passage in Phophi and Van Warmelo’s Tshivenda-English dictionary alludes to “Mambeza” as the regimental name of the Gaza-Nguni formation that attacked Lwamondo in June 1869. In Gerhard Liesegang’s unpublished papers, he writes that a certain Sokunaka wa ka Mabesa served as the first induna, or political officer in Mzila’s court. See, Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, 173; Nemudzivhadi, *History of Lwamondo, Annex C*, (Unpublished Notes, 16 November 1999); G. Liesegang, *Notes on the Internal Structure of the Gaza Kingdom*, 206.

(1861-1903).<sup>100</sup> At the time of the Nguni invasion, the chiefdom at Thengwe was cleaved to Ha-Mphaphuli as a satellite just as the Rambuda chieftaincy was bound to Ha-Tshivhasa, saving one notable distinction. As direct descendants of Thohoyandou, the Tshivhasa and Mphaphuli dynasties, as well as the Dzimauli chiefdom belonged to the Singo/Rozvi mutupo.<sup>101</sup> Khosi Nethengwe and his predecessors descended from the royal clan of the Vhatavhatsindi, an autochthonous mutupo who settled the Zoutpansberg at least a century before the Singos.

Because of its political affiliation, the Nguni incursion against Thengwe represented the first stage in a full-scale invasion of Ha-Mphaphuli. Notably, this interpretation breaks with what is by default, the conventional narrative in an otherwise understudied episode in the history of the Zoutpansberg. The historian and archaeologist Jan Boeyens identified those communities who gave battle and who absorbed casualties without situating those confrontations within the context of any specific set of politico-military objectives. According to Boeyens, the Nguni “clashed with the people of Tshivhasa and those of Mphaphuli,” and “many of the followers of Nethengwe and [Ranwedzi] Mphaphuli were killed in the fighting.”<sup>102</sup> Earlier in this chapter, I described how Ligege Tshivhasa sent a consignment of provisions to a war party of invaders in an attempt to drive a wedge between the Mabunyu and his brother Tshivhenga. Boeyens offers an altogether different interpretation of this same conjuncture. He asserts that Ligege surrendered livestock to the invaders, not in the interest of negotiating an armistice, but rather, as an act of submission.<sup>103</sup> For his part, Nemudzivhadi omits any mention of fighting at Ha-Tshivhasa. Moreover, he submits that it was Mzila’s desire to annex Thengwe that gave impetus to this first incursion.<sup>104</sup> Importantly, after Thengwe, the Nguni moved

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<sup>100</sup> S. Mmbara, *Bestowing Honour on Royalty: A Case Study of the Mphaphuli Dynasty* (Unpublished MA thesis: University of Limpopo, 2009), 17.

<sup>101</sup> *Mutupo* is roughly analogous in meaning to a totemic and ancestrally orientated clan. See the Introduction.

<sup>102</sup> Boeyens, *Die Konflik Tussen*, 97.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Nemudzivhadi, 115.

on to Lwamondo, according to the sequence of events that both Nemudzivhadi and Boeyens reconstruct from their sources. Indeed, even Tshivenda oral traditions substantiated this chronology. And yet, evidence from a long-overlooked 1877 account in German disrupts the extant narrative. In fact, it offers a new perspective on the political itinerary that Mzila's commanders advanced after they captured Thengwe, but before they moved against Lwamondo.

The Notes of BMS Rev. Klaas Koen

Having sacked Thengwe, the Nguni commander Magidjane reorganized his forces into two regiments in preparation for a full assault against Ha-Mphaphuli. One regiment was dispatched to Mbilwi, the capital of Ha-Mphaphuli, while the other marched on Tshipwarapwara, the village ruled by Makwarela, the heir-apparent of the Mphaphuli dynasty. While we do not know which of Magidjane's officers lead the attack on Mbilwi, the Lutheran evangelist Rev. Klaas Koen recorded the details of the incursion against Makwarela's village at Tshipwarapwara.<sup>105</sup> Crucially, Koen did not bear witness to the events so copiously detailed in a July 1877 diary entry. Instead, this reconstruction of the battle at Tshipwarapwara in either late May or early June 1869 was the retrospective narrative as told from the perspective of the heir apparent, Makwarela. According to Rev. Koen, "the two indunas," Mpissane and Muyakayaka, led the "notorious army" from Gazaland deep into Mphaphuli's territory, "deposing one chief after the other" en route to their target.<sup>106</sup>

Makwarela's stronghold at Tshipwarapwara was situated in readily defensible terrain. Additionally, the defenders would have had occasion to collect considerable intelligence about the disposition and intentions of the invading force in the interregnum following the Nguni raid against

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<sup>105</sup> Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul*, 104

<sup>106</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz 1880, BMB 1/410/171, Berliner Missionsberichte., Boeyens records the names and *non de guerre* of Nguni commanders 'Moftene' and 'Madumelana.'

Thengwe. Indeed, while Rev. Koen's description of the battle at Tshipwarapwara revealed much about the tactical acumen of Makwarela, the missionary's notes speak to the role of deception and misdirection as a facet in the repertoire of embodied practices described herein as the Venda Armory.

The evangelist writes that when the Nguni regiment of 2,000 highly disciplined soldiers arrived at Tshipwarapwara, "Makwarela's people all lost their nerve." The elders among the councilors to the prince "recommended that the enemy should be bought over with 100 head of cattle" as a gesture of submission, "or else they should flee into the forests."<sup>107</sup> In response, Makwarela was said to have admonished his elders to feast upon "his cattle yourselves before you flee." Crucially, even if Makwarela would not abandon his village without a fight, he calculated that he and his men might seize a decisive advantage if the Nguni could be convinced that surrender was indeed their intention. According to Rev. Koen, Makwarela and two of his trusted guards retrieved their firearms and made their way towards a maize field located just beyond the stockades of the village. From cover, Makwarela called out to the Mabunyu, misrepresenting himself as "a messenger sent by a fearful khosi" who, he said, was hiding inside the village. Makwarela added that his "khosi had instructed him to offer 300 head of cattle" as a gesture of his chief's desire to avoid conflict. According to Koen, Makwarela's ruse succeeded in its design which was to lull the Nguni into lowering their guard. Then when their commander approached the maize field, Makwarela and his men sprang their trap and concentrated their musket fire into the Nguni officers, which sent the rest of the breaching force to flight.

The success of Makwarela's plan depended on an underlying assumption that the Nguni "were still ignorant about guns."<sup>108</sup> Both their response to this improvised ambush and the available historical

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<sup>107</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz 1880, BMB 1/410/171. Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

evidence suggests that Makwarela's belief was well founded.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, the inexperience of the Gaza-Nguni warriors with firearms contrasted with Makwarela, who learned to handle guns in his late teens during the 1850s. According to the annual mission report of 1880, the young prince often visited an aunt who lived on a farm belonging to an Englishman identified only as Watt. It was from Watt, that Makwarela "learned how to use a gun." Convinced of their efficacy as weapons, Makwarela "managed to obtain several of these" and eventually "used them in wars."<sup>110</sup>

This first brief encounter with the Mabunyu highlights two tenets of the Vhavenda way of war. The first of these involved deception. Makwarela convinced the Nguni commander that he and his people were disinclined to fight. In response to a question about those elements of martial culture that are unique to Vhavenda, an informant stated that Venda people sought to convince an opponent that they (Vhavenda) were docile and peaceably disposed.<sup>111</sup> This, my informant continued, was especially important in a confrontation with a more powerful opponent. It merits mention that this informant, a middle school principal by profession named Tshilidzi Ndevana, spoke on background in general terms, and not in response to a specific historical event. And yet, Ndevana's comments offer an ethnographic lens through which historical events can be understood by virtue of his dual role as a long-time participant and chief organizer of Musangwe, a customary institution particular to Venda involving bare-knuckle pugilism. Inasmuch as contemporary generalizations about Venda culture are relevant here, Makwarela employed a measure of strategic deception in this first skirmish with the Nguni.

Ndevana, who goes by "Poison" in his capacity as "President" of Musangwe, also noted that

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid. Also, Lisa Brock argues that Nguni migrant workers only began to repatriate guns into Gazaland from Lourenço Marques and the Transvaal in the 1870s. See. L. Brock, *From Kingdom to Colonial District: A Political Economy of Social Change in Gaza Land, Southern Mozambique, 1870-1930* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis: Northwestern University, 1989), 74. The historian Gerhard Liesegang list the comparatively slow process of adaption to firearms among the weakness of the Gaza State. See, G. Liesegang, *Notes on the Internal Structure*, 196.

<sup>110</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz 1880, BMB 1/408/170. Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>111</sup> Tshilidzi Ndevana/Dzimauli. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 13 March 2018.

Vhavenda generally avoid direct confrontation with a more powerful entity without first having ascertained their opponents' most readily exploitable weakness.<sup>112</sup> Applied to the past, this insight suggests the combination of avarice and sloth were the traits that Makhado and his compatriots seized upon when they relieved the Schoemansdalers of their precious hunting muskets in 1865.<sup>113</sup> Four years later in 1869, just beyond the barricades surrounding Tshipwarapwara, Mphaphuli prince Makwarela exploited the ignorance of the Nguni fighters about firearms, along with the tactical predictability inherent in their military doctrine.

Returning to Koen's account, the missionary wrote that Makwarela's people inside the village "sounded tavha-mukosi, the call to muster" immediately after the first shots were fired.<sup>114</sup> Within minutes, all of the chief's followers who were capable of handling arms" had assembled and took to the field "on Makwarela's side." Sensing that the Gaza-Nguni had yet to recover their collective bearing after the initial ambush, the Venda chief and his reinforcements pressed their advantage and again set the invaders to flight," at a loss of fifty Gaza fighters against none for Makwarela and his people.<sup>115</sup>

Importantly, if this account of the battle at Tshipwarapwara is to be accepted as a reliable representation of historical events, then the circumstances within which Rev. Koen collected this testimony are deserving of elucidation. Born at the Cape in 1852 to parents of both European and indigenous ancestry, Klaas Koen had only progressed as far as the preliminary stages of his seminary training in Germany in 1869 when the Nguni invaded Venda.<sup>116</sup> Upon his ordination, Koen returned to South Africa in April 1876 to begin his career as an evangelist. At the invitation of Makwarela in

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<sup>112</sup> Here, Ndevana was speaking in reference to resistance to the apartheid state during the 1980s, where *Musangwe* also served as spaces to disseminate information and organize subversion to the Venda Homeland government.

<sup>113</sup> See R. Wagner, Zoutpansberg, A Hunting Frontier.

<sup>114</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz 1880, BMB 141/170, Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>115</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz 1880, BMB 141/171, Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>116</sup> For more on Koen's parentage and the social politics of race at the Cape, see A. Kirkaldy, "Klaas Koen: Identity and Belonging in the Berlin Mission Society During the Late Nineteenth Century," *Historia*, 55, n. 2 (2010), 99-120.



1877, Koen established the Lutheran mission station that would eventually be known as Georgenholtz. The narrative account of Makwarela's role in the Mabunyu War that Koen recorded for posterity in that same year were the memories of a man with obvious stakes in the curation and presentation of his own chiefly biography.

During their first quarter century of ecclesiastical work in Venda, the success of Lutherans' evangelism—and their very presence in the Zoutpansberg—depended on the German missionaries' ability to retain the favor of Venda dynasts. Notwithstanding the precarity of their circumstances, the writings of the Rev. Koen betray his esteem for Makwarela. Following their initial encounter in July 1877, Koen describes the Mphaphuli heir apparent in complimentary if not entirely patronizing terms: “clever, diligent, skillful and interested in everything,” a man with whom “one can converse better than with any other person of his nation.”<sup>117</sup> While there is no evidence that their cordial rapport impelled Koen to embellishment, we might fairly surmise that the missionary was inclined to take Makwarela at his word with respect to his account of the events that transpired at Tshipwarapwara in autumn 1869.<sup>118</sup>

Beyond their evidentiary value, the memories that Makwarela shared with Koen illustrate how the martial traditions of Vhavenda differed from those that the historian John Laband characterizes as the “generally accepted, continent-wide system of military values” that “legitimized aggressive masculinity and the violence of war.”<sup>119</sup> Gaza-Nguni warriors embraced the “face-to-face, heroic combat” in which the individual combatant “proved his courage” in battle, “the ultimate test of manliness.”<sup>120</sup> Indeed, according to Gerhard Liesegang, a historian of pre-conquest Gazaland, Nguni

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<sup>117</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz, 1878, BMB 1/490/123, Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>118</sup> Interestingly, in 1907, Native Secretary William Windham submitted a report to his superiors in Pretoria that included a version of the battle at Tshipwarapwara that is virtually identical in substance to Rev. Koen's account recorded three decades prior. William Windham to Secretary for Native Affairs/Johannesburg, 9 April 1907, PM 1260/07,

<sup>119</sup> John Laband, *Zulu Warriors: The Battle for the South African Frontier*, (Hartford, 2014), 11.

<sup>120</sup> Laband, *Zulu Warriors*, 12.

warriors adhered to the values of a martial tradition in which “individual bravery” was extolled.<sup>121</sup> Nguni men embodied those values by “attack[ing] openly” as demonstrable proof “that they were not afraid to die.”<sup>122</sup> At Tshipwarapwara, as elsewhere during the Mabunyu War, Vhavenda exposed the limitation in the martial ethos of their opponents, albeit from the security of elevated settlements beyond the range of the iklwa, the short stabbing spear that Gaza-Nguni infantrymen expertly handled in close combat.<sup>123</sup>

Whereas the fighting traditions of the Nguni “legitimized aggressive masculinity,” those of the Vhavenda encouraged caution and restraint. This aspect of Vhavenda “military culture” is expressed in the proverb *nowa a i londwini mulindini*, (“a snake should not be followed up to its hole”), which is an injunction against the pursuit of a defeated opponent into their territory. According to the notes of Rev. Koen, Makwarela divined that the Nguni military culture brooked no such caution. Although he had bloodied the Nguni in the initial ambush, Makwarela “knew very well that they would return.”<sup>124</sup> In preparation, he repositioned his men away from the maize field to another concealed location beyond the immediate line of sight of the village. When the Nguni returned under cover of darkness, they found an unobstructed path to Tshipwarapwara. It was only after the Nguni crossed the outer threshold of the village that Makwarela and his men emerged from cover to encircle “the unsuspecting enemy” and massed their musket fire into the Nguni forces. Those among the Nguni who survived this final ambush made their egress from Tshipwarapwara, also under the cover of darkness, just as they had arrived. While Makwarela outmaneuvered the Nguni and exposed their

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<sup>121</sup> Gerhard Liesegang, *Notes on the Internal*, 201.

<sup>122</sup> Gerhard Liesegang, “Aspects of Gaza and Nguni History 1821-1898,” *Rhodesian History*, (1975), 12.

<sup>123</sup> In Siswati, this weapon is called *lijozi*. See H. Breemer “The Development of the Military Organization in Swaziland,” *Africa: Journal of the international African Institute*, 10, (2) 1937, 117.

<sup>124</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz, 1880, BMB 1/411/171, Berliner Missionsberichte.

tactical weaknesses, ironically, what he could not anticipate was his father's response to the second Nguni war party marching on Mbilwi, the capital of Ha-Mphaphuli.

During a feast to celebrate their victory, Makwarela reproached his councilors "who wanted to surrender cattle to the Mabunyu," asking if it were not instead "better to eat [them] yourselves?"<sup>125</sup> The arrival of messengers from the capital brought an abrupt end to the festivities at Tshipwarapwara. Located 30 km to the southeast, Thovhele Ranwedzi-Ngolo's royal residence at Mbilwi was carved into a mountain terrace affording a clear vantage of the surrounding terrain. And when Ranwedzi's advisors surveilled the massive force now poised for attack just beyond their ramparts, they arrived at precisely the same conclusion as did their counterparts at Tshipwarapwara. Unlike his son Makwarela however, the aging Mphaphuli acceded to his councilor's entreaties to pacify the invaders with 100 head of cattle. While Ranwedzi offered a worthy ransom, the Nguni appended an additional and particularly onerous condition onto the arrangement.

After Ha-Mphaphuli, the Nguni planned to march on Lwamondo. Importantly, regardless of whether it was Z.A.R. officials, or Ligegise Tshivhasa, or even his brother Tshivhenga who desired to capture Lwamondo, the Nguni did nevertheless require local intelligence about their next target. Thus, to leave Mbilwi in peace, the Nguni instructed Ranwedzi to mobilize a war party from among his followers who were to serve as a scouting force under the command of Nguni General Magidjane Tavedi. As Makwarela reveled in the events of the previous day, his feast was interrupted when messengers arrived at Tshipwarapwara bearing word from Mbilwi that the debt his father had accrued as a cost of peace with the Nguni was now his ignominious burden to bear.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

## The Mabunyu Invade Lwamondo

The last passage in Koen's notes affirmed that Makwarela did as he had been instructed and assembled a contingent of his men to lead the Nguni to Lwamondo. According to the missionary, prior to their departure, Makwarela dispatched messengers to Lwamondo to warn Khosi Maboho of the impending attack. In addition, the messengers also informed Khosi Maboho, that Makwarela and his men "would not load any bullets into their guns."<sup>126</sup> As such, Khosi Maboho and his people "should bravely attack the Mabunyu" and when the battle began, "Makwarela would help" the people of Lwamondo.<sup>127</sup> Interestingly, Secretary of Native Affairs William Windham submitted to his superiors in Pretoria a report in 1907 that continues in much the same narrative vein as Rev. Koen's observations recorded three decades earlier.<sup>128</sup> About the instruction from Mbilwi to ally with the Mabunyu Windham writes that Makwarela "had no differences with Ne Lomondo [and] cared not about this arrangement."<sup>129</sup> Yet, "seeing no other way out of the difficulty, he acquiesced and accompanied the Zulus."<sup>130</sup> Further, Windham confirms that Makwarela did indeed "sen[d] a secret message . . . informing Ne Lomondo of the pending attack" and of Makwarela's instructions to his troops "not to fire on Ne Lomondo's men."<sup>131</sup>

With the benefit of the intelligence from Makwarela, Khosi Maboho "made preparations to receive the Zulus." Having learned from the near disaster during the 1850s when Albasini and his

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Windham does not identify the source(s) that informed his report titled "History of Pafuri (Mpafuli), NA 1260/07, 9 April 1907, 9.

<sup>129</sup> W. Windham, History of Pafuri (Mpafuli), NA 1260/07, 9 April 1907, 9-10.

<sup>130</sup> Windham, NA 1260/07, 9 April 1907, 10.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. Unlike the vernacular accounts explored earlier in this chapter, Windham make no mention of Ligegise Tshivhasa as the architect of the attack on Lwamondo. Where the Native Secretary's report does partially align with Tshivenda language accounts is Tshivhasa's response to Nguni army poised to invade his country. Windham writes "Tshivhasa, being afraid...send cattle etc. at a peace offering which was accepted and the Zulus passed him unhindered." Windham, NA 1260/07, 9 April 1907, 9.

auxiliaries came close to sacking Lwamondo, Maboho “posted men on top of” Mafela, the mountain peak overlooking the royal residence.<sup>132</sup>

Windham’s report is vague as to the chronology of this first attack; however, the Transvaal Witness published a story in which one of its correspondents wrote that the Gaza-Nguni moved against Lwamondo either in late February or Early March.<sup>133</sup> The Nguni “were totally defeated” according to Windham, in a battle “which lasted a whole day.”<sup>134</sup> Importantly, Makwarela’s men inflicted “a large number” of the casualties that Nguni sustained at Lwamondo after “they turned openly against” the Mabunu invaders.<sup>135</sup> The Nguni returned to Lwamondo in June, this time under the leadership of Mpisane, the brother of Nguni ruler Mzila. Unlike Magidjane, who advanced on the royal village from the south, Mpisane made his approach from the east, through Tshiseni, under cover of darkness. Crucially, unbeknownst to the Nguni, Tshiseni was *munuvhe*, a term connoting treacherous marshland similar in composition to quicksand. According to oral traditions, the Nguni ingress stalled as the war party struggled to traverse the bogs at Tshiseni; and, in their haste to do so, the Nguni roused the baboons of Lwamondo. Once again, it was the bark of the mountain’s baboons—sacred to both autochthon and allochthon residents of Lwamondo—that alerted Khosi Maboho’s men of the impending attack (see Introduction).<sup>136</sup> With ample time to prepare their defenses, the people of Lwamondo drove the Nguni from their mountain under a hail of bullets, arrows, and boulders.<sup>137</sup>

The amaSwazi Join the Invasion of Central and Western Zoutpansberg

The arrival of 1,600 Swazi warriors in October 1869 signaled an intensification of the Mabunyu War.

Though their presence in Zoutpansberg clearly raised the tactical stakes of the war, particularly for

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<sup>132</sup> Windham, NA 1260/07, 9 April 1907, 10.

<sup>133</sup> “Latest from Zoutpansberg,” Feb 29, 1869; *Transvaal Argus*, 6 April 1869.

<sup>134</sup> W. Windham, to Native Commissioner/Johannesburg, 9 April 1907, SNA 1085/1260/07.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Thovbele* Calvin Nelwamondo/Lwamondo. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 31 July 2018.

<sup>137</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado*, 116.

Vhavenda, the specific objectives that the Swazis hoped to accomplish by virtue of their involvement have yet to be adequately explored. Nemudzivhadi emphasizes the idea that the Swazi intervention satisfied a prior commitment to Joao Albasini.<sup>138</sup> In contrast, evidence from other African sources alludes to a different interpretation, one that was grounded in the internal politics of the Swazi kingdom. In a compendium work, *A Biographical Register of Swaziland to 1902*, Huw Jones identifies Matsafeni Mduli and Khoza Dlamini among the aristocrats who led the invasion of 1869.<sup>139</sup> According to Jones, Mduli and Dlamini positioned themselves as leaders of the war party that was mobilized for the purpose of deposing Sekhukhune, Paramount of the Maroteng Chiefdom and installing his brother, Mampuru.<sup>140</sup> If Jones's evidence is to be believed, then his work explained why the Swazi regiments marched south to the Pedi kingdom after the conclusion of the Mabunyu War. Less clear however, were the reasons why Mduli and Dlamini led their forces to Zoutpansberg—located some 150km (90mi) north—en route to their ultimate destination. Historical precedent offers some possible explanations.

During the Mushavho or 'times of flight' from the 1820s-40s, the Swazi kingdom sent men to raid Venda settlements for cattle and agricultural products. We also know that plunder and confiscatory raids for meat and grains were central features of Swazi military doctrine during the nineteenth century.<sup>141</sup> However speculative, it seems likely that the leaders of the Swazi expeditionary forces bound for the Pedi state regarded their sojourn in Venda as a waypoint and an opportunity to gather much needed resources ahead of a long road march to their final destination to the south. Thus, the appeals from Albasini and other representatives of the Transvaal Republic might have provided

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<sup>138</sup> Nemudzivhadi, 118.

<sup>139</sup> Jones, *A Biographical Register*, 107,

<sup>140</sup> Jones, *A Biographical Register*, 150, 2176, 403.

<sup>141</sup> Hilda Bremer, "The Development and the Military Organization in Swaziland (Concluded)" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 10, 2 (1937), 178.

the Swazi aristocrats Mduli and Dlamni with a convenient pretext to advance their own plans. Regardless of their strategic objectives, in Zoutpansberg, the Swazis accepted the tactical guidance of Albasini. And it was Albasini who directed the Swazis to divide their forces into two regiments. While the first marched on Tshakhuma, a chiefdom located in south central Zoutpansberg, the other was assigned the task of invading Ha-Ramabulana, located 40 km west of Tshakhuma.

