

## SINGING PSALMS WITH OWLS: A VENDA TWENTIETH CENTURY MUSICAL HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

by

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### PART ONE: TSHIGOMBELA<sup>2</sup>

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Ndi a givha-givha</i> <i>Na vhafunzi vha ḁo givha-givha</i> <i>Na magwitha ri ḁo vula iyo psalema</i> <i>Vha dzia u via ri ḁo tangana henengei Matatshe</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">I am dancing<sup>3</sup> And priests will also dance And with owls we will open that psalm We will meet ritual murderers at Matatshe jail</p>
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World historiography of the second half of the twentieth century has been marked by the expansion of historical subject matter. Bundy (1991:94-95) notes of American historiography that “new methodologies, new sources of evidence, new themes and concepts have not only transformed existing specialist fields of enquiry but also called into being entirely new genres and sub-disciplines”. South African historiography has lagged behind in this respect, and it is only in recent years that themes in social history have emerged. These include demography, the family, youth, old age, death, crime, leisure, health, education and law (Bundy 1991:100). Bundy (1991:99-100) furthermore notes that the study of these themes has not yet been taken far, while “entire areas of the past remain blank”. While artistic cultural forms like literature, orature, graphic and plastic art, theatre, dance and music are receiving increasing historical attention, they too still have to enter mainstream historiography. Furthermore, within the domain of these artistic forms, musical perspectives in particular are inadequately represented in historical reconstruction.

There are a number of possible reasons for the neglect of perspectives on music<sup>4</sup> in South African historiography. Firstly, musical performance is widely regarded as peripheral social action. It is usually frivolous entertainment, or, at most, something with which to celebrate political revolutions. Music historians have done little to show why musical perspectives are important in the writing of social history. Music historiography in South Africa generally is ethnocentric and product-centered. It

<sup>1</sup> The term musical history refers to the construction of social history through music, as opposed to music history which normally indicates a history of musical form. *Ed*: This article will be followed by Part Two: “Tshikona, beer songs and personal songs” in the next number of this journal.

<sup>2</sup> The construction of this musical history partly was made possible through the Musical History Project conducted at the University of Venda from 1989-1994. During this time students investigated the music and lives of approximately 600 musicians and groups of musicians. The accumulated information is housed in the music department at the University of Potchefstroom. I would like to thank everyone who participated in this project.

<sup>3</sup> From a song by well-known guitarist Vhutshilo Netsianda (Netshifhefhe 1992:9). Dancing is a metaphor for authoritarian rule. Owls are witch familiars, and symbolic of evil. Singing psalms with owls is a reference to religiously justified opposition against authoritarian rule.

<sup>4</sup> The term music is used in its holistic sense to refer to sound, movement and drama, and all their attendant social dynamics.

mainly involves studying the stylistic features of Western classical music without linking the music firmly to its social roots. Because of the discontinuity between the social experiences and preferences of most students, and the methods and materials of music education, educational preference usually is given to non-music subjects and sport. It therefore comes as no surprise that most South African social scientists have not come to terms with the historical role of music. It is significant that existing comprehensive South African musical histories mostly have been written by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists (see Ballantine 1993, Coplan 1985 & 1994, Erlmann 1991, James 1993, Kruger 1993; but see Vail and White 1991).<sup>5</sup>

The product-centered methodology of South African musicology arguably is a second cause of the neglect of musical themes in local historiography. The study of music is popularly perceived as necessarily related to musical literacy and some competence in musical performance. But none of the musical histories cited above focus primarily on musical structure. They consider musical performances as settings for the generation of cultural patterns. Although there are obvious limitations to this kind of anthropological approach, it makes two fundamental aspects of musical performance readily accessible to non-music specialists, namely general performance practice, and song texts (see Harries 1987, Vail and White 1991). In other words, while it has heuristic use, musical training is not a prerequisite for the study of the behaviour that produces music. An interest in musical culture mostly is what is needed to construct a musical history.

### **Challenges of musical historiography**

There are two challenges facing the mainstream acceptance of musical historiography. The first of these is the usefulness of perspectives on music in historical construction (especially political and economic history). The second is the possibility that musical history may yet be another “nearly hermetic” historical sub-specialization (see Bundy 1991:96).

Musical thought is important, perhaps even indispensable in historical reconstruction. Blacking defines musical thought as “performing, listening to and talking about music as parts of the processes of making sense of the world through and with music” (Blacking 1990:72). Musical thought combines human affective and cognitive qualities in the generation of emotionally charged social action. Many social scientists regard the affective function of music as paramount. Blacking notes that “music cannot make people act unless they are already socially and culturally disposed to act” (1995b:35-36). Rather, it makes “people more aware of feelings they have experienced” (Blacking 1995b:36). This process of affective arousal is displayed in musical ritual which may be defined as the assembly of a group of musicians (and sometimes also an audience), their common focus of attention (the

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to disregard the increasing number of shorter musical histories which include contributions by historians. See inter alia Ballantine 1991, Coplan 1987, Erlmann 1989, Kruger 1989 & 1996, Manghezi 1996, Rorich 1989, Harries 1987, Rycroft 1991, Vail and White 1978.

musical performance), and consequent feelings of shared heightened emotion and social cohesion (see Collins 1988:193).<sup>6</sup> Awareness of shared feelings, particularly of fellow-feeling, is basic to the development of human cognitive processes and capacities, and, ultimately, human social adaptability (Blacking 1977:5-8).

The cognitive processes and musical skills generated in musical ritual are critical for enculturation and advanced communication which allow social interaction, and thus shape culture. Musical performance invokes several means of communication, namely motor, visual, kinesthetic, auditory, olfactory, proxemic, and tactile. In this sense music is an exceptional aspect of cultural systems which allows adaptively valuable information to be communicated between people (Hanna 1977:214-216). So anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have shown that processes of urbanization and social change in South Africa cannot be understood fully without considering musical thought (see Coplan 1985 & 1994, Erlmann 1991, James 1993, Kruger 1993). Unlike certain streams within social history (see Bundy 1991:97), the musical construction of history therefore does not ignore politics and related social issues, and the label of peripheral sub-specialization consequently does not apply to it.

In discussing recent Venda history, I treat certain communal dances (*tshigombela*, *tshikona*, and *malende*) and individual music making as categories of Venda musical thought which derive their meaning in the context of socio-political change in the second half of the twentieth century. But while Venda musical thought partly is a response to certain social conditions, this discussion will suggest that it helped to shape recent political history. Musical thought not only promoted social cohesion, but communicated many messages through song texts and dance features.

My objective is to illuminate the value of musical historiography in terms of the social role of musical thought, and not to attempt a comprehensive overview of Venda recent political history. Rather, my broad, selective historical reconstruction is shaped by important musical dynamics of political change. My aim is to construct a musical history which, together with other existing and future interlocking musical histories (see Blacking 1995a, Kruger 1989, 1993, 1996) will contribute towards a comprehensive view of social life in twentieth century Venda.

As Blacking's extensive oeuvre indicates, Venda musical thought is integral to social structure, and its organization and performance practice mirrors and shapes general cultural patterns. Although Venda twentieth century musical thought has been affected by social change, it has retained its prominent traditional role in the political economy. Blacking's observation (1985:87-88) that the power of *tshikona* (the reed-pipe dance) and *domba* (the girls' initiation school) "as symbols embodying Venda society has been so great that they have survived many fundamental social and economic changes" not only is correct, but it also applies to the categories of music

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<sup>6</sup> Venda musicians are aware of the cohesive qualities of music-making. Lamellaphone player Joseph Mudau of Mutale sings: "Let us be unified like the swallows when they come here in Venda to eat worms in the Mutale river. These swallows have an agreement to sing *naa, naa, naa...*" (Netshiungani 1990:5; see Blacking 1976, Kruger 1993).

included in this musical history. I discuss the female dance *tshigombela* in part one, and *tshikona*, beer songs, and personal songs in part two. *Tshikona* and *tshigombela* are useful for analysis because their performance is intimately associated with traditional politics. While beer songs feature less directly in politics, they comprise the largest category of adult songs, and give additional insight into the political experiences of ordinary people. Personal songs also are useful because they are the most elaborate of all Venda songs, and often provide detail not contained in communal songs.

