**A SHORT HISTORY OF THE LAND OF LEGEND**

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**Geological and fossil history**

A short history on the Land of Legend is actually a contradiction in terms because it is a very long story indeed. Going back to the dawn of time, its geological history includes some of the oldest known dateable rocks on earth. The Sand River Gneiss found on the Messina Nature Reserve (adjacent to the border town of Musina) has been dated at more that 3.2 billion years. The virtually undateable Primitive System found in the south-east of the district probably goes back some 3.5 billion years, whereas the Ancient Granites of the Fundamental Complex (of some 3 billion years and regarded as the foundational rocks of the subcontinent of Southern Africa) guards the southern entrance gate to the district at Matoks.

The Soutpansberg Mountain range forming the 130km backbone of the district is regarded as one of the ancient mountain ranges of Southern Africa. Its birth as a rift valley gradually filling up with sand, goes back 2000 million years. Compare this with the 150 million years of the basaltic peaks of the Drakensberg – Southern Africa’s highest and largest mountain range.

Not only is it an old mountain range but it also has been isolated from other mountain ranges for millions of years. This made it virtually an ecological island giving it time to develop into one of the most varied geological, natural, archaeological and cultural regions of the world. There are 6 endemic tree species, which occur nowhere else, as well as a number of endemic animal species including the beautiful Swanepoel’s Widow Butterfly and a unique lizard.

Extensive fossilised footprints of prehistoric animals at Kokwane near Siloam have been dated back some 180 million years, giving a clear signal of the antiquity of life in the Vhembe District. These footprints are associated with an important episode in the fossil history of the area when the primitive forests and swamps of the Karoo system left a high quality coal endowment in the northeast (and of a lesser quality in the northwest) of the district.

Even more recent and economically important, is the volcanic activity that resulted in the 12 kimberlite pipes exploited today by [Venetia mine](http://www.debeersgroup.com/DebeersWeb/Diamond%2BJourney/De%2BBeers%2BGlobal%2BOperations/De%2BBeers%2BMines/Geology%2Bof%2BVenetia%2Bmine.htm) – the most lucrative diamond mine of De Beers and one of the great diamond bodies of the world. This relatively recent volcanic activity also gave rise to the mountains of Tswime and Tshipise with their associated hot springs. [Return to top](http://www.greatlimpopodream.co.za/history.html#top)

**The human history**

The greatest hour in the human history of the district started about 900 years AD when the amazing Mapungubwe civilisation arose along the life-giving Limpopo River. The key elements of this powerful and sophisticated African kingdom were its priceless gold and ivory products, the trade links with Arab, Chinese, Indian and Indonesian civilisations, extensive stonewalling and the exalted god king status of its leadership. The Golden Rhino artefact has come to be recognised as the foremost symbol of this civilisation, which was the first known to produce golden products in Southern Africa. The high status of its kings was maintained by the physical isolation of the royal family on a flat-topped hill dominating the landscape. This pattern is found even to this day amongst the traditional leadership of the Land of Legend. For nearly 400 years (until 1290) this kingdom could be described as the foremost civilisation of Southern African – an ancient capital of the region. It is also regarded as the cradle of Great Zimbabwe – a civilisation, which was shorter-lived than Mapungubwe but left the most impressive archaeological site in Southern Africa.

Great Zimbabwe’s splendour started from about 1290 and collapsed in about 1450 AD. Similar reasons have been provided for its collapse as for those of Mapungubwe. These include internal strife, the over-utilisation of natural resources and the loss of control of international trade. According to Warren Fish, Great Zimbabwe was abandoned some 50 years before the Europeans started to make an impact with the Portuguese establishing trading stations on the Mozambican coast in the sixteenth century.

One group leaving the Great Zimbabwe capital set up a new subkingdom at [Thulamela](http://www.primeorigins.co.za/interactive_map/nprov/thulamela.htm) ('place of birth') in the northeast corner of the Land of Legend. This impressive stone-walled kingdom were only found in the 1990s and is one of several archaeological sites in the Vhembe District tracing a linkage with Great Zimbabwe. Thulamela maintained some of the extensive trade links of its predecessors and produced a quantity of golden products.

However, the centre of political power moved from Great Zimbabwe to Khami in the south west of present-day Zimbabwe. The Khami kingdom was ruled by the Torwa dynasty and lasted from about AD 1410 to AD 1460. Long-distance trade, as practiced at Great Zimbabwe, and earlier at Mapungubwe, continued at Khami but with the Portuguese replacing the Swahili traders along the East African Coast.

The Khami period was marked with many civil wars, strife and migrations. Some of these migrations ended in, or just north of the Soutpansberg.

The earliest (± 1300AD) local inhabitants known from the oral history are the Ngona people of diverse ethnic origin. They had linkages with the people from both north and south of the area. From about 1450 AD Shona-speaking communities migrated from present day Zimbabwe to form such settlements as the one at Thulamela. They amalgamated with Sotho-speaking communities south of the Soutpansberg.