As elsewhere in Venda, the people of Tshakhuma integrated the natural environment into the security architecture that protected people and property from invaders. The royal residence of Khosi Raluthaga Madzivhandila was located on the southern slope of Mangwele mountain, near a cave that was large enough to accommodate both people and livestock during times of war. Importantly, just as the people at Lwamondo relied on the mountain's baboons as part of their security architecture, so too did Madzivhandila's followers learn to integrate elements of the natural environment at Tshakhuma to provide advanced warning of a hostile incursion. The only avenue of approach leading to Mangwele mountain was a narrow strip of land, just more than a kilometer in length and bordering a natural lake to the east. According to the descendants of Madzivhandila, the people of Tshakhuma paved the causeway leading to their settlement with "special stones" that resonated with what they described as a melodic chime. In October 1869, as 800 warriors from the Swazi kingdom disguised their ingress under the late-night pitch, their footfalls triggered the "magical stones" of the Mutombongwene, and alerted Tshakhuma's residents to their presence.<sup>142</sup>

The organization of people within the cave at Mangwele reflected the cultural exigencies of politics and warfare in nineteenth century Venda. As the embodiment of ancestrally located community, the life of the chief was of paramount importance. As such, the space at the rear of the cave was reserved for Khosi Madzivhandila. The center accommodated commoners. Crucially, fighting

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<sup>142</sup> David Muladuzi/Tshakhuma. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 13 August 2015.

men and notably, women, positioned themselves near the mouth in anticipation of the approaching enemy.<sup>143</sup>

The etymology of the place name ‘Tshakhuma’ is important in the context of the Swazi invasion. The locative derives from the Tshivenda verb stem -huma, which connotes the “turning back of an enemy after an unsuccessful attack.”<sup>144</sup> Although the people of Tshakhuma organized themselves in a defensive formation, the surviving accounts indicated that Madzivhandila’s people carried the fight to the Swazis and launched a preemptive attack. Both sides absorbed casualties in a battle that began in the predawn hours and continued “until sunset.”<sup>145</sup> According to one account, Madzivhandila’s son Masindi was mortally wounded early on in the fight. Crestfallen, the mother of the prince—a woman named Madzunga—joined the fray and slew two Swazi warriors according to vernacular histories published under the auspices of the Berlin Mission.<sup>146</sup> It was only after their commander had been killed that the Swazis withdrew from Mangwele.<sup>147</sup> Venda sources further stated that the Swazi impi buried their induna near Tshakhuma. While Venda sources do not identify him by name, a close reading of Swazi sources suggests that Matsafeni Mduli was most likely the Swazi aristocrat who lost his life at the battle of Mangwele.<sup>148</sup> Mduli’s soldiers mourned his loss for three days before they left Tshakhuma and regrouped with their allies before the culminating battle in the Mabunyu War, an all-out assault on the headquarters of Makhado Ramabulana.

Nemudzivhadi wrote that Makhado’s royal residence was located on the southern slope of Luatame mountain. Like the settlements at Mukumbani, Mangwele and Lwamondo, an invading army

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<sup>143</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *The Attempts by Makhado*, 113-114.

<sup>144</sup> Ernest Mudau, “The Dau of Tshakhuma,” 72.

<sup>145</sup> Mudau, “The Dau of Tshakhuma,” 79.

<sup>146</sup> S. Masiagwala, *Ndededzi V*, (Tshakhuma, 19??) 43.

<sup>147</sup> Nemudzivhadi cited Mudau’s account, in his own dissertation, but makes no mention of this detail. Mudau indicates that the Swazi general was buried at a place then called “Nanyi, near a large fig tree.” He also indicates that this place is now considered sacred among the Venda.

<sup>148</sup> Huw Jones, *A Biographical Register of Swaziland to 1902*, (Pietermaritzburg, 1993), xxiii.



“would be forced” to make their ingress to the capital at Ha-Ramabulana “from one direction.”<sup>149</sup>

After seven months of intermittent combat and a half-dozen or more failed attacks, surely the invading forces were well familiar with the tactical repertoire of their Vhavenda opponents. The Swazi also welcomed reinforcements from Davhana—Makhado’s brother and rival claimant to the Ramabulana kingship—along with his Vhatsonga followers.<sup>150</sup>

The attack commenced at midnight on 18 October. Makahdo’s marksmen peppered the invaders with accurate rifle fire and held them at bay. Undaunted, a column of Swazis “approached the royal residence,” while a second group “entered through the southern gate” and eventually breached the village walls.<sup>151</sup> Once the Swazis crossed the threshold into the residence, the king’s bodyguards made haste to evacuate their charge from the immediate threat. Two separate accounts described a nearly identical sequence of events. In both, Funyufunyu—the commander of the forces of Ha-Ramabulana—issued instructions to his subordinates to scatter full milk vessels around the compound to create the impression that it had been abandoned in a hasty retreat. Just as Makwarela lured the Gaza-Nguni into his village at Tshipwarapwara months earlier, so too did the Swazis allow themselves to be lured into the trap that Funyufunyu laid for them. Operating under the assumption that the battle had already been won, the Swazis laid down their shields and weapons to enjoy the first spoils of victory. Lying in wait, Funyufunyu gave the command for his men to ambush the invaders and once again sent them to flight.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *The Attempts by Makhado*, 120.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>152</sup> Simon Dzivhani, “The Chiefs of Venda,” in N.J. Van Warmelo, ed., *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, (Pretoria, 1940), 58.

## Conclusion

This chapter examined the military contest for control of the Zoutpansberg in 1869. The central argument advanced herein is that this episode—commemorated in Tshivenda traditions as the Mabunyu War—was neither a confrontation exclusively involving Vhavenda and the Transvaal Republic, nor was it a conflict between Makhado Ramabulana and whites aggrieved over the loss of Schoemansdal. Instead, this chapter demonstrates that warriors from the Gaza-Nguni and Swazi polities, numbering some 7,000 of southern Africa's most fearsome military formations—invaded the Zoutpansberg in response to political developments internal to the Venda Confederation. Foremost among these, according to a preponderance of vernacular histories and the oral traditions of Tshivenda speaking peoples, was the protracted disputes among the sons of King Luvhengo, the first Tshivhasa, who died in 1865.

In the limited academic literature, the Mabunyu War is represented primarily as a skirmish between Gaza-Ngoni and Swazi forces under the overall command of settlers and representatives of the ZAR and the Ramabulana family who controlled western Zoutpansberg. By critically engaging with indigenous sources, oral traditions and missionary archives, this chapter enriches our understanding of this military confrontation for supremacy in the northern Transvaal. These previously overlooked sources allude to a more complicated story, one centering in part on the political ambitions of a spurned Venda prince whose avarice had disqualified him for consideration for the kingship. Vernacular sources point to Tshivhenga—brother of Ligegise Tshivhasa—as the party bearing the most responsibility for inviting the Gaza-Ngoni to invade Zoutpansberg in early 1869.

Likewise, Swazi traditions offer some helpful clues about the complex intermingling of domestic and regional considerations that brought Swazi regiments to Zoutpansberg. Ultimately, the invasion of Venda proved to be an unmitigated disaster, not just for the fighters who lost their lives in the ill-fated foraging campaign, but also for the Swazi leaders who orchestrated the attack in the

first instance. The death of one architect of the war, Matsafeni Mduli, at the battle of Tshakhuma, presaged the eventual demise of his compatriot, Khoza Dlamini, who lost his life just weeks later, at the hands of Sekhukhune's men. Jones proffered two reasons why their plans miscarried. First, at the time of the expedition in October 1869 the Bapedi “were already well armed with guns with which to defend themselves.” Second, the expedition itself required Mduli to lead the “impi twice as far as Swazi tactical raiding had allowed.”<sup>153</sup> Thus, it was less likely that their arrival in the Zoutpansberg was delayed because of “other commitments” with which the Swazis “had to attend,” as Nemudzivhadi claimed, but rather, because the expeditions leaders synchronized their intervention with the October harvest season.<sup>154</sup> As the Swazi surely discerned during their predatory raids of the 1840s—the era that Vhavenda remember as the times of flight—among the most abundant harvest were to be reaped from the gardens at Tshakhuma. Yet, unlike the 1840s, what both the Swazis and the Gaza-Nguni received from Vhavenda—instead of free food—was a drubbing and a lesson in the versatility of the Venda Armory. Ultimately, even if Venda was but a logistical detour, at least for the Swazis, such an interpretation centers on the intra-African dimensions of a conjuncture known to Vhavenda as the Mabunyu War.

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<sup>153</sup> Jones, *A Biographical Register*, xxiii.

<sup>154</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado*, 118.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: Women's Power and Warfare in Venda, 1870s – 1880s

On 19 May 1887, a troupe of musicians presented themselves at the barricades of the village ruled by Mahwasane, the son of King Ligegise Tshivhasa. The man who led this assemblage of percussionists and reed flute players identified himself as an emissary of the Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo. It was Mphaphuli himself, the musician explained, who dispatched them to perform in Ha-Tshivhasa as a gesture of his “respect and high esteem” for King Ligegise.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, even if the Tshivhasa and Mphaphuli dynasts had spent the better part of the last decade locked in a de facto state of war, Venda customs obliged Mahwasane to welcome the musicians into his fortified settlement and slaughter a cow for a feast in honor of his guests. Carl Beuster, a Lutheran evangelist of the Berlin Mission Society (BMS), witnessed this performance. In his diary, Rev. Beuster characterized the gesture from the Mphaphuli King to his erstwhile enemy, Ligegise Tshivhasa, as a peace offering. However, this chapter will demonstrate that the Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo sent his musicians to Mahwasane's homestead in furtherance of an entirely different set of exigencies.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, organized violence was one of the main vehicles for the expression of intra-dynastic Venda politics and statecraft. Warfare in the last self-governed Black South African kingdom had become a theater of political discourse at the intersection of aristocratic and popular life. Indeed, war was so ubiquitous and predictable that it signaled the changing of the seasons in the Zoutpansberg region of South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

As elsewhere, Vhavenda waged war within the parameters of culturally prescribed norms and mutually recognized standards of conduct.<sup>3</sup> In the main, dynasts and chiefs prosecuted small wars of medium intensity, usually not to annihilate an opponent, but rather, to establish political hegemony,

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1887, *Berliner Missions-Berichte* [hereafter BMB] 3 520/304.

<sup>2</sup> In 19<sup>th</sup> century Zoutpansberg, war was most frequent during the dry season from late-June to mid-August, when the granaries were after the harvest. Warfare was less prudent after September, when the seasonal rains limited mobility.

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Reid, *Warfare in African History*, (Cambridge, 2012), 9.

or to satisfy a desire for “territorial aggrandizement.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, to postulate a Venda way of war is to contradict the deeply entrenched representational trope of Vhavenda as militarily effete and constitutionally predisposed to docility. Indeed, the defensively oriented style of asymmetric combat that Vhavenda developed to protect fortified settlements bore scant resemblance to the more ostentatious expressions of martial prowess valorized in the popular imaginary of the English-speaking world.<sup>5</sup>

The formidable amabutho regiments of Zulu kings have often served as the standard against which all other indigenous African fighting traditions have been measured in scholarly literature and in popular understanding.<sup>6</sup> Spurious comparisons with Zulu history have long distorted the interpretation of the Venda past(s) and their cultural traditions. A canonical ethnography by Hugh Stayt stated that the individual Muvenda “will argue and talk and gesticulate in the face of extreme provocation, when a Zulu similarly provoked would have half-killed his aggressor.” Indeed, in contrast to the AmaZulu, with their reputation for martial prowess and honor, the average Muvenda, at least in Stayt’s assessment, “is not a warrior.”<sup>7</sup> So beholden was Stayt to the canard of Venda cowardice that even uncontroversial facts had to be reworked to erase any traces of human agency in the strategic construction of a “Venda Armory.” While The Bavenda conceded the Venda Confederacy’s “supremacy in the Zoutpansberg,” it underplayed local knowledge resources and material practices, claiming it was simply “their mountains [that] protected [Venda people] from annihilation.”<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, the myth of a pacifist Venda culture dates back a half century, when Theophilus Shepstone, the architect of colonial British “native policy” in Natal, drew upon the trope of Vhavenda

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Ralushai, “Further Traditions Concerning Luvhimbi and the Mbedzi,” *Rhodesian History*, (1978), 7.

<sup>5</sup> John Laband, “Bloodstained Grandeur: Colonial and Imperial Stereotypes of Zulu Warriors and Zulu Warfare,” in Benedict Carton, John Laband and Jabulani Sithole, eds., *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu, Past and Present*, (Scottsville, 2008), 168.

<sup>6</sup> Laband, “Bloodstained Grandeur,” 168.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Stayt, *The Bavenda*, (London, 1931), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Stayt, *The Bavenda*, 18.

docility as a rhetorical device to buttress his case for the annexation of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) in early 1877. In a memorandum to his Colonial Office superiors in London, Shepstone stated that “the Makatee” of the Transvaal [i.e., Venda] were “an unwarlike and docile people when compared with the Zulus” who “successfully resisted the authority of the Boer government, until” their settlement at Schoemansdal “had to be abandoned.”<sup>9</sup> In the eyes of the British authorities, the inability of the ZAR to subdue the Venda Confederacy posed an existential threat to British and settler interests in southeastern Africa.

Although Venda dynasts continued to defy the ZAR’s demands for taxes and the concerted efforts of British and Portuguese empires to curtail the sale of firearms to Africans, by the 1890s, white perceptions of Venda military prowess had begun to shift. In June 1892, the *London Times* characterized Makhado Ramabulana’s disposition vis-à-vis the Transvaal Republic’s demands for taxes by writing that the dynast “would successfully resist by means of guerilla warfare carried on in the most inaccessible country.”<sup>10</sup> Three years later, the *Eastern Province Herald* noted that the position of the Venda Confederacy made “it particularly difficult to access [for] any invading force.” Of the tactical acumen of Vhavenda in general, and of Makhado’s men more specifically, the same correspondent notes, their “men are fighters,” against whom the prospect of “war would be a heavy drain upon the resources of the Transvaal.”<sup>11</sup> Still, the most decisive rebuttal to the trope of Venda docility found expression in a report on the disarmament of the Venda Confederacy by C.A. Wheelwright, an official who began his career as a Native Commissioner in Zululand prior to serving in the same capacity in Zoutpansberg. In a memorandum dated 10 January 1903, Wheelwright wrote that, Vhavenda generally “figh[t] in bushes and mountainous country where they can creep to a very

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<sup>9</sup> Theophilus Shepstone to Governor/Cape Town, 12 March 1877, CO/879/11/80, Public Records Office, [Hereafter PRO].

<sup>10</sup> “The Natives in the Northern Transvaal,” *The Times* (London), 2 June 1894, 9.

<sup>11</sup> “A Native War,” *Eastern Province Herald*, 17 May 1895.

close distance under good cover,” well within the effective range of the antiquated firearms that were “if not more dangerous in effect than the most modern of arms.”<sup>12</sup>

Even Vhavenda were themselves aware of the ways in which their mutually recognizable standards of military conduct differed from those of other Black South African peoples. In Tshivenda, the phrase, *timba’ fhi vhuhali ha u lwa na Libunyu midavhini*<sup>2</sup> speaks to the inadvisability of confronting AmaZulu warriors in open level country rather than in the mountains, where the Venda Armory conferred distinct tactical advantages in battle.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, whereas Vhavenda subscribed to repertoires of material and ritual practice that distinguished their armory from those of their neighbors, the evidence presented in this chapter underscores the differences—in terms of tactics and standards of honorable conduct in war—among the dynastic and chiefly lineages that constituted the Venda Confederation.

As with other aspects of politics and everyday life in nineteenth-century Venda, women played active roles as strategists and combatants in war. Like their male counterparts, elite women used war to advance their own interests. This chapter centers on the careers of several Venda women to foreground the gendered dynamics of confederal politics. Without sanitizing its personal and material consequences, it explores war as a theater of political “deep play,” one in which women and men alike could participate. Importantly, this theoretical framework challenges the androcentric biases of much of the scholarship on warfare in precolonial Africa, which either infantilizes women as passive victims (along with children) or generalizes about their positions as supportive care givers to active male combatants.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> C.A. Wheelwright to Native Secretary/Johannesburg, 10 January 1903, TAB/SNAZ/891/02, South Africa National Archives [hereafter SAN]

<sup>13</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, 382.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Bradford, “Ingxoxo enkulu ngoNongqawuse (A Great Debate about Nongqawuse's Era),” *Kronos* (2008), footnote 28, 24.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first reconstructs the *muvhango* or contested succession following the death in 1879 of Khosi Dingana, the third ruler of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda. Part two returns to the kingdom of Ha-Tshivhasa to explore the first decade of a war for control over the chiefdom of Dzimauli. There are two themes that link these otherwise discrete confrontations. The first of these is the nature of the conflicts themselves. At Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda, just as in Dzimauli, the death of a ruler triggered disputes among their potential successors. In both cases, powerful dynastic rulers seized upon the occasion of contested successions to insinuate themselves into the affairs of neighboring chiefdoms. The second common feature of the proxy wars at Ha-Mutsha and Dzimauli was the decisive role of women from royal bloodlines who parlayed their positions of political and ritual power to shape outcomes that suited their own preferences. At Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda, as elsewhere in Venda, the senior *makhadzi*, a woman named Govha, selected the successor to her late brother's throne. As the evidence shows, it was largely because of the *makhadzi*'s political and military support that her designated candidate eventually overcame the challenge of his brother, who enjoyed the support of Ramabulana King Makhado. This chapter also highlights the ways in which two women checked the power of Tshivhasa King Ligegise and controlled his space for political maneuver. The first of these women was Nyatshiṭahela. In the previous chapter, Nyatshiṭahela preserved Ligegise's kingship from Tshivhenga, their brother and a rival claimant to the throne. In this chapter, Ligegise is once again obliged to rely on his sister to realize his ambition to reunite Ha-Tshivhasa with the kingdom of Dzimauli. King Ligegise was also forced to accommodate a second woman, *makhadzi* Nyatema Muofhe. In the previous chapter, Nyatema Muofhe protected Ligegise from his elder brothers and groomed him for the office of the king. In this chapter, Ligegise betrays Nyatema Muofhe and likely played a role in her assassination. In both cases, women played decisive roles in political strategies that male potentates prosecuted through war.



The military confrontations recounted here are reconstructed from vernacular histories. To an extent, reliance on such materials reflects the paucity of available sources. Wherever possible, I have attempted to corroborate the information recovered from these previously untranslated books with oral testimonies, ethnographies, and other textual materials. These books are among the only sources that elaborate on the lives of Venda women. For all of their biographic detail, a challenging characteristic of this genre of Tshivenda language literature is a lack of chronological specificity. Nevertheless, by reading vernacular sources against their narrative grain, we learn that the *muvhango* at Ha-Mutsha and the beginning of the Dzimauli wars occurred in the early 1880s because both were coterminous with a celestial event in 1882 that punctuated a devastating famine.

#### PART I: The Contested Succession at Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda

During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, Venda rulers waged war against each other for control over the Zoutpansberg and to enlarge their basis of popular support, but especially for control over the ritual apparatus through which kings and chiefs were selected. In life, Venda rulers embodied the ancestral link between past and present; in death, they strengthened the spiritual basis of ancestrally located communities. Thus, in the interregnum that followed the death of a ruler but prior to the coronation of a successor, the foundational structures that buttressed Venda sovereignty were exposed. Chapter three centered on the contested succession that destabilized the Tshivhasa kingdom, a Singo dynastic lineage, following the passing of King Luvhengo in 1864. This chapter focuses on a similar set of circumstances following the death in September 1879 of Khosi Dingana, the ruler of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda.

Khosi Dingana was nearing the end of a long reign as the ruler of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda when his chieftaincy first appeared in the documentary record. In his report for the year 1878, the Lutheran evangelist Erdman Schwellnus wrote, “our station was troubled by war [from] Tsianda” following the death in September of that year of Dingana, a “neighboring chief.” The unrest,

Schwellnus explained, “was due to a succession war, started between these two” candidates for succession, Mugivhi and Mukhosi.<sup>15</sup>

By virtue of his interactions with merchants and traders from Ha-Mutsha, the evangelist was already familiar with the central actors in the crisis brewing just beyond the confines of the mission station. Mugivhi enjoyed the support of the neighboring chiefs, “the mighty chief Maboho” referring to the ruler of Lwamondo, and Madzivhandila, the ruler of Tshakhuma.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the candidacy of Mukhosi was supported by Makhado, lineal head of the Ramabulana dynasty, who claimed for himself the right to appoint the successor to Dingana.<sup>17</sup> As a guest in his country, Rev. Schwellnus of the BMS knew that Madzivhandila supported Mugivhi’s claims to the chiefship at Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda. However, because Tshakhuma was a satellite of Ha-Ramabulana, his host was powerless to obstruct the regiments that Makhado dispatched to punish Mugivhi and Maboho, which passed through Tshakhuma en route. Although he did not witness the fighting himself, Schwellnus wrote that the forces from Ha-Ramabulana “were unsuccessful” in their campaign to see Mukhosi installed as chief, “and returned home” leaving “Maboho the winner” of this contest for control over Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda.<sup>18</sup>

However valuable his insights, Rev. Schwellnus was only tangentially aware of the interior logic of the succession dispute at Tsianda and Ha-Mutsha. Nor was he privy to the regimes of practice through which the Venda chieftaincy was revitalized during the transfer of power from a deceased ruler to a successor. In 1937, the Berlin Evangelical Mission Society, the successor organization to the BMS, published a more detailed account of this episode in the history of Tsianda and Ha-Mutsha. The author was an African Christian named Mashambe, described in the preface to his testimony as “an

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<sup>15</sup> Erdmann Schwellnus/Tshakhuma, 1879, BMB 1 140/408-9. Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>16</sup> Schwellnus/Tshakhuma, BMB 1 140/408-9. Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>17</sup> Schwellnus/Tshakhuma, BMB 1, 140/409, BMB1. Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

outcast of his nation,” one who has “lost the sense of belonging to the tribe.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Mashambe was a reliable narrator; “the youngest son of the Chief Mugivhi” who, in his own words, was “still a child, when the deep waters dried up,” referring to the death of his grandfather, Dingana.<sup>20</sup> The abiding value of Mashambe’s account lay not in the recitation of facts supplemental to those proffered in the notes of Rev. Schwellnus, but rather, in its elaboration upon the reasons why particular events unfolded as they did, as told from the perspective of a cultural insider.

Mashambe’s testimony also recounted features of the embodied rituals that legitimized political succession in Venda. The central actors in the first part of his statement—recorded decades after the events described therein—were his paternal aunt, makhadzi Govha, and the maine (diviner), a ritual specialist who remained unnamed, but whose importance is second only to the makhadzi. Mashambe explained that these two were the only office holders who retained their ritual authorities after the death of the chief who they had served. Govha and the maine worked in tandem to preserve the sanctity of the transition process. The diviner used his ivory dice, known in Tshivenda as thangu, to select a day for the assembly, one on which “evil is far away.”<sup>21</sup> Whereas the diviner designated the occasion, it is the makhadzi, in her capacity as the “guardian of the family traditions”—who convenes the assembly of elders.<sup>22</sup> The makhadzi is also the only member of the family who can “direct the necessary rituals arising from the death” of the chief, whose departure necessitated the appointment of male and female priests.<sup>23</sup> Known as tshifhe, these priests serve a vital intercessory function at the center of the relationships that bound together the realm of the living and that of the ancestors. The death of the chief meant that the tshifhe who performed the annual offering of sorghum beer to the

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<sup>19</sup> Mashambe, “The Story of a Muvenda, Told by Himself/In His Own Words,” Berlin Evangelical Mission Society (Berlin, 1937), 27/3.

<sup>20</sup> Mashambe, “The Story of a Muvenda,” 27/3.

<sup>21</sup> Mashambe, 27/4.

<sup>22</sup> Mashambe, 27/3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

ancestors during his reign, “were no longer entitled to perform this duty.” It is for this reason, therefore, “that new people have to be appointed.”<sup>24</sup> Crucially, the identity of those new priests who would hereafter make the annual offerings to the ancestors on behalf of the living was decided by the ancestors themselves.

In Mashambe’s account, he wrote that “the ancestors speak to us, the living ones, through the dice” of the diviner.<sup>25</sup> And, it was through the dice that the ancestor’s preferences for male and female priest were expressed. Before dawn on the designated day, makhadzi Govha led a single-file procession of familial elders to the ancestral gravesite, for the purposes of identifying two tshifhe. As makhadzi, Govha, was entrusted with the care and protection of a sacred object called the sila, a blanket woven from wild cotton. Since the “ancient days,” Mashambe explained, the dice through which the ancestors expressed their will “could be thrown for us only on this blanket.”<sup>26</sup> At the time of Dingana’s death, all that remained of the sila was a “small shred of the original blanket.”<sup>27</sup> At the grave site, Makhadzi Govha knelt down and spread the sila before her. The other members of the family knelt on either side to form a semi-circle. With everyone arranged just so, makhadzi Govha received the dice from the diviner. Whilst agitating the thangu between the palms of her hands, she said aloud, “here we are, my brother, choose for yourself from these your children, who will present the annual sacrifices to you?” She continued, “is it Tshipetana, your eldest child, then say so!” At the question, “she threw the ivory dice onto the [sila],” where the diviner inspected the tableau.<sup>28</sup> As to the suitability of Tshipetana for this ritual office, the answer from the dice was negative.

