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Chieftaincy succession disputes among the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane in Hammanskraal, 1962 to 1994

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Multiple chieftaincy succession disputes characterised the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane community in the Majaneng area, Hammanskraal, between 1962 and 1994. This chapter explores the historical roots of the disputes through oral interviews with both political and cultural brokers in the community. It also builds on some archival materials from the Bophuthatswana regime, during the bantustan era. It argues that the roots of this regime stretch back to the British system of indirect rule, pioneered by Lord Frederick Lugard in the 1800s, and later recalibrated into the bantustan system by the apartheid regime after it took power in 1948.

The bantustan system was established in the 1970s within the framework of colonial and apartheid laws. Under this system, chiefs were appointed and deposed to ensure allegiance and weed out rebelliousness; often the authorities were less concerned about the effects of their approach to succession issues in the affected

chieftaincy. Colonialism, apartheid and their progeny, the bantustan system, saw Africans as differentiated by language, culture and custom, therefore naturally belonging to separate political units or chieftaincies. The ongoing succession dispute in the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane chieftaincy can be seen as largely a product of the insidious effects of indirect rule in the form of the Bophuthatswana bantustan.

This chapter will also look at preceding research into the chieftaincy dispute in this community, for comparative purposes. To this end, it will focus on the findings of Sarah Godsell, whose work has considerable thematic overlaps with the current study.

The origins of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane (of Majaneng, Hammanskraal)

According to tradition, the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane originated in Moletlane, Zebediela, in what is today known as the Limpopo province. Their founder was Lebelo Seroto (Kekana). Lebelo was the younger brother of the reigning chief of AmaNdebele of Zebediela, Numungebe (Mamokebe), according to the then Department of Native Affairs government ethnologist Dr NJ Van Warmelo (1944). Because of his fluency in the Dutch language, Lebelo was said to be the middleman between the chieftaincy and the Voortrekkers, between whom relations were cordial. The Voortrekkers had arrived in the Zebediela area in the 1840s and 1850s. Van Warmelo (1944) reports that his informants mentioned the name Lebese (Sotho-ised version of Louis Trichardt); this was probably a reference to the leader, or at least one of the leaders, of the Voortrekkers.

It is not clear how Lebelo came to master the Dutch language. However, the most plausible inference is that he would have lived among native speakers for some time, developing basic Dutch. The ability to speak Dutch afforded him some social capital in his community. With time, Lebelo's influential position as the chieftaincy representative and interpreter in the dealings with the Voortrekkers aroused either jealousy or fears of a threat to the position of the chief among some of the influential members of the royal court (Van

Warmelo, 1944). Fears of Lebelo becoming a threat to the throne suggest that chieftaincy usurpation would have been par for the course among the AmaNdebele in particular, and pre-colonial African chieftaincies in general. In fact, in tracing the historical origins of the Transvaal AmaNdebele, Lekgoathi (2009) points out a chiefly dispute among brothers, Ndzudza and Manala, following the death of their father, Bulongo. Following this brotherly rivalry for chieftainship, the Ndebele of the Transvaal split into two groupings (Manala Ndebele and Ndzudza Ndebele) named after the two brothers (Lekgoathi, 2009).

Fears of Lebelo's usurpation of the chiefship of Numungebe led to a conspiracy among the chieftaincy councillors to eliminate him. Generally, oral tradition agrees that Lebelo's brother, Numungebe, never fell for this scheme against his brother, despite goading to that effect by his councillors.¹ However, beyond this point in the narrative, contradictions and divergences begin to emerge. Some informants from the Marokolong² side of the dispute could only say that Lebelo fled Zebediela following a dispute about chiefship, without further explaining the historical circumstances and context of the fight (Marokolong Royal Family, 2017). From Zebediela he is said to have sought refuge in Moutse, where he became chief. For his side, Molato Kekana, Lebelo's father and one of the pretenders to the throne of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, submits that the successor of Bulongo³ (one of the earliest ancestors in the Transvaal Ndebele genealogy), whom he does not mention by name, was advised to escape, following the succession dispute over chiefship.

Together with his group and his son, Lebelo ran to Wallmannsthal, where he became a pastor (Kekana, Makera, 2017). Molato Kekana maintains that Lebelo was not a chief. He argues that the chieftaincy began with his son, Johannes Mokonyama Kekana, after the purchase of Leeukraal farm in 1916. Yet another version is given by former chieftainess Esther Kekana, who was shafted from power after 14 years on the throne following the death of her husband, Hans Kekana, who had ruled until his untimely death in a car accident in 1962. Esther Kekana holds that Lebelo returned educated from Kimberly, where he had been a migrant worker. His brothers felt upstaged by

his education status and feared that he would use it to take over chiefship. So Lebelo fled with a section of his supporters to a place called Uitvlug, in Moutse, East of Hammanskraal (Kekana, E., 2017).

All three versions of the historical conditions under which a section of the AmaNdebele peeled off from their parent community in Zebediela, and the identity of the individual who led them, differ in important respects. This tangled web of contradictions in the oral tradition flags the innate weakness of oral sources and the need to cross-reference with written sources for purposes of verification. Neither oral sources nor written sources seem adequate or reliable on their own, particularly regarding the historical account that dates back more than a century. For instance, Esther Kekana's version seems to confuse Lebelo's life with that of his son, Johannes Tane Kekana, who lies at the heart of the historical conflict over legitimacy of chiefly succession among the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, about which this chapter is concerned. Johannes Tane Kekana is the one historical figure who is said by some accounts to have worked in Cape Town for the acquisition of guns (*dithunyeng*) (Van Warmelo, 1944; Godsell, 2015).

Van Warmelo's (1944) version is that after many dealings between the Voortrekkers and the Zebediela AmaNdebele, in which Lebelo was messenger, the Voortrekkers warmed to him as a result of his good service and began asking for him instead of the chief every time they came to deal with the chieftaincy. This, Van Warmelo says, led to the suspicion that Lebelo might have harboured ambitions to stage a palace coup against his brother, Nomungebe. According to this version, the chief was informed of this ominous possibility, but decided not to act on it, except privately to advise his brother to leave (Van Warmelo, 1944). This Lebelo did, one day after the chief and a section of his people had left to honour an invitation for a social occasion in Mogano (Valtyn), in Mokopane.

Van Warmelo says that Lebelo headed south, to a place called Nokanapedi (Moutse), where he was given refuge by Europeans and where his people lived side by side with the Kgatla people (Van Warmelo, 1944). In Nokanapedi, Lebelo recognised the suzerainty of Sekoti, regent for Maubane, chief of the Kgatla ba Motsha, then living

on the Tshwane (Aapies R) on Boschplaats 507 (Van Warmelo, 1944: 16). After moving on to a few other places, Lebelo ended up at a farm owned by a Schoeman, in Mmamotlhabane, Haakdoornfontein 492, where he would later die (Van Warmelo 1944: 16). Lebelo may have converted to the Christian faith at Nokanapedi, as the Europeans who gave him and his people refuge had set up a Christian missionary station and would have probably made conversion to their faith a precondition for staying there. In any case, converting a chief would have been tantamount to converting his subjects, figuratively killing many birds with one stone.

According to Van Warmelo, Johannes Tane, the first-born son of Lebelo, led the chieftaincy to Wallmannsthal, where he found different chiefdoms settled, including the Manala Ndebele. The farm initially belonged to a white man whom the various communities living there nicknamed *phoko*. Later, the farm was purchased by the mission, with whom relations with the Johannes Tane chieftaincy would later sour, forcing the latter to move on with his community to their current location in Leeuwkraal 396 (Van Warmelo 1944: 16). According to Van Warmelo (1944: 15), '[a]fter the Anglo-Boer war, the Native Commissioner King gave him [Johannes Tane] a plan whereby to acquire the farm, and in 1911 they began paying for it'.

