

A Matriarchal Ecology

**INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL
ACTIVISM IN VENDA, SOUTH AFRICA**



Kimberly B Ross

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*A Matriarchal Ecology: Indigenous Women's Environmental
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In Memoriam

For Thama Matamela Makaulule Mutangano Dima,
a life that was lost too soon.

We remember his vibrant and loving spirit.





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Makhadzi pictured at Dzomo La Mupo meeting

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With *makhadzi* including Vho-Mphatheleni Makaulule seated on the right.

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Positionality Statement



As an African American woman from California who has Creole roots in Louisiana, I acknowledge my positionality and potential biases as a Black American scholar. I am a descendant of enslaved West Africans as well as Europeans and this standpoint potentially shapes my understanding of power and patriarchy in a Western context. With this said, I have actively worked to center the discourse of African gender scholars and my original dissertation research concentrates on the opinions and voices of Vhongwaniwapo women. As a doctoral student in the African American and African Studies Department at Michigan State University, I was funded as a Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellow (FLAS) within the African Studies Center. As a FLAS fellow, I studied isiZulu as opposed to Luvenda/TshiVenda because of the lack of access in American Universities. This impacted my interaction with the research subjects because I had to rely on Vho-Makaulule as an interpreter which shapes the neutrality of the research and potential findings and data interpretation. It should also be clear that while I utilized an African gender framework, I intentionally did not impose a feminist lens on the subjects' interview statements but rather relied on African gender including VhaVenda scholars' work to critically examine how globalization impacts VhaVenda women.



Introduction

Biological diversity is a common term that refers to the varied species, organisms and ecosystems in a region. We often hear members of the scientific, conservationist and environmentalist communities discuss the need to safeguard biological diversity amid threats of climate change and environmental degradation, yet what is less referred to is biocultural diversity. This concept is the embodiment of cultural, linguistic and environmental knowledge that co-evolved over many centuries (Bridgewater & Upadhaya 2022; Maffi & Woodley 2010; Mariani, Cerdan & Peri 2022). Maffi and Woodley (2010) characterise this process as a complex socio-ecological adaptive system – one that many Indigenous people around the world and on the continent of Africa have retained as centuries-long cultural, spiritual and ancestral beliefs. Akin to Indigenous knowledge skills or systems, biocultural diversity is often represented through rituals and an intricate spirituality, sometimes associated with sacred natural sites and forests that have been protected by local communities for generations.

Cocks et al (2017) propose that a biocultural diversity perspective of heritage not only recognises the inextricable relationship between nature and culture but also gives prominence to the beliefs, values and practices of local people and the need to strengthen their agency to safeguard their heritage in ways and forms that are relevant to them. In essence, biocultural diversity includes diverse indigenous epistemologies expressed as a symbiotic and context- and culturally specific relationship that human communities embody as inhabitants of their natural world. What many intergovernmental and academic researchers are finally conceding is that Indigenous environmental knowledge is just as expansive and complex as contemporary conservationist methods.

Indigenous women have been acutely aware of the links between ecosystems and human communities for many centuries and have observed that a loss of endemic languages and cultures is directly



Makhadzi pictured in traditional *nwenda* attire.

linked with biodiversity loss (Bridgewater & Upadhaya 2022; Maffi 2004; Mariani et al 2022; Zent & Maffi 2009). For example, in many African cultures, women customarily manage seed selection and storage, use indigenous agricultural techniques and pass on cultural taboos about plants and nature to protect sustainability. Since women are impacted the most when these techniques are altered in the name of modernity, many communities of women are on the frontline of defending indigenous knowledge systems, sacred lands and human rights.

Within the context of the traditional role of *makhadzi* in indigenous Vhongwaniwapo culture, women observe the ecological importance of sacred sites and forests in the former apartheid homeland of Venda in Limpopo, South Africa. *Makhadzi* ecocultural knowledge is an indigenous understanding of native plants and ecosystems and it includes natural resource management. *Makhadzi* ecological

knowledge also focuses on seed, food and seasonal cycles rooted in an appreciation of the sacredness of life and nature. In Venda, in what is now known as the Vhembe District Municipality in Limpopo, there are many sacred sites in the Thathe Vondo Forest by rivers and lakes and in the mountains that are vulnerable. The sacred sites serve different spiritual purposes and have distinctive management customs and ceremonies associated with them. The spots include burial sites, ritual-only sites and communal sites (Pfarelo 2013; Tshiguvho 2008). As custodians of these areas, *makhadzi* have traditionally played a fundamental role in protecting the sacred sites and maintaining a harmonious balance between community and spiritual life. Over many centuries, the role of *makhadzi* has extended to managing the relationships of individuals to their family, clan, community, and society to nature. The literature describes sacred areas around the world where high rates of biodiversity have been retained and where a range of animal life and plant life need protection. The same is true for Venda's sacred areas where *makhadzi* have played a central role in upholding the sacred site culture (Tshiguvho 2008). A study conducted in the Vhembe region (Sinthumule 2022) showed that rituals that are performed by women empower resident spirits to govern and manage sacred natural sites, and, in return, humankind gets good health, rain, protection, patronage and blessings. In the study, it was found that this type of governance and its associated customary laws and taboos have allowed sacred natural sites to emulate 'explicit nature conservation'; these sites therefore serve as refugia of biodiversity. It was furthermore found that women have formed a social movement to fight against the destruction of sacred sites. This initiative has not only raised awareness but also challenged existing legislation; it has also stimulated broader discussion around the issues of sacred natural sites, sustainability and Indigenous rights. Based on the findings of the study, Sinthumule (2022) recommends that gender-specific restrictions imposed on women in other sacred natural sites be lifted.

Scholars (Bridgewater & Upadhaya 2022; Maffi & Woodley 2010; Zent & Maffi 2009) indicate that the interdependence between culture and nature, or biocultural diversity, exists among people in varied societies, not just among rural indigenous communities. However, environmental and cultural connections have been weakened in

industrialised, urbanised communities where people are removed from subsistence living (Maffi & Woodley 2010). In addition, changes in gender roles, and global food and seed systems have altered women's influence on environmental matters in indigenous communities. Many remaining indigenous cultures and communities have endured sociopolitical changes and strife, causing a deterioration of traditional environmental practices and knowledge. Other external changes include "loss of tenure over...lands and resources, displacement, out-migration, impoverishment, forced or induced assimilation, loss of cultural identity and acculturation to a dominant way of life" (Maffi & Woodley 2010; Zent & Maffi 2009). The result is that indigenous people lose self-determination due to the overt linguistic, economic and political influences of the dominant culture. Ultimately, biocultural diversity erosion leads to environmental hazards that have a direct impact on the resilience of ecosystems and human welfare and is reflective of larger social, economic and political processes at work. Pikirayi and Magoma (2021) state that there are consequences when intangible values ascribed to sacred landscapes are ignored and that there is value in preserving and conserving intangible heritage. They conclude that sacred sites and landscapes in Venda are slowly being eroded and decimated by modern development and intensifying human settlement.

In Venda, the Vhongwaniwapo or indigenous communities have endured many sociopolitical changes that disturbed their way of life and relationship to biocultural diversity. The legacy left by colonial and apartheid frameworks has restricted Vhongwaniwapo communities' access to sacred sites, forests and land. What is especially striking is the gathering of local, national and multinational actors who appropriate colonial and apartheid frameworks and gender ideologies to disenfranchise women in the land administration process. Specifically, politicians, chiefs and multinational corporations reinforce imperialist authority to undermine the traditional roles and eco-cultural knowledge practices of *makhadzi*.

Makhadzi once played a central role in their clans by advising chiefs on community affairs and presiding over customs that connect with environmental sustainability. Presently, however, chiefs and politicians

ignore specific *makhadzi* community organisers' warnings that development projects threaten biodiversity and food and water security in the region, opting to enter into deals to establish foreign coal mines, casinos and tourist resorts instead. In this context, *makhadzi* and all other women are socially and economically vulnerable within national, provincial and local traditional leadership structures – and subject to compromised livelihoods, environmental and cultural degradation and a lack of citizenship rights.

Pikirayi and Magoma (2021) relate the example of three major scared sites or landscapes central to the Venda worldview, namely, the Thathe Vondo Forest, Lake Fundudzi and the Phiphidi Waterfall, where, according to legend, half-humans collected water from the waterfalls, travelled into the adjacent forest for rituals, and finally to the lake for rain petitioning. This cultural landscape is under serious threat due to mining and agriculture. The authors note that significant colonial and corporate developments in mining and agriculture have been touted as crucial investments that would bring employment among local and indigenous people and help reduce poverty and hunger. However, according to the authors, these developments are causing biodiversity loss and increasing hunger and poverty.

Dzomo la Mupo (DLM), a community-based organisation in Venda founded by *makhadzi* and activist Vho-Mphatheleni Makaulule, seeks to revive the role of *makhadzi* and to build community resilience in the face of these environmental threats. DLM has established campaigns to protect sacred sites and forests, preserve wetlands and safe drinking water, revive indigenous seeds and agriculture and inspire intergenerational activism to protect ecocultural knowledge and the Vhongwaniwapo way of life. The *makhadzi* and organisations such as DLM face major challenges, as pointed out in an article published in *Daily Maverick* (The Voice of the Natural World 2020): “Colonial dispossession, the imminent threat of mining activity, and the desecration of their *zwifho* – the sacred natural temples in the forests and mountains – by tourism ventures [have] brought disruption to their communities and forced them to extend their work into the courts, sometimes even against traditional authorities who have abandoned their sacred duty to their people.”

Where it all began: The journey with Vho-Makaulule unfolds



I first learnt about Vho-Mphatheleni Makaulule's activism as a doctoral student at Michigan State University while studying in the African American and African Studies Department. As an African-American woman, I felt drawn to Pan-Africanism and continental issues. In 2011, I was writing a research paper about the impact of globalisation on women in Africa. I specifically wanted to research how globalisation intersects with environmental and gender issues. I came across an article titled "Celebrating women activists: South Africa's Mphatheleni Makaulule" in *The Ecologist*. In the article was a picture of Vho-Makaulule perched on a mountaintop overlooking a serene and lush landscape in northern South Africa, in the former apartheid homeland of Venda. Of all the research I had completed, Vho-Makaulule's story left the most indelible impression on me. I was inspired by her community-based organisation, Dzomo la Mupo¹, and its work to safeguard sacred natural sites, watersheds and forests from development projects and coal excavation in the region. Moreover, I was interested in her work to revive the Indigenous role and eco-cultural knowledge of women known as *makhadzi* who comprise Dzomo la Mupo's members. It was then that I decided to write my dissertation exclusively on the activism of Dzomo la Mupo and the socio-political issues impacting Indigenous women in Venda, particularly the *makhadzi*. Consequently, I became determined to travel to Venda, South Africa and to meet Vho-Makaulule in person.

Meeting Vho-Makaulule proved more difficult than expected. During two trips to South Africa as the coordinator of my department's study abroad programme, I only developed meagre contacts in the region. Venda was six hours north from the areas I was travelling to and in a

1 Dzomo la Mupo means "voice of the earth" in Luvenda.

rural part of the country. I was in communication with the human rights lawyer Vho-Makaulule who was working with to register sacred natural sites with the South African Heritage Resources Agency but he was wary of arranging an interview given the sensitive nature of her activism. After multiple attempts to contact her, my efforts fell short. At this point, some members of my dissertation guidance committee were becoming unconvinced about my ability to produce the field research I had claimed I would be able to complete. Then, in 2015, with funding from Michigan State University's Centre for Gender in Global Context, I returned to South Africa for a six-month research trip. Again, scanty contacts in hand, I boarded a bus to rural Venda in the hope that I would be able to meet Vho-Makaulule.

I arrived in Thohoyandou, the former capital of the Venda homeland and set out for the University of Venda. I searched for Vho-Makaulule's name online and, quite astonishingly, for the first time, I found her email address and sent her a message. Later that day, I received a reply from her in which she gave me her phone number and asked me to call her! I was more elated than I can describe at this significant turn of events. I nervously dialled her number and she answered. We discussed my research and what I was hoping to accomplish. She agreed to an interview and gave me directions to her home, some of which did not include street names but rather landmarks in a rural township. I cannot describe how excited I was. I could not help but think back to the first article I had read about her years before – the first of many articles I read about Vho-Makaulule. One of my contacts, who was familiar with the area, drove me down a dusty road to her house, a small brick home. We stayed at her house for five hours, talking about the *makhadzi*, Dzomo la Mupo and the roles of women.

Shortly after this meeting, I was invited to spend the day with Vho-Makaulule and Dr. Dima, both of whom were acting as cultural consultants for a music video that was being made for the South African music group Mzee & Rafiki. Early in the morning, when it was still dark, we made our way to the sacred Lake Fundudzi in the Soutpansberg mountains. At sunrise, we greeted the lake – at a respectful distance – near the Thathe Vondo Forest and then made our way to a cultural village where the *makhadzi* performed many dances, including the

domba, which is traditionally performed by young women who are entering adulthood. I had the opportunity to meet many *makhadzi* that day, which was essentially a dream realised.

Amazingly, Vho-Makaulule and I had an immediate bond. We quickly built a rapport, so much so that I was invited for much of the first month to spend nights at her home in the township where most of my interviews and research would take place. I soon found myself trekking from my lodge with an overnight bag to the taxi rank in Thohoyandou to take the 30–45-minute kombi² ride to Vho-Makaulule's home to spend the night, which often turned into two or three nights at a time. Thereafter, I would return to my lodge to get clean clothes or to have alone time to focus on my research. I made a good enough impression on Vho-Makaulule's family – Dr. Dima, teenage son and two-year-old son – that we negotiated that I would spend an additional month at her home, which would be followed by archival research in Tshwane (Pretoria).

Staying in Vho-Makaulule's home was the ultimate form of participant observation. I was granted the opportunity to observe the everyday life of a *makhadzi* first-hand, including cooking, cleaning, gardening and family time. In the beginning, I felt like an intruder and did not know how to be a part of the family's activities. Yet, I soon realised that assisting with the day-to-day chores would help me contribute to the household and connect with the family. I found that my best conversations with Vho-Makaulule were in the kitchen. She cooked traditional food, *vhuswa na muroho wa thanga* – sautéed pumpkin leaves with onions, tomatoes, pumpkin flowers and peanuts – which her eldest son crushed in a large mortar and pestle. I helped with cooking by picking vegetables from the garden, taking the stems off the pumpkin leaves, cutting onions, browning the meat and, on one occasion, with great trepidation, killing a chicken and plucking its feathers for dinner.

Over chores or tea, we would talk about Vho-Makaulule's upbringing and culture. As the eleventh of twenty-four children, her father played a prominent role in her life, and from him, she gleaned a great deal of ancestral wisdom, which she shared with me. In the evenings, we often discussed topics germane to Vhongwaniwapo culture, such

2 Kombis are informal minibus taxis in South Africa and other parts of Africa.



Me and Vho-Mphatheleni at her home in Vuwani

as Indigenous plants and seeds, the sacred drum known as *ngoma lungundu*,³ the meaning and importance of her *vhukunda* (bracelets) and the meaning of her name, Mphatheleni, which means “to build”. She strongly believes that through this name, her father set her on a path to rebuild the ancestors’ knowledge and to restore the order of nature in Vhongwaniwapo culture.

Through Vho-Makaulule, I met and interviewed thirty-two *makhadzi* for my dissertation. The interviews mostly took place at Dzomo la Mupo gatherings and meetings. At the first meeting, we hosted, the *makhadzi* arrived and disembarked from a kombi, and Vho-Makaulule called for me to see them as they were walking up the path. They were wearing their traditional attire, called *nwenda*, and looked like regal, elegant women with so much dignity. The temperature was blistering, yet we served hot tea with milk and sugar, along with peanut butter sandwiches. I quickly learnt that, at every meeting, I would have to supply live chickens, pap (maize porridge) and greens for lunch. I also learnt that, at meetings, there was usually singing and dancing.

Every encounter with the *makhadzi* felt extraordinarily special. It was a great privilege to interact with and interview them about a range of topics, from the importance of protecting their sacred sites and the environment, to the erosion of their eco-cultural role as *makhadzi*. Although many interviews took place at Vho-Makaulule’s home, we also travelled on a rugged road to Tshidzivhe Village, where one chief lived with his wives. Here, the *makhadzi* discussed the seeds that were important to their diet and other native plants such as the sacred *mufhoho* (finger millet). The *makhadzi* often remarked on how the interviews gave new life to their activism because they had to recall their journey of community organising from the start. They gave me a Vhongwaniwapo name, Nyamkamadi (“one who collects the first clean water from the spring”), to mark my time with them.

My time in Venda was inspirational. When I first set out to meet Vho-Makaulule years before, I did not realise we would become friends. Nor

3 Oral history tells of a sacred drum that warded off enemies; sometimes likened to or referred to as the Arc of the Covenant and thought to be brought to Venda by the Balemba people. Scholars (Kirkaldy 2005; Loubser 2008) reference the drum’s use by the Masingo *mahosi* to defeat his enemies.

did I realise that I would be given tearful goodbyes on my way home. My journey to Venda was not just a means to an end but shaped for me an enduring concern for the welfare of the women I interviewed and Vho-Makaulule and her family. We continue to keep in touch and share stories about our lives and what is happening in the community there. We discuss the continuing shared work of helping the community along with her organisation, Dzomo la Mupo.

chapter one



Shaping a vision for the community

Shaping a vision

Development projects, commercial farming and industrialism in the Vhembe District Municipality in Limpopo, South Africa, are threatening the environment and cultural heritage of one of the country's remaining indigenous communities that lives a traditional way of life. This uniquely impacts *makhadzi*, the women and elders who play a spiritual role in Vhavenda and Vhongwaniwapo culture. *Makhadzi* have retained ecological and cultural knowledge regarding seed selection, agriculture and conservation practices in sacred forests for generations – an interconnection referred to as biocultural diversity. For nearly 20 years, Vho-Mphatheleni Makaulule, a *makhadzi* and leader in her community, has worked to restore her culture, empower women and *makhadzi* and safeguard the environment. Alluding to the need for African women to return to a custodial role, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Co-chair of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, and former President of Liberia, states that the gender-specific division of labour in rural agricultural societies means that environmental degradation caused by climate change, coupled with unplanned development, affects women the most (Johnson Sirleaf 2022). “Yet, despite their strong dependence on the environment’s well-being making significant contributions to their households, their communities and the economy, women’s voices are noticeably absent from discussions on Africa’s development. It is time to make our voices heard” (Johnson Sirleaf 2022).

Many life events have shaped Vho-Makaulule's journey of reviving her culture and the environment. To begin with, when Vho-Makaulule left her village of Vuvha at age sixteen to live at her uncle's homestead in another township, there she was exposed to cultural values that sharply contrasted with the Vhongwaniwapo way of life. As the daughter of Makaulule Ratshili Aron, a traditional healer and farmer of the Vhongwaniwapo clan, Vho-Makaulule was deeply imbued with Vhongwaniwapo culture. However, her uncle taught her that her traditional ways were immoral, and he began to preach Christianity to her. When she was growing up, Vho-Makaulule loved learning about indigenous plants and fruits and gaining wisdom from the elders of her clan, but their knowledge was now disparaged by her Christian kin. In fact, one particularly zealous relative burnt a highly cherished book of Vho-Makaulule's that her father had composed about traditional healing, now deemed sacrilegious. Such imposition of Christianity over traditional customs and knowledge have led to the demise of African customs. Christianity also led to the implementation of apartheid (to which it gave its theological support) and undermined the leadership role of women (Manala 2013). Although missionaries had left their mark in Venda long before, this was the beginning of Vho-Makaulule's awareness of how Westernisation was enveloping her culture.

In the mid-90s, as apartheid was ending, Vho-Makaulule faced even greater criticism at the University of Venda from her classmates and on-campus church groups. Everything about her culture, from *nwenda* (traditional attire) and *vhukunda* (bangles) to traditional healing, was viewed as demonic and antithetical to the Christian Church. Customary rituals like *u phasa* (libation) and *thevhula* (thanksgiving after the harvest) (Matshidze 2013), the ritual of praising a child's totem and traditional medicine were all vehemently discouraged. Even the sacred *mufhoho* (finger millet) plant was threatening to the Church. In the wake of this Christian fundamentalism, Vho-Makaulule suffered emotionally since her whole way of life was being censured. She felt that her path was deviating from her customary ways, and she began to long for the days when she would learn from the elders of her grandmother's clan. Out of these experiences, Vho-Makaulule developed a yearning to learn more from the elders and to preserve their knowledge.

In 1998, Vho-Makaulule finished her Bachelor's degree in teaching. She decided at that time to return to her village and to interview the elders to preserve Vhongwaniwapo oral history and traditions. With the elders, she discussed the importance of rivers and forests and why protecting them was an essential part of their sacred natural sites and rituals. They discussed the various myths and taboos that were used to protect plant life, such as the belief that firewood collected from sacred areas would turn into snakes which was essentially a conservation practice. Vho-Makaulule spoke with the elders about the ways in which Westernisation and development were impinging on their culture and land, and how Christianity was continuing to influence their cultural practices. Based on these conversations, Vho-Makaulule began to contemplate ways to educate people about Vhongwaniwapo culture.

At this time, Vho-Makaulule returned to the University of Venda to meet with an indigenous knowledge expert who would become the father of her children, Mashudu Rubson Dima, fondly referred to as Dr Dima. Dr Dima encouraged her to do more research on her ethnic background. He suggested that she find a homestead where she could collect cultural artefacts and demonstrate Indigenous knowledge so that young people could learn about Vhongwaniwapo clans and Vhavenda culture. A year later, Vho-Makaulule started the Luvhola Cultural Village where she worked with educators to impart indigenous knowledge to schoolchildren and to teach them traditional dancing and women's traditional crafts, all inside an indigenous forest.

Through her work at the Luvhola Cultural Village, Vho-Makaulule began to emerge as a community leader. She worked with local clans to restore *mupo*, that is, nature or all of creation, including the cosmos. She also met regularly with elders and worked closely with *makhadzi*, the women who traditionally advise the chief on community affairs and are the caretakers of traditional knowledge regarding seed selection, harvesting and Indigenous agriculture. While engaging in this work, Vho-Makaulule was approached by the local office of tourism and requested to be a project coordinator to connect people with the elders to learn about their customs. Although she was deeply fulfilled by this community engagement, she wanted to do deeper work to preserve her cultural heritage and protect the sacred sites and larger

landscapes around her. Fortuitously, through the local office of tourism, Vho-Makaulule learnt about an opportunity to apply for a Bill Clinton Fellowship to study leadership for two months in the United States. Vho-Makaulule was ecstatic about the prospect of traveling to the United States to learn about leadership and eagerly applied for the fellowship.

By this time in 2003, Vho-Makaulule and Dr Dima had their first child. The selection committee for the Bill Clinton Fellowship notified Vho-Makaulule that she had advanced to the interview stage but because she was a new mother, she did not want to leave behind her son for so long. She therefore declined the interview. A year later, in 2004, Vho-Makaulule received a call from the selection committee once again. The committee implored her to apply for the fellowship, explaining that they still had her CV on file. Hence, Vho-Makaulule once again applied for the fellowship and once again advanced to the interview stage. She was flown – on her first flight ever – from Polokwane to Johannesburg for the interview at the University of the Witwatersrand. She acquired references from three people for her application, including Dr GS Mashau, her high school principal, whom she describes as her first mentor and the cornerstone of her passion. Dr Mashau supported her in her vision for the Luvhola Cultural Village, came to support the community there and introduced her to the idea of studying indigenous knowledge and entering the world of academia, which included undertaking postgraduate studies later in her life. Dr Mashau died of Covid-19 in 2020, and she pays tribute to his spirit. Vho-Makaulule also acknowledges the support she has received from the father of her children, Dr Dima. He helped shape her vision and set her on the path to live up to her name, Vho-Mphatheleni, which means “to build”. She also pays tribute to Anieler Batchari, who gave support in the form of connecting her to many people who helped shape her community activism. It is important to Vho-Makaulule to recognise those who helped her get selected for the Bill Clinton Fellowship and enabled her to be a leader in her community. This opportunity would become a major turning point in Vho-Makaulule’s life and community organising.

After Vho-Makaulule was selected as a Bill Clinton Fellow, she stayed in the United States for two months. First, she went to Atlanta where

she visited the gravesite of Martin Luther King Jr. She was educated about his contributions to civil rights in the United States and the civil disobedience that defined the larger network of activism. Learning about King's work and achievements was deeply inspiring to Vho-Makaulule because he was a black man who, along with other civil rights leaders, shaped a social movement that changed democracy in the United States and inspired the world, including anti-apartheid activists in South Africa.

After travelling to Georgia, she went to Tufts University in Massachusetts to meet with professors and to learn about community organising. She attended classes like a college student and visited many non-profit organisations to learn about what non-governmental organisations (NGOs) do and how they function. She also attended a leadership training course at Harvard University. While at Harvard, she learnt that leadership is about pursuing your vision despite the trials you may face. Vho-Makaulule learnt that you must decide if these challenges are resolvable and use your passion to inform your vision. During the fellowship, Vho-Makaulule also spent time in New York City and went to the United Nations to learn what the organisation does and to understand what the various agencies do to carry out its mission. At the end of the fellowship, the fellows had the opportunity to meet former President Clinton and then-Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. Vho-Makaulule presented Hillary Clinton with a *mufaro* (basket), which she was elated to receive. Vho-Makaulule remembers seeing former President Clinton for the first time, noting that he was a tall and imposing man. He motioned for her to greet him. Dressed in her *nwenda* attire and carrying a wooden spoon as a gift to him, she approached him and shook his hand. She shared with him that she had a young son and she hoped he would be a leader like a president one day.

The Bill Clinton Fellowship broadened Vho-Makaulule's imagination about what was possible for her community. The cultural village was just the beginning of a larger idea Vho-Makaulule had for safeguarding her culture and environment or *shango* (territory) around her. Vho-Makaulule often talks about the idea of a *phangami* in the Luvenda/Tshivenda language. She has remarked that "a voyage or dream cannot start without a *phangami*". A *phangami* is someone who launches a

journey. Vho-Makaulule humbly felt moved to initiate such a journey. She felt that within her was a calling to protect her traditions, the sacred natural sites in Venda and the surrounding land. She recognised that ecological and cultural governance must be realised through the intergenerational and collective work of the elders and the youth. Therefore, in 2006 she began to connect with organisations with shared goals such as the African Biodiversity Network (ABN).

The ABN is a regional “network of individuals and organisations seeking African solutions to the ecological and socio-economic challenges that face the continent” (www.africanbiodiversity.org). The ABN works with twelve African countries and abides by culturally driven models that elevate indigenous knowledge to determine answers that are grounded in social, cultural and ecological diversity. Through the ABN, Vho-Makaulule was introduced to the Gaia Foundation, an organisation based in the United Kingdom (UK) that works with communities in Africa, South America, Asia and Europe to revive biocultural diversity, to rekindle healthy ecosystems and to support community self-governance for climate change resilience (gaiafoundation.org). Through these contacts, Vho-Makaulule was introduced to larger networks of people engaged in the type of organising that she was envisioning for her community. Further, she was exposed to the methodologies these organisations were utilising to advance indigenous knowledge about agriculture and techniques to preserve ecocultural practices.