This thick description of the process of appointing ritual specialists offered valuable insights

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<sup>24</sup> Mashambe, 27/4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

into those elements of Venda material culture and embodied ritual practice that were common in nineteenth century Zoutpansberg. Indeed, ethnographic evidence collected during the early twentieth century indicated that the rites through which ritual office holders were selected remained consistent across the confederacy. In circumstances such as those described in Mashambe's testimony—wherein the ancestors rejected a potential candidate—state ethnographers N.J. Van Warmelo and W.M.D. Phophi wrote, “the dice are consulted again to discover who” among the decedent's relations “should be the l<sup>29</sup> Thus, makhadzi Govha repeated the process twelve times, twice for each of the possible children of the late chief. Each cast of the dice produced the same response. Having exhausted the options among the sons of the late Khosi, makhadzi Govha casted the dice once more, this time for Dingana's grandsons. On the thirteenth cast, the dice responded in the affirmative. And so, it was the will of the ancestors that they receive the annual offering from Mashambe. Yet, because he was but a child at the time of his appointment as tshifhe, makhadzi Govha determined that Mashambe's mother would act as regent and make the annual offering on behalf of her son, at least until he reached adulthood.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the selection rituals for male priests, the female candidates cast the ritual dice for themselves. This variation underscored the preminent role of women vis-à-vis men in the maintenance of harmonious relationships between the living and the dead. Mashambe identified his sister Munzhedzi, the third in order of seniority, as the ancestor's preferred priest, who would join him in the annual rites, known in Tshivenda as Thevhula, a term connoting the product of the first fruits of a successful harvest. As with Mashambe's appointment, the selection of Munzhedzi was greeted with ululations of joy. Having satisfied this vital rite, Makhadzi Govha recovered the sila,

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<sup>29</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo and W.M.D. Phophi, *Venda Law* (series), *Part IV: Inheritance*, Ethnological Publications, (Pretorial, 1949), 887.

<sup>30</sup> Mashambe, 27/4.

returned the dice to the diviner and led the procession from the grave site just as they had come. Thus, a crucial element of the relationship between the worlds of the living and that of the ancestors was restored and renewed for another generation.

### Succession Politics

The customs governing dynastic succession in Venda were a paradoxical artifice of propositions and taboos regarded as immutable, at least in theory, but also context-specific and often self-stultifying in their application. Immediately after the fall of Dzata, Venda succession customs combined features of both linear (father to son) and collateral succession (among brothers in order of seniority). For instance, there was no office of political or ritual power awarded exclusively on the basis of heredity.<sup>31</sup> Instead, positions of public trust required an appointment.<sup>32</sup> A male born of a royal house (one in which the bride wealth was paid in royal cattle) stood a much better chance of one day becoming a ruler than someone of common birth.<sup>33</sup> Importantly, an equally immutable custom mandated that the eldest son of a patriarch could not be deprived of his inheritance by fiat.<sup>34</sup> While this facet of customary practice speaks most directly to the inheritance of property, among the ranks of the aristocracy, its provisions also pertained to the chiefship and kingship. Indeed, if a patriarch had reason to disown a son, or to exclude an otherwise eligible heir from a bequest, he was first obliged to articulate his grievances before an assembly of the lineal elders, to include the makhadzi and other senior advisors.<sup>35</sup> This is precisely what King Luvhengo Tshivhasa did in the late 1850s to punish his son Tshivhenga for his role in the assassination by poisoning of his elder brother and heir apparent, Liholimana.<sup>36</sup> With

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<sup>31</sup> The only exception to this rule is that of *Makhadzi*, who comes into her office by virtue of her relationship to the King or Chief.

<sup>32</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, *Venda Law, Part 4: Inheritance*, (Pretoria, 1949), 835.

<sup>33</sup> In Tshivenda, the word *thakha* means bride wealth or dowry and is equivalent in form and function to *lobola* as used among other northern Nguni speaking peoples. Like *lobola*, the Venda practice of *thakha* denotes neither the sale nor the purchase of people.

<sup>34</sup> Van Warmelo, *Inheritance*, 737.

<sup>35</sup> Van Warmelo, *Inheritance*, 739.

<sup>36</sup> As described in chapter three.

respect to Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda, the sources are silent as to whether Khosi Dingana publicly disowned his eldest son Mukhosi. Nor do the sources enumerate the specific grievances Khosi Dingana harbored against Mukhosi that would have disqualified the latter from consideration as a possible successor. What missionary archives and oral traditions do make clear however, was that Dingana, in the last years of his reign, actively groomed his youngest son Mugivhi to eventually assume the office of khosi.

In the first instance, Khosi Dingana installed Mugivhi as headman at Tshituwani. This appointment was important for at least two reasons. Located in the lowlands, Tshituwani had been the seat of power and the capital of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda prior to the disturbances of the 1860s that forced Dingana to seek out more readily defensible territory at Mikondeni, located in the mountains.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the old village at Tshituwani overlooked the ancestral burial site of Dingana's predecessors.<sup>38</sup> In his account chronicling the history of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda, Mashambe writes that "[Khosi] Dingana ordered his favorite son, Mugivhi to go to the old capital village" so that he can better "protect the (ancestral) graves."<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere in Venda, appointments to villages of ancestral significance were a reasonably reliable indicator that a designated prince was the preferred successor. This was true of Luvhengo, the first Tshivhasa, who governed the region of Vhulaudzi immediately prior to his elevation to the kingship in 1834. Likewise, Makwarela ruled Gaba, the seat of power at Ha-Mphaphuli during the reign of his grandfather Maḍadzhe (1840-1847).<sup>40</sup> Beyond the decision to install Mugivhi as headmen over Tshituwani, Khosi Dingana indicated his preference for Mugivhi as

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<sup>37</sup> Mphaya Henry Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado Ramabulana, the Lion of The North, 1864-1895*, (Thohoyandou, 2017), 175.

<sup>38</sup> Mashambe, 27/3. Gwamasenga was buried at Tshituwani, as was his son Tshipetana, the first *Khosi* of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda and father of Dingana. As the father of the dispersed Vhulaudzi dynasty, Gwamasenga's other sons were Masia, Tshimbupfe, Tshivhulani and Tshisahulu., Magdalena Mugivhi, *Gwamsenga na. vhuana vhave*, Ethnographic Essay, 1937, N.J. Van Warmelo Collection, University of Pretoria Special Collection Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Mashambe, 32/13.

<sup>40</sup> Like Mugivhi, both Luvhengo and Makwarela attained the Kingship of Ha-Tshivhasa and Ha-Mphaphuli respectively over elder brothers who had been disqualified from consideration as successor.

a possible successor in other ways.

On his deathbed, Dingana gave Mugivhi the sacred “spears and amulets which he had worn up to then.”<sup>41</sup> According to Mashambe, the transfer of the mantles of the chiefship indicated that Mugivhi had become “the new ruler” of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda. Mashambe goes on to state that the transfer of sacred objects further indicated that Dingana had “disowned his eldest son, Mukhesi.”<sup>42</sup> Strictly speaking, at least in terms of Venda succession customs, neither of Mashambe’s claims were entirely accurate. While a living chief could attempt to clear a path to the throne for his preferred successor, as Khosi Dingana clearly did, the vernacular proverb *vhuhosi a si vhuswa* captures the common sentiment that the chieftaincy could not be doled out like porridge. Nor was the appointment of Mugivhi within the purview of Dingana’s powers, at least not so long as the latter remained among the living. Despite the apparent biases in his testimony, Mashambe’s account included an important detail, one that threw light on the legitimacy of his father’s succession.

Although Govha was married, she gave priority to her duties as the senior makhadzi of Ha-Mutsha. Mashambe wrote that when Dingana “was already old and weak,” his sister Govha attended to the needs of her brother the chief.<sup>43</sup> However conjectural, it seemed likely that the ailing Khosi Dingana communicated to his sister—the only person with the requisite ritual authorities—his wish to be succeeded by his youngest son, Mugivhi. Beyond her customary powers as makhadzi, Govha was also well positioned as a proverbial kingmaker by virtue of her marriage to Maboho Nelwamondo, the independent ruler of the neighboring kingdom of Lwamondo. Maboho’s support ultimately proved crucial to Mugivhi in the conflict to come.

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<sup>41</sup> Mashambe, 32/14.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Mashambe, 32/13.



## Makhadzi Govha and the Partition of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda

Upon the death of Dingana, the third ruler of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda, Mugivhi ascended to the chiefship of his father's country with the explicit endorsement of Makhadzi Govha. Having been passed over for the chiefship, the partisans of Mukhesi turned to the west, to solicit the support of Makhado—lineal head of the Ramabulana dynasty—to revive his failed candidacy. Mphaya Nemudzivhadi wrote that the appeal from Mukhesi and his people aligned “well with Makhado’s expansionist plans.”<sup>44</sup> In response, Makhado dispatched the most lethal of his regiments, “the cruel Masiavhogo” to Ha-Mutsha in support of Mukhesi according to Mashambe’s testimony recorded in the missionary archives.<sup>45</sup> The oral traditions that Nemudzivhadi collected contradict the testimony of Mashambe on some of the details of the four years of intermittent warfare that followed. Yet, the available sources affirmed that Makhadzi Govha impelled her husband Maboho to mobilize his military resources in support of Mugivhi, her brother’s preferred successor.

The first battle in this four-year-long contest occurred along the banks of the River Tswororo. There, Makhado’s Masiavhogo regiment met the combined forces of Mugivhi and Maboho Nelwamondo.<sup>46</sup> Mashambe wrote that the commanders of Makhado’s forces wore tshiala, a cockade cap made of “white goat skins,” the sight of which “aroused horror” among the ranks of Mugivhi’s armies, but not those of Maboho Nelwamondo’s more experienced fighters.<sup>47</sup> At Tswororo, the well-trained troops from Lwamondo fought a sanguinary battle against the Masiavhogo, one that produced no clear victor. The “war between these two brothers” raged through 1881, “when a great star” traversed the night sky and continued “through the famine of 1882.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado*, 117.

<sup>45</sup> Mashambe, 33/13.

<sup>46</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado*, 181.

<sup>47</sup> Mashambe, 32/14.

<sup>48</sup> Magdalena Mugivhi, *Gwamsenga na vluana vhave*, Ethnographic Essay, N.J. Van Warmelo Collection, University of Pretoria Special Collection Archives, 1937. Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhadoi Ramabulana*, 183. This famine is remembered as “Tshipindula” in vernacular traditions.

The three sources agree as to how the civil war at Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda was ultimately resolved. Despite his effort to seat Mugivhi as his successor over a unified country, Khosi Dingana's domain was partitioned into two territories. The River Tswororo formed the new boundary dividing the territory of Mugivhi, who now ruled the lowlands to the south, to include the ancestral burial grounds near Tshituwani. Mukhesi ruled over the highlands north of the river, a territory that encompassed the new capital at Mikondeni. Where the sources disagree however, involved how the opposing forces arrived at this dispensation. Consistent with the oeuvre of his published analysis, Nemudzivhadi placed Makhado at the center of the armistice between the sons of Dingana. He wrote that "Makhado's messengers succeeded in persuading Mugivhi and Mukhesi to lay down their arms" and recognize the river Tswororo as the new boundary between their territories.<sup>49</sup> In the testimony of Magdalena Mugivhi, it was "Tshiwawa,"—Joao Albasini's name for Tshivenda speakers—who forced Mukhesi to come to terms. Mashambe, the Christian convert and the son of Mugivhi, added that it was the Lutheran evangelist, the Rev. Schwellnus, who interceded with Makhado. At the missionary's request, Makhado "agreed not to send his warriors on a renewed attack against Mugivhi."<sup>50</sup> Without trivializing the substantive discrepancies that distinguish these three sets of evidence, there is one fact that merits mention. Whereas both Mashambe and Magdalena Mugivhi recognized that the chieftaincy of their forebearer, Mugivhi, survived by virtue of his connections to Lwamondo, and the intervention of Makhadzi Govha in particular, Nemudzivhadi elides both her standing as a power player in this confrontation and her very existence in Venda history. As the second part of this chapter illustrates, the omission of women as influential actors in Venda warfare and politics was a recurrent theme in the dominant narrative of the Venda past(s).

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<sup>49</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado*, 184.

<sup>50</sup> Mashambe, 34/15.

## PART II: The Women of Ha-Tshivhasa

On the advice of the khoros, King Ligegise, the second Tshivhasa initiated a plan to strengthen his position by reuniting his family, an initiative that required him to make peace with siblings scattered across the confederacy during the *muvhango*, the scramble for succession occasioned by the death of their father, Luvhengo Mukhesi, the first Tshivhasa in either 1864 or 1865. When Luvhengo died, and was succeeded by Ligegise, Masiagwala refused to pay *u luvha* to his younger sibling of another house and announced his intention to rule Maungani as an independent khosi. In response, Ligegise deposed Masiagwala and installed a more pliable headman in his stead. Because Masiagwala limited his insurrection to an assertion of sovereignty over Maungani rather than a claim to the throne, Ligegise's forces allowed Masiagwala to flee into the country of Madzivhandila, the independent khosi and ruler of Tshakhuma.

By the end of the Mabunyu invasion of 1869, Ligegise had come into his own as a ruler and legitimized his reign in the crucible of war. Thus, in response to the guidance of the elders of Ha-Tshivhasa, Thovhele Ligegise dispatched messengers to Tshakhuma bearing an offering of peace and news of Ligegise's wishes that Masiagwala return from exile and settle once again in the country of his birth.<sup>51</sup> The available records tell us that Masiagwala accepted this invitation to return home to Ha-Tshivhasa. King Ligegise rewarded his brother's confidence by reinstalling Masiagwala as headman over Maungani.

Having reconciled with one brother, Ligegise turned his attention to another, Makhavhu, his brother from the house of his mother's sister, who had sought refuge at Tshikota in Ha-Ramabulana. Like Masiagwala, Makhavhu was similarly receptive to his brother's overtures of reconciliation. And, just as the king bestowed his largess upon Masiagwala, so too did Ligegise reward Makhavhu with an

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<sup>51</sup> Wilfred Musetsho Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha dza Hatshivhasa* [195?], (Johannesburg, 1989), 92.

appointment to the headmanship at Tshiheni.<sup>52</sup> Crucially, if bringing his wayward brothers back into the fold at Ha-Tshivhasa involved relatively simple propositions, repatriating his sisters Mutshinyani and Masindi Nyatshiṭahela involved a more delicate operation, one that would first require the dissolution of the marriage alliance with a potentially dangerous adversary.

Upon the death of the first Tshivhasa, his eldest surviving son, Tshivhenga, forged a military alliance with the Buys leader Tshikhovhokhovho to usurp the kingship for himself.<sup>53</sup> In response, Ligegise allied with the Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo. Together, they prevailed upon Tshikhovhokhovho to abandon Tshivenga the pretender with a peace offering consisting of cattle and two of Ligegise's sisters for marriage. While Venda customs provided for the dissolution of a marriage alliance, to do so was an inherently hostile act. Yet, in this instance, Ligegise desired to recall his sisters, without incurring any of the political blowback. Because the delicate diplomacy that this mission required was beyond the capacity of an ordinary messenger, Ligegise turned to the commander of his armies and de facto prime minister Makhuga Ratshiṭanga, a man with whom Tshikhovhokhovho and the Buysvolk were already familiar.<sup>54</sup>

Upon his arrival at Mara, Ratshiṭanga requested and received an audience with Tshikhovhokhovho. During their parlay, Ratshiṭanga saluted his host on behalf of Thovhele Ligegise and regaled the Buys Kaptein with news of the peace that had returned to Ha-Tshivhasa following the expulsion of the feared Mabunyu. Ratshiṭanga also recounted the resolution of the rift between the sons of deceased King Luvhengo, which had previously drawn Tshikhovhokhovho into an alliance with Tshivhenga, a rival claimant to the mantles of Tshivhasa. From here, Ratshiṭanga broach the

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<sup>52</sup> Phophi, *Phunzḡaphunzḡa*, 92.

<sup>53</sup> As noted in Chapter three, Thivhenga was the elder son of Luvhengo by default as the surviving traditions implicate Thivhenga as the architect of the plot to assassinate his elder brother Lihalamanana. Separately, Tshikhovhokhovho is the name by which Tshivenda-speakers knew and referend to Coenraad de Buys, the son and namesake of the notorious frontiersmen.

<sup>54</sup> Phophi, *Phunzḡaphunzḡa*, 93.

object of his visit. Even if Ligegise had succeeded in restoring the prestige of the house of Tshivhasa, there was one task that remained undone. That task, as Ratshiṭanga explained, was the ritual designation of priests. As with Tsianda and Mugivhi following the death of Khosi Dingane in September 1879, so too were the sisters of Ligegise obliged to cast the dice that would determine their suitability for the role of tshifhe. Though the elders of Ha-Tshivhasa almost certainly satisfied this ritual obligation before Ligegise's coronation as king years earlier—as part of their ruse—Ratshiṭanga alleged that the priests had not yet been designated. Thus, he claimed that the appointment of priests from among the royal family was the only remedy for the likely fictitious misfortunes at Ha-Tshivhasa. Since the selection of priests required the consultation of the ancestors, the rituals demanded the presence of the king's sisters, Mutshinyani and Masindi Nyatshiṭahela. Ratshiṭanga gave his word that if Tshikhovhokhovho saw fit to grant this request, that he would personally return both women to Mara just as soon as the ritual observances were complete.<sup>55</sup>

In a response belying the mutual intelligibility of the customs of the Buysvolk and their autochthonous African neighbors, Tshikhovhokhovho granted the request from his brother-in-law, noting that they too had experienced the material manifestations attendant to the ancestors' displeasure. He also noted that the pacification of the ancestors might also assuage the disquiet of one of the sisters in particular. While their stay amongst the Buysvolk had been hard on both sisters, Mutshinyani appears to have suffered the most. Tshikhovhokhovho also attributed the younger sisters' poor health to ancestral forces. They opined that a consultation of the healer's dice might also improve Mutshinyani's disposition when she and Nyatshiṭahela returned to Mara.<sup>56</sup>

The next morning, Ratshiṭanga left Mara with the sisters Mutshinyani and Masindi in tow. The

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<sup>55</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 94.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Buysvolk also supplied Ratshiṭanga with ammunition for his shotgun.<sup>57</sup> This proved to be a tactical mistake. In addition, Tshikhovhokhovho sent three horsemen to escort the party back to Mukumbani. Instead of the more direct route that ran parallel to the mountains, Ratshiṭanga guided the group along a more circuitous path via the flatlands to the southeast, in the direction of Ha-Sinthumule. This too was part of Ratshiṭanga and Ligegise's plan. When the group was nearer to Ha-Sinthumule than to Mara, Ratshiṭanga discreetly revealed to the sisters the true nature of his mission. Their brother the king had no intention of returning them to the Buysvolk. Beyond the earshot of their escorts, Ratshiṭanga also relayed the instructions the sisters were to follow as he executed the second phase of their plan. On his signal, the sisters were to flee in the direction of Ha-Sinthumule, where they would find accommodation and refreshments.

In many respects, Ratshiṭanga was the proverbial power behind the throne at Mukumbani. In a historical perspective, the relationship between Ratshiṭanga and the Tshivhasa dynasty was analogous in both form and function to that of Funyufunyu and the Ramabulana crown. Just as Funyufunyu mobilized a critical mass of political support that helped Makhado overcome his elder brother Davhana, so too had Ratshiṭanga aided his nephew Ligegise to neutralize Tshivhenga's competing claims to the Tshivhasa kingship. And like Funyufunyu, Ratshiṭanga also proved himself an adroit operator in political and military affairs. The latter demonstrated his diplomatic bona fides in the skilled execution of the first phase of King Ligegise's plans to bring his sisters back to Mukumbani. The success of the next phase of their plan now depended on precise timing and Ratshiṭanga's repertoire of polymorphic skill with a shotgun.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> In the text, Ratshiṭanga's weapon is described as "*tshigidi*," a generic term for firearms. Yet, the evidence suggests that Ratshiṭanga traveled to Mara armed with a double barrel shotgun.

<sup>58</sup> William Storey notes that polymorphic skills refer to the kinds of informed judgments required to deploy "technology while reacting to changing circumstances." See William K. Storey, *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa* (Cambridge, 2008), 137.

With his first shot, Ratshiṭanga felled the horsemen leading the party back to Mukumbani. With his second, he killed the dead man's horse. Seeing what had become of their companion, the other two horsemen retreated in the direction of Mara before Ratshiṭanga could reload his weapon. With the deed now done, the general set off in pursuit of the sisters, who had followed his instructions and fled to the south. When they were reunited, they proceeded to Ha-Sinthumule, where the trio were received as welcomed guests. In addition to food and shelter, their hosts at Sinthumule advised Ratshiṭanga as to the safest route back to Mukumbani. They also replenished Ratshiṭanga's supply of ammunition. Yet, no amount of hospitality could restore Mutshinyani's failing health. Indeed, by the time the travelers arrived at Vhulaudzi, Mutshinyani was in grave condition. Ratshiṭanga would have to act quickly if his charge was to have any chance of surviving the last leg of their journey from Mara. The general resolved to leave the sisters at Vhulaudzi in the care of the senior Makhadzi Nyatema Muofhe, while he proceeded to Mukumbani to report the situation to the King.

In response to Ratshiṭanga's news, Ligeise immediately sent messengers to Murangoni, located 7km to the southwest, to retrieve the diviner known as Mudzhadzhi.<sup>59</sup> Later, as Mudzhadzhi the diviner and General Ratshiṭanga hurriedly returned to Vhulaudzi, they witnessed a chameleon crossing the footpath before them, followed immediately by a springhare. To the healer, this tableau was *matudzi*, an undeniable omen and harbinger of death.<sup>60</sup> The pair continued along the road leading to Vhulaudzi only to learn that they were too late; Mutshinyani, sister to King Ligeise, the second Tshivhasa, was already gone.

Funerals among the Venda aristocracy involved both spiritual and political components. Given the circumstances of her death, Ligeise's advisors deemed the young woman's soul could be

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<sup>59</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 97.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

pacified only if she were buried among the clan's ancestors at Vhulaudzi. For the Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo, the occasion of Mutshinyani's interment also served as an opportunity to strengthen his political alliances with Tshivhasa. At the funeral, Ranwedzi counseled Ligegise as to the soundness of his decision to recall his sisters from the Buysvolk, noting that he too had done the same with his daughter Luvhengo, who he had subsequently installed to the headmanship over the region of Tshififi.<sup>61</sup> When Ranwedzi returned to his country he did so with Ligegise's daughter Denga, who was betrothed to Tshikalange, the eldest son of the Mphaphuli King. Before the end of the decade, this marriage would come to complicate the relationship between these two dynastic lineages that controlled Vhuphani, the region of the Zoutpansberg east of the Nzhelele valley.<sup>62</sup>

#### The Discontent of Nyatshiṭahela

The dissolution of her marriage to Tshikhovhokhovho marked an inflection point in Nyatshiṭahela's career as a power player in Venda politics. During the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, King Ligegise Tshivhasa sought to use his sister as a proxy to advance his own interests. Just as often however, Nyatshiṭahela elevated her own profile at her brother's expense. The incompatibility of their respective itineraries lay at the core of the tensions that characterized the relationship between these siblings of royal lineage. For instance, Nyatshiṭahela was well aware that it was her marriage to Tshikhovhokhovho in the late 1860s that rescued Ligegise's nascent reign from utter ruin. It was their sojourn among the Buysvolk, however brief, that claimed the life of Mutshinyani, her sister and companion. By the late 1870s, Ligegise faced another more implacable threat to his power, this time from within the Venda Confederation. As had happened before, the Tshivhasa king turned to his sister, Nyatshiṭahela, to neutralize the challenge.

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<sup>61</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 98.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 99.



The Rambuda lineage that ruled the region of Dzimauli since the late 1820s was an offshoot of the house of Tshivhasa. Raluswielo—the son of Thohoyandou—founded the dynastic lineage that came to be known as Tshivhasa during the reign of his eldest son and successor Luvhengo. Raluswielo's junior brother of the same house was Phophi. With the blessing of his brother the king, Phophi annexed the region of Dzimali, located northwest of Mukumbani, and designated himself the first Rambuda. During his reign, Phophi Rambuda paid u luvha (homage) to his brother, King Raluswielo. When Raluswielo died in 1830, Phophi continued the tradition of u luvha to his nephew, Luvhengo, the first Tshivhasa. When Phophi died in 1851, his eldest son Vele ascended to become the second Rambuda. Like his father, Vele Rambuda continued to pay u luvha to the house of Tshivhasa until the death of King Luvhengo in 1864 or 1865.

We can only speculate as to how Vele Rambuda interpreted the disorganization that characterized the final years of Luvhengo's reign. First, there was the assassination by poisoning of Lihlimana, Luvhengo's designated successor, at the hand of another son, Tshivhenga the pretender. Then there was the designation of Ligegise—the youngest of Luvhengo's eligible heirs—a child who still nursed of his mother as Vele succeeded Phophi to become the second Rambuda. Whereas the traditions from Ha-Tshivhasa identify Makhuga Ratshiṭanga as the one who retrieved Ligegise from seclusion at Vhulaudzi, those from Dzimauli claim that it was Vele Rambuda who orchestrated the installation of the second Tshivhasa.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the same traditions from Dzimauli tell us that the infighting among the sons of Luvhengo catalyzed Vele Rambuda's decision to rule Dzimauli as a sovereign kingdom, independent of Ha-Tshivhasa.<sup>64</sup> Crucially, whereas Vele Rambuda regarded his obligations to the house of Tshivhasa with ambivalence, his sons regarded King Ligegise with naked

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<sup>63</sup> Wilfred Musetsho Phophi, *Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli* (Johannesburg, 1970 [1951]), 13. I regard the traditions of Ha-Tshivhasa as authoritative on this point.