The purchase of farms Leeukraal 396 and Tweefontein

The farm Leeukraal 396 is divided into four villages, namely Majaneng (the capital village), Marokolong, where the opposing faction is based, Suurman (also known as Tweefontein) and Ramotse. According to claims of some of the informants in this study, the initial jurisdiction of their chiefdom stretches as far as areas of modern-day Arcadia in Pretoria and Hartebeespoort in the North West province (Kekana, M., 2017). In fact, the Marokolong faction insists on this version of the purchase and, based on this scale of the putative land ownership, sees itself more as a paramountcy than chieftaincy. They accuse the Majaneng faction of selling out to Mangope of Bophuthatswana

under chieftainness Esther Kekana, by confining their chieftaincy to the four wards mentioned above (Marokolong Royal Family, 2017). Interestingly, Molato Kekana – also from the Marokolong faction, but who is at odds with the rest of the faction (and is therefore a subset) over chiefship on the grounds that the rightful heir forfeited his turn when he turned it down – also agrees that the initial jurisdiction is far wider than the Majaneng faction is claiming (Marokolong Royal Family, 2017).

Correspondence (dated 21 October 1996) from the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights,⁴ stemming from the land claims of this community or factions within it, contradicts the key claim made by Molato Kekana (i.e. 15 September 2017, Roodepoort), and other informants, about the scale of the historical ownership of land belonging to AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane. According to the correspondences of Emma Mashinini (9 June 1999), the Regional Land Claims Commissioner, ‘... the Commission concluded by asserting that claimants were never dispossessed of their rights in land and that their claims on the other eighty-one (81) farms or portions thereof could not meet the requirements of the Restitution of Land Rights Act, 1994 (Act No. 22 of 1994 as amended)’.⁵

The farm, according to the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform⁶ (post-apartheid) was purchased by Johannes Kekana. Only when one starts to probe further as to the identity of Johannes Kekana do matters become hazy. The Majaneng faction claims the buyer was Johannes Tane Kekana, while the Marokolong one says it was Johannes Mokonyama Kekana. The Majaneng faction is backed up by the version of Dr van Warmelo. Yet it should be borne in mind that Van Warmelo seems to have consulted only with the Majaneng faction during his ethnographic study, which would explain the similarity of their versions. The Deed of Transfer only has the English first name ‘Johannes’, complicating matters further. The letter to a Mr Geoff Budlender, Director-General in the Ministry of Land Affairs and Agriculture, by Emma Mashinini, Regional Land Claims Commissioner: Gauteng and North-West, dated 4 May 1999, states:

In terms of the information at our disposal (i.e. Deed of

Transfer No. T7775/1916 date 23rd October 1916) the Ndebele tribe under Chief Johannes Kekana bought a certain portion called 'Michelstraak' of the freehold farm Leeukraal No. 396 (now Leeuwkraal 92-JR), in extent, two thousand six-hundred and seventy-eight (2678) morgen and seventy-three (73) square rods. The said portion was bought for the total sum of 5356.00 (five thousand three hundred and fifty-six pounds) and was later held in trust for the tribe. But other portions such as 1 and 4 of the farm Leeuwkraal 92-JR are STATE OWNED or registered as STATE LAND meaning that they do not form part of the Kekana domain or Tribal Authority.

A Majaneng District memo, dated 15 December 1987, purportedly replying to a Bishop ME Kekana's protest to the recognition of the Johannes Tane Kekana's chiefly lineage, and signed off by the Bophuthatswana chief ethnologist IM Selebogo claims that: '[T]he available records in the deeds office indicate that the farm Leeukraal no. 396 was bought and registered in the name of Johannes Jan Kekana, but not Johannes Mangonyama Jakkals.' On the other hand, Jacob Leka Kekana of Kekana Gardens, a splinter family lineage from the Marokolong faction, and paternal uncle to Molato Kekana, claims that: 'Chief Johannes (Mokonyama) Kekana – Son of Chief Lebelo's tribal Queen, also ruled the tribe in Moutse till he died and was also buried in Moutse. His death occurred after his purchase of the farms Leeukraal, Tweefontein and Vyeboschlaafte' (Kekana, L. 1994).

All these contradictory statements make it all too murky to understand which of the two 'Johannesses', Tane or Mokonyama, bought the land and was therefore the legitimate heir to Lebelo. The cloud of confusion hanging over the identity of the individual who purchased land in this chieftaincy further confounds the question of the true and legitimate heir to the throne of AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane. This confusion about the chiefly lineage and land purchase is steeped in a history that goes back just over a century and continues to confound this chieftaincy. The dissipation of this confusion is contingent on decoding the two individuals named 'Johannes' at the centre of the matter, as well as their individual roles in this history.

The emergence of the two factions

While the bare bones of this storyline are more or less shared among different factions and individuals, the parting of ways starts with the chiefly status of the sons of Lebelo, Johannes Tane Kekana and Johannes Mokonyama Kekana. What lies at the heart of the dispute about this history is who is the rightful heir to the throne of Lebelo. Once again, oral tradition on its own turns out to be inadequate given the inherent shortcomings of oral sources, yet oral tradition is the only source available since the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, like many of their African counterparts, were a pre-literate society (Tosh, 1984: 116).

The current ruling faction is generally known as the Majaneng group, and the rival faction, the Marokolong group. The Majaneng narrative contends that Johannes Tane, Lebelo's first-born son by his first wife, is the legitimate heir to the throne under the customary law of primogeniture. In customary parlance this (i.e. Johannes Tane's) ruling lineage would be called the senior or ruling house. The Majaneng version differs completely from the Marokolong version in the account of how Johannes Tane Kekana came into the picture. The Majaneng version simply states that he was the first-born son of Lebelo. He purportedly headed off to Cape Town to work in order to afford guns (Marokolong Faction, 2017). He came back a Christian convert who was redirected to Uitvlug, to which his father had fled. The Majaneng faction never mentioned the fact that Johannes Tane Kekana was brought by missionaries to the Kekana royal family.

The Majaneng faction's narrative seems to have gone down in history as the authoritative version, as shown by much historiography of this chieftaincy. Van Warmelo, the chief government ethnologist from 1930 to 1969, recorded the history of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, and to all intents and purposes interviewed only informants from the Majaneng faction. His approach is baffling, given his awareness about the murky waters of chiefship. He stated as much when he '...maintained that when a dispute arose the waters were so muddied by tendentious local factions that the truth was impossible to ascertain' (Hammond-Tooke, 1997: 113).

Van Warmelo was apparently the first scholar to record the history of this community and therefore elevated their version to become the subject of historiography. Subsequent studies and official investigations of the chiefly succession dispute in this chieftaincy tend to take for granted Van Warmelo's historical record without question and as such may be unwittingly perpetuating the predominance of the written (Majaneng) version. Ethnographic studies that succeed in covering all sides of the disputed narrative may help to minimise bias resulting from unequal access to the historical record. Jeff Peires (1981: 34) noted this when he states that '[i]n oral societies more than in literate ones, it is the victors who record history, particularly if the losers become reconciled to their defeat. Genealogies, for instance, are not so much accurate chronicles of genetic relationships as indexes of relative political standing.'

This does not mean that there has not been some awareness of the historical depth of the chiefly succession dispute in this community.⁷ Although, prior to 1994, there were three government-instituted commissions of inquiry into the chiefly succession dispute in this chieftaincy – one by the apartheid state and two by the Bophuthatswana regime – none of them concerned themselves with the historical origins of this dispute, which is variously said to go back to 1914 or 1916 (see Matabane, 1990; Marokolong Faction, 2017).

Van Warmelo may have done pioneering work in recording the history of this chieftaincy, but his work is not necessarily free of the intrinsic defects of oral history, and Van Warmelo himself was not so much occupied with a critical approach as a simple recording of this history (Lekgoathi, 2009: 53–67). Van Warmelo's approach is even more vulnerable of being susceptible to the subjective perspectives of his researchers and informants in 'the co-production of cultural knowledge' (Lekgoathi, 2009: 53–67). Lekgoathi (2009) has argued that '... Van Warmelo's writings and interpretations of the Ndebele history and society were fundamentally shaped by local informants' perspectives, which were themselves products of old traditions that had been recast in the context of contemporary struggles and changes occurring in early twentieth-century South Africa'.

In terms of Lekgoathi's critique, it is plausible that the canonical

version of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane's history (the Majaneng version) is but the tendentious history of the victors; victors in the sense of being the only faction in the conflict to tell their side of the story. This is worth keeping in mind, given that both the local informants and the researchers themselves are invariably drawn from the ruling segment, who would have had access to both the history of the community and modern education. Jacob Leka Kekana confirms as much when he tells researcher Sarah Godsell that 'Van Warmelo ... consulted only one of the Kekana family: the branch that has achieved recognition through prolonged interaction with Europeans' (Godsell, 2015: 88).