**“*Tshigombela ndi tsha mahosi*” (tshigombela is for chiefs): a historical overview of *tshigombela***

*Tshigombela* is a dance mainly for girls and women (see footnote 14) which became popular during the early part of the 20th century (Blacking 1962:56).<sup>7</sup> The dance has the characteristic circle formation of Venda dances. Dancers wear decorated skirts with costume jewelry. Some teams wave handkerchiefs and blow on metal whistles (see Burnett-van Tonder 1984, 1987).



*Tshigombela* at the homestead of headman Abraham Ramugondo, Ngudza, 1990.

Blacking (1962, 1965) describes *tshigombela* as a “game” for unmarried girls. His choice of the term derives from the term *mutambo* (pl. *mitambo*, from *-tamba*, to play). The problem with these terms is that they attribute to *tshigombela* the quality of mere amusement. Venda speakers in fact use the term *mutambo* to distinguish a *mutambo* social event such as *tshigombela* from a *ngoma* event. *Ngoma* events are ‘sacred mysteries’ which have cosmological, religious, and mystical qualities. They include religious musical rituals, initiation schools and *tshikona*, the reedpipe dance (see Kruger 1996). *Mitambo* may be described more appropriately as a form of entertaining musical drama which mediates social conflict (see Kruger 1993, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Blacking (1962) notes that *tshigombela* is a version of *masiavhogo*, an obsolete dance. My information suggests that *tshigombela* may be an import from neighbouring Shangana-Tsonga musical culture.

*Tshigombela* always has played a role in the Venda political economy. Blacking (1962) describes it as a social institution which helps to uphold the social dichotomy between ruling and non-ruling families.<sup>8</sup> This is reflected clearly in a well-known *tshigombela* song:

*Tshigombela ndi tsha mahosi  
Musiwana u tshi wanafhi?*

Tshigombela is for chiefs  
Where will a commoner find it?

*Tshigombela* was performed under the auspices of rulers, and consequently functioned as a symbol of political power. *Tshigombela* dancers required permission from their ruler to practise and perform. Rehearsals took place at the ruler's homestead. The ruler was the only person possessing the drums needed for *tshigombela*.<sup>9</sup> Blacking (1965:35) notes that *tshigombela* performance practice "gently" introduced young dancers to patterns of political authority.

*Tshigombela* also mobilised *bepha* groups (see Blacking 1962). The term *bepha* signifies a group of dancers sent by a traditional leader on ambassadorial visits to other leaders. Blacking notes that *bepha* is

a particularly useful institution for consolidating bonds between rulers or would-be rulers and their families, who are separated spatially by their occupation of ruling different districts, and commoners who live together in those districts. The overall effect is to reinforce the solidarity of the rulers and their families and their right to rule (1962:54).<sup>10</sup>

Blacking (1962:61) remarks that *bepha* had "a variety of meanings according to the status of the individual". For members of the team "the mounting excitement of the daily practices, the collection of the special costumes, the washing of clothes and the preparation of food for the journey" all consolidated and expanded the bonds of fellowship which existed between age-mates of the same neighbourhood. This is reflected in a very old *tshigombela* song:

*Ri ne ri vhasidzana vha Venda  
vha diphinaho nga tshigombela  
Tshi ri humbudza zwa kale  
shango lo lala*

We are Venda girls who enjoy  
ourselves in tshigombela<sup>11</sup>  
It reminds us of the past  
when there was peace

*Tshi ri kuvhanganya ra vha huthihi*

It gathers us together in unity

*Bepha* to another district thus was important "not so much for the extension of

<sup>8</sup> Ruling families mainly belong to the Singo clan which first invaded Venda in the seventeenth century, subjugating non-ruling families comprising earlier migrations of settlers, as well as aboriginal inhabitants.

<sup>9</sup> Good drums used in communal music have always been costly items, and only the wealthy are usually able to afford them. Perhaps as consequence, drums were traditionally used in performances of music taking place under the auspices of traditional rulers. As such these drums were symbolic of political power (see Kruger 1996). The decline of traditional political power in Venda in the twentieth century is mirrored in the widespread communal possession and use of drums, the majority of which comprise skin-covered tins or plastic buckets.

<sup>10</sup> Blacking (1962:58-59) identifies seven types of *bepha*, all pertaining to relations between traditional rulers: expressing sympathy on death, tax collection, congratulations on installation, friendly visit, return visit, expression of subservience, and request for *bepha*.

<sup>11</sup> Mr A.N. Tsanwani, Univ. of Venda, 24/8/90, who heard the song from old women.

young people's geographical knowledge, nor for the association with strangers, as for the consolidation of existing relationships based on locality rather than kinship" (Blacking 1962:61). This also applied to the parents of dancers who played an active part in organising *bepha*. This strengthened "feelings of neighbourliness, as parents of children with a common interest, and their loyalty to the district and its ruler" (Blacking 1962:62). *Bepha* thus served as vehicle for the promotion of communal solidarity, and was an agreeable means by which a ruler indirectly could cultivate the continued loyalty of his people (Blacking 1962:62). In this context *tshigombela* played a vital role in the system of political checks and balances. The dance was a platform for communication with rulers. This is evident in singing that often occurs at the start of *tshigombela* performances:

<i>Ri a dzhena</i>	We are entering
<i>Vhamusanda, kha vha ri vulele</i>	Honourable chief, allow us in

In this song a traditional leader is asked to 'open' his homestead for *tshigombela* dancers to enter.<sup>12</sup> This does not only mean that the dancers are asking permission to perform, but by implication also to communicate with their leader. This communication takes various forms such as praise or criticism. By singing "we are entering", the performers indicate that they are entering a ritual space. This is a space for musical performance as well as other important communal events such as court hearings and initiation schools. Ritual space provides dancers with the opportunity to adjust or even suspend social norms. For example, people do not normally discuss the affairs of ruling families openly.<sup>13</sup> Also, in a male-dominated society such as in Venda, men tend to be the leaders and formal decision makers. These norms are suspended when *tshigombela* is performed. For the duration of the dance women address rulers and men openly:<sup>14</sup>

<i>Vhamusanda Vho-Mushavhanamadi</i>	Mr Mushavhanamadi, our headman
<i>Vha ri vusa nga matsheloni-tsheloni</i>	wakes us up very early in the morning <sup>15</sup>
<i>Vha ri hulungisa nḁu dzavho</i>	He forces us to smear his house
<i>Ngeno vhatanuni vhavho vho lala</i>	while his young wives are sleeping

But *tshigombela* not only is an institution allowing dancers to make political

<sup>12</sup> In performance dancers assemble on the periphery of the dance arena (in recent decades situated immediately adjacent to the ruler's homestead), and move slowly onto it while singing the song.

<sup>13</sup> This is reflected in expressions such as "zwa thavhani a zwi ambiwi" (it is forbidden to speak of that which happens in the chief's home).

<sup>14</sup> It is not unknown to see women performing *tshigombela* in male clothing, wielding objects usually associated with men (e.g. large handkerchiefs or ritual weapons). This arguably is symbolic of their changed yet temporary status (Burnett-Van Tonder 1984:606). Julia Mikosi, *tshigombela* dancer from Thengwe, suggested that men and women originally used to dance *tshigombela* together (Makwarela Stadium, 1/10/94). Perhaps men performed another dance in tandem with *tshigombela*, but *tshigombela* performances by men and women have also been reported by other informants (Azwifarwi Mudzanani, Makwarela Stadium, 1/10/94). Perhaps, as men became migrant workers or left for school, women perpetuated the male identity of the dance. There is in any case a dual male/female identity evident across the spectrum of traditional dance performance.