Through her collaboration with the ABN, the Gaia Foundation and the organisation Gaia Amazonas, Vho-Makaulule was invited to travel to an Indigenous community in the Amazon rainforest in Columbia to learn about their experiences in facing the decimation of the environment and the threat to their Indigenous way of life. This was a monumental trip for Vho-Makaulule, and she believes it was an ancestral calling that shaped her vision for her own community. In her high school geography class, she learnt about the Amazon River but she never knew there were Indigenous people there who connected with the land the way her people did or whose worldview was like her own. Therefore, for Vho-Makaulule, this trip was rooted in the ancestral spirit and creator. She reflected on her father’s life – he was someone who protected the Mudzinga River in Venda, loved the mountains and protected the

forests. Vho-Makaulule believes that it was a love of the land, like that of her father, that took her to the Amazon.

Vho-Makaulule made the journey to the Amazon twice, once in 2006 and again in 2008. While she was there, she observed the ways in which both cultures' way of life was under threat. She knew that, in Venda, Vhongwaniwapo people were not confident to practise their rituals, like *u phasa* and *thevhula*, and she learnt that the Indigenous people of the Amazon in Columbia were concerned about the loss of their customs. She shared with the people her ritual use of snuff and they shared with her their use of coca. She deeply feels that the opportunity to travel to the Amazon, where she could see that the life of the Venda people and the life of the Columbian people in the Amazon are similar, was bestowed on her by the creator. She found commonalities between the Venda people's beliefs and customs and the way the indigenous people in the Amazon respect the river, the sacredness of life and the traditional healers. She sat in a *maloca* (ancestral long house) and gained deep insight into the Amazonians' indigenous culture. She saw the commonalities between their spirituality and origin story and the Venda people's spirituality. These experiences in another indigenous community revealed to Vho-Makaulule that indigenous people from different places have a shared worldview that attaches importance to safeguarding land and culture and protecting the environment.

Moore and Nesterova (2020) note that indigenous peoples are guardians of the earth and that their traditional knowledges and traditionally sustainable and biocentric approaches to living, learning and engaging with others can secure sustainable, inclusive and equitable futures. In their report, they acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous knowledge systems but also recognise and explore commonalities between indigenous thinking and custodial knowledges around the world.

Voice of the earth

Vho-Makaulule's partnership with the ABN set her on a path to create the Mupo Foundation and the community-based organisation, Dzomo la Mupo (DLM), which means "voice of the earth" or "creation". Vho-

Makaulule now centres her efforts on DLM and sees her work as an intergenerational approach to rebuilding the heritage of elders' knowledge, restoring the roles of women and paternal aunts (*makhadzi*), ensuring food sovereignty and revitalising indigenous agricultural and ecological approaches. The South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey in 2016 found that nearly twenty-five percent of South Africans were being deprived of food, while another twenty-five percent faced the risk of going hungry in the near future, while reliable access to food is a human right recognised by South African and international laws. This right entails that human beings have the right to access food and to feed themselves by producing or buying their own food (Open Foundation SA 2021). Through grassroots organising, DLM has worked to raise awareness of critical environmental and social issues since 2007. DLM has addressed problems associated with commercial farming, which relies on chemical fertilisers and new seeds that degrade the soil. DLM has also organised to stop multinational development projects and unsustainable tourism ventures that threaten the ecosystem and sacred natural forests. DLM has been particularly vocal against the coal company, Coal of Africa, now MC Mining Limited, whose mining activities in Limpopo, one of the driest regions of South Africa, have a negative impact on water resources. With reference to the granting of a mining licence to this company, a Greenpeace South Africa report concludes that the hidden water footprint of the mines that supply the coal for South Africa's electricity will increasingly become a source of conflict in the near future. Agriculture will bear the brunt of this water shortage if South Africa continues to push forward with coal as its main source of energy production. It is projected that South Africa will experience a supply and demand shortfall of 2,7 billion cubic metres of water by 2030 (Gaia Foundation [sa]).

DLM continues to impart ecological knowledge to individuals, household farmers and schools through intergenerational learning and environmental education. The organisation prioritises the revival of indigenous farming skills and the preservation of biocultural diversity. Through community research teams, DLM provides training in permaculture and traditional agricultural techniques that support agroecology, seed and food security, and land-based livelihood

strategies for household farmers. DLM works with thirteen villages and fifteen schools. Its programmes serve an estimated ninety-thousand people in the Vhembe District Municipality. Moreover, with respect to the strategic efforts of the organisation's seed, sacred forest, intergenerational learning, and Indigenous forest and wetland programmes, DLM interacts with communities through workshops, tree planting initiatives, territorial eco-cultural mapping, wilderness retreats, community dialogue and paralegal training on land and environmental rights.

The region that falls under the Vhembe District Municipality in Limpopo was declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2009. Yet it continues to suffer from the effects of climate change, a loss of wetlands, deforestation, soil erosion, and the deterioration of biodiversity in the remaining indigenous forests and sacred groves. The unemployment rate and households' income lead to increased wetland dependency and utilisation, which has a negative impact on the wetlands in the Vhembe region (Dalu et al 2022). In addition, urban and rural developments, unregulated use and extensive agricultural practices (i.e., cultivation, and livestock grazing) have resulted in wetland degradation. Dalu et al (2022) found in their study that the local communities around the wetlands were interested in the benefits they receive from wetlands when compared to their conservation and that wetland co-management or collaboration among the local stakeholders was poor. The sacred forests of Limpopo are of great cultural significance to the Vhavenda, particularly the *makhadzi*, the women who traditionally protect the sacred natural sites, are the carriers of ecocultural knowledge and are responsible for seed selection and storage. Environmental degradation in the region is also a result of local commercial farming and the monocrop techniques used by plantations such as Levubu Farms, the Komatiland Forests timber plantation and the Tshivhase Tea Estate – many of which are government-supported enterprises. DLM addresses the problems associated with local commercial farming, which is dependent on chemical fertilisers, pesticides and new seeds that cause soil degradation and consequently compromise food security.

DLM also prioritises the revival of indigenous farming skills and agriculture, as reflected in the promotion of agroecological principles

of traditional seed saving and mulching and the use of fertility beds and grey water for irrigation. Through over 200 community meetings and intergenerational workshops, DLM has analysed how the loss of biocultural diversity – specifically in relation to the link between indigenous knowledge systems and traditional ecological governance – has negatively affected social and ecological conditions in Venda. DLM labours to preserve indigenous knowledge and traditional agricultural practices to combat environmental problems. Radcliffe and Parissi (2022) point out that Indigenous farmers have, for centuries, applied practices that maintained resilient and sustainable landscapes, and that understanding and preserving the agricultural knowledge of indigenous farmers may enhance the knowledge base of sustainable agriculture and lead to positive environmental impacts.

Women restoring the earth

It is of the utmost importance to Vho-Makaulule that DLM supports women's traditional leadership positions related to land and agriculture and meets with women to discuss the role of *makhadzi* as carriers of ecocultural knowledge and custodians of sacred natural sites and groves. The role of *makhadzi* in environmental and community affairs is discussed at wilderness retreats and seasonal community gatherings. *Makhadzi* are given the opportunity to participate in activities aimed at restoring their confidence as ecologists, and DLM holds meetings to discuss ways of reviving the role of *makhadzi* in community life. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule 2023) states: "In my view, after learning from elders, I trust and have a firm belief in this: we cannot define tomorrow and restore the earth without defining 'woman'."

Venda people are taught from an early age that the moon is a *makhadzi* or a woman (Makaulule 2023). This is important because the moon governs so much on the earth, such as the flow of the tides and even a woman's menstrual cycle. Therefore, Vho-Makaulule finds meaning and significance in the word "wemoon" to represent women. Restoring *mupo*, meaning "all of creation" or "the earth", cannot be separated from defining women or wemoon. The natural order of the universe includes how a girl, daughter, mother, grandmother, sister,

aunt, or even a breast or womb, is created. Vho-Makaulule regards women as being connected to the earth. Therefore, for her, reclaiming the identity of women is linked with restoring the earth. According to Vho-Makaulule, creation or *mupo* gives order to all living things, such as reptiles, insects, birds, soil, rocks, trees, plants, rivers, mountains, stars, moons and clouds. Consequently, women also have their place. Through *mupo*, women or wemoon have an Indigenous role. Vho-Makaulule believes that a woman's role is not established by human thinking; it is her natural role since *tsiko* (the creation of the universe). The creator/God, through *mupo*, naturally created her. At her 2021 Earth Day presentation at the University of South Africa in Vho-Makaulule stated:

In this implication, woman is the foundation of life, woman is the germinator of life and grower of life and bowl of life. In her body, that's where ecosystems of all life manifest . Wemoon are the root of everything. If you want to see something die quickly, cut the root; wemoon are like the roots of life. We cannot restore the earth without wemoon knowledge. Woman is a germinator of seed, seed selector, planter, harvester.

Vho-Makaulule learnt from the elders that Mother Earth is important since life comes from the earth and lives on the earth. She says: "When we look at Mother Earth, they did not say Father Earth. I don't see a difference between the earth and women. We cannot say 'the earth' without 'the wemoon'; we cannot say 'the earth' without 'the mother'. We cannot celebrate the earth without celebrating who we are and how we are connected to the [natural] order. We as women are the power that carries everything" (Commemoration of Earth Day 2021 through womenvoice: UNISA Women Forum 22 April 2021). Vho- Makaulule believes women are strong vessels for life.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2022), Co-chair of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response and former President of Liberia, remarks: "... [D]espite their strong dependence on the environment's wellbeing making significant contributions to their households, their communities and the economy, women's voices are noticeably absent from discussions on Africa's development. It is time to make our voices heard."

Empowering *makhadzi* is an important element of restoring indigenous knowledge. DLM, whose members are primarily women, seeks to uphold women's important roles in the community. Indigenous ecocultural knowledge, particularly rooted in the role of women, evolved through intergenerational learning and the wisdom of ancestors. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mphatheleni. Personal interview 10, May 2023) shares, "We learn from the elders who are our living libraries." DLM, although comprised of women, works with the whole community, both young and old, male and female, to restore community ecological governance and to foster greater awareness of environmental degradation in the region.

Continued vision for the community

DLM members trained in territorial eco-cultural mapping and traditional eco-calendar composition facilitate workshops with villages and schools. Participants are taught how to sketch the evolution of land use, from the predevelopment era and present-day environmental degradation to a vision for future sustainable land use. Constructing ecological calendars based on traditional food and seed systems teaches communities about traditional agricultural practices. Additionally, intergenerational learning is grounded in experiential education. For example, DLM provides environmental education on the value of trees and then plants trees with schoolchildren at their schools. In addition, through DLM's yearly wilderness retreats for educators where it uses a scaffold model of mentoring involving teachers, elders and curriculum advisors, teachers reconnect with nature through dialogues about *mupo*, preparing them to transfer knowledge about biocultural diversity and ecosystems through the curriculum and educational forest walks with students.

DLM is a valuable community asset in that it addresses key issues that have a negative impact on the population of the Vhembe District, such as challenges regarding sustenance and health, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, unemployment and teenage pregnancy – issues further intensified by a growing environmental emergency. Members of DLM and other residents attribute these critical social problems to a loss of

cultural heritage, a legacy of colonialism and apartheid, and an overall degrading of community ecological governance.

DLM continues to lobby for the protection of sacred sites, the restoration of ecological governance and indigenous knowledge and a revival of the role of *makhadzi*. What is of great concern to DLM right now is to re-establish a network of local ecosystems and biodiversity through the protection and rehabilitation of Indigenous forests, wetlands and sacred groves and the cultivation of an additional seven-thousand Indigenous trees. DLM has organised the establishment of twenty-one community nurseries that stock indigenous plants and saplings. In addition to the nurseries' income-generating purpose, whereby *makhadzi* sell the trees they grow, their planting initiatives will continue to target areas that are affected by deforestation, soil erosion, poor air quality, low rainfall and drought. An example of such an area is the Nzhelele River and surroundings.

The sacred natural sites that DLM works to protect, particularly the site that is in the care of the Ramunangi (Madau), Nevhutanda and Tshidsivhe clans, are discussed in the next chapter. In contemplating DLM's vision for future work, it is important to review how it wants to empower the myriad of Vhongwaniwapo clans. For example, while I was completing my fieldwork for my dissertation, Vho-Makaulule shared with me many documents that help to articulate the trajectory of DLM's community organising, including meeting minutes that detail the work that has been done to uplift the Khwevha clan and to protect their land.

According to the meeting minutes, Vho-Makaulule and DLM conducted dialogues where members of the Khwevha clan shared their story of the destruction of their *zwifho*, or sacred sites and forests. The Khwevha elders shared the history of their removal from their land, explaining that they were denied access to their territory. Based on the transcript of the minutes, the major concern for the Khwevha clan and elders is the encroachment of development onto their *zwifho* zones, or sacred sites, especially the construction of homes and private yards, roads and public gravesites. One elder was quoted in the meeting minutes, as follows:

Western life and governance system came with the rule of making many homesteads in our territory. By those new laws we were denied to bury our loved ones at home as it was our ways, traditionally that we bury at home, we were forced to go to graveyards done by new government and new chiefs who overcome us, the indigenous people. They said we should use one graveyards [sic]. As clan we explained that we cannot be buried mixed with other people as our spirits knows only our homes and the *zwifho* and again we have different ways of burials. That become difficult and we end up using our *zwifho* portion as burials place. In the clan, this new way disorganised us and our *zwifho* become what you see this day. That *zwifho* is not a burial site, it was only forest for rituals alone (Meeting minutes 2020).

This account is not unfamiliar to DLM and Vho-Makaulule. Vhongwaniwapo oral history often recounts the forced removal or seizure of land for development projects. DLM wants to work with Vhongwaniwapo clans like the Khwevha clan so that they may be educated about their rights and how they can organise among themselves to protect their land. Through continual meetings with DLM, the Khwevha clan formed a commission, the Khwevha Council for the Protection of *Zwifho zwa Khwevha* and has since prepared a sacred site profile and clan constitution for the protection of the remaining territory. The clan constitution provides a framework for petitioning for the formal protection of the clan's original ancestral lands. In the clan constitution and sacred site profile, the Khwevha Council describes the clan, the clan's totem and the families that comprise the Khwevha clan. Moreover, *makhadzi* of the Khwevha clan outline their rituals to the clan and community.

At DLM meetings with Vhongwaniwapo clans such as the Khwevha, ecological maps and calendars are composed as part of tapping into elders' knowledge about environmental sustainability and indigenous agriculture. Khwevha elders shared their knowledge on such maps to sketch a relationship between past conditions and present-day challenges in order to track the destruction of their land and to chart future actions. DLM has also started discussions with the chiefs of other Vhongwaniwapo clans from Vuu and Malale in the hope that by instilling confidence in them about their rights and facilitating paralegal training and conversation, they will be empowered to use the law through their own independent organising. Through an integrated



Vho-Makaulule engaged in dialogue with members of the Khwevha clan

model, utilising indigenous knowledge and skills in tandem with modern conservationist practices, DLM seeks to educate the community about sustainable agricultural practices.

The failure of scientific approaches in rural areas has often been attributed to the exclusion of indigenous knowledge. Approaches that disregard indigenous knowledge tend to result in inappropriate, technically oriented solutions and management practices that do not address complex ecological issues, thus failing to provide long-term sustainability for local farmers. Indigenous knowledge is often critical. The continuous, detailed observations of local people and the strong relationships they have with nature give them a deeper understanding of the evolving environment (Buthelezi & Hughes 2023).



Vho-Mphatheleni addressing participants at a *Dzomo La Mupo* meeting.

Through continued capacity building and fundraising, DLM intends to establish community-wide research teams to document elders' knowledge of traditional farming systems adapted within an agroecological framework. DLM's hope is that through continued capacity building, it will one day be able to organise research teams to exchange this knowledge about permaculture, seed saving, mulching, composting and the use of grey water with household farmers across towns and villages. The organisation specifically wishes to raise awareness about ecological knowledge among Vhavenda citizens,

household farmers and schools, but also among commercial farmers and government departments.

In 2012, DLM began offering paralegal training to educate community members about customary law and the protection of sacred natural sites and forests. At this time, the organisation submitted applications for the registration of three sacred forests as protected areas under the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). Although the applications have not been successful thus far, Vho-Makaulule and DLM are still optimistic and intend to continue lobbying for the protection of sacred forests. DLM's intention is to expand the provision of legal training through a lawyer or community organiser who is well versed in environmental and Indigenous law to educate community members about customary and constitutional rights, the integration of Indigenous knowledge into the Vhembe school curriculum, and environmental policies, including programmes on seed and food systems and health and nutrition.



chapter two

Sacred Sites

“I am a timber which comes from a tree that survived many hard
thunders.”

– Vho-Mphatheleni Makaulule

When Vho-Makaulule was growing up, she was taught that it was forbidden to chop down certain trees or collect dry wood in sacred sites. Her father taught her many things about sacred sites, which is what fuels her passion for defending them today. She was raised within the sacred site culture, which included many rituals, including libations and rituals linked with certain vegetables. All the people in her family and clan knew that sacred sites were to be protected and not disturbed – for example, certain fruit, no matter how ripe, should be left alone and not picked or eaten. Vho-Makaulule believes that spirituality creates order and well-being and that sacred sites embody these principles.

Sacred natural sites that are recognised by Indigenous cultures around the world are biodiversity hotspots and the world’s oldest conservation areas (Sinthumule, Mugwena & Rabumbulu 2021; Sinthumule 2022; Zannini et al 2021). These places include waterfalls, forests, lakes, springs, mountains, caves and other landscapes. Sacred natural sites have been important to local cultures for centuries and are the equivalent of churches or temples and serve as monuments to indigenous people’s ancestors. Examples of such sites in different parts of the world are Uluru-Kata Tjuta in Australia, the sacred groves of India, the nine sacred mountains of China, Lascaux Cave in France and the Ohlone Shellmounds in northern California in the United States to name but a few (Sacred Film Land Project). Some of these sites are

sacred as burial grounds and others are significant because of their biodiversity.

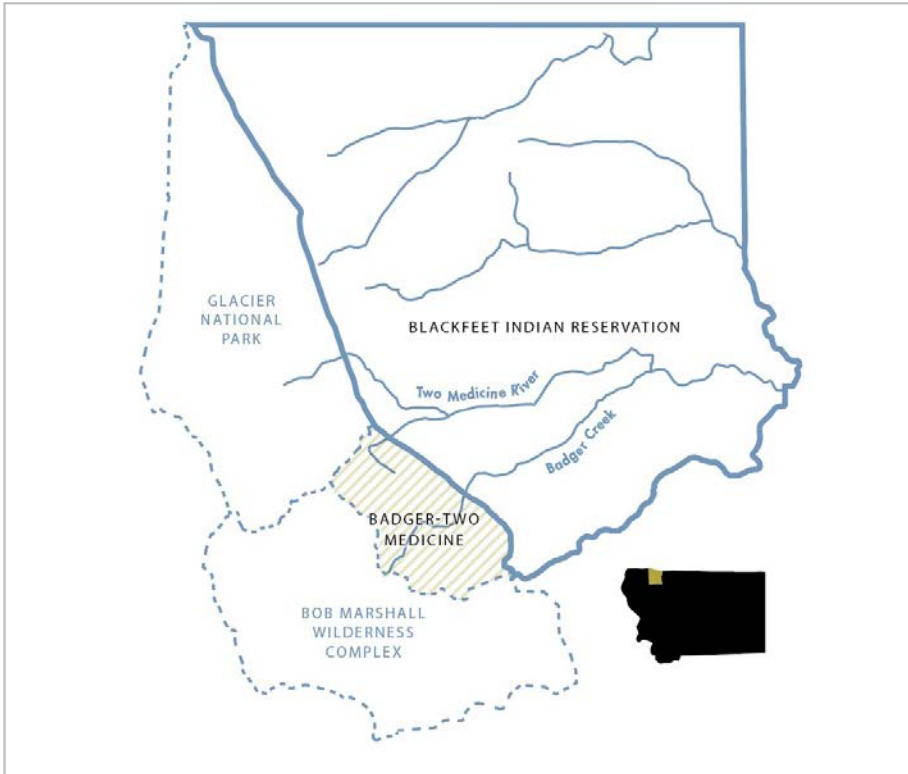
Sacred natural sites fulfil vital and varied roles in supporting the health of the whole organism that is the earth and carry the original templates for the continuity of life. These sites are often inextricably linked to sacred, prophetic and totemic species directly associated with the sites and/or endemic to the region (Moodley 2019).

In these areas, aboriginal people have protected the lands with local customs and practices through agricultural techniques and spiritual beliefs related to ethical land stewardship. In the United States, for example, the Amskapi Piikani people of the Blackfeet Nation have tended to the lands in north-west Montana for centuries. Their relationship with this land has supported great levels of biodiversity on their reservation and a territory to the west in Glacier National Park and the Badger-Two Medicine Area. Over fifty percent of the state of Montana's remaining biodiversity exists in the Blackfeet territory (www.montana.edu/nativeland/). In addition, “[o]ver fifty percent of all known native plants, amphibians and reptiles within the state of Montana are present on the Blackfeet Reservation. Over sixty-five percent of all known native birds and fish are present and over eighty percent of all native mammals” (Berger 2018). The mountains, particularly on the east side of Glacier National Park, are deemed sacred. The great levels of biodiversity in this region are attributed to the Blackfeet Indians' conservation practices and ethics, which run contrary to extractive industries such as oil and gas drilling.

Akin to the Amskapi Piikani or Blackfeet tribe in Montana, the Vhongwaniwapo or Vhavenda people in the former homeland of Venda, known today as the Vhembe District, in South Africa have upheld indigenous practices and ethical land stewardship throughout their history. Additionally, the Vhongwaniwapo people recognise sacred natural sites that are a vital part of their complex spirituality and link to the environment (Sinthumule 2022). The concept known as biocultural diversity describes this relationship between culture and the environment, particularly beliefs associated with indigenous conservation and ecocultural practices. Sacred sites, known as *zwifho*, have been a crucial element of the culture and heritage of the

Vhongwaniwapo people since time immemorial. There are numerous sacred sites in Venda – Vho-Makaulule’s organisation, Dzomo la Mupo (DLM), has identified 54 sites. Sacred natural sites provide a nexus of ecosystems that have an impact on nature and culture. These sites have proven to be under threat worldwide due to land grabs, development and global change. In a *Mail & Guardian* article titled “Battle to salvage the soul of Venda’s sacred sites”, journalist Lucas Ledwaba (2018), in referring to the Phiphidi Waterfall, states: “It is just another holy site caught up in the never-ending, protracted battle between preserving tradition and using nature for commercial gain.” He continues: “Tradition dictates that some of these hills should not be open to everyone, that some of the rivers and lakes should not be swum in and that some spots are so sacred that it is taboo to point at or photograph them. These are the *zwifho*. To the Venda people, the land is not only a source of food but also a revered holy of holies to which they are bound spiritually, for it is a gift from the gods.” While there is a conflict between economic use and cultural use, researchers have been making great efforts to show the importance of these sacred areas to local cultures, as well as the environmental benefits of conserving these areas.

The sacred sites in Venda or the Vhembe District are active community networks that have similarities in identity, spirituality, cultural practices and ecological characteristics. *Zwifho* can be likened to temples, and those identifying as Vhongwaniwapo – who are considered the first peoples – were entrusted by Nwali, the Creator or God, to be guardians of the *zwifho* (Barnwell et al 2021). Sacred natural sites are significant to human life because, among other purposes, they are burial sites for the custodians of such places, places for connecting with spirits and ancestors, and sites for performing rituals that have deep cultural meanings for society (Sinthumule et al 2021). They also serve the health needs of people by providing medicinal plants, areas for contemplation, ceremony, meditation and prayer and places that hold secular values for culture and history. Furthermore, it is argued that if conservation is to be successful, it should not only focus on formally protected areas but also include indigenous people’s sacred natural sites. Spiritual governance has become an important concept when dealing with the protection of sacred natural sites. Spiritual governance



Map of Blackfeet Indian Reservation and sacred land in the Badger-Two Medicine Area

Source: Blackfeetnation.com

is a characteristic behavioural practice that is found among many of the world's Indigenous people (Sinthumule et al 2021).

Vho-Makaulule has had a deep appreciation of sacred sites since she was a young girl. She remembers the sacred sites near her village – particularly Zwifho zwa Harasivhilwi and Zwifho zwa Dumbini ha Nyatema – where people were forbidden to pick fruit from the trees. Taboos or myths regarding sacred sites are, in effect, conservation practices. Vho-Makaulule remembers a time when her father would not allow her to go on a field trip to Lake Fundudzi with her class. This lake, located in the Soutpansberg mountains, is believed to have a sacred python considered to be a source of fertility beneath its waters. Vho-Makaulule's father was adamant that visiting the lake would go against

the ancestors' wishes. Although she was disappointed at the time, she later came to understand the importance of upholding these beliefs.

Vho-Makaulule has fought arduously to protect sacred sites in the Vhembe District for nearly 20 years. To Vho-Makaulule and the Vhongwaniwapo clans that protect them, these sites are a central element of *mupo*, that is, all of creation. According to Vho-Makaulule, this life force, *mupo*, gives one the energy to walk, determines a healthy pregnancy, determines the germination of plants, makes air, wind and water and creates the moon, which affects the seasons. Therefore, the sacred sites that embody *mupo* are a crucial element of Vhongwaniwapo or Vhavenda culture and the well-being of the community (Barnwell et al 2021).

While sacred natural sites are an important part of the whole community, they also hold special significance for the women known as *makhadzi* in Vhongwaniwapo culture. Their significance stems from *vhadzimu*, the ancestral spirits with which the *makhadzi* commune (APE UK 2023; Sinthumule et al 2021). Part of the role of *makhadzi* in indigenous Vhongwaniwapo culture is to observe the ecological importance of sacred sites and forests. *Makhadzi* ecocultural knowledge is an indigenous understanding of native plants and ecosystems and it includes natural resource management. The ecological knowledge of *makhadzi* also focuses on seed, food and seasonal cycles rooted in an appreciation of the sacredness of life and nature. In Venda, in the Vhembe District Municipality, there are many sacred sites that are environmentally vulnerable. The sacred sites serve different spiritual purposes and have distinctive management customs and ceremonies associated with them. The spots include burial sites, ritual-only sites and communal sites (APE UK 2023; Matshidze 2013; Tshiguvho 2008). While there are select clans that protect these areas, *makhadzi* have traditionally played a vital role in maintaining a harmonious balance between nature, community and spiritual life in connection with sacred areas (APE UK 2023; Sinthumule 2022).