Godsell's research is not aimed at confirming one side of the historical conflict over chiefly succession. In her own words: '... the purpose of this thesis is not to establish which group is legitimate. My intention is to examine the narratives and ways of belonging created in relation to power structures that administered this space' (Godsell, 2015: 79). Despite Godsell's stated intention of avoiding it, the bias towards the Majaneng faction emerges again, at least by default, in her PhD thesis.

Godsell used oral interviews to explore the nature and history of the chieftaincy disputes among the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane. In the process, she came up with a raft of findings that relate to the chieftaincy, gender issues and customs, directing her attention to the two primary groupings that constitute the community of AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane.

However, Godsell's research appears to confuse the identity of the correct groupings in this dispute. From the viewpoint of Majaneng, she was right to have interviewed Esther Kekana, a former chieftainess and one of the prominent protagonists in the dispute. Yet Godsell misidentified the second group. She suggests that the second group is from Kekana Gardens. In fact, Kekana Gardens is a subset, to use Godsell's useful terminology, which falls under the second main group and rival to the Majaneng group: the Marokolong group. To detect the main defect in Godsell's conceptualisation of the two groups, it helps to cite her summary of the dispute in her own words. Godsell (2015: 80) states:

These two primary groups (with different subsets within them) have been contesting the leadership of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane for over 60 years. The contestations have run through apartheid, bantustan, and post-1994 administrations. To provide a very rough sketch, the dispute centres on two things: first, which wife of the common ancestor Lebelo Seroto was the royal wife, and so whose children would continue the lineage. Johannes Tane was the heir linked to the now Majaneng group. Johannes Mokonyama was linked to the now Kekana Gardens group. Second, but linked to this, was who was the paramount chief when the land (discussed below) was bought; Karel Seroto, son of Johannes Tane, so linked to Majaneng, or Johannes Mokonyama himself, which links the land purchase to Kekana Gardens.

Godsell did not interview the Marokolong group. It may be that she has confused the naming, meaning she has mislabelled the main group as Kekana Gardens instead of Marokolong, under which the former falls. It is true that Jacob Leka Kekana, who is based in Kekana Gardens and whom Godsell had interviewed, is one of the claimants to the throne of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, along with Mavis Kekana (Esther Kekana's daughter), Richard Vonk Kekana (of Marokolong), Molato Kekana (Leka Kekana's nephew, Kekana Gardens) and the current incumbent, Cornelius Kgomotso Kekana (Majaneng). However, before focusing on Jacob Leka Kekana, it is worth noting that Kekana Gardens itself was established in 2002 as the offshoot of Marokolong, and so chiefly claimants from there are the Marokolong sub-group.

Kekana Gardens and Jacob Leka Kekana

In order to understand the central fault in Godsell's research findings, one must first give a synopsis of Jacob Leka Kekana's history, and the origins of the Kekana Gardens. These findings emerged during an interview (Marokolong Faction, 2017) with the prominent actors

within the Marokolong camp. These include members of the royal family and clan as well as the individual the Marokolong faction believes to be the paramount chief-in-waiting, Richard Vonk Kekana, who, in keeping with cultural dictates, spoke to this researcher through his spokesman and adviser, Simon Makau Kekana.

This account holds that Kekana Gardens was established by Abram Sombalane Kekana, who is a close kin member of the royal family from the Marokolong lineage. Before marriage, Abram Sombalane Kekana had a girlfriend with whom he had two sons, Zebediela Simon Kekana and his younger brother, Jacob Leka Kekana. This was a girlfriend and not a wife. In terms of the Kekana or Northern Ndebele culture, an individual becomes eligible for the chiefship throne if he was born of a chief and a *timamollo* (or candle wife), or otherwise under exceptional circumstances, such as when he is a son of the reigning chief's brother or uncle and by default happens to be the next in line in the absence of qualifying individuals ahead of him. Jacob Leka Kekana's mother was neither a princess nor married, let alone being a *timamollo* (Marokolong Royal Family, 2017). Of course, as John Comaroff (1974:37) points out, there are 'a number of discontinuities between the ideal and the actual patterns [...] disputes do arise over succession to office; [...] chiefs vary considerably in the power they wield; and [...] may gain or lose legitimacy during their careers'. As we shall see later, though, Abram Sombalane Kekana's descendants' claim to chiefship arise out of unusual circumstances, where the acknowledged legitimate heir passed up his turn. Godsell did interview Leka Kekana, yet she did not reach out to the rest of the Marokolong village faction for their side of the story.

However, while Leka Kekana's version of chiefly lineage seems designed to suit his claims in this historical period, closer scrutiny shows that matters are more complex than that, and Leka may have a case after all. Firstly, Molato Kekana, one of the claimants to the chieftaincy and the son of Zebediela Kekana (i.e. Jacob Leka Kekana's brother) states (2017) that the chieftaincy shifted to his lineage after Vonk Kekana, whom he acknowledges as the initial, legitimate heir, turned down the chiefship in 1992.

Molato argues that according to Ndebele custom, once an heir

passes up his chieftaincy turn, it cannot be reinvoked later.

Molato's grandfather, Abram Sombalane Kekana, who is the brother of Richard Vonk Kekana, who forfeited his chiefly turn, drew up 'A Royal Family Tree of Descent' under the rubric of the Kekana Royal Executive Council. This body, also known informally as 'The Ruling Cabinet', had constituted itself as the traditional authority of Marokolong. In this family tree, the chiefly lineage is depicted as starting from Mokonyama, the son of the founder Lebelo, followed by William Makera Kekana, followed by himself, Abram Sombalane Kekana, then his sons Zebediela Simon, Jacob Leka and later Stuurman Kekana (the son of his customary wife). In other words, the contention that the chiefly lineage within the Marokolong faction belongs to the Kekana Gardens lineage was started by Abraham Sombalane Kekana, the father of Jacob Leka Kekana. According to this account, Molato's claim that, by rebuffing his turn, Richard Vonk Kekana irretrievably lost chiefship is backed up by the events pertaining to chieftainess Esther Kekana's court appeal after her deposition. In his judgment, Judge Moll states that Agrippa Kekana, the younger brother of Esther Kekana's late husband, Chief Hans Kekana, forfeited his turn to assume chiefship after turning it down in a letter from 17 December 1976.⁸ In like manner, the Kekana Garden lineage based its claim to chiefship on Richard Vonk Kekana's refusal to take his turn, even though he tried to make amends by reclaiming it later on.

The rival historical narrative as told by the Marokolong faction more or less echoes the Majaneng version, except when it comes to the status of Johannes Tane. The Marokolong faction's main issue with the Majaneng faction is that the Majaneng faction was not the chiefly lineage, but rather a regent lineage. They claim that it all started in 1914, when the rightful chief, called Karel Seroto Kekana, was forced to go and fight in the First World War, following an instruction from the colonial government which reasoned that because he was a chief he had to fight for his people. Karel Seroto Kekana left for war and would eventually die on the ship *SS Mendi*. In the meantime, an acting chief had to be appointed, and this is how, as the story goes, the Johannes Tane lineage came to assume the throne.

Karel Seroto Kekana was then replaced by Karel Mmatshetlha

Kekana as acting chief. Karel Mmatshelha Kekana hailed from the lineage of Johannes Tane Kekana. The Marokolong faction claim that Johannes Tane Kekana was brought to the Kekana family by the missionaries, who claimed that he was a long-lost son of Lebelo Kekana, who had gone to Cape Town to work for guns (Marokolong Faction, 2017).

Yet this narrative has some factual inconsistencies. Firstly, no one knows how the missionaries met Johannes Tane Kekana, since he is said to have gone to Cape Town for work. Oral tradition tends to be muddled when it comes to chronology. This garbled narrative by informants who are themselves of royal descent resonates with Lekgoathi's argument about '... old traditions that had been recast in the context of contemporary struggles ...' (Lekgoathi, 2009: 53–67). For instance, it is not clear how the missionaries know about Johannes Tane's family, given that he had been working in Cape Town and therefore would probably never have made his acquaintance with local missionaries, who would have had to know enough about his background to take him to his father's chiefdom. Equally, it is just not comprehensible that no one knew about his existence when he was the first-born son of Lebelo Kekana.

