

## C O M M E N T A R Y

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#### THE EXPLOITED DAUGHTER: LESSONS IN THE FIELD

'The "white" wants to learn about Swazi traditions.' This was the final sentence with which the chief of the area I had chosen for my fieldwork in Swaziland summed up my long speech. I had tried to convince him (but in this case, due to rather special circumstances, it was a *her*) that I wished to live - and indeed was capable of living - in one of the homesteads under her control; and I had tried to explain as clearly as