Makhadzi and their clans view sacred sites and the areas above and below them as culturally and environmentally significant. A sacred place converges with its surrounding areas high into the cosmos and deep into the earth's soil like an energetic force field. Consequently,

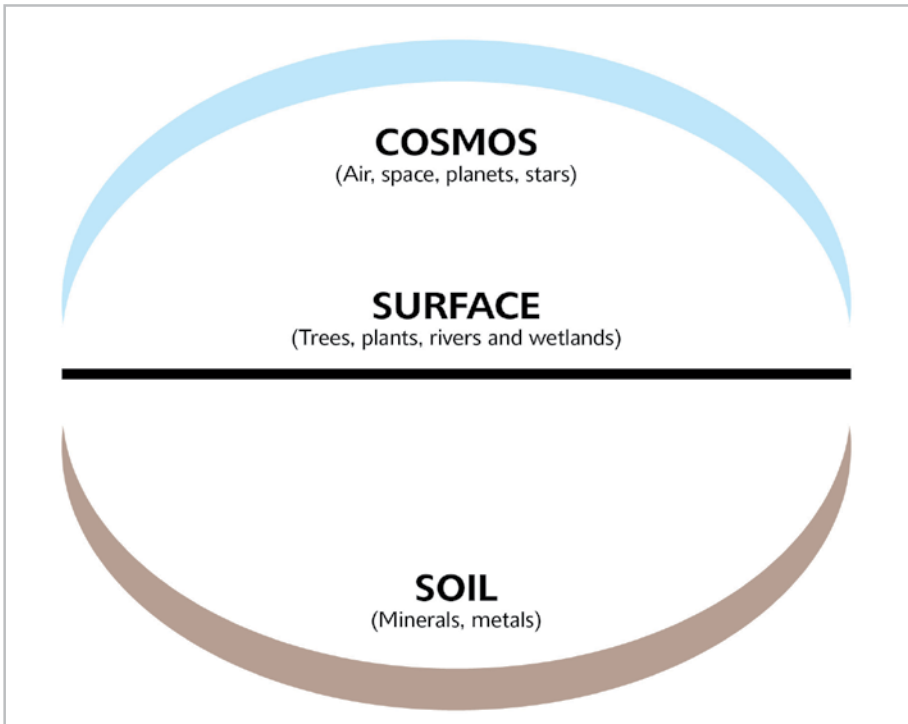


Diagram of the Vhongwaniwapo worldview of the breadth and dimensions of the three layers of a sacred site

even minerals and metals in the subsoil are essential (South African Heritage Resources Agency application for heritage protection, 2012). The removal of such minerals, for example, the extraction of gold or coal through mining is an infringement of indigenous laws of origin that determine what are sound practices. The very soil of a sacred site is revered since the Vhongwaniwapo bury their dead in the ancestral way in some sacred areas – although it should be noted that there is a distinction between a sacred site and a burial site, or *tshiendeulu* (plural: *zwiendeulu*). They believe that digging into the soil and damaging the ecosystem have an impact on their ancestors and will bring misfortune.

The rights of indigenous people and their sacred lands are upheld by the United Nations and a host of NGOs committed to defending ancient cultural practices. For example, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) drafted in 2007 was an important milestone in protecting sacred sites around the world since

it provides a political framework for influencing international policies to protect these natural phenomena (Bas Verschuuren et al 2011; Sinthumule et al 2021). Several articles of the UNDRIP directly address the cultural sites of native peoples. Article 12(1) and (2) and Article 25 deal with the rights related to maintaining spiritual traditions, which are summarised below.

Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies and the right to maintain, protect and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites.

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources.

As an advisory body, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues supports the provisions and effectiveness of the UNDRIP. The 21st session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2022 centred on the following theme: “Indigenous peoples, business, autonomy and the human rights principles of due diligence including free, prior and informed consent” (United Nations 2022). The regional dialogues were organised in the seven socio-cultural territories of the world and targeted the progress made in respect of Indigenous peoples’ rights to autonomy and self-government. In addition, items for discussion included the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through which 193 member states have vowed to safeguard comprehensive economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection by 2030. Through this decree, the South African government has also recognised that indigenous people’s knowledge and skills regarding agriculture, education and biodiversity are useful in approaching the 2030 Agenda within the country (South Africa’s National Statement at the 20th Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2021).

Broadly, the rights of indigenous people and the protection of indigenous heritage and land are recognised by organisations such as the United Nations. However, indigenous people still struggle to uphold

their rights against extractive industries and corporate enterprises that wish to exploit aboriginal land. A recent example of a land dispute in South Africa can be seen in Cape Town. The dispute concerns the construction of several businesses and the first African headquarters of the multinational company Amazon. The reported \$300 million development was stalled because the building site is located on sacred Indigenous land (Bartholomew 2022; Eligon 2022). At the time, Judge Patricia Goliath noted a lack of proper consultation with Indigenous people and ordered construction to stop.

Western Cape provincial officials had sanctioned the project, ignoring the protests of local indigenous people, including the Goringhaicona Khoi Khoen Indigenous Council, which subsequently filed a lawsuit along with the Observatory Civic Association. The judge ruled, in effect, that despite the supposed economic and public benefits that such a project would yield, the rights of First Nations peoples were paramount (Bartholomew 2022; Eligon 2022; Stark 2022). In what became a drawn-out legal conflict, the Liesbeek Action Campaign, which represented environmentalists and indigenous factions, expressed concern over the cultural and environmental degradation that would take place as a consequence of such construction – in particular, the risk of flooding between the Black and Liesbeek Rivers (Malinga 2022). Since Indigenous people would be displaced from their land, which they used for grazing and rituals centuries ago, the stalemate was a matter of the rights of indigenous people “versus the modern-day demands of developments that will lead to job openings in a city that has a 29% unemployment rate” (Evans 2022).

Despite the judge’s ruling in favour of the plaintiffs, the company disputed the decision by filing appeals against the delay of construction. The Liesbeek Action Campaign responded by saying that “the appeal against the historic judgment is a slap in the face of indigenous rights in SA” (Malinga 2022). Moreover, the Liesbeek Action Campaign believed the government was siding with the developers because local government officials spoke out against the judge’s decision. Despite the appeals, the judge’s decision was a historic pronouncement in favour of indigenous rights, and the indigenous communities involved were hopeful that her judgment would not be overturned. However,

the 2022 High Court interdict that stopped the development was rescinded in November 2022 because it had allegedly been obtained “through fraud” (Payi 2023). In a subsequent development, in May 2023, the Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) refused the Observatory Civil Association (OCA) permission to appeal the Western Cape High Court’s order dismissing the OCA’s application to interdict the R4,6 billion development, and construction proceeded (BusinessTech 2023). The matter, however, did not appear to end there – it was expected that the Western Cape High Court would later in 2023 hear another challenge in the form of an application for the review of the authorisations granted by the provincial and municipal authorities for the development.

South Africa has its own nationwide administrative body responsible for safeguarding the country’s cultural heritage, known as the South African Heritage Resources Agency. SAHRA is authorised in terms of the National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999 to protect South Africa’s rich and diverse cultural heritage through comprehensive legal means, such as prohibition notices, penalties and prosecution in court for any outside entities that seek to overtake or destroy these protected areas. As an agency, SAHRA is also obligated to provide guidance to the communities who live in areas in which national heritage sites are located. The Liesbeek Leisure Property Trust’s decision to proceed with construction at the disputed Cape Town site in March 2023 after the favourable court judgment was further buoyed by the decision of SAHRA’s special grading and declaration review committee to recommend that the River Club not be provisionally protected, although this had yet to be ratified by SAHRA’s council.

Previously, in 2018, SAHRA had awarded the site provisional protection, which subsequently expired (SAHRA site ID 138385). SAHRA’s manager for built environment, Ben Mwasinga, said that while SAHRA recognised the intangible heritage significance of the Three Rivers Urban Park in its entirety and the River Club location specifically, SAHRA was of the view that hundreds of years of development had severely eroded any tangible elements remaining on the site (Payi 2023). SAHRA would nonetheless ensure that the historical events that had taken place in the space were memorialised and commemorated

through interpretation and access to the site for the First Nations who find it significant for their cultural practices.

Lake Fundudzi in Venda or the Vhembe District was declared a National Heritage Site in 2014. It was the first sacred site to be declared a National Heritage Site (South African Heritage Resources Agency 2020). According to SAHRA, the site holds significant intangible heritage value and is closely associated with the living heritage of the Vhavenda people. The site is also scientifically significant with its relatively unaltered natural environment due to its sacredness. Lake Fundudzi is furthermore regarded as the only natural inland lake in Southern Africa. Three rivers flow into the lake – the Mutale (or Mavhidzelele), Godoni (or Tshidumbi or Govha) and Muiladi. The lake is geologically unique in that it is one of the few lakes that was formed due to a landslide. Scientifically, the sediments of the lake are important since they may hold a wealth of information about the geological history of the area. SAHRA also notes that Lake Fundudzi is a revered sacred site for the Vhavenda people, especially the Vhatavhatsindi (“People of the Pool”), and is the focus point of folklore, myths and ceremonial rituals. The lake is home to the Vhatavhatsindi ancestors, the python God of Fertility and the White Crocodile, who all watch over the Vhatavhatsindi. The White Crocodile protects the ancestral spirits of the lake (South African Heritage Resources Agency 2020).

Other living heritage sites or sacred sites declared as either National or Provincial Heritage Sites by SAHRA include the following:

- Witsie’s Cave, Monontsha Village, Qwaqwa, Free State (Provincial Heritage Site, 2016, SAHRA site ID 105597): The cave was used as a place of refuge by Witsie and his people, the Makhelokoe, and by Witsie in his capacity as a traditional healer and rainmaker. The cave is believed, to a certain extent, to possess spiritual powers, while it has historical and cultural significance for the Makhelokoe.
- Sheikh Yusuf Kramat, Macassar, Somerset West, Western Cape Province (National Heritage Site, 2021, SAHRA site ID 137919): This site is the location of the kramat where Sheikh Yusuf was laid to rest in 1699. Sheikh Yusuf was an Indonesian Muslim of noble descent and is considered a founder of Islam in South Africa. He was exiled to the Cape by the Dutch. The site is considered sacred by Muslims and forms part of a circle of kramats that surround Cape Town and are said to protect it against adverse events.

Some other notable SAHRA heritage projects, though not related to sacred sites but cultural landscapes, burial grounds and other areas include the Boomplaats Rock Engraving Site Complex near the town of Lydenburg in Mpumalanga, which was declared a National Heritage Site in 2022 (Boshoff 2022); the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape in Limpopo, which was declared a National Heritage Site on 28 June 2002 and a World Heritage Site in 2003 (SAHRA); the historical community of the Bo-Kaap, Cape Town, which was declared a National Heritage Site on 30 April 2019; and the Makapan Valley with its significant cave, which was declared as culturally significant in respect of aesthetic, historical, scientific, social, spiritual, linguistic and technological value and declared a National Heritage Site on 28 June 2002 and a World Heritage Site in 2005 (SAHRA).

Vho-Makaulule's organisation, DLM, was advised that an indigenous group must formally submit an application to SAHRA for a stated sacred area to be declared a national or provincial heritage site.

Most sacred site locations are unknown to the public. The International Union for Conservation of Nature's publication, *Sacred Natural Sites: guidelines for Protected Area Managers* (Wild, McLeod & Valentine 2008), points out that "[w]hile the identification of sacred natural sites within protected areas is useful for protected area management, no pressure should be exerted on local communities to reveal the location of their sacred natural sites, nor the details of their cultural values, practices, history or use." In some cases, however, the location of sacred sites and limited information about the practices of local communities are known because of the efforts to protect them through legal and/or conservation efforts. For example, in 2012, DLM, with the help of a human rights attorney, began the process of protecting three out of 54 sites by applying to register them as Provincial Heritage Sites through SAHRA. One news report around that time (IOL 2011) details the conflict between maintaining location secrecy and gaining SAHRA's protection for the sacred site of Lake Fundudzi. The report quotes locals who either welcomed the likely promotion of tourism to the area or who said protection by the heritage council would undermine the site's status as a sacred site and burial place of kings where sacred rituals are performed. As noted earlier, Lake Fundudzi was declared

a National Heritage Site by SAHRA in 2014. Sinthumule et al (2021) note there is conflict between the custodians of a sacred natural site, whose intention is to preserve the site, and developers, whose goal is to use the sacred natural site for commercial gain. Based on new market conditions, developers deem the economic value of a sacred site to be greater than the spiritual value.

I was granted access to the sacred site profiles and applications to SAHRA, which provided me with information about the clans that protect the sites and the major threats that they face. The three sites that Vho-Makaulule and DLM organised to protect are (1) Zwifho zwa Guvhukuvu, La Nwadzongolo (publicly known as Phiphidi Waterfall), which is located in a rural area of Venda at the foothills of the Soutpansberg (Dzwaini), South Africa's northernmost mountain range (Stacy 2009); (2) Zwifho zwa Vhutanda, which is now fragmented and surrounded by the Tshivhase Tea Estate; and (3) Zwifho zwa Thathe, which is a sacred Indigenous forest. According to Vho-Makaulule, the major threat to the environment and sacred areas in Venda is the destruction of indigenous forests and rivers. Traditionally, these sacred areas were not to be interfered with by people. The indigenous clans in Venda believe that the ecosystems within these sacred areas should not be disturbed. Only cultural rituals may be performed at the sacred sites, and the sites are cared for or protected by select clans. Some of the rituals performed at sacred sites include the summoning of rain (Sinthumule 2022). If the rituals are interrupted or interfered with, rain patterns are disrupted. Moreover, "scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have now recognized that forest destruction releases carbon and disturbs the hydrological cycle, in which vegetation cover plays a vital role" (Ramunangi Claim of Rights Letter 2008) According to indigenous custom, the cutting of trees is to be carefully monitored. Now, however, these sacred areas are vulnerable to development projects in the region. The Vhongwaniwapo believe development will have a devastating impact on their culture and the environment, particularly rainfall.

Tourism is also encroaching on these sites, driven by tourism marketing that uses local culture, spiritualism and sacred sites to attract business. For example, tour and safari operator Where It All

Began advertises on its website a three-night Venda Sacred Forest Walk starting at US\$2 000 and lists as tour highlights, a “walk through a forbidden forest”, a “visit [to] a sacred hilltop lake” and “magical natural rock swimming pools”. The operator specialises in what it calls “personalised, ethical, South African journeys”. Another operator, Morning Sun Nature Reserve, offers guided and unguided tours of sacred sites, including Lake Fundudzi in the Thathe Vondo Forest. Even the Vhembe District Municipality, on its website under ‘Tourism’, advertises, for example, the Phiphidi Waterfall, saying it is “situated less than 15 km away from Thohoyandou in the Mutshindudu River and is one of the cultural sites”. In an article based on their research into cultural barriers to tourism development, Odhiambo and Manuga (2017) contend that tourism, plantations and development projects have been the main threats to the sacred sites and forests in Venda. They note that Tshatshingo Pothole is a sacred place with definite potential as a tourism destination but that full-blown tourism development is unlikely to take place because of the prevailing deep cultural conservatism of the Vhavenda people. They point out, however, that this conservatism could possibly be overruled by the local Makani chief. In Tanzania, the bad behaviour and disrespect tourists show at sacred sites created a disconnection between people and their traditional religions and actually caused some of them to abandon traditional spiritual practices in favour of joining mainstream religions such as Islam (Chani et al 2020).

Apart from tourism and in addition to the commercial mining activities of MC Mining Limited (previously Coal of Africa) mentioned earlier, another example of the encroachment of mining activities on sacred sites and the forests and rivers in Limpopo, and the kind of conflict it can generate, is that of Mammba Metal Group (Tau 2020). This case falls within the jurisdiction of the Tshivhase Royal Council, near the National Heritage Site of Lake Fundudzi. According to Tau (2020), the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy issued Mammba Metal Group with a prospecting right on 1 August 2018. The right was valid for five years ending 31 July 2023. The department confirmed that the miner had received written consent from the traditional authority, but the Tshivhase Royal Council in Limpopo has strongly denied that

it approved mining activities that overlap with sacred, heritage and biodiversity-rich sites on its land. The miner alleged it had refused to succumb to a bribe demand for the approval and that it may be the reason for the denial. The mining right was for prospecting for chrome, coal, manganese, iron, copper, diamonds, gold, nickel and platinum group metals, and a company spokesperson said at the time the miner had already discovered 10 minerals after drilling 15 holes and added this happened “a distance away from sacred areas”. The company claimed its mining activities were some 24 km from the lake, but the distance was being disputed.

Another threat to the traditional custodianship of sacred sites and their surrounding natural environment seems to be the eviction of entire communities to make way for varied kinds of development. Independent environmental journalist Jess Craig (2023) writes that, for decades, Maasai communities in the Ngorongoro region adjacent to the Serengeti National Park in northern Tanzania have faced eviction attempts to make way for a game reserve and, the government says, to help protect the environment. However, in 2017, in Loliondo, about 100 miles (160 km) north of the Ngorongoro conservation area, government security forces burnt 185 Maasai houses along the park border in what rights groups called a forced act of eviction. This is similar to the fate of the San people in Botswana, who have been barred from their ancestral land to make way for the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (Zenda 2023), and a fate many communities suffered in the apartheid era in South Africa when entire communities were relocated to make way for white-owned farms or newly designated white areas.

The sacred natural site that has garnered more media attention than others in Venda in recent years is the Phiphidi Waterfall (known to the locals as Zwifho zwa Guvhukuvu, La Nwadzongolo). This sacred site is located on the Mutshindudi River where ritual processions begin at the Mitangani Vhadzimu or wetland (Makaulule 2023; South African Heritage Resources Agency application 2012) Ancestral ceremonies like *thevhula* and *u phasa* are conducted at the site, and the waterfall is understood to be the location where the *lwidulwame* (water spirits) reside. Beer and grain offerings were traditionally left at the sacred rock at the top of the waterfall to maintain good relations with the ancestors

and spirit world (Makaulule, Mphatheleni. Personal Interview 2023; Ramunangi Claim of Rights Letter 2008) However, the sacred rock at the top of the falls and the surrounding forest have been damaged by construction companies, with only the waterfall remaining.

Presently, tourists can picnic in the area and go hiking near the falls, to the dismay of the clan that has traditionally protected the area. According to Indigenous laws of origin and oral history, the Phiphidi Waterfall has been in the protective care of the Ramunangi clan (Vhadau vha ha Ramunangi) since the creator bestowed the status of custodians of the waterfall upon them. Since picnickers have been allowed in the area, the Ramunangi have complained about the immense pollution and litter at the waterfall and the lack of access for the clan to perform rituals. Construction has contributed to the destruction of the overall ecosystem. The Phiphidi Waterfall area supports hundreds of plant and



Makhadzi members of *Dzomo La Mupo* dancing in a cultural village and school in the Vhembe District Municipality

animal species – thirty percent of Africa's tree species grow in the area, and sixty percent of South Africa's birdlife, forty percent of its mammals and 30% of its reptiles live in the surrounding region (Pinnock 2010; Sinthumule et al 2021).

Moreover, the site has been vulnerable to larger tourist development schemes. Beginning in 2007, the local headman at the time, Jerry Tshivhase, approved a development project managed by the Tshivhase Development Foundation Trust (TDFT). The company was set to build chalets and a restaurant near the falls, and local tourist organisations utilised the sacred site culture in their marketing strategies. Loss of access to this area for the Vhongwaniwapo first began during apartheid when the government installed chiefs who were not from the smaller aboriginal clans. Therefore, the Ramunangi clan of the Vhongwaniwapo were largely suppressed in the wake of development schemes and land use that contradicted the ancient customs pertaining to sacred sites. In the post-apartheid era, the Ramunangi, including the *makhadzi*, have raised their voices in protest against the current threats they face. At the onset of this most recent development project, the Ramunangi clan sent letters of petition to halt the construction plans. Vho-Makaulule and DLM were very active in the subsequent protests against the project. The development proposal disparaged the values that Vho-Makaulule and DLM venerate, not just because of their ancestral worship but because of the destruction of *mupo*. The Ramunangi shared this sentiment and were distraught by the presence of tourists at their sacred natural site.

In the wake of this development proposal, the Ramunangi, with support from DLM and its lawyer, challenged the plans legally in court. Before the trial, the lawyer sent letters to the local headman and chief, asserting that the Ramunangi have been the custodians of the sacred site since before recorded history and should have continued access to the site to perform their rituals – and that the development plans should be stopped. Beginning on 15 June 2009, legal correspondence was also sent to the Member of Executive Council of the Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism, the CEO of the Limpopo Heritage Resource Agency (LIHRA), the Director General of the Department of Arts and Culture, the Director General of the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs, the CEO of the Commission for

the Promotion and the Protection of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities and even the royal family in Venda (Vho-Makaulule 2015; 2023). It is especially courageous to go against the royal family in Venda, who has ties with the TDFT.

After two successful court interdicts to stop construction at the Phiphidi Waterfall, the development project was paused. Nevertheless, tourists are still admitted on the grounds and admission fees are still collected for entrance to the falls and picnic areas. Additionally, recent accounts suggest that chalets have been built on the land near the waterfall. Sinthumule et al (2021) note that despite all the efforts that were made to stop construction at the sacred site, the development of the tourist lodge and associated facilities continued, and the construction has caused massive destruction to the Indigenous vegetation that has existed for millions of years. Sinthumule et al (2021) further point out that although the Ramunangi have preserved the Phiphidi sacred natural site for centuries, they do not hold the title deeds to the land where the site is located. In other words, they are not legally recognised as the owners of the area, even though they have strong connections to, and an interest in, the sacred site. As a result, the tourism development that started in the early 1980s happened without consultation with the custodians, and this undermined the cultural practices that have been observed since time immemorial. For now, it is unknown what further plans the headman has for this area, but what is evident is that despite the trial, the local leadership can still make development decisions without conferring with the clan. Vho-Makaulule, DLM and their lawyer continue their efforts to have the three sacred sites declared provincial heritage sites by SAHRA, which would give them marginal protection.

In June 2022, South Africa's Minister of Tourism, in response to a question in Parliament, listed 30 community-based tourism projects, including the Phiphidi Waterfall, for which built environment professionals had been appointed and planning was being finalised, including the necessary planning approvals, which would include environmental impact assessments, where applicable. The minister said that the final completion of these projects could not be reported at the time (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2022).

In addition to protecting the cultural and intangible heritage of South Africa's multitude of ethnic groups, SAHRA is responsible for giving effect to more than a dozen legislative Acts that protect Indigenous people, including the Biodiversity Act 10 of 2004 (sahra.org.za). The Vhavenda clans held meetings with SAHRA representatives. Vho-Makaulule's meeting notes add context to SAHRA's site visits. She wrote: "I detailed them about the sensitive reactions of the clans on the relationship with SAHRA and from that we agreed to come with an approach which will guide the meeting towards positive understanding with SAHRA and clans. We even formulate the questions on approaching them and to be aware on how to respond if clans come with questions that are sensitive." Vho-Makaulule's perspective on communication with SAHRA was correct since the clans are very concerned about collaborating with agencies that might take control of their land. Therefore, it is complicated to protect the sacred areas because a great deal of delicate communication is required. There is always a fear that any 'protection' of land could be misconstrued as control of the land. SAHRA eventually sent site administrators to visit the communities in Venda and to discuss the sacred sites. However, according to Vho-Makaulule, the applications for provincial heritage status were never approved and, therefore, the sites are still vulnerable to development and destruction. According to Pikirayi and Magoma (2021), the Thathe Forest and Lake Fundudzi have, in fact, been protected under the Heritage Resources Act since 2014, yet indigenous communities in these areas are sceptical about these claims of protection. Various research projects have supported their scepticism. For instance, Pikirayi and Magoma (2021) concluded that large-scale agriculture, mining and commercial plantations around the Thathe Forest, Lake Fundudzi and the Phiphidi Waterfall are not only destroying these places but also impoverishing indigenous peoples. This, they say, is not sustainable from the perspective of heritage conservation, survival and the well-being of indigenous communities.

Vho-Makaulule continues to work with Vhongwaniwapo clans to help them gain agency. In addition to the work that Vho-Makaulule and DLM have done to protect the sacred sites of the Ramunangi (Madau), Nevhutanda and Tshidsivhe clans, they have embarked on

efforts to safeguard the territory and sites of the Khwevha clan. Vho-Makaulule conducted extensive interviews with Khwevha elders, who Vho-Makaulule refers to as “living libraries”. The dialogue with the elders revealed that their *zwifho* or sacred areas, forests and larger landscapes were fragmented because of the development of roads and other construction projects such as homes and public gravesites. Vho-Makaulule and DLM conducted ecological map workshops to help track the destruction of the land and to determine future action with regard to protecting the Khwevha’s sacred sites. Environmental sustainability, indigenous agriculture and seasonal cycles will be taken into account in such action. The elders drew on their memory of how the land was used in the past, prior to development, to create ecological maps. On completion of the maps, the clan members were instructed to imagine land use in the future and to outline what they envisioned for the next generation. Since the community dialogue with the Khwevha elders, the clan has formed a committee known as the Khwevha Council for the Protection of Zwifho zwa Khwevha and prepared a sacred site profile and clan constitution for the protection of the remaining ancestral land. Vho-Makaulule hopes that the constitution and profile of the land can be used for the clan’s independent organising to gain protection for its territory.

The Vhembe District Municipality, which encompasses all the territories of the former Venda homeland, is experiencing biodiversity loss as a result of damage to, and fragmentation of, the sacred areas mentioned and because of agricultural expansion, development and mining projects in the larger landscapes. Contemporary practices not only undermine the Vhavenda culture but also have negative implications for the biodiversity of the area and undermine the founding principles of the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, while the passion of custodians and local communities to save the sacred sites is met with weak government support (Sinthumule et al 2021). This biodiversity loss is affecting areas such as the Soutpansberg, which is the northernmost mountain range in South Africa. The Soutpansberg is home to 2,500-3,000 recorded vascular plant taxa, 594 tree taxa, 510 bird species, 116 reptile species and 145 mammal species (Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism

[LEDET] 2019.) Moreover, the “Vhembe District Municipality, inclusive of the Kruger National Park, has 24 different vegetation types. Two of the 24 vegetation types are classified as Threatened ecosystems, namely Tzaneen Sour Lowveld which is classified as Endangered and Lowveld Riverine forest classified as Vulnerable” (LEDET 2019). Ecosystems are considered threatened based on their risk of elimination because of irreparable natural habitat, ecosystem degradation and overall loss of integrity (LEDET 2019). The depletion of indigenous plants, fruits and a variety of animal life – all entities that contribute to a thriving ecosystem – can be observed in sacred sites. The importance of conserving sacred natural sites is conveyed in this statement by Sinthumule et al (2021): “The tall trees in sacred natural sites not only help to protect the soil and water but also help in storing carbon, particularly in urban areas In addition, these sites shelter a wide diversity of insects, macro-fungi, birds, mammals and other forest-dwelling animals as compared to the surrounding areas”

It is the expressed hope of Vho-Makaulule and DLM that fragmented areas like that of Zwifho zwa Vhutanda at the Tshivhase Tea Estate will be reconnected in order to restore the already weakened biodiversity and enable the clans to continue their rituals. Vho-Makaulule and DLM continue to monitor the development at the Phiphidi Waterfall in the hope that the Ramunangi clan can continue to protect this area, given that SAHRA, according to the locals, has not been able to protect this territory. The anthropogenic threats to the area loom large amid continued protests.



chapter three

Land and gender in the context of customary leadership and globalisation

Land in Peril

Indigenous Vhongwaniwapo land and culture have been under threat in Venda for many generations. Sacred sites, in particular, have been in peril due to interethnic conflict, European settlers and missionary proselytising (Barnwell et al 2021; Kirkaldy 2005; Tshiguvho 2008). Not only white settlers and missionaries but also the dominant Masingo, who also inhabit this former apartheid homeland, disturbed the sociopolitical and cultural values of Venda society. According to Tshiguvho (2008), the Vhongwaniwapo or indigenous people endured a type of dual colonisation from both the Masingo and the European settlers. These exogenous threats to Vhongwaniwapo land and culture have influenced traditional leadership in the region and have left sacred sites perpetually defenceless.