For his part, Van Warmelo says that Johannes Tane, who died in May 1916, left for Cape Town and when he returned found that his father, Lebelo, had left the Moletlane chieftaincy following the advice from his brother. He was redirected to Ga Mantsubuko, at his father's chiefdom, only to find that his father had already died two years before and the chiefship was in the hands of a headman. The chiefdom had also absorbed people other than the Ndebele from Moletlane, which enlarged it considerably. Then some among the chiefdom refused to be ruled by Johannes Tane on account of his education and so split from the chieftaincy, moving to Leeuwkloof, further east (Van Warmelo, 1944: 17). Dr van Warmelo says the splinter group later rejoined the mother chieftaincy.

While the Majaneng faction sees their chiefship as historically legitimate, the Marokolong version depicts them as usurpers of the chieftaincy of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane. This is how the second royal kraal (which is informal) in Marokolong came into the picture.

It was into these historically toxic conditions of chronic rancour over the chieftaincy that the Bophuthatswana regime, set up under the bantustan system and headed up by Lucas Manyane Mangope, emerged. Bophuthatswana would play no insignificant role in further roiling the already disturbed waters.

Succession disputes during the bantustan era: The politics of bantustan system and gender

The Bophuthatswana bantustan came into being within the context of the wider bantustan system. This was set up with successive pieces of legislation: first came the apartheid state's promulgation of the Bantu Authorities Act No. 68 of 1951, which was followed by the 1959 Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act No. 46, which in turn paved the way for the establishment of the Bophuthatswana homeland for Tswana-speaking people in 1961. From being a self-governing territory, Bophuthatswana was granted independence in 1977. There is a thread connecting these two acts (Bantu Authorities and Bantu Self-Government Act), especially the former Act, with the 1927 Native Administration Act No. 38. This Act was promulgated by British colonial authorities to be the bedrock of the colonial strategy of indirect rule, which would turn the institution of chieftaincy into a tool of colonialism.

Conceptually, the difference between the 1927 Native Administration Act and the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act was that the former designated customary law for the 'natives' as a category and civic rule for settler society. In comparison, the latter Act was intent on breaking down the monolithic 'natives' category into clusters of minorities, each with its own traditions, customs and chieftaincy (Myers, 2008). Some scholars have argued that the bantustan system was born out of the apartheid state's need to further refine the concept of indirect rule in order to deal with increasing resistance to apartheid in the 1950s and 1960s, when militant African nationalism led by both the African National Congress (ANC) and its breakaway, the Pan African Congress (PAC), was rapidly gaining ground (Myers, 2008).

The Natives Land Act (No. 27 of 1913) had corralled Africans into reserves, partly to pander to the political sentiment of emerging Afrikaner agricultural capital, and partly for the forced proletarianisation of Africans, designed to meet the needs of growing industry, especially mining (O'Meara, 1983). Growing industrialisation did not only provide 'detrribalising' conditions for the rapidly urbanising Africans; in the decades to come, it also created ideal conditions for political mobilisation against increasing racial oppression. This modernising impulse by the subject population posed an existential threat to the colonial mode of domination and had to be reworked to respond to the exigencies of the historical period.

Therefore, thinking up new strategies to meet the challenges of its times head on, the apartheid state set up the 1950–54 Tomlinson Commission 'to conduct an exhaustive inquiry into, and to report upon, a comprehensive scheme for the rehabilitation of the Native areas, with a view to developing within them a social structure, in keeping with the culture of the Native, based on effective socio-economic planning' (Myers, 2008: 32). The Tomlinson Commission's findings saw ethnic identity among Africans as the linchpin of the future of South Africa, arguing that '... the Bantu peoples ... do not constitute a homogeneous people, but form separate national units on the basis of language and culture' (Myers, 2008: 32).

Along with the influence of Van Warmelo's ethnological texts, the depiction of Africans as clusters of ethnic groups provided the rationale for 'territorial homeland and separate system of political representation' (Myers, 2008: 32). The bantustan system was therefore the recalibration of indirect rule, based on the ethnic fragmentation of indigenous populations, as per findings of ethnographers such as Van Warmelo and the Tomlinson Commission itself. The Tswana territorial authority was constituted to incorporate the Odi-Moretele district, which is made up mostly of non-Tswana (including the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane community).

Yet the depiction of Africans as clusters of ethnic groups is both embedded in, and consistent with, the intrinsic logic of indirect rule. The Native Affairs Act No. 23 of 1920 had already provided a legal framework for this. It had created the statutory basis upon which

African chiefs could be turned into servants of the state, whereupon a white governor-general was made the supreme chief of all natives. In effect, the governor-general had the powers to define who was, and who was not, the chief; he could depose and appoint at will in keeping with the interests of the colonial system. Gone were the days when a system of indigenous political authority determined chieftaincy succession. The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, which envisaged the subordination of chieftaincy to the bantustan authorities, served two purposes: firstly, it increased the powers of the chiefs and, secondly, it cemented the apartheid state's control over them. William Beinart contends that 'in this way, the state hoped to secure a conservative, or reactionary, rural hierarchy which would help to defuse broader national struggles. Modern chieftaincy, in short, has been seen as a creation of, and creature of, the state' (Beinart, 1995: 177).

Consequently, the emergence of the Bophuthatswana bantustan compounded the historical feuds among AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, thereby entrenching a deep legacy of bitterness among all the claimants, individuals and groups. One of Mangope's blatant interventions was to prevail on the chieftaincy to change their name from AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane to AmaNdebele-a-Lebelo, on the grounds that they would not be confused with their ancestral chieftaincy, from which they had splintered. However, members of the Marokolong faction resisted, choosing to continue going by the initial name to preserve their historical identity (Marokolong Royal Family, 2017). Between 1977, when Bophuthatswana gained 'independence', and its dissolution in 1993, no less than 10 individuals had been appointed chief (or acting chiefs) and deposed, as the regime saw fit (save for those who died in office). Mangope is also on record as making many important decisions about who was to become chief or acting chief. Consequently, the chiefly succession dispute within the Majaneng group cannot be understood without taking cognisance of external interference by the government of Bophuthatswana.

What sharply defined the pernicious role of the Mangope regime in this community was its unilateral imposition of decisions regarding the imposition and deposition of chiefs. As provided for in the 1951 Native Authorities Act, it was the logic of indirect rule to imbue the

bantustan political leadership with unquestioned powers to appoint and remove chiefs as they deemed fit. Equally, ethnic particularism was inherent in this Act and it did not take long before its manifestations surfaced as the Bophuthatswana bantustan took shape. This arbitrary power over chiefs preceded the bantustans. Citing figures in the Native Affairs Department, Myers shows that the number of chiefs increased ‘... from 384 in 1936, to 466 in 1945, and 701 in 1947’ (Myers, 2008: 17). Although this was at a national level, it shows the arbitrary appointment or creation of chiefs, even where none existed before. The Bophuthatswana government enjoyed the same arbitrary powers provided by the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act. As a ‘state’ with questionable credentials, but nevertheless powerful authority, it seemed set to assert itself in whatever manner it deemed fit, as in this instance (Kekana, E., 2017).

In keeping with the ethnic particularism inherent in the notion of bantustans, Bophuthatswana under Chief Lucas Manyane Mangope, who was to remain its leader throughout its existence as a chief minister and later president, asserted its ethnic character shortly after its establishment. All non-Tswana people were to bear the brunt of its founding ethnic philosophy, and the AmaNdebele people would be no exception.

The climate of ethnic chauvinism emerged in the early 1960s. Among its various manifestations was the removal of the non-Tswana people from a certain area in Ga-Rankuwa earmarked for the building of the Medical University of South Africa (Lekgoathi, 2003). Subsequent to that, the non-Tswana communities across Bophuthatswana were to be subjected to systematic discrimination when government came up with the philosophy of *popagano* (welding together of a people), which it rolled in through its education system (Lekgoathi, 2003). According to Lekgoathi (2003), *popagano* was meant to help advance the goal of Tswana-isation of the entire homeland. The philosophy of *popagano* was therefore an inherently exclusionary approach that would trample on the human rights of all non-Tswana people, irrespective of their historical ties to the territories now falling under Bophuthatswana.

