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## Mandevu

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### ABSTRACT

There are crucial African indigenous cultural stories of reality told throughout generations. Most of these stories are opined as primitive myths and mysteries and therefore unworthy of empirical research – Mandevu is one such story. This paper investigates whether Mandevu is myth or reality. The over-arching purpose of the paper is to show empirical value and importance of indigenous cultural African stories whether myths or real – especially for the social, and other related sciences. This qualitative paper employed field work, transect walk at Mandevu settlement, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to gather data. The paper concludes that Mandevu as told amongst communities in northern Vendale is instead real rather than myth. The Mandevu settlement could be developed into a tourist centre, while the story could be documented in local literature which could be taught in local schools to conserve these culturally important stories.

**Key words:** Mysteries, myths, Mbuyapenga, Oedipus, tourism, Vhembe and Dzinzilini.

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### 1.0 Introduction

Mandevu means the bearded one. Mandevu might however be a corrupted word from its original form if its meaning is to be linked to the predominant *Tshivenda* language currently spoken in the local village – Dolidoli where Mandevu's ruins are located. *Tshivenda* is a composite language spoken by various smaller tribes constituting the main *Vhavenda* tribe (Mashau, 2007) – and their region was called Venda – especially during the apartheid white South African government and its surrogate administrative-

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political system of tribal homelands or Bantustans. At some point during apartheid South Africa, Venda was administered by *mahosi*; traditional leaders masquerading as politicians who were imposed on the people by successive apartheid white governments in Pretoria, South Africa. In *Tshivenda*, the word Mandevu should actually have been Madebvuvu – meaning big beards. Mandevu would be more of Zimbabwean *Shona*; a dialect spoken by a different tribe found in the far north of Venda, however less than 100 kilometres - just across the Limpopo River into Zimbabwe from the Mandevu settlement. It is confusing how the word could have been corrupted by influence of a dialect not spoken in the country, and in addition the local area. However, *Shona* and *Tshivenda* are said to share a number of words because the origin of *Vhavenda* is said to have had some roots in *Shona* in Zimbabwe. It could be that in the process as *Vhavenda* and *Shona* stayed closer to each other, somehow there was the influence to corrupt the word Madebvuvu to Mandevu. Factually, how the word was corrupted to Mandevu is not known – and beyond that, the speculated corruption of the word is not in the focus nor material interest of the current study.

Tellers of the Mandevu story argue that Mandevu was not a myth as many would suppose. In other words, Mandevu is not a mythical story or symbol told and built by certain individuals or societal communities to explain certain reality of human life as [Ogormegbunem \(2014\)](#) alluded to in a study on myths and mysteries amongst the Igbos of Nigeria for example. Mandevu's story is not an “*inversion of the Oedipus*” or the Bird-Nester myths narrated by [Jensen \(2007\)](#) who also opined that even the Jewish-Christian Bible was a myth. Tellers of the story of Mandevu opine that Mandevu's story is reality and truth which makes the story go beyond mere explanation of human realities as it would be in the case of myths. As is the case in communities around the world, myths and stories of mysteries about people, places and events are also common in indigenous African societal communities. These myths have been told for centuries for various reasons ([Ogormegbunem, 2014](#)), amongst others inspiration and promotion of reconciliation of peoples ([Jensen, 2007](#)). As [Ogormegbunem \(2014\)](#) found, some of these stories were purely false while some were real.

Mandevu was not imaginary,  
 Mandevu was strange, and  
 Mandevu's issues were strange.  
 Nobody ever told when Mandevu lived,  
 Nobody ever told how long Mandevu lived,  
 Nobody ever told of Mandevu's family,  
 Nobody ever told where Mandevu came from,  
 Nobody ever told how Mandevu ended,  
 Nobody ever told of Mandevu's descendants and their whereabouts in the modern world, and  
 Nobody claims to be his descendent either.

The issues of Mandevu are in sharp contrast with those of other similarly old individuals and tribes such as the *Vhangona* for example who are presumed to have stayed in the vicinity of Mandevu at some undetermined period before the arrival of the current inhabitants in this area. Because of the nature of the so-called *Vhangona* ruins – especially approximated age, it is locally believed that the *Vhangona* might have stayed in this area at least two centuries before the current inhabitants could settle in the area. Unlike Mandevu, the *Vhangona*'s descendants are known to exist still all over Venda. The current *Vhangona* descendants are even laying various claims with the South African government for recognition of their dynasty in what is now known as Vhembe District of Limpopo Province because what was known as Venda in the apartheid era no longer exists. Amongst other claims of the *Vhangona* descendants, there is the *Vhangona* kingship claim lodged with the South African government through various petitions and Government Commissions on Traditional leadership by one Tshidziwelele Nephawe who argued he was a direct living descendent of the *Vhangona* Kingship and ownership of the so-called Vendaland as the “first” inhabitants of the region. Tshidziwelele Nephawe is claiming recognition as king of the *Vhangona* dynasty, alternatively the whole of the modern *Vhavenda* tribe and kingdom. Writers such as [Van Heerden & Mudau \(n.d\)](#) however contradict Tshidziwelele's assertion that *Vhangona* were the “first” inhabitants

of the area mentioning the *Vhalembethu*, *Vhatavhatsindi* and *Vhatwanamba* of Tshivhula amongst some of the early inhabitants of Vendaleland. In other words, the issue of the *Vhangona* having been the “only first” inhabitants of the region is also materially contestable and therefore inconclusive.