Both European settlers and Masingo rule led to forced removals of Vhongwaniwapo or Indigenous residents leaving their sacred sites, customs, and burial practices defenceless. Though the Vhongwaniwapo had been subjugated by other Venda groups such as the Vhatavhatsindi, the Masingo used armed power (Kirkaldy 2005; Tshiguvho 2008). Tshiguvho (2008:55) states:

Khosi (Chief) Velelambeu, who led the Singo [Masingo] group when they came to Venda in the 1600s, kidnapped and beheaded two Ngoni

chiefs, which made both Vhangona and Vhatavhatsindi (who had settled into Venda) surrender. Then the Laudzi group ... overpowered Vhangona by targeting their strong belief in the sacred practice. Sometime in the early 1900s, Vhalaudzi burned what is now known as Lwamondo Mountain which was a sacred site for Vhangona in the area, as a strategy to overpower Vhangona.

This account demonstrates the interethnic conflict between more dominant Vhavenda groups like the Masingo and the indigenous people such as the Vhongwaniwapo and how the latter's sacred sites were targeted. These socio-political factors have intersected with present-day politics and a history of European rule in South Africa.

In the 19th century, the Voortrekkers, that is, Dutch-descended Afrikaners who ventured north from the Cape Colony into the Transvaal, had their own intentions for 'Vendaland'. The Voortrekkers temporarily settled in what they called Schoemansdal, at the foot of the mountain range that they first named Soutpansbergdorp and later, in 1848, Soutpansberg (Kirkaldy 2005). Their momentary settlement in the region began an unscrupulous, exploitative and hostile relationship with Vhavenda people over forced labour and tyrannical tax edicts, and they left their mark on the geography by renaming rivers, mountains and general terrain (Berlin Mission Society Archives. The Schwellnus-Giesecke Family in Venda 1873–1970; Kirkaldy 2005).

In 1870, German missionaries also developed a domineering relationship with the Vhavenda people and their traditional values regarding land and sacred sites. According to the Berlin Mission Society Archives and Kirkaldy (2005), "these German settlers equated the untameable vegetation and their own vulnerability to disease, due to the dense foliage in the region, with the perceived heathenism of Vhavenda people" (Kirkaldy 2005). Kirkaldy suggests that the missionaries considered the challenges of converting the Vhavenda people as undistinguishably linked with the mysterious and malevolent terrain. Moreover, sacred sites and forests became a controversial issue between missionaries and Vhavenda clans. For example, in 1874, after the construction of the Tshakhuma mission station by the Berlin Mission Society, conflicts arose about the collection of wood from the Thathe Holy Forest. Kirkaldy (2005) notes that the Berlin missionaries,

the reverend PE Schwellnus and Reverend Carl Beuster, developed tense relations with the Venda king, Khosi Madzivhandila after the king learnt of their aims to cut down trees in the holy area. After multiple attempts to cut down wood, where the king refused the missionaries' permission to collect wood from the sacred forest, Schwellnus from all accounts told King Madzivhandila, "God does not stay in the forest or in a river, but His home is in heaven ... I would like to believe that he, the King, will later see this and be convinced of it that his opinion about the gods is false, because their gods are just lies of people, which the devil has fed them" (Kirkaldy 2005:173). The missionaries regarded the Vhavenda and Vhongwaniwapo perceptions of sacred lands as sacrilegious and believed that their mission station, by contrast, was God's garden in the heathen wilderness (Kirkaldy 2005). Because of this, the Vhongwaniwapo people regarded the missionaries as destroyers of the land. Similar pressures and developments occurred elsewhere in Africa. For instance, between 1880 and 1961, the German and British colonial administrations, often aided by missionaries, placed considerable pressure on the traditions and way of life of the Bena people of Njombe, Tanzania, and such foreign control had unprecedented effects on the way traditionally sacred forests were maintained (Mgaya 2023).

The role of women denigrated

Just as the sacred sites in Venda became vulnerable during the missionary encounters, so, too, did the role of paternal aunts, known as *makhadzi*, especially with respect to sacred sites and spirituality (Matshidze, Pfarelo Eva (2013), Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021; Sinthumule 2022). Historically, *makhadzi* in both the imperial family and among the commoners played an essential domestic role and supervised important rituals in relation to families' sacred objects, ecocultural knowledge, sacred sites and communing with ancestors (Sinthumule 2022). When the missionaries exerted power and control in Venda, the role of *makhadzi* was challenged. Vho-Makaulule (Personal interview 2017) remarks as follows in this regard:

Colonisers came first. They saw that they could not defeat the Venda people, then they sent the missionaries. After colonisation was defeated, to win us, to colonise us, they sent the missionaries. And when the missionaries came here, they brought another way of spirituality, the new allegiance. They taught people that *makhadzi* play a wrong role, evil role, because they use their ancestors.

These women played an important role that was denigrated among the missionaries and, eventually, among many Vhavenda people and Christian fundamentalists. Because *makhadzi* were associated with traditional beliefs that ran contrary to Christian values, their role became demonised. According to many *makhadzi* of the time, recognition of the Vhongwaniwapo dead or ancestors was considered demonic. These *makhadzi* believed that their spirituality was not accepted by Jesus and, therefore, the missionaries replaced the role of *makhadzi* with that of priests and replaced sacred sites with churches so that they could pray there instead.

European missionaries introduced Christianity, along with Western education, and built churches in the area, which had a significant impact on the Vhavenda people's religious beliefs. The process of westernisation significantly undermined the Vhavenda people's culture and traditions (Kumar & Lakshminarayana 2023).

The *makhadzi* I interviewed explained that everything related to their spirituality and the roles of women within their spiritual belief system was maligned in the missionary era. Even sacred plants were made out as evil. The sacred finger millet plant, for example, was disparaged, and *makhadzi* suggest that the plant was replaced with the Bible and the drink made from finger millet was replaced with wine – and, again, sacred sites were replaced with shrines or churches.

Moreover, Christianity was forced onto the people and created in them a sense of shame about their Vhongwaniwapo or Vhavenda culture. Vhavenda people began to reject the *nwenda* (traditional attire) that women wore and stopped wearing the *vhukunda* (bangles) on their arms (Vho-Makaulule 2023). Everything about their culture was deemed profane. The Berlin Mission Society Archives give this account of a woman in the 19th century who destroyed her Venda jewellery before baptism: “When we [missionaries] arrived at the house of an

old lady, who was about to be baptised, she had presented him with her heathen amulets and necklaces ... she presented them with two stones and told him to crush the beads; to destroy her last link with the heathen world.”

The missionary and European aggression in Venda undermined the roles of women. The role of *makhadzi*, in particular, was diminished. During colonisation and into the apartheid era, the government undermined and manipulated traditional leaders and chiefs in the former apartheid homelands. In my dissertation, *makhadzi* interview statements emphasise from their perspective that non-Vhongwaniwapo leaders, namely, the Masingo chiefs were manipulated to support the interests of the government over the interests of the Vhavenda. The seizing of traditional authority had a particular impact on the former homelands since “[t]he apartheid government’s power of patronage was encapsulated in its power to depose and install chiefs and it



Indigenous female farmers.

was an effective tool in implementing apartheid policies in rural areas” (Matshidze 2013). It was during colonialism and apartheid that *makhadzi* first saw a deterioration of their authority, which was further diminished in the country’s democratic constitution in the post-apartheid era (Matshidze 2013).

Even Venda’s ostensibly independent years did not sway the imbedded values of the white settler regime, and its influences over traditional leadership and women’s access to land. Regarding traditional leadership, Matshidze (2013) contends: “The encounter of chiefs with missionaries, merchant capital and colonialism significantly and ominously undermined traditional leadership. Traditional leadership is an important relic of the pre-colonial and colonial orders that poses a special challenge to post-colonial state makers.” Matshidze (2013) explains that, under the current democratic government, matters of succession that were once privately arbitrated are now publicly disputed and controlled by state authority. This is a direct result of the interference of colonialism, apartheid and current democratic structures.

In her doctoral dissertation on the role of *makhadzi* in traditional leadership among the Venda-speaking people in South Africa, Matshidze (2013) points out that colonial rule legitimised the mainstreaming of men in politics while women were relegated to the domestic, which had a negative impact on the position of an institution that had women at its core, namely, *makhadzi*. In considering the place of *makhadzi* in the new democratic South Africa, Matshidze finds that legislation enacted to give effect to traditional leadership also did not recognise *makhadzi* explicitly. Many *makhadzi* interviewed for my research believed that the role of *makhadzi* fragmented because of the installation of Masingo chiefs who did not follow the elders’ ways in the way that the indigenous Vhongwaniwapo did.

The destruction of the role of *makhadzi* coincides with the destruction of Vhongwaniwapo culture since *makhadzi* are the carriers of that culture. Customarily, a *makhadzi* is the one who makes sure that there is order in the family, order in the clan, and order in the community. Through her knowledge, which continues to develop within

her and which is brought to her by the ancestors, she becomes a guide. The chief cannot rule without the *makhadzi* (gaiafoundation.org). *Makhadzi* are the crux of Vhavenda families and heritage. The following remarks by the former Public Protector of South Africa, Advocate Thuli Madonsela in an address to the Law Society of South Africa in 2014 provide further context to the role of *makhadzi*: “We call the whispering truth to power, the Makhadzi Way. We draw lessons from an ancient local Ombudsman-like institution, called the Makhadzi. The Venda Makhadzi is an aunt whose duty is to be the eyes and ears of the King or Chief while acting as the voice of the people. She serves as a buffer between the people and their leader. It is said that a wise Chief or King listens to Makhadzi’s counsel and that ignoring Makhadzi is done at that leader’s peril. We have since adopted the Makhadzi as the symbol of the Public Protector.” One could conclude from this that governance in South Africa today would be unthinkable without a Public Protector, just as traditional rule in Venda would be unthinkable without the *makhadzi*.

Vho-Makaulule believes that despite the erosion of culture and the role of *makhadzi*, women have self-determination. She believes that women in South Africa have a platform on which to raise their voices and trusts that, as South Africa has been liberated from colonisation and apartheid, women now have a space. Women’s empowerment, in her estimation, is related to freeing oneself from the sociopolitical factors that have constrained women. The *makhadzi* who are in Vho-Makaulule’s organisation, Dzomo la Mupo, are dedicated to revitalising their eco-cultural knowledge and clan roles to stabilise the community. There is a powerful recognition here that exogenous influences throughout South Africa’s history have contributed to the subversion of their roles as women and *makhadzi*, thus weakening their communities (Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021). *Makhadzi* traditionally fulfilled the role of centring the community through a connection with *mupo* (Barnwell et al 2021).

Mupo, according to many *makhadzi*, gives everybody a role and function in society – women, men and children. To restore order in the community would be to return to those roles. The undermining of the role of *makhadzi* is inescapably connected to the destruction of

sacred sites, biocultural diversity and Vhavenda communities' way of life. Wanzala (1998) framed a conceptual approach in terms of which women's access to resources and their development needs can be understood as being controlled by an influx of societal powers which she calls a "multidimensional conceptualization" of power. Her radical analysis considers patriarchy and a hierarchical social relation based on class, race and religion, and does not posit that patriarchy and social hierarchies are due to colonialism exclusively. She asserts that some of these structures resulted from precolonial African societies. McFadden (2001) likewise recognises the historical forces that shape present-day neocolonialism and globalisation in reinforcing a contemporary imperialist world order, which has especially challenged the rights and citizenship of South African women. For example, the reinstitution of traditional courts and the assemblage of local, national and multinational actors who appropriate imperialist authority and gender ideologies now unify men of different colours and classes to continue to control black South African women in a "colourblind global patriarchy" in the post-apartheid era (McFadden 2001).

Although colonialism did alter gender relations in Africa, there is a debate about how prevalent patriarchy was in precolonial societies. African patriarchy does manifest in contemporary African social affairs and gender relations and, in effect, goes hand in hand with other global forms of patriarchy in a neocolonial context. Consequently, in many African countries, women find themselves vulnerable to both local and global economies that offer them little support for land tenure or economic security (Boko 2005; Tsikata & Kerr 2000), which explains how local and global systems of patriarchy disadvantage women and privilege men (Boko 2005; Tsikata & Kerr 2000).

African gender studies and patriarchy

To understand global systems of patriarchy, it is important to take a step back to look at what patriarchy means through an African gender studies lens, particularly in the precolonial, colonial and neocolonial eras in Africa. African gender studies contest narrow epistemologies that stem from androcentric and Eurocentric research and narrow

discussions in the field by critically examining constructions of gender throughout the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial eras. This gives insight into how the role of the *makhadzi* has been diminished along with women's roles in traditional leadership structures in Venda. The field of African gender studies analyses gender flexibility, which is distinguished from Western gender conceptions, thereby challenging universal gender norms, explaining differential power (McFadden 2001, McFadden 2009, McFadden 2011) and patriarchy, dispelling normative whiteness and deconstructing historically racist ideology. Furthermore, African feminism uses intersectional research paradigms – identified as a framework – to interpret the social dimensions and structural components of repression as interlocking systems. Therefore, African feminist theoretical frameworks draw on past lineages to clarify the multiple forms of oppression African women continue to face due to race, gender, colonialism and neocolonialism, with a view to offering solutions in support of African women's empowerment and transformation in Africa.

African gender scholars (Oyewumi 1997; Kopytoff 2005; Amadiume 1987; Achebe 2011; Osborn 2011) challenge universal notions of womanhood and constructions of gender that feature prominently in Western gender discourse. These scholars question concepts and approaches in gender studies steeped in Western experiences, asserting that because gender is a socio-cultural concept and women's and gender studies' origination in the Western academy cannot be applied to an African context. Oyewumi (1997) argues that because Western expressions of feminism circulate in the domestic sphere, gender studies revolve around the nuclear family construct. This is regarded as an imposed normative framing of women's issues that fails to answer the necessary questions for gender research in Africa exclusively. African gender theorists and African feminists (Oyewumi 2005; Amadiume 1987) reason that normative whiteness, the nuclear family construct and strict gender norms are prominent aspects of feminist theorising. Therefore, they alternatively present models of non-gendered African cultures and family structures as research paradigms.

Amadiume's (1987) and Achebe's (2011) research on constructions of gender in pre-colonial Nigerian societies, for example, deconstruct Western gender research that adheres to rigid gender conceptions and hierarchies and the inseparability of sex and gender. They have paid special attention to areas of gender flexibility in culture, language/etymology, divisions of labour, domestic and family hierarchies, religion and African political systems that directly contrast with the strict gender roles of the West and the resultant social constructions of gender and power that portray African women as a monolithic "oppressed" group under the thumb of African patriarchy. Amadiume's (1987) sociocultural analysis of gender ideology in pre-colonial (pre-1900) Nnobi society in Igboland, now South-eastern Nigeria, for example, reveals great gender flexibility in culture and language. Her research asserts that realms of power were not masculine or feminine in precolonial Nnobi society. Flexible gender systems were represented by male roles that were open for women through such practices as *nhanye*, "male daughters", and *igba ohu*, "female husbands" – daughters who were "male" in ritual and political matters, and female husbands who aided families in different matters and assisted wives. There was no sexual role to these identities, and therefore no gender confusion about these positions within a family.

Achebe's (2011) research on the historical figure Ahebi Ugbabe in colonial Nigeria, who came to be known as a female king, is another noteworthy example in the same time period of gender flexibility in African societies in Nigeria. Ahebi Ugbabe serves as another model of how gender is a sociocultural and historical construct and why gender in Africa cannot be understood through Western theoretical frameworks alone. Like Amadiume, Achebe (2011) contends that in precolonial Igbo societies, sex and gender did not coincide, as seen with the gendered performances of the male daughters and female husbands, or in her analysis of Ahebi Ugbabe's gendered performance as headman, warrant chief and, eventually, king of Enugu-Ezike, which is situated in the northernmost tip of the present-day Enugu state (Achebe 2011; Amadiume 1987). Historically, Ugbabe exhibited a range of female masculinities and married many women. Her story models

gender malleability in the practice of woman-to-woman marriage, which was a distinction of wealth and status, not of homosexuality (Achebe 2011; Amadiume 1987). It was the colonial conquest by the British after 1900 that altered these flexible gender roles over time (Oyewumi 2000; Amadiume 1987), bearing testimony to the modification of gender in European colonies, and the construction and imposition of colonial gender ideologies. Amadiume's and Achebe's research supports suppositions that gender flexibility was prevalent in Vhavenda/Vhongwaniwapo culture, underscoring the role of the *makhadzi*, who rules with the chief (Matshidze 2013; Buijs 2002a).

Western thought embodied many sex and class disparities that were then foisted onto African men and women in the colonies through fixed gender ideologies that originated in the European metropolises; a European woman was always female, regardless of her social achievement or status (Amadiume 1987). This difference represents many challenges concerning how gender should be studied in Africa. Consequently, it is problematic when African societies and political systems are likened to the West in academic research. Ignoring these distinctions conceals relevant information necessary to study how gender was ultimately constructed and perceived, for example, in South Africa's apartheid homelands, and how these philosophies have permeated present-day political systems.

Analyses of contemporary social and economic conditions in Africa are also vulnerable to an imposed normative framing positioned within Western gender studies and NGO initiatives. Dominant Western epistemologies, in this sense, are regarded by many as harmful to African women (Taiwo 2004; Kopytoff 2005; Haysom 2001). It is argued that Western feminists concentrate on development, the division of labour, and class in ways that do not fit the complex and pluralistic needs of African societies.

In examining the idea of differential power, many African gender scholars (Lewis 2001, McFadden 2001; 2009; 2011) feel hindered by scholarship that focuses asymmetrically on the politics of difference between the West and Africa since, in their view, it pardons African

patriarchy or romanticises the notion that patriarchy did not exist in precolonial Africa.

Traditional leadership and land in Venda

Traditional leadership in Venda once comprised male and female authority, as evidenced by the roles of the chief and the *makhadzi*, who governed in tandem (Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021). Whether Vhavenda society was matriarchal or patriarchal is not the question. Amadiume (1987) suggests that “patriarchal” and “matriarchal” are not appropriate terms to describe precolonial African societies if deciphered through a Western model of power, specifically in relation to influential decision-making exclusively exerted in public and state forums. She argues that women exercised power in both public and domestic settings, which impacted state-making in different ways. Women in pre-colonial Africa accessed power through gender flexibility, which is also true for Vhongwaniwapo culture. Traditionally, a chief could not rule without a *makhadzi*. Today, however, chiefs are said to be controlled by external forces in a South African democracy that does not recognise the function of women within the role of the *makhadzi* (Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021). Furthermore, traditional leadership as it intersects with present-day land politics prevents women and *makhadzi* from enjoying the agrarian privileges they once had. The entire system of traditional leadership was both assailed and defended within the ruling African National Congress (ANC) after 1994, but the “ANC could not dismiss the role of chiefs as peripheral in the new South Africa, because traditional houses still commanded respect in their communities and chiefs were still influential over their subjects” (Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021). Mulaudzi and Kriel (2021) further observe that “the male-dominated discourse on traditional leadership, and its stake in the politics of post-apartheid South Africa, downplays the cultural history of women’s established role in rulership since pre-colonial days”.

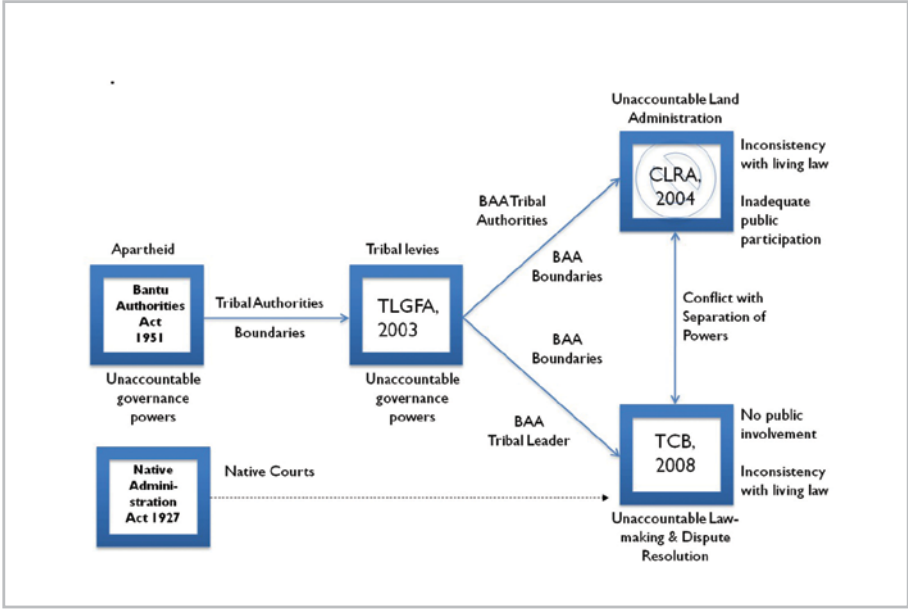
In South Africa, customary law eclipses gender equality despite constitutional protection, hence women are marginalised in land reform. Akinola (2018) states: “In Africa, the bulk of the land (about 75%), as an economic asset, is under customary tenure, administered

by norms, historical practices and unwritten law based on tradition and cultural affiliation" Therefore, the chiefs hold more power than women in the land administration process. The purported aims of land reform, such as the redistribution of wealth and the closing of the gender gap, are consequently not being achieved (Akinola 2018). As a result, livelihoods are threatened, conservation efforts are undermined and food insecurity festers (www.landesa.org). In Venda, this further means that *makhadzi* ecocultural practices are compromised.

In the "Report on the high-level public inquiry on the impact of rural land use and ownership patterns on human rights", the South African Human Rights Commission (2019) states: "Women make up the majority of the rural population and labour force on commercial farms, yet they are deprived of land ownership. Women who benefit from land reform projects are in most cases excluded from decision-making processes on issues regarding land use. Women constitute only 23% of land beneficiaries in South Africa, despite progressive laws and policies in place." The Women's Charter for Accelerated Development, adopted by the South African Parliament in 2021, sets out several recommended priority actions, including, among other things, that cultural traditions that disempower women's access to and security of tenure on land must be urgently addressed; the government shall ensure that women subsistence and small-scale farmers receive adequate support; women shall be enabled to play a greater and a cooperative role in food security, both in rural and urban agriculture; and proactive steps shall be taken to ensure that women participate in land reform projects, pre- and post-settlement. How much progress has been made with these recommendations is a question for debate.

Presently, the land disputes that affect the Vhongwaniwapo in Venda are attributed to the manipulation of chiefs by companies and the government. As mentioned, the chiefs, who are largely Masingo, are perceived to dominate the indigenous Vhongwaniwapo because they have more political power (Tshiguvho 2008). Once companies like coal mining or other corporate entities that need land come to South Africa, the last hurdles they encounter are said to be the chiefs. The *makhadzi* interviewed contend that the chiefs are influenced by gifts and other compensation. In some cases, corporations take the chiefs to a hotel and

offer them cars, enticing them to sign contracts. Therefore, the public participation meetings regarding various development projects are, at times, disregarded. One such case relates to the *Final environmental impact assessment report of the proposed Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone located within the Vhembe District Municipality [Revision 03] of September 2021*, specifically objections to the report (Centre for Environmental Rights 2021). The debacle concerning this project – which includes coal mining – shows how not only the chiefs but also the provincial government and its agencies have ignored communities and their rights, as well as environmental impacts, and by implication also the *makhadzi*. In a letter dated 3 November 2021 addressed to the relevant authorities, the Centre for Environmental Rights, on behalf of its clients, groundWork, Earthlife Africa and the Mining and Environmental Justice Community Network of South Africa, argues that the entire environmental impact assessment (EIA) process was unlawful and its approval would be a “further indication of possible bias, irrational decision-making and procedural irregularities which have marred the entire EIA process”. The Centre for Environmental Rights also points to alleged serious flaws in the public participation process, threats and intimidation of those opposed to the project, and differences between landowners, developers and community members. Those objecting to the economic zone project have also pointed out the serious impacts it would have on the region’s water supply and biodiversity. The *Daily Maverick* (Karim 2023) reports that the “major portion of the project is slated for an energy and metallurgical hub. Included in the proposals are a coal-washing plant capable of processing 20 million tonnes a year, a dedicated coal power station of at least 1,320MW, a coking coal plant, a ferrochrome plant, a ferromanganese plant, a stainless steel plant, a lime plant and a titanium dioxide plant”. The report continues: “By backing the development, the provincial government has chosen to disregard people who desperately need a limited resource. It has prioritised a dirty, thirsty, capital-intensive industrial sector over the long-term sustainability of the region. These rural communities were already vulnerable to extremely high [demands] for the limited water supply, mainly due to commercial agriculture and mining, even before the SEZ entered the picture.” The government and developers forged



The legislative links between the colonial, apartheid and democratic eras

Source: Land and Accountability Research Centre (LARC)

ahead with the project despite serious opposition, but in January 2023 the environmental authorisation was challenged in the Polokwane High Court by the Herd Nature Reserve, Living Limpopo and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies. As this example shows, community stakeholders are often ignored or singularly dependent on the will of traditional leadership and the government.

Ironically, while some chiefs use tradition and custom to secure land in the postcolonial and post-apartheid era, it is the *makhadzi* of DLM who organise to retain authentic traditions to protect land. Additionally, the chiefs' power is increasingly dependent on capitalism. It is clear that the power differentials of the missionary, colonial and apartheid eras have directly influenced political might today. Although colonialism did not affect Venda in the same way as it did the rest of South Africa – with Venda outmanoeuvring European antagonism until 1898 – it is important to examine the impact of colonialism and apartheid on traditional leadership in the former homelands and the resultant effect on land use, women's land rights and the role of *makhadzi* today (www.customcontested.co.za; Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021).