The Bophuthatswana education philosophy *popagano* was aimed

at socialising the young into a single ethnic and cultural identity, by imbuing them with ethnic consciousness through the medium of instruction of the Setswana language. This unilateral policy would cover all learners within Bophuthatswana territory, including the non-Tswana communities such as the northern Sotho and northern Ndebele people, who had until then received education through their mother tongues. *Popagano* was to have a toxic impact on the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane under the chiefship of Esther Kekana. ‘The new change’, according to Lekgoathi (2003: 53–76), ‘affected, among others, eight schools belonging to the Kekana-Ndebele or AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane community at Majaneng (Leeuwkraal) near Hammanskraal in the Odi-Moretele district’. That most of the people in this district were non-Tswana did not make matters any easier. Until then, this community had used northern Sotho as the medium of instruction in the education of their children, as the northern Ndebele community had largely been culturally assimilated into the northern Sotho people over the years, possibly even before they splintered from the Zebediela AmaNdebele back in the 1800s (Lekgoathi, 2003).

During this time, the chieftaincy was under Esther Kekana, who had succeeded her late husband in 1963 after he perished in a car accident in 1962. Esther Kekana ascended the throne prior to the onset of Bophuthatswana, at the time when the chieftaincy was still under the jurisdiction of central government in Pretoria. Protesting the imposition of Tswana on the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, chieftainess Kekana closed seven schools for about three years (Kekana, E., 2017). She tried without success to secede through the route of joining forces with the Ndebele nationalist organisation called Northern AmaNdebele National Organisation (NANO).

NANO was furiously agitating for a separate homeland for the northern AmaNdebele people. This impulse can be understood as a product of the ethnic mentality generated by the Tomlinson Commission, which atomised Africans into ethnic minorities. They advocated the need for separate development for the Transvaal AmaNdebele, not unlike that of other ‘tribal groups’. In this spirit, the northern AmaNdebele, who were aggrieved at being left out

when the southern Ndebele were offered the Kwa-Ndebele bantustan, were keeping up the fight for officially recognised space. Chieftainess Kekana found resonance with this organisation yet, ironically, tried to affiliate her chiefly jurisdiction to the Lebowa homeland, from which NANO was striving to break away. After failing, she tried the newly formed Kwa-Ndebele homeland, which was set aside for the southern Ndebele people, still to no avail. Her defiance turned her into the foe of the Mangope regime and led to her forfeiting some of the privileges of the office of chiefship, starting with the rescinding of the purchase of a car (Lekgoathi, 2003). As she continued to dig in, Mangope finally dethroned her, replacing her with a pliable individual in the person of Nathaniel Sello Kekana (Lekgoathi, 2003).

However, Esther Kekana refused to blink. Instead she approached the Supreme Court of South Africa in a case in which Mangope was the first respondent, her replacement, Sello Nathaniel Kekana, the second respondent and the minister of Bantu Administration and Development the third respondent. The matter sat on 1 June 1977.⁹

However, Esther Kekana lost this case on the grounds of her gender, which, according to the judgment, was out of step with customary law as per the findings of the Holt Commission of Inquiry, instituted by the South African government before Bophuthatswana gained independence.¹⁰ From this point onwards in the history of this chieftaincy, the Mangope regime was to be entangled with the royal affairs of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, especially as they pertained to the appointment and deposing of chiefs.

The removal of Esther Kekana from office coincided with a confluence of processes within this community itself. As Lekgoathi (2006: 109) shows:

[T]he ousting was relatively easy to execute because of the ongoing split within the Majaneng community over chieftainship. There was a 'small band of rebels' who claimed that the community wanted a man to rule it. The chief minister used this to his advantage and replaced the chieftainess with Mr Nathaniel Kekana, one of the contenders who appeared to be amenable to the policies of Bophuthatswana.

A section of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane was dead set against the chiefship of Esther Kekana (see below) primarily because her line of descent (i.e. the ruling house) was deemed to be ruling on the basis of regency, historically speaking. Based in Marokolong, this section went by the name 'the ruling cabinet'. Simon Makau Kekana, one of the elders of the Kekana ruling clan from the Marokolong faction, explains that the reason for the adoption of the name 'ruling cabinet' was to distinguish themselves from the Majaneng faction, to avoid confusion in the public mind as to who came from which side (Kekana, V., Marokolong Faction, 2017).

The two sides interestingly have contradicting narratives about the role played by Mangope in the ongoing fight. The Marokolong side, the main rival to the ruling house, depicts Esther Kekana as a sell-out who let in Mangope and therefore compromised the independence of their chieftaincy (Kekana, V., 2017). The fact that she worked for the Bophuthatswana government in the capital city, Mmabatho, did not endear her to some of her people, providing her detractors with ammunition against her. For instance, the Marokolong faction believes that '... Esther Kekana was collaborating with Mangope and she has even worked for him based in Mmabatho while she was the leader of the AmaNdebele people. Our people felt that she could not represent us while she had chosen to live in Mafikeng' (Kekana, V., 2017). Esther saw nothing wrong with the position, contending that '[t]hrough chiefly experience, the Bophuthatswana government appointed me to the House of Traditional Leaders. I was in Mafikeng for 10 years, the laws kept changing' (Kekana, E., 2017).

While ambiguity seems an apt term for Esther Kekana's relationship with the Mangope regime, it may nevertheless serve the purpose of her detractors to use that relationship against her, as seems to be the case now. In fact, they hold that Esther Kekana's embracing of the Mangope regime was what froze relations, in addition to the question of gender and the refusal to acknowledge their ownership of the land and the chieftaincy of Leeukraal (Marokolong Faction, 2017).

On the other hand, Esther Kekana tells of a rather hostile attitude from Mangope towards her because she refused to give in to his regime's philosophy of *popagano* and the imposition of Tswana as a

medium of instruction. For her, the fall-out with the Mangope regime could be ascribed to her refusal to accept Tswana-isation. While the Marokolong section accuses her of collaboration with the Mangope regime, she denies the accusation, instead depicting herself as having been on the frontline in the resistance to cultural imposition. She maintains that deposition was ultimately the price she had to pay. Esther Kekana (2017) insists that:

Along with chiefs like Pilane and Maselwane, I was in opposition to Mangope's government in Mafikeng, so he never supported me. That is the reason he pushed me out of my acting position. So, when he forced seTswana on us and we reacted by closing down schools, lowered the flag etc., he said fine go on and find yourselves a land in Lebowa because this is Bophuthatswana.

From the preceding excerpt, Esther Kekana presents herself as the victim of the Mangope regime, which removed her from her rightful position as chief following her husband's death. On the other hand, the Marokolong faction has a totally different version of events. On this issue, the Marokolong faction (2017) argues that:

Mangope found Esther Kekana in power. But Esther Kekana had issues with the elders of the clan and community because they would not be ruled by a woman in terms of their culture [...] Mangope used Esther Kekana for his own political ends. Mangope used Esther as a pawn and she could not see that. For instance, there are many houses in this neighbourhood which Esther razed down. Initially when Esther took over chieftainship there were no serious issues. Issues between her and the community were started with the onset of Bophuthatswana when Mangope started changing things through Esther Kekana. This pitted her against her own people. She sold them out to the Batswana or to government.

While Esther Kekana's version shows her pitted against Mangope for the sake of her people's interests, the Marokolong section has a different

take. It is also advisable in a case like this to remember that both Esther Kekana and the Marokolong faction have been at daggers since the late 1960s when Marokolong arrived into the chieftaincy from Uitylug or Moutse without formally announcing themselves, as they thought themselves the true ruling house, accountable to no one. This resulted in the chieftainess, Esther Kekana, tearing down their houses (Kekana, V., Marokolong Faction, 2017).

Against the background of this hostile history, the Marokolong faction members credit themselves with removing the chieftainess from the throne, not Mangope. They contend that:

It is the AmaNdebele not Mangope. So, the two main issues that ejected Esther Kekana from power were her gender and her apparent collaboration with the Mangope government. During this court case Mangope supported Esther Kekana. Esther Kekana once lived and worked in Mafikeng for a long time (Kekana, V., 2017).

However, the judgment that upheld Mangope's decision to depose Esther Kekana defies the Marokolong claim that their faction was the one that removed her from the chieftaincy. Interestingly, as the judgment shows, Mangope dethroned Esther Kekana in terms of Section 2(8) of the Bantu Administration Act No. 38 of 1927, read with Section 21 and item 27 of the Bantu Homelands Constitution Act No. 21 of 1971. Two conclusions can be drawn about the removal of Esther Kekana.

