

## Chapter 9

# The Distortion of Vhavenḁa Cultural Conception of Royalty and Governance and the Incorporation of Venḁa into South Africa

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### Introduction

The description of pre-colonial *vuhosi*<sup>1</sup> of Vhavenḁa gives one a sense that African values of custom, culture and tradition are core elements that define the institution. However, by the close of the 1970s these core values had experienced dilution, especially, after the defeat of Aḁilali Mphephu in the 'Mphephu-Boer War' of 1898-1899 and the subjugation of Vhavenḁa, which gradually eroded the 'essence of *vuhosi* (Mahosi, 2000). Following this, in 1979, Vhavenḁa area became a nominal 'independent' 'Republic of Venda' ('RoV') under *Khosikhulu* Patrick Ramabulana Mphephu, an addition to Transkei, Bophuthatswana and the Ciskei (as TBVC states), wherein *mahosi* were the main government role players (Heroldt & Dombo, 1992). During this period, poor socio-economic and political conditions of rural Venḁa, exposed *vuhosi* and institutions to exploitation by the apartheid system, which enticed them to be agents of the homeland policy. This compromised the relationship between *mahosi* and subjects. During that period, *mahosi* were generally absent from their royal headquarters, attending to their responsibilities as Westminster-type ministers of the homeland. This distorted their image and dignity in the eyes of their subjects. As crass materialism crept in, they descended into ritual murder, believing it made them invincible and powerful. This chapter discusses how the environment affected the relationship between *mahosi* and subjects, and eventually distorted Vhavenḁa's cultural conception of royalty and governance. The chapter closes by looking at how the post-1994 government could not effectively integrate *vuhosi* and institutions into governance, regardless of that provision in the new dispensation.

The above developments motivated the current author to write on *vuhosi* and institutions *vis-à-vis* the homeland policy. Furthermore, some government officials (Lestrade, 1932; Myburgh, 1985; Stayt, 1968; Van Warmelo, 1935) researched *vuhosi* for the purpose of a segregation policy, using the Eurocentric perspective, which unfortunately glorified

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<sup>1</sup> *Vuhosi* is the Tshivendḁa equivalence of government's "traditional leadership". The current author preferred to use it instead of the Eurocentric version because their meanings are not similar in significance. For the same reason, this author prefers *mahosi* (plural, and *khosi*, singular) instead of "traditional leader(s)".

the role of *vhuhosi* and its institutions within white South Africa's political development, claiming that the policy benefitted Native South Africans. In contrast, the current author has underpinned this chapter on the Afrocentric perspective, which has the potential to rewrite and reconstruct distorted historical facts about *vhuhosi* and its institutions of Vhaventḁa. Importantly, Afrocentricity has the propensity to provide an alternative perspective (Mahosi, 2020; Shai, 2018; Mazama, 2003) on *vhuhosi* and institutions of Vhaventḁa's within the erstwhile homeland policy. Furthermore, the current author consulted literature with an Afrocentric theoretical lens from History, Political Science, and other cognate disciplines to assist in the discussion (Shai, 2018; Halala, 2011; Mazama, 2003; Modupe, 2003; Mamdani, 1996). Lastly, the author does not wholly reject the Western perspective, but challenges its falsified universal applicability and dominance, especially on the subject of *vhuhosi* and its institutions during colonialism and apartheid.

## The Situation in Ventrḁa at Nominal Independence

The author believes that it is important to note that at the time of Ventrḁa's self-government, and later the 'independence' of the 'RoV' on 13 of September 1979, the area was largely underdeveloped. The general Vhaventḁa, either practised peasant farming or were employed as 'migrant' labourers in the urban areas of South Africa (Musitḁha, 2012). The only evidence of urbanisation was a small business centre and homeland administration, in the town of Thohoyandou, which gradually became a symbol that transcended traditional and cultural life, when some of the Vhaventḁa became attracted to the urban life. The Ventrḁa homeland administration accorded the small town the status of capital town along the lines of apartheid-imposed Westminster-type of governance. This attracted rural Vhaventḁa to settle in Thohoyandou. Butler, Rotberg and Adam (1977) agree that the changing rural landscape affected the relationship between *mahosi*, communities and their dependency on *mahosi* for the acquisition of land, their socio-economic conditions, and the intra- and inter-relationship of traditional communal *dzunde* (traditional Vhaventḁa land usage practice) system. In other words, the basic attachment to rural life under *mahosi* had experienced a level of transformation (Mahosi, 2000).

Meanwhile, the migration from rural life to urban life equally saw a massive inflow of Vhaventḁa from the urban areas who were dumped into the homeland by the segregated system. This caused a demand for land and a dramatic decline in land for agricultural production and grazing land for livestock, overcrowding and the overwhelming dependency on the reduced earnings accrued from the migrant labour system (Khorommbi, 2001). This contrasted the early years of sole dependency on the mercy of *mahosi* for land for settlement, grazing and cultivation (Khorommbi, 2001). Essentially, in the homeland<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In the apartheid South Africa context, "homelands" referred to specially designated areas for different African linguistic and cultural groups. Ten such areas were created for the ten different language groups.

government some of the powerful and influential *mahosi* in government positions spent most of their time in T̄hohoyandou, instead of at their royal headquarters, which resulted in the gradual disconnect between *mahosi* and communities. These changes gradually sacrificed African values of traditionalism, customs and cultural practices at the altar of political expediency. The section that follows discusses the impact of the dualism of *vhuhosi* responsibilities on royalty and governance, due to the inherent absenteeism from royal headquarters (Musitha, 2012).

### **Royalty, Governance and Absenteeism: Patrick Mphephu's Yoke of Dualism and Favouritism**

According to Van Rensburg (2007:31), a core characteristic of leadership is its willingness, transparency and accountability to its followers. This is characteristic of the essence of the leader's acceptance of responsibility for the legitimate concerns of their followers. The current author posits that this is possible only under legitimate authority rather than absolute power reminiscent of the 'RoV', where legitimate authority had become oligarchic power. Biko (1996) conscientises the reader that because of the apartheid system it was difficult to talk with authority on African culture, as espoused by African value systems, culture, traditional practices and the relationship between *mahosi* and subjects. Kunnie (*City Press*, Voices and careers, 15 September 2019) notes that Biko was critical of the way the apartheid capitalist system viewed and treated Black people, as devoid of human needs and feelings. This statement refers to *mahosi* who had become salaried workers of the homeland system and agents of the apartheid policy of racial segregation. In turn, segregation tarnished the image of *mahosi* as symbols of traditional authority, by changing the foundation of social and administrative justice of African value systems and their subjects, and distorted the moral fabric associated with traditional *vhuhosi*. Lonsdale (1998:11) accentuates this thus, '... Africans have had the misfortune, throughout history, to be objects of the generally ignorant or arrogant actions of others, and mimic-men themselves, not actors on their own account'.

Amidst these misgivings *mahosi* became transformed into servants, absent and dislodged from their subjects, by apartheid, which imposed paternalistic views and policies on them, another dent on their image. Musitha (2012:37) calls this a 'de-tribalisation' process, which resulted in gradual 'de-legitimation', because *mahosi* spent most of their lives in the homeland government and divorced themselves from their vaunted pillars of African culture and traditionalism. Therefore, illegitimate acquiescence had replaced legitimate authority such that this diluted the traditional bond between them and their subjects. Essentially, they became weakened by modernisation and de-communalisation due to the emergence of Vhavent̄a homeland (SA K20 E5/38[22], Socio-economic development of Native Areas Commission [Tomlinson Report]: Record of