<sup>15</sup> Mr A.N. Tsanwani, Univ. of Venda, 24/8/90. Blacking (1962:68) identifies Mushavhanamadi as the traditional leader of Tshivhambe, now a suburb of Thqohoyandou.

representations to their leader. The dance also symbolises the interdependence between leaders and their followers:

<i>Ri a dzhena, tshigombela</i>	We, the tshigombela dancers, are entering <sup>16</sup>
<i>Vhamusanda vha ḡo ri fha mini?</i>	What will the headman give us?
<i>Vha ḡo ri fha kholomo mbili</i>	He will give us two oxen

The song suggests that dancers should be rewarded for their performance with food and drink. However, food and drink are not rewards only, but also a way of formalising the temporary status of the dancers and the interdependence of ruler and subject. In other words, the dancing of *tshigombela* becomes a sign of political support for a ruler who in turn must see to the needs of his subjects.

**1948-1979: “Vhakegulu na vhakalaha murumba u tambela zwanda”  
(old men and women play the drum well)**

Blacking (1967:191) remarks that before and during the middle of this century “no married woman would think of dancing *tshigombela*”. Married women, however, have been the backbone of many *tshigombela* teams since the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> There are several possible interrelated reasons for this change in the social organisation of the dance. Perhaps the most important reason was the role of rural adult women in the political process in Venda during the 1950s and 1960s. Following the rise to power of the National Party in 1948, and the subsequent promotion of separate development, the first Venda local authorities were established in 1954 (Nemudzivhadi 1985:28). This legalised the traditional political system, since these authorities were headed by traditional leaders. In 1962 the heavily populated central area of Venda came under the control of the Thohoyandou Territorial Authority, led by Patrick Mphephu, a powerful leader of the Singo ruling clan (Nemudzivhadi 1985:28). Venda was accorded self-rule status in 1969, and Mphephu again was appointed leader with several important traditional leaders serving on the governing council (Nemudzivhadi 1985:29).

Self-rule gave a temporary boost to the declining political power of traditional leaders. Their power had been curtailed steadily by colonial administration, and changing demographic and cultural patterns. Under colonial rule, Venda people started to move from their defensive mountain strongholds to adjacent valleys and plains. This process was accelerated by population growth and the establishment of homeland borders. The introduction of annual family tax of one pound in 1903 (Nemudzivhadi 1981:25) enforced a new kind of economy. Formerly Venda people were farmers and hunters who had no need for money. The introduction of a money economy promoted migrant labour, an economic pattern which still exists. Colonial institutions like the army, police, and magistrates assumed many of the functions of

<sup>16</sup> Performed by a *tshigombela* team from Tshixwadza at the installation of their new traditional leader, 29/9/90.

<sup>17</sup> The incorporation of women in *tshigombela* dancing came as a shock to older people, but they soon came to accept changing practice. Wilfred Phophi from Tshifudi, after seeing *tshigombela* performed by women for the first time, remarked: “I was surprised, but it did not matter because the women were making a bigger noise than any group of girls ever could!” (Tshifudi, 1984).

traditional leaders. Missionary influence, dating back to the middle of the 19th century, made further inroads on the authority of traditional leaders. Until the 1960s the promotion of traditional culture was strongly suppressed by the church.<sup>18</sup> Teachers were expected to be Christians. The church influenced their appointment, and had the power to transfer those with whom they had ideological conflict. Certain missionaries interfered in the personal lives of their converts.<sup>19</sup> They also forbade their converts to participate in traditional dances and initiation schools because “they pulled people back to heathenism” and interfered with school work.<sup>20</sup> The advent of self-rule in 1969 thus created conditions favourable for traditional leaders to reassert their pre-colonial political status. These leaders promoted an ideology of nationalism under traditional political leadership. They established their own political party, the Recognized Leaders’ Party, which won the first local election in 1973 (Heroldt and Dombo 1992:76, Nemudzivhadi 1985:29). Their political nationalism was promoted through cultural nationalism which legitimised many traditional cultural practices and gave them patriotic status. The cultural practices promoted by traditional leaders were those supporting their traditional political status. Not surprisingly, dance featured prominently in this process. The concepts of tradition, a Venda identity and independence were promoted through traditional dance which was revitalised during the 1970s.

Many people remarked that adult women became involved in *tshigombela* during the 1970s because they had to teach girls how to dance. However, it is more likely that their initial involvement was a factor of cultural nationalism. Adult *tshigombela* teams became involved in political power play, particularly to promote the authority of traditional rulers:

<i>Vho-Ravele ndi khosi</i>	Mr Ravele is a chief
<i>Vha Matshavhane ndi vhashu</i>	People of Matshavhane are ours
<i>Vhakegulu na vhalakaha</i>	Old women and men
<i>Murumba u tambela zwanda:</i>	They play the drum well <sup>21</sup>
<i>‘Tshi tshi tshi’</i>	

In discussing this *tshigombela* song text, Mabeba (1993:4) remarks:

The performers want us to know that Mr Ravele<sup>22</sup> likes chieftainship and money. They

<sup>18</sup> While church opposition to traditional culture has diminished, it remains a factor in contemporary social formation. Many Christians are opposed to traditional initiation. Some churches organise holiday camps for young people to entice them away from initiation schools.

<sup>19</sup> Christians were forbidden to wear traditional dress, and had to take Biblical names. Missionaries also influenced their choice of marriage partner.

<sup>20</sup> Mutshutshu Nevhulaudzi, Maungani, 31/8/90 and Mbulaheni Musehane, Univ. of Venda, 27/8/90. Burnett-Van Tonder (1984:595) in fact suggests that *tshigombela* virtually disappeared during the 1960s and early 1970s. This was confirmed by John Marubeni Tshivhase, Phiphidi, 4/6/84. Comments by Tshivhase also suggest that local opposition to traditional culture was part of a deliberate strategy of resistance against the ethnic basis of apartheid education.

<sup>21</sup> Lit: the alto drum is played with the hands.

<sup>22</sup> At the time, a traditional leader in the Nzhelele area, and subsequently the president of Venda.

are trying to show us that he used old people to acquire the territory<sup>23</sup> of others by making them dance tshigombela in return for slaughtering sheep and cattle for them.

The 'reward' of meat is symbolic of the traditional inter-dependence between leaders and followers. However, there is a suggestion here of political corruption. This was confirmed by Mutshutshu Nevhulaudzi who remarked that "adult women started to dance *tshigombela* for favours".<sup>24</sup> Also, refusal to participate in traditional dance elicited accusations of opposition to the government. People opposed to initiation were referred to as communists,<sup>25</sup> while attempts were made to enforce participation. During 1986 and 1987 there was conflict regarding a massive drive to forcibly recruit male circumcision school initiates at Nzhelele, the seat of the two Venda presidents. Some people protested against traditional dance, arguing that it interfered with children's school work:

*Ri ñe a ri nga ðo tshi konda*  
*Tshigombela tsha vhusiku*  
*Tshikona tsha vhusiku*  
*Ruvhuruvhu ða vhusiku*

We shall not tolerate it  
 Tshigombela of the night  
 Tshikona of the night  
 There is an uproar at night

Ntungufhadzeni Tshivhase of Vondwe complained in this song about the traditional leader of Tshitereke who forced scholars to perform dances at night when they wanted to study and sleep (Thimisha 1991:5). Christians also protested against traditional dance, saying that it was a heathen practice. It was common for people opposed to traditional dance to be summoned to tribal courts where they were fined.<sup>26</sup>

The involvement of women in the political economy of *tshigombela* was a logical extension of views regarding their traditional social role as mother and house keeper. During early years of schooling many families kept girls from going to school, arguing that it would make them mad. Also, girls had to remain at home while young men became migrant labourers. Uneducated rural women whose existence centered around the home hence became the logical choice for involvement in *tshigombela*. The social acceptance of adult *tshigombela* dancing also was a factor of the changing political and economic status of women. The absence of men from home put more social responsibility on the shoulders of women. Not only did the family, home, cattle and land become their responsibility, but many became employed as "labourers in timber plantations, government tea and sisal hemp agricultural schemes and constructions works" (Ralushai 1977:3). Their incorporation into *tshigombela* thus also was an aspect of changing relations of production.