The first is that oral history can be fluid to suit the historical circumstances of particular political interests, as the Marokolong claim shows. While the ongoing chiefly feud between them and the Majaneng faction did provide background context to the removing of Esther Kekana, the Marokolong faction alone cannot be credited with her removal as the court case shows. Secondly, the contention that the British colonial system of indirect rule, as institutionalised by the 1927 Native Administration Act, provided the impulse for the later apartheid Acts such as the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act is vindicated in this judgment that enabled the Mangope regime to dethrone Esther Kekana.

Both Lekgoathi and Godsell show that at some point the Mangope regime lost patience with Esther Kekana and schemed to remove her from office (Lekgoathi, 2006: 109; Godsell, 2015: 98). This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that it was only after a long, drawn-out if volatile relationship that the Mangope regime suddenly found her regency could not be permitted under cultural norms. The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, as well as the Bophuthatswana Traditional Authorities Act of 1978, empowered the bantustans to subject chiefs to their will. It was because of these unchecked powers that the Mangope regime deposed chiefs such as Chief SK Mankuroana of Taung, Chief Marcus Mathibe of Bahwaduba, Chief RD Mabe of Batlhako ba Matutu in Mankwe, Chief DK Manimane of Bakwena ba Modimosana and many more.

This exercise of arbitrary power by the Bophuthatswana government was therefore not just confined to the case of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane. Rather it was extended to all the chieftaincies falling under Bophuthatswana. Billy Mokgabodi, the most senior royal councillor, confirms that Esther Kekana did enjoy significant support (Mokgabodi, 2017). As Godsell shows in her study, Esther Kekana was a popular figure during her reign, at least from the side of Majaneng (Godsell, 2015: 98). She even earned the nickname 'Mmabatho' (mother of the people), as a *Drum* magazine article of 1970 reported (Godsell, 2015: 79). It is also true that when Mangope started imposing unpopular policies, this put Esther Kekana under strain. Matters reached a head on the Marokolong side, where she enjoyed less legitimacy and had already crossed swords with the elders over many demands she refused to meet (Marokolong Faction, 2017).

Over the years, Esther Kekana has taken multiple sides in the succession dispute. In fact, as will be shown below, she at some point ended up fighting against the Marokolong faction (for reasons set out), the Majaneng faction (when she could not agree with them on the succession plan based on gender considerations) and the Mangope regime (for resisting imposition of policies). Her narrative about being deposed by Mangope is given credibility by Billy Mokgabodi, the elder within the Majaneng faction. He sees the trouble beginning with the onset of Bophuthatswana, when Mangope rammed policies

down their throats. According to Billy Mokgabudi (2017):

The trouble started then. The reigning chief was Esther Kekana for 13 years. After the death of her husband in 1962, she took charge. All this peace was disrupted by Mangope when he started to make claims over our land. Esther put up resistance but Mangope was joined by so-called 'ruling cabinet' from Mamelodi. This ruling cabinet was established by Abram Kekana's daughter. She mobilised broadly among the AmaNdebele community against the gender of Esther. But all of them ended up nowhere.

Mokgabudi thus identifies the combination of hostility from the Mangope regime and the rival faction combining to dethrone Esther Kekana, as playing a part in her deposition, with no internal squabbling within the Majaneng faction itself playing any part. Yet this line of thought is contradicted by the opinion of Stella Kekana, one of the elder women (aunties, *kgadi*) within the Majaneng royal council. For her, Mangope had nothing to do with Esther Kekana's removal from office. She insists that 'Mangope did not cause any troubles in this chieftom. It is just that he found the situation already conflicted. Some elders within the clan mobilised, including those living outside the chieftom, to remove Esther' (Kekana, E., 2017).

Stella Kekana and Billy Mokgabudi are of the same generation and cultural status within the chieftaincy. They witnessed the same historical events, probably sat in the same royal council meetings, yet have different interpretations of the role of Mangope.

Contrary to Stella Kekana's representations, documentary evidence from the Mangope regime consistently shows Mangope's hand in the royal affairs of the AmaNdebele-a-Moetlane. Again, in the 1986 document called 'Recognition and Appointment of Acting Chief Mbofane Thomas Kekana: Majaneng District Moretele', which sets out the reasons for the appointment of the acting chief, Mbofane Thomas Kekana, the Bophuthatswana government contends that it had been a mistake to appoint Esther Kekana a regent in the first place. In this connection, the document states that:

[T]herefore the recognition and appointment of the great wife Nchadi Esther Kekana was contrary to the principle of primogeniture which provides that the first-born and eldest son of the deceased chief shall succeed to the hereditary office of chieftaincy.

The argument is based on the interpretation of Ndebele principle of primogeniture. According to the principle of primogeniture, the eldest son is eligible for succession to hereditary office of chieftaincy (provided the mother is also candle wife) (Kekana, M., 2017). Mokgabudi's citation seems to evoke the innate weakness of oral history, which tends to conflate personal feelings with objective analysis. Mokgabudi says that Mangope was joined by the so-called 'ruling cabinet' in dislodging Esther Kekana from power. Yet we know that the Marokolong faction, of which the 'ruling cabinet' was part, did not see eye-to-eye with the Mangope regime from the beginning. Their interest in her deposition may have coincided with Mangope's, but there is no evidence to imply collaboration.

As will be shown later, the Marokolong faction blames Mangope for ignoring a court order from the South African jurisdiction instructing Nathaniel Sello Kekana to step down after a period of six months. During this period he would serve as Acting Chief (as an olive branch to the Majaneng faction), after which the Marokolong faction would reclaim 'their' chieftaincy forever. Had the Mangope regime honoured this judgment, according to the Marokolong faction, the age-old chiefly feud would have been solved once and for all. Their explanation is that Mangope ignored this judgment as a form of revenge against them for their vociferous opposition to his policies (Marokolong Faction, 2017). Be that as it may, when Mangope deposed Esther Kekana he did not cite the Marokolong conflict, which centred less on gender and more on the historical illegitimacy of the Majaneng faction. Instead, Mangope leaned to culture, citing chieftainess Kekana's gender and primogeniture as the key issues. The gender issue comes up repeatedly in the documentation of the Bophuthatswana government, especially as a matter for customary law, commissions of inquiry and legal processes (*Kekana vs Mangope*,

Kekana & Ministry of Bantu Administration & Development, 1977; Mophatlhana, 1986).

Despite the apparently untenable situation Esther Kekana was entrapped in, the care-taker administrators of Marokolong insist that had she thrown in her lot with the whole community, Mangope would not have made any headway in his impositions. '[I]f she teamed with the AmaNdebele community, Mangope would have failed in his mission. Esther is accused of conceding to Bophuthatswana. The four wards (villages) closed down schools' (Marokolong Faction, 2017). This statement appears not to accord with the historical evidence that shows Esther Kekana to have been in the forefront of fighting against the imposition of Tswana-isation policies (Lekgoathi, 2006; Godsell, 2015).

What makes matters worse for an observer of these historical processes is the mass of contradictions that emerge every time a historical occurrence is interpreted. The caretaker administrators of Marokolong persist in their belief that Esther Kekana was not deposed by Mangope, but by her subjects, by which they mean themselves, the Marokolong section. Among these contradictions are also clashing points among people who are in the same camp, as is the case with Stella Kekana, from Majaneng. From her viewpoint, Esther Kekana was not deposed by Mangope. In fact, for her Mangope had nothing to do with local politics. She simply believes that Ester Kekana ended up working for the Bophuthatswana government until she was deposed by a section of the Kekana clan, just when her eldest daughter Mavis was about to take over. She insists that '[i]t was not Mangope who removed Esther from office. Mangope did not have any problem that we know of. The family insisted that the AmaNdebele are not ruled by women' (Kekana, S., 2017).

As stated elsewhere, the Mangope regime removed Esther Kekana from chiefship, following the recommendations of the Holt Commission, instituted in February 1976.¹¹ As Esther Kekana submits, she challenged the decision in a court, apparently with the assistance of the community, but lost (Kekana, E., 2017).

Complicating the process leading up to Esther Kekana's deposition is that the Majaneng faction largely supported her (except for the

tiny section that always demurred on account of her gender), and the Marokolong section supported her removal, driven by their long-term feud with the Majaneng section. Indeed, Stella Kekana does not seem to differentiate between the internal Majaneng group that objected to Esther Kekana's gender without disputing the legitimacy of the chiefship of their faction, and the Marokolong faction, which was dead set against her primarily because of the question about the historical legitimacy of the Majaneng group, though her gender may also have troubled them.