<sup>64</sup> Phophi, *Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli*, 13.

contempt.<sup>65</sup> The traditions of Dzimauli described an incident in the late 1870s in which some among Vele's many sons crossed the Mutale river—the informal boundary between Dzimauli and Ha-Tshivhasa—to raid cattle from the kraal of King Ligegise which grazed in the fields of Mudzidzdidzi and Tshilumbwi.<sup>66</sup> When the news reached Vele Rambuda, he admonished his sons for their impertinence and decreed the cattle be driven back across the Mutale and returned to Ha-Tshivhasa.<sup>67</sup>

With few viable avenues for recourse, once again, Ligegise turned to his sister to shore up the vulnerabilities in the northern flank of his kingdom. In either 1879 or 1880, Nyatshiṭahela married Mashila, from the house of Mukumela, the fifth in order of seniority among Vele sons.<sup>68</sup> Later that same year, Vele died after three decades as the lineal head of the Rambuda dynasty. As elsewhere in Venda, Vele's death triggered a *muvhango* among his heirs. The ironies of this succession dispute are discernible in retrospect. Vele used the skullduggery among King Luvhengo's heirs as a pretext to advance his own political ambitions. And yet, just as Luvhengo's son Tshivhenga usurped the mantles of the Tshivhasa kingship in 1865, so too did Vele's eldest son Bele use the occasion of his father's death to seize the mantles of the Rambuda dynasty in 1880. Crucially, Bele's succession claims lacked the legitimizing endorsement of Masindi, the senior Makhadzi of the Rambuda lineage. In response to his attempt to circumvent the customary practices of dynastic succession, Makhadzi Masindi turned to Mukumbani, the capital of Ha-Tshivhasa, where she sought redress from King Ligegise. Thus, the irony of even greater historical significance—one that would have been discernible to Ligegise—is that Bele's illegitimate succession created precisely the opening the Tshivhasa dynast sought to exploit with the help of his sister, Nyatshiṭahela.

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<sup>65</sup> The names of *Khosi* Vele's sons were, in order of birth: Bele, Siphuma, Tshikosi, Makhomisana, Mashila, Nngwana, Madula, Mukhaiphi, Thukhuthwane, Manyelani, Muditambi, Khakhu, Luvhengo and Vele.

<sup>66</sup> Phophi, *Phusuphusu Dṣa Dzimauli*, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Phophi, *Phunḁhaphunḁha*, 99.

Although Venda succession customs often disadvantaged unpopular and presumptuous princes, regardless of the merits of their claims, those same customs made it exceedingly difficult for a leader to disinherit an eligible heir for capricious reasons. Instead, if a father had cause to disown one of his children, he was first obliged to assemble the elders who would serve as the executors of his estate in order to enumerate his case.<sup>69</sup> The traditions tell us that before Vele Rambuda died, he had indeed communicated a desire to replace Bele with another successor, his second son Tshikhosi.<sup>70</sup> Makhadzi Masindi and the elders of the Rambuda dynasty found a receptive audience for their indictment of Bele among the elders of Ha-Tshivhasa. Even if Ligegise deemed Bele unfit for reasons that had little if anything at all to do with the wishes of the late ruler Vele, the Tshivhasa and Rambuda elders found common cause in their desire to see another eligible heir installed in Bele's stead.

In early 1880, Ligegise mobilized the armies of Ha-Tshivhasa to drive Bele from Dzimauli. Decisively, however unfit Bele may have been, cowardice was not among the character deficiencies that disqualified him from the chieftaincy. While he may have failed to cultivate the political and personal support required to ensure his succession, Bele ably harnessed the defensive advantages that his mountain fastness conferred. Thus, when Tshivhasa's army attempted to storm the natural fortress, Bele and his followers repelled the invaders. Importantly, a victory over the forces of Ha-Tshivhasa likely indicated to the masses of commoners at Dzimauli—who were likely ignorant of the wishes of the late Rambuda—that Bele was indeed the legitimate and rightful successor. Before the end of the year, however, Bele's lack of support among the elders of the Rambuda dynasty and his inability to retain the loyalty of subjects ultimately proved to be his undoing.

Unlike Bele, Ligegise underwent a period of grooming prior to his coronation as Thovhele. During the earlier years of his reign, Ligegise benefited from the guidance of elders knowledgeable in

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<sup>69</sup> Warmelo, *Inheritance*, 739.

<sup>70</sup> Wilfred Musetsho Phophi, *Nganea Dza Mutale*, (Swaziland, 1990), 6.

the ways of the Venda kingship. For instance, it was the khoro of elders at Mukumbani who gave impetus to the campaign to entice the estranged brothers Masiagwala and Makhavu back to Ha-Tshivhasa. We may deduce that the elders' advice was predicated upon both cultural and practical considerations. In the introductory remarks to *Venda Law*, the ethnographer N.J. Van Warmelo alludes to the existential danger of simmering dissension among the ranks of the Venda familial unit. He believed that "the disruption of the blood group . . . was the greatest danger" to material security of ancestrally located communities.<sup>71</sup> The application of laws, according to the ethnographer, aimed to ensure social cohesion more than dispense justice for an individual. Van Warmelo explained that the defection of a disgruntled member of the community equated to "an enemy thirsting for revenge in the opponent's camp . . . a potential guide to the weakest point in the stockade, one who knew habits, dispositions and plans."<sup>72</sup> Thus, whereas elders at Ha-Tshivhasa protected their duly installed and ritually legitimized king against precisely these dangers, Bele—the courageous usurper—had only the benefit of his own council.

Back at Mukumbani, King Ligegise and his advisors contemplated their next move in the aftermath of a failed attempt to unseat Bele, when the answer to their questions presented himself at the gate of the musanda. A man who identified himself as Mamphidzha explained that he was intimately familiar with the region of Dzimauli from where he had come.<sup>73</sup> As Ligegise and his fighters had recently learned, Bele's stronghold was a natural fortress, a cave called Tshavhaḍinda. The sources are silent as to the reasons Mamphidzha may have had to quit Dzimauli to resettle in Ha-Tshivhasa. Nevertheless, Ligegise accepted the stranger's offer to guide his men along the secret path to Tshavhaḍinda. With the new intelligence from Mamphidzha, Tshivhasa's fighters approach the

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<sup>71</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, W.M.D Phophi, *Venda Law, Part I: Marriage*, (Pretoria, 1984), 11.

<sup>72</sup> Warmelo, *Marriage*, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 101. Phophi, *Phusuphusu*, 17.

barricaded stronghold via the mountain pass at Luheni. In a manner that was uncharacteristic of the Tshivhasa way of war, the invaders launched an attack on Bele's stronghold under cover of darkness. Although they succeeded in capturing the musanda, which they razed to the ground, Tshivhasa's people failed to capture Bele.<sup>74</sup> In the confusion of the attack, Bele and small party of followers escaped Tshivhasa's troops. As refugees, Bele and his people threw themselves at the mercy of the Ramabulana King Makhado.

Bele could expect no succor at Dzinani, however, because of the long-simmering enmity between himself and Makhado, the Ramabulana dynast. Sometime in either 1866 or 1867, Makhado visited each of the most important kings and chiefs of the Venda confederacy with the purported object of securing u luvha or a pledge of fealty from each. At Dzimauli, Makhado and his entourage encountered Bele, who was then the heir apparent to his father Vele, the second Rambuda, who rebuffed Makhado's demands. Since then, Makhado was believed to have harbored a desire to repay Bele for this perceived slight.<sup>75</sup> The latter's presence in Ha-Ramabulana presented Makhado with just such an opportunity. Thus, Bele made the rather prudent decision to seek shelter elsewhere. Following the advice of his mother, Nyatshivhana, who suggested that they move to her ancestral home, Bele led his supporters into the land of the rainmakers at Ha-Luvhimbi.<sup>76</sup>

With Bele now out of the picture, Ligeigise and the Rambuda elders agreed on Mashila—husband to Nyatshiṭahela—as a compromise candidate for the throne at Dzimauli. The absence of chronological specificity is a characteristic of the genre of Tshivenda vernacular literature upon which this reconstruction derives. Yet, we know that Mashila assumed the mantles of Rambuda in September 1881 because his coronation was remembered as coterminous with a celestial event, *naledzi ya*

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<sup>74</sup> Phophi, *Phusuphusu*, 17.

<sup>75</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makabdo*, 50.

<sup>76</sup> Phophi, *Phusuphusu*, 18.

mutshila, or (a star with a long tail; i.e., a comet?).<sup>77</sup> This date was also remembered because it signaled the beginning of a long period of drought and famine, the effects of which were experienced most acutely at Dzimauli and Ha-Mphaphuli.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Mashila's ascent was a coup for Ligegise, who in one move managed to shore up the threat to his legitimacy along the Mutale River, while simultaneously restoring the historical seniority of the Tshivhasa dynasty vis-a-vis the Rambuda lineage.<sup>79</sup> As the son of Mukumela, Mashila's succession as Rambuda also enjoyed at least the tacit support of Mphaphuli.<sup>80</sup>

The coronation of Mashila marked the revitalization of a historical relationship between the Rambuda and Tshivhasa dynasties, one in which the former recognized the seniority of the latter. Mashila's reign as Rambuda was short lived. He succumbed to poisoning, which was believed to have resulted from witchcraft, in either 1882 or early 1883. In the traditions, the finger of suspicion pointed to a faction within the Rambuda family who maintained that it was Tshikosi—not Mashila and certainly not Bele—who was the rightful successor to Vele, the second Rambuda.<sup>81</sup> Yet, neither the untimely death of their preferred successor, nor the clandestine activities of the partisans of Tshikosi were sufficient to loosen Ligegise's grip on the reins of power at Dzimauli. However brief, the union between Ligegise's sister Nyatshiṭahela and Vele's son Mashila produced a possible heir.

Venda customs deem only those sons born after their father's inauguration as ruler were eligible candidates for succession.<sup>82</sup> Thus, a case could be made for Nyatshiṭahela to rule Dzimauli on behalf of her infant son. Yet, by definition, regency was transient, and its powers more directly bound to the will of the khoro. Moreover, given the brevity of his reign as Rambuda, Mashila had not the

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<sup>77</sup> Phophi, *Phunzhaphunzha*, 101.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Phophi, *Phusuphusu*, 16,

<sup>80</sup> Phunzhaphunzha, 100.

<sup>81</sup> Phophi, *Nganea Dzɔ Mutale*, 16. Mashila's mother Mukumela suspected the Tshivhasa's of having poisoned her son.

<sup>82</sup> Author, Interview, Davhana Netshivhulana, 26 July 2019.

occasion to cultivate the breadth of support sufficient to sustain a successor, much less a child. Thus, the more favorable option, at least from the perspective of the Tshivhasa lineage, was to forgo an interim trusteeship and install Nyatshiṭahela as Rambuda. Indeed, there was precedent for female rule at Dzimauli. Before Phophi, the first Rambuda, Dzimauli was ruled by Nyafhasi, a female king and daughter of the house of Ravhura. Beyond this, the late Mashila was the son of Mukumela, another daughter from the house of Ravhura. The aristocracy of Ha-Tshivhasa drew upon these genealogical linkages between past and present to advance their preference for Nyatshiṭahela to succeed her late husband Mashila, with the assistance of a headman named Mulondo.<sup>83</sup>

It is unclear if Nyatshiṭahela's political tenure as governor of Dzimauli bore the formal endorsement of Masindi, the senior makhadzi of the Rambuda lineage. This question merits at least a brief digression insofar as the possible answers yield insights into the ways in which limited sources have been interpreted, parsed, and refashioned in secondary literature about the Venda past(s). Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli is the most well-known of W.M.D. Phophi's vernacular histories. Since its publication in 1951, Phusuphusu has been cited as the authoritative primary text on the formation of the Rambuda dynasty, from its founder Phophi, the first Rambuda, to its dissolution after the death of Phophi's son Vele and subsequent reconstitution under Tshikhosi. In the decades since its original publication and subsequent use as a textbook in Tshivenda-language schools during the 1960s and 1970s, Phusuphusu Dza Dzimauli has been cited as a primary text among Tshivenda-speaking scholars who published their research in English. The most prominent of these is Mphaya Henry Nemudzivhadi, who published his Ph.D. dissertation.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 101-2.

<sup>84</sup> Nemudzivhadi submitted a doctoral dissertation titled, *The Attempts by Makhado to Revive the Venda Kingdom 1864-1895*, to the History faculty at Potchefstroom University (now North West University) in 1998. In 2017, he published his doctoral study in a book titled, *King Makhado Ramabulana, the Lion of the North, 1864-1895*. Nemudzivhadi died on 15 July 2018.

Phusuphusu serves as the evidentiary basis for Nemudzivhadi's reconstruction of the sixteen-year proxy war for the Rambuda chieftaincy, supplemented by oral traditions that he collected from among the elders of the Ramabulana family. Nemudzivhadi cited Phophi as the source of his assertion that "Mashila was chosen for leadership" at Dzimaui "because he had married Nyatshiṭahela," the sister of King Ligegise Tshivhasa.<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, in Phusuphusu, Phophi wrote that, after Mashila died in 1881-2, "the elders" selected Mulondo to help Nyatshiṭahela raise Mashila's child, but also to help her "to lead" Dzimaui.<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, in his English-language [book/thesis], which relied on Phophi's vernacular history, Nemudzivhadi carefully elided any mention of either the child that Nyatshiṭahela produced with Mashila, or the brief period after Mashila's death when Nyatshiṭahela ruled Dzimaui with the aid of the headman Mulondo. Whatever motives informed Nemudzivhadi's narrative decisions to omit this detail are less important than the comparatively pedestrian conclusion that he was almost certainly aware that the text he relied on made clear the fact that Nyatshiṭahela briefly ruled Dzimaui, either as a woman Rambuda, or as a proxy for her brother, Thovhele Ligegise Tshivhasa.

Gladys Nethengwe also relied on Phusuphusu Dza Dzimaui in her unpublished doctoral dissertation, which analyzed the changing role of the Venda chiefship as a political office and organizing institution before colonial conquest and after. Unlike Nemudzivhadi, who sidesteps the issue entirely, Nethengwe argues that Nyatshiṭahela succeeded her husband Mulondo and presided over Dzimaui from 1883 until 1885. Moreover, rather than a caretaker, Nethengwe states that Nyatshiṭahela was indeed a ritually and, therefore, legitimately inaugurated Rambuda.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makabdo*, 215.

<sup>86</sup> Wilfred Phophi, *Phusuphusu Dza Dzimaui: A History of Rambuda's Tribe. Northern Transvaal*, (Johannesburg: 1970), 44.

<sup>87</sup> Gladys Nethengwe, *The Study of Chieftainship: A Case of Tshivhenda Lore*. (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Limpopo, 2005), 71.



## Nyatshiṭahela Stakes Her Claim

Before disappearing from the historical record, Nyatshiṭahela found herself back at Mukumbani, apparently exhausted, having narrowly escaped the forces of Tshikhosi, the son of Vele Rambuda. For the second time, her life had been unceremoniously uprooted. Indeed, Ligegise Tshivhasa used his sister, Princess Nyatshiṭahela, as an instrument to advance his own political itineraries. In the late 1860s, when his reign as Tshivhasa was in its infancy, Ligegise offered his sister as a wife to Tshikhovokhovho, the ally of their brother Tshivhenga, a rival for the throne. This arrangement required that she live among strangers at Mara. To be sure, at least some aspects of this deal would not have been entirely unfamiliar to a Muvenda woman of royal birth. Like his brother and his father Coenraad de Buys, Tshikhovhokhovho was a polygamist. Moreover, other aspects of the material culture and customs of the Buysvolk bore more resemblance to their African neighbors the Bagananwa than to their European forebears according to the historian T. J. Makhura.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the circumstances of this particular union left Nyatshiṭahela without the customary protections against abuse and undue harassment at the hands of her husband and his kin.

According to Venda custom, marriage involved the joining together of not just a husband and wife, but also of their respective families.<sup>89</sup> Cultural norms obliged the family of the bridegroom to pay thakha or bride wealth—denominated either in iron hoes or livestock—to the family of the betrothed.<sup>90</sup> Thakha served at least two functions. The primary role of the customary exchange of property was to assure the rights of the husband and his family to any children that their union might

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<sup>88</sup> Writing about their material culture and customs, Makhura asserts that the Buysvolks, Buys people were generally ‘more black than white’, not only in terms of the colour of their skin, but also in their way of living. See Tlou John Makhura, “Mercenaries and Missionaries in the Boer Subjugation of the Bagananwa in the Northern Transvaal, 1894-1895,” *South African Historical Journal* 36, 1 (2009), 194.

<sup>89</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, W.M.D. Phophi, *Venda Law Part 3: Divorce*, (Pretoria, 1948), 437.

<sup>90</sup> Abigail J. Moffett, Tim Maggs, et al, “Breaking Ground: Hoes in Precolonial South Africa—Typology, Medium of Exchange and Symbolic Value,” *African Archaeological Review* 34, (2017), 11-12.

produce.<sup>91</sup> Importantly, it also served as collateral that would have to be repaid in the event of a formal divorce. Neglect or pattern of excessive or unwarranted physical abuse were among the few circumstances in which both families would accept a dissolution of the marriage arrangement. In this case however, the rituals governing Venda marriage were inverted, as it was the Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo who gave cattle to Tshikhovhokhovho. As a consequence, Tshikhovhokhovho owed little if anything to Ligegise and less still to his sisters. There is no evidence that Nyatshiṭahela suffered maltreatment at the hands of the Buysvolk. Nevertheless, upon her return to Mukumbani following the violent dissolution of the marriage alliance, we might infer from Nyatshiṭahela's disposition that the princess resented the circumstances of her betrothal. While it is also conjecture, if Tshikhovhokhovho's attitude and behaviors towards his African wives were molded on those of his father, Coenraad du Buys, the progenitor of the Buys community, Nyatshiṭahela likely saw her role as beneath her station.<sup>92</sup>

The loss of her sister Mutshinuyani may have also cast a pall on Nyatshiṭahela. The sisters had only each other as companions during their sojourn among the Buysvolk. When Makhuga Ratshiṭanga arrived at Mara to escort them back to Ha-Tshivhasa on the orders of the king, he found that Mutshinyani was already gravely ill. The arduous journey back to Ha-Tshivhasa only served to exacerbate her condition. Ultimately, while there is no evidence implicating Tshikhovhokhovho or his followers, it merits mention that both sisters were in apparently good health when they arrived at Mara years earlier.

These circumstances add context to the resentments that Nyatshiṭahela harbored for her brother, and which found expression upon her return to Mukumbani following a brief tenure as

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<sup>91</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Law Part 3*, 437.

<sup>92</sup> Agatha E. Schoeman, *Coenraad de Buys: The First Transvaaler*, (Unpublished M.A. thesis: University of Pretoria, 1938), 55.

Rambuda and ruler of Dzimauli. At the royal village, Nyatshiṭahela expropriated the property of her sisters in law. By the second half of the 1880s, she no longer bothered to hide her contempt for her brother, as she dispensed with the customary deference to which Thovhele was entitled. On at least one occasion described in vernacular sources, Nyatshiṭahela openly mocked Ligegise with words illustrative of the hardships to which she was subject during her first marriage: “had I not gone to work for you among the Buys people, you would not be king.”<sup>93</sup> Beyond these slights, Nyatshiṭahela destroyed the pots of home brewed beer, much relished among the elder men of the khoros, that were routinely delivered to the gates of Mukumbani as tribute to the king. It seems this last act of contempt proved too great an affront for Ligegise’s advisors to ignore. In response, they arrived at the conclusion that the confines of the royal village at Mukumbani were large enough to accommodate only one king at a time.

Nyatshiṭahela’s well-justified indignation sent an unmistakable signal that the time had long since past when she would be shifted about from place to place. In brief, she had rendered her service both to king and country and was therefore entitled to her just deserts. However, in laying claim to that which she felt she had earned, Nyatshiṭahela created a conundrum to which her brother and his advisers were obliged to come to terms. In an attempt to assuage the princess’s disquiet, or perhaps to marginalize her, the elders of Ha-Tshivhasa summoned Nyatshiṭahela to an assembly designed to arrive at a more politically sustainable outlet for her ambitions. The khoros and likely the king himself desired that his sister relocate elsewhere. Prudently, they expressed their wishes to the princess in the form of a choice about where Nyatshiṭahela desired to establish a royal home—one that was worthy of her accomplishments—for the next phase of her career as emissary and daughter of the house of

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<sup>93</sup> In the text, Nyatshiṭahela is said to have described her sojourn among the Buysvolk as “-shumela” a verb denoting labor or work, rather than marriage. See Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 104.

Tshivhasa. In response, Nyatshiṭahela identified Gondeni. Located some 7km to the southeast of the capital, Gondeni was a comfortable distance removed from the seat of power for all concerned. Still, the khoro recognized the solution to one rather immediate problem had the potential to create yet another. Before the elders operationalized their plan to relocate Nyatshiṭahela, they forewarned the princess that she would be accommodated at her new home as a guest, as Gondeni already had a headman, her uncle, the renowned General Makhuga Ratshiṭanga.

Tshivhasa ordered his people to build a suitable home for his sister at Gondeni. The labor party completed their work shortly thereafter. No sooner than she established herself in her new residence, Nyatshiṭahela resumed her practice of confiscating the property of her hosts, the followers of Makhuga Ratshiṭanga. In response to their remonstrations, Nyatshiṭahela is said to have resorted to brute force, regardless of social standing, against anyone who refused her demands. As a woman who had grown weary of carrying her brother the king, Nyatshiṭahela took issue with Ligegise's self-presentation as a benevolent ruler, whilst shunting onto his sister the burden of the peace enjoyed by the people of Ha-Tshivhasa. However valid her grievances, the cruel irony was that at Gondeni, Nyatshiṭahela found herself a guest in the village of perhaps the only other person in Ha-Tshivhasa who could make precisely the same claim. Notably, unlike Nyatshiṭahela—who pilfered that which she believed to have been her birthright—Ratshiṭanga had accumulated sizable herds of cattle as booty during his long and distinguished military career that proved the point.

We may assume that livestock were among the possessions that Nyatshiṭahela confiscated from her neighbors at Mukumbani and later at Gondeni. If so, then the pejorative connotations in which her activities are characterized in vernacular literature cut a sharp contrast with the hagiographic tenor in which the same source described how her uncle, Ratshiṭanga, came to possess so large a herd of cattle. This disparity likely reflected the androcentric bias either of the author, W.M.D. Phophi, or

those of the oral informants whose testimonies informed his narrative. There is still another possible explanation that can account for this apparent double standard, one that is grounded in customary practice. A Native Affairs Department ethnography devoted to Venda customary laws specifically lists raiding among the means through which men—who controlled their own villages—could legitimately acquire livestock.<sup>94</sup> According to the same ethnography, women of all ages and social ranks may own livestock. Moreover, “there is no essential difference between a women’s ownership of livestock and that of men,” aside from the essential condition that women “are not free agents to the same extent as men.”<sup>95</sup> Be that as it may, local customs imposed limits on how women might acquire livestock.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, it was another paradox of customary practice that women could and often did participate in military campaigns that produced livestock as booty, and yet customs denied women’s access to the spoils of war.

Returning to Gondeni, not even Ratshiṭanga, the adroit commander of the forces of Ha-Tshivhasa, had standing sufficient to deter his niece from her chosen course. Yet, as a man of considerable means, Ratshiṭanga could express his displeasure in other ways. In nineteenth-century Venda, aristocrats and commoners alike could exercise their prerogative to leave one country and establish themselves in the domain of another potentate.<sup>97</sup> As such, he proceeded to Mukumbani with the intention of tendering his resignation. In a parlay with Ligegeise, the general announced his intention to enjoy a peaceful semi-retirement elsewhere. “I have brought peace to the country,” he is reported to have declared.<sup>98</sup> Ratshiṭanga continued, “as there are no other troubles in the land to which

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<sup>94</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, W.M.D. Phophi, *Venda Law, Part 5: Property*, (Pretoria, 1967), 1141.

<sup>95</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Law, Part 5*, 1217.

<sup>96</sup> To be sure, those are: as gifts, as payment for services to include the practice of medicine, inheritance, or the marriage of a daughter.

<sup>97</sup> The ability of individuals and groups to migrate from the domain of one leader into that of another was a common feature of political life in precolonial southern Africa. See, Paul S. Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa* (Cambridge, 2010), 59.

<sup>98</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 105.