Before the arrival of the Boers in the northern Transvaal of the South African Republic, Venda was a sovereign kingdom with its own sovereign territory, indigenous government and political structures and administration systems in place. In addition, Venda had its own defence force of powerful battalions such as *Mavhoi*, *Maunavhathu*, *Manenu*, *Vhalube* and *Vhaingamela* located in the South African Republic's northern frontier up to the time of King Makhado-Boer war which ended when Makhado died in September 1895 – alternatively during Mphephu's defeat by the Boers and his subsequent exile in *Vhukalanga*; now Zimbabwe in 1898 (Tempelhoff & Nemudzivhadi, 1999). Modern *Vhavenda* kingdom has been restored by the democratic South African government of the African National Congress (ANC) to King Toni Mphephu Ramabulana of the *Singo* tribe. The *Singo* are said to have been the conquerors of the *Vhangona* dynasty and other “early settler” smaller tribes such as *Vhalembethu* of Mutele, *Vhatavhatsindi*, *Vhatwanamba* of Tshivhula at Hananwa and *Mavhambo* in the far western Vendaleland towards the Blouberg area and *Vhanyai* amongst others - some centuries ago.

Without delving much into the historicity of the claims by Tshidziwelele because this paper is about Mandevu, primarily, Tshidziwelele and other surviving *Vhangona* descendants would want to revive the *Vhangona* dynasty. *Vhangona* would, therefore, continue to come to the picture in this paper however as riders on the Mandevu issues. However, Tshidziwelele could not be successful in his claims, not on dispute of non-existence of the *Vhangona* traditional leadership but on legal technical limitations. Whichever the case might be, the focus of this paper is Mandevu whose genealogy of tribe remains unknown. In fact, this paper does not intend to embark on the investigation of Mandevu's tribal roots opining that the same could be of another follow-up study which might take a more comprehensive way through archaeological-anthropological approaches to establish suggestive cultural or genetic relations (Schoettler, 1971) of Mandevu and the other unknown inhabitants in the valley. Indeed there are obvious questions on tribal, cultural and genetic roots and relations of Mandevu which could be critical in the understanding of his issues – however difficult to resolve within the limitations of this paper. For instance, there are several material differences between issues of Mandevu and the *Vhangona* in terms of building techniques and architectural styles of their settlements around the mountains at Dolidoli and the Mandevu settlement. The ruins at Mandevu, for instance, were apparently made of logs of wood which visibly burnt down completely during the fire which engulfed the settlement at some point while the ruins of the *Vhangona* were stone built.

Assuming Mandevu, and the *Vhangona* lived while the same age makes further questions pop up on why the settlements were structurally different. On the other hand, it was highly improbable that Mandevu could have been of the *Singo* ancestry because if that were the case, why was Mandevu, not at Dzata with the other *Masingo* assuming Mandevu was as old as the Dzata settlement in the Nzhelele Valley. Whatever the case might be, issues of Mandevu's connectedness or disconnectedness to the *Masingo* at Dzata and/or the *Vhangona* residing on the mountains around his homestead should be viewed in the context expressed by Jensen (2007) who posited thus “cultures, languages, and religions are all different, but they are never totally different: there are always certain phenomena, on different levels of abstraction that connect them” This connectedness and even disconnectedness of Mandevu and the *Singo* at Dzata and the *Vhangona* around Mandevu's homestead would always remain visible throughout the Mandevu discourse. In other words, there remain good chances of Mandevu having been a *Singo* from Dzata or a *Mungona* from elsewhere in the region or none of either – and to therefore conclusively declare that Mandevu could have been a *Singo* of Dzata or *Mungona* or that Mandevu could not have been either of the two would remain materially disputable. Another possible paradigm is that of Mandevu having been *Shona* from Zimbabwe since there had been relations between the *Vhavenda* and the *Shona* in Zimbabwe, and in addition, the *Vhavenda* are said to have lived side by side with the *Shona* in southern Zimbabwe along the Beitbridge region before the *Vhavenda* could cross into South Africa approximately mid-1500. However, unearthing Mandevu's tribal affiliation could bring a formidable material challenge to the

whole of *Vhavenda* historiography and ethnography as recorded in some of modern literature. That Mandevu and the settlements of the *Vhangona* around the study area are neither mentioned in Venda historiography and ethnography strengthens the empirical demand of a study of this nature. However, methodologically, the interest of this paper has mainly been oral-anthropological which were expected to yield different results to the archaeological-anthropological approaches suggested earlier on further probing of the Mandevu issues.

Given this discussion, this paper investigates whether Mandevu is myth or reality. In terms of specific objectives of this paper are to record the historiography and ethnography of the *Vhavenda* in the Nzhelele area using the Mandevu cultural story as told by inhabitants of the so-called Musekwa Valley, northern Limpopo Province, South Africa.