Divisions within the Majaneng faction

Given the ethnic politics of the Bophuthatswana regime, Esther Kekana's gender played no small part in the continued fragmentation of the Majaneng grouping as the issue of chieftaincy continued to be a source of discord. As the descendants of Johannes Tane Kekana, there are no reports of divisions with the Majaneng faction until the death of chief Hans Kekana in 1962. Hans Kekana's death, however, precipitated protracted internal strife over who is the legitimate heir to the throne, given that he died without sons. This contention should be understood within the broader context of the Majaneng faction, which sees itself as the legitimate ruling house (Kekana, E., 2017). By April 1994 – some 42 years after the death of Hans Kekana – when the democratic government came into power and the bantustan system was dissolved, this issue was still an area of discord within the Majaneng faction. For its part, the Bophuthatswana government had been entangled with and implicated in the ongoing chiefly succession dispute within this section of the AmaNdebele (Mokgabudi, 2017). It had also instituted commissions of inquiry and had countless meetings in which Mangope himself took part (Bophuthatswana Office of the President, 1988).

Go tsena mo tlung/seyantlo

The principle of *go tsena mo tlung* (literal meaning, ‘to enter the house’) or *seyantlo* (literally, ‘the one who goes into the house’) also does not seem to have been applied in the case of Esther Kekana, according to her. Practised by both royalty and commoners alike, *seyantlo* was a common cultural tradition among different African cultural communities. Linguistic evidence suggests the existence of widely shared, common socio-cultural concepts that governed the processes of chiefly succession across many cultural communities. We know for a fact, for instance, that ‘*Ukungena/Go tsena mo tlung*’, was a near-universal practice. Comaroff explains that ‘[a]ccording to this prescription, any man who dies without an heir should have one raised in his name. This is to be undertaken by a younger brother or close agnate, who cohabits with the wife of the dead man’ (Comaroff, 1974: 39). Interestingly, the term ‘*go tsena mo tlung*’ is Tswana (and may have had Pedi and southern Sotho variants), and *Ukungena* falls under the Nguni languages, which means it may be Zulu, Swati and Xhosa, all at once. It would seem reasonable to conclude that both among the Sotho and Nguni groupings it was a common practice to fill a vacuum in terms of chieftaincy succession by letting a brother or other agnate partner with the widow of the male relative who died childless.

Popoti Kekana (2017) concedes that, at some point in history, this practice was in use among AmaNdebele: ‘... we do. If a woman is married and cannot bear children they normally fetch her sister for this purpose. This practice used to be done before, but now it has fallen off.’ If the practice was still enforced, Esther Kekana would have married her late husband’s surviving brother, Agrippa Kekana. She did not. Some blame her for this, while she blames the Kekana royal family for failing to make this arrangement for her. In her own words, she was prepared to have an arranged second husband so as to retain chiefship within Hans Kekana’s homestead.

From the Majaneng faction viewpoint, some think that Esther Kekana spurned Agrippa Kekana, her late husband’s brother, because he was disabled and not classy enough for her. Molato Kekana seems

to be among those who subscribe to this view. He holds (Kekana, M., 2017) that:

Esther was supposed to mate with one [of the] male relatives in the clan to have a successor; she did not and chose an outsider because of status. The brother to her husband was probably not classy enough for her. She was already used to classy life. Her son with Motsepe happened after the death of Hans.

Meanwhile, the Marokolong faction contradicts Lekgoathi's claim that Mangope replaced Esther Kekana with Nathaniel Sello Kekana (Marokolong Faction, 2017). According to them, Mangope 'forwarded Agrippa Lepheng Kekana to succeed Esther Kekana; the AmaNdebele community were eyeing Nathaniel Sello (NS) Kekana. NS Kekana was in Alexandra Township and the community went to fetch him to replace Hans Kekana after the removal of Esther Kekana' (Marokolong Faction, 2017).

They claim that Mangope removed NS Kekana because he was not sure of his allegiance and pliability and instead imposed Agrippa Lepheng Kekana on them, the late chief Hans Kekana's brother. However, Agrippa Lepheng Kekana turned out to be an embarrassing choice, since he was a borderline alcoholic and generally indolent (Marokolong Royal Family, 2017). Consequently, Mangope removed him and replaced him with Thomas Mpofane Kekana as Acting Chief. Then he removed Thomas Mpofane Kekana and replaced him with Agrippa Lepheng Kekana for the second time. All these decisions Mangope made unilaterally (Marokolong Royal Family, 2017).

Lepheng died of his alcoholic habits. His wife, Tshidi Rose Kekana, acted as Chief a short while, in place of Lepheng's minor son, Silas Tlhabaki Kekana. Then came allegations against Silas Tlhabaki Kekana, namely that he was illegitimate because he was fathered elsewhere. Silas Tlhabaki Kekana was also disapproved of because of associations with the Mangope government, according to the Marokolong Faction (Marokolong Faction, 2017). Reports say he was a drunk, dissolute and his behaviour bordered on criminal. Yet, if Silas Tlhabaki Kekana was ever co-opted by the Mangope regime, the

relationship did not last long. He penned a letter in 1993 titled ‘My Grievances as Chief of AmaNdebele-Ba-Lebelo’, in which he laments that:

[I]t is with sore-heart that I grieve as Chief of Amandebele-Ba-Lebelo. Since my installation as Chief of the said tribe, I never had peace of mind to do my job as expected. I’ve been interrupted all the time when I tried to settle down to my job and this is attributed to the state of Bophuthatswana Republic since my installation in 1990 (Kekana, S., 1993).

Silas Tlhabaki Kekana was knocked down and killed by a car. He died without a son. Subsequently, Agrippa’s son, Cornelius Kgomotso Kekana, was installed as Chief, acting for the House of Silas Tlhabaki Kekana.

The future of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane

Cornelius Kekana is still (September 2018) the acting chief of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, amidst the ongoing vortex of controversy about which house the legitimate chiefship belongs to. Stella Makatu thinks the community is keen on Mavis Kekana, the daughter of the late Hans Kekana, even though Mavis’s old age is an impediment to bearing children. If this were not an inhibitor, Stella Makatu suggests, Mavis would be paired with one of the men from the Kekana royal clan for procreation and therefore solve the problem (Kekana, S., 2017). She also wishes for Cornelius to ask for Mavis’s endorsement with a view to sharing the spoils of office of chiefship, so as to give his office legitimacy. She believes because Cornelius’s wife is not from the royal house, his succession is already problematic since, if he were to die, he would have no legitimate successor.

Esther Kekana is not sanguine about the future. She believes that ‘... if it were not for jealousy, these people know that they have the duty to resuscitate this house (i.e. Chief Hans Kekana’s House), but in actuality they are killing it. When you ask them as to who they want,

they have no clue' (Kekana, E., 2017).

Molato Kekana has set his sights beyond the chiefship and jurisdiction of the current incumbent. His ambition is to once again restore all the areas the Marokolong faction believes historically belong to AmaNdebele-a-Moetlane (Kekana, M. 2017). This he is pursuing despite the findings against the claim, cited earlier.

From the viewpoint of Marokolong, Molato Kekana, who believes himself the paramount chief-in-waiting, is locked in legal battle (at the time of writing, September 2018) with the Gauteng provincial government over the issuance of a certificate of chiefship. He believes the reason for not receiving the certificate is political and that 'individuals with economic interests in our areas are the ones holding up the process. When our matter comes up, it is stalled. Each time we approach the provincial government, we see different people' (Kekana, M., 2017).

Like Molato Kekana, Richard Vonk Kekana is awaiting a certificate from Gauteng provincial government, which will recognise him as the legitimate (paramount) chief of AmaNdebele-a-Moetlane. His concern is that the youth have taken up this struggle and at times keep them (elders) in the dark about developments. It would seem the current generation of the AmaNdebele-a-Moetlane have also hurled themselves into this ongoing chiefly saga. He also insists that '[w]hat is for sure is that the current incumbent must be removed. We are only awaiting the legal process and the obtaining of the certificate. Then we will appoint Richard Vonk Kekana to his rightful place' (Marokolong Faction, 2017). Richard Vonk Kekana also alleges that Mavis Kekana has forged documents purporting that the clan support her chiefship. He continues that:

[O]n being asked what we thought about the fraud we assured them that we wanted to challenge them legally. One of us whose signature was genuine reported that the Kekana clan was once called to a meeting in which they were asked to support the claim of Mavis Kekana to the chieftaincy. Many were so incensed that they even left the meeting. Those who remained behind were invited to lunch and plied with alcohol and then

a paper was circulated which we were asked to sign without full explanation. Even the one that signed also denounced the resolution (Kekana, V., 2017).