#### 1979-1985: "*Ri vha luvha nga tshigombela*" (we praise with tshigombela)

The second Venda election took place in 1978. As was the case with the 1973

<sup>23</sup> Referring to territorial conflict between headmen. It is likely that this conflict was connected to Ravele's elevation from headman to chief, a step that legalised his appointment as paramount chief and president.

<sup>24</sup> Maungani, 31/8/90.

<sup>25</sup> Mutshutshu Nevhulaudzi, Maungani, 31/8/90.

<sup>26</sup> Mr H.S. Tshamano, Univ. of Venda, 6/6/94.

elections, the party of Venda traditional leaders (now the Venda National Party) emerged victorious under the leadership of Patrick Mphephu. The process of cultural nationalism which started during the early 1970s reached a peak during and after the declaration of independence in 1979:

Efforts by the government to revitalise tshigombela took place in 1979 during independence celebrations. In pursuit of power, and to gain membership of parliament, many nominees organised a big tshigombela team.<sup>27</sup>

After independence the Venda National Party channelled its cultural nationalism through government structures such as the Department of Education and Culture, and Radio Thohoyandou. The former instituted a national dance competition. This competition involved communal dances with the exception of initiation dances. Staff of Radio Thohoyandou (and Radio Venda, situated in Pietersburg) recorded and broadcast traditional music.

Numerous *tshigombela* songs which originated around 1979 and the early 1980s reflected strong support for independence and traditional political rule:

- *Takalela vhu divhusi ha Venda* Rejoice over the independence of Venda<sup>28</sup>
- *Shumela vhuthihi ha mahosi* Work towards the unity of chiefs<sup>29</sup>
- *Vhuthihi, Vho-Mphephu* Unity, Mr Mphephu
- Vhamusanda, riye ri na vhuthihi* Honourable chief, we are unified<sup>29</sup>

For several years following the declaration of independence, many people believed that their material conditions would improve. *Tshigombela* dancers expressed enthusiastic support for the idea of a Venda national identity, and praised progress and economic development:

- *Vho-Mphephu, ri a vha luvha* We salute Mr Mphephu<sup>30</sup>
- Ri vha luvha nga tshigombela* We praise him with tshigombela
- Vho ri wanela mudagasi na dzibombi* He provided electricity and water
- Thohoyandou, mavhoneni* Thohoyandou, place of glittering lights
- *Vho-Mphephu, vha songo fa* Mr Mphephu, do not die<sup>31</sup>
- Vha fa na vhathu vhothe vha do fa* Otherwise everybody will die with you
- Ha athu vha hone a no nga* There is nobody like you
- Khosi ya mahosi* Chief of chiefs
- Vhane ra fura nga u tou pfa ipfi lavho* We are satisfied when we hear your voice

The last song emerged during the period 1982-1983 when Venda suffered in the grip of a drought caused by the El Nino weather phenomenon. Both songs suggest a link between material development and political support. Manngo (1989:2) notes that

<sup>27</sup> Mr M.T. Masengana, Univ. of Venda, 24/8/90. This remark only applies to candidates competing for contested seats.

<sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup> Recorded at Mathugana, 2/7/83.

<sup>29</sup> Recorded at Mukula, 3/7/83.

<sup>30</sup> Mr A.N. Tsanwani, Univ. of Venda, 24/8/90.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Nekhavhambe, Univ. of Venda, 5/9/91.

in songs which promoted the concept of independence

people [were] rejoicing because honourable chief Patrick Ramaano Mphephu brought development to our country of Venda by making it an independent state. He unified his people and made them develop their country. Because of that the Venda people live in peace and work very hard so that they cannot suffer.

Similarly, Ndou (1989:8) remarks that “by independence we must strive for economic, political and social development. We must be proud of our identity, tradition and culture.<sup>32</sup> Unity of our nation is important”.

The annual independence celebrations which took place on the thirteenth of September became the most important event at which these views were publicly manifested. Just as the education system promoted change in the colonial context (see Kallaway 1984), so it became an important setting of ideological conflict after 1979. The Venda National Party mobilised masses of dancers by using the established organisational structure of the Department of Education and Culture. School yards became places where dancers assembled and rehearsed, and where eliminating rounds of the competition took place. Dance teams and their supporters were transported in pick-ups and lorries to be part of the almost frenzied activities of regional rounds. Community elders and government officials sat in the shade, enjoyed refreshments and listened to patriotic speeches against the backdrop of teachers excitedly paying last minute attention to the costumes and instruments of a colourful sea of agitated dancers. Opportunist street vendors set up temporary fruit stalls and passers-by were lured by the sound of drumming, the sight of friends and family, and the flashing of cameras. Great honour was bestowed on the winning schools, particularly those who managed to reach the final round. These schools promoted the image of the local traditional leader and his district.

The dance competition provided further opportunities for traditional leaders to display and reinforce their political status. This was evident at the 1991 Dzimauli regional dance competition and agricultural show. This event took place at Ratshilumela Secondary School in the village of Tshixwadza. Not only did a *tshikona* reedpipe team from the neighbouring village of Mukondeni participate in the competition, but their traditional leader acted as master of ceremonies. He opened proceedings by welcoming everybody and thanking the Department of Education and Culture for its support. He was much in evidence as he rushed around to organise the programme. The traditional leader of Tshixwadza also used the event to promote his status. He had been installed shortly before, and saw an opportunity to consolidate his position. Because initiation dances were usually performed during initiation only, they were not included in the competition. However, the traditional leader of Tshixwadza had arranged for a performance of the famous snake dance from the *domba* initiation school for girls. *Domba* was a powerful symbol of the identity of

<sup>32</sup> John Mudzanani, a boys' circumcision school leader, remarked that the purpose of his school was to allow “our children to discover their roots. We are reviving and practising traditional dances, just like some German and Portuguese South Africans still perform their own traditional dances” (Mukula, 30/6/86).

local communities and of the power of their leaders (see Blacking 1965, 1969, 1985). The snake dance was an icon of Venda cultural identity, and photographs of it often appeared in tourist brochures and popular media reports on Venda culture. What made its performance at the show unusual was not only its incorporation into the competition programme, but also that it took place out of context. The dance properly is performed by initiates in their late teenage years. However, on this occasion it was performed by a group of elderly women, none appearing younger than sixty years. The second musical performance not part of the competition was that of a beer song (*malende*). This performance featured one dancer only. She was one of the traditional leader's younger wives. She crawled in submission to her husband from the side of the play ground to where the drums were, and proceeded to dance. Her submissiveness also affected other older singers who knelt in respect. The crowd applauded them enthusiastically. These two musical events which are normally associated with life at a royal homestead had been appropriated to a new, public context. They promoted traditional power relations during a time of increasing demand for democratic government.

**1985-1990: “*Ndi vhutungu fhedzi shangoni la vhaloi*” (there is only misery in the land of witches)<sup>33</sup>**

Two elections took place between 1969 and 1979, the first in 1973 and the second in 1978. These elections were contested between the Recognized Leaders' Party (subsequently the Venda National Party) and the Venda Independence People's Party under the leadership of Baldwin Mudau. The policy of the Venda Independence People's Party was a drastic curtailment and reformation of the power of traditional leaders (Heroldt and Dombo 1992:78, quoting M.C. Botha). The Venda Independence People's Party won most contested seats in both elections. However, in terms of the Black States Constitution Act of 1971, traditional leaders were ex officio members of parliament, and their superior number ensured them election victory (see Heroldt and Dombo 1992:75-78).

The repressive nature of the Venda National Party (VNP) regime in the 1980s was already evident prior to the 1979 elections. They interfered with Venda Independence People's Party election rallies, detained some of its members without trial, and blocked the civil service career opportunities of others.<sup>34</sup> The repression of the Venda Independence People's Party heralded the final phase of the VNP's ascendancy to total power. Mphephu was appointed as life president in 1983. Through continued intimidation the VNP dominated the 1984 general election and was the only party to contest the 1985 by-election. Mphephu justified Venda's one party government by remarking that party politics had an adverse effect on “orderly and peaceful life” and that “as long as mahosi [chiefs] and magota [headmen, councillors] are and remain actively participating in ruling... peace, order, progress,

<sup>33</sup> From a song by well-known bow player Jim Mundalamo from Nzhelele (Maiwashe 1990:4).