I might attend,” he served notice of his intentions to seek out grazing land for cattle.”<sup>99</sup> In response, Ligegise appealed to Ratshiṭanga to consider how the Tshivhasa kingship might survive in his absence. Candidly, Ratshiṭanga cited his weariness with Nyatshiṭahela and her insufferable impertinence as the impetus for his departure. The general continued, “because she is also the daughter of your father” the late Thovhele Luvhengo, “I have no desire to bring the two of you into conflict.”<sup>100</sup> In an attempt to divert his uncle from such a course, Ligegise offered Ratshiṭanga the option to settle just beyond the Ngulubi River. As an added inducement, Tshivhasa immediately mobilized a work party to begin construction of a suitable home and cattle enclosure. With Ratshiṭanga’s consent, the construction of the promised homestead was complete in short order. With everything in place, Ratshiṭanga’s followers and his cattle were relocated to Ngulumbi. Crucially, the last reference to Nyatshiṭahela during this phase of her career is the description of her utter surprise when she found herself surrounded by empty homes at Gondeni.<sup>101</sup>

#### Ligegise Drives Makhadzi Nyatema from Vhaluadzi

No sooner than he had defused the dispute between Nyatshiṭahela and Makhuga Ratshiṭanga, King Ligegise found himself embroiled in yet another crisis, this one involving the senior makhadzi of the Tshivhasa lineage, Muofhe Nyatema. Importantly, unlike the quarrel between his aggrieved sister and their uncle, the rupture between the king and his senior makhadzi created precisely the breach that the Ramabulana King Makhado was prepared to exploit. Unlike Nyatshiṭahela, who may have been motivated by a desire to punish her brother the king, Ligegise instigated this confrontation with Makhadzi Nyatema, the woman who protected Ligegise from assassination during his youth and groomed the heir apparent for his eventual succession. Indeed, W.M.D. Phophi cited this proverb as

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

prologue to this conflict: “protect a lion when it is young, and it will eventually grow to eat its protector.”<sup>102</sup>

The origins of this dispute merit brief elaboration. Muofhe Nyatema was still a child when then King Luvhengo Tshivhasa decreed that she should move to Vhulaudzi, where she would govern the region with the assistance of the headman Mulondo. To fortify her position, the king also entrusted into her care a sizable herd of cattle. Nearly two decades after the death of the first Tshivhasa, his son and successor Ligegise dispatched messengers to Vhulaudzi bearing words that could only be interpreted as an ultimatum. In an audience with Makhadzi Nyatema, the king’s men articulated Ligegise’s demand that she surrender cattle given to her by Luvhengo Tshivhasa all those years ago. The response from Makhadzi Nyatema was predictable, especially given her well-earned reputation as *muhali* (a warrior). Nyatema’s reply was preserved in the traditions of Ha-Tshivhasa in which she instructed the king’s messengers to remind their patron that he was “the child that she had raised” for the throne that he now occupied. In what had become a recurrent theme in Ligegise’s disputes with powerful women, Makhadzi Nyatema ensured that the king’s messengers also reminded him that, “where it not for me, [your brother] Tshivhenga would have made you his fool.”<sup>103</sup> Thus, with their respective positions now firmly established, all that remained was to settle the matter on the field.<sup>104</sup>

The first move belonged to Ligegise, who dispatched *mamba khulu* (the great army), the most powerful of his regiments, also known as the “Blind Commando.”<sup>105</sup> En route to Nyatema’s stronghold in the mountains of Vhulaudzi, the army attacked Tshivhiliḽulu and Depeni. From there, Tshivhasa’s army continued to Ngome, where they captured not only Nyatema’s herds, but also those

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>104</sup> In an essay titled, “Exodus from Nzhelele”, the Muvenda writer O. Radzilani proffers a different interpretation of the cause of the confrontation between Makhadzi Muofhe Nyatema and King Ligegise Tshivhasa. Radzilani contends that Ligegise propositioned Nyatema for the purposes of marriage, which she roundly rejected. O. Radzilani, “The Exodus from Nzhelele,” (Unpublished) N.J. Van Warmelo Collection, University of Pretoria Special Collections Library.

<sup>105</sup> War Sketches, 1886, Report 21&22, 1887, 286/489, BMB2.

of her followers.<sup>106</sup> Having accomplished its goal, a detachment was sent back to Mukumbani with cattle in tow, while the remainder marched on Vuvha, to deal with Ramulongo, the headmen who had assisted Nyatema govern Vhulaudzi since she was a child. While the “Blind Commando” overpowered Ramulongo’s fighters, they failed to capture Ramulongo himself, who made his escape to the southwest, to seek the assistance of King Maboho NeLwamondo. Not even these reinforcements were sufficient to effect a change in Ligege’s belligerent disposition. Ramulongo was once again set to flight, this time to the west.

At Mara, Ramulongo found that Tshkhovhokhovho needed little convincing to mobilize his calvary against Ligege to seek vengeance for his treachery. Still, Ligege learned from his mistakes since their last confrontation and modified his defensive fortification to neutralize an attack from mounted riflemen. Tshkhovhokhovho’s commando arrived at Mukumbani to find the armies of Ha-Tshivhasa well prepared to counter their advance. Unlike their last encounter in the field, Tshkhovhokhovho’s calvary were driven from Ha-Tshivhasa, with fewer numbers than when they arrived.

Desperate and on the run, Ramulongo sought refuge among the Mukwevho people of Luvhola. This would prove to be a mistake. In the night, messengers made their way to Ha-Ramabulana to report on the developments at Luvhola. When the news reached King Makhado, he dispatched his assassins. The killing of her partner and confidant Ramulongo signaled the liquidation of Nyatema’s tenure as the senior makhadzi of the Tshivhasa dynasty. Newly impoverished and militarily isolated, Nyatema inexplicably threw herself at the mercy of Maphaha, the headmen of Phahwe, another ally of the Ramabulanas who lured Ramulongo to his death.<sup>107</sup> In an equally intriguing

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<sup>106</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 108.

<sup>107</sup> O. Radzilani, “The Exodus from Nzhelele,” (Unpublished) N.J. Van Warmelo Collection, University of Pretoria Special Collections Library.



turn, the defection of Nyatema presented an opportunity for the Ramabulanas, one that Makhado quickly seized. He sent instructions to Khosi Maphaha that Nyatema and whatever remained of her following should be accommodated at Phahwe.<sup>108</sup>

It is unclear what broader strategic objectives Tshivhasa sought to advance with his invasion of Vhulaudzi, aside from the confiscation of cattle. Nevertheless, by driving away Makhadzi Nyatema and Mulondo, the long-established rulers of the region, Tshivhasa also denuded Vhulaudzi of its most senior political and military authorities. Moreover, that a woman of Nyatema's stature had, in essence, signaled a willingness to make herself a subject of Ha-Ramabulana sent a clear message, one that resonated with Makhado, who sought to expand both his territorial and political domain.<sup>109</sup> Unlike Tshivhasa, who ordered a predatory incursion against Nyatema that advanced no clear strategic ends, Ramabulana dispatched his own forces to Vhulaudzi in 1883 to accomplish two rather specific objectives.<sup>110</sup>

Whereas Vhulaudzi is situated on the eastern border of Makhado's country, annexing the region thus denied Tshivhasa a strategic avenue of approach were Ligegise inclined to launch a full-scale invasion into Ha-Ramabulana. Even more important was the symbolic value of Vhulaudzi as the ancestral home of the Tshivhasa dynasty. As the burial ground of its progenitors, Makhado's control of Vhulaudzi had the potential to cripple the house of Tshivhasa by denying them access to sacred sites where the annual Thavhula, or first fruits ceremony were annually performed.

Meanwhile, at Makhado's behest, Khosi Maphaha extended the full measure of his hospitality to Nyatema Muofhe—now the former makhadzi of Ha-Tshivhasa—as she and her people established

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<sup>108</sup> According to O. Radzilani, Nyatema entered into a brief relationship with Davhana, the brother of Makhado Ramabulana. See, O. Radzilani, "The Exodus from Nzhelele," (Unpublished) N.J. Van Warmelo Collection, University of Pretoria Special Collections Library.

<sup>109</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado*, 191.

<sup>110</sup> Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado*, 186. Simon M. Dzivhani, "The Chiefs of Venda" in N.J. Van Warmelo, *Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, (Pretoria, 1940), 40.

themselves in Phahwe. Ultimately, Maphaha's hospitality proved insufficient to protect his honored guests from the wrath of her enemies. Just prior to their first harvest season as refugees, Nyatema Muofhe received a guest, a man identified only as "Khwali" in the sources.<sup>111</sup> The visitor claimed to bear a message as pretext for an audience with Nyatema. With no reason to doubt his intentions, Nyatema accepted the ruse and invited the stranger to rest himself under the shade of a nearby tree and wait as she finished tending to her crops. Having completed her work in the fields, Nyatema saluted her guest as per custom, and invited Khwali to state his business. When the stranger finished his remarks, Nyatema asked Khwali to pass her phaphana, a container used for serving a portion of beer, so that they might conclude their business with libation.<sup>112</sup>

As host, Nyatema imbibed three deep draughts before passing the calabash to her visitor. What she did not yet know was that Khwali laced the container of beer with a lethal dose of mulimo, a poisonous concoction, while he waited for Nyatema to finish tending her garden.<sup>113</sup> And so, when his turn came to drink, the assassin refused, and departed the village before anyone could admonish his deviation from protocol. In retrospect, his haste appears warranted, as the poison began to take effect no sooner than Khwali had departed the village. The sources tell us that Nyatema Muofhe suffered a particularly agonizing death a few hours later.

Makhado was the first to receive the news of Nyatema's death under suspicious circumstances, as she was his guest in Ha-Ramabulana. He then dispatched messengers to Ha-Tshivhasa to notify Ligegise.<sup>114</sup> Crucially, although there is no evidence implicating Ligegise Tshivhasa in the death of Nyatema Muofhe, what the sources do reveal by way of insinuation is no less sinister. When Makhado's messengers arrived at Mukumbani and served notice to the king, the language in the

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<sup>111</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 111.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 113.

sources implied that Ligegise only pretended to mourn the death of Muofhe Nyatema, the woman who orchestrated his coronation.<sup>115</sup>

Chapter three recounts how Nyatema was rechristened Muofhe as an infant to mollify the ancestral spirit of her namesake, the first makhadzi of the Tshivhasa dynasty. As an adult during the late 1850s and early 1860s, she protected an adolescent Ligegise from assassination at the hands of his brothers. As King, Ligegise repaid Makhadzi Nyatema with his spears. Ultimately, Nyatema spent her last days as a refugee in a foreign land. Yet, in spite of the inauspicious end to a decades-long career, Muofhe Nyatema transcended the legacy of her forebearer. Unlike the first Nyatema, who died without an heir, Muofhe Nyatema bore a son named Radziilani, who was but a child at the time of her demise in the early 1880s. Although Nyatema's people were scattered in the aftermath of her assassination, King Ligegise saw to it that Radziilani was raised at Mukumbani, the capital of Ha-Tshivhasa. When Radziilani attained adulthood, Tshivhasa installed him as chief at Vhulaudzi, the country over which his mother had once presided.

## Conclusion

This chapter advanced three main arguments. First, as the succession disputes at Ha-Mutsha and Dzimauli both illustrate, Venda rulers waged war as an instrument of statecraft. Second, Venda women—particularly those of royal lineage—shaped the political strategies that dynastic rulers prosecuted through the deployment of military resources. Following the death of the independent Khosi Dingana in September 1878, it was Govha who leveraged her position as makhadzi to execute her late brother's wish that Mugivhi—the youngest of his sons—should take up the mantles of the chiefship. And when the powerful King Makhado insinuated himself into the succession process at Tsianda and Ha-Mutsha, it was Govha—acting in her capacity as wife to another powerful

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

independent ruler—who mobilized the military resources to counter Makhado’s intervention.

Part two of this chapter illustrated the third argument: the ritual and more indirect authorities entrusted to Venda women were sufficient to constrain the prerogatives of even the most powerful Venda dynasts. The death in 1881 of Vele Rambuda created an opportunity for King Ligegise Tshivhasa to draw the kingdom of Dzimauli back within his sphere of influence and restore the historical relationship between the Tshivhasa dynasty and Rambuda chiefdom. Despite his initial success in 1881 and 1882, by 1883, Ligegise had alienated two of the most important women in Ha-Tshivhasa. Ultimately, Ligegise’s attempts to strengthen the northern flank of his country collapsed under the weight of adversarial relationships between himself and Nyatshiṭahela, his sister, and Muofhe Nyatema, the senior makhadzi of Ha-Tshivhasa.

CHAPTER FIVE: The Prophecy of the Red Ants Fulfilled: From War in Ha-Mphaphuli to  
Disarmament, 1880s-1904

In Venda, a dying man's words are believed to carry the weight of prophecy. Vhavenda of an older generation believe the destruction of the nineteenth-century confederacy was foretold more than a half-century beforehand when whites first brought firearms to the Zoutpansberg. The story of this prophecy has its origins in yet another succession dispute, this one involving the sons of Munzhedzi, who was among the first potentates to establish a Singo dynasty in western Zoutpansberg following the collapse of Dzata. Munzhedzi favored his second born son Ramavhoya. And when Munzhedzi died, Ramavhoya ascended to the kingship. In a manner consistent with a pattern of confederal politics described in previous chapters, Ravele built an alliance with outsiders to help him to contest his brother's succession. First, Ravele found common cause with a band of Sotho elephant hunters who sought revenge against Ramavhoya for having treacherously killed their leader.<sup>1</sup> The hunters also told Ravele about a white man staying near Mmamabolo who might be willing to join them. At their suggestion, Ravele summoned this white man, Boer Voortrekker leader Louis Trichardt, who is remembered in Venda traditions as Luvhisi. When Luvhisi arrived in Zoutpansberg in a wagon in December 1836, he came bearing his gun.

Luvhisi agreed to help Ravele oust his brother. In exchange, Trichardt would receive a tract of land upon which his followers might settle.<sup>2</sup> According to the plan, Ravele would send messengers to draw Ramavhoya out under the pretext of a parlay with a white man who had traveled quite some distance to meet him. Because of the taboo against spilling royal blood, Ravele insisted that Luvhisi fire his gun only to frighten Ramavhoya, rather than killing him outright. This first phase of their

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<sup>1</sup> Tshamaano Ramabulana, "History" in N.J. Van Warmelo, ed., *Contributions Towards Venda History, Religion, and Tribal Ritual* (Pretoria, 1932), 17-8.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Boeyens, "Louis Tregardt and the Succession Battle Between Ramabulana and Ramavhoya," *South African Historical Journal* 23 (1990), 3.

strategy played out just as they had choreographed it. Ramavhoya and his entourage were unarmed when they arrived at the designated location. Luvhisi emerged from his wagon with his gun and addressed Ramavhoya and his followers, declaring an end “to the deeds of blood” so that there may “be peace in the land.”<sup>3</sup> At that, Trichardt fired over Ramavhoya’s head, setting the king and his men to flight. When the Sotho hunters retrieved Ramavhoya from a nearby tree where he had attempted to conceal himself, they insisted that the two sons of Munzhedzi should fight each other to determine who would be king. When Ravele remonstrated, the hunters presented him with an ultimatum. Citing vengeance for their slain chief as the cost of their cooperation with his scheme, the hunters told Ravele that he could either fight his brother or be killed by them. Having considered his options, Ravele wrapped a ligature around his brother’s throat. As Ramavhoya was being throttled by Ravele, he turned over onto his stomach and dug his fingers into the earth.<sup>4</sup> With his last words, Ramavhoya cursed his brother thus, “you will not retain the kingship, for the red ants will appear and they will consume you.”<sup>5</sup> With the deed now done, Ravele became king. He also established a dynastic lineage in western Zoutpansberg under a new name: Ramabulana.

Returning to the last words of Ramavhoya, Venda lore tells us that whites were the “red ants” to which he had alluded. Subsequently, when the “red ants” of the British imperial army arrived in Venda after the South African War, they did so while also proclaiming an end to the wars of the past, referring specifically to those among Blacks. No longer would Venda princes settle their differences on the battlefield. Instead, as colonial subjects, Vhavenda would supposedly enjoy the protection of the British crown and the benefits of Pax Britannica. Their new status also meant that Vhavenda

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<sup>3</sup> Ramabulana, “History,” 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothea Moller-Malan, *The Chair of the Ramabulanas* (Johannesburg, 1953), 78; 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* (Pretoria, 1940), 56.

would no longer need the firearms that had played so prominent a role in their politics and warfare during the era of confederal independence. This chapter brings together two discrete narrative arcs in the Venda Confederacy. The first centers on a military conjuncture that began as a dispute among the princes of the Singo house of Mphaphuli, and which eventually transformed into a war the drew in Singo and non-Singo rulers from across the confederacy. The second story returns to Zoutpansberg in 1902, in the aftermath of the South African War, as the British crown began to assert its control over the last independent Black South African polity. Drawing on missionary archives, vernacular narratives, and oral traditions, part one of this chapter reconstructs the Mphaphuli Wars (1880-1897), the final time Venda rulers used war to pursue purely political objectives. Part two centers on the British government's plan to force Vhavenda of all ranks to acknowledge their subjugation by surrendering their prized firearms. The disarmament of Zoutpansberg produced a precise account of the numbers and kinds of guns that Vhavenda had accumulated during the past century. Crucially, the record of this disarmament also reveals the methods that the colonial government used to dismantle the assemblage of knowledge resources, technologies, and repertoires of embodied rituals that this study calls the Venda Armory.

#### PART I: The Mphaphuli Wars (1880 – 1897)

A series of conflicts in Ha-Mphaphuli in the 1880s and 1890s presaged the end of the era of political independence in Venda. At the center of the story are three sons of the Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo: Tshikalange, Masikhwa, and Makwarela.<sup>6</sup> Though each of these men were princes of royal blood, Masikhwa was ineligible for the kingship, and was therefore appointed as Khosi and ruler over the remote chiefdom of Tshivhilwi. While Masikhwa built a network of allies that extended beyond the borders of the Mphaphuli kingdom, his half-brothers Tshikalange and Makwarela jostled each

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<sup>6</sup> Masikhwa is known variously as Bababa Masikhwa and Lukhaimana Masikhwa. For clarity, I will refer to him here as Masikhwa.

other for the right to one day succeed their father and attain the mantles of Mphaphuli. It was only the death in 1896 of the eldest Prince, Tshikalange, that brought an end to the first phase of the Mphaphuli Wars. With his path to the throne now all but assured, Makwarela embarked on a campaign to reclaim those lands lost during the war with Tshikalange. In 1897, the heir apparent ordered the assassination of the independent potentate and renown rainmaker Itani Luvhimbi, an in-law to Masikhwa. The death of his neighbor and political ally brought Masikhwa into direct confrontation with Makwarela over Luvhimbi's chiefdom, but also for political supremacy in eastern Zoutpansberg.

The battles amongst the sons of Ranwedzi-Ngolo had implications that spread beyond the borders of their country. In this respect, the dynamics of the Mphaphuli Wars resembled those of the succession disputes chronicled elsewhere in this dissertation. Chapter three recounted the succession scramble at Ha-Tshivhasa following the death of Thovhele Luvhengo in the early 1860s. Not only did the *muvhango* involving his sons Tshivhenga and Ligege undermine the strength of the Tshivhasa dynasty, but it also invited the intervention of neighboring African states that ultimately threatened to bring down the entire confederacy. Chapter four explored the succession struggle triggered by the death in 1881 of Khosi Dingana, the ruler of the chiefdom of Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda. While the rival claimants, Mugivhi and Mukhosi, both enjoyed the support of other Venda potentates, it was the intervention of the late chief's sister, Makhadzi Govha that was decisive in bringing that conflict to its final resolution. While the conflict between the brothers Makwarela and Tshikalange shared many of the characteristics of these other wars, such as the external intervention from neighboring confederal powers, the war at Ha-Mphaphuli differed from these contested successions in some historically significant respects. In the first instance, because the war began some three decades before the death of Thovhele Ranwedzi-Ngolo in 1901, the quarrel among the Mphaphuli brothers was neither a dispute over succession—in the strictest sense of the word—nor was it a *muvhango*. Indeed, unlike Mphaphuli's counterparts Khosi Dingana and King Luvhengo Tshivhasa, it was Ranwedzi-Ngolo



himself who instigated the war amongst his sons. Moreover, unlike his contemporaries, Mphaphuli took the field of battle in support of his preferred successor.

Only two of Ranwedzi-Ngolo's sons were eligible candidates to eventually succeed him as Mphaphuli. Tshikalange was the first-born son of the king, a fact that generally tended to strengthen a potential successor's claim. Nevertheless, his mother, Nyatshikalanga, belonged to the Kwinda, an Ngoni mutupo. These and other biographical facts discussed later in this section do necessarily raise questions about whether Tshikalange could have ever been regarded as a successor in the first instance. Although he was the youngest of the king's sons, Makwarela's mother Matsheketsheke was a Singo.<sup>7</sup> Beyond this, her bride wealth had been paid with cattle from the royal kraal, all of which strengthened Makwarela's succession claim relative to those of his elder brothers. Makwarela was a fully initiated adult of some twenty years in the mid-1860s when Ranwedzi-Ngolo installed his youngest son as khosi over the region of Gaba, located in the northeast part of Ha-Mphaphuli. Meanwhile, Tshikalange governed the area known as Tshififi, located in the southeast.

In the various accounts of the war's origins, Ranwedzi-Ngolo was the principal instigator of the hostilities between his eldest and youngest sons. In the family history that Makwarela provided to a Native Affairs Land Commissioner in 1907, Ranwedzi "promised both his sons that they would be his successor, and they thus fought against each other, even during his lifetime."<sup>8</sup> According to S.M. Dzivhani, the king set his sons against one another in a series of private meetings about the disposition of the kingship. The king's provocations came to a head when he summoned both princes to his musanda at Mbilwi. Why Makwarela was first to arrive at the royal residence the sources did not say. Nevertheless, Ranwedzi instructed his youngest son to conceal himself inside a grain basket that had been positioned near to where Tshikalange would soon sit. Upon the arrival of his eldest son,

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<sup>7</sup> The evangelist Klaas Keon estimates that Makwarela was born either in 1840 or 1848.

<sup>8</sup> W. Windham, to Native Commissioner/Johannesburg, 9 April 1907, SNA 1260/07/11.

Ranwedzi recounted the words of Makwarela, who had spoken ill of Tshikalange's mother, Nyatshikalanga, but also of her Kwindi ancestry.<sup>9</sup> When Tshikalange remonstrated, declaring that he alone was the only suitable successor, Ranwedzi signaled to Makwarela to reveal himself and confront his brother. Mphaphuli's intentions were rather more difficult to discern in the account of the wars that BMS evangelist Klaas Koen submitted as part of his 1880 annual report.

In another account of the war's origins, the missionaries tell us that the conflict began with a misunderstanding between Tshikalange and his father, one from which their relationship would never recover. In his report, Rev. Koen writes that Mphaphuli made a tour of Gaba only to fall ill following his return to Mbilwi. The king was so stricken, in fact, that he was not seen in public for nearly half a year. When word reached Tshififi, Tshikalange interpreted the news of Ranwedzi's absence as evidence that the king was already long dead. His assumption was not completely unfounded, as it was established custom among royal families that any news of a king's death should be suppressed until a successor had been selected and ritually inaugurated. Thus, Tshikalange rushed to Mbilwi with the intention of claiming what he believed was his birthright. At the capital, the prince had the King's cattle slaughtered and the meat roasted for a series of lavish feasts designed to win over the support of the senior headmen whose loyalty Tshikalange would need to rule effectively. Even after Ranwedzi had recovered his health, the king remained in seclusion. Koen writes that it was only Makwarela's pleas that finally convinced Ranwedzi-Ngolo to present himself in public once again and reclaim his position.

Consistent with an already well-known reputation for spectacle, Ranwedzi used the occasion of his return to amplify his standing among the people. According to Koen, he invited his followers

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<sup>9</sup> 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* (Pretoria, 1940), 49.

at Gaba to look upon him thus, “here is Mphaphuli! He was dead, yet he is alive!”<sup>10</sup> To the extent that Rev. Koen’s account can be trusted as an accurate representation of events as they happened, Ranwedzi-Ngolo’s words reflected the King’s appreciation for the office of the kingship as the embodiment of ancestrally located community and the link between the living and the dead. Ranwedzi purportedly continued, “You think Mphaphuli is old and was conquered by death [but] Mphaphuli will still be young even after his children and his grandchildren have become old.” Having firmly reestablished his presence, Ranwedzi pivoted to the politics of the day and to Tshikalange’s premature play for the kingship. Mphaphuli chastised his son and those “who hailed Tshikalange as your king” because “you wish death to me.” Here again, there is a subtext to Ranwedzi’s word choices that is discernable in the context of custom and tradition. Mphaphuli admonished Tshikalange for having “devoured my wives.”<sup>11</sup> To be sure, as the eldest son and potential heir, Tshikalange’s attempt to claim the younger wives of his father had at least some grounding in custom, provided that the king was actually dead.<sup>12</sup> Yet, because Ranwedzi was still very much among the living, Tshikalange had breached a taboo, and automatically disqualified himself from any inheritance in its commission.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, just as Ranwedzi is purported to have said, Tshikalange was guilty of a transgression that was tantamount to “sending death to one’s father, in order to inherit his wives” according to state Ethnographer N. J. Van Warmelo in the Venda Laws Series volume on inheritance.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Tshikalange and his followers fled Mbilwi in disgrace.