## 2.0 Literature Review

This section reviewed literature sourced for the purpose of this study. Although sources were scarce, efforts were made to obtain any such literature as far as possible. The reviewed literature was structured in relevant sub-themes for convenience to the reader.

### 2.1 Short citation of literature on Venda historiography and ethnography

Modern literature on Venda historiography and ethnography is scarce, and from the little available, it is clear that the majority of this literature was written from oral sources. The little available literature is also littered with conflicting accounts and in some cases clearly erroneous assumptive speculations. To start with, some literature erroneously recorded that the various paramount chieftainships such as Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Thengwe and so forth in the pre-liberation Venda of South Africa – especially from King Makhado onwards were politically independent chiefdoms from the ruler-ship of the overall *Vhavenda* dynasty of Mphephu Ramabulana at Dzanani (Tempelhoff & Nemudzivhadi, 1999). Some of this erroneous literature could be from the fact that the region was one of the youngest in the main South Africa and amongst the other indigenous tribes to receive modern western education which taught people how to read and write. One other example of erroneous recording of the historiography and ethnography of the *Vhavenda* is the work by Van Heerden & Mudau (n.d) which recorded Tshivhula as a *Mungona* for example whereas Tshivhula is conclusively and widely acknowledged as a *Twanamba* senior chief. The Tshivhula people currently reside at Khomele in the north eastern side of the Nzhelele Valley.

In addition to the limitations of the *Vhavenda* ethnography and historiography is the fact that missionaries and white settlers who brought western civilization up north from the Cape only arrived in the Venda region approximately mid-1800, almost over a hundred years later than in any other region in South Africa (Nemudzivhadi, 1998). Effectively, writers and narrators of Venda historiography and ethnography such as Hamisi Raulinga, Mphaya Nemudzivhadi, SM Dzivhani, WMD Phophi-Gangazhe, Professors MER Mathivha and Victor Nkhumeleni Nemakhavhani Ralushai amongst others were young writers who had to gather information from very old sources for reconstruction – and from these emanated possible omissions and factually incorrect materials. However, for the purpose of this paper, efforts were made to consult, collect and record material from various sources which were thereafter recollated into a better source. This approach was motivated by the submission of O'Brien, Remenyi & Keany (2004) who cautioned historiographers and ethnographers hinting thus “*History stands or falls on the researcher's ability to obtain a range of reputable and credible sources of evidence*” However, to completely remove the contradictions and other forms of bias in a study of this nature might be a tall order. O'Brien et al. (2004) cautioned in this regard “*Each researcher will have his or her own set of criteria for accepting a piece of evidence as relevant and credible and there is no doubt that bias enters into this process*”

## 2.2 The Region – Venda and her myths and mysteries

Venda is a region with many myths and mysteries which have become legendary amongst people of this minority tribe in South Africa. Myths and mysteries of kings and other persons such as Dambanyika, Thohoyandou, Nyamulanalwo the Great *Makhadzi*; the official ceremonial sister of the chief (Matshidze, 2013) of the *Singo* at Lwandali and Dyambeu who all disappeared into the unknown (Van Heerden & Mudau, n.d), magical powers of certain individuals such as Gole-la-Denga who was the high priest with powerful magical spirits during Dimbanyika at Dzata; the magical horn of Tshishonga; a *Vhandalamo* ruler given to him by *Mwali*; the god of the *Vhavenda* to give Tshishonga victories during confrontations with enemies as happened during the war between Tshishonga and Bele-la-Mambo in the Nzhelele Valley in the early years of *Vhavenda* history this side of the Limpopo River (Van Heerden & Mudau, n.d). Some of these magical individuals could even make the rain and stop winds while magical drums of war such as the *Ngoma-lungundu-ya-Vhavenda* made out of human skin could cause enemies of war sleep during war. There are also issues of Nemaangani and his leopard at *Maangani-a-nngwe* which would kill livestock of those who failed to bring to Nemaangani and the leopard some *nduvho* during harvest told even today. The great and amazing *Dzinzilinsi*; a natural tunnel between two villages; Musekwa and Mamvuka covering approximately 13 kilometres through the Mulenga mountains at Musekwa Village towards Mamvuka Village – the mountain range which divides the two villages remain part of the many mysteries and myths of Vendaland – at least at this part of the region. However, some cultural oral sources contend that *Dzinzilinsi* was at Pfumembe Village of one Nephumembe; a supposed *Mungona* magical traditional practitioner who also masqueraded as chief of the area decades ago. However, many in the area still insist that Nephumembe was never a traditional *musanda* as he claims, but a feared and revered magician (Mafukata, 2012).