Traditional leadership in Venda today has largely been shaped by interethnic conflict, colonial and missionary influences, and apartheid. These influences are seen in the present-day political dynamics of Venda. The legislative associations that influence chiefs and traditional leadership today show the colonial and apartheid-era influences. In an article titled “South Africa has a new traditional courts bill. But it doesn’t protect indigenous practices”, Anthony Diala (2022), the Director of the Centre for Legal Integration in Africa at the University of the Western Cape, argues that the state is a “colonial clone” since it retained colonial socioeconomic systems and imposes European culture on Africans. “This is evident, once again, in the new Bill. Its judicial procedure gives little room for indigenous laws to thrive. Every significant aspect of the Bill is subjected to ‘constitutional values’”, he states (Diala 2022).

In the postcolonial and post-apartheid era, women’s land rights are controlled within current land administration practice. Citizens and land rights advocates condemn traditional leadership and court systems for being undemocratic since such leadership edifices disproportionately benefit men. Colonial and apartheid era practices established in the homelands remain in current legislation and shape land management and traditional leadership, significantly affecting women in the former homelands in rural areas (www.customcontested.co.za). Current regulations, such as the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act (2003) and its amendments in 2019, the Communal Land Rights Act (2004), the Traditional Courts Bill 2008/2022, the National House of Traditional Leaders Act (2009) and other laws have given customary leadership unlimited authority over land decisions, including the power to sanction national and multinational development projects and the destruction of sacred lands (www.customcontested.co.za). Because the law favours men, these Land Acts have further alienated women within the traditional court system or village legislatures (Claassens & Cousins 2008; Diala 2022).

Key legislation demonstrates why *makhadzi* have been disenfranchised. For example, the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 41 of 2003 (TLGFA), amended in 2019, bolsters colonial and apartheid era influence through legal means that

provide expansive and semi-autonomous control over residents in the homelands (Claassens & Cousins 2008). The ostensible aim of the TLGFA is to incorporate customary leadership in the post-apartheid democracy. However, it overlooks gender-based discrimination and the potential leadership roles of women. The TLGFA, for example, omits the role of the *makhadzi*, who was once a central part of Venda leadership, which traditionally comprised the chief, the *makhadzi* and the *khotsimunene* (chief's brother or paternal uncle). This is a conspicuous oversight. Matshidze (2013) remarks that there are some accounts that, in certain situations, the *makhadzi* played a greater role than some men and “once enjoyed equal privilege with her male counterparts ... even above the role of the *khotsimunene*.” Matshidze adds: “This is also suggested by Stayt (1931:196) when he writes that ‘all vital matters connected to the state must be referred to her [the *makhadzi*]’ (Matshidze 2013).

Makhadzi have been excluded from modern leadership, where they once played an essential role in the Vhongwaniwapo/Vhavenda communities (Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021). In explaining how important *makhadzi* are in communities, Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mphatheleni. Personal interview 2023) notes:

A chief cannot be a chief without a *makhadzi*. [If] you could be there last week – the king, all the chiefs of Venda were there – we were installing another head chief; but including the king himself, there was a moment when he said, It's not for me. This *makhadzi* is the responsible [sic]. And everybody, government people, just sit down and let *makhadzi* to play a role.

Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mphatheleni. Personal interview 2023), in describing the importance of a *makhadzi*, says that her mouth is important because she says important words and her knees are important because she kneels to say prayers for the family and the people. Other *makhadzi* interviewed say that a *makhadzi* is important for the burial of the dead and the healing of the sick.

Makhadzi were undeniably fundamental to all community life from birth to death and were once quite powerful entities in chiefs' leadership (Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021). The role of *makhadzi* is a critical vehicle to convey ancestral wisdom. *Makhadzi* are connected to the

sacred, or as one *makhadzi* communicated to me: “There is no sacred site without *makhadzi*.” In addition, as Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mphatheleni. Personal interview 2023) notes: “A chief cannot be a chief without a *makhadzi*.” *Makhadzi* also played a fundamental role in Vhongwaniwapo society by serving as conduits of sacred site rituals and supervising over traditions deeply interwoven with spirituality and community life, traditional healing and eco-cultural wisdom (Barnwell et al 2021; Sinthumule 2022; Matshidze 2013; Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021). Therefore, the role of *makhadzi* was once a strong aspect of Venda society and its leadership structure. However, this once key role within the authentic traditional governing structure of Venda is not officially reflected in present-day statutes (Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021). For some *makhadzi* – due to present-day legislation – democracy is not equated with freedom, even in the post-apartheid era.

The legislative connections between colonialism, apartheid and the democratic era have greatly impacted traditional leadership and the role of *makhadzi* (Mulaudzi & Kriel 2021). Although apartheid has a degrading and violent history, many *makhadzi* believe that democracy in South Africa has further weakened their role because of the partiality shown to traditional male leaders and the entrenchment of colonial and apartheid-era legal structures. It is clear that *makhadzi* perceive democracy as an interfering component that unsettles culture and home life, especially considering that they traditionally arbitrated disputes, negotiated marriages, deliberated on the placement of new chiefs and, in general, had great influence in the clan, family, home and society. Matshidze’s (2013) *makhadzi* informants further validate that the traditional leadership legislation in the post-apartheid era has undercut *makhadzi* authority – one informant states: “... [T]he government has stripped us of all powers. Firstly, it was the Traditional Leaders Act, the *makhadzi* were not written anywhere but we are the custodians of traditional leadership. We are in possession of the sacred artefacts. Now President Jacob Zuma has come up with the *Traditional Court Bill*”¹ (Zuma was South Africa’s president from 2009 until 2018).

1 The Traditional Courts Bill was overturned in 2014 and was reintroduced in Parliament in 2016.

These *makhadzi* therefore believe that the former president and the democratic structures robbed them of their role within the community.

Globalisation and gender-based discrimination

Based on research and interviews it is evident that various development projects and extractive industries in Venda, which threaten land and sacred natural sites, are driven by an outgrowth of globalisation that systematically excludes women and *makhadzi*. This, again, is verified by Land Acts and traditional governance legislation traversing the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid eras that have historically deprived women in the land administration process. A succession of laws, namely, the Native Administration's Act of 1927, the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2003, the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004, the Traditional Courts Bill of 2008/2022 and the National House of Traditional Leaders Act of 2009 disparaged South Africa's democratic structures. The Commission for Gender Equality has carried out numerous investigations regarding these laws, focusing on governmental statutes that conflict with gender protection as outlined in the country's Constitution. The development of these laws as they are today suppresses public involvement and unbiased adjudication, and there is a constant struggle with respect to the separation of powers (www.customcontested.co.za).

Many land activists and residents are concerned about expansive land claims and the extension of authority to the traditional local leadership in the former apartheid homelands. This disempowers women due to weak legal protection, cases of patrilineal inheritance, low percentages of female political power, female exclusion from select traditional courts, restricted access to land, vulnerable housing tenure, a lack of public participation in proposed development plans, poor livelihoods and a lack of women's access in shaping customary law (www.customcontested.co.za).

Globalisation and gender-based discrimination are deep-rooted in colonial and apartheid gender ideologies. Frenkel (2008) mentions the effect of colonialism on gender roles in Africa, stating: "In most histories

of colonial conquest, the colonising power refused to negotiate with women or acknowledge women as leaders in a public context. The collusion between colonial powers and Indigenous male leaders led to female exclusion from higher structures of power" This power dynamic was replicated across the continent and had a great impact on women's contributions to state-making. It explains how and why the relationship between chiefs and *makhadzi*, as well as the prominence of *makhadzi* in clans and communities, changed over time.

Globalisation has an impact on the rights and citizenship of women in rural areas (McFadden 2001). In her doctoral dissertation, Pfarelo Matshidze (2013) confirms the powers that *makhadzi* continue to have in society, adding that they have a place in the new democratic society but it is not well recognised by the South African Constitution (Mulaudzi & Kriel, 2021) speaks to the concept of a colourblind global patriarchy that is the result of men of different races internationally coming together to make decisions through companies and global enterprise, which has a detrimental impact on women (Chimhangwa 2020). The collusion of powers, both locally and globally, that stifles women's rights can be seen in Venda today. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mphatheleni. Personal interview 2023) believes that this type of gender stratification and power over women was not a cultural norm among the Vhongwaniwapo, remarking:

When I was at university, we were taught in sociology about this thing of hegemony, and African women were undermined when this new governing system came ... culture was respecting women but if you talk about the Venda culture or African culture you see that women were undermined; women were dominated by the men. We Venda people we do not have that. The companies continue with this hegemony that men are superior to women, and our chiefs also, but most of them go with women in the elder way. This foreign role, outside forces, they undermine culture and if you undermine culture, you undermine women's role, because culture is held in the hands of women.

Vho-Makaulule firmly believes, as do many other *makhadzi*, that women are not discriminated against in the Vhongwaniwapo culture. She believes that it is outside forces like companies that make decisions that disparage women.

Various scholars (e.g., Osorio & Galina 2018; Ananda, Moseti & Mugehera 2020) point out that gender inequality is a major factor in the determination of women's meaningful contribution to land governance. This, they point out, is despite calls in the African Union for governments to promote women's participation in land administration structures, as well as commitments under the Maputo Protocol for states to ensure increased and effective representation and participation of women at all levels of decision-making. African gender scholars have recognised the abuse and relegation of African women in development models from colonialism to the present day (Chimhangwa 2020). In the former apartheid homelands, specifically Venda, this systematic marginalisation is rooted in colonial and apartheid gender notions expressed in the country's Land Acts, which are heavily influenced by ongoing discriminatory frameworks. An investigation of South African land legislation reveals clear components that discriminate against women not only through a convergence of unequal land policies but also in how the laws function within traditional leadership structures and courts (www.customcontested.co.za; www.landesa.org). The laws as they exist today allow local, regional and national politicians to arrange development schemes that leave the former homelands and rural areas intensely vulnerable to multinational companies such as commercial farming businesses and extractive industries that seek the nation's high deposits of fossil fuels and mineral wealth.

In the former apartheid homeland of Venda, in the Vhembe District Municipality, sacred natural sites have been vulnerable throughout Vhongwaniwapo history. European encounters, missionaries and interethnic conflict have created tension regarding land use through South Africa's colonial, apartheid and democratic eras. The indigenous Vhongwaniwapo have been dominated by these various factions of power. Political dynamics have reshaped the customary leadership in the region (Matshidze 2013). Large-scale agriculture, mining and commercial plantations around the Thathe Forest, Lake Fundudzi and the Phiphidi Waterfall are not only destroying these places but also impoverishing indigenous peoples, which is not sustainable from the perspective of heritage conservation, survival and the well-being of indigenous communities (Pikirayi & Magoma 2021).

The *makhadzi* or paternal aunt in Vhavenda culture, who was once crucially integrated into the hierarchy of leadership in both domestic and royal settings, has been largely disenfranchised. This is significant because the *makhadzi* was of great importance to sacred natural sites since she was the one who communed with ancestors, had great ecocultural knowledge and was integral to the inner workings and well-being of the clan, the family and the entire community (Sinthumule 2022). The disenfranchisement of *makhadzi* is indicative of a larger systematic exclusion of women from the land administration process, customary leadership and citizenship rights.

The land laws in South Africa today are biased in favour of men, particularly because they uphold colonial and apartheid frameworks. Women's citizenship rights have been diminished due to weak legal representation, dominant systems of patrilineal inheritance, low percentages of female political influence, female exclusion from select traditional courts, tenuous access to land, housing insecurity and poor livelihoods. These factors are only aggravated in this globalised era (Chimhangwa 2020).

Globalisation also has a great impact on women's citizenship rights. International corporations and their current development paradigms impair women's rights issues through poorly conducted public participation meetings, unsustainable development practices and insufficient career opportunities for women. Additionally, in this globalised era, men of varying ethnicities come together in ways that create a global patriarchy. Inequitable structures and multinational development schemes have impacted the role of *makhadzi* uniquely, given their traditional position as custodians of sacred natural sites and their role of overseeing customs that are integral to ecological systems (Sinthumule 2022). Despite these hurdles, Vho-Makaulule continues to thrive as a leader in her community to empower women and amplify the voices of elders and all people in her community.



chapter four

Restoring the ecocultural role of *makhadzi*

“To all women around the world, we must remember our role as mothers and healers. Today we need to heal our Earth from all challenges we are facing because of climate change, biodiversity extinctions, water shortages We women are natural leaders; our leadership is a sacred role.”
– Vho-Mphatheleni Makaulule

Role of the *makhadzi*

The Vhongwaniwapo people emphasise that “*makhadzi*” is more than a title or name; it is an ancestral role that emerges in several ways. In a universal sense, every woman is recognised and respected for her connection to the ancestors. Yet there are *makhadzi* who are linked with sacred site rituals and the preservation of spiritual customs to sustain order in their clans and distinct *makhadzi* who are installed with chiefs and assist with royal and traditional governance (APE UK 2023, Buijs 2002a; Matshidze 2013). Traditionally, the *makhadzi* who are associated with traditional governance also learn from and communicate with the *makhadzi* of sacred sites. Together, these *makhadzi* traditionally worked in tandem with one another for the good of their clans.

Among the ethnic groups in the province of Limpopo, the presence of female power and spirituality can also be witnessed among the Balobedu people. Historians and gender scholars (Lestrade 1930; Schlosser

2002) have examined the matrilineal leadership of two spirit mediums, Tshisinavhute of Mianzwi, an Mbedzi ruler among a succession of female leaders/mediums since the 18th century, and the Lovedu Rain Queen, Modjadji, both of whom held power through their rainmaking gifts (Lestrade 1930; Schlosser 2002). Lastly, as described at length, among the Vhongwaniwapo, *makhadzi* historically played a critical role in the family and the royal leadership within customary governance. Following contact with white settler colonialists and missionaries, these constructions of gender and women's power receded.

Makhadzi in both the imperial family and among the commoners play a crucial role in families and oversee important customs in relation to families' sacred objects, ecocultural knowledge and communing with the ancestors. In Venda, spirituality and the environment are indivisible; it is a way of life drawn from a deep lineage of ancestral wisdom passed on orally from generation to generation. It is a deeply matriarchal tradition in which the *makhadzi* are the mothers and spiritual leaders of the community, the defenders of the sacred sites and the guiding hand of the Vhavenda culture. (Naidoo 2021). The *makhadzi* in the royal family has state responsibilities that interconnect with the chief and officiates during communal rituals such as *u phasa* (libation) and *thevhula* (thanksgiving after the harvest) (Matshidze 2013). Overall, *makhadzi* traditionally arbitrated disputes, negotiated marriages, deliberated on the placement of new chiefs and, in general, had great influence in the clan, family, home and society (Matshidze 2013).

In addition to the roles mentioned, *makhadzi* have maintained domestic responsibilities and have been associated with sacred site culture and possess ecological and cultural knowledge about Indigenous agriculture, seed selection and conservation practices in sacred forests for centuries. Their customary roles and tasks support immense ecocultural wisdom and understanding of harvesting and traditional farming. For instance, *mitanga* and *tshikovha* involve reaping crops in strategic areas away from the wetlands, not in areas that absorb the water. Another illustration is the safeguarding of the wetlands when menopausal *makhadzi* are selected to protect springs and water – accordingly collaborating with the community of elders when debris and branches need removal – after which an unsoiled,

unused calabash bowl is the only vessel clean enough to collect water from the springs. Apart from these many Indigenous agricultural skills, *makhadzi* also observe the scary myths and taboos used to maintain a congruous balance in human-environment interactions.

In a recent study, “Gender and sacred natural sites: the role of women in sacred sites protection and management in Vhembe region, Limpopo Province of South Africa” (Sinthumule 2022), it was shown that although women are still marginalised in many sectors of society, the protection and survival of sacred natural sites in the study area depend on women. Sinthumule (2022) found that the participation of women in sacred rituals performed in sacred natural sites has a beneficial impact on conservation issues. The gender-specific restrictions in other areas that are imposed on women regarding entry and involvement in the management of sacred natural sites should be lifted because evidence from this study shows that it is beneficial to involve women in sacred forest conservation and management.

Inherited customs and practices have moulded *makhadzi* understanding of environmental sustainability, ecosystems and food systems for healthy living. Observing the traditional ecological calendar, *makhadzi* use the traditional methods of gathering food. “The traditional ecological seasons in the Luvenda language include *Nyendavhusiku*, *Phando*, *Luhuhi*, *Thafamuhwe*, *Lambamai*, *Shundunthule*, *Fulwi*, *Fulwana*, *Thangule*, *Khubvumedzi*, *Tshimedzi* and *Lara*” (Makaulule 2022).

It is important to choose and pack a variety of seeds to create well-balanced meals made up of proteins and organic wild fruits and vegetables (Makaulule 2022). Additionally, various plants are harvested based on different climates and seasons. Although finger millet is a revered plant used for significant observances, it is also wholesome. Drawn from this understanding, *makhadzi* believe in planting a mixture of crops for a diverse harvest. According to the women of Dzomo la Mupo (DLM), assorted crops planted with the aid of local agricultural techniques, or within an agroecological model, benefit the soil and the yield, in contrast with genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or chemical pesticides used in monocrop farming and commercial agriculture. This access to indigenous and culturally appropriate food

is what *makhadzi* refer to today as food and seed sovereignty, which is essential for nourishment and culturally relevant and appropriate food systems. However, research shows that indigenous peoples' food systems contain extensive and sophisticated knowledge that is often undocumented and underutilised in contemporary society, which has increasingly poor nutrition and a loss of food biodiversity (Kuhnlein & Chotiboriboon 2022).

Makhadzi are custodians of ecocultural knowledge and have an understanding of seasonal rotations. They adhere to a Vhongwaniwapo ecological calendar for planting, harvesting, seed selection and storage. Indigenous seeds, along with 120 types of native vegetables, are susceptible to monocrop farming. These indigenous crops are under threat from commercial farms, forest industries and other businesses that depend on unnatural fertilisers that damage the earth. Therefore, *makhadzi* work to preserve the sacred plant *mufhoho*, or finger millet, to protect their rituals, food and seed security, and food sovereignty. As is the case in Venda, mineral extraction areas represent an environmental, social and food sovereignty challenge for several countries, and indigenous peoples and local communities are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of mining activities, especially those that affect their lands and waters (Blanco et al 2023). It has also been shown that indigenous and traditional food crops have multiple uses within society and have an important role to play in the attempt to diversify food in order to enhance food and nutrition security, but research suggests that the benefits and value of indigenous foods in the South African and African context have not been fully understood and synthesised. Therefore, their potential value to the African food system could be enhanced if their benefits were explored more comprehensively (Akinola et al 2020).

***Makhadzi* of Dzomo la Mupo**

Makhadzi of the community-based organisation, Dzomo la Mupo (DLM), are concerned about a number of environmental threats in Venda, including deforestation (evidenced by the depletion of indigenous forests and sacred groves), commercial and monocrop



A makhadzi pointing to the ecological calendar.

farming, extractive industries, the pollution of wetlands, seed security and food sovereignty. Rooted in their role as *makhadzi* is an environmental ethic that situates their Indigenous knowledge skills and ecocultural practices within contemporary conservation efforts. The members of DLM actively work to revive their eco-cultural wisdom through the restoration of Indigenous agricultural practices, ecological governance and biocultural diversity preservation. DLM addresses spoiled ecosystems by intentionally focusing on strategies to maintain indigenous forests, tributaries, wetlands and sacred natural sites/woodlands. The members work to secure food security by protecting indigenous local seeds, cultivating tree nurseries and reviving traditional agricultural knowledge. It is argued (Oliver, Deawuo & Rao 2022) that food sovereignty and agroecology, informed by feminist approaches, can provide important lessons for localisation since they prioritise local knowledge and decision-making and are based on social justice principles, while they also provide alternatives to the problematic concept of development, particularly the agro-industrial development model that contributes to environmental and health crises, corporate concentration, colonialism and inequality.

DLM endeavours to embolden women, empower *makhadzi* and increase community resilience to maintain food sovereignty. *Makhadzi* recognise that westernisation has impacted farming techniques and beliefs about Indigenous practices. *Makhadzi* define seed and food sovereignty as saving the seeds of their ancestors. When they reflect on the past, they acknowledge that their ancestors lived long, healthy lives because of the healthy food they ate. They believe that the Western ways of harvesting and preparing food have not been good for their bodies and, therefore, they want to return to the ancient ways. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mphatheleni. Personal interview 2023) observes: “When you see different seeds here after we harvest, we can mix different things here to produce one meal. Maize, peanuts, beans – and in that one meal we have mixed different seeds to create a healthy meal.” *Makhadzi* recognise that the Venda seeds take a longer time to grow. According to them, the Western way of harvesting crops has become preferable because the crop yield is faster and bigger due to chemical

fertilisers and GMOs. Nevertheless, they do not want to maintain the Western ways.

Furthermore, the understanding among *makhadzi* is that food sovereignty is defined as having access to nourishing and customary food, that is, food that is grown and prepared through indigenous means. *Makhadzi* consider their indigenous food and seeds to be more beneficial and healthful than those from the market. Similarly, they have observed that their ancestors did not have high blood pressure and diabetes the way people do in Venda today. Casual observation could link modern-day diseases with the growing presence of Western fast-food restaurants in the region. Returning to the ways of their ancestors is just another way that *makhadzi* members of DLM revive their cultural roles. Traditional foods serve as a symbol of heritage, trademark and culture, besides offering an important opportunity to diversify the food base (Akinola et al 2020). Traditional foods are fundamental to many cultural identities of diverse ethnic groups, and it is important to preserve diverse food practices, especially elements of food preparation and consumption since this knowledge can easily be lost over a few generations.

Makhadzi favour their indigenous seeds over non-native plants and vegetation because of their importance in rituals and the benefits they offer with respect to nutrition and food quality. Through Indigenous tree nurseries, such as the Tshidzivhe Tree Nursery and the Seed Project, *makhadzi* and DLM are recuperating seed varieties. The sacred *mufhoho* (finger millet) plant, in particular, is very important to maintain for Vhavenda culture and *makhadzi*. Mupo Foundation literature describes the plant's use for rituals (*mpambo*), as well as for pap (*vhuswa*) and the traditional drink, *mabundu*. *Mufhoho*, which is native to Africa, was the staple crop in Southern Africa before maize. However, as *makhadzi* describe it, plants that are faster and easier to grow are relied upon the most nowadays. Therefore, a reliance upon GMOs, chemicals and pesticides is the norm. There are many practical reasons to revive finger millet: restoring the cultivation of finger millet will promote the conservation of biodiversity and food security; finger millet seeds are resistant to insects and can be stored for up to ten years without decaying or losing value; and finger millet is not affected

by cross-fertilisation or serious diseases. Finger millet is one of the most nutritious cereals in the world. It is rich in minerals and calcium, with 5, 000 per cent more calcium and 350 per cent more iron than maize. The plant has protein and mineral components that are imperative for human health, whereas most cereals lack these components (Devi et al 2011).

DLM's community grassroots organising begins with women's empowerment by restoring confidence in *makhadzi* to resume their role within community ecological governance. "As the world grapples with a planetary crisis of both biodiversity loss and climate change, scientists and policymakers are racing to find viable solutions. Increasingly, they are recognizing that the traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples could well provide cost-effective nature-based solutions", according to Ervin (2022). This also applies to Western discourses about food (in)security and nutrition, which often focus on food access primarily through male-driven efforts, in other words, the gendered dimension is missing. Indigenous food systems cannot be fully understood without Indigenous women's world view, challenges and labour (Ferreira, Gaudet & Loukes 2021). Hence, the *makhadzi* of DLM rely on their cultural roles to understand the environmental crisis in the Vhembe District Municipality. In 2013 Vho-Makaulule received the Global Leadership Award through the International Indigenous Women's Forum, or Foro Internacional de Mujeres Indigenas (FIMI). In her acceptance speech, she explained how *makhadzi* of DLM have emerged as environmentalists:

To all women around the world, we must remember our role as mothers and healers. Today, we need to heal our Earth from all challenges we are facing through climate change, biodiversity extinctions, water shortages. We need to learn from our knowledgeable women, elder women, before they pass away. Venda people know that they cannot be chiefs or leaders without the leadership of the *makhadzi*, the women. We women are natural leaders; our leadership is a sacred role.

This speech structures *makhadzi* responsibilities as a call to all women and mothers to protect nature, not just in Venda, but worldwide. Vho-Makaulule sees her role as a *makhadzi* and mother as an incentive

for protecting life. *Makhadzi* members of DLM are energising their cultural roles as women and reasserting their authoritative knowledge about nature and the environment. Vho-Makaulule further stated: “We as women hold the responsibility for custodianship of life because the ancestors chose us to be *makhadzi*. *Makhadzi* is not just a name or title; it is a role – a spiritual role. We are the custodians of water, soil, seed and forests, and traditional medicine that come from indigenous trees ... we cannot stand back and watch life be destroyed.” Through her guidance, Vho-Makaulule is instilling confidence in the *makhadzi* of DLM to regain their leadership role of serving as advocates for their communities in the Vhembe District Municipality. In Vhongwaniwapo culture, *makhadzi* is a role that involves the whole community; consequently, women’s empowerment, in this context, is defined in conjunction with the community and its well-being. With this in mind, rebuilding *makhadzi* roles requires intergenerational dialogue and communication with women and men.

Ecocultural maps

One tool that the *makhadzi* of DLM uses is ecocultural maps. Ecocultural maps are diagrams that chart the environmental conditions of a territory in the past, present and future. Vho-Makaulule learnt this mapping technique from the organisation Gaia Amazonas when she went to the north-west Amazon in Columbia. Following that experience, Vho-Makaulule returned to Africa and, through the non-profit organisation African Biodiversity Network, shared the mapping process with communities in Venda, South Africa, as well as communities in Benin, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia. The *makhadzi* use modest materials to create the maps, including butcher paper and markers. The results are vibrant collections of images that depict the diminished indigenous forests and wetlands in Venda that need protection from a host of environmental threats. These maps are now used regularly by DLM and Venda communities in their efforts to build community resilience, to restore ecological governance and to draw on the knowledge of the *makhadzi*.



An ecocultural map of the Nzhelele River and its numerous tributaries

DLM members trained in territorial eco-cultural mapping and traditional eco-calendar composition hold mapping gatherings with many townships and schools. The process begins with community workshops where students and other residents are taught how to graph landscapes through drawings and sketches to characterise the evolution of land use. The maps, which are conceptualised by *makhadzi*, elders and students, function as an intergenerational tool to empower Venda communities. The elders lead this process by first constructing an ancestral map of the past to share information about the territory before environmental pollution and unsustainable development. By first constructing an ancestral map of the past, elders and *makhadzi* share their knowledge about how land was used in the past, as well as their memories of the historical conditions of the woods, rivers, territory and sacred lands. Young people learn from the elders and work with them to envision future land use. The construction of ecological calendars



An ecocultural map indicating development changes.

involves comparable instruction on traditional food and seed systems to teach communities about traditional agricultural practices.