During the late 1400s and early 1500’s the interaction between the Khami/Great Zimbabwe culture and the Sotho/Tswana culture has started to form a new group, which has been identified as early Venda. This group was already clearly formed by about 1600 AD.

A profound event was the arrival of the Singo royal clan in about 1700 AD. The early history of the Singo is one of the great mysteries of Africa. According to their oral history they are derived from the Congo Basin and has an affinity with the Tutsi people in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. The royal beads, which has been the definite proof of kingship, is said to be of Arabic or even ancient Egyptian origin.

The Singo claim of originating in the far north is supported by their association with the even more mysterious Lemba group, traditionally the iron-making clan of the Vha-Venda people. The Lemba has always claimed to be direct descendants from the Jewish people, a claim recently verified by DNA testing.

The Lemba still has allegiance to the Jewish faith and retains distinct Jewish customs and beliefs.

According to the legend the Singo migrated from their original home known to be Dangadzivhe somewhere along the Congo-river. As they arrived at the Zambezi a solar eclipse took place. This was seen as a warning sign from the gods resulting that they did not cross the Zambezi for a whole generation. (Astronomers could possibly use this eclipse to accurately date this period). In traditional Vha-Venda belief an eclipse was regarded as a harbinger of drought and death.

After a generation they moved to present-day Zimbabwe “between the rivers Zambezi and Limpopo” and build a large city named Dzata meaning “peace” or “refuge”

During this period they had a cruel king - called Dyambehu for his practice of killing his male offspring. His successor Vele was only saved by a maternal uncle and came to power after a fierce power struggle with his paternal uncle Tindima. Continuous attempts were made against his life even after his accession to the throne.

As he escaped one plot after another Vele finally decided to abdicate his throne. Adopting a new name Dambanyika – meaning one who has abdicated from all “land affairs” - he set off for the south. In this he was following the tracks of two groups still loyal to him, who have fled the turmoil of old Dzata: the Vhakwevho and the Bhatavhatsindi. They have crossed the Limpopo River, known to them as the Vhembe, at great risk to settle at Mount Lwandali (presently known as Tshiendeulu) and near Lake Fundudzi in the Soutpansberg mountain range. The Vhakwevho was under the leadership of Vele’s maternal uncle Ratshidula who saved his life as a child and raised him to maturity. Vele Dambanyika was also accompanied by a number of generals who have stayed loyal to him, and the Lemba clans.

On his arrival at Mount Lwandali, Vele Dambanyika was welcomed by the groups that preceded him. They still acknowledged him as their king, pledge their loyal respect to him and assisted him to build a major stronghold on the mountain.

Other loyal groups followed him to Mount Lwandali and he became a great king with no opponents. His rival at Old Dzata has in the meantime met his just deserve in being assassinated by “some Rowzi rascals”

However, at the height of his power, disaster again struck this longsuffering survivor, whose own father and paternal uncle persistently endeavored to kill him. He was following his favorite hunting dogs chasing some “rabbits” on Mount Lwandali early one bright morning. Climbing high against a precipice he entered into a cave where he found and killed several “rock-rabbits”. However, before he could get out of the cave he was trapped by a major rock fall blocking the entrance.

His dogs ran home in great agitation and managed to attract the elders to the cave. As they came to the closed cave, they found the king’s helmet made of jackal skin, the dead rock-rabbits, his weapons and his walking stick. Standing around not knowing what has happened, they heard a voice coming from behind the rock fall. It was Vele Dambanyika calling out to them. Desperately trying to roll over the rocks that have entombed the king they heard his voice addressing his people. This amazing and tragic episode continued for several days until Dambanyika was eventually overcome by hunger and thirst.

After this event Mount Lwandali’s name was changed to Tshiendeulu – meaning royal burial ground. It also became taboo for any chief of the Singo clan to be addressed directly – there must be a wall separating them – to symbolise Vele Dambanyika speaking from behind the rock wall.

Furthermore, it became taboo for any king or chief of the Singo clan to ever visit Tshiendeulu again. The people from Tshiendeulu are also unique in being set free from any obligatory “dzunde” (labour) for the Mphephu chiefs.

Thus came to the end the tragic life of Dambanyika Vele, the first great king of the Singo clan who lived in the Land of Legend.

Dambanyika was succeeded by a man with the name of Phophi, who was appointed regent because the rightful successor was still a minor. In time, Phophi became one of the most famous leaders of the Land of Legend, the great Thohoyandou, who united the Vha-Vhenda people under his leadership.

According to the legend he was told by Dambanyiba to take over the leadership of his people when trapped in the cave.