## 3.0 Materials and methods

### 3.1 Statement of the problem

For decades, indigenous Africans have always believed that knowledge management was critical for their welfare – therefore keeping their knowledge resources on various instruments serving as archives. For example to record information of crucial events, children would be given names associated with events that took place during their birth or major events. Some children were instance named *Horoni* because they were born just after the white government officer named *Horoni* responsible for the demarcation of areas into modern settlement villages. The 80 Kg bag of mealie meal is called *malane* because the packaging of mealie meal in the 80 Kg bag in South Africa started during President Malan's government. Some children born during the inception of the packaging of mealie meal in the 80 Kg are mostly named *Malane*. In other words, throughout ages South African indigenous Africans developed their solid knowledge management systems however not in modern writing. The majority of the knowledge kept and recorded indigenously is re-told as myths or ordinary stories for generations to come. It is unfortunate that modern civilisation views Indigenous African knowledge as being outdated and often characterised by spurious, inaccurate, false, uncertain evidence which is contradicting and confusing because of its oral origin (Schoettler, 1971). On the one hand, modern modern knowledge archival and management systems in writing are considered convenient, reliable, dependable and accessible by many an emerging literature throughout generations. As a result, crucial knowledge in most African communities has been lost in indigenous archival resources or corrupted in the process of being re-told generation after generation. The limitations of indigenous knowledge management systems lead to devaluation of critical indigenous knowledge – especially in modern social science literature, with a large body of indigenous African stories classified as backward, primitive, barbaric, outdated and inadmissible for modern investigation for instance.

One issue critical is the loss of indigenous African peoples' mythological stories in modern social science research discourse because such stories are mostly completely unresearched if not under-researched. As

a result, such stories were mostly unwritten and unarchived. However, in the last two decades, a new body of literature on indigenous African mythology – especially in West African communities such as the Igbo (Ogormegbunem, 2014) and Yoruba (Kazeem & Adegun, 2012) tribes of Nigeria and the Asante of Ghana (Boaduo, 2011) started to emerge. In South Africa, such literature is however still conspicuously absent despite the fact that indigenous South African peoples such as the *Vhavenda* of Limpopo Province have existed in crucial mythological stories which amongst others greatly influenced and shaped their cosmological, mystical, philosophical, psychological and sociological domains just as it is customary amongst most African indigenous peoples elsewhere in the continent (Boaduo, 2011).

Mythological stories have influenced indigenous African civilisation for centuries and to exclude them in studying African indigenous peoples and their world views could be a great loss of crucial knowledge on African civilisation and impairment of the reality of the peoples of Africa. This paper posits that the issues of the Mandevu discourse are fundamental in addressing the shortcomings of social science research with regard indigenous African mythology – especially amongst smaller tribes such as the *Vhavenda* in South Africa who continue to receive less national and international interest amongst policy makers and social science scholars for example. This view is corroborated by Tempelhoff & Nemudzivhadi (1999) who cited an example of crucial omission from national South African history of King Makhado of the *Vhavenda* as an example of such omissions. King Makhado's political exploits against white colonial occupation of South Africa in the northern frontier of the South African Republic and its effect on the development of political discourse in liberation struggles between indigenous African rulers such as Shaka, Sekhukhune and others have been minimally acknowledged in South African history for example – where it has been acknowledged. Often, Makhado's history is mentioned as one of those other events of black resistance to white settler occupation of South Africa, not as a major story of interest in the class of the Bhambatha Rebellion of the Zulus in Natal for example. Indeed Makhado's battles with the Boers might never have suffered heavy casualties just as it might have been the case with other resistance struggles and confrontations with the Boers or British elsewhere in the South African Republic. In other words, heavier casualties should not be standard to measure the importance of resistance – or historicity of the events. Instead, it could be lesser casualties with heavy resistance what matters. A friend of this researcher – who ironically was an adult of approximately 58 years and a doctoral graduate once said that he had never heard of any war between the *Vhavenda* and the white settlers in South Africa because all, he knew, was that white colonialist-indigenous peoples' wars were fought by the *AmaZulu* and *Amakhosa* in Natal and the Cape. Tempelhoff & Nemudzivhadi (1999) acknowledged that *Vhavenda* history was insignificantly disseminated to the rest of the peoples outside the *Vhavenda*.

### 3.2 Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. The theory espoused by Matshidze (2013) on qualitative inquiries formed the methodological framework of this paper. Matshidze (2013) provided useful guidelines when hinting thus on qualitative research “Qualitative research design is defined as a multiple perspective approaches to social interaction, aimed at describing, making sense of, interpreting or reconstructing this interaction in terms of meanings that the subject attaches to it. In a qualitative study, as in other scientific research, the researcher collects evidence and produces findings that were not pre-determined. Such research should be able to produce findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study, using a sample to represent a population. Additionally, it seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the population it concerns. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining the culturally-specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of particular populations”.

This study was conducted in three stages.

**Stage One:** The researcher undertook a site visit at Mandevu and the other sites around which would have material reference in the Mandevu discourse. During the several field work to Mandevu, it emerged that there were several ruins around the area – especially on mountain summits. The field work was to

assist in the collection of archaeological evidence and data although for the purpose of this study no archaeological excavations were conducted in the sites. It became necessary for the archaeological data and evidence to be collected because the study was to develop an *interpretist* approach common with historiography (O'Brien *et al.*, 2004) as it progressed. For example, the study had to compare the ruins at Mandevu and the others commonly known as the *Vhangona* ruins to establish any structural and/or architectural similarities or differences thereof – or simply, to make meaning of the issues there. This was crucial in establishing any possible relations or lack of it thereof of Mandevu and other inhabitants of the area – especially those in the *Vhangona* settlements.