The above map is an example of the eco-cultural maps that are used for DLM's activism. The map shows the various tributaries that surface from the Nzhelele River, a water-stressed area that many Vhongwaniwapo people settled in after they had been displaced during apartheid. Drought conditions and receding riverbanks in the area affect farmers and the hydration of cattle. Plans of the company MC Mining Limited (formerly Coal of Africa) to mine in this area are deeply distressing because of the large amounts of water needed for mining. This mining project is one of two coal-driven mega projects in the Limpopo North Water Management Area that can be described as water grabs in the context of inter-basin transfers. The Mokolo Crocodile West Augmentation Project (MCWAP) and the proposed Electro Metallurgical Special Economic Zone (EMSEZ) between Makhado

and Musina are mega projects, both of which involve power stations, entail or imply the expansion of coal mining, involve inter-basin water transfers, can be seen as water grabs and hold immense risks for other users, particularly the majority of residents of the Limpopo river catchment, whose water rights can be described as fragile, as well as for the environment (Munnik 2020). In this context, the mapping by DLM serves as an example of how ecocultural maps can be used as an educational tool for communities with a view to galvanising them to protest against extractive industries that threaten to encroach on their land and use their water.

Ecocultural mapping and eco-calendar construction are practical tools that complement hands-on fieldwork. For example, DLM provides environmental education on the value of trees and works with students to plant trees on their school grounds. DLM participants, skilled in eco-cultural mapping and traditional eco-calendar work, facilitate workshops with villages and schools. These maps also become applied tools when educators use them to teach students about nature through forest walks and earth science courses.

Ecocultural maps are also a fundamental aspect of the lived experiences of *makhadzi*. They exemplify how this group of women see themselves as ecologists, and the maps demonstrate how *makhadzi* are reclaiming their cultural roles since they are rooted in ecocultural and Indigenous knowledge. Moreover, the maps indicate *makhadzi* perceptions about land use in the region and denote what solutions they envision. The maps also show the role that *makhadzi* fulfil as environmentalists. For example, a *makhadzi* gave the following description of the above map: “This is a businessman who offers money for a development project while a woman, no longer wearing the [traditional] *nwenda*, stomps around the sacred forest in high heels – but here we come [pointing to the drawing of a car or kombi], *Vho-makhadzi*, to stop this destruction.” Her explanation of the map demonstrates *makhadzi* perceptions of Western influences and the desecration of land, culture and the environment, including sacred sites. In her statement, she positions *makhadzi* within their cultural roles and as ecologists. The maps are empowering tools that *makhadzi* utilise to reconstruct their place in Vhongwaniwapo society.



An ecocultural map indicating threats to sacred sites.

The *makhadzi* of DLM seek to educate the community about sustainable agricultural practices. Through continued capacity building and fundraising, the organisation envisages creating communitywide research teams that will document the elders' knowledge of traditional farming systems adapted within an agroecological framework. DLM's hope as an organisation is that it will one day be able to organise research teams that share this knowledge about permaculture, seed saving, mulching, composting and the use of grey water with household farmers across towns and villages. DLM specifically wishes to raise awareness about ecological knowledge among Vhavenda and Vhongwaniwapo citizens, household farmers and schools, as well as commercial farmers and government departments.

The work that the *makhadzi* have committed to far exceeds that of a community-based organisation. This work is a cultural and sacred pursuit. For Vho-Makaulule and the *makhadzi* of DLM, it is essential

to restore *mupo* (nature and creation), to revive Vhongwaniwapo indigenous practices and to return dignity to the institution of *makhadzi* after the vilification caused by interethnic conflict, colonialism, the work of missionaries and present-day Christian fundamentalism. DLM encourages Indigenous women's leadership roles by holding wilderness retreats – including separate wilderness retreats for men – and seasonal gatherings where the role of *makhadzi* as ecologists and community advocates is discussed. The retreats, through discourse and activities, help restore the confidence of *makhadzi* as conservationists. This work is also a community-wide endeavour in which women, men and children participate, demonstrating the Vhavenda/Vhongwaniwapo belief that, through *mupo*, women, men and children have distinctive roles in society. DLM also organises four seasonal meetings linked with the traditional ecological calendar to examine corresponding seed and food systems. One *makhadzi* made the following remarks about the work of DLM:

DLM is doing a lot because DLM has raised awareness all over – now we are hearing on the radio that people should protect *zwifho* (sacred sites), people should no longer cut down trees, people should protect *mupo* and the environment. I think DLM has done a big awareness because the radio is talking about protecting these things. People were destroying rivers, and now there is a big awareness.

DLM is planting trees, like you see these trees here. They are the trees from the nursery. DLM is reviving the indigenous seeds for food. We were using the chemical seeds and buying food from the shops only, but now, through DLM, we are able to plant things in our own homes. There are many things which DLM is doing in relation to seeds, in relation to food, in relation to the trees. DLM is doing a lot, it has revived the finger millet. Planting again the finger millet, DLM has restored back the role of *makhadzi*.

It is evident that the revival of *makhadzi* knowledge is beneficial for the whole community. Although reviving traditional agricultural methods is a generational effort, it is the ecocultural knowledge of *makhadzi* that is binding the community together and restoring the Indigenous knowledge that supports conservation and community resilience.





***Makhadzi* community activism**

Protesting against coal mining

Environmental degradation is interconnected with several factors, evident in the Vhembe District Municipality. According to the *makhadzi* of Dzomo la Mupo (DLM), one cannot describe deforestation in Venda without considering its interconnectedness with rainfall, soil erosion or sedimentation run-off. The cutting down of indigenous trees has an impact on vegetation biomass and riparian vegetation growing along rivers and can lead to receding riverbanks and stunted aquatic wildlife. Similarly, when discussing extractive activities to excavate fossil fuels, environmentalists would be remiss to ignore the chemical pollution of rivers and springs, exorbitant water use or the shock to human welfare. Fundamentally, any threat to one component of the environment – people, water, trees or soil – is a danger to them all due to the delicate balance and connectivity of ecosystems.

As self-identified ecologists, the *makhadzi* of DLM are acutely aware of the interdependent relationship between people and nature. Therefore, they organise environmentally comprehensive campaigns that address multiple environmental dangers. For example, DLM's campaign against the Makhado Coking Coal Project of MC Mining Limited (formerly Coal of Africa), first proposed in 2012, is a fight to protect human health and welfare and to preserve water for communities, livestock, household farmers and agricultural livelihoods. MC Mining Limited is one of several extractive companies that have submitted excavation proposals in Limpopo, such as the Tuli and Soutpansberg coalfields

and the Makhado Coal Processing Plant (MC Mining Limited 2022; www.londonstockexchange.com).

MC Mining Limited

MC Mining Limited (formerly Coal of Africa) has communicated its development timeline and goals primarily with the local and provincial male leadership, such as the King's Advisory Forum and the Makhado Chiefs Forum (MC Mining Limited 2022). The company projects production of 5,5 million tonnes of coal a year for domestic and export markets. (Ismail 2016) In addition to local tourism developments, MC Mining Limited represents an increased presence of multinational development companies with schemes for land in the Vhembe District Municipality and greater Venda region in Limpopo.

MC Mining Limited shareholders include ArcelorMittal Steel of South Africa (Lyal 2019), a subsidiary of the ArcelorMittal Steel group based in Luxembourg, which has ventures in 60 countries and is the largest steel company in the European Union. Though it is just one company, MC Mining Limited represents a larger network of multinational companies and strategic investors that rely on extraction and excavation in this Indigenous community. The company describes itself as “an emerging developer of high-quality coking and thermal coal assets, located primarily in the Limpopo province of South Africa” (MC Mining Limited 2024). It says the purchase of the Uitkomst Colliery in KwaZulu-Natal in 2017 “has shifted the company's focus from project development to operation” (MC Mining Limited 2024). The company's key projects include the Uitkomst Colliery (metallurgical coal), the Makhado Project (hard coking and thermal coal), the Vele Colliery (semi-soft and thermal coal) and the Greater Soutpansberg Projects – MbeuYashu (coking and thermal coal). Because DLM's members had observed the effects of other coal-mining projects in the region, they joined community members in protesting against MC Mining Limited's development proposal to protect their communities.

In a *City Press* article titled “Black gold versus blue water” by Yolandi Groenewald (2012), Johnathan Mudimeli, chairperson of the Mudimeli Royal Council, is quoted as follows: “There is a huge fight coming



Makhadzi Wetland focus group

Our community will be surrounded by a mine and no one is talking to us.” A delegation of local advocates, farmers and community members accompanied Mudimeli to the Department of Mineral Resources in Limpopo to contest the mining plans. The entire community was alarmed about the impact that this proposed mining project could have on water. Although there are people who are supportive of the project because of the prospect of jobs – with a projection of one-thousand jobs during the operational phase of the mine– mining is still a huge threat to water supplies in the region. In her article, Groenewald (2012) states that the project has initiated a water war. She describes a water workshop that was held the following day, noting that the “workshop [was] packed and the green shirts of Dzomo La Mupo ... [dominated] the room The group, made up mostly of women, is not popular with Coal of Africa” Groenewald (2012). The company’s chief executive at the time, John Wallington, even suggested legal action against the group if it continued to oppose the mine. In addition to protests

by *makhadzi* of DLM, the company met up against other obstacles, including a R9,2 million fine for environmental offences indicated by environmental management inspectors (EMIs), commonly referred to as the Green Scorpions, appointed under South Africa's National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) of 2008, and by farmers who acquired a court interdict to stop portions of work on the R4bn project in 2014 (Mantshantsha 2015).

Makhadzi of DLM have been vocal about their water concerns and distressed about where the company will siphon the vast amount of water needed for coal production. MC Mining Limited must traverse several phases of water plans. It must acquire a water licence to use groundwater, after which it must apply for a bulk water licence from the Department of Water Affairs to pipe in 4,6 million litres of water from the Nzhelele Dam. Lastly, it must buy water rights from regional farmers (Groenewald 2012). In anticipation of securing the necessary water licences, the company began proactively negotiating the purchase of water rights from farmers in the area, despite the suspension of an integrated water-use licence (IWUL) acquired in January 2015. The suspension followed an appeal to the Department of Water and Sanitation, filed by the Vhembe Mineral Resources Forum. This forum is comprised of concerned citizens and farmers of Limpopo. "The appeal automatically suspends the IWUL in terms of Section 148 (2) (b) of the South African National Water Act No 36 of 1998" (Ismail 2016). In addition, 350Africa, a Johannesburg-based environmental organisation, called for a climate change state of emergency and cautioned that the mining project will cause irreversible damage to the area, including the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The continued public relations strategy of MC Mining Limited is to emphasise the supposed environmental sustainability of the project and the socioeconomic transformation it will bring about in the region (MC Mining Limited 2022). Moreover, the company constantly guarantees residents that no water will be taken to the detriment of farmers without compensation. The implication of these reassurances is that if the communities in the area do suffer environmental harm,

recompense is an equitable solution for the company, despite threats to human or environmental well-being.

If internationally recognised world heritage sites such as Mapungubwe cannot ward off mining, what will happen to smaller communities in the region, as well as sacred natural sites? According to the Makhado Coking Coal Project fact sheet, the project is situated on five nearby farms. The company claims the Makhado Project affects seven communities in total, yet *makhadzi* believe that this is a modest estimation of the damage that the region will incur. The project threatens an already water-stressed area, local livelihoods and a network of sacred forests, including Thathe. Large-scale agriculture, mining and commercial plantations around the Thathe Forest, Lake Fundudzi and the Phiphidi Waterfall are not only destroying these places but also impoverishing indigenous peoples, which is not sustainable from the perspective of heritage conservation, survival and the well-being of indigenous communities (Pikirayi & Magoma 2021).

The *makhadzi* are particularly concerned about the Nzhelele River, which begins in Thathe and flows through many communities before feeding into the massive Limpopo River. Drinking water, land irrigation and livestock would all be impacted by the mining project. Vhembe, along with the rest of Limpopo, is already the driest region in South Africa, and *makhadzi* speculate that mining would destroy the Nzhelele, which is already lower than in previous years. The Nzhelele's riverbanks have already eroded, and its path and support have dissipated because of deforestation at its banksides. Deforestation in the region is largely caused by commercial farms, but it is also occurring because residents cut wood for cooking and the construction of dwellings and because fields planted near the banks of the river soak up water.

Consequently, *makhadzi* anticipate that this river will be further stressed, if not completely evaporated, by coal mining.

Makhadzi are disheartened by the Makhado Coking Coal Project. Their attempts to impart their eco-cultural knowledge to the company's representatives at the water workshop were in vain since their cries fell on deaf ears. In fact, John Wallington, the then chief executive of Coal of Africa, described DLM's protestations as "a circus" (Groenewald 2012).

Nevertheless, *makhadzi* continue to educate the community and to raise important questions that are not addressed in full by MC Mining Limited's press releases, company literature or public statements. For instance, DLM clarifies questions about the impact of mining on the connectivity of ecosystems and about water use for household farmers and the finite life of a mine.

The *makhadzi* members of DLM are trying to envisage what will remain of regional biodiversity when MC Mining Limited leaves and closes its mines. The women demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of ecosystem vulnerabilities, which contradict MC Mining Limited's public relations claims purporting sustainability. In a similar vein, according to the *Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone*



Residents collecting firewood in Vuwani

Designated Site environmental impact assessment report (Delta Built Environment Consultants 2021), which deals with the same area as that of the coking coal project, negative impacts on the environment of the proposed Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone (MMSEZ) and its surrounds can be expected during the construction and operational phase of the project, and cumulatively there is a very high risk that it will contribute to South Africa's climate change impact. Even if mitigating measures are applied, the loss of biodiversity on the site, which falls within the Vhembe Biosphere Reserve, and the significance of that loss will remain high due to the protected trees, wetlands and aquatic features, and the cultural and heritage significance associated with the site and the area of the Biosphere Reserve Plan and Draft Bioregional Plan, the report found.

The proposed land use conflicts with these plans and the available guidelines on identified critical biodiversity areas published by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) in 2009 and revised and published in 2013 by the Limpopo Provincial Government as the *Limpopo Conservation Plan v2* (LCPv2) (Desmet et al 2013). It is the EAP's opinion that the disturbance of ecosystems and loss of biological diversity cannot be avoided. It can only be minimised marginally on the site and cannot be mitigated through a successful offset as per the biodiversity offset framework. Overall, the report states, that the impacts before applying mitigation, as well as after applying mitigation during the operational phase of the SEZ development, will in all likelihood be negative to the site. Mitigation measures can be applied, but the significant impacts on climate change, air quality, water supply, waste and human health, if best practices and international standards and laws are not undertaken and adhered to, will be significant.

MC Mining Limited's assertions of sustainability are also refuted by the frequent accounts of acid mine drainage, black lung disease and the contamination of drinking water due to coal mining. Water use is also a particular concern. DLM members are fearful of contaminants and toxins in the water, the disruption of watersheds and freshwater aquifers, and the dangers to ecosystems that have ecological and spiritual significance. Ultimately, *makhadzi* are distressed about the

socio-environmental effects of mining water grabs and the seizing of land and water by coal undertakings throughout rural South Africa.

Many residents question where MC Mining Limited will get the amount of water needed for its enterprise, given that the average rainfall in Limpopo is low and has even been compared with the rainfall in the Kalahari Desert (Groenewald 2012). This and other issues related to the mining activities in the area were also the focus of environmental organisations and social movements who were angered by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) memorandum of understanding with the MMSEZ, which, they claimed, showed that the UNDP endorsed the sustainability of the zone while glossing over its many environmental and livelihood problems. This illustrates the kind of obstacles local residents and environmental activists are coming up against. Following complaints by the Centre for Environmental Rights



An ecocultural map indicating the Nzhelele River

and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies, a delegation of the UNDP's Social and Environmental Compliance Unit travelled to the Vhembe District in February 2023 to meet residents and key stakeholders about the developmental and environmental impacts of the MMSEZ, as reported by the *Mail & Guardian*. According to an article by Lisa Thompson, Hazel Shirinda and Meshack Mbangula (2023) in the *Mail & Guardian*, the MMSEZ's "notoriety arises from many complex sources", most notably a coal-fired power plant to provide energy for metallurgical extractive industries and a steel plant. The article states that these industries "already have sustainability question marks, enhanced by the water scarcity of the region and its world heritage biodiversity status".

The article further states: "Interested and affected parties that have followed the evolution of the zone's deeply flawed environmental impact assessment (EIA) process have raised questions relating to biodiversity and climate change. The major flaws include poor participation processes and missing climate and biodiversity reports. These concerns have fallen on deaf ears at the Limpopo Economic Development Agency. The zone is championed as the developmental salvation of Limpopo and the source of long-term employment creation in a province with the lowest rates in the country." Further on the article continues: "Recent interviews with stakeholders and residents show that a number of mothballed coal mines have had their environmental authorisations resuscitated, despite previous environmental legal action. Two environmentally controversial collieries owned by MC Mining (previously Coal of Africa) are re-opening in the next couple of months and Vele mine has opened job applications, facilitated by the Musina municipality."

The article continues as follows:

In a meeting with the Mudimele elders, concern was expressed by their chief that although they had been informed that the Makhado Colliery adjacent to their land would be opening, they had no further information about the operations of the mine. They, together with the agricultural company ZZ2, had the Makhado environmental assessment set aside in 2016, in court action taken by advocate Christo Rheeders on behalf of the Vhembe

Stakeholder Minerals Forum. Ironically, Coal of Africa, now rebranded MC Mining, has re-emerged as the mining conglomerate of the province.

The environmental authorisation of the zone is under appeal review by the Centre for Applied Legal Studies, the Living Limpopo and Herd Nature Reserve represented by All Rise Attorneys for Climate and Environmental Change.

MC Mining Corporation's website explicitly states that the coal mines will supply the zone with its energy needs, making more mockery of the chief executive's pronouncements that solar energy has been abandoned.

In the piece "How coal mining already threatens an already water-stressed area, local livelihoods, and a network of sacred forests", which Vho-Makaulule wrote for the Gaia Foundation, *makhadzi* express the hope that MC Mining Limited will come and see the communities whose water they will be using. In her editorial, Vho-Makaulule asks local community members, who rely on water for household needs and agriculture, if they know about the coal mine. "No one knows!", she writes, "many people in the community do not know that the mine is coming and that it will take the water. They depend on the water of [the] Nzhelele River. They take it to boil and drink. They use it for everything. They will simply wake [up] one day and find that there is no more water." The kind of horror scenario that could arise is illustrated in the handbook, *How to engage with coal mines through a Catchment Management Forum* (Munnik et al [sa]). The handbook was written for citizens who want to protect water and biodiversity, people who are involved in making decisions about coal mining and people who are concerned about the kinds of decisions being made about coal mining. Referring to the catchment management forum (CMF) in the Upper Komati Forum in Mpumalanga, the authors relate: "On the morning [of] 11 January 2012, residents of the small Mpumalanga Highveld town of Carolina woke up to sour water in their taps. The water tasted bad and had a funny colour. Porridge prepared in this water turned blue. A white jelly formed on top when the water was boiled. Residents could not brush their teeth because 'it felt as if your mouth was on fire' It turned out the dam was acidic, with a very low pH." The town of Carolina had no drinking water for seven months as a result of the acidification of the town dam due to coal mining activities in the area. The book goes on to describe the damage coal mining does to the environment,

including how the functioning of wetlands is severely compromised, possibly leading to total collapse.

Makhadzi demand transparency from MC Mining Limited. Vho-Makaulule concedes that the company has posted information on the internet but states: “These villages don’t have an internet connection! How can people know that there is an application for a water licence to take the water from this river? They cannot access this information.” The Gaia Foundation and DLM made a video about the company’s Water Open Day to share their concerns with the larger environmentalist community. In the video, the farmers present at the meeting express anger at the public participation programme regarding the mining proposal. However, the mining company always claims to be transparent.

In a *News24* follow-up article (Wallington 2012) in response to Groenewald’s piece in the *City Press*, the former chief executive of Coal of Africa, John Wallington, rebukes the journalist’s generalities. In addition, he expresses his frustration with Johnathan Mudimemli’s assertion that there was no public participation, stating: “It was disappointing to read a community leader saying, ‘no-one is talking to us’ when I personally have attended meetings with this community, often in the presence of both local and provincial government representatives.” Wallington continues, describing the underdeveloped mineral wealth in the region that could assuage the socioeconomic problems of the historically disadvantaged Venda apartheid homeland. He cites examples of the company’s dual memorandums of understanding with the Department of Environment and Sanparks, and the Save Mapungubwe coalition, evidence, he suggests, of the company’s commitment to conservation and development. In the article, Wallington even alludes that the mining efforts will see an “enhancement” of the environment and regional biodiversity. For example, he contends that improvements to the bulk water pipelines will improve water reticulation systems and claims that only three percent of the Nzhelele Dam’s reserves will be utilised over the lifetime of the mine.

Wallington is correct that both local and provincial government representatives have been consulted, yet the public participation

appears to be a pretence to communicate with local leaders exclusively for the purpose of launching the company's development project with expediency. When the proposal was first made, Khosi Kennedy Tshivhase was king, but more recently the company has engaged with the now dethroned Khosi, Khulu Toni Mphephu Ramabulana. The Makhado Coking Coal Project fact sheet provides a pyramid chart of "engagement structures", outlining forums of communication and public participation with provincial, regional and local government assemblies. The "King's forum", which MC Mining Limited seemingly uses to assure stakeholders of its community engagement, includes representatives and traditional authorities of affected communities, as well as other elected representatives. At the bottom, there is a space that represents a nebulous set of community members.

Gender has not been a categorical consideration within traditional leadership, nor has it been reflected in the mining company's fact sheet, which stresses its expected socio-economic contributions and community development approach. The company's priority above community and gender interests was to first secure a new-order mining right from the Department of Mineral Resources, (Odendaal 2015) clearing a final hurdle of compliance with black economic empowerment (BEE) legislation. Therefore, the former Coal of Africa entered into an agreement with community BEE empowerment representatives to have them purchase a 26% stake in the Makhado Coking Coal Project – 20% held by the Makhado Colliery Community Development Trust and 6% gained by Yoright Investments – which would include historically disadvantaged South Africans and black entrepreneurs. Such community-based alliances and shareholders do not explicitly represent the interests of indigenous women. Rather, the implication is that the most lucrative and advantageous approach for the company is to appeal to local and provincial male leadership and to enter into business partnerships with powerful organisations that can provide the legislative clearances and capital needed to proceed with operations. The public participation is ultimately tenuous, and *makhadzi* and other community members must rely on rumours to understand what future development plans may be imposed on their communities.

MC Mining Limited's activities highlight the ways in which neocolonialism replicates hegemonic systems of exploitation and privilege shaped by colonialism and globalisation. Research shows that globalisation erodes economic and social progress, resulting in explosive poverty, illiteracy, disease and infant mortality rates that are aggravated by the stronghold of contemporary Western control over Africa's resources. Multinational corporations inhibit African self-governance and are intended to extract the continent's wealth to the detriment of African people and the most vulnerable among them, women and children.

MC Mining Limited's interaction with the *makhadzi* of DLM and other women in the region epitomises the link between globalisation and gender-based discrimination. The protests, in particular, reveal the marginalisation of *makhadzi* in the public participation process for the



A Vhavenda youth collecting water from a communal pump between Vuwani Township and a village.

proposed Makhado Coking Coal Project, which is especially egregious given the historically vital role of *makhadzi* in the leadership of the chiefs as stewards of land and agriculture and as ecologists. When former Coal of Africa chief executive, John Wallington, characterised *makhadzi* protests as a circus, threatening legal action against the women for exerting their cultural role within their own nation and ancestral land, it became clear how corporations supersede and delegitimise culture and indigenous women's rights. An intersectional analysis of discrimination within these public participation structures reveals a differentiation between the citizenship rights of Vhongwaniwapo women and the citizenship rights of men. These multinational companies ignore women by appealing almost exclusively to national, provincial and local male leadership. This approach is unmistakable in MC Mining Limited's engagement structures and reports that showcase its hierarchal public participation with local populations – the chart depicts the Venda king at the apex, followed by male chiefs and other leadership. This representation shows no explicit interaction with women, no consideration of the environmental impact of the project on women, and no recognition of *makhadzi*. Likewise, the company circumvents community and *makhadzi* protests. It uses BEE legislation and strategic investors to demonstrate community involvement with historically disadvantaged communities and black entrepreneurs, yet these sectors are not largely representative of women, especially Indigenous women of the Vhongwaniwapo clan.

The operations of extractive industries pose many environmental threats to water in the Vhembe District Municipality. *Makhadzi* members of DLM describe mining, deforestation, modern agricultural practices and commercial farming as threats to the wetlands. Severe pollution, such as the fact that approximately four billion litres of raw or partially purified sewage are discharged daily into South Africa's dams and rivers, as well as the widespread destruction of wetlands by mining and agricultural activities, has a negative impact on the quality of scarce water resources (Viljoen & Van der Walt 2018). One of the consequences of pollution is the growing presence of toxic blue-green algae in the water resources of South Africa, with an estimated 62% of

aquatic bodies already contaminated with cyanobacteria – the highest incidence in the world.

Water vulnerabilities

The previous section illustrated the extent to which water has become a commodity amid local mining politics. While noting the activities of Vho-Makaulule's family through participant observation for my dissertation, I witnessed other problems related to access to water. In the townships, most homes have one tap outside; few dwellings have indoor plumbing. The townships are run by the municipality, while many of the villages, managed by chiefs, have access to communal water pumps. Vho-Makaulule's home had one spigot in front of the house, connected to a hose to water the garden and to provide water for bathing, cooking and drinking. Water was drained into a large, uncovered plastic barrel around four feet high. The family had a bucket system in which one small pail, used like a ladle, was dipped into the barrel to fill a series of smaller plastic buckets to be stored in the house for drinking and cooking – or carried off to fill up bathing tubs.

The Vhembe District Municipality is fraught with water politics, rations and strikes. The Department of Water Affairs periodically restricts water or shuts it off completely during wage negotiations. On one such occasion, I accompanied the family to the house of a generous neighbour who was willing to share water from his tank. In 37-degree-Celsius (100-degree Fahrenheit) we made two trips to the neighbour's home and loaded up the family's truck with as many buckets as we could. We then carried the water to the backyard using a wheel barrel. Whether transporting water to the family's house on that day or managing the daily household water use, lifting heavy buckets together was an everyday routine.

Vhongwaniwapo culture is filled with taboos and myths, represented as either blessings or scary myths, that are used as conservation strategies to ensure sustainable land use and to protect water. The wetlands are susceptible to many hazards of development and modern agricultural practices that negate *makhadzi* ecocultural wisdom and methods of conservation. Interviews for my dissertation revealed what

makhadzi identify as environmental threats, and how *makhadzi* of DLM face these challenges through efforts to preserve customary beliefs.