Phophi then left Mount Lwandali - now renamed Tshiendeulu, and settled on a lower plateau overlooking the Nzhelele valley. Here he established a major city called Dzata “place of peace and refuge” in remembrance of the earlier Dzata beyond the Limpopo. According to one legend Phophi outwitted a troublesome herd of elephants in the Nzhelele Valley, which was bothering his people, thereby enabling the secure settlement of the fertile and well-watered valley. He did this by a carefully planned system of deep traps and then pronounced himself Thohoyandou – head of the elephant – implying that he was more intelligent than the elephant.

Using Dzata as a base, he united the Vha-Venda people after defeating Raphulu the chief of the Ngonas – the early inhabitants of the area - reducing them to a state of slavery. This was the culmination of a process started earlier under Dambanyika or even earlier whereby the Singo royal clan gradually took over control over the various resident communities including the Dan, Kwinda, Mbedzi, Ndou and Nyai collectively known as the Ngona.

The question arises how a group of fugitives, who had to flee their Rozwi homeland, were able to dominate a large resident community within a few generations. Possible reasons forwarded are that the resident communities, despite sharing some cultural affinity, were consisting of fragmented groups without a strong level of cohesive organisation.

The second was the superior military tactics and organisational structure of the new comers. The buffalo formation with the two horns used by the Singo bears amazing similarities to the superior tactics introduced by Shaka in his Zulu armies. It is also clear that the Singo people were a highly organised group with a very strong leadership institution of the divine king type as found at Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe.

For the traditional Vha-Venda, the key to their success was assistance from their gods as called upon by their king through the medium of the Sacred Drum. It was a big traditional drum covered by human skin.

During battle the king had to thump the Sacred Drum and while he was playing his armies would be sure to be victorious. Many are the legends about this drum, including the disastrous consequences and defeats if the Drum, was not treated with due respect.

Unfortunately the peace and prosperity of Thohoyandou’s reign came to a premature end. Certain members of the royal family started to plot against him in order to install someone more to their own liking. After surviving a number of assassination plots - only because of the loyalty of his generals - he decided to abdicate the throne.

He apparently was last seen in the Nzhelelepoort northwest of Dzata where he was murdered according to one version. However, according to legend Nwali Raluvhimba (god of the Vha-Venda) rescued him and concealed him in Lake Fundudzi where he became immortal as a white python. Sacrifices are still being made to this day for the white python. In the past even human sacrifices were apparently offered.

His disappearance from Dzata led to serious disputes over chieftainship and increasing chaos, which culminated in the reduction of the capital to flames and ashes. It also caused a profound split in the Vha-Venda kingdom, which is still casting a long shadow in the affairs of the nation. At the time of writing, almost two centuries later, this split in the royal family was the cause of a court case disputing who is the rightful heir to the throne.

In the wake of Thohoyandou’s disappearance, Raluswielo Tshivhase, a son of the king’s sister (Makhadzi), was initially installed as king at Dzata by the elders. However, he was ousted by a certain Munzhedzi, which became the founder of the present Ramabulana’s (Mphephu) line of chieftaincy. Ramabulana translates as the treacherous one.

Raluswielo Tshivhase fled only a short distance to the east near the present village of Dopeni in the eastern shadow of Tswime Mountain. Here he and his son established a stronghold and he declared himself an independent chief.

Munzhedzi tried to remove him from this strategic point but without success. He eventually died there of old age after consolidating the Tshivhase chieftainship. Later his remains were exhumed by his sister for reburial at Vhulaudzi, the royal burial ground.

But a major new challenge was shaping up for the rulers of the Land of Legend - the white man was coming. [Return to top](http://www.greatlimpopodream.co.za/history.html#top)

**Early interaction with white settlers**

Coenraad Buys, a renegade character and a giant of a man (said to be 7-feet tall) arrived in the area in 1809 with his Khoisan wife and followers. A few early elephant hunters and traders followed in their footsteps.

The first party of Voortrekkers, the Van Rensburg and Trichardt treks, reached the Soutpansberg in 1836. It is perhaps unfortunate that Louis Trichardt and his party left the area to journey onto Maputo where he and most of his people died of malaria fever. He still came across history as a man of considerable character and integrity. Because in his wake came a group of people under the notorious Stephanus Schoeman who made the area a byword for lawlessness, strife and corruption.

In the beginning the interaction seems to have been quite peaceful. Men such as Schoeman and the renowned elephant hunter Jaoa Albasini spend most of their time organising a network of elephant hunters amongst the local people.

Schoeman, who was not very much liked, even by his own people, must have been a very forceful character. In time he became Commandant-General of the South African Republic – basing his position on the fact that he married the widow of the previous Commandant-General! At one stage he even staged a virtual rebellion against the then republican government, nearly got himself into prison but instead succeeded in rising to the position of Acting President of the Republic.