**Stage Two:** Realising that not everyone at Dolidoli Village had sufficient customary knowledge on Mandevu, a list of sources who might have the customary knowledge and evidence on Mandevu was developed through snowballing techniques until a sizeable number of informants (27) was reached. Some valuable informants (Five) were however located outside Dolidoli Village. The majority of these were those who had stayed in the Dolidoli Village at some point of life. The study employed Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to source for qualitative data from the listed informants. Eighteen informants were interviewed as individuals from an open-ended questionnaire instrument. One Focus Group Discussion session was held at Dolidoli chief's kraal with nine informants who were all locals. Data from the FGD were recorded as field notes for analysis.

**Stage Three:** Collected data were coded, collated, categorised and analysed for the main report after some 'thematic analyses' (Matshidze, 2013).

## 4.0 Results and discussion

### 4.1 Remarks on Mandevu and his ruins at Dolidoli

This researcher first heard of Mandevu around 1968 – off course when this researcher was still very young; approximately five years of age to be exact. During the evenings, when sitting around the fire having a meal before going to bed, the elders would fondly narrate stories of Mandevu who once stayed in this village the uncountable and unknown number of years ago. In fact, stories of Mandevu were told by locals at Dolidoli who had also heard of this mysterious man from those who also had heard of Mandevu from others. The *Vhavenda* are known to be keen story tellers – especially on myths and mysteries (Van Heerden & Mudau, n.d) perhaps as part of the broader culture of Africans such as the Igbo of Nigeria who also valued story telling (Ogormegbunem, 2014). Apparently, in the case of Mandevu there was nobody amongst the story tellers of Mandevu who had personally met or seen this man. Nobody had an idea as to when this man exactly stayed, left or died in the area. Everybody, who told Mandevu's story only, told the story of Mandevu's life but never his whereabouts, death or otherwise – and neither his descendants were ever mentioned in his story.

Mandevu's story was told until he became a historical cult amongst the villagers – and therefore Mandevu became a historical story told by the villagers for decade's generation after generation. In the process of Mandevu's story, it remains probable that some untrue or factually incorrect issues of his life were also told because often in historical stories “*whoever does the telling will have a point of view*” (O'Brien *et al.*, 2004), and furthermore, oral traditions would mostly experience disruptions which might distort their discourse (Schoettler, 1971). It is this point of view of the story tellers who could have corrupted issues of the Mandevu's story. However, so far no evidence of such corruption could be detected in the Mandevu story.

Right through the mid-eighties, Mandevu's homestead ruin was still very visible even after what looked like a heavy fire that had razed the homestead – obviously decades before current inhabitants of the village arrived to settle in this area from different places in the Musekwa Valley and beyond. There is the belief narrated from the Mandevu's story that the Mandevus never died. Perhaps this was something

that had probably evolved into the discourse of the Mandevu's story as some who tell Mandevu's story argue that there were no burial sites and neither were there any visible graves at the Mandevu settlement strengthening the assertion that the Mandevu's never died. The contrast is that in the other ruins around Mandevu, presumed to be the ruins of the *Vhangona* there is evidence of grave sites – in some cases the locals would even find old human bones in what looked like grave sites. Beads and potteries, which normally would be placed on graves, were also found in some of the so-called *Vhangona* settlements, but never at Mandevu. One other thing, which creates a poser in the Mandevu's story, is that if indeed the Mandevus died like other humans, where were their dead buried, and how? What caused the fire that razed the settlement at Mandevu? Was it a deliberate fire by Mandevu as he left the settlement or an act of arson by enemies? If the fire were from an act of war, which war? If the Mandevu occupants left the settlement, where did they go – and where are his descendants? If the descendants are not there in the modern world, could it be that all the household members of the Mandevu settlement perish in the fire? Furthermore, there were lions that seem prominent in the Mandevu discourse. Where are those lions?

#### 4.2 The “*Vhangona*” ruins surrounding Mandevu homestead

Vendaland has countless number of ancient ruins – from Lwandali at Tshiendeulu, Mbwayapenga and Dzata amongst others (Van Heerden & Mudau, n.d). Dolidoli Village is surrounded by tall mountains and hills on all sides. On these mountains, there were approximately ten old-looking settlement ruins of inhabitants who were presumed to have stayed in this area centuries before the arrival of current inhabitants. The settlements are scattered over an area which could approximate 64 square kilometres. The majority of these ruins are on the summit of mountains and were made of what appear to have been neatly packed stones. Even-though the settlements appear to have long been deserted, the construction stones were still intact in some cases. Fire places are still visible, and some clay artefacts of pottery and other utensils had been found in some of these ruins. Locals claim that the ruins were of the *Vhangona* who stayed in the area long time ago. It is difficult to predict the age of the ruins – not for this study however. What is clearly visible is that the so-called *Vhangona* ruins look structurally different to the Mandevu settlement. The Mandevu settlement has no rock structures like those of the *Vhangona* settlements. The difference in the structures might suggest that the inhabitants of the Mandevu settlement were tribally different from those at the so-called *Vhangona* settlements. On the one hand, it might opine that the settlers in the two settlements might have resided there during different ages. It is hard to tell. The second contrast is the obvious fire that might have razed the Mandevu settlement while the *Vhangona* settlements show no fire evidence. Fires were common weapons of destruction used against those who had been defeated during the war – especially amongst the *Vhavenda* or the various tribes in the region. Chances are that the Mandevu settlement might have been gutted by war fires. Interestingly, Van Heerden & Mudau (n.d) reported that during the battle of the Nzhelele River Valley between Tshishonga of the *Vhandalamo* at Tshivhilidulu and Bele-la-Mambo who ended up being killed great mysterious and mythical fires which were never seen in the history of this tribe razed the whole valley killing the hundreds of people, animals and above all destroying the land. However, it could make no sense to speculate that these fires might have reached the Musekwa Valley where Mandevu is situated because of the vast distance between the Tswime area and Mandevu. However, despite the improbabilities, the probability could not be entirely removed as well.