<sup>34</sup> Mutshutshu Nevhulaudzi, Maungani, 31/8/90 (cf. Heroldt and Dombo 1992:78-80, Mphahlele 1984:241-247).

and stability will continue” (Heroldt and Dombo 1992:81-82). The clampdown of the VNP on its political opposition in fact had the opposite effect. People suspected of political opposition were assaulted, tortured and killed in detention,<sup>35</sup> while telephone tapping and aggressive vehicle searches at road blocks became part of everyday life. In spite of these repressive measures, the VNP found it increasingly difficult to control massive political discontent that was brewing in the Venda community (cf. Koch and Ritchkin 1988). Challenging the independent status of Venda, *tshigombela* performers started to sing:

*Vho-Mphephu vho thoma mndwa*  
*Ri vha lwele ngani?*  
*Zwigidi a hu na*  
*Masole a hu na*

Mr Mphephu started the war.<sup>36</sup>  
 What shall we fight with?  
 There are no weapons  
 There are no soldiers

Not long afterwards, in April 1990, the VNP was overthrown by the Venda military who ruled until Venda was reincorporated in South Africa in 1994.

There were a number of factors leading to the demise of the Venda National Party. Patrick Mphephu died in 1988. He was succeeded by Frank Ravele who, while attempting to negotiate the re-establishment of official political opposition (Heroldt and Dombo 1992:84), underestimated the fervent popular desire for effective democratic government, and downplayed widespread civil disorder. Tshilowa (1992:5) summarises popular opinion of the Ravele regime as follows:

People were suppressed by the Venda government during the time of F.N. Ravele. Most of the oppressed were poor, cheap labourers who worked in the government and were robbed of their salaries.<sup>37</sup> On top of this the government also protected people who were involved in ritual murder. Some people became orphans because their parents were the victims of ritual murderers. Others remained poor because their jailed parents had criticised the government.

Pervasive, often abject poverty constituted fertile breeding ground for social discontent.<sup>38</sup> The civil service was the biggest employer, and the economic cycle was determined by the staggered pay-out of government salaries at the middle and end of each month. Unschooling government labourers, temporary employees and low ranking clerks earned very little.<sup>39</sup> To aid the very poor during dry years, the government established a drought relief scheme. People participating in this scheme were employed on public works projects, and were paid a nominal amount. Despite this low amount, there was stiff opposition from drought relief workers when their

<sup>35</sup> Mirror, 11/10/96 and 11/4/97.

<sup>36</sup> Justice Mukhethoni, Univ. of Venda, 27/9/89. Starting the war refers to the declaration of independence.

<sup>37</sup> Meaning they were underpaid.

<sup>38</sup> Personal songs about poverty abound (see Kruger 1993). Subsequent to the military coup, many personal songs indicated that the new government would help people to become wealthy (see Part Two).

<sup>39</sup> Mmbangiseni Mphaga, a clerk in the Department of Works, earned R10 a day during the period 1989-1991 (Kruger 1993: 276). Workers in the Department of Agriculture and Forestry earned R140 a month in 1994 (Mirror, 23/9/94).

employment was terminated. Pensioners became the only source of income in many families. Poverty filtered through all social layers, and young people, who were central role players in anti-government protest, complained in *tshigombela*:

<i>Mutheiwana wa lila</i>	Mutheiwana is crying <sup>40</sup>
<i>Mutheiwana u lilela pfunzo</i>	Mutheiwana is crying for education
<i>Mutheiwana u lilela vhuswa</i>	Mutheiwana is crying for porridge

Jobs outside the civil service were very scarce, and it became common to see unemployed men and women of all ages roving the roads of Venda in search of work. Many people felt that their poverty was to be blamed on leaders who earned large salaries, were out of touch with the needs of their followers, and cared little for them. Thus people complained in *tshigombela* that

- *Ri a fa nga ndala mahosi no lavhelesa*      The chiefs are watching us starving<sup>41</sup>
  
- *Ro neta nga u tshinela mahosi*      We are fed-up with dancing for chiefs<sup>42</sup>  
*Na maḍi a hu na, na mavhone a hu na*      We have neither water nor electricity
  
- *Vho-Ravele, a vha ri ḍivhi naa?*      President Ravele, don't you know us?<sup>43</sup>  
*Vho-Randima, a vha ri ḍivhi naa?*      Headman Randima, don't you know us?  
*Ri dzula navho, a vha ri ḍivhi naa?*      We stay with you, don't you know us?  
*Ri shuma navho, a vha ri ḍivhi?*      We work with you, don't you know us?

The experience of poverty was aggravated by the obvious differences between the poor and the wealthy, and complaints about nepotism, corruption and theft in the civil service. Food destined for poor people by Operation Hunger was stolen by officials who were supposed to distribute the food.<sup>44</sup> Headmen were accused of bribery regarding the allocation of land to their subjects.<sup>45</sup> People also complained over tribal tax, and rejoiced when it was eventually abolished.<sup>46</sup> Traditional leaders were also accused of not being available for consultation with their subjects, and for their general incompetence. The expression “we are following the helicopter on foot” was commonly heard in song. It referred to the use of a helicopter by politicians during the reign of Frank Ravele. These politicians “regarded themselves as if they were God” (Rathogwa 1994:6), and were told by guitarist Solomon Mathase to

<sup>40</sup> Performed by a *tshigombela* group from Mudikhomu School at Mulima (Badetswana 1989:5).

<sup>41</sup> M.M. Mugabi, Univ. of Venda, 27/9/89.

<sup>42</sup> A.P. Mudau, Univ. of Venda, 27/9/89.

<sup>43</sup> Performed by workers of the Damani Coffee Estate, Khubvi (Nemaxwi 1990:1). Nemaxwi remarks that “the performers are complaining about the leaders, because they are not cared for by them.”

<sup>44</sup> This claim was made in 1984 by staff of St. Joseph's Mission at Tsianda (the mission served as depot for Operation Hunger), and by Mutshutshu Nevhulaudzi (Maungani, 31/8/90) who remarked that this type of corruption made him join the Venda Independence People's Party.

<sup>45</sup> Mukwevho (1992:6), Mirror (13/1/95), Mashanzhe (1994:6).

<sup>46</sup> Luvalo (1993:6), Netshiungani (1990:5).

continue sleeping (Kruger 1993:97). They became known collectively as Vho-Nkhetheni (Mr Nkhetheni) in a beer song that said "*Shango lo fhela*" (the country is perishing; see Part Two). A case in point<sup>47</sup> is that of F.N. Muthavhine who was elected unopposed in 1984 as a Venda National Party MP of the Vuwani district. Muthavhine was acting traditional leader at a village where the rightful heir was still too young to rule. Villagers complained that Muthavhine made no effort to streamline the payment of old age pensions. Prior to the (one party) general election in 1988, a *tshigombela* team from the village of Posaito started to sing:

<i>Ro neta nga u shumela a duxwani</i>	We are tired of working for a zombie
<i>line la si vhuye la hotola nga u tshuwa</i>	who is afraid of speaking up <sup>48</sup>

This song elicited popular support, and spread across the district. Muthavhine, realising that his position was in danger, tried to curry favour by showing videos to local youths, but to no avail. His opponent, a Mr Singo (also from the Venda National Party), won the election, and Muthavhine became a shopkeeper.

One of the main issues leading to the demise of the Venda National Party was the high rate of ritual murder thought to be politically motivated, and the fact that few of these cases were solved:

As from 1979 to 1990, during independence, people were not charged for their crimes. Even highly-placed authorities were committing crimes such as ritual murder. These people were not charged or arrested for their crimes because they were powerful (Mabidi 1994:6, cf. Koch and Ritchkin 1988).