By 1855 Schoemansdal was a thriving small community taking a heavy toll on the once prolific wildlife. At the time it was the fourth largest European-dominated town in the then South African Republic with a population of about 1 800 people. Pretoria, the emerging capital of the Republic, only had a population of about 800 people at the same time.

During this initial contact period Ramavhoya, grandson of the great Thohoyandou, was installed as king. One of his younger brothers, Ravele, enlisted some of these mercenary trekkers to assist him in ousting Ramavhoya. The Vha-Venda royalists were defeated with the assistance of a few guns enabling Ravele to kill his unfortunate relative - in an elaborate ritual process - and establish himself as the new king with the title of Ramabulana (The Treacherous One).

By the time Ramabulana died relations with the burghers of Schoemansdal has reached a low point. Disputes about the wages of the hired African hunters and forced labour seemed to have been the final straw.

In the newly installed king, Makhado, the local people have found a careful but formidable leader. As a trained elephant hunter himself he knew the threat posed by the white man’s weapons. Hearing of a witchdoctor living north of the Limpopo having a medicine against bullets he sent many presents to obtain such protection. Eventually it came in the form of an ointment with the following instructions: “Rub in well, it will bend all bullets - and if you try it out, use a close female relative of the chief”.

A fine female cousin was duly selected, daubed with the ointment and confidently present herself for the experiment – only for her to be effectively decapitated. So much for the effectiveness of some medicines!

After overcoming this setback and considering his options Makhado – in time earning himself the title of the “Lion of the North” - went onto the attack and in 1867 after two years of struggle overcame the redoubtable Paul Kruger. This was one of the most effective victories by an African people against a white settler or colonial authority during the 19th century. For a whole generation, until after the death of Makhado, the Vha-Venda people kept their independence.

Then, with the aid of artillery, the Boer commandos broke the back of the Vha-Venda resistance under king Mphephu. In the process the Boers also obtained the royal beads, the symbol of royalty of the Singo clan. These ancient beads, said to be of Arabic or Egyptian origin, were reputed to be haunted and to bring only misfortune if it is to fall into the hands of the wrongful owner.

Well, the new inheritors of the beads went from misfortune to tragedy. The whole Boer nation was also to lose their independence not long afterwards in the wake of the Anglo-Boer War from 1899 to 1902. One of the most notorious incidents of that war occurred in the Spelonken (caves) area south of the Soutpansberg. Breaker Morant, a colourful Australian, who claimed to be the illegitimate son of a British admiral, was fighting for the British army. Angered by the loss of his best friend, he shot a number of Boer prisoners-of-war, execution style. This was in an apparent misunderstanding of a verbal instruction coming from the ruthless British Commander in Chief Lord Kitchener. Kitchener, frustrated in his attempts to bring the war to a close, formulated a secret “take no prisoners” policy, meaning that no prisoners should be taken in action. Breaker Morant took this to mean that he could shoot Boer prisoners in firing-squad style.

In a trial held at Polokwane (then Pietersburg) that reverberated around the world, and still throws a shadow a century later, he was found guilty and executed. [Return to top](http://www.greatlimpopodream.co.za/history.html#top)

**The modern era**

During the 1970’s the Vha-Venda gained pseudo-independence under another king Mphephu, in terms of the apartheid policies of the then Nationalist party. Although these policies did set back the development of the people of the Land of Legend in many respects it did stimulate the development of a major town at Thohoyandou, named after the great leader of the Vha-Venda. The ample government infrastructure at Thohoyandou led to the town being declared the district capital of the Vhembe District after the inauguration of the new democratic dispensation in 1994.

Today, the Land of Legend is part and parcel of South Africa. Cyril Ramaphosa, perhaps the most prominent person to originate from the Land of Legend for his role in negotiating the transition to the new dispensation, came within a whisker of following President Mandela as the second president of the New South Africa.

The Land of Legend is now ready to play an interesting and not inconsiderable part in the vision of Former President Mbeki for an African Renaissances and the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). This flows largely from its strategic position in the heart of Southern Africa.

The two Transfrontier parks in the district, the N1 (or Great North Road) and the Limpopo Basin Spatial Development Initiative are to play key parts in this vision.

The Limpopo Economic Development Enterprise (LimDev), in partnership with the local community and a range of other stakeholders, is currently developing the Nwanedi, Mphephu and Acacia Park resorts as part of this vision. The African Ivory Route, that should in time cross into neighbouring Mozambique, Botswana and Zimbabwe, consists of a series of adventure lodges for the 4x4 and adventure tour fraternity, could play an even greater role. Four Ivory Route camps have already been developed in the Land of Legend.

A key project still to come is to develop a major African Renaissance Resort based on the rich history of the Land of Legend and the legacy of the internationally significant archaeological sites of the region at Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, Thulamela and Dzata.

The history of the Land of Legend still has many future chapters to be written.

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