In Venda Law, Van Warmelo further stated that during the era of confederation, a son who involved himself in an adulterous relationship with the wives of his father was typically put to death.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz, 1880, BMB 1/408/170.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, *Venda Law: Inheritance* (Pretoria, 1949), 921.

<sup>13</sup> Van Warmelo, *Inheritance*, 747.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The actual text uses the phrase “in the olden days,” which I interpret as alluding to the era prior to conquest.

Unlike an ordinary criminal however, such an offender was summoned to the musanda, where he received instructions to deliver a message to someone in the country of another chief. The adulterer was further told to travel using a specific route, whereupon the chief's assassins would intercept him. So grave was this offense that his assailants would leave the murdered man's corpse to be devoured by wild beasts.<sup>16</sup> Returning to the BMS archives, the Rev. Koen writes that Mphaphuli summoned Tshikalange back to Mbiliwi. If the punishment for Tshikalange's impertinence was as common as Van Warmelo's research suggests, then perhaps it makes sense that the wayward prince was initially hesitant to return to the capital, especially in light of all that had recently transpired. Eventually Tshikalange yielded to pressure from his followers and heeded the call from the king. Back at Mbiliwi, Ranwedzi gave voice to his displeasure to "see that my people forget me so quickly and that my children fight for my kingdom while I am still alive;" though, by all accounts, it was the king himself who gave impetus to the enmity among his sons.<sup>17</sup> The king then had an ox slaughtered for a feast of reconciliation in which both Makwarela and Tshikalange participated. Despite this gesture, however, it appears that Mphaphuli never truly forgave Tshikalange for his actions. Whatever ambivalence the king may have had about his succession plan, his illness combined with the presumptuousness of his eldest son appears to have clarified the picture.

If the bond between Tshikalange and Ranwedzi-Ngolo was irreparably damaged in the early to mid 1860s, the relationship between the former and his half-brother Makwarela played out in more than a dozen years of intermittent warfare.<sup>18</sup> Most of what we know about this first phase of the Mphaphuli Wars from the early 1880s until 1896 is reconstructed from the fragmentary evidence recorded in the archives of the Berlin Mission. The Lutherans were well positioned to observe the war

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<sup>16</sup> Van Warmelo, *Inheritance*, 749.

<sup>17</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz, 1880, BMB 1/410/171.

<sup>18</sup> Klaas Koen's notes indicate that the rift in the Mphaphuli family occurred several years before the Mabunyu War of 1869.

from the Georgenholtz mission station, and its satellite outpost located near Tshikalange's stronghold at Tshififi. Two African "native assistants" manned these locations, Nathaniel Lalumbe at Georgenholtz and Stoffel (likely Christoffel) as he is identified in the text, at Tshififi. Lalumbe noted for example that his parishioners and the people near Georgenholtz station spent much of the year 1884 in a state of heightened alert in response to the "constant threat of the eruption of war between Tshikalange and Makwarela."<sup>19</sup> This brief reference was silent as to the identity of the aggressor or the number of lives that fighting between the brothers may have claimed.

In late August 1886, Tshikalange attempted to regain his father's favor with an offering of cattle, which he had claimed in a nighttime raid into the country of King Ligegise Tshivhasa. In a personal diary entry, Rev. Beuster wrote that four people were killed in the raid and that Mphaphuli was all too glad to receive the fifteen head of cattle that Tshikalange offered as tribute. Whether the gesture did anything to thaw the relationship between father and son the sources did not say. We do know however, how Ligegise intended to respond. In a conversation with Tshivhasa, Beuster noted that the King did not regard this provocation as worthy of his attention. Of the material losses and casualties, Tshivhasa reportedly said, "those are the games children play! Mphaphuli's children are playing; but I also have children, and they also want to play."<sup>20</sup> Three days after the first attack, Tshivhasa's son Mahwasane orchestrated a reprisal in Ha-Mphaphuli in which five people were killed and another seven captured.<sup>21</sup>

As the 1880s drew to a close, Tshikalange adopted a strategy designed to marginalize Makwarela, whilst not further antagonizing their father Ranwedzi-Ngolo. In their annual report, the missionaries described 1889 as "a year filled with shocking events caused by the war."<sup>22</sup> Tshikalange's

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<sup>19</sup> Nathaniel Lalumbe/Georgenholtz, 1886, BMB 2/182/249.

<sup>20</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1887, BMB 2/486/284.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1890, BMB 3/465/344.

forces made inroads into the territories controlled by Makwarela. To halt the advance into his country, Makwarela enlisted the support of King Ligegise Tshivhasa. Ligegise was married to Makwarela's sister Mutshekwa.<sup>23</sup> This preexisting relationship made it easier for the two men to forge a pact against Tshikalange. In response to the news of this burgeoning alliance, Tshikalange sent yet another peace offering to his father. Unlike the cattle stolen from Tshivhasa three years earlier, Mphaphuli refused the tribute from his eldest son. Missionary accounts tell us that the war intensified following this abortive attempt at reconciliation.

With the support of his allies, Makwarela advanced deep into Tshikalange's territory. The forces from Ha-Tshivhasa left their own signature on the account of the war that the Rev. Beuster recorded in his diary circa February 1889. "Wherever [Makwarela] went" on his march to Tshififi, his forces incinerated villages and "transformed the countryside into a desert."<sup>24</sup> These "burning tactics" would eventually be their undoing, however. Makwarela's army arrived at the gates of the enemy capital and made camp for the night. The culminating battle of this war would begin just before the next sunrise. Crucially, with no place to take shelter, the invading forces and their precious stores of gunpowder were soaked in a deluge that evening. When it became clear to Makwarela's leaders in the field that their attack could not proceed as planned, they ordered the entire army into a hasty retreat. Importantly, they were obliged to make their withdrawal in full view of the spotters posted inside the barricaded gates of Tshikalange's residence. Sensing an advantage, the defenders gave chase. Thus, what had begun as an orderly tactical retreat had now become a headlong flight as Makwarela and his allies were driven from the field.<sup>25</sup> Despite this drastic reversal of fortunes, Makwarela learned a

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<sup>23</sup> 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* (Pretoria, 1940), 49.

<sup>24</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1890, BMB 3/466/344, Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

valuable lesson about his brother's military capabilities. Less than a year later, Makwarela drew upon this bit of tactical intelligence to deal a decisive blow to his opponents.

After the battle, Beuster traveled to Mbilwi in the company of a Black man named Simon. Together, the pair of Christians planned to consult with Mphaphuli to learn if the king could be moved to intercede in the war between his two sons. Beuster and Simon had witnessed the violence for themselves. The missionary reasoned that if the king heard their testimonies, then perhaps the "old sinner could be persuaded to improve matters."<sup>26</sup> At the palace, the missionaries found Mphaphuli engrossed in a game of Mufuvha.<sup>27</sup> "Your majesty," Beuster began, "I have come to you with great sorrow and worry in my heart," speaking of recent events on the battlefield. Before the reverend could finish his thought, however, Mphaphuli interjected to ask Simon to translate Beuster's words. It merits mention that nearly two decades had passed since the missionary had last required the assistance of an interpreter to communicate with a Venda monarch. Sensing that this curious response was Mphaphuli's oblique way of signaling that he was in no mood to be lectured to; Beuster changed tact and adopted a more confrontational approach. This time, rather than focusing on the humanitarian dimensions of the war, which had originally failed to capture Mphaphuli's attention, Beuster challenged the king to ponder the second order consequences of his military strategy.

The war was being fought within the boundaries of Ha-Mphaphuli and most of the casualties were the king's subjects. Yet, the only party who stood to gain from the wars among the Mphaphuli princes was "Tshivhasa, your archenemy," and the one into whose grasp "you have thrown your country."<sup>28</sup> This last point appears to have had the desired effect, and the evangelist's words would eventually prove prophetic. Mphaphuli's response spoke to the heart of the matter; the king desired

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<sup>26</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1889, BMB 3/472/348, Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>27</sup> A bead game also known as Mefuvha or morabaraba elsewhere in southern Africa

<sup>28</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1889, BMB 3/472/348, Berliner Missionsberichte.

only to “punish a disobedient son,” referring to Tshikalange.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Mphaphuli “was prepared to go along with Tshivhasa” so long as their arrangement advanced this part of his agenda.<sup>30</sup> Insinuating that Mphaphuli had mismanaged the affairs within his own house, Beuster pressed further: “you have destroyed your country” over a dispute that could have been resolved by means “other than this terrible war.”<sup>31</sup> Instead of a rebuttal, Mphaphuli attempted to deflect attention away from the potential downside of his strategy by accusing Beuster of bias. “You are defending Tshikalange [who] is not even my legitimate son.” Indeed, “I have not paid cattle for his mother.”<sup>32</sup> Mphaphuli’s response is telling, least of all because it calls into question if he ever seriously considered Tshikalange as a viable successor in the first instance.

On 17 May 1889, Tshikalange launched a counterattack that captured large swaths of his brother’s territory. In his diary, the Rev. Beuster wrote that “Tshikalange had lost all restraint” in a pair of raids in which his forces weaponized arson, just as Makwarela and Tshivhasa’s people had done several months earlier.<sup>33</sup> Makwarela rallied his own troops in a last-ditch effort to arrest the progress of the forces under the command of his brother. Even this measure was only partially successful, as several headmen who had been loyal to Makwarela defected to the side of Tshikalange.<sup>34</sup> The next day, Beuster received a messenger on horse-back bearing an urgent request from Makwarela for medical assistance. Beuster rode all night and arrived at Makwarela’s place at Tshipwarapwara by dawn on 19 May. There, the missionary learned that he had arrived too late, as the injured warrior who was to be his patient had taken his own life with a gunshot to the head. Beuster took his leave after an interview with Makwarela, in which the prince confided in the missionary that he waged this war not

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1889, BMB 3 /474/349. Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1889, BMB 3/479/353. Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>34</sup> Makwarela would later seek to recover the territories lost during the war by directing his appeals to Native Land Commission.



because of any personal animus with his brother, but rather, to appease his father—the king. On his way back to the mission station, the evangelist passed a large contingent of troops coming from the direction of Ha-Tshivhasa. The recent defection of his headmen left Makwarela's forces depleted. Thus, at the instruction of his father, Makwarela once again sought out the assistance of Tshivhasa.<sup>35</sup>

Makwarela mobilized his troops and those from Tshivhasa to Tshikalange. Rev. Beuster described the scene on 25 May; just before the opposing armies closed with each other, the Mphaphuli King, Ranwedzi-Ngolo, took up a position atop a hill overlooking the field of battle from which his voice could be heard by all. To announce his presence and his intentions, Mphaphuli called out by name the leaders of the armies arrayed against his preferred successor, Makwarela. “Hewe! All of you...Hewe! Tshikalange...Hewe! Phala...today I am here, come closer my children.”<sup>36</sup> Taunting Tshikalange and his people, Mphaphuli continued, “Look, here, the elephant has fallen in the bushes . . . you must come closer to collect your share. Let us meet one another today!” The disembodied menace of Mphaphuli demoralized Tshikalange's followers. According to the missionary, “each one slung his gun over his shoulder and ran away” without firing a single shot.<sup>37</sup>

To consolidate his advantage, Makwarela mobilized a contingent of soldiers to Tshififi, where they would finish the project of extermination by fire that had begun months earlier. Upon their arrival, sometime around 5 June 1889, Makwarela and his people found the enemy capital at Tshififi nearly vacant, save a handful of stragglers who were too infirm to evacuate.<sup>38</sup> These people, the last followers of his now vanquished brother, Makwarela had put to death, before ordering the entire village razed to the ground. With this evidence that the war had indeed been won, Makwarela returned home to Tshipwarapwara for the first time in six months. The missionaries reported that the victorious

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<sup>35</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1889, BMB 3/479/353. Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. BMB 3/480/353.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. BMB 3/481/354.

Prince received a hero's welcome on 11 August 1889. Soon after, Makwarela began construction of a new headquarters at Miluwani. Located in the territory hitherto controlled by Tshikalange, Miluwani was also closer to his father's palace at Mbilwi. Relocating nearer to the seat of power allowed Makwarela to ensure that his brother Tshikalange did not attempt to quietly reestablish himself in Ha-Mphaphuli.

While Makwarela entrenched his new standing as heir apparent to the Mphaphuli Singo dynasty, Tshikalange reconfigured his network of alliances to complicate Makwarela's path to the kingship. Back in early June 1889, when Tshikalange abandoned his stronghold at Tshififi, he led his followers into Ha-Ramabulana, the dynastic lineage that controlled western Zoutpansberg. There, Tshikalange and his people received asylum. Although the Ramabulana King had played no role in the Mphaphuli Wars until now, the sudden appearance of these refugees gave Makhado precisely the opening that he apparently desired. Their stay in Makhado's country lasted for just a few months, however. For reasons that the BMS archives do not explain, Tshikalange's party quietly left Ha-Ramabulana in either late 1889 or early 1890. When the missionaries next reported on the whereabouts of Tshikalange, he and his followers had moved back towards the east, into the country of their de facto enemy, King Ligegise Tshivhasa. Interestingly, Tshivhasa received the itinerants with a surprisingly warm welcome.<sup>39</sup>

There are no answers in the sources to the question of why the relationship between King Ligegise and his erstwhile ally Makwarela soured to the extent that it had by the time Tshikalange arrived in Ha-Tshivhasa. Yet, the missionary wrote that it was Ligegise's "hatred of Makwarela" that had inspired Tshivhasa to "restore the honor of Tshikalange."<sup>40</sup> Nor do the BMS archives offer any clues about why Tshikalange quit Ha-Ramabulana so soon after having requested and received the

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<sup>39</sup> There, Tshikalange built another *musanda*, which he called *Dzhabvelo*, which means a place of refuge, or stronghold.

<sup>40</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1891, BMB 3/460/380.

protection of King Makhado. The missionaries' sources do reveal that Tshikalange's curious departure had "roused Makhado's full ire."<sup>41</sup> As Makwarela established himself at a new headquarters in Miluwani, he did so with the political and military support of Makhado. At the same time, Tshikalange strategized with Tshivhasa about their new plan of attack against Makwarela.

The war resumed in mid-1891. On 24 July, Beuster received word of a reconciliation between Tshikalange and Tshivhasa, and that the two planned to attack Makwarela from opposite directions. Although the missionaries were formally neutral—and limited their involvement in the war to the provision of medical assistance to the injured on both sides—they did occasionally enter the fray. In this instance, Beuster decided that it was important to warn Makwarela of the impending attack. When Beuster's messenger arrived at Miluwani, he found "smoke already rising from the village that had been set alight."<sup>42</sup> In the initial melee, Tshikalange led an invading force that successfully captured a village called Ha-Gavhe. From there, the war party moved themselves into position for a decisive strike against Makwarela's new headquarters at Miluwani. At the same time, the commanders of Tshivhasa's forces planned to converge on Miluwani from the opposite direction as their allies.

Though he was under threat from two sides, within the barricaded gates of his stronghold, Makwarela the tactician was not surrounded. The missionaries write that Makwarela and his people somehow managed to "penetrate both enemy camps," and have "totally repelled" them. What remained of the invading army regrouped at Ha-Gavhe. To retake this last village, Makwarela would need to draw upon the intelligence he had collected about Tshikalange's tactical decision-making while fighting in the defense. On the morning of that ill-fated attack on Tshififi back in February 1889, Tshikalange's people left the safety of their walls to drive an opponent from the field. It seems Makwarela calculated that they could be enticed to repeat their mistake on this occasion. On 24 July

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1890, BMB 3/479/352.

1891, Makwarela staged his own people and his Ramabulana allies around Ha-Gavhe to create the effect of an impending attack. Having done so, Makwarela and his allies began to withdraw their forces from the field. Just as anticipated, Tshikalange's war party gave chase to a fleeing opponent. What happened next is a scene that had played out on other occasions over the past few decades. In the middle of their retreat, Makwarela's party "suddenly reversed themselves and fell upon their pursuers" and drove them from his country.<sup>43</sup> The same happened some 22 years earlier, when a much younger Makwarela had driven his Gaza-Ngoni opponents from Tshipwarapwara during the Mabunyu War of 1869. Now, the heir apparent adapted the same operational concept to secure an important victory in the final stage of the Mphaphuli Wars.

Makwarela moved against his former ally Tshivhasa in late 1891. He did so in coordination with Makhado's warriors, according to Rev. Beuster's diary entry written in September of that year. The missionary further states that Tshivhasa learned of the incursion well enough in advance to prepare a competent defense. Tshivhasa's people inflicted "many casualties" on the invading force that eventually broke off its attack.<sup>44</sup> The alliance between Makwarela and Makhado was still in place some eighteen months later when the missionaries recorded another clash involving soldiers aligned with Tshikalange and Tshivhasa. This time, it was the Rev. Erdman Schwellnus's "turn to bandage the wounded."<sup>45</sup> The missionary managed to remove a bullet from the arm of an injured warrior but reported that the attack itself had accomplished nothing.

The missionaries were not the only Europeans with a stake in these wars. On 13 May, the Port Elizabeth Telegraph published a dispatch from Zoutpansberg that read, "the warlike Makhado evidently wants his comb to be cut." The writer observed that "Makhado is now combining with

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<sup>43</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1892, BMB 3/551/404.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 1892, 553/405.

<sup>45</sup> Erdmann Schwellnus/Tshakhuma, 1894, BMB 4/364/466.

[Makwarela]—a chief of the same kidney—with a view to utterly annihilating Tshivhasa.”<sup>46</sup> The letter tells us that Tshivhasa was “attacked and severely defeated.”<sup>47</sup> In another article that described the same incident, the politician G.G. Munnik told a correspondent that “there is not the slightest danger to the whites [nor] to the mining industry” as a result of the “trouble which has broken out between Makhado and Tshivhasa.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, it seemed that most of the fighting in the year 1893 occurred in Tshivhasa’s country.<sup>49</sup> Makhado attacked Tshivhasa at least once more in October. While the raid cost the lives of eight soldiers on Tshivhasa’s side, Makhado also captured a portion of disputed territory.<sup>50</sup>

The dynamics of the Mphaphuli Wars changed once again in the mid-1890s following the death of two leaders on opposing sides of the conflict. First, King Makhado Ramabulana died in October 1895, a development that deprived Makwarela of an important source of military and political support. Then, Tshikalange died late the following year, a development that should have spelled the end of the Mphaphuli Wars. And yet the conflict continued, but not as it began, as a fight between two Mphaphuli princes about which of them should be the next king. Instead, following the departure of Makhado and Tshikalange, the war transmogrified into a contest between Makwarela and Tshivhasa for political supremacy in eastern Zoutpansberg. Through his partnership with Tshikalange, Tshivhasa acquired several chiefdoms along the river Ngwendi, such as Makuya and Mbulu, which had been satellites of Ha-Mphaphuli since the reign of Ratsibi (1848-60). Without Makhado, Tshivhasa no longer needed to protect the western flank of his country. As a consequence, the only place where Makwarela could make inroads and offset his territorial losses was at Tshikundamalema. The outcome

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<sup>46</sup> Makwarela’s name is spelled “Monkoreto” in the article; *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 13 May 1893, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “No Cause for Alarm,” *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 18 May 1893, 8.

<sup>49</sup> “No Cause for Alarm,” *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, (Port Elizabeth, South Africa) 11 October 1893, 8.

of the war was ultimately decided in 1897 in a contest for control of two neighboring chiefdoms, Makonde and Ha-Luvhimbi.

The way in which Tshivhasa managed to establish hegemony at Makonde and especially at Ha-Luvhimbi illustrated the nature of warfare in Venda until the end of the nineteenth century. In chapter four, I argued that warfare during the era of confederacy was a form of elite political discourse that was not only common, but also expected. At the risk of reducing the human costs of war to simple arithmetic, Venda chiefs and kings fought small-scale wars that produced fewer casualties than those of the Anglo-Zulu War era. Likewise, military victories were seldom won purely on the field of battle. Indeed, the disposition of the chiefdom at Ha-Luvhimbi demonstrated how military victories often yielded political defeats in the context of confederal statecraft. To be sure, for Makwarela and Tshivhasa alike, hegemony at Makonde and Ha-Luvhimbi was defined not exclusively by military conquest, but rather, in terms of the right to install subordinate chiefs.

The Ravhura Singo lineage ruled the chiefdom of Makonde since Thohoyandou's reign at Dzata. As direct descendants of Thohoyandou, the Ravhura lineage was more senior than any of the other three Singo Venda dynasties.<sup>51</sup> Yet, despite its pedigree, the Ravhura lineage had been subject to Mphaphuli kings, even if Makonde was not technically a satellite of Ha-Mphaphuli.<sup>52</sup> The first Ravhura was succeeded by Tanzwani, who had two sons born of royal houses. Malise maternal aunt was Nyatamutshenuwa, the mother of Tshivhasa King Ligege.<sup>53</sup> The mother of Nwanathavha belonged to the royal house of Mphaphuli. We do not know precisely when Tanzwani died, but the Khosi described in the Rev. Beuster's report for the year 1888 was "totally blind, almost deaf and certainly passed his hundredth birthday a long time ago."<sup>54</sup> The limited sources on this period immediately

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<sup>51</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo, *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg* (Pretoria, 1940), 9.

<sup>52</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz, 1878, BMB 1/499/129, Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>53</sup> Tanzwani is also known as Vele.

<sup>54</sup> Carl Beuster/Ha-Tshivhasa, 1889, BMB 3/538/323, Berliner Missionsberichte.

after Tanzwani disappeared show that Malise was installed as his father's successor. Soon thereafter, Ranwedzi-Ngolo dispatched a war party to Makonde to depose Malise—a son of the house of Tshivhasa—and install Nwanathavha in his place.<sup>55</sup> The matter of the chieftainship at Makonde was only settled in 1897, when Malise was finally reinstalled with the support of Ligegise Tshivhase.<sup>56</sup>

Located fewer than 5km east of Makonde, the chiefdom at Ha-Luvhimbi had been governed by a royal lineage of the Mbedzi matupo. The name of the chiefdom denoted both a specific territoriality and a lineal title of the Luvhimbi kings who threw the bones that made rain from one end of Zoutpansberg to the other. Ralushai argued that their abilities to make rain partially explained how Luvhimbi lineage had managed to retain a nominal measure of political autonomy until 1897.<sup>57</sup> Venda oral narratives and vernacular ethnographies identify Dzhenzhele as the first Luvhimbi, who the newly arrived Singo believed to have been installed by the Venda God Nwali Raluvhimba. “People came to Luvhimbi in great numbers and from all quarters . . .to beg Dzhenzhele for rain.”<sup>58</sup> Consistent with custom, the rainmakers of Luvhimbi were handsomely rewarded for their services. A visitor usually offered a single black sheep as tribute along with their request for rain according to a contemporary informant.<sup>59</sup> In February 1881, during the great drought (see chapter four), Makwarela sent “several head of cattle to Chief Luvhimbi, who was reputedly the greatest rain maker” in northeastern South Africa.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, however, not even the exalted standing of Luvhimbi Kings was sufficient to insulate the last of their lineage from the struggle for hegemony and “territorial aggrandizement” in Eastern Venda.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha Ha-Tshivhasa* (Johannesburg, 1889), 152.

<sup>56</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 153.

<sup>57</sup> N.M.N. Ralushai, “Further Traditions Concerning Luvhimbi and the Mbedzi,” *Rhodesian History* 9, (1978), 7.

<sup>58</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Mafhungo na Nganea dza Tshulu [The History and Stories of Tshulu]* (Johannesburg, 1991 [195?]), 15.

<sup>59</sup> Midiyavhathu Masikhwa/Ha-Luvhimbi. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 18 August 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Klaas Koen/Georgenholtz, 1882, BMB 2/437/204, Berliner Missionsberichte.

<sup>61</sup> Ralushai, “Further Traditions,” 7.

Just as with the chiefdom at Makonde, Mphaphuli dynasts attempted with varying degrees of success to insinuate their influence into the selection of Luvhimbi rulers. The most detailed genealogy of the kingship at Ha-Luvhimbi is clearly telescoped, with just three generations of supreme rainmakers from the arrival of the Singo until the events of the late 1890s. The lack of chronological specificity in the available source also complicates the identification of the potentates whose governance coincided with those of the earlier Luvhimbi rulers. For example, the sources indicate that the first successor to Dzhenzhele was Masindi; and that the “people of Mbilwi,” referring to the Mphaphuli dynasty, deposed Masindi and replaced him with the other eligible son of the departed king, a man named Nwatani.<sup>62</sup> Sometime thereafter, the Mphaphulis reversed themselves and reinstalled Masindi. When Masindi died, the Mphaphuli’s once again saw to the installation of Itani, their preferred successor, who ruled during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>63</sup> Itani probably received the tribute of cattle that Makwarela paid for relief from the 1881 drought. It was Itani, whose sister Manwele was married to Masikhwa, the son of Ranwedzi-Ngolo, who played a decisive role in the conclusion of the Mphaphuli Wars.