#### 4.3 Mandevu's village or homestead

Mandevu – referring to the area where the ruin is located as locals call the place Mandevu, is found in the Dolidoli Village. Dolidoli is a former Trust farm called Keerweerder 168MT (Mafukata, 2012). Dolidoli is located in the Mphephu Territorial Council of Dzanani under a *Singo* Chief called Mphephu Ramabulana. Dolidoli is however known to have been the territory belonging to a *Ndalamo* dynasty under chief Musekwa (the great grandson) of Tshishonga. Chief Musekwa subsequently became a subject of the Mphephu Territorial Council at Dzanani at some stage (Mafukata, 2012). There are ancient marital relations between Musekwa the *Vhandalamo* chief and the *Singo* of Dzanani. These relations were



explained in detail in the narrations of [Van Heerden & Mudau \(n.d\)](#) where the literature explains issues of the *Singo* and *Ndalamo* at Dzata. With regard Dolidoli belonging to the *Ndalamo* dynasty – especially that of Musekwa, there are however, competing views to the effect because [Van Heerden & Mudau \(n.d\)](#) contend that Dolidoli was instead part of land given to Mandiwana by his father Dimbanyika when he was distributing land to his sons Ravhura, Munzhedzi, Tshivhase and Thohoyandou immediately before Dimbanyika's demise at Dzata. At current Dolidoli, there is a Mandiwana household who are alleged to have arrived at this area for livestock rearing from the Nzhelele Valley some considerable number of years before the current village chief who is a *Singo* could arrive from Swongozwi through the implementations of the Land Acts of 1913 and 1936 ([Mafukata, 2012](#)). Amongst the current Mandiwana clan at Ha-Mandiwana near Dzata, there are contentions however that the Mandiwana descendants are the actual *ndu ya vuhosi*; rightful genealogy to produce the traditional *vhamusanda* - chief of the Mandiwana clan.

Dolidoli Village is named after a small seasonal river – especially during heavy rains which flows through the village on the western side. There is an old praise poem about Dolidoli which goes:

“Dolidoli la pinda ndi sanwa  
Vhakaḷanga vho fhira vha so ngo nwa”

Loosely translated meaning

I passed Dolidoli Village without drinking its waters  
The Kaḷanga also passed without drinking its waters

Praise songs and poems about people, places and events have been part of the *Vhavenda* culture and tradition for years for various reasons and occasions – and the praise song and poem mentioned on earlier could be inferred as cultural. [Van Heerden & Mudau \(n.d\)](#) cite praise songs and poems of the *Vhavenda* – especially during sacrifice offering ceremonies to the ancestors and spirits, mostly during spiritual ceremonies of what is known as *Thevhula*.

Those who narrate the history of this small village called Dolidoli of approximately 462 inhabitants ([Mafukata, 2012](#)), explain that the passer-bys – particularly the *Kalanga* of *Vhukalanga* or Zimbabwe - especially those crossing to *Vhukalanga* or Zimbabwe in the modern world, would not have an opportunity to drink the water at Dolidoli because of the dangerous lions found in this village. They explain that passer-bys had to pass the village quickly to avoid being attacked by the lions in the village. This saying evolved to become part of the indigenous culture of both the locals and the *Vhukalanga* because the saying eventually became a song – even sung by those inhibited or possessed by spirits after *malombo* practice – a spiritual ritual practised by some locals through a diviner or sangoma who acts as medium. During the *malombo* ritual, the patient must dance going round and round or spinning until the spirit of his ancestors possessed the patient. The patient will fall, and the spirit manifests by changing the language of the patient into another language. Amongst the *Vhavenda*, the possessed patient would speak Shona.

The Mandevu homestead or village – depending on how observers might look at the size of the ruin, is situated on a hill, but on its undulating slope in the north of the current *musanda* at Dolidoli. *Musanda* is a Venda word meaning traditional chief's kraal. However, it was co-incidence that the current *musanda* is situated near the Mandevu's homestead or village because the current chief has no relations with Mandevu at all. Issues emanating from the reconstructions of the positioning of the Mandevu settlement are that Mandevu might have settled in the area before or after the other surrounding settlers because they were on the summits of mountains while the Mandevu settlement was on low-lying land. The locations of the other settlements make the Mandevu settlement look to be almost at the centre. On further probing, those who tell the story of Mandevu opine that because Mandevu was considered a *de facto maine*; witchdoctor who assisted the others with his magical powers, his homestead should be

