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The Mapungubwe Story and Land Claims

The Battle for the Soul of the Dead, Greed, and Deception

M. Piet Sebola

Introduction

The South African government initiated the land claims process in order to solve the land inequalities created by the “Native Land Act of 1913” which resulted in asymmetrical ownership of land between Africans and whites. As a result, 87% of productive land is owned by the white minority as compared to only 13% of infertile land belonging to Af-

ricans (Sebola 2014: 15). The process resulted in unintended consequences, however, in the sense that most claiming communities lodge, in a dishonest manner, claims to the land that they identified. The Land Claims Commissioners conduct therefore the so-called “verifications process,” in which the communities should identify graveyards or old buildings as proofs that they themselves, or their ancestors, once settled in the area. At least two major problems hinder the entire process. Firstly, claimants want to claim only the areas that are economically profitable; and, secondly, multiple related or unrelated clans, motivated by greed, lay claims to the same area. The case in point analyzed here is Mapungubwe that became the centre of such controversy. Specifically, the Batwanamba of Tshivhula (Sebola) and various Vhavenda groupings claim to have been settlers of the Mapungubwe area and descendants of the ancestors resting in the Mapungubwe graves. They also claim to belong to the powerful Mapungubwe dynasty. In this article, I do not ask if the said dynasty ever existed or not but rather address the question if the people lying in those graves are the ancestors of the Batwanamba of Tshivhula (Sebola) clans (in this case Sebola, Machete, and Leshiba) or the Venda (in this case the Vhalemba, Vhangona, Vhavenda, and Vhasenzi)? In answering this question, I will critically look at the controversial nature of the Mapungubwe excavations, as well as the legitimacy of the Batwanamba of Tshivhula (Sebola) and the Vhavenda claims, respectively.

Mapungubwe

The Mapungubwe story dates back to the 1930s, to the research project undertaken by the University of Pretoria that concerned archaeological excavations in the Transvaal Province. The story began at the Farm Greefswald, then owned by E. E. Collins, located close to the point where the borders of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana come together (Carruthers 2006; UNESCO 2014: 1–17). The discovery of the Mapungubwe site in 1932 was in fact a rediscovery of that place already known to local farmers (Hirst 2014: 2). Tshiwana Sematla (Mokoena) took the researchers to the hill that was considered a no-go area by the people living in that area who believed that something terrible could happen to any person who would dare to go to the gravesites there. People were cautioned through their oral tradition never to visit that place or even not to point at it with a finger. This suggests that the people buried there were not ordinary mortals but rather of noble origin. However, E. S. J van

Graan, from the University of Pretoria, and his son J. C. O van Graan, accompanied by a local farmer, broke the millennial taboo and visited the site, anyway, to find stonewalls, certain gold artefacts, pottery, and glass beads.

Setumu (2002) argues that the news about the discovery of that site was kept secret because its existence threatened the established belief that white Afrikaner were the champions of civilisation in South Africa. The archaeologists estimate that the site was inhabited between 900 and 1300,¹ and more precisely between 1202–1290 (Ivarsson 2007; Meyer and Cloete 2010), and was one of three settlements that belonged to the Mapungubye Kingdom. The archaeological remains of the other two settlements have been identified at the farm Schroda (900–1220) and the site denominated K2, or Bambandiyanalo (1020–1220), where specific types of ceramic were discovered (Setumu 2002, Carruthers 2006).

The Schroda and K2 are not of major concern for the ongoing land claims in South Africa, however; their interest is centred on the Mapungubwe hill gravesites. The research on the Mapungubwe Kingdom points to the existence of a true successful kingdom in the southern part of Africa that was operating as a commercial hub for trade conducted by Arab merchants. Other sources suggest a sophisticated system, with a highly developed agriculture, mining, and metallurgy (Warren 2013: 10f.). Setumu (2002), however, asserts that most stories about Mapungubwe are in fact stereotyped fabrications and distortions. Indeed, there are many lacunae in the research concerning Mapungubwe that require further study and clarifications. For instance, what kind of polity Mapungubwe really was and who are the people of Mapungubwe? How did they disappear? Can the theory of changing climatic conditions be applied in this case?; why there is no reference to the Mapungubwe in Arab sources?, etc.