While ritual murder was tacitly condoned in precolonial times,<sup>49</sup> opposition to ritual murder in recent times may be linked to changing belief systems, and the influence of Christianity.<sup>50</sup> It certainly is a symptom of disruption resulting from rapid social change. There may be a connection between traditional ritual murder involving human sacrifice and accusations against politicians thought to employ a similar method to remain in power. In any case, opposition against ritual murders thought to be politically motivated mobilised people against all forms of government violence and corruption. People expressed their abhorrence of ritual murder by adapting a popular nationalistic slogan. This was the well known '*Vhuthihi ha Venda!*' (Unity of Venda!) which was heard regularly at political rallies and on Radio Thohoyandou. It was also shouted by *tshigombela* performers at the beginning of the dance. However, this slogan was subsequently changed to '*Vhuthihi ha u via!*' (Unity

<sup>47</sup> Mr T.J. Mbulaheni, Univ. of Venda, 10/10/90.

<sup>48</sup> Lit: clearing his throat (in parliament).

<sup>49</sup> Ritual murder is universal, and serves magical purposes. In Africa magical rites are associated with farming, drought, battle, iron-smelting and initiation. Drought magic involves sacrificing babies (Ms M. Ramonyai, Univ. of Venda, 23/8/94). Ritual killings precede battles and initiation schools to ensure their successful completion. These murders are silently condoned because they are thought to promote group survival (Godfrey Dederen, Univ. of Venda, 12/6/94).

<sup>50</sup> Riots against ritual murder in the 1980s very often started in the Tshakuma area (cf. Koch and Ritchken 1988), which was one of the first places in Venda to have come under missionary influence.

commits ritual murder!) by a musician from Nzhelele, indicating that unity was enforced through fear and repression. This changed slogan achieved rapid popularity in communal dances such as *tshigombela*. Furthermore, ritual murder was mimed during the solo (*gaya*) part of the dance. At a *tshigombela* performance at Tsianda during 1987,<sup>51</sup> primary school girls mimed a ritual killing by showing how a powerful sedative was handed to a ritual murderer by a herbalist. The throat of the sedated victim was then cut, body parts hacked off with an axe, and carried away in a plastic bag.

**The military coup: “Mahosi vha tshi lwa nga ma to” (chiefs are fighting with the eyes**

Venda’s tenth year of independence was celebrated in 1989. There was an upsurge in dance performance, and many teams practised feverishly for the dance competition. Political themes of the early 1980s reverberated again for a while: independence, unity, prosperity and progress. Matodzi (1989:2) remarks of the role of *tshigombela* dancing in the celebrations that “the performers were reflecting national spirit by participating in this event. The group was reflecting support, respect and loyalty to the government by participating”. Similarly Tshamano (1989:11-14) remarks about a patriotic *tshigombela* song that “it discusses the growth or development of Venda from 1979 until now. It shows people are satisfied with independence and development and are proud of their identity, tradition and culture.” By contrast, many *tshigombela* songs of 1989 reveal underlying tension and fear:

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| - | <i>Rabelisani vhuḍilangi</i>                  | Pray for our independence <sup>52</sup>    |
|   | <i>Ro vhu wana ha Vho-Ravele</i>              | We have found it through President Ravele  |
|   | <i>Rabelisani mukoma wa fhano</i>             | Pray for our village leader                |
|   | <i>Rabelisani tshigombela ndi tsha Mulodi</i> | Pray for the tshigombela dancers of Mulodi |
| - | <i>A ri yeni Thohoyandou</i>                  | Let us go to Thohoyandou <sup>53</sup>     |
|   | <i>Ri yo vhona mutatisano</i>                 | We are going to see the competition        |
|   | <i>Ri ye u vhona musunyedzano</i>             | We are going to see glaring                |
|   | <i>Mahosi vha tshi lwa nga ma to</i>          | Chiefs are fighting with the eyes          |
|   | <i>Vha tshi lwela dzisa la khosi</i>          | They are fighting for leadership           |

In contrast to the musical performances of the 1989 independence celebrations, the coup of 6th April 1990 resulted in communal dance ceasing in a number of areas, and the annual dance competition being scaled down. Where *tshigombela* performances took place, new song texts emerged. These texts not only celebrated the coup, but also the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of liberation movements:

- |   |                                      |  |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| - | <i>Ri takalela muvhuso wa vhaswa</i> | We rejoice over the reign of the youth <sup>54</sup> |
|   | <i>Ri takalela muvhuso</i>           | We rejoice over the reign                            |

<sup>51</sup> Video recording made at Mafharalala Primary School, Tsianda, 9/5/87.

<sup>52</sup> *Tshigombela* song recorded by S.K. Netshisaulu at Mulodi, 17/7/89.

<sup>53</sup> *Tshigombela* song recorded by S.N. Sinthumule at Maluta Junior Secondary School, Madombidzha, late 1989.

<sup>54</sup> From a *tshigombela* performance observed by Ms M.E. Tshisikule at Rambuda shortly after the coup.

	of Mr Ramushwana
<i>wa Vho-Ramushwana</i>	
- <i>Muvhuso wa Mandela, wee</i>	The government of Mandela
<i>U do vhusa, u do vhusa</i>	will rule, will rule <sup>55</sup>
<i>Muvhuso wa apartheid, wee</i>	The apartheid government
<i>U do fhela, u do fhela</i>	will come to an end
- <i>Vhuthihi ha SAYCO</i>	Unity of SAYCO <sup>56</sup>
<i>Ri a livhuwa Vho-Mandela</i>	We thank Mr Mandela
<i>Aee! Yawee, Sisulu!</i>	Yeh Sisulu
<i>Ripe ri na vhuthihi!</i>	We are unified!

The last *tshigombela* song was performed by the Khubvi Cultural Club which comprised boys and girls aged ten to seventeen years. This club was affiliated to the local African National Youth Congress and its members performed *tshigombela* and other communal dances. There was no political association between the club and the local traditional leader. Club members appropriated *tshigombela* from the jurisdiction of the traditional leader, and used it to promote political solidarity amongst themselves.

#### Beyond the coup: old and new social formations

The political realignment of some *tshigombela* groups after the coup did not mean that the original socio-political context of the dance had changed. At least sixteen traditional rulers were installed between 1992 and 1997.<sup>57</sup> Traditional leadership ideally remained associated with benign patterns of life, and references to it formed part of a yearning for a harmonious past. So guitarist Solomon Mathase sang:

<i>Muzila kha u vhuye</i>	Traditional leadership must return
<i>shango li lale</i>	so that there can be peace <sup>58</sup>
<i>Tshikale kha tshi vhuye shango li lale</i>	Tradition must return so that there can be order
<i>Na npe ndo zwi vhona zwa ri nndwa i bva ngafhi</i>	And I realised how chaos started
<i>Vhatshena na vhone a vha fani vhothe</i>	White people are not all the same <sup>59</sup>
<i>Tshikale kha tshi vhuye, ri tshile rothe</i>	Tradition must return, we must all live

Subsequent to the military coup in Venda and the general election of 1994, most traditional leaders were careful to promote themselves as a-political local administrators whose task it was to develop their districts, maintain peace, be fair in their handling of local affairs, and to oppose greed and corruption. In practice they were involved in the disciplinary hearing of local teachers and unruly social elements, as well as settling land conflict.<sup>60</sup>

It is in this context that *tshigombela* continued to function in the affairs of certain

<sup>55</sup> From a video recording of a performance by the Tshakuma Cultural Group (comprising primary school girls) at a Cultural Day held at the University of Venda on 6/10/90.

<sup>56</sup> Netshiomvani (1990:7).

<sup>57</sup> The Mirror, 1992-1997.

<sup>58</sup> Kruger 1993:144-145.

<sup>59</sup> Referring to their behaviour. This is an implicit reference to the destructive effect of western culture.