located at the centre for everyone to reach with ease. However, some posited that Mandevu had to stay closer to the *tshisimani* where the lions stayed in order to manage their affairs – and in addition assist the people to pass there without harm from the lions. However, some of these posits apparently grew with the story but not part of the original Mandevu story because pointers are that Mandevu was never a magical person with occult under-cover, secretive, hidden and mysterious spiritual factors such as astrology, divination, idolatry, magic, satanism, witchcraft and demonic powers amongst others which assisted and influenced his life and that of others around him favourably or unfavourably (Mashau, 2007). In other words, Mandevu was not possessed by spiritual forces which made him manipulate circumstances and people. In most cultures amongst the *Vhavenda*, the *tshisimani* where the lions stayed and Mandevu communicated with them, such places could have easily have developed into sacred places, haunted by spirits and feared by many. But to date, *tshisimani* remains a public place where people even fetched water for domestic use and also watered their animals. The place has no spiritual significance. The Mandevu settlement also has no spiritual significance. However, had Mandevu's descendants been still alive, the spiritual significance of the two places could have been different because the *Vhavenda*; assuming that Mandevu's descendants would have been *Vhavenda* are known to be ardent believers of the occult world and practices.

#### 4.4 Mandevu and his lions

On the eastern side of the Mandevu settlement, there used to be a dense bush with a *tshisima* or well. From this well it is told that the Mandevu people would fetch their water for domestic use. Passerbys would also get water from the well. However, there were lions that stayed around this well and probably getting water here. Just nearby the well, there was an African track used by passerbys. Passerbys would however not just pass without first having to “call” on Mandevu to go “talk” to his lions in the well not to harm them. Mandevu would then go to the well and talk to the lions not to harm the passerbys – especially those to and from *Vhukalanga*. Some passerbys would sleep-over at Mandevu's homestead before proceeding with their journey. Claims are that Mandevu would smear the passerbys with a *muthi* made from *Mupfure – Racinus Communis* (Mabogo, 1990) so that the lions would not harm the passerbys. Unproven claims are that lions shun the smell of *Pfure* – the concoction made from seeds of the *Mupfure – Racinus Communis*. Lions would not attack someone smelling with *Pfure*. Some narrators of the Mandevu story claim that the lions that attacked humans at Mandevu would develop diarrhoea and would therefore die of Mandevu's curse while others opined that *Pfure* was actually poisoners to cause diarrhoea on the lions that would have consumed human flesh smeared with the *Pfure* concoction and the lions would die from the *Pfure* poison not Mandevu's curse. In fact, Mabogo (1990) did mention that *Mupfure – Racinus Communis* could be laxative – especially with humans. What is not known is whether it could be laxative on lions as claimed by the Narrators of the Mandevu issues. However, emphasis from those conversant with the Mandevu issues was that Mandevu was never considered a magician, sangoma or a supernatural being. Narrators of the Mandevu issues opined that Mandevu was an ordinary individual gifted of knowing indigenous African medicinal plants and their uses. For example, Mandevu could also cure other ailments such as toothache through a concoction made from *Mupfure-donga* (*Jatropha Carcus*) and sexually transmitted diseases through *Fulathulo – Helichrysum Krausli* concoction. Mabogo (1990) corroborates the assertions that concoctions from the mentioned tree species were traditionally used for such ailments in most communities in the Vendlan region, but the concoctions were mostly developed by trained traditional healers.

On the other hand, there are some tellers of the Mandevu story who claim that Mandevu did not use magical powers to communicate with the lions, but instead Mandevu had learnt the behaviour of the lions over time. Some tellers of the Mandevu's story argued that the *muthi* from *Pfure* was actually not *muthi* as such but a repellent concoction which Mandevu applied on people after Mandevu had that lions actually shunned the smell from *Pfure*. In other words, Mandevu just kept his knowledge on the behaviour of lions a secret from others. In fact, in most African societies – especially in the Vendlan region where Mandevu is situated, indigenous peoples possessed valuable and crucial indigenous

information on ethnobotany particularly medicinal plants which through generational teaching and learning harvest and use for the benefit of humans (Mabogo, 1990; Tshisikhawe, Van Rooyen & Bhat, 2012). Although assumptions are that those individuals possessing the knowledge and skills were diviners, spiritualists, sorcerers and traditional healers, there are some individuals who possess such knowledge and skill without being either of the mentioned designations.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Mandevu is a real man who had lived at the Mandevu settlement near Dolidoli Village during a period which is unknown to the tellers of his story. However, certain pointers exist opining that Mandevu might have been a “created” being who never existed. His story might have evolved over time told from one generation to another. The difference being that the Mandevu's story however lacks material characterisation of myths for as the story is, it narrates Mandevu's life and exploits without clearly addressing certain real life issues of humans as normal myths would culturally want to.