The Name Mapungubwe

There is no oral tradition that would relate the Mapungubwe to any contemporary ethnic group. Certain authors agree that the name Mapungubye means: “the place of the jackals or the place of the great jackal” (Anonymous n. d.: 1). Some others argue that the word can be explained only by combining Venda and Sotho elements, although it seems to be better understood in Venda rather than in the

Sotho, which ultimately points to the first group as the original inhabitants of that area. On the other hand, it is also plausible that the name has absolutely nothing to do with the Venda, and the word might have appeared even after the kingdom had collapsed – if it ever existed. It is true, that in Venda language a jackal is called *phungubye*, with the plural form *dzi phungubye* and not *mapungubye*. If the word *mapungubye* is an expression from the northern Sotho language, however, the place could have also been called *diphukubyen*, and not *mapungubye*. Some other interesting references can be also found in the Lemba and the Shona languages. Thus, according to the Lemba, the word means “the place where rock flows like water,” which suggests that the location was the place where metallurgy was practiced. Still, we must remember that the Lemba, who are spread across South Africa, usually speak the language of the area where they live. In the past, they spoke Kalanga though. The meaning found in the Shona language suggests veneration of stones or stone buildings (temples). The word is not used in any Shona or Kalanga dialect today, however.

The People of Mapungubwe

As stated above, no ethnic group living in the area could trace their ancestry to the people of Mapungubwe, except for the post-apartheid misinterpretations motivated by possible land claim benefits. There is no reliable scientific research, however, that would corroborate such claims. Only a few authors, writing mostly in the 1930s, made attempts to relate the Mapungubwe people with one or another ethnic community of today. The current (mythologized) narration about the Mapungubwe can be summarized in the following way. The King at Mapungubwe established his capital on the hilltop and his rule spread across the area. There were demarcated ways to arrive at his court. The king was both a political and a spiritual leader of some kind.

Nonetheless, this narration about the early inhabitants of Mapungubwe and their economically, culturally, and politically strong kingdom fails to consider the current cultural reality in the area. Setumu (2002) suggests that after the collapse of the kingdom, the society could have moved to Soutpansberg, although the present-day Soutpansberg communities are not necessarily related to the Mapungubwe people either. The clans living in Soutpansberg included the Tshivhula (Sebola), the Sephuma, the Seakamela, and perhaps even certain Venda clans – all having their roots in the territories located north of the Limpopo River (today Zimba-

¹ Setumu (2002); Baxter and Kudakwashe (2008); Chandler (2009: 1–12); Hirst (2014).

bwe). Now, in order to discuss the legitimacy of the ongoing land-claim process, it is indeed necessary to discuss possible historical links of those groups to the Mapungubwe people.

The Vhavenda

The Vhavenda nation consists of descendants of several heterogeneous clans of which the Vhangona and the VhaMbedzi are considered as the “original” Venda. The archaeological evidence and carbon dating suggests that the Vhangona settled in the Venda territory around 700 A.D., while the Vhasenzi (Masingo, Vhalaudzi, Vhandalamo, and the Vhalembe), as well as the other current Venda-speaking groups are said to have come to that area in the late 1500s (Mabogo 1990: 12 ff.), presumably from Central Africa. Nonetheless, other historians and archaeologists suggest the period between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century as the time of that migration, although these estimates would concern only the Venda-speaking groups of Kalanga/Shona origin.

Kashe-Katiya (2013: 67) described and analyzed how the Vhangona Cultural Movement, which represented the Vhavenda, Vhangona, and Vhabikwana groups, challenged the University of Pretoria about the repatriation of remains of their supposed Mapungubwe ancestors. If archaeological evidence is to be trusted, there are two interesting issues about the Vhangona and the other Venda claimants concerning their ancestry with the Mapungubwe people. Firstly, the Mapungubwe Kingdom existed from 900 to 1300 and archaeological evidence and the carbon dating suggest that the Vhangona had been in that area almost two centuries before the Mapungubwe people could arrive. On the other hand, the Vhasenzi probably entered the area of Venda in 1500, that is, almost two centuries after the collapse of the Mapungubwe dynasty. This means, that the Vhasenzi and Vhalembe cannot claim any ancestral relations to the community that lived there two hundred years before. Still, the Venda-speaking communities used the name of the place as evidence of being natives and owners of the place (Nienaber et al. 2008). And yet the name “Mapungubwe” cannot be attributed to any currently living tribe, be it Venda, Shona, or Sotho; so far linguists have concluded that Mapungubwe has no meaning that could be understood in any of those languages. Thirdly, if the gravesites belonged to any of the Vhangona and/or other Vhavenda clans, they would have been performing their rituals there before the arrival of white settlers. Indeed, African royal lineages always keep

performing rituals on graveyards of their ancestors. In this case, none of the claimants did that because they could not perform rituals on strangers’ graves and, moreover, all African clans observed the rule according to which unknown gravesites were no-go areas.