For *makhadzi*, the preservation of biocultural diversity is an act of survival. It is evident how important taboos have been for protecting nature, including the cultural elements linked with water, such as womanhood, birth and healing. The websites of the Gaia Foundation and Mupo Foundation indicate the concerns that *makhadzi* have about bankside erosion and dried-up rivers throughout Vhembe. For example, *makhadzi* are alarmed about the condition of 24 rivers flowing out of the Thathe Holy Forest. They contend that deforestation and erosion of the rivers will eliminate irrigation for household and small-scale farmers and, eventually, all farms. Vho-Makaulule writes: “Sacred sites are places that make evaporation that makes rain. If you don’t protect the pools and waterfalls, where do the people get clean water to drink? Rituals aren’t empty things. They’re the Earth wisdom of hundreds of generations of wisdom (www.gaiafoundation.org). The negation of indigenous farming systems and the destruction of rivers and springs are putting communities in Vhembe at risk. In the next chapter, I delve deeper into the water crisis in South Africa and Limpopo and how it affects Vhongwaniwapo communities and culture.

chapter six



The politics of water

South Africa is an exceptionally water-stressed country. All the country's provinces have been impacted by severe water shortages. In major cities in Gauteng, for example, reservoirs are extremely low due to multiyear droughts driven by global warming and climate change, as well as an increase in the population. Moreover, water is scarce owing to leaks caused by decaying pipes and infrastructure. Non-revenue water, that is, water that is supplied or pumped but is then lost or unaccounted for, is a critical issue for municipalities. According to Du Plessis (2022), "41% of water [in South Africa] is lost due to leakages owing to poor operation and maintenance of existing aged water infrastructure, commercial losses caused by meter manipulation or other forms of water theft and lastly, unbilled authorised consumption such as firefighting." Water is being wasted in many regions, causing shortages and necessitating regional water authorities to impose restrictions.

Senzo Mchunu, the former Minister of Water and Sanitation, provisionally increased the distribution of bulk water as a temporary solution to water shortages and restrictions. The cities of Gqeberha, Cape Town, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg have all been impacted by water restrictions of up to 30%, and in some of them, water has been cut off periodically to repair pipes, leaving these areas without tap water for up to 54 hours. Water restrictions and shutdowns have left citizens vulnerable as officials try to resolve the ongoing problem. In July 2023, *The Citizen* reported as follows: "Large swathes of Johannesburg are in for water cuts and shortages which might last as long as two weeks – and Rand Water's maintenance shutdown was extended suddenly yesterday into an extra day. The 58-hour-long shutdown, one of the longest and widest yet in the city and which will

affect almost 138 areas, is scheduled to start from 7pm on Tuesday, 11 July” (Simelane 2023). Ferial Haffajee (2023) indicates in a *Daily Maverick* article that, according to a report tabled at the Johannesburg city council, government departments and state-owned enterprises owed Johannesburg Water R636 million in unpaid water bills by the end of 2022 (Haffajee 2023). Haffajee (2023) further notes that, according to the city, there are roughly 4 190 pipe bursts every month, averaging about 140 a day.

Cape Town has, in many ways, served as a bellwether of the water crisis in South Africa as it continues to confront the possibility of a “day zero” – the day when there is no water to extract from the dams or reservoirs (Majavu 2022). In October 2019, dam levels were 10% to 60% lower than they were in 2018, and although there has been intermittent rain since then, the prediction is that more dry weather is ahead. This is an indication that a day zero may be imminent in other parts of the country too (Heggie 2020). This possibility was evident in KwaZulu-Natal when, in 2019, “rural communities south of Durban had to survive weeks without municipal water, depending instead upon unreliable tanker trucks. By November, protracted drought saw the province’s south coast suffering severe shortages as water sources dried up” (Heggie 2020). A similar situation occurred in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape in 2022, when officials and local business representatives and South African disaster relief had to prepare emergency water supplies before the taps ran dry for its 500 000 residents. The long-term concerns are that fresh water will be reduced, the quality of water that remains will decrease, the likelihood of waterborne diseases will increase and the staple crop maize will desist. On 19 May 2023, newspapers in South Africa reported an outbreak of cholera in Hammanskraal, a few kilometres north of Pretoria. Within less than three weeks, 31 people had died while many more were hospitalised. Although an independent assessment by the Water Resource Commission could not identify the exact source of the cholera outbreak in Hammanskraal, the investigation highlighted another serious issue: wastewater treatment works that release other harmful bacteria into the water system. The grimmest prediction is that water as a resource may see its end by 2030 in various parts of South

Africa, which is a very solemn forecast for the country (Heggie 2020; Majavu 2022).

The Vhembe District Municipality in Limpopo is also suffering from the water crisis. In general, Limpopo, which comprises three former apartheid homelands, including Venda, is a desiccated region. Limpopo receives less than 500 mm of rain in the catchment yearly, which usually falls in fewer than 50 days between October and April (Munnik 2020). The international Limpopo River Basin is a “closed catchment” since the water reserves have already been apportioned to existing activities. Moreover, management of the Limpopo catchment is weak since competing entities in South Africa, such as agricultural factions and the mining industry, have a strong influence (Munnik 2020).

In Limpopo, as in many other parts of the country, citizens have turned to boreholes as a solution to access groundwater. However, boreholes have been found to contain contaminants. Majavu (2022) states: “In 2019, microbiologists and environmental health experts from South Africa’s University of Venda and the Tshwane University of Technology found that 33% of borehole water in the Vhembe rural areas in South Africa’s Limpopo province was polluted with *E. coli* bacteria.” Moreover, a 2020 study of borehole water in the town of Giyani in Limpopo revealed that the groundwater contained salmonella and other bacteria resistant to antibiotics and was not fit for human consumption. It was also suggested that, apart from containing bacteria, boreholes could be a source of new and infectious diseases (Majavu 2022). Studies have revealed that 2,11 million people in South Africa are without access to safe drinking water, especially in rural areas (Edokpayi et al 2018).

In the Vhembe District in Limpopo, some rural households rely on untreated river water for consumption and household needs, such as bathing, cooking, drinking and doing laundry. This water is of poor microbiological value and unsafe for domestic use. Research found indications of viral and faecal contamination in river catchments in the Vhembe District (Potgieter et al 2020). Moreover, residents in this area often store water in buckets or receptacles, which leaves them vulnerable to waterborne pathogens (Potgieter et al 2020). In the village of Vuwani, for example, water is piped in from the Mutshindudi River, 40% of which Venda uses, which has been exposed to pollution. Rural

communities in Venda in the Vhembe District therefore contend with the dual problem of the overall water crisis in South Africa and poor water quality in rural areas. In an article published on the Greenpeace website, Igamba (2022) states that labelling the current water situation in South Africa as “anything other than a crisis would be to downplay the severity of the problem”. According to Igamba (2022), South Africa is already a water-scarce nation that receives insufficient and unreliable rainfall. The country receives a mean annual precipitation of 497 mm/year, almost 50% less than the global average of 860 mm/year. This water scarcity also presents in the way water resources are unevenly distributed in the country (Igamba 2022).

Along with the water crisis in Limpopo is also the problem of access. In South Africa, the Department of Water Affairs is responsible for upholding people’s right to water and sanitation, as enshrined in the Constitution, yet, in Limpopo, water service delivery and sanitation are compromised. The constitutional right to water is complicated. Even when water is available in dams, it is not always accessible from taps and pipes due to an alleged lack of skilled personnel. According to Hamedat Deedat (2020), the Acting Executive Director of the National Labour and Economic Development Institute, claims of a shortage of skilled personnel are unfounded since many civil engineers are looking for employment. Deedat (2020) also states that money is being misused because millions of rand have been spent on consultants and bulk infrastructure through the building of dams, yet water is still withheld. In the politics of water, the municipalities are blaming traditional leaders for blocking citizens’ access to water in rural areas.

In February 2020 the committee the Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation Committee of the National Assembly conducted an oversight visit to assess water and sanitation infrastructure in Giyani and Polokwane, after which it called in the National Department of Water and Sanitation and the Limpopo Department of Water and Sanitation to provide an assessment of the regional water and sanitation performance and challenges, specifically in respect of the Nandoni and De Hoop Dams. The committee found that despite a considerable investment in bulk infrastructure, water was still only intermittently available to residents, particularly in the countryside. Rural communities are now expected

to foot the cost of bulk infrastructure although, historically, they were disadvantaged during apartheid by not having access to water (Jegede & Shikwambane 2021). It is the responsibility of the municipality as the executing authority to deliver water – however, throughout South African history, the water landscape has been extraordinarily complex (Deedat 2020). This is especially so in Limpopo.

Research (Mmbadi 2019) has shown that many rural communities in South Africa are living without adequate water supplies, mainly due to a historical lack of infrastructure and effective water reticulation systems. The day-to-day challenges of accessing water from distant boreholes and rivers are a reality, particularly for women and children in rural Limpopo. Bazaanah et al (2023) found in their study that South African local municipalities are often unable to sustainably deliver safe water and basic sanitation for all. Drawing on perspectives of ecological economics, they analysed the sustainability of water and sanitation systems in rural communities of the Lepelle Nkumpi Local Municipality in Limpopo. They found that households use water for multiple purposes, including consumptive, productive and domestic purposes, but existing facilities are in a deplorable condition. Pollution arising from agrochemicals, waste systems, mining, sewerage and industrial effluence significantly affects water systems in the communities. Bridging demand–supply gaps requires initiatives like bulk water supply and the implementation of the free basic water policy in underprivileged areas. Bazaanah et al (2023) recommend that tariffs either be waived or adjusted for extremely poor households. They conclude that waste management initiatives, like capacity building, public education, investments and facility upgrades, could help avert the spread of waterborne infections and improve residents' health.

The issue of the privatisation or outsourcing of water delivery systems is debated frequently. Outsourcing which has resulted in joblessness coupled with corruption linked with outsourcing has been a key impetus for water politics opposed to keeping the water delivery service public. In March 2020, Corruption Watch and the Water Integrity Network published a joint report called *Money down the drain: corruption in South Africa's water sector* (Muller 2020). According to the report, the impact of corruption in the water sector is measured in

dry taps, lost jobs and polluted rivers; many people, particularly young children, old people and people with compromised immune systems, have become ill from drinking unsafe water or because their homes and toilets cannot be kept hygienic. Corruption in the water sector has also resulted in deaths. The report continues: “This corruption extends from taps in rural villages to the systems that supply South Africa’s economic heartland.

Village taps have run dry so that councillors and their friends could get contracts to truck water. Construction of a dam to provide water to Gauteng has been delayed by years, in part because a minister sought to change procurement rules to benefit her friends. In the Western Cape, the raising of the Clanwilliam Dam, which would create thousands of new farming jobs, has been delayed for similar reasons. Companies have paid bribes to get business. Some companies have promoted unnecessary projects and claimed payment for work done badly or not at all, often colluding with officials who oversee their work. Others have monopolised specialist areas of work to grossly overcharge for their services. Individual households are involved through unauthorised, unmetered water connections, often made by the same plumbers who maintain the supply systems, using material from their workplaces”. The 78-page report sets out several more instances of corruption and theft, as well as other related problems.

Deedat (2020) calls for water forums to bring various stakeholders together to discuss the complexities of the water crisis and water delivery situation in the local water catchment areas in Limpopo. She contends that “the South African Constitution and the international declaration of the UN on the right to water is the platform to exercise the rights of South African people with regard to water rights. Water is a right and sanitation is dignity” (Deedat 2020).

In the Vhembe District Municipality, many villages do not have access to water. The Mutoti Village, which is outside Thohoyandou, is grappling with a lack of water despite being close to the Nandoni Water Plant. Residents of Mutoti are extremely frustrated because there is no pipeline to supply water to their village despite promises from the Limpopo Department of Water and Sanitation that they would have access to water from the Nandoni Dam. Moreover, “according to

community leaders, residents have had to hire trucks to ferry water from nearby villages such as Lufule and Mphego, which are getting their water supply from Nandoni” (Mukwevho 2021). Community leaders have shut down the water plant to express their grievances about the lack of water in Mutoti. Protests like these are perilous because water activists have been threatened and even killed for claiming their constitutional rights. In May 2023, *News24* reported that angry residents from Phiphidi in Limpopo had destroyed water infrastructure and shut down the water supply from the Nandoni Dam, leaving five hospitals facing a dire water shortage (Sobuwa 2023). The residents had allegedly blocked the road leading to the dam and destroyed pipes. According to the Limpopo Department of Health, the dam was the primary water source for several healthcare facilities and hospitals, such as Tshilidzini, Donald Fraser, Louis Trichardt and Malamulele, which were experiencing water shortages as a result of the closure of the water supply. Residents from the Vhembe District had been protesting about water scarcity in the area for a week. However, intermittent community protests in the Vhembe District had been ongoing for several years.

As discussed in Chapter Five, coal mining is a looming threat to people’s access to water in Limpopo. Historically, when the local authorities were not able to provide water services, the community’s water and sanitation were left to the mining sector. After a mining company had depleted the resources in a region and left the community, the residents who had been dependent on the company were left without constitutional protection. The municipality believed it did not need to provide water once a mining company had left a region. Mining was responsible for massive pollution from acid mine drainage (Deedat 2020). Moreover, the vast quantity of water needed to produce coal is potentially devastating to an already water-stressed area.

Fossil fuel development can have an impact on water five decades after the start of coal mining and coal-fired power generation. Therefore, water grabs by the coal industry have far-reaching implications for the quality of water and communities’ access to water for several years. Two coal-driven mega projects in the Limpopo North Water Management Area of South Africa can be described as water grabs. The Mokolo Crocodile West Augmentation Project (MCWAP) and the projected Electro

Metallurgical Special Economic Zone (EMSEZ) between Makhado and Musina are both extractive projects involving fossil fuel development in the water-scarce area of the Limpopo North catchment of South Africa (Munnik 2020).

These mammoth projects involve or imply the expansion of coal mining, as well as inter-basin water transfers, which can be seen as water grabs. These developments are infringing on the water rights of people in the Limpopo water catchment area. The projects not only have severe environmental implications but also encroach on the indigenous beliefs, customs and conservation practices that communities in Venda have shared for generations.

The sanctity of water in Venda

Springs, waterfalls, rivers and wetlands are consecrated in Venda. The four main rivers in the region, the Nwanedi, Nzhelele, Mutale and Luvuvhu, flow from the Soutpansberg mountains and empty into the Limpopo River¹ (Earle et al 2006; Tshiguvho 2008). Tshiguvho (2008), in articulating how water shortages may have contributed to the significance of water in Vhavenda cosmology, states: “Water has always been a scarce resource in Venda, especially in the drier regions of Nzhelele, Niani, Sinthumule and Kutama. Perhaps this has been the reason why Vhavenda have treated water as sacred. Natural water bodies, such as lakes, rivers, and waterfalls have been treated with respect and declared sacred. Such examples include Lake Fundudzi and the Phiphidi Waterfall.” Therefore, the water crisis is not only detrimental to Vhavenda people’s health – it also poses a threat to their way of life and cultural beliefs. In Venda, human-driven loss of biodiversity occurs concurrently with the loss of forests, the destruction of waterscapes and the degradation of other ecosystems (Pikirayi & Magoma 2021). Forests are rapidly disappearing and waterbodies are silting due to increased human settlement, farming, mineral prospecting and infrastructural development. The destruction of existing natural and cultural habitats causes local and indigenous communities to lose food resources and living spaces. But what is central to the Phiphidi

1 Known as *Mulambo wa Vhembe* in Luvenda/Tshivenda (Tshiguvho 2008).

Waterfall, the Thathe Forest and Lake Fundudzi is their sacredness. Destroying and desecrating these sacred sites and places will result in famine and hunger. The Thathe Forest, like the Congo and Amazon rainforests, is a regenerative “spring” for Venda farmlands, including areas east of the Soutpansberg. As such, it speaks to the sustainability of livelihoods among the local and indigenous peoples and should be seen as the “lungs of Venda”, which are vulnerable to modern developments (Pikirayi & Magoma 2021).

The Nzhelele River also features prominently in conversations with Vho-Makaulule and other *makhadzi*. Earle et al (2006) note that the Soutpansberg area has a tropical climate, and the condensation and showers in the mountains reach the Nzhelele through various tributaries. Many rural settlements have been established in the Upper Nzhelele Valley, once classified as the “Venda homeland”, over time. Today, the water is still extracted from the Nzhelele for agricultural irrigation in what Earle et al (2006) describe as a region among Venda’s fertile valleys (Ralushai 1977; Earle et al 2006). Given the Nzhelele’s importance, *makhadzi* have expressed concern over its receding riverbanks and evaporation due to coal mining and climate change. Although many *makhadzi* and specialists argue that the region was once more fertile than it is today, Ralushai (1977) suggests that, historically, the whole Nzhelele River valley area was never abundant, stating:

The government, after forcing Chief Mphephu² to vacate the fertile hills of Louis Trichardt [Makhado] and return to his ancestral home Nzhelele, had to introduce an irrigation scheme, for without irrigation in this area, Nzhelele people can starve, as this area suffers from constant drought. In fact, many people, when their fertile areas such as Luonde, Tshindzivhani, Maulum, etc. were declared ‘White’ when told that they should go live at Nzhelele, preferred to settle in the east (Sibasa District) which was undoubtedly more fertile

Ralushai contends that the area has always been prone to droughts and food shortages because of the intense heat in the region. Scholars (Mabogo 1990; Tshiguvho 2008) describe how chiefs once enforced

² A Venda historical figure and leader among Venda’s ruling houses in the 19th century. He was later defeated by the Transvaal government, which preceded the Transvaal province.

conservation procedures to safeguard this precious resource through rules governing the use of rivers and water for domestic and agricultural purposes.

According to Vho-Makaulule, springs are of great importance to the indigenous Vhongwaniwapo. Vho-Makaulule describes how one will see that near a spring there is a flowing stream like a river and there is something like a fountain, and not far from it there is a wetland. She explains that these places are highly respected by indigenous Vhongwaniwapo people. The Indigenous community call a fountain like this a *tshisima*. A *tshisima* is almost constructed like a well or a spring where one can take water from the ground. Only the elders understand the notion and have customary knowledge of *u kapa*, which is the ritual of taking water from this fountain or *tshisima*. The elders perform *u kapa tshisima*. When *u kapa* takes place, the women elders who are no longer menstruating make a small circle for the ritual of making a hole where the water emerges. That hole must have a path where the water flows to the stream. The women then kneel as they perform this custom while the elder men carry big logs from dead trees and stones and build around the water.

In describing the topography of a fountain and spring, Vho-Makaulule remarks that inside the fountain there is mud, soil and sand, and around it, there are small plants, grasses, different types of weeds and reeds, as well as a small forest that creates shade. She notes that one will also find some of the giant trees like *mutu*, *munzere*, *munadzi*, *mutulume* and *mueneene*. These are the trees along the river that shade the water. These trees are respected, according to Vho-Makaulule; therefore, the community does not chop them down. Moreover, the community does not even fetch dried wood along the river – according to custom, fetching dry wood next to the river is not allowed. If the trees fall on their own, their wood can be used for medicinal purposes only.

One of the ecological taboos that many Vhongwaniwapo people abide by is the notion that you must not collect dry wood by a river and you must not kill the snake that resides in a spring. The snake must be left untouched in the spring because killing it could bring misfortune to your family. These taboos or belief systems are essentially conservation practices meant to prevent the water from drying up – they are all about

protecting the ecosystem and the sanctity of water. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mpahtheleni. Personal interview 2023) states:

We respect water; water is very sacred to us. Wetlands, rivers, fountains are respected. Because this water from river, from wetland, from well, they are the element which we communicate with the creator – God. Many people say Nwali a Venda name referring to the deity. We have the waterfall.

The water in the waterfall is very, very important, it's for our healing. You go to the traditional healer and they will say, go and collect water from *mativha*, from the pool. That water is a healing. Another healer will say your sickness needs the water from the waterfall, go and collect water from the waterfall.

Vho-Makaulule describes the healing nature of water and its importance for life and customs, especially communicating with “the one we do not know”. The Vhongwaniwapo communicate with this spiritual entity through ceremonies and prayer in which water plays an important role. When they perform the ceremony of *u phasa*, they use water. The water is considered sacrosanct and has healing properties. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mpahtheleni. Personal interview 2023) states: “We cannot communicate with the creator if we lose water in the rivers because we are doing this using the tap water. It's not allowed! Water is our element for communication with the creator. We have also the rain, rain also carried our sacred water, that's why in [a] sacred site we go to request the rain; in our ceremonies, we request the rain.”

The water crisis in the Vhembe District Municipality of Limpopo is also connected to the problem of conserving the wetlands. Apart from water being a threatened resource, the rivers and wetlands are easily degraded. Wetlands or marshes are important ecosystems that are known to filter natural pollutants, retain run-off and prevent river deluges and floods (Sinthumule & Netshisaulu 2022) Vho-Makaulule's organisation, Dzomo la Mupo (DLM), is actively working to restore these ecosystems to protect the sanctity of water in the Vhembe District Municipality among the indigenous Vhongwaniwapo people.

DLM has a dedicated programme for protecting rivers. For example, Vho-Makaulule's brother, Ravhutsi, has started a project to protect the Mudzinga River. He is carrying on the legacy of their father, who resided



Ecocultural map drawn by community members

in that village, was a traditional farmer and healer and always worked to protect that river. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mpaitheleni. Personal interview 2023) states: “My father ended up fencing the river and leave an opening where only human being just move around to get in and collect water and come back so that the river is not endangered. But when my father passed away, it was difficult to do that. People removed that fence; cattle start to graze there.” Vho-Makaulule explains that the Mudzinga River has a wetland and a fountain or well that was made by very old elders of their ancestors. This river flows into the Mutshedzi River; the Mutshedzi River then flows into the Nzhelele River, which flows into the Limpopo River. The Limpopo River then flows into the Indian Ocean. Her brother and her organisation, DLM, are working to protect not only these various rivers and tributaries but also the ocean. It all begins with protecting the Mudzinga River.

DLM is engaging with young people to teach them about these rivers. Young people, guided by DLM, construct ecological maps of the rivers and surrounding territory – and, together with the elders, they visualise walking near the rivers and what they will see, for example, plants, big trees, and animals such as reptiles and insects. They create a map of the past through the elders’ recollections and then create a map of the present that shows the current degradation of the environment. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mpaitheleni. Personal interview 2023) recounts the past as follows: “We see the river of the disorder of the present. What do we want to do for the future? We want to protect river because Mudzinga River in Livuvha village is an important river because its people depend on that river. 1980s government put the pipes, but the pipes run dry, people ran to the Mudzinga River to collect water. People still go there to the river.” Indigenous communities are reliant upon the Mudzinga and other rivers, and DLM is working towards protecting these critical resources by reviving the traditional knowledge about the rivers.

Vho-Makaulule and DLM take young people to the rivers so they can observe what is living there and so they can understand what a vibrant ecosystem should look like as opposed to a polluted river and landscape. She tells them to look for crabs and beetles and so forth and explains what is natural to see there. Moreover, they see the refuse

that floats in the Mudzinga River and compare the present-day polluted landscape with the landscape that Vho-Makaulule remembers from her youth, the landscape where she could hear the waterfall at night while she was sleeping. All these memories go into maps of the past, contrasting maps of the present and hopeful maps of the future.

More than 24 rivers start from the sacred forest of Thathe, and they flow and form the rivers in Venda. When working with the youth, DLM discusses how the rivers start. When constructing an ecological map, the participants learnt that the Mutale River starts at the heart of the sacred Thathe Forest and outside of the mountain. According to Vho-Makaulule, the forest is the habitat of many life ecosystems and a rain catchment area. The Mutale River flows from its origin at the Thathe Forest and goes into Lake Fundudzi. When the Mutale River enters Lake Fundudzi, the water of the river and the water of the lake do not mix. The water of the river flows like a snake inside the lake and pours out into the Luvuvhu River near the Kruger National Park. Vho-Makaulule and DLM hope to restore community members' knowledge about the origins of the rivers and where they flow to enhance their understanding of the importance of water to both their way of life and their water and environmental rights.

Overall, water activism in South Africa is a complex and multifaceted issue that is driven by a range of social, political and environmental factors. While progress has been made in improving people's access to water resources in recent years, significant challenges remain, and ongoing advocacy and activism will be necessary to ensure that all South Africans have access to clean and safe water. The country faces a range of complex water-related challenges, including water scarcity, pollution and an uneven distribution of water resources. In recent years, water activists in South Africa have been lobbying for greater transparency and accountability in water governance, as well as increased investment in infrastructure and water management systems. These efforts have been driven by a range of actors, including civil society organisations, community groups and individual activists. In Venda, where water is considered sacred, Vho-Makaulule continues to work with her community to uphold the sanctity of water and to ensure the availability of safe, clean water for domestic use.

chapter seven



Food security and indigenous farming

“We have been disconnected with the natural flow of creation of God and this disconnection is why we have so many conflicts between humans If we respect the natural law, the wild law, which today we are talking about the earth jurisprudence, we can stay connected.”

– Vho-Mphatheleni Makaulule

Chapter four touched on some aspects of food sovereignty as it affects indigenous communities such as the Vhongwaniwapo. This chapter delves deeper into food justice and food security and examines the complexities of indigenous farming.

“Food sovereignty” is a term that refers to the right of people to choose their food and farming systems and to have access to healthy ancestral food (Mudombi-Rusinamhodzi & Rusinamhodzi 2022). In Africa, food sovereignty is centrally, though not exclusively, about the ability of groups of people to make their own decisions about food systems – it is a way of talking about a theoretically informed food system practice (Grey & Patel 2014). Food sovereignty is especially complex in Africa because of the continent’s history of colonialism and the persistent challenges faced by African farmers and communities. According to Bjornlund, Bjornlund and Van Rooyen (2022), colonialism fundamentally disrupted and suppressed the existing food security systems of Africa, resulting in widespread poverty, chronic food shortages and malnourishment. Referencing Morgan and Solarz (1994), Bjornlund et al (2022) conclude that by focusing political and economic development on resource extraction and neglecting the biophysical limitations, environmental degradation and social inequality increase,

and unpredictable rainfall events now lead to human catastrophes. According to Blue Bird Jernigan et al (2021), Indigenous communities experience disproportionality high rates of food insecurity as a by-product of settler-colonial activities, which included forced relocation to rural reservation lands and the degradation of traditional subsistence patterns. They hold that many indigenous communities have worked to revitalise their local food systems by pursuing food sovereignty, regularly expressed as the right and responsibility of people to have access to healthy and culturally appropriate foods, while defining their own food systems. Historically, the colonial powers that ruled Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries promoted agricultural policies that were designed to benefit their home countries rather than local people (www.sahistory.org.za). This often meant that African farmers were forced to grow cash crops such as cotton or cocoa instead of using Indigenous seed. This created a complicated relationship between the land and indigenous agriculture (Kobuthi 2020). This legacy has made a lasting impact on the continent since many African countries are still heavily reliant on imported food despite having the potential to produce their own, which influences farming systems and food security.

