CHAPTER 6

“Before, the Entire Land Was Ramabulana”

In light of the ramshackle system of land titling and its problems in the South African Republic (ZAR), conflict between this Boer government, its settler populations, and their African counterparts over issues of boundaries and ownership is not surprising. In cases like the Pedi example in Chapter 5, the notional titling of land already thick with grazing herds and African cultivation contributed heavily, if not decisively, to open conflict and the uprooting of title. Measures from 1874 onward sought to place some kind of wall between untrammeled settler acquisitiveness and relations with African polities. But their purpose was more programmatic than pacifistic, because the Volksraad still sought to establish settler control over the landscape, and the bureaucracy of the ZAR increasingly pushed to define its boundaries, contents, values, and restrictions. That two-pronged drive to prescribe and enumerate became, in light of growing state wealth after 1886 and pressure for land, the vehicle for a new phase of conflict over land, livelihoods, and authority with kingdoms and chiefdoms that before had considered Pretoria’s reach about as notional as it truly was. There were many such states across the districts far from Pretoria, but few had as long or convoluted a history with the Boers as the western Venda kingdom of Ha Ramabulana (see map 6.1), which was arguably the strongest single independent power in the mountains of the northern Transvaal between the first Boers’ visit in 1836 and its military defeat in late 1898.1 The kings of Ha Ramabulana, from Ramabulana himself (r. 1836–1864) to his son Makhado (r. 1864–1895) and grandson Mphephu I (r. 1896–1925), were careful yet assertive in making their own claims to land, and the landscape of Venda communities under them was resilient yet responsive to influences from the south.

As with almost every other activity of the ZAR, the incremental developments in the Republic’s system of land inspection and survey rarely had direct meaning for Ha Ramabulana and the other Venda polities in the region. The

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1 I employ the name Ha Ramabulana (Ramabulana’s country) to focus on change from his era forward, and to define the house’s potential reach to clients instead of a particular piece of land. It is not a territorial term that people used regularly or exclusively, but it is consistent with other houses’ territorial labels (e.g., Ha Tshivhase). The term Boer here refers primarily to the agrarian white settler population of South African birth who spoke proto-Afrikaans dialects, although their interests often shared little beyond that.
Ramabulanas ejected most Boer presence from the area around the mountains in the 1860s, and kept all agents of external authority, whether ZAR officials or missionaries, at arm’s length. That limited state power meant that virtually the entire northern portion of the vast Zoutpansberg district (including the Soutpansberg Mountains themselves) formed a vast and persistent gap in the various archives in Pretoria that extended beyond the lifespan of the ZAR itself. There were few scientific surveys, positional measurements, route sketches, or even inspection drawings of the area before 1900, and those that existed came from missionaries or the handful of explorers who generally avoided the central mountains. Together with a lack of effective authority from Pretoria, general Venda wariness assured that very little reliable data about the landscape was initially available to the ZAR or to the British.

The poor state of European geographical knowledge of the northern Zoutpansberg was clearly visible on the maps that German-born cartographer Friedrich Jeppe produced between 1867 and 1899. Jeppe arguably did more than any other individual to compile maps from the geographical archive and correct them during the era between 1864 and 1899, and his status as a perennial bureaucrat in the various governments of the Transvaal—including the office of the