All these claimants are determined to stake a claim on the chiefship of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, each convinced of the legitimacy of their claim, based on the same meta-history of this community.

Conclusion and implications of the findings

This chapter has established the historical conditions responsible for the ongoing chieftaincy succession dispute among the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane in Hammanskraal, between 1962 and 1994. However detailed the findings presented are, space constraints still prevent full coverage of the entire historical process, spanning a period of 32 years. The mapping of the processes also illustrates how scholarship and divergent, even conflicting, findings tend to complicate and confuse definitive historiography. Hopefully, the current study advances the process of identifying the underpinnings of this dispute.

While it cannot be said that pre-colonial chiefly succession was trouble free, or that there is a direct causal link between indirect rule and chiefly succession disputes within the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane, colonial rule manifested in the 1928 Native Administration Act and later, through the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act, provided conditions conducive to the perpetuation of chiefly succession disputes. Within the framework of these laws, the bantustan system and the Bophuthatswana regime intervened in the internal affairs of this chieftaincy in a way that proved insidious in the long term.

According to the Marokolong version, the roots of the chieftaincy succession dispute among AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane go back to the early 20th century, but became more pronounced after the death of Chief Hans Kekana in 1962.

Historiography does not seem to have approached the study of this community with even-handedness as far as both factions are concerned. The ethnological studies of Van Warmelo provided the authoritative

background on the main narrative of this history. Yet Van Warmelo does not seem to have consulted both sides to the conflict. Critiques of oral sources and other historians have demonstrated the intrinsic bias of both the researchers and the informants, the latter invariably being linked to the ruling elites and therefore recasting history to suit the needs of the moment. The narrative of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane seems to have suffered the same fate.

Overall, one can submit that oral sources on the history of this community from both the Majaneng and Marokolong sides have not been entirely impartial or fully informed. Their narratives are garbled, facts and chronologies are incorrect and the personal feelings of informants interfere with even what is generally known or acknowledged from both sides. This, however, does not mean that all oral sources on this history are suspect. Oral sources have over time yielded considerable historical content on this chieftaincy and other areas of historical research.

By covering both sides of the conflict, this chapter attempts to bring out the underlying issues at the core of chieftaincy succession. Many attempts to get to the roots of the historical origins of the chiefly dispute of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane scuff the issue by confining their focus to the early 1960s, after the demise of Chief Hans Kekana. Inevitably, this only scrapes the surface of the dispute in that it restricts the focus to one side only, while providing the illusion that the fissures within that one side are the main scope of the issue.

When open hostilities emerged, it turned out that it was not a straightforward matter of a dispute between the Marokolong and the Majaneng sides; there were also internal conflicts within each faction which further complicated the conflict. The Majaneng faction was divided along the lines of gender as Esther Kekana bore the brunt of customary law that saw her turfed out of the position of acting chiefship. The ousting of Esther Kekana took place within the context of the Bophuthatswana bantustan ethnic policies, which were in turn the culmination of the colonial and apartheid systems of indirect rule. The bantustan concept was ethnic in orientation, which resulted in the chieftaincy of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane being subjected to continued harassment and arbitrariness.

The Mangope regime used the prevailing climate of hostility within this community to its own advantage; it rewarded those who towed the line and punished those who rebelled against it, without seeking to address the root causes of the chiefly succession dispute. The regime also took it for granted that the legitimate lineage of chieftainship resided in the line of Johannes Tane Kekana, as has historically been the case.

This chapter does not cover the period since April 1994, when the bantustan system was dissolved. Even though commissions of inquiry were instituted to consider the question of chiefly succession disputes, the post-1994 period does not appear to have brought justice to the issue of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlana. As the pre-1994 era overflowed into the post-1994 one, there are historical continuities that blur the boundary between the two periods. In fact, the conflict may have been exacerbated by the various findings of the post-1994 government's commissions of inquiry. During its time, the Mangope regime seems to have taken for granted much of the historical record handed down from the time of Van Warmelo; it appears that the democratic dispensation has been doing the same and has not explored the historical roots of the chieftaincy succession dispute.

Overall, this study has found that it is not possible to fully understand the ongoing, entangled chieftaincy succession dispute among AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane without taking account of the framework of the bantustan system and the environment created by a history of indirect rule. While the origins of the dispute cannot be directly ascribed to the Bophuthatswana bantustan, the hypothesis argued here is that British colonial policies which distorted or misunderstood indigenous political and cultural systems, served to both worsen and perpetuate the division.

The 1951 Bantu Authorities Act propped up the bantustan system and the wider apartheid system that underpinned it. However, the Act also compromised the institution of chieftaincy, rendering it unstable. Thus, the institution of chieftaincy came to be based on misapprehension, fabrications and wilful distortion for self-preservation, and so was refigured into an institution contingent on external forces and historical conditions. This intervention into

the nature and character of chieftaincy proved insidious for the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane in the Hammanskraal area.

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Notes

- 1 It is useful to distinguish between 'oral history' and 'oral tradition'. The former refers to '... oral evidence specific to the life experiences of the informant. Such evidence does not pass from generation to generation ...', while the latter denotes 'oral testimony transmitted verbally from generation to the next, or more' (Prins, 1992: 120).

- 2 The Marokolong faction is one of the two main factions (along with Majaneng faction) fighting over the chieftaincy succession of the AmaNdebele-a-Moletlane in Hammanskraal.
- 3 Genealogically, Bulongo is one of the early ancestors of the Transvaal Ndebele people. Yangalala, one of his three sons, fathered Maboyaboya, from whom descended Mamokebe and Lebelo Seroto. It is thus not possible for Bulongo to have been part of the palace intrigue during Lebelo's generation as alleged by Molato Kekana.
- 4 Letter to Leka Jacob Kekana, of the Kekana Royal Executive Council, by Emma Mashinini, Regional Claims Commissioner: Gauteng, Mpumalanga, North West and Northern Province, 21 October 1996
- 5 Letter from Emma Mashinini, Regional Land Claims Commissioner of Gauteng and North-West, to Geoff Budlender, Director-General Land Affairs and Agriculture, 9 June 1999
- 6 Letter by Emma Mashinini, Regional Land Claims Commissioner: Gauteng and North West, 4 May 1999. This letter was intended for Mr Geoff Budlender, Director-General of Land Affairs and Agriculture, under the title: Response to Queries Raised by the Kekana Royal Executive Council in their Letter Dated 27th May 1999 Regarding the Non-Acceptance of their Land Claims on the Farms Leeuwkraal 92 JR and Eighty-One Others in Districts of Hammanskraal, Pretoria, Moretele 1, Warmbad in Gauteng, North West and Northern Province.
- 7 For instance, the Mangope regime has always referred to this dispute, even though it has often dismissed the Marokolong faction's claim as false. See, for example, the findings of the Commission of Inquiry, AmaNdebele Tribal Authority, 'Bophuthatswana Office of the President', 6/4/2, p. 2.
- 8 *Esterhilde Nchadi Kekana vs Lucas Manyane Mangobe, Nathaniel Sello Kekana, the Minister of Bantu Administration & Development*. 1 June 1977. Supreme Court of South Africa (Transvaal Provincial Division).
- 9 *Esterhilde Nchadi Kekana vs Lucas Manyane Mangobe, Nathaniel Sello Kekana, the Minister of Bantu Administration & Development*. 1 June 1977. Supreme Court of South Africa (Transvaal Provincial Division).
- 10 *Esterhilde Nchadi Kekana vs Lucas Manyane Mangobe, Nathaniel Sello Kekana, the Minister of Bantu Administration & Development*. 1 June 1977. Supreme Court of South Africa (Transvaal Provincial Division).
- 11 *Esterhilde Nchadi Kekana vs Lucas Manyane Mangobe, Nathaniel Sello Kekana, The Minister of Bantu Administration and Development*. 1st June 1977. Supreme Court of South Africa (Transvaal Provincial Division).