In Venda, South Africa, apartheid particularly contributed to land disparities since most commercial farms are owned by white farmers and small-scale farms are predominately black-owned. Materechera and Scholes (2022) state: “Although the exact number of commercial farming units in the Vhembe district is not specified, ... 174 830 ha of arable land (70% of the total for the district) is owned by white commercial farmers while small-scale farmers own 74 927 ha (30% of the district total).” Moreover, small-scale farmers in the Vhembe District of Limpopo contend with overpopulated land that is limited and controlled by traditional authorities under a collective land tenure system (Materechera & Scholes 2022; Olofsson 2018). This land system confines the production capability of small-scale farmers. Commercial farmers typically own the land that they farm, which supports their production capacity in national and international markets – while small-scale farmers are trying to shore up subsistence farming for food sovereignty and security.

Food security in Africa is particularly important because of the continent's rapidly growing population. The United Nations predicts that Africa's population will double by 2050, meaning that there will be a vastly increased demand for food. This demand can be met through a combination of increased agricultural productivity and a shift towards more sustainable farming practices (Uhunamure et al 2021). However, achieving this will require the support of small-scale indigenous farmers and the prioritisation of local food production. Indigenous food sovereignty is a specific policy approach to addressing the underlying issues affecting indigenous peoples and their ability to respond to their own needs for healthy, culturally adapted indigenous foods. Community mobilisation and the maintenance of multimillennial cultural harvesting strategies and practices provide a basis for forming and influencing "policy driven by practice" (Indigenous Food Systems Network [sa]).

Indigenous farming is an essential practice in Venda that has been used for centuries to cultivate crops and provide food for the community. Kom et al (2023) define Indigenous knowledge systems as "a collection of know-how, local culture, beliefs, experiences, [and] management of ... local [resources] which has passed down from generation to generation. Indigenous knowledge systems are also labeled in several studies as local knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, Indigenous people's knowledge or farmers' knowledge". Traditional farming systems are based on the use of local knowledge and resources and are characterised by practices such as intercropping, crop rotation and the use of natural fertilisers and other Indigenous farming techniques and practices, such as *mitanga*, which is practised near wetlands, and *tshikovha*, which entails farming near the edge of a riverbank (Vho-Makaulule 2022).

Indigenous farming practices and community gardens in Venda have been vital in providing food security for the community; however, climate change is threatening this traditional system. When I lived with Vho-Makaulule's family during my dissertation field research, she had a small home garden with carrots, pumpkins and other vegetables. The garden was hard to maintain because of the intense heat and intermittent water accessibility. It is predicted that if climate change is not adequately managed, it will have a large negative impact on



A *Makhadzi* picking vegetables out of Vho-Mphatheleni's home garden.

smallholder subsistence farmers, posing a significant danger to household food security (Ogundeji 2022). The empirical findings of Ogundeji's study show that the gender makeup of a household, age, tropical livestock unit and access to climatic information improve the likelihood that smallholder farmers will adopt climate change adaptation measures. Based on the findings of the study, Ogundeji recommends that governments and NGOs support smallholder farmers' indigenous adaptation options with a variety of institutional, regulatory and technological assistance, with a particular emphasis on female-headed households.

Climate change already greatly affects indigenous agriculture and small-scale farms. South Africa is experiencing more frequent droughts and erratic weather patterns due to climate change, which is affecting agricultural production and increasing food prices. Droughts, floods and other extreme weather events are becoming more common, making



Indigenous seed varieties from the Tshidzivhe Tree Nursery and the Seed Project

it increasingly difficult for farmers to produce crops. South Africa has experienced a series of extreme weather events over the last few years. Dan Shepard (2018/2019), in an article for the United Nations' digital magazine *Africa Renewal*, states that for sub-Saharan Africa, which has experienced more frequent and more intense climate extremes over the past decades, the ramifications of the world's warming by more than 1,5 degrees Celsius would be profound. Temperature increases in the region are projected to be higher than the global mean temperature increase; regions in Africa within fifteen degrees of the equator are projected to experience an increase in hot nights, as well as longer and more frequent heat waves. Moreover, climate change is leading to the spread of pests and diseases that can devastate crops, further exacerbating food insecurity. Indigenous and small-scale farmers are particularly vulnerable to the effects of these changes, especially dead crops and food shortages. Additionally, small-scale farmers may

wish to participate in commercial markets but lack the production and marketing knowledge and skills to be able to adequately compete amid these complications (Zondi et al 2022).

One of the main challenges to achieving food sovereignty and security in Venda is the dominance of large multinational corporations in the food industry. These corporations often prioritise profits over people, and their practices can have a negative impact on both the environment and local communities. For example, large-scale monoculture farming affects the soil and pollutes the land with pesticides, while also undermining the livelihoods of small-scale farmers (Vho-Makaulule 2022). Within Vho-Makaulule's organisation, Dzomo la Mupo (DLM), the women and community recognise the powerful force of global agriculture and the conflicts of interest that have arisen regarding farming and the saving and storing of seeds. They understand that there has been a monopolisation of global food production and control of the food economy. To them, seed contains life, seed is at the centre of ritual. They plant seeds to welcome new life; when a boy becomes a man, they shower him with seeds; and when a person dies, they plant seeds on their grave (Seeds of Freedom 2012). Vho-Makaulule relates that the chief of Vhutanda went to Ethiopia and Kenya to do ecological mapping with the communities there, where they discussed the sanctity of seeds.

For DLM and community members, it is important to have varied seeds for the purposes of adapting to the environment and supporting diverse nutritional needs and food sovereignty. Moreover, Vho-Makaulule and DLM continue to construct a seed bank by saving seeds at home. The seeds are saved for cycles on the traditional ecological calendar that they adhere to. The food that they eat includes maize, a variety of beans, different types of ground nuts, sorghum, finger millet, pumpkin and more. They also save the seeds of indigenous trees. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mpahtheleni. Personal interview 2023) states: "Our seed bank is not only that we place the seeds like a museum. We have to do storage so that we give people the seeds to plant. Our seed bank is going to be constructed in another way; it is a learning centre. That's why in DLM our programme is called Seed and Food System." The storing of seeds has been a tradition in which women have participated



A traditional ecological calendar used among the Vhongwaniwapo.

in Vhongwaniwapo culture. DLM is therefore revitalising this role of women.

The production of food in indigenous traditions for most of human history focused on advancing biological diversity. This approach changed with the rise of chemical use after World War I and World War II. The Western world became dependent on chemical farming methods, which gravely affected indigenous farming. Consequently, mono-crop farming became the dominant food and farming system, largely replacing Indigenous agriculture (Seeds of Freedom 2012). Subsistence farming also changed as mono-crop farming became the standard practice on much of the continent. Farmers were enticed by these new agricultural practices because of short-term benefits. However, they had to keep up with the rise in the cost of production because of the need to buy new seeds, fertilisers and pesticides in order to meet the demands of an unpredictable market (Kom et al 2023).

Two farming systems have been coexisting in the Vhembe District Municipality in Limpopo. Large-scale commercial farms cultivate subtropical crops that support the country's agricultural economy through exports. At the same time, 90% of rural communities mainly depend on small-scale farming for their income and household food security (Materechera & Scholes, 2022). Limpopo has the largest involvement with agriculture among households in the country at 41%, yet 91,5% of that statistic relates to farming for subsistence as an additional food source and only 4,4% relates to farming for income. Moreover, "up to 41% of small-scale tree crop farmers in the Vhembe district depend primarily on welfare in the form of state pensions, available from the age of 60 years onwards, as their main livelihood source. These were used to purchase food from markets to supplement food obtained from home gardens" (Materechera & Scholes 2022). Therefore, by contrast with large-scale farmers, small-scale farmers' whole income does not derive from their farms.

The continuous demand for mono-crops within this new global agriculture is distressing to indigenous farmers. Global agriculture is driven by multinational corporations that invest in the latest technologies to increase profits. Indigenous farming, by contrast, is characterised by the use of traditional methods to grow crops and raise livestock for subsistence and local markets (Lewis 2021). One of the main reasons for the rise in global agriculture is the increasing demand for food in the international market. With a growing global population, there is a need to produce more food to meet the demand. Countries with arable land and favourable climate conditions have become prime targets for global agriculture investment. Yet climate change might complicate these agrarian conditions (Lewis 2021).

Another factor that contributes to the replacement of indigenous farming is a lack of infrastructure and investment in traditional farming methods. In an online article published by the College of Agricultural Sciences, Pennsylvania State University, Fogle and Kime (2021) state: "For agricultural operations to function and continue, they require support systems and facilities (infrastructure), to remain viable. This infrastructure in some cases can be specific to agriculture and in others used by the public as well." Infrastructure, they state, includes the

farms, markets and businesses that support the farms within a given area (Fogle & Kime 2021). Small-scale farmers often lack access to modern technologies and inputs such as fertilisers, seeds and irrigation systems. This makes their farming less efficient and less profitable compared to global agriculture, which is undermining indigenous farming. In the current climate conditions, irrigation threatens small-scale farmers and their production capacity because, unlike large-scale commercial farms that have access to irrigation, small-scale Indigenous farmers are more dependent on rainfall and water harvesting (Kom et al 2023). In an article published online by *The Conversation*, Karissa Moothoo Padayachie (2023), a researcher for the Centre for Competition, Regulation and Economic Development, University of Johannesburg, states that farming is a capital- and resource-intensive business that requires access to sufficient finance, but government funding for smallholder or small-scale farmers is limited in both scale and scope and provided on a piecemeal basis.

Padayachie (2023) notes that fresh efforts are being made to increase the share of black ownership in South Africa's agricultural sector following decades of missteps and badly designed interventions that have failed to significantly change the ownership patterns in the sector. According to her, the latest plan – known as the Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan – aims to provide, among other things, comprehensive farmer assistance, development finance, agricultural research and development, and extension services. The master plan has been signed by government and representatives of various businesses and civil society organisations within the agricultural sector and is, according to Padayachie (2023), the first multi-stakeholder strategic plan in the country. Its aim is to promote transformation in agriculture and agro-processing sectors affected by apartheid.

The rise of global agriculture has had several negative impacts on indigenous farming. First, it has led to the displacement of smallholder farmers from their land. Multinational corporations often acquire large expanses of land, which were previously used for subsistence farming, for commercial agriculture. This leaves local farmers without access to land. In Venda, for example, Levubu Farms and the Tshivhase Tea Estate, both in the Vhembe District, take up large swathes of land,

which in some cases fall on sacred grounds. Tshivhase, which was acquired under the government's land reform programme, has fallen into a state of neglect. Richard Thagwana, a long-time employee of the estate, blames the Limpopo Economic Development Agency (LEDA), a government entity, for this situation.

He told the SABC in an interview that LEDA is not providing enough support. "So far, we are not producing at the moment because we don't have harvesters, we don't have maintenance money, the machinery is not maintained, the fleet is not roadworthy, everything here is shattered. And it pains me because I know the magnitude of this tea industry" (Makungo 2023). The tea estate once employed over two-thousand people but now employs only about 200 workers. The result is that vast swathes of farmland are now underutilised. Global agriculture has also had a negative impact on the environment. Large-scale monoculture farming practices have resulted in soil degradation, deforestation and water pollution. Indigenous farming alternatively uses traditional methods that are sustainable and environmentally friendly (Vho-Makaulule 2023).

In addition, the rise of global agriculture has led to a loss of biodiversity. Indigenous farmers use a wide variety of crops and livestock, which are adapted to local conditions. Global agriculture focuses on a few cash crops and livestock breeds, making it more competitive in international markets. This results in a loss of local genetic diversity (Seeds of Freedom 2012; UN Environment Programme 2021).

Although Limpopo has fewer food security concerns than other provinces of South Africa, it is still a critical issue in rural areas. The United Nations (Un.org) defines food security as a state where all people have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life. South Africa is one of the countries that have set up food security policies, but access to food is still a challenge, particularly in the countryside (South Africa National Treasury 2020).

An additional challenge for food security in rural areas is poverty. Many people in these areas do not have access to enough resources to purchase food. Because indigenous farming is not well supported,

small-scale farming for subsistence is not productive enough to provide adequate food for households. These issues are compounded by a lack of infrastructure, which makes it difficult to transport food to rural areas. In the face of these problems, organisations such as Vho-Makaulule seek to revive indigenous practices. They believe that with the right support, indigenous and small-scale farming can thrive.

Vho-Makaulule believes there are several potential solutions to challenges regarding food sovereignty and security in her community, particularly solutions that focus on utilising traditional farming practices. One approach is to provide greater financial backing to small-scale farmers, who are often the backbone of local food systems. Such backing can involve providing access to credit, training and technology, as well as protecting small farmers' land rights. Another approach is to promote agroecological farming practices, which prioritise sustainability and resilience and can help mitigate the impacts of climate change (Kom et al 2023). Poorva Karkare (2022) of the Centre for Africa–Europe Relations believes another solution is to increase intra-African trade as a way to increase the resilience of domestic and regional food markets to shocks. From this perspective, she believes, the much-talked-about African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is not just an opportunity for economic growth and development but a necessity to ensure food security and resilience on the continent.

According to the *International assessment of agricultural knowledge, science and technology for development* (IAASTD) report (Independent Evaluation Group 2010), agroecology is the most appropriate agricultural system to support small-scale farmers while addressing global climate change challenges (African Centre for Biosafety 2015). This ground-breaking report, commissioned by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Bank, indicates that an agroecological approach acknowledges the varied scope of agriculture and enables progress towards equitable and sustainable development goals. Various technologies, including indigenous and traditional knowledge, draw on the science of agroecology.

Vho-Makaulule is a big advocate of organic farming methods and agroecological practices among indigenous small-scale farmers. She believes that organic farming techniques yield stronger, more resilient



An Indigenous farmer in Venda

crops. The use of artificial agrochemicals is prohibited or limited in organic farming. Moreover, Indigenous sustainable farming systems are rejuvenated by the natural recycling of natural soil-replenishing nutrients, such as biomass, compost, manure and other forms of organic matter (Imoro et al 2021). This farming system relies on natural processes to control pests and requires lower artificial external energy inputs than large-scale mono-crop farming (Imoro et al 2021). While organic farming is less supported within the current global farming system, the techniques of intercropping, cover cropping, crop rotation and agroforestry are utilised in indigenous communities such as those in Venda.

Uhunamure et al (2021) conducted a study about the perceptions of South African smallholder farmers, particularly in Limpopo, regarding organic farming, highlighting concerns over pollution linked with large-scale or mono-crop agriculture. They discovered that there is an increasing interest in organic agriculture, that is, farming “done without

the use or application of synthetic chemicals such as genetically modified seeds, pesticides, fungicides, insecticides or fertilisers” (Uhunamure et al 2021) among small-scale farmers. Organic farming involves a wide range of techniques that help reduce pollution, sustain ecosystems, improve production and promote quality nutrition associated with improved economic and social viability (Uhunamure et al 2021; Ndlovu et al 2022). Organic farming techniques support sustainable agricultural development by promoting soil, plant and human health while supporting ecological systems.

Remarkably, South Africa has had a strong record of organic farming throughout its history. The country was one of the founding members of the International Federation of Organic Movements (IFOAM), and although the use of organic farming today is low, there has been an upsurge in interest in techniques of organic agriculture. The districts of Mopani, Vhembe, Capricorn, Sekhukhune and Waterberg in Limpopo were researched to explore the use of organic farming techniques. The research was carried out among certified organic farmers and farmers who claimed to use organic practices. The researchers discovered that, in Limpopo, there is an increased interest in using manure and compost as opposed to synthetic chemicals (Uhunamure et al 2021; Ndlovu et al 2022). Sustainable practices such as these will benefit food security for the growing population in the coming decades.

Given the projected increase in South Africa’s population – with a predicted population of 73 million by 2050 – the country will have to produce fifty percent more food to maintain food security. People are turning to organic farming as a solution to the growing demand for food because “informal organic farming by subsistence and smallholder producers in the country may feed as much as two-thirds of the country’s population” (Uhunamure et al 2021). In addition to playing a role in enhancing sustainability, organic farming, according to Vho-Makaulule, increases food sovereignty and has a strong link with the consumption of ancestral foods, which increases the likelihood of healthy food choices (Mbhatsani et al 2021).

Farming in South Africa is subject to ever-changing environmental, political and social conditions. Small-scale and Indigenous farmers are the most vulnerable yet are an important part of food sovereignty and

security. The complexities of Indigenous and small-scale farming, which are linked to climate change, an unpredictable market, poor support and the dominance of mono-crop global agriculture, emphasise these farmers' vulnerability. Nevertheless, the techniques of indigenous small-scale farming, when combined with modern technology, may offer solutions to food insecurity amid climate change. For instance, the use of drought-resistant crops, drip irrigation and natural compost can help to increase yields. By combining traditional and modern farming practices, farmers can adapt to the changing climate and ensure food security for their communities (Vho-Makaulule 2023; Kom et al 2023). Vho-Makaulule is working towards empowering her community by integrating indigenous knowledge with modern conservation, technologies and finance mechanisms. Her vision is to revitalise indigenous and local knowledge to tackle the contemporary issues of food insecurity.

Conclusion



Historically, female power in Venda was reflective of the gender flexibility of many precolonial African societies. In precolonial Venda, households' married women enjoyed privileges of land and agrarian decision-making. Additionally, Vhavenda populations in the Soutpansberg region had assorted lineages of female leaders, from petty chieftainships and headwomen to advisers known as *nduna* or *mukoma*. Historians and gender scholars have examined the matrilineal leadership of two spirit mediums, Tshisnavhute of Mianzwi, an Mbedzi ruler among a succession of female leaders/mediums since the 18th century, and the Lovedu Rain Queen, Modjadji, both of whom held power through their rainmaking gifts (Lestrade 1930; Schlosser 2002). Lastly, as described at length, among the Vhongwaniwapo, *makhadzi* historically played a critical role in families and the royal leadership within customary governance. However, after contact with white settler colonialists and missionaries, these constructions of gender and women's power receded.

The manifestation of colonial gender ideologies in Venda, particularly at the intersection of the Church, the nuclear family and wage labour, had a critical impact on the corporeal existence of *makhadzi*. In interview statements obtained as part of my dissertation research, *makhadzi* are described as conduits between this realm and the ancestral one, a belief particularly contested within colonial and apartheid social formations. The role of *makhadzi* is a multilayered example of gender flexibility and this, paired with their connection with the sacred, challenged the cultural values of white settlers and missionaries. A *makhadzi* was heretical in nature, and her authority in precolonial Venda society was disparaged. The moral and social denigration of *makhadzi* in colonial Venda is not surprising. The literature attests that an African female embodiment of leadership that conflicted with colonial social conventions was considered deviant. In the context of colonial social formations, the relegation of *makhadzi* is a form of symbolic

violence in an attempt to control their citizenship rights and physical relationship with the sacred. This is substantiated by the demonisation of sacred site practices, which explains the subordination of *makhadzi* to male priests and the replacement of sacred land with the sanctity of churches. Flexible gender expressions such as girls' initiation rites into womanhood, gender flexibility and matrilineal customs were not acceptable to colonial societies forged on Christian, male and capitalist values.

Further, the agricultural implications of the introduction of wage labour also disrupted *makhadzi*. While it is true that approximately 80% of small-scale farmers in Africa today are women, colonial social formations relegated women's input in agricultural systems and recanted female inheritance and access to communal land. Accordingly, *makhadzi* were ostracised from their pastoral roles, including their guardianship of sacred environments. These social progressions are clarified in the following statement by Osborn (2011): "Recognizing that gender roles are, in part, a product of wider social, economic, and political processes and that those processes are likewise affected by prevailing gender norms, thus generates a more complex understanding of the foundations and forms of power in ... Africa". The gendered and social arrangements of the colonial and apartheid eras are replicated in Venda today. This is evident in the agreement of local, national and international actors who enact development schemes with little input from women.

Analysing the advancement of corporate activities in the Venda region from the colonial era to today exposes an authoritative and patriarchal relationship between Westernism and nature. Colonial and apartheid-era land policies, ranging from the displacement of Indigenous communities from protected areas and wildlife reserves, forced removals based on racial ideology and segregation, and the country's overall spatial politics, altered people–environment relations and communities' access to resources. For example, the replacement of indigenous agriculture and traditional ecological knowledge with commercial farming and monocropping or the extraction of the country's mineral wealth exposes the dominance of Western ideology in food and seed systems, and economic and development paradigms. Further,

dominant metaphors about gender and nature have co-evolved within a Westernised global capitalist agenda. Christian fundamentalism as an integral component of Western patriarchal claims to nature is deeply ingrained in South Africa's white settler philosophy of authority. The erosion of the traditional role of *makhadzi*, especially the connection *makhadzi* have with nature, further connects South Africa's colonial and apartheid gender ideologies and women's marginalisation from land and environmental legislation.

The imposed gender norms of white settler colonialists have become embedded in local, provincial and national governing structures in South Africa in the post-apartheid era. As local Vhavenda male leadership increases through capitalist means, *makhadzi*, by contrast, lose power. This further supports the notion that global patriarchy is a dominant characteristic of capitalism – which determines economic models, land-use strategies, global food and seed systems, and environmental and conservation approaches. Furthermore, in an effort to gain capitalist power by acquiring land and authority through traditional governance, male leaders recast culture and manipulate South Africa's democratic structures.

This legacy has been particularly detrimental to women in rural areas in the former homelands. Women's citizenship rights have been diminished due to poor legal representation, dominant systems of patrilineal inheritance, low ratios of female political influence, female exclusion from select traditional courts, tenuous access to land, insecure housing tenure and degraded livelihoods. In this scenario, women disproportionately lack representation and influence to shape customary law, environmental policy and conservation, especially in the Vhembe District in Limpopo. The presence of multinational corporations and their current development paradigms merely exacerbate these issues due to shoddy public participation meetings, unsustainable development practices and meagre career opportunities for women. The study undertaken for my doctoral research revealed that, in the Vhembe District, these discriminatory frameworks and multinational development schemes have impacted the role of *makhadzi* uniquely given their traditional position as custodians of sacred natural sites and their role of overseeing customs integral to ecological systems.

Through this joint project, Vho-Makaulule and I reflect on the issues of biocultural diversity that are ever-present among the Indigenous Vhongwaniwapo and examine the ecocultural roles of the women known as *makhadzi*. As custodians of sacred natural sites in the Vhembe District *makhadzi* environmental knowledge derives from ancestral insight, customs and ecocultural wisdom among the Vhongwaniwapo. These women officiate over traditions interconnected with environmental sustainability and agriculture. *Makhadzi* also customarily manage seed selection and storage and adhere to ecological calendars to determine harvest times for different seasons. The elders, in particular, preserve their approaches to harvesting and traditional farming, which underlie healthy food and seed systems and their conception of food sovereignty. By reason of these various traditions, *makhadzi* who are members of the community-based organisation Dzomo la Mupo (DLM) identify as ecologists and assert that they have important perspectives to add to the dialogue on climate change, agroecology and modern conservation techniques.

DLM is working to reverse the effects of climate change and the deterioration of biodiversity in the area that falls under the Vhembe District Municipality. Through this book, we learn that, among DLM members, there is a distinctive political praxis and environmental ethic grounded in *makhadzi* environmental epistemologies and customary beliefs. Accordingly, DLM members work to empower women, restore the traditional role of *makhadzi* and strengthen community resilience by retaining food sovereignty and expanding land-based livelihood strategies grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems.

DLM founder and director Vho-Makaulule has orchestrated her vision for defending the environment and Vhongwaniwapo culture in accordance with her desire as a mother to protect her children and the next generation. As a mother, Vho-Makaulule regards her work as a call to action to mothers worldwide to protect nature and the environment. Safeguarding The Vhembe District's sacred sites is unmistakably important, as is protecting larger landscapes and the whole earth. Vho-Makaulule sees her role as a *makhadzi* and mother as the impetus for protecting life, in much the way that Catherine Acholonu's theory of motherism positions African women's empowerment and civic

engagement in the context of motherhood. By identifying as ecologists in the post-apartheid era, *makhadzi* members of DLM are energising their cultural roles as women and reasserting their authoritative knowledge about nature and the environment. Vho-Makaulule (Makaulule, Mpaitheleni. Personal interview 2017) observes: “We as women hold the responsibility for custodianship of life because the ancestors chose us to be *makhadzi*. “*Makhadzi*” is not just a name or title; it is a role – a spiritual role. We are the custodians of water, soil, seed and forests, and traditional medicine that comes from indigenous trees. We cannot stand back and watch life be destroyed.” Through her role as a *phangami*, or leader, Vho-Makaulule is restoring confidence among the *makhadzi* of DLM to regain their leadership role of being advocates on behalf of their communities in the Vhembe District Municipality.

Globalisation and land legislation have also impacted the Vhongwaniwapo and the *makhadzi*. Gender-based discrimination as an outgrowth of globalisation has been studied at length. African gender scholars have noted a trajectory of exploitation and marginalisation of African women in development paradigms from colonialism to today. In the former apartheid homelands, specifically in Venda, this systematic exclusion is rooted in colonial and apartheid gender ideologies expressed through the country’s land acts which are heavily influenced by ongoing discriminatory scaffolds. Examination of the evolution of South African land legislation shows explicit provisions that disenfranchise women not only through a confluence of inequitable land policies but also in how the laws function within traditional leadership structures and courts. Now, owing to unaccountable governance in many rural areas, this legislation empowers local, provincial, and national politicians to arrange development schemes that leave the former homelands and rural areas intensely vulnerable to multinational companies such as commercial farming, or extractive industries that seek the nation’s high deposits of fossil fuels and mineral wealth. This negatively impacts Indigenous communities and women especially.

The disregard for women’s traditional roles related to eco-cultural and environmental wisdom is directly connected to the socio-political changes in the Vhembe District and the country at large. We explore how colonialism and now globalisation reinforce gender discrimination

within agriculture and the land administration process, and how that leaves women vulnerable to the decisions of corporate and extractive entities amid a local and international confluence of power. This lack of decision-making power leaves *makhadzi* and other women vulnerable to environmental crises such as climate change, a lack of access to clean and safe water, and compromised food security and sovereignty. This makes Vho-Makaulule's community organising crucial.

DLM works towards protecting sacred natural sites and preventing coal companies and extractive industries from depleting and polluting the land and water. The organisation's conservation practices are grounded in traditional indigenous knowledge systems. DLM continues to work towards the revival of *makhadzi* ecocultural wisdom and intergenerational learning to restore community strength. Together, these women and community members work to protect nature in all its forms, including indigenous forests, rivers and sacred natural sites, and to uphold indigenous agricultural practices to maintain food security. What is of the highest importance is to restore the natural order of *mupo*, or creation. This is essential as Vho-Makaulule assiduously strives to promote earth jurisprudence.

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