<sup>60</sup> Mirror, 9/9/94, 5/5/95, 9/12/94.

traditional ruling families. During December 1993 *tshigombela bepha* groups from several districts attended the installation of a traditional leader at Tshikonelo.<sup>61</sup> In 1994 a *tshigombela bepha* group from Khubvi were sent to Tshikundamalema to commemorate the death of chief Hanyani Tshikundamalema.<sup>62</sup> The ongoing role of *tshigombela* in the affairs of ruling families also was evident at the installation of a traditional leader at the remote village of Tshixwadza in the Rambuda district on 29th September 1990. The installation was marked by the performance of several types of communal dance including *tshigombela*. The role of music making at the installation, as well as the contemporary role of traditional leadership, was revealed in the following *tshigombela* song performed at the ceremony:

<i>Ri a dzhena</i>	We are entering
<i>Vhamusanda vha ḁo ri fha mini?</i>	What will the headman give us?
<i>Vha ḁo ri fha kilasi mbili</i>	He will give us two class-rooms
<i>tsha vhuraru ndi ofisi</i>	and thirdly, an office
<i>Ri a vha shela buse, vhamusanda</i>	The dust from our dancing billows towards you, honourable headman

As the song shows, the Tshixwadza community was in need of extra classrooms for their school. The death of the previous traditional leader some three years before had left a vacuum in the local authority structure. Villagers were in need of someone to represent them at government level. Their immediate needs included extensions to the local school, electricity, a post office and an automatic telephone exchange. The desire for a new traditional leader appeared to be less politically motivated than a practical necessity. People seemed more interested in traditional leadership than in a specific individual. This was reflected in some of the *tshigombela* songs performed by the local adult *tshigombela* team:

<i>Riṅe ri a dzhena</i>	We are entering
<i>Ri takalela vuhosi</i>	We rejoice over chieftainship
<i>A ri yeni, ri ye hayani</i>	Let us go home
<i>Ndi takala ndi Tshixwadza</i>	I am happy at Tshixwadza
<i>Naṅ waha ro vhoḁholowa</i>	This year we have a headman

There were additional factors conducive to the performance of *tshigombela* and other communal dances. Tshixwadza was a remote rural community relatively free from the ills characterizing other Venda villages,<sup>63</sup> especially those closer to commercial centres and in less fertile or drier areas. Traditional relationships were strongly evident, including those linking the village to their traditional leader.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Eric Makhado, Univ. of Venda, 23/8/94.

<sup>62</sup> Sannie Nemaxwi, Univ. of Venda, 23/8/94.

<sup>63</sup> Godfrey Musweswe, Univ. of Venda, 25/9/90 and 11/10/90. The remoteness of Tshixwadza did not mean that it was isolated from the outside world. The village got strong radio and television signals, and many residents had television sets powered by solar panels.

<sup>64</sup> *Tshikona*, the reedpipe dance was performed at the installation. Team members escorted the new traditional leader to the ceremonial arena from his house while performing the dance. *Tshifasi*, a courting dance for teenagers,

Situated in the mountains, the summer rainfall figure was high, and many people had vegetable and fruit plots. There were two water reservoirs and people did not have trouble getting drinking water. Ritual murder was virtually unknown in the village, and criminal activity was minimal. Most adult males were employed, and few residents were migrant workers. Most families were relatively intact. There were also no significant disciplinary problems between parents and children.

A pattern of communal dance performance linked to political conditions thus emerged during the 1980s and early 1990s. Absence of communal dance or dancing of low standard occurred when there was a recent change in leadership, an acting leader, leadership was contested, leadership was weak, there was a low population density and people were widely dispersed, or there was some form of political conflict. The unbanning of liberation movements in 1990 often resulted in political conflict as communities and their traditional leaders realigned themselves. When this happened, people either stopped dancing altogether, or danced in opposition to traditional leaders while advocating their own political aims. In the early 1990s there was a boycott of communal dance at the village of Tshidimbini near Thohoyandou.<sup>65</sup> Prior to the military coup in 1990, the traditional leader (who was a policeman) was instrumental in the apprehension of certain villagers for their outspoken support of the African National Congress and "communism". One of the arrested persons was a local minister of the Lutheran church. The minister gathered a local following opposing the traditional leader. This group pressurised villagers not to dance for the traditional leader. He was accused of having an "Inkatha mentality", a metaphorical reference to dictatorial traditional leaders. The withholding of political support by suspending communal dance had seemingly become a common strategy. In the neighbouring district of Ngudza, *tshikona* reedpipe dance performers still supported their traditional leader, but not unconditionally. If there was any political conflict in the village or at a national level, they refused to perform.<sup>65</sup>

These cases were characteristic of the power struggle that emerged between traditional leaders and newly-established civic associations during the 1990s. Traditional leaders accused civic associations of intruding on their jurisdiction. Traditional leaders in turn were accused of responding in knee-jerk fashion to civic associations because they felt threatened by change. They also were accused of "lacking a clear understanding of political change."<sup>66</sup> These accusations by civic associations were partly a response to efforts by the deposed Venda National Party to reorganise itself into a *khoro ya mahosi* (council of traditional leaders) in 1992. The ambiguous policy of this council raised suspicion. It claimed to be a-political while describing its objective as developing Venda culture "because this culture is based on

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expressed patterns of traditional gender relationships.

<sup>65</sup> /<sup>66</sup> Abraham Ramugondo, Ngudza, 20/10/90.

<sup>66</sup> Mirror 5/5/95.

traditional leadership”.<sup>67</sup> Chief Mphephu IX pleaded in 1994 for the restoration of initiation schools. The duty of these schools would be to provide irresponsible and undisciplined young people with “proper cultural education”.<sup>68</sup> This appeal was undermined by a subsequent report that the traditional leader of Nweli village was forcing villagers to attend a local initiation school, described by the Nweli civic organisation as an “outdated obstacle” to education.<sup>69</sup>

Shifting social alliances also were noticeable in the annual dance competition which continued, albeit in changed form. The final round of the various dance categories took place on Saturdays during September and October, and not necessarily during the annual agricultural show which had previously coincided with independence celebrations. It became organised and sponsored by Radio Thohoyandou and Chibuku, a company making traditional beer.<sup>70</sup> Both these institutions benefited from their sponsorship. Radio Thohoyandou recorded and broadcast traditional music (thus attracting listeners), and communal dance was synonymous with the drinking of traditional beer. At the final round of the 1994 *tshigombela* competition held at Makwarela Stadium in Thohoyandou, Chibuku employees put up advertising banners on both soccer goal posts on the field. The judges were also provided with sun umbrellas on which the name Chibuku appeared.

Fifty-one *tshigombela* groups participated in the 1997 competition.<sup>71</sup> Clearly, the competition had regained much of its former popularity. However, this was not so much a factor of traditional politics. As the Venda National Party’s view of nationalism was losing credibility, another form of nationalism was taking its place. This was a non-sectarian nationalism which promoted a Venda regional identity in the new South Africa. Venda ethnicity was invoked in the jostle for power in the Northern Province which now included the former homelands of Lebowa, Venda and Gazankulu. Not only did Pietersburg (situated in the former Lebowa) become the capital of the Northern Province (forcing the closure of most Venda government departments situated in Thohoyandou), but a sePedi speaker was elected as provincial premier. A popular perception arose that the national as well as provincial government was neglecting Venda.<sup>72</sup> A local journalist remarked that a “tribalist spirit ...is creeping back — slowly and very scary...if you do not include all the aspirations and interests of all people [in the Northern Province, the] administration will be doomed to failure”.<sup>73</sup> Complaints about political neglect and comments in support of a Venda identity were aired on

<sup>67</sup> Mirror 18/9/92.

<sup>68</sup> Mirror 27/5/94.

<sup>69</sup> Mirror 27/1/95.

<sup>70</sup> In 1996 cash prizes worth R41 000 were offered to competing teams (Mirror, 26/07/96).

<sup>71</sup> Mirror, 20/6/97.

<sup>72</sup> When the provincial government covered up the statue of President Mphephu (presumably in preparation for its eventual removal), it met with stiff resistance from residents of Thohoyandou.

