

The Historical Account and Restoration of the Mrhabuli Royal House within the Ndzundza Ndebele Nation

Author:

Mrhabuli, J.M.K. HRH

(Full name: **HRH Jacob Mohube Karabo Mrhabuli**,

Institutional Affiliation:

Press Office, Mrhabuli Ndzundza Royal House
Ndzundza Ndebele Nation, South Africa

Corresponding Authority:

Office of Inkosi Mrhabuli II (Mokgabudi)

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Abstract:

This article reconstructs the historical trajectory of the Mrhabuli Royal House, also historically referred to as the House of Mokgabudi, within the political history of the Ndzundza Ndebele nation. It examines the rise of King Mrhabuli in the seventeenth century, the crisis of succession precipitated by his assassination, the strategic exile and concealment of his descendants among neighbouring polities, and the eventual restoration of the lineage in the post-apartheid era. Drawing on oral traditions, comparative historiography, and customary-law analysis, the article argues that the Mrhabuli lineage represents a coherent and continuous royal house whose displacement and later restoration are fully consistent with Ndebele and Pedi customary jurisprudence. The study further clarifies persistent misunderstandings surrounding the Mokgabudi name and kingship status within the Bapedi polity, demonstrating that the lineage functioned historically as an exiled Ndebele royal house rather than a Pedi ruling line.

1. Introduction

The history of the Ndzundza Ndebele is marked by cycles of consolidation, fragmentation, and renewal. Within this dynamic political landscape, the Mrhabuli Royal House occupies a pivotal but long-disrupted position. This article presents a historically grounded account of the rise, exile, and restoration of this lineage, situating it within broader frameworks of southern African kingship, customary law, and post-colonial redress.

Rather than treating exile as rupture or disappearance, the article conceptualises it as a legally regulated and politically strategic condition through which royal continuity was preserved. The restoration of the Mrhabuli Royal House in the twenty-first century is therefore analysed not as the creation of new authority, but as the formal recognition of an already continuous, though historically displaced, royal lineage.

2. Early Ndzundza Political Formation and the Mahlangu Line

The Ndzundza Ndebele trace their origins to King Musi, who established the foundational polity in the early seventeenth century in what is now Gauteng. Subsequent generations experienced both expansion and internal differentiation, resulting in the emergence of senior and cadet royal lines.

The lineage examined here descends from Sindeni, son of Mrhetjha and brother of Magobholi/Nkopodi (the father of Bongwe), placing it firmly within a senior stratum of Ndzundza royalty. Magobholi/Nkopodi's grandson, Mahlangu, is remembered in oral tradition as a formidable military strategist whose reign was marked by territorial ambition and sustained conflict with neighbouring polities, including the Swazi and Pedi (Van Vuuren, 1985; Bergh & Feinberg, 2019).

3. Royal Houses and Customary Succession

Ndebele kingship operated within a structured system of royal houses: the **Great House (Indlunkulu)**, **Right-Hand House (Ikhohlo)**, and **Left-Hand House (Iqadi)**. These houses were institutional mechanisms regulating succession, authority, and governance rather than mere domestic arrangements (Junod, 1912; Van Warmelo, 1935).

The Great House constituted the primary line of succession. The Right-Hand House supported the Great House with senior advisory and military functions, while the Left-Hand House produced powerful cadet branches often tasked with territorial administration.

4. Succession Crisis after Mahlangu

Following Mahlangu's death, the Ndzundza polity entered a prolonged period of instability. Several sons Phaswane, Maridili, and Kawule ruled briefly and died without producing heirs eligible for succession from the Great House. Mgwezani's reign did not resolve the crisis, as his sons were born outside the ritual requirements of the Great House.

The eventual accession of Mrhabuli around 1763 thus marked the **restoration of lineal Great House authority** after nearly a century of disrupted succession.

5. The Reign of King Mrhabuli (c. 1760–1795)

King Mrhabuli's reign is remembered as a period of consolidation, resilience, and political maturity. Oral traditions portray him as a unifying ruler who strengthened central authority, defended Ndzundza autonomy, and fostered regional trade networks (Bergh & Feinberg, 2019).

He is further remembered as the last confirmed custodian of the sacred *iNamrhali*, central to Ndzundza spiritual sovereignty. The loss of these sacred elements following his death remains one of the enduring ruptures in Ndzundza historical memory.

6. Assassination, Usurpation, and Strategic Dispersal

Mrhabuli's assassination by his nephew Magodongo around 1795 constituted a profound rupture of customary order. As the son of Mgwezani, Magodongo was genealogically junior and lacked a legitimate claim to kingship, considering unresolved questions relating to his elder brother Gembe. His seizure of power thus represents usurpation rather than lawful succession.

Anticipating such danger, Mrhabuli had already instructed his household to disperse upon his death. This dispersal was not flight, but a deliberate act of statesmanship aimed at preserving the royal bloodline through concealment, alliance, and refuge.

7. Violence and the Fragmentation of the Mrhabuli Household.

Despite dispersal, Magodongo pursued Mrhabuli's sons relentlessly. Oral genealogical records list fourteen sons, many of whom were killed between 1795 and 1827. Only **Khunwana (also Mokhulwana)** survived to carry forward the line of descent.

This sustained violence illustrates the vulnerability of displaced royal lineages during a period of intense regional militarisation (Hamilton, Mbenga & Ross, 2010).

8. Exile as a Customary–Legal Condition

Southern African customary systems recognised exile as a distinct political status. Refugee royals were protected and absorbed, but prohibited from exercising sovereign authority within host polities (Delius, 1983).