The shifting constellations of alliances and enmities that had characterized the last quarter century of confederal politics gives credence to Makwarela’s concerns about a possible alliance between Itani Luvhimbi and Masikhwa. Moreover, given Tshivhasa’s penchant for finding common cause with disaffected Mphaphuli princes, Makwarela had good reason to fear a three-way alliance between Masikhwa, Itani Luvhimbi and King Ligegise.<sup>64</sup> These considerations add context to Makwarela’s preemptive move against Itani, which may have been motivated by a desire on the part

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<sup>62</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha Dza Ha-Tshivhasa*, (Johannesburg, 1989) 151.

<sup>63</sup> Henry Nemudzivhadi and Victor Ralushai allude to the Luvhimbi King named Tshirumbula as the predecessor of Itani, the last Luvhimbi rainmaker. If Tshirumbula died in 1882, as Nemudzivhadi suggests, then his reign would extend to four the number of Luvhimbi king rainmakers between Dzhenzhele and Itani. It is also possible that Tshirumbula is also another name by which Nwatani was known in the textual sources. See Mphaya Henry Nemudzivhadi, *King Makhado Ramabulana, the Lion of the North, 1864-1895* (Thohoyandou, 2017), 192; N.M.N. Ralushai, “Further Traditions,” 6.

<sup>64</sup> Ralushai, “Further Traditions,” 7.



of the Mphaphuli's to create the conditions in which they could orchestrate the succession process, as much as it was designed to prevent the feared tripartite alliance with Tshivhasa. The identity of Itani's assassin and manner of his death is subject to debate. When Ralushai investigated Mbedzi origins in the mid-1970s, he recorded testimonies from people who identified Makwarela's sons Phaswana and Madadzhe as the killers. Ralushai also found a chief aligned with the Mphaphuli dynasty who claimed Makwarela gunned down Itani.<sup>65</sup> In an interview with the reigning Khosi at Ha-Luvhimbi and his advisors, my interlocutors also identified Makwarela as Itani's killer.<sup>66</sup> On the basis of these sources, it seems clear that the Mphaphuli people ordered the assassination of Itani Luvhimbi in 1897.

At least one follower of Itani who survived the raid on Ha-Luvhimbi shared his testimony with assistant state ethnographer W.M.D. Phophi. An Mbedzi man named Shuruma (discussed earlier in this study) described the scene at Ha-Luvhimbi on the morning of Itani's assassination. Shuruma's testimony illuminated two points of fact that clarified the circumstances in which Itani was killed, but also when the attack occurred. First, Shuruma told Phophi that Mphaphuli's people descended upon their village "just as the maize and millet was getting ripe," which suggests the attack occurred just before the May-July harvest season.<sup>67</sup> Shuruma's testimony also indicates that Mphaphuli desired not just to assassinate Itani, but rather, to liquidate the entire Luvhimbi lineage. On the morning of the attack, Shuruma recounted how he responded to the sound of a call for help coming from the direction of Vhunga. There, he found the bodies of a group of women who had gone to collect wild greens.<sup>68</sup> From there, Shuruma reported that "the fight was on," with the invaders.<sup>69</sup> Before long however, Shuruma said he and his compatriots were quickly overwhelmed and fled. Some of the Mbedzi

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Midiyavhathu Masikhwa/Ha-Luvhimbi. Interview. By Akil Alexander Cornelius. 31 May 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Hugh A. Stayt, *The Bavenda* (Oxford, 1931), 36.

<sup>68</sup> Van Warmelo, *Venda Law: Property* (Pretoria, 1967), 1113.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

followers of Itani were taken in by relatives at Thengwe, or Mianzwi, while Shuruma himself found safe harbor at Dzimauli.<sup>70</sup> Those followers of the slain rainmaker who returned to Ha-Luvhimbi after the invasion “found nothing but famine for their share,” as Mphaphuli’s people had seized all their grain. Another possible survivor later alluded to a marriage with non-Mbedzi people—and likely someone from Ha-Mphaphuli—which purportedly “gave the [invading] enemy an opening.”<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, it was the marriage between Itani’s sister Manwele and Ranwedzi-Ngolo’s son Masikhwa that ultimately proved decisive in determining the fate of the Luvhimbi kingship.

Masikhwa was reportedly “incensed” when word of his uncle’s murder reached his stronghold at a place called Tshivhilwi.<sup>72</sup> Almost immediately, Masikhwa traveled to Ha-Luvhimbi, where he killed Neswiswi, the Mbedzi man who the Mphaphuli people installed as the successor to Itani. Importantly, the next move that Masikhwa made tells us that he was fully cognizant of the circumstances, which were not totally of his own making, but which were also clearly headed for a military confrontation. Before his father Ranwedzi could respond to this most recent twist in the scramble to replace Itani Luvhimbi, Masikhwa sent word to King Ligegeise with an offer of an alliance. The terms of the arrangement were obvious in retrospect; Masikhwa would rule Ha-Luvhimbi as a satellite of Ha-Tshivhasa in exchange for military support in the war with the Mphaphulis that was sure to come. Tshivhasa accepted these terms, which only enhanced his already dominant position in the years’ long competition with Makwarela for supremacy in eastern Zoutpansberg.

What we know from Tshivenda oral narratives and contemporary testimonies is that Ranwedzi-Ngolo mobilized “a great army to attack Masikhwa.”<sup>73</sup> With fighters from Ha-Tshivhasa, Masikhwa sent his forces to intercept the invaders. The two armies met at a place known as

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> N.J. Van Warmelo and W.M.D. Phophi, *Venda Law: Marriage* (Pretoria, 1948), 43.

<sup>72</sup> Ralushai, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha*, 151.

Tshamutshovholi. We also know that the fighters from Ha-Mphaphuli were killed in great numbers prior to their retreat.<sup>74</sup> After the battle, Masikhwa relocated his palace from Tshivhilwi to Ha-Luvhimbi. With the endorsement of Ligegise Tshivhasa, Masikhwa established a chiefly lineage there that endures to the present. Crucially, although he was able to fill the political void following the assassination of Itani; Masikhwa was still a Singo, which meant that he could not lay claim to the genealogies of ritual practice that generations of Luvhimbi potentates had called up to bring rain.<sup>75</sup>

King Ligegise Tshivhasa's victories at Makonde, Makuya, and Ha-Luvhimbi signaled the end of the Mphaphuli Wars. Although he had enlarged his kingdom at the expense of his rivals and won the battle for territorial aggrandizement in eastern Zoutpansberg, Tshivhasa did not have long to savor his victory. King Ligegise, the son, and successor to Luvhengo, died in 1901. Shortly thereafter, the Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo, the son and successor to Ratsibi, also died. Along with Makhado, this trio of Singo Kings were among the last cohort of dynasts whose ascendancy bore the endorsement of their own elders and of their Vhomakhadzi in particular. By the end of the South African War in 1902, the elevation of Venda leaders would come to depend on the endorsement of the British imperial state. Yet, the dynamic relationship between these two Singo dynasts who shared eastern Zoutpansberg and their near-simultaneous departures from the political scene merits further elaboration. It has been suggested that some among the followers of Ranwedzi-Ngolo and Ligegise experienced the disappearance of their leaders—one after the other—as a sign that both had agreed amongst themselves that the era of independent Venda monarchs was indeed over.<sup>76</sup>

Returning to the conclusion of the Mphaphuli Wars, the greatest obstacle in Makwarela's path to the kingship had been removed in 1896. However, when his father Ranwedzi-Ngolo died in 1901,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>75</sup> As noted in the introduction, initiated adults of the Mbedzi *mutupo* served as guardians of the ritual knowledge associated with rain making.

<sup>76</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Phunzaphunzha dza Ha-Tshivhasa* (Johannesburg, 1989) [19??], 132.

the country that Makwarela inherited was much reduced in terms of its territoriality but also in its prestige—a direct reflection of the losses sustained during the latter years of the wars against Tshivhasa. Although his ascent was generally believed to have been unopposed, Makwarela's reign as Mphaphuli began at a time when such men were “Kings” only among their own people. Before the retinue of magistrates, police, commissioners, and other functionaries of the resurgent British empire who had begun to establish a permanent presence in Zoutpansberg in 1901, Venda leaders were known more simply as chiefs.<sup>77</sup> Like the red ants of prophecy, the agents of the colonial state declared an end to the era when Africans used war to advance purely political objectives.

## PART II: Disarming the Vhavenda

Venda people had begun to acquire firearms in appreciable numbers during the 1850s. Even after British and Portuguese powers conspired to curtail the sale of guns to Africans in the 1870s, Vhavenda continued to purchase guns clandestinely. They also supplied arms, ammunition, and training in their use to allies in South Africa and Shona-speaking neighbors to the north in what would become Zimbabwe. Yet, the true size and composition of the Venda armory of firearms remained a matter of speculation until after the South African War (1899-1902), in which Great Britain vanquished the Transvaal Republic and Free State and completed its conquest of South Africa. After the war's end, British officials embarked upon a project of reconstruction and political consolidation that set conditions for the eventual emergence of the modern South African state. Among the central features of post-war state building was the disarmament of Black South Africans, even those like the Vhavenda,

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<sup>77</sup> Tshivhangwaho Solomon Ntsandeni, *The Mphaphuli Dynasty in Crisis* (Louis Trichardt, 2017), 42.

who supported the British in hopes of winning concessions and reacquiring land lost to white settlers and farmers in the intervening decades.<sup>78</sup>

On 18 August 1902, William Windham, Secretary for Native Affairs, signed Ordinance No. 13, a legislative act that officially criminalized the possession of firearms in Transvaal without a state issued license. The act also authorized a large-scale campaign to disarm African gun owners. In some respects, Ordinance No. 13 represented part of Governor Milner's broader mandate to forge reconciliation between Afrikaners and English citizens of the colony in the aftermath of the South African War (1899-1902). In late July, Native Commissioner E.A. Hogge captured popular sentiment among whites in his district of Lydenburg about the urgent need to address this issue. In a report to his superiors in Johannesburg, Hogge described the "great anxiety" among Boers and British alike, as they awaited the government's response to the "burning question of disarming the natives." This question, Hogge continues, "must be dealt with" and the "longer it is left unaddressed . . . the more difficult it will b[e]" to resolve.<sup>79</sup> In a fortnight, Hogge and the other Native Commissioners in the Transvaal would have their answer. For Vhavenda in particular, newly imposed gun control would be their first encounter with their subordinate status in the emergent racial hierarchy of twentieth-century South Africa.

The public notice of Ordinance No. 13. stated that "all persons except certain [designated] officers are to deliver up all arms and ammunition to the Resident Magistrate of the district where they reside."<sup>80</sup> The language of the decree left little room for doubt about its true objectives, which were to disarm Africans in the Transvaal. Magistrates' officials "may issue to fit and proper white male

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<sup>78</sup> Andrew Manson and Bernard K. Mbenga wrote, "A[n] important means of restoring the pre-war racial inequalities was to disarm the African population. See Andrew Manson and Bernard K. Mbenga, *Land Chiefs, Mining: South Africa's North West Province Since 1840* (Johannesburg, 2014), 53. For more on the South African War see, Bill Nasson, *The War for South Africa: The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, Cape Town, 2010; Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*, London, 1993.

<sup>79</sup> E.A. Hogge, to Native Secretary/Lydenburg, 31 July 1902, CO 879/78/504.

<sup>80</sup> Notice to the Public: Arms and Ammunition Ordinance No. 13, Johannesburg, August 1902, SNA/38/1299/44.

inhabitants of the Transvaal license to possess and carry arms and ammunition.” Only later was it determined that Blacks too, could receive licenses at the discretion of Native Commissioners. The penalty for violating the new law was either one year’s imprisonment “with or without hard labor” or a hefty fine of £250. Importantly, the punitive aspects of the law were only scheduled to take effect after a period of amnesty, when Africans could surrender their weapons without punishment. The law permitted magistrates and their mostly African constables to “search any land, house, wagon” or indeed, any other place where there may be a “reason to suspect that arms or ammunition are kept or hidden.”<sup>81</sup>

The record of correspondence showed that the Native Commissioners who were responsible for administering the disarmament campaign immediately recognized the possibility that Africans might not surrender all their firearms. If the threat of fines and imprisonment served as the proverbial stick, the Native Secretary used cash payments in exchange for guns as the carrot that they hoped would incentivize Vhavenda to comply with the provisions of Ordinance No. 13. The law empowered Native Commissioners in each of the five districts targeted for disarmament to pay Black gun owners on a graduated scale that reflected the operability and lethality of each weapon that they surrendered. The office of the Secretary provided guidance on this matter to each district commissioner in a supplemental memorandum dated 24 September. The document indicated that the commissioner of native affairs approved a valuation of £4 for “modern magazine rifles,” and £3 for “breech loading muskets.”<sup>82</sup> The memo also included a third miscellaneous category for all other arms, which would be priced at “market value.”<sup>83</sup> Lastly, the Secretary for Native Affairs allocated a total of £50,000 for all five of the Transvaal districts subject to the disarmament order.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> W. Windham, to Native Commissioner/Johannesburg, 1 September 1902, SNA/38/1299/49/02.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

Despite voluminous reports that Africans in Transvaal were well-armed with modern rifles, it seems Native Commissioner Windham anticipated the possibility that Africans would surrender only their oldest and least functional weapons. Given the projected cost of the entire operation, Windham issued further guidance about the level of detail that he would expect in the reports from the Native Commissioners about the kinds of firearms that they were confiscating. In a memorandum dated 24 September 1902, Windham wrote, “special care is to be exercised in describing the various weapons.”<sup>84</sup> This information, he continued, “may be required for statistical purposes.”<sup>85</sup> Windham clarified the value of detailed record keeping in a separate message. He wrote, “care should be taken to describe every rifle surrendered to you and your sub-commissioners.” Moreover, he stated that “the value of each gun assessed by you on delivery should be inserted on the receipt and in your register.” With respect to valuations, Windham noted, the Native Commissioners should “bear in mind, the intrinsic or present market value of the firearms.”<sup>86</sup>

In response, C.A. Wheelwright, Native Commissioner for Zoutpansberg, sent a telegram to the Secretary for Native Affairs in which he requested clarification about the “market value” stipulation referenced in the supplemental instructions. Wheelwright stated the problem thusly: “I am aware of no market or intrinsic value attached” to such obsolete or inoperable guns.<sup>87</sup> Wheelwright received his answer the following day. Secretary Windham’s telegram stated that “the valuation of all weapons is left absolutely to you.” Nevertheless, “it was never contemplated to pay a standard of £3 for worthless and unserviceable weapons.”<sup>88</sup> The Native Commissioners responsible for executing his

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<sup>84</sup> W. Windham, to Native Commissioner/Johannesburg, 24 September 1902, SNA 39/1299/1718/02.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> W. Windham, to Native Commissioner/Johannesburg, 1 September 1902, SNA/39/16355.

<sup>87</sup> C.A. Wheelwright, to Native Secretary/Zoutpansberg, 25 September 1902, SNA 39/16355/2025/02.

<sup>88</sup> W. Windham, to Native Commissioner/Johannesburg, 26 September 1902, SNA 39/16355/1718/02

order were therefore to apply their best judgement in the evaluation of each weapon, so that their reports made clear “which firearms were serviceable, and which were rubbish.”<sup>89</sup>

Windham’s communications in August and September 1902 also reflected his desire to see the operation conducted as smoothly and efficiently as possible. In a message dated 21 August, he instructed the Native Commissioners “to proceed in a quiet and cautious way.”<sup>90</sup> It was imperative that they inform each of the chiefs in their districts “of the orders of the government and call upon them to respond thereto without hesitation.”<sup>91</sup> If necessary, they should “personally see the chief” and impress upon them that there would be “no occasion” for resistance to the order. The commissioners were also to supply the secretary with the names “of any chief [who] declines the disarmament order,” so that they might be dealt with posthaste. These face-to-face conferences also afforded Native Commissioners with an opportunity to take the temperature of the chiefs in their districts. One commissioner in the Pietersburg district wrote that “in my experience, disobedience of summonses and impertinence to messengers has always seemed to me the forerunner of rebellion.”<sup>92</sup> Not only had this commissioner experienced no such hostility to the order, but curiously, the Africans in his district had expressed no compunction at all about the prospect of surrendering their arms.

Windham also staggered the commencement of the campaigns so that the disarmament operation in Zoutpansberg would only begin after the other four were already underway. The secretary identified Pietersburg (today’s Polokwane) as the ideal district to start the confiscation of guns from Transvaal Africans. First, “it was the biggest ward” in terms of its territorial dimensions. Next, there was a general understanding among the members of the Commissionerate that Africans in Pietersburg—a district that was home to many of the followers of Paramount Sekhukhune—were

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> W. Windham, to Native Commissioner/Johannesburg, 21 August 1902, SNA 39/16355/1718/02.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Native Commissioner/Pietersburg, 11 October 1902, CO 879/81/271.



“under better control.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, as Windham reasoned, their compliance could serve as an “example that would be followed” by Black gun owners in other wards.<sup>94</sup> Windham was also well aware of the reasons why the campaign in Zoutpansberg should begin last. The Secretary received a report from the Native Commissioner there, in which Wheelwright described the less familiar situation further to the north. Commissioner Wheelwright described Zoutpansberg as a district that was “to a great extent . . . new to any regular rule.”<sup>95</sup> Secretary Windham had also received a message from Commissioner Griffin of Pietersburg and Pretoria, who wrote that the followers of Venda dynasts such as “Mphephu, Tshivhasa, and Ramabulana are to a great extent, an unknown quantity.”<sup>96</sup>

The uncertain situation in Zoutpansberg in late 1902 also highlighted one way in which this era of Venda history has been mischaracterized in scholarly historiographies. As mentioned earlier, Ha-Ramabulana is often conflated with the entire Venda polity. This is also why the Mphephu War (1898) is typically understood to have symbolized the *de facto* end of political autonomy in Venda. And yet, four years later, even the agents of the colonial enterprise—men of considerable experience—were obliged to accept just how little influence they exercised over most of the confederacy. Indeed, as this study demonstrates, the process of colonization did not begin for Venda people until they were disarmed in late 1902 and early 1903.

Native Commissioner Wheelwright offered a similar observation ahead of a meeting with Venda Vhahosi in late November 1902. In a report to his superiors in Johannesburg, he wrote that Vhavenda “are a strange people, and have had practically little or no handling.”<sup>97</sup> Wheelwright summoned Venda Chiefs to a meeting at the new offices of the Native Commissioner. Situated at a

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<sup>93</sup> C.A. Wheelwright/ Zoutpansberg, 1 January 1903, SNA 39/891/02.

<sup>94</sup> C.A. Wheelwright/ Zoutpansberg, 1 January 1903, SNA 39/891/02.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Native Commissioner/Pietersburg 11 October 1902, CO 879/78/505/271.

<sup>97</sup> C.A. Wheelwright, to Native Secretary/Zoutpansberg, 22 November 1902, SNA 76/2592/674/02.

height of 3500ft, just below the summit of a mountain known as Tshanowa, the colonial office at Sibasa would serve as the site where Vhavenda would surrender their guns. The name chosen for the outpost was a corruption of the lineal title Tshivhasa, the dynast in whose territory it was located. At the Sibasa office, Vhavenda of all ranks also encountered Mr. H.C. Stiebel, the new sub-Native Commissioner, another one of the men to whom their chiefs were to render tribute in the form of taxes. It was immediately clear to the Native Commissioner that Vhavenda were unfamiliar with the embodied performance of colonial subjecthood. Wheelwright observed that “their manners and demeanor seemed good” and that “we should have them properly in hand . . . in a very short time.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, Native Commissioners also seemed to have regarded the disarmament operation as a prudent conjuncture to begin the process of assimilating Venda people into the British empire in Southern Africa.

Meanwhile, the English-language press represented the voices of those white civilians whose anxieties had given impetus to Ordinance No. 13 in the first instance. Journalists covered the disarmament as it transpired. The prevailing sentiment expressed in their reports is that the campaign itself served as a compelling illustration of the extent to which “native policy” in the pre-South African War Transvaal was out of step with those parts of South Africa already absorbed into Britain’s imperial sphere of influence. One observer described it as “unthinkable that natives should be allowed to roam the country armed with modern weapons . . . whilst white men are deprived of rifles.”<sup>99</sup> The same report goes on to note the “medieval” pedigree of the weapons in the possession of “the near 400 natives” who presented themselves at the government offices, “each man [bearing] a gun—and such guns!”<sup>100</sup> The guns are described as “elephant-killers of venerable antiquity, smooth bores, muzzle-

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<sup>98</sup> C.A. Wheelwright, to Native Secretary/Zoutpansberg, 22 November 1902, SNA 76/2592/674/02

<sup>99</sup> The Native and His Gun: Wholesale Surrender of Aged Weapons, *The Rand Daily Mail*, 26 September 1902.

<sup>100</sup> The Native and His Gun, 26 September 1902.

loaders, Sniders dating from Crimea, Martinis, the British short carbine, and at least one Mauser found room in the collection.” In the reporter’s estimation, “ninety percent” of the arms so surrendered “might have been used by the voortrekkers of old.” Ironically, when the operation was complete, this estimate proved to be a generous overstatement of the percentage of technologically modern weapons confiscated from Vhavenda. Indeed, the same writer asked, “where are the latest patterns known to be in the possession of the natives?” What they found most striking, however, “was the absence of modern rifles from the armoury,” especially in light of all that the correspondent had “heard of Mausers and Lee-Enfields swaggering about in the charge of black men.”<sup>101</sup>

Another journalist lauded the execution of the disarmament operation as compelling proof that the era of mismanagement and neglect in Transvaal had come to an end now that the British empire was firmly in command. The northern Transvaal, once “the hotbed of native insubordination under the old regime,” was now the stage of a “peaceful little drama,” as Africans “submitted to the new order without protest and relinquished long-cherished guns.”<sup>102</sup> Potentates such as Mmaleboho from the neighboring Bagananwa polity and Mphephu, “who threw down the gauntlet to the Boer government . . . are all coming in without a murmur.” Despite its early success, the writer noted another less favorable aspect of the disarmament campaign—cash payments to African gun owners. “The native smiles and sings merrily” about the prospect of “ready cash for his weapons.” This sudden windfall supplied Africans with the means “to pay taxes if he chooses and avoid labour for another period.” Ultimately, the piece concluded, “however much [Vhavenda] cherished their arms, they hate work more than they love [their] guns.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> “Inkos! Bayete!” *Zoutpansberg Review*, 6 October 1902, TAB 38/1299/02.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Wheelwright provided a detailed official account of the disarmament operation in Zoutpansberg. In a report dated 10 January 1903, the Native Commissioner wrote that the Venda Chiefs he had summoned to Sibasa had “expressed a readiness to comply and proceeded at once to hand in the weapons they had.”<sup>104</sup> Very little ammunition was handed in. Wheelwright explains the reason for this was that Vhavenda had disposed of it themselves. As they “approach the places where they were to surrender,” Venda people “blasted away in volleys,” with the purpose, “in their own words . . . of enjoying the pleasure of firing off their last charges.”<sup>105</sup> Someone also turned in “a certain amount of very inferior powder . . . which I destroyed at once.” Because the disarmament of Zoutpansberg was only complete after similar operations in Lydenburg, Pretoria, Waterberg and Rustenburg, the commissioner’s report included statistical data that lends itself to comparative analysis. When Wheelwright determined that the operation in his district was finally complete, 30,842 firearms of various sorts had been confiscated. This figure amounted to more than 60% of the final tally of guns confiscated as a result of Ordinance No. 13 of 1902. Likewise, Vhavenda received £37,274 for their guns, an amount roughly equivalent to 60% of the cash payments earmarked for the entire disarmament program.<sup>106</sup>

The records of the disarmament campaign also revealed the wide variety of firearms in the possession of Vhavenda by the 1900s. Venda people apparently had access to several generations of gun technology. Wheelwright and his sub-commissioners identified, “Lee Medfords, Winchester repeaters, Mausers, Martinis, Wesley Richards,” among the weapons they collected along with designs from the mid-1800s and earlier such as, “Tower Muskets, Brown Besses, and muzzle loading revolvers.”<sup>107</sup> The commissioner described one particularly notable artifact, “a very large flintlock

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<sup>104</sup> C.A. Wheelwright, to Native Secretary/Zoutpansberg, 10 January 1903, SNA 38/1299/891/03

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> This sum has the purchasing power of £4.1 million in contemporary currency per <https://www.measuringworth.com/>