The Tshivhula/Sebola People

The oral tradition of the Tshivhula clan is not precise regarding the date of their arrival in South Africa. Two accounts are provided by Mamadi, a local historian who worked with Dr. Van Warmelo on other research projects, and by Vhatwanamba of Tswera.

M. Frank Mamadi

According to Mamadi (1940), the Tshivhula or Sebola people come from the area located north of Limpopo (currently Zimbabwe) and crossed the Limpopo River during the Mzilikazi wars. They settled in the Venda territory. After certain time, however, a conflict broke out between the Tshivhula and their Venda cousins, about a not fulfilled marriage contract. After that war, the Tshivhula left Venda and migrated to a place in the area of Soutpansberg, where they established a kingdom called it Mavhambo.

Mamadi’s account of the Tshivhula or Sebola history does not point to any dynastic connections between them and the Mapungubwe. Mamadi himself was born in 1875, and he was a relative of important political leaders of the clan. His account can be therefore trusted. Researchers studied the Mapungubwe area/sites/people also cite other oral accounts. Lestrade, for instance, concentrated on the Mphephu, the Tshivhase, and the Sebina clans of Botswana, but the results did not provide much relevant information. Mamadi’s work remains therefore the most cited ethnographic work on the origin of the Tshivhula (Sebola), Musina, Mamadi, and Machete clans (cf. Lekgoathi n. d.: 11).

The Vhatwanamba of Netswera

The Vhatwanamba of Tswera present a similar history of Tshivhula but with certain light differences. Unlike M. Frank Mamadi, who did not provide any date of arrival of his clan to the Venda and then to the Soutpansberg area, they believe that Tshivhula or Sebola arrived in South Africa around A.D. 1780

(*Mamphiswa Online* 2014). Still, there are two contradictory concerning this date. Firstly, the same source claims that Tshivhula were Mungona (part of early Venda natives that settled in Mapungubwe). According to archaeological data, the Vhangona arrived in the Venda territory around A.D. 700. Secondly, written sources suggest that the Tshivhula arrived in the present-day South Africa around A.D. 1780 and stayed in the Mihoye Mountains until they were threatened by the Mzilikazi assault around the year 1800, which ultimately forced them to abandon Mihoye Mountains and other settlements, such as Marandzhe, and to end up in Soutpansberg. This also contradicts the thesis that Tshivhula or Sebola were Mungona – which is also rejected by the Tshivhula or Sebola clans. Furthermore, Mabogo (1990: 15) described the movement of the Tshivhula (Sebola) from the Venda territory as a retreat caused by the aggression by the Vhangona of Raphulu who lived with them at Vuvha.

The history of the Tshivhula/Sebola people is characterised by many similar discrepancies, which means that researchers collecting information did not verify their data correctly. L. E. Matsaung, for example, when giving a historical account of the Musina people in his article, confuses the clans' names of the Musina and the Tshivhula/Sebola by labelling “[t]he Musina people as Mathwanapa (Baleya tribe),” while in reality the Sebola are Bathwanamba and the Musina are of the Baleya clan (Marsaung 2005). Similarly, Huffman (2012) makes reference of Motete as “western Tswana.” However, the oral history of the Tshivhula refer to its founder as one of the popular royal sons of Ramasunzi Tshivhula, a hunter with multiple skills. It is plausible, however, that Huffman talks of another Motete in his contribution. Motete is a Kalanga name, and not a Tswana, and the origin of the Sebola is Kalanga. Motete was therefore a Sebola prince and not a “western Tswana” at all.

Now, the Tshivhula Royal Council, as well as some other of their clans, e.g. the Machete and Leshiba, collectively claimed ancestral connections to the Mapungubwe, participated in the repatriation of the Mapungubwe remains (Kashe-Katiya 2013: 67f.), and in their reburial at the Mapungubwe site. Nonetheless, it is very clear from the cited oral and written accounts that the Batwanamba of Tshivhula arrived in the current South Africa almost 500 years after the Mapungubwe dynasty had disappeared; any ancestral link to that dynasty should be, therefore, questioned.

Attempts to Identify the Unknown

The question whose bones lie in the gravesites of the Mapungubwe has not been satisfactorily answered so far. In the mid-1930s, Professor of Bantu Studies at the University of Pretoria, G. P. Lestrade, made an attempt to establish possible historical links between the existing clans and the Mapungubwe dynasty. He concluded that Mapungubwe was occupied by “a race of mixed elements of Shona and Sotho.” In this way, Lestrade suggested that the people of Mapungubwe are of Shona-Venda origin, and their descendants are, therefore, the Baleya [Musina], Batwanamba [Sebola]), and the Sotho group of Bakwena. The present-day claimants to the land around the Mapungubwe legitimize their claims pointing to this particular statement. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence concerning the Baleya is rather scarce and cannot be used to support the claim.