Within the Maroteng-led Bapedi polity, kingship was reserved for the Thulare–Sekwati–Sekhukhune line, while foreign royals were entitled to settlement and protection. This dual principle governed the integration of Mrhabuli’s descendants.

9. Linguistic Concealment and the Name “Mokgabudi”

A central mechanism of survival was linguistic adaptation. Descendants adopted the name *Mokgabudi*, a Sotho-Tswana transliteration of *Mrhabuli*. This transformation followed predictable phonetic rules and enabled concealment without loss of identity (Van Warmelo, 1935).

The name *Mokgabudi* thus constitutes a linguistic artefact of exile rather than evidence of Pedi kingship.

10. Integration through the Dipheko Kgoro

Integration into the Maroteng polity occurred through settlement and intermarriage mediated by aristocratic dikgoro, particularly the **Dipheko kgoro**. Positioned between the ruling house and commoner lineages, Dipheko functioned as a diplomatic buffer capable of absorbing refugee elites without destabilising succession hierarchies (Delius, 1983).

Through Khunwana, Mrhabuli’s descendants were integrated as **dikgosana** (junior royals), preserving royal blood while excluding kingship claims.

11. Mapule wa Dipheko and Maternal Transmission of Legitimacy

Within Pedi customary law, legitimacy and protection could be transmitted maternally, especially in exile contexts (Stayt, 1931). Mapule (Mmapula) wa Dipheko emerges in oral tradition as a woman of high aristocratic standing, likely the daughter of a senior Dipheko lineage head.

Oral accounts further record her marriage to **Kgabo Mokgatla** of Bakgatla royal descent. Through this union, she bore sons remembered as **Mokgabudi** and **Bogopa bja Mafifi**, anchoring the lineage within aristocratic networks while retaining its Ndebele royal origin.

Footnote:

¹ Oral-historical and linguistic analysis suggests that the name “Bogopa bja Mafiri” reflects a customary strategy of incorporation and protection rather than a claim to kingship. In Pedi naming practice, “Bogopa” denotes settlement or belonging, while the construction “bja Mafiri” functions as a non-sovereign lineage identifier, marking affiliation rather than succession. The contrast between this name and “Mokgabudi” indicates a deliberate differentiation of roles within the same maternal household, consistent with exile-era survival strategies among displaced royal lineages.

12. Kingship Confusion and Customary Reality

Modern confusion regarding Mokgabudi kingship arises from conflating royal blood with sovereign authority. The Mokgabudi lineage was an exiled Ndebele royal house, not a Pedi ruling line. Its absence from Pedi kingship is consistent with customary law governing refugee royals (Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 41 of 2003).

13. Restoration and Contemporary Significance

13.1 Post-apartheid redress and historical reopening

The democratic transition in South Africa created institutional mechanisms for addressing historical injustices in traditional leadership. The **Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act** and the work of the **Commission on Traditional Leadership Disputes and Claims (CTLDC)** enabled the reassessment of disrupted lineages using customary law and historical evidence (CTLDC, 2010–2012).

For the Mrhabuli Royal House, this process addressed the foundational injustice of violent displacement following the assassination of King Mrhabuli.

13.2 Lineage continuity and the restoration branch

Despite exile, the lineage persisted through **Khunwana**, establishing a continuous genealogical trunk. The restoration claim rests on a specific, senior lineage culminating in the contemporary figure of Inkosi Mrhabuli II.

Table 1: Restoration Lineage of the Mrhabuli Royal House

Generation	Individual	Notes
1	Bongo	Senior Ndzundza royal ancestor
2	Mahlangu	King; consolidated Ndzundza authority
3	Mrhabuli	Legitimate Great House ruler who unified the Ndebele Kingdoms and expanded the Ndzundaza territories. He was killed by his nephew , Magodongo, who subsequently took over the leadership of the Ndzunza
4	Khunwana (Mokhulwana)	Sole surviving exile line, He represents a key branch of the royal family, continuing the lineage and leadership within the Bakgatla and Bapedi Marota nation, particularly in the context of the early 1800s/19th-century migrations and conflicts, notes
5	Difolwane	Warrior avenge for what was done to his grandfather King Mrhabuli and His father Khunwana by Magodongo
6	Marikana (Mametshe)	Died without issue
7	Ngabane	Progenitor of contemporary branches
8	Mohube (Mrube)	Restoration branch
9	Mabowe (Spumendo) – Ikosi Mrhabuli II)	Son of Mohube’s Great Wife (Indlunkulu), Restored senior traditional leader

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13.3 Inkosi Mrhabuli II as the restoration king

Ikosi Mrhabuli II/Mpokgabudi is recognised as the restoration king because he embodies the reactivation of a kingship that was historically suspended rather than extinguished. His legitimacy derives from uninterrupted descent through the senior lineage and from the reaffirmation of Great House principles at the Mohube–Mabowe node.

Recognition under the sovereign authority of **King Mabhoko III** constitutes customary ratification, reintegrating the restored house into the living political and ritual order of the Ndzundza nation.

14. Conclusion

The history of the Mrhabuli Royal House demonstrates that royal survival in southern Africa was often achieved through concealment, intermarriage, and lawful subordination rather than conquest. The Dipheko kgoro played a decisive mediating role, while Mapule wa Dipheko illustrates the centrality of women in transmitting legitimacy across political boundaries.

The restoration of Inkosi Mrhabuli II closes a two-century cycle of exile and confirms that kingship preserved through strategy and endurance can be lawfully reactivated when historical conditions permit.

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