<sup>107</sup> C.A. Wheelwright, to Native Secretary/Zoutpansberg, 10 January 1903, SNA 38/1299/891/02

musket” with a barrel measuring “over six feet in length.” The khosi who turned in this weapon identified his predecessor as the one who purchased it for the handsome price of £100. The khosi, who Wheelwright identified as “Malitze,” reported that this gun was described as a “cannon” and that it was only fired once, “because it consumed more powder than they could afford.”<sup>108</sup> All told, slightly more than 5% of the firearms that Vhavenda surrendered were logged as serviceable and technologically modern. Despite a general anxiety among colonial administrators and civilians that Vhavenda and other Africans surrendered inoperable weapons while hiding modern breach loaders for later use, Wheelwright’s report included insights that contextualize the ratio of modern to antiquated guns collected in Zoutpansberg. “Although several people describe many of the arms handed in as useless,” he writes, “it should be born in mind that kaffir fighting as a rule takes place in bushy and mountainous country where they can creep to a very close distance on the good cover.”<sup>109</sup> Consistent with the type of close-quarters mountain warfare that was the hallmark of the Venda way

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

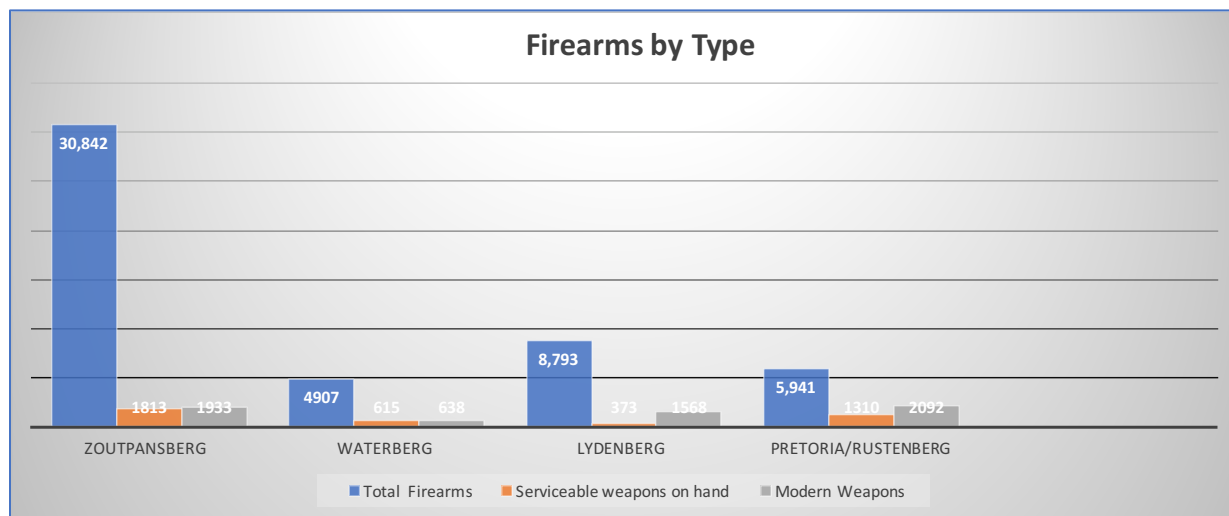


Figure 4: Graphic representation of confiscated firearms. Source: National Archives of South Africa (1903 - 1904)

of war, “a charge fired from a twelve, ten, eight or forbore loaded with a variety of missiles is quite if not more dangerous in its effect than the most modern of arms.”<sup>110</sup>

Wheelwright and his subordinates also use the occasion of the disarmament as an opportunity to impress upon Vhavenda of all ranks that it was the government that determined who was and was not eligible for gun ownership. The evidence explored in chapter three indicates that commoners and aristocrats could own guns during the era of confederacy, and that individual firearms were regarded as the personal property of its owner. In this way, disarmament symbolized both a loss of personal property, but also, the end of an era of political autonomy in Venda. Wheelwright acknowledged that the campaign was successful due in large measure to the “earnest way” in which Venda Vhahosi “took to the matter at hand” and mobilized their followers to comply with the government’s instructions. Thus, as a gesture to acknowledge their cooperation, Wheelwright instructed his sub commissioners to leave 315 arms in the hands of selected leaders. The scope of this “privilege” was limited to “chiefs

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

and one or two responsible indunas.” He reasoned that “the chiefs would appreciate,” the courtesy that recognized their role in bringing Vhavenda peacefully under white [British] rule.<sup>111</sup>

The Native Commissioner also remarked on a subtle but discernable shift in the attitudes of Vhavenda after the disarmament was complete. Back in November 1902, Wheelwright and his colleagues understood the Zoutpansberg as a place that was new to white control and Vhavenda as people who had been subject to “very little handling.”<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, Vhavenda willingly gave up their guns. In so doing, they also received a larger portion of the compensation funds set aside by the Native Secretary than any other district. Indeed, the total paid to African gun owners in Zoutpansberg was greater than the sums paid in the other four districts combined. Yet, their guns likely symbolized something more. Charles Springwood elaborates on the embodied meanings that are often associated with gun ownership. Firearms, he writes, are “conspicuous objects of power and resistance.”<sup>113</sup> Vhavenda clearly constituted “a well-armed group,” whose ownership of so large an armory also communicated “their ability to flout national or even international authority.”<sup>114</sup> Now, this was no longer true. Perhaps it stands to reason then, that by the time the disarmament operation was complete in early 1903, Wheelwright detected that the “tone of independence” that he noticed just months earlier “had disappeared from the people.” The Native Commissioner further stated that others had shared this same observation.<sup>115</sup>

When the surrender of firearms was finally complete, Transvaal Lt. Governor Lawley sent a letter of congratulations to the Native Affairs Secretary in Johannesburg. Lawley wrote, “having read the records with great interest, I desired to place on the record my appreciation of the admirable

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> C.A. Wheelwright, to Native Secretary/Zoutpansberg, 22 November 1902, SNA 76/2592/674/02.

<sup>113</sup> Charles Springwood, *Open Fire: Understanding Global Gun Cultures* (London, 2006), 20.

<sup>114</sup> Springwood, *Open Fire*, 20.

<sup>115</sup> C.A. Wheelwright, to Native Secretary/Zoutpansberg, 10 January 1903, SNA 38/1299/891/02.

manner in which the disarmament of the natives has been effected.” Despite its cost, which exceeded the original estimates by about 15%, Lt. Gov. Lawley’s message emphasized the “great tact on the part of those called upon to execute” the disarmament. Lawley also asked that it be “conveyed to the Native Commissioners who are responsible for its successful performance my congratulations on the manner in which they succeeded in obtaining from the natives a very great number of rifles.”<sup>116</sup>

### The Emergence of a New Order

The Venda confederacy was not subjugated in a valorous military confrontation with whites. Nor was it conquered all at once. And yet, the events of late-1902 and early-1903 symbolized an inflection point in the emergence of a new colonial order. In the previous section, I drew on the official archive of the disarmament as written by the colonial officials who conducted the operation. There is no corresponding textual record of African responses to disarmament. For if such an archive did indeed exist, then perhaps there would be some way to corroborate Native Commissioner Wheelwright’s observation that Vhavenda lost the sense of their own sovereignty when they gave up their firearms. Of course, such a record of African perspectives might also prove Wheelwright’s observation as little more than the false projections of the colonial gaze. Still, traces of the Vhavenda experience of disarmament have survived in fragmentary form and preserved in ethnographic texts and oral vernacular testimony. Unlike the forensic precision of the Secretary of Native Affairs archive, these alternative sources offered a glimpse into the political affairs of Vhavenda in the aftermath of disarmament. These materials preserve the voices of now diminished Venda leaders. They also suggest that as Vhavenda surrendered their guns, Native Commissioners did more than just record statistical data for their reports. Considered in the context of what we already know about the disarmament, these traces of information represent something of a hidden transcript of messages and instructions

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<sup>116</sup> A. Lawley, Lieutenant Governor, Transvaal, 11 March 1903, SNA 39/12999/1903.



that colonial officers such as C.A. Wheelwright communicated to surrendering Venda leaders, messages that the Native Commissioner did not deem to include in the reports that he sent to his superiors in Johannesburg. These communications offer insights into the new discourses of political power in early colonial Venda. They also offer hints about the ways in which Venda leaders attempted to master the new language of power now that they possessed neither the means nor the liberty to use violence as a medium of political discourse as they had before.

The testimony of a Muvenda man named Tshikalange Makuya is one part of this incomplete and unofficial transcript of early colonial rule in Venda. In 1938, Tshikalange gave an interview to Daniel Lalumbe, a Muvenda researcher working on behalf of the Native Affairs Department (NAD) of the Union of South Africa. In the interview, Tshikalange recites the story of how he became the Mahosi of Ha-Makuya. In his words, Tshikalange also told Lalumbe how Native Commissioners leveraged the biographical information about Venda Chiefs collected during the disarmament to displace *vhomakhadzi* as the arbiters of chiefly succession claims. Khosi Tshikalange began this facet of his story in 1902, in the immediate aftermath of the South African War, when his late father Matshikiri was still recognized as the Khosi of Ha-Makuya. The transcript of the interview read, when the “English had beaten the Boers . . . [and the English] then ordered us all to give up our guns.”<sup>117</sup> As instructed, “we carried our guns to Tshanowa,” to the office of the Native Commissioner, where “they burn[ed] them.” This last remark refers to 29,013 of the 30,842 surrendered firearms that were incinerated and buried near the commissioner’s office at Sibasa. When Matshikiri returned from Sibasa, the chief entrusted the “sovereigns that he received as compensation” into the care of his third son, Tshikalange. Importantly, Matshikiri also passed along the instructions that he had received from

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<sup>117</sup> Tshikalange, *The History of Ha-Makuya*, (Pretoria, 1944), 64.

the Native Commissioner about what to do with those monies. The men at the commissioner's office instructed Matshikiri to keep the currency and "use it later to pay tax."<sup>118</sup>

The order to pay taxes came just months after the arms surrender in the form of Ordinance No. 20, of 1902, also known as the Native Tax Ordinance. By April, when the first tranche of annual tax was due, Matshikiri, who was already advanced in years, no longer possessed the vitality for the trip to Sibasa. Tshikalange told Laumbe that he produced the money from the sale of their guns and offered it to his elder brothers so that they could pay the tax on behalf of their father.<sup>119</sup> Both of his elder sons, Mashila, the first born, and Phophi, the second, appear to have been timid men, as both refused their father's instructions. We have some insight into their thinking based on the historical narrative of a man named Ramudzulu Erdman, the younger brother of Tshikalange Makuya and son of Matshikiri. Erdman shared his interpretation of the history of Makuya with the Muvenda ethnographer W.M.D. Phophi for a Tshivenda historical book titled, *Mafhungo na Nganea dza Tshulu* (History and Stories of Tshulu). Erdman told Phophi that the two eldest sons of then Khosi Matshikiri seem to have convinced themselves that these summonses from the Native Commissioners were but pretenses to ambush them and place them under arrest.<sup>120</sup> Thus, the responsibility for traveling to the commissioner's office at Sibasa fell to Tshikalange.

Considered together, the testimonies of Tshikalange and his brother Erdman indicated that Native Commissioners used the April 1902 call for taxes as an opportunity to create a register of tax receipts, but also of the men who paid them. Tshikalange explained that this record informed the decisions that future colonial officers would make about the eligibility of aspirants to Venda chieftaincy. In his book, Phophi also described a situation in 1902 as one in which the native

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<sup>118</sup> Tshikalange, *The History of Ha-Makuya*, 64.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> W.M.D. Phophi, *Mafhungo na Nganea dza Tshulu*, 66.

secretariate and its men on the ground attempted to come to grips with the intricacies of Venda politics. The office of the Native Commissioner recognized a two-tiered hierarchy among Venda leaders. At the top were the Singo, “Tshivhasa, Mphaphuli and Rambuda,” while potentates like Nelwamondo of Lwamondo and Madzivhandila of Tshakhuma “were regarded as headmen” who governed satellite chiefdoms cleaved to Singo overlords.<sup>121</sup> It also appears that it was during these early encounters with the bureaucratic apparatus of the British crown that Makwarela did much to cast himself as a man whose words carried weight with other Venda rulers. For example, when Tshikalange visited the colonial office at Sibasa, he did so in the company of Makwarela, who apparently vouched for the former as a responsible headman. Phophi’s book also provided us with some hints about the disposition of at least one of the 315 weapons that Wheelwright elected to leave in the possession of certain Venda leaders. He wrote that with Makwarela’s endorsement, the Native Commissioner gave Tshikalange a gun with an inscription that read, “King of Makuya.” Tshikalange also received a supply of ammunition, which he was to use to protect crops from wild animals.<sup>122</sup>

Tshikalange continued to pay the annual taxes. He also paid regular visits to Makwarela’s court at Mbilwi, a task that Tshikalange’s elder brothers also refused. And, when Matshikiri died, likely in 1904, it was Tshikalange rather than his brothers who traveled to Mbilwi to report the news to Makwarela. As discussed earlier, during the era of confederation, it was established custom that the death of a Khosi should be reported first to the musanda of the most senior dynastic lineage to which the departed leader was aligned. It merits at least brief mention then that Venda leaders continued to observe these elements of intra-dynastic protocol under the new and still evolving colonial system. In response to the news, Makwarela dispatched his own messengers to accompany Tshikalange and his entourage to register Matshikiri’s disappearance with the authorities at Sibasa. There, the Native

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<sup>121</sup> Phophi, *Mafhungo na Nganea dza Tshulu*, 65.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

Commissioner apparently endorsed those vestiges of the old system when he instructed Makwarela's messengers "to go back to Mbilwi and tell Mphaphuli that [Tshikalange] is the new chief of Ha-Makuya."<sup>123</sup> Although Tshikalange had two elder brothers, each of whom having stronger claims to the chiefship, it was his name that appeared in the register of chiefs and potential successors. Moreover, it was Tshikalange who enjoyed the endorsement of Makwarela Mphaphuli, who had already established himself as a "responsible" chief who could be useful as Native Commissioners and resident magistrates and other officials went about the work of transforming the once independent Venda Confederacy into a colonial possession.

The testimony of Khosi Tshikalange and the narrative that Phophi synthesized from the recollections of the chief's brother Erdman enrich our understanding of a critical conjuncture in the subjugation of Venda. They also captured echoes, however faint, of the voices of some African leaders as they attempted to navigate a changed social and political landscape. Read in conjunction with the colonial archive, the picture of disarmament that emerges from these sources is one in which Vhavenda lost much more than their right to possess and deploy the power of firearms technology. These records were silent about the experiences of Vhomakhadzi across Venda, who watched as white men usurped the right to inaugurate chiefs, a prerogative that had belong to such women for more than a century. Nor do the official or supplemental transcripts reflect the experiences of commoners, who bore the brunt of the changes wrought by the imposition of colonial rule. Yet, if the story of how Tshikalange came to occupy the office of chief is representative of the experiences of other Venda leaders, some observations about the disarmament campaign of 1902 merit mention. First, the cash payments authorized in Ordinance No. 13 of 1902 were designed not merely to entice Vhavenda to voluntarily surrender their guns, but also to familiarize Vhavenda with the process of paying cash taxes

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

to a white-run colonial state. Second, Tshikalange's words illustrated how the colonial administration linked the payment of taxes to the selection of chiefs.

It also merits mention that Makuya was among the territories that King Ligegise Tshivhasa captured in 1897 during the Mphaphuli Wars. Ligegise's death in 1901 destabilized the Tshivhasa dynasty. It seems likely that Makwarela seized on the departure of his great rival to rebuild the relationship between himself and the leadership of Ha-Makuya. Crucially, in a departure from the past, when disputes of the right to appoint chiefs was settled on the field of battle, it would appear that Makwarela had already begun to modify his strategies in response to changing circumstances. In his testimony to the Native Land Commission in 1907, Makwarela specifically named Thengwe, Ha-Muvhimbi, Makonde and Makuya among the areas that he sought to recover through the good offices of native affairs bureaucracy. Of these areas lost to him in war, Makwarela told commissioner Hogge, "I should like these lands returned to me," and that he had previously "informed the Native Commissioner about the matter." Makwarela continued, that if these chiefs were placed under him, "as a paramount chief [,] the government would get its taxes paid more regularly."<sup>124</sup> Thus, it appeared that for Makwarela, ever the adroit tactician, positioning himself as a regional paramount was one way to regain some of the lands lost during the Mphaphuli Wars.

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<sup>124</sup> E.H. Hogge to Native Secretary/Pretoria, 9 April 1907, SAB 202/17/1260/07.

## Conclusion

The first part of this chapter drew upon oral traditions, vernacular histories, and missionary archives to reconstruct the Mphaphuli Wars. This conflict that began in the early 1880s as a personal dispute among the sons of Mphaphuli King Ranwedzi-Ngolo eventually expanded into a proxy war that ensnared monarchs and chiefs from across Zoutpansberg. Part two returned to Venda in the immediate aftermath of the South African War, when the ascendant British crown ordered the disarmament of Africans in the old Transvaal. This section drew upon the archival record of the disarmament campaign of late 1903 and early 1904, to better understand how British officials finally managed to assert control over the selection and appointment of Venda chiefs. By 1904, the government replaced the time-honored process of ritual inauguration, under the supervision of aristocratic women, with its own bureaucratic rituals of colonial subjecthood. Considered together, these two discrete narrative arcs illustrated the changing dynamics of political power in Venda during the last decades of confederal independence. Whereas the Mphaphuli Wars underscored the role of violence as a medium of intra-dynastic statecraft, the disarmament campaign of the early 1900s demonstrated the parameters of a new political dispensation, one in which leaders no longer derived their powers from the effective mobilization of military resources, nor from the legitimizing endorsement of *vhomakhadzi*, but rather, from the emergent colonial state.

## EPILOGUE

This dissertation has made three central arguments. First, rituals comprised the scaffolding of the security architecture that Venda people mobilized in defense of their own sovereignty. During the nineteenth century, Vhavenda harnessed the power of rituals to structure their quotidian affairs, but also to preserve the equilibrium between the worlds of the living and that of the dead. Many of those repertoires of embodied practice survive into the present and continue to retain their salience for Venda people in twenty-first century South Africa. While women from the ranks of the elite controlled rituals associated with the selection and inauguration of chiefs, the second argument advanced in these pages addressed the broader role of African women in the preservation of Venda communities. This study has foregrounded women's roles as the guardians of ancestrally located rituals at the center of the social, political, and martial lives of Venda people. Lastly, this study argued that Venda people, males and females, commoners, and aristocrats, all contributed to the preservation of a cultural assemblage of knowledge, materials, practices, ideologies and objects that I have described as the Venda Armory. And it was this armory that accounted for the long tenure of political independence that extended beyond that of any other indigenous polity within the borders of present-day South Africa.

These central themes are developed and explored in the five substantive chapters of the dissertation. Chapter one traced the origins of Venda language and elaborated on important facets of Venda identity and material culture. Tshivenda developed likely during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from an amalgamation of Sotho and Karanga (Western Shona) languages, based on the coterminous appearance of Letaba style ceramics. Although archaeologists tend to discourage direct correlations between cultural groupings and specific expressions of material culture, this chapter also examined the evidence that substantiates this chronology for the origins of Venda language. Chapter one also explored the development of social stratification in Venda. During the eighteenth century, a

branch of the Rozvi empire of central and southern Zimbabwe migrated south across the Limpopo River and settled in Zoutpansberg. These newcomers, who were known as the Singo, or Vhasenzi, established a tributary state organized around the stone walled settlement at Dzata. In less than a century, the Singo introduced elements of Rozvi-style civil administration into Zoutpansberg. Though they also subjugated aboriginal Tshivenda-speaking peoples, the Singo abandoned Karanga in favor of Tshivenda, and subjected themselves to aboriginal initiation rites. The collapse of the Singo-led tributary state in circa 1760 AD gave impetus to a new era of politics governed by mutually autonomous chiefdoms that were bound together by shared language, ritual practices, and material culture into a Venda Confederacy. Finally, chapter one chronicled the violent upheavals of the early 1800s, an era commemorated in Tshivenda lore as the *mushavho* or times of flight. Venda people developed new practices to protect themselves against predatory raids from neighboring African states. From agriculture to settlement patterns, the adoption of encrypted court speech, to the cultivation of symbiotic relationships with local wildlife, Vhavenda responses to the insecurity of the 1800s formed the basis of a security architecture described in this dissertation as the Venda Armory.

Chapter two explored the role of firearms and the social contexts in which some Venda people adopted gun technology. It also examined the relationships between discrete nodes of the Venda Confederacy and the whites who settled the frontier town of Schoemansdal and its environs. Boers supplied Africans with guns and hired them to hunt big game on their behalf. African hunters used firearms to enhance their own repertoires of hunting knowledge to harvest ivory and pelts with greater efficiency. By the 1860s, the Boers shifted their efforts into the production of *swart ivor*, a euphemism for black child slaves. Archival records of the British Parliament proved that Boers used “apprenticeship” to disguise their slave raiding activities. There is scant evidence however, that Boers trained any of the “apprenticed” captives as child hunters. Thus, the major contribution of this chapter



is its substantive revision of the alluring but ultimately unsubstantiated trope of the swart skut in South Africanist historical literature.

Venda people eventually drove the Boers from their town at Schoemansdal which survived for scarcely two decades. Chapter three recounted a conflict that other historians have characterized as an attempt by the Boers to reassert their influence in Zoutpansberg and punish the Venda king believed to have orchestrated the rebellion that resulted in Schoemansdal's destruction in July 1867. Drawing on evidence recovered from popular histories written in Tshivenda, oral traditions and missionary archives, this chapter reconstructs a confrontation between Venda leaders and invaders from the Swazi and Gaza-Ngoni states that Vhavenda commemorate as the Mabunyu War of 1869. Although Boers had clear stakes in the outcome of the conflict, chapter three recasts this war as the product of confederal Venda politics. This characterization breaks with another element of historiographical canon in which the Swazi and Gaza-Ngoni soldiers invaded Venda on behalf of the Transvaal Republic and its representatives. The invaders, known to Vhavenda as Mabunyu, attacked Tshipwarapwara, Lwamondo, Tshakhuma, and Dzanani, in search of cattle, grain and land upon which they might settle. What they received at each of these chiefdoms, however, was an object lesson in the versatility and potency of the Venda Armory. The soldiers who invaded Venda in 1869 came from the same highly militarized states who drove Vhavenda from their homes in the flatlands into the mountains during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, an era that Vhavenda remember as the *mushavho* or the "times of flight" (see the introduction). In addition to the defensive tactics developed to protect people and property during the *mushavho* (see chapter one), Venda people had upgraded their military arsenal with firearms, which they used to repulse the Mabunyu invasion. At the center of the story of this war was a *muvhango* or contested succession at Ha-Tshivhasa following the death of a monarch. Ultimately, the chapter argues that it was the political disunity within the

Tshivhasa kingship rather than the interests of the Transvaal Republic that attracted the Swazi and Gaza-Ngoni to Zoutpansberg in 1869.

Chapter four explores the gendered use of violence and warfare as central features of intra-dynastic statecraft in Venda during the 1880s. Drawing on evidence recovered from Tshivenda-language literature, this chapter recounts key junctures in the careers of several Venda women. The death of a monarch exposed the foundational structures that bound communities into a Venda confederation. The succession dispute at Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda offered insights about how a powerful female leader leveraged her customary authorities to install her preferred successor. She also leveraged her role as the senior wife of another equally powerful monarch to mobilize military support to help her selectee to resist the challenge from a rival claimant to the throne at Ha-Mutsha and Tsianda. Meanwhile, at Ha-Tshivhasa, two senior women from the royal family frustrated the ambitions of their king. The ensuing conflict highlights how the ritual and customary authorities entrusted to Venda women were sufficient to constrain the prerogatives of even the most powerful Venda dynasts.

Unlike chapters two through four, chapter five narrates two discrete narrative arcs in the history of Venda. The first of these used missionary archives to reconstruct the Mphaphuli Wars, a conflict between two princes for the right to one day succeed their father and attain the mantles of Mphaphuli. The detailed account of this decades long conflict preserved in missionary archives offers a vantage into the tactical features of the Venda Armory. Significantly, as the last occasion in which Venda monarchical powers used warfare to adjudicate overlapping claims to chiefly office, the Mphaphuli Wars also marked a break with the traditions of the past century of confederal politics. The second part of this chapter returns to Venda in the aftermath of the South African War (1899-1902) to reconstruct the British campaign to disarm Vhavenda and their neighbors in the Transvaal. The disarmament campaign of 1903 and 1904 generated a detailed inventory of the number and types

of firearms that Venda people had stockpiled in their armory of knowledge and material resources during the second half of the nineteenth century. This section draws on archival documents and ethnographic literature to better understand how British officials used the disarmament campaign to insinuate colonial power into the selection of Venda chiefs, a responsibility that had been the prerogative of Venda women during the era of confederal independence. Considered together, these discrete epochs chronicle and explain the transformation of the Venda polity from an independent black state governed by customary practice into a possession that completed Britain's conquest of territory that would become present-day South Africa.

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