<sup>73</sup> Kenny Mathivha, Mirror, 27/5/94.

several Radio Venda Talk Back Shows. Thus the Mirror reported on the comments of participants that

another view is that people should not forget their culture. People should be identified by their culture. They must stick to their traditions and nobody should be dominated by other groups...all women should be identified by their traditional dresses<sup>74</sup>...Zulus and Swazis [are praised] as the people who do not look down on their tradition. Zulu men are always carrying their sticks and traditional weapons...traditional leaders must encourage their people to stick to their culture. They must introduce traditional dances like tshikona and tshigombela and see to it that people are not shy about it (Mirror 29/7/94)

...in the New South Africa Vendas are not treated like other race groups...the Venda region is known for its poverty, there is no health care and transport also is a problem...people have no electricity, phones, roads, water, etc. The number of unemployment is soaring (Mirror 2/12/94).

A general complaint aired on the Talk Back Show concerned the scrapping of the Tshivenda-Xitsonga television magazine programme Swahombe-Zwanthesa. Listeners remarked that

"The SABC must realise that Tshivenda is not only a language, but it is spoken by the Vhavenda, a nation like other nations. These are the people who need to be uplifted to be proud of their culture and norms through the media, especially TV...even if we can speak and understand many South African languages, we do not want our nation and culture to be forgotten" (Mirror, 5/8/94).<sup>75</sup>

Aspects of *tshigombela* performances of the time reflect the sentiments set out above. For Julia Mikosi, a member of a *tshigombela* team from Thengwe, winning the competition was not so important for the cash first prize, as for the opportunity to travel around South Africa and represent Venda.<sup>76</sup> But most evident was the value of traditional dress. The Venda National Party exploited the political value of traditional dress in the 1980s. Although *tshigombela* dance costumes in the 1980s were attractive and colourful, and one of the criteria of adjudication in the competition, new standards were set in the 1990s. The costumes of some teams became veritable works of art. Most adult dancers wore decorated skirts, with necklaces and headlaces. In 1994 one group wore beaded belts studded with small round mirrors. A number of women also wore layers of ankle-bracelets. Many dancers wore make-up and had permed hair which was tended constantly with the aid of small pocket mirrors. *Tshigombela* teams also showed allegiance to their home area by introducing unique variations on the basic decorated skirt and costume jewelry. Teams from the Nzhelele district liked to decorate their skirts with wool, while women from other areas used cotton. Teams also printed the

<sup>74</sup> *Ndi Muvenda mubikwa na ive. Ive !a vhibva, Muvenda a sala. Ndi bva Venda. Ndi a dítongisa nga minwenda.* (When a Venda is cooked with a stone, the Venda remains uncooked. I come from Venda. I feel proud about traditional dress) From a song by guitarist James Nefale of Vhulaudzi, 1/7/93 (Ramotsoaki 1993:6).

<sup>75</sup> An association for the traditional board games *mufuvha* and *muravharavha* was formed in 1996 (Mirror, 6/9/96). The purpose of the *mufuvha* competition was for "the very best [to] win...and put our own cultural heritage on the map" (Mirror, 27/1/95).

<sup>76</sup> At the *tshigombela* finals at Makwarela Stadium, 1/10/94.

names of their villages (and sometimes their political affiliation) on their T-shirts.

While shared residency remained a determining factor in musical formation, there was an increasing tendency for dancers to assemble on the basis of other shared experiences. Professional and other types of social association became one of the organising principles of dance. Many women's care groups and self-help projects formed *tshigombela* teams. Care groups were involved in social betterment schemes. They promoted self-employment and health,<sup>77</sup> and *tshigombela* became a mechanism to promote their objectives:

<i>Vhashumeli vha mutakalo</i>	(We are) health workers <sup>78</sup>
<i>Riṅe ri a tuwa</i>	We are going
<i>Ri yo ṅangana ngei Tshilidzini</i>	We will meet at Tshilidzini (hospital)
<i>Malwadze a phirela ri a lafha:</i>	We can heal any disease:
<i>tshitenza na u pfukela</i>	vomiting and contagious disease
<i>Riṅe ro phasa na zwa mabikele</i>	We are qualified cooks
<i>Dikhekhe ri a bika</i>	We bake cakes
<i>Dzikentucky ri a bika</i>	We cook Kentucky (chicken)
<i>Zwoṅhe-zwoṅhe ri a bika</i>	We cook anything
<i>Na malwadze oṅhe ri a lafha</i>	We cure all diseases

Other local non-political associations whose meetings and activities featured *tshigombela* performances included burial societies, organisations for the blind, and employee associations. For example, on 19th August 1994, *tshigombela* dancing performed by workers of Venda University formalised the signing of an agreement between NEHAWU and the university over conditions of employment.

*Tshigombela* was performed by ever diminishing social groupings during the 1990s. The eliminating rounds of the dance competition which took place in rural areas were attended by children, women involved in the home economy, old people and the unemployed and poor. Many dancers indicated that they danced to keep their "culture alive". The concept of culture was represented by the word *mvelele*. This seems to be a synonym of the archaic concept *sialala* (tradition).<sup>79</sup> Keeping one's culture "alive" was a means of promoting social survival. Traditional supportive relations had particular value for old and poor people (see Kruger 1993).

Many people considered traditional dance a hindrance in their social ambitions. Non-participation in traditional dance usually symbolised middle-class ambitions. For some girls, *tshigombela* was "a primitive dance done by uneducated people only".<sup>80</sup> At the same time there were educated urban and peri-urban people (like those belonging to the Khubvi Cultural Club) who regarded elements of traditional culture as part of

<sup>77</sup> "They were performing [tshigombela] at the chief's kraal because the care group had visited the village of Mamvuka in order to teach them how to make candles and stoves so that they can get jobs, because there is a shortage of work." (Liswoga 1989:3).

<sup>78</sup> Recorded by M.W. Budeli at Tshilidzini hospital on 20/7/89.

<sup>79</sup> Lit: "that which was done by those now sleeping" (sleeping being a euphemism for death).

<sup>80</sup> Mr M.G. Magidi, Univ. of Venda, 24/8/90.

their social strategy. Students of Venda University established a traditional dance society in 1994. The society combined its first performance with dances by contemporary dance societies. The performance was very successful, and club membership grew. Some musicians went a step further and adapted traditional dance forms to appeal to a wider audience. One such person was composer Christian Mukwevho, principal of Mukwantheli Secondary School at Dididi. His music had eclectic roots. This was evident in the reggae roots of his beer songs. His band, which comprised electric guitars and keyboards, accompanied a *tshigombela* group from his school. There was no significant connection between this dance group and local political structures. The team also did not participate in the annual dance competition. Instead, the dance served as 'entertainment and education':

<i>Tshinani vhana, riye ri rhone</i>	Dance children so that we can see <sup>81</sup>
<i>Tshinani tshigombela</i>	Dance tshigombela
<i>Tshinani malende</i>	Dance beer songs
<i>Tshikona tshi tshinwa nga vhanna</i>	The reedpipe dance is for men
<i>Tshigombela tshi tshinwa nga vhana</i>	Tshigombela is the dance of children
<i>Vhana vha zwino ndi vha disco</i>	Children nowadays dance disco
<i>A si zwone zwila zwa madekwe</i>	It is not our tradition
<i>Hai, ndi tshigombela</i>	No, it is tshigombela
<i>Vhakalaha, thusani vhana vhanu</i>	Old men, help our children
<i>u ri vha si si hangwe zwa mulovha</i>	not to forget our tradition

While Mukwevho supported disco dancing, he indicated that children must retain the social and musical values of traditional dances. He promoted the idea that people must express what they really feel. This was achieved through the process of *hwela*, 'catching spirit', which allows a person's spirit and true nature to come out. In other words, if people still found a degree of emotional and physical security in tradition, be it ancestor worship or traditional dance, they should retain from tradition that which had value for them, and not merely reject old things because they were 'primitive'.<sup>82</sup>

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