- There are issues of Mandevu's story and life which are beyond human comprehension – and some of these issues concern his possible disappearance from the settlement or perishing in the fire that had razed the settlement at some unknown period together with the rest of the residents of this settlement as there has never been any evidence of escapees or descendants elsewhere in the Vendaleland region in the modern world.
- The Mandevu story is an embodiment of cultural and traditional heritage of the Vhavenda if not the entire South African nation. This story and its culturality opine for conservation.
- The story of Mandevu is also informative because the *Vhavenda* ethno-botanical indigenous knowledge - especially on medicinal plants and vegetation is stored and narrated to generations to come.
- Apart from the Mandevu settlement, there are numerous archaeological sites around scattered all over the surrounding mountains of peoples that were never accounted for – including by modern empirical social science investigations. These sites might provide interesting dimensions and paradigms on the historiography and ethnography of the *Vhavenda* – and possibilities also exist that these sites might evoke some interest on national historical discourse in South Africa in general. As claims made by the Mandevu story narrators are also that the ruins on the mountains at Dolidoli might be of the *Vhangona* who might have stayed there hundreds of years ago, possibilities but remain that some escapees of wars and trekkers such as Mzilikazi passing to Zimbabwe might have settled around the area before crossing over the Limpopo to Zimbabwe. Others telling the story of Mandevu contend that the ruins of the Mandevu settlement and those around were instead ruins of the escapees of the Alilali Mphephu *mushavho*; war with the Boers at *Swongozwi* in the Soutpansberg around 1898 which the Mphephu-Boer war escapees might have built while escaping to *Vhukalanga*. This view might be corroborated and strengthened by the fact that indeed around 1895-1899 there were a number of wars between the Vhavenda and the Boers which resulted in various *mishavho* in the region. Since the Dolidoli area where Mandevu and the supposed *Vhangona* ruins are situated is located en-route to Zimbabwe from the Soutpansberg where the war was fought, it is not unreasonable to opine that the escapees of the war might have passed over the area to *Vhukalanga*. Those tellers of the Mandevu's story who bring the dimension of the Mphephu-Boer war escapee theory assert that the character Mandevu might instead never have existed but created as a myth for the ruins at Mandevu and elsewhere around could have been of the Mphephu-Boer war escapees.

However, if researchers were to employ the contrasts mentioned here to dispute the validity and reality of the Mandevu's story, it would be materially imperative to also note that such dismissal of the truthfulness and reality of the Mandevu's story might as well conclusively opine and declare Mandevu a myth because obviously the Mandevu's story could not have happened in a vacuum. The mentioned contrasts might, in other words, reaffirming “*there are always preceding circumstances to any event*” (O'Brien *et al.*, 2004). In other words, the supposed wars and possible escapees of war having had built

the settlements at Mandevu and around the area, might be construed as “preceding circumstances” to the Mandevu discourse. That would be insufficient to dismiss the Mandevu discourse as myth. In other words, the evidence is not strong enough to suggest some naivety of the Mandevu's story. As O'Brien *et al.* (2004) argued thus “*whoever does the telling (of the story) will have a point of view*”, it is not uncommon that qualitative researchers lack an opinion in the social sciences.

- This paper concludes therefore that there are real and true stories which evolved to become mythical and mysterious because of the difficulties in sourcing for evidence to support their genuineness to such a point that such stories are classified as myths and mysteries. In other words, some stories are not myths, and they are not mysteries – the Mandevu story could just be one of the many such stories. In fact, Schoettler (1971) corroborate this assertion in the famous posit “*although the time sequence is telescoped, the events have meaning*” This appears to be the case in the Mandevu discourse.

## 6.0 Recommendations

The policy recommendations are structured as follows:

- **Academy and Research:** The Mandevu settlement and the supposed *Vhangona* ruins around Dolidoli mountains are valuable archaeological sites which might be valuable for new knowledge development. Considering the limitations of this paper, it is recommended that a comprehensive study be conducted at these sites perhaps with multi-disciplinary approach at doctoral level to enhance the opportunity for unearthing new knowledge.
- **Community Heritage Preservation:** The Department of Arts and Culture together with others such as Education must be roped in to conduct community awareness on the preservation of heritage sites such as the Mandevu settlement and the *Vhangona* ruins in the area in particular to avoid situations of vandalism and desertification of the sites.
- **Economic relevance:** Departments such as Economic Development and Tourism, Small Business Enterprises and Local Municipal Economic Structures should be persuaded to preserve, conserve and develop these sites as tourism destinations in the region by providing funding to interested parties – especially youths and other entrepreneurial individuals who might have interest to develop the sites to consider investing in the area. There are several other crucial sites such as Dzinzilinsi at the Musekwa Village which should be exploited together with the Mandevu site and the *Vhangona* ruins to promote tourism prospects in the region.
- **General policy matters:** Cultures of minorities around the world are largely ignored and therefore easily erode. The Mandevu story is an embodiment of cultural and traditional heritage of the minority *Vhavenda* – one of the ten or so indigenous tribes in South Africa, if not the entire South African nation. This story and its culturality opine for conservation. Local writers should be encouraged to document such stories as Mandevu into meaningful literature to promote conservation of the stories – and subsequently the cultures and traditions such stories embody. The story of Mandevu is also informative because the *Vhavenda* ethno-botanical indigenous knowledge - especially on medicinal plants and vegetation is stored and narrated generationally. Efforts should be made to extract relevant ethno-botanical knowledge from these cultural and traditional groups to assist the course of modern scientific medicine in treating some ailments and diseases for example.

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