In the same text, Lestrade argues that most likely the Bakwena were the last clan to arrive in that area and subjugated the Sebola (Tshivhula) and Baleya (Musina). Nonetheless, this assertion is questionable for three reasons: Firstly, the oral history of the Batwanamba (Sebola) clan is silent about them having been ever conquered by any enemy; to the contrary, they have always been peaceful and respected people. Secondly, the Baleya were specialists in metallurgy and they were regarded as useful and necessary neighbours. Thirdly, according to the oral history of the clan, a Tswana boy named Moseri, from the Bakwena clan in Botswana, married a Sebola girl named Mohodo. Consequently, all their children belonged also to the Sebola (Tshivhula) clan as nephews, nieces, and grandchildren, of the clan's founder. In this way, Moseri would be the grandfather of Tshiwana Mokoena – the last descendant of the Mapungubwe. Robert Broom's analysis of a skull recovered at the Mapungubwe site suggests that the individual was not a typical Bantu (Dubow 2008: 98). This discovery, however, brought about even more confusion about the Mapungubwe graves. Specifically, Broom pointed to the fact that the skull under study showed certain Semitic features, which in turn supports Lemba's claim as Mapungubwe descendants.

The Honesty, Deception, and Greed of Land Claims

Sebola and Tsheola (2014) have argued that land claims in South Africa are often characterized by dishonesty and greed to the extent that claimants fraudulently wish to lodge claims only on land

where active economic production is taking place. Mapungubwe, therefore, became a target of multiple claimants who are not interested in the area per se but with the international recognition accorded to the archaeological discoveries in the area. To a particular extent the clans in the Limpopo area mentioned above started prefacing their origin with the Mapungubwe area. Interestingly, the Baleya (Musina), whom Lestrade identified as supposedly related to the Mapungubwe dynasty have made little or no attempts to claim such relation. On the other hand, the Sebola (Tshivhula), the Machete, the Leshiba, and the Bakwena did lay their claims on the gravesite (Dubow 2008: 98).

Nonetheless, the arguments that they present, based on archaeological and written sources, as well as on the oral tradition, are not conclusive if not inconsistent. Schoettler (1971: 3) argued, for instance, that “[t]he value of archaeological data depends upon the extent of the excavations and the skills and knowledge of the archaeologist who interprets the material remains.” This, in turn, opens room for individual bias and differences in interpretation. Similarly, the claimants subscribe to the theory of that the Mapungubwe people traded with Arabs in gold (Anonymous n. d.: 1 f.), which would explain the Semitic features of the skull studied by Broom; and yet, no further studies have corroborated his findings.

Land claims in South Africa are said to have taken a slower pace than anticipated perhaps because many claims that had been honoured resulted in economic failure (Jeffery 2013: 1 f.; Sebola 2014). Specifically, the previously productive farms are no longer active and about R\$ 2.14 billion was spent on recapitalising some of them. While the government redistributed land to promote agricultural development in African communities, many groups showed to be more interested in financial compensation than in land use (James 2009; Jeffrey 2013: 5). Moreover, those who want land as a form of compensation, frequently use the land for residential use rather than for agriculture. According to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2012: 1–11), at particular instances, different clans of different historical origins claim one area as theirs despite the lack of any historical evidence to support it.

Still, the “Land Restitution Rights Act 22 of 1994” empowers the Ministry of Land Affairs to honour a land claim even if the minister only feels that it is a valid restitution claim (*South African Human Rights Commission* 2013: 5). The Mapungubwe area, which became internationally famous because of the archaeological discoveries made there, opened the way for such doubtful and un-

verifiable claims based on greed. Such greed has already caused South Africa substantial losses in revenue collection from agricultural land. There is, therefore, urgent need to redefine the criteria for land claims and to honour them on fair terms. Natural resources are public treasures and should benefit all people and not only particular clans. The current land claim system in the country is causing divisions in African communities.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the claim of certain clans – namely, the Tshivhula (Sebola), the Machete, the Leshiba, the Lemba, the Vhangona, and other Venda groups – to the Mapungubwe gravesite is not appropriate, as their ancestral links to the Mapungubwe Kingdom cannot be consistently corroborated by the existing evidence. A valid claim can only be based on the fact that their ancestors had inhabited that area for some time, even if they later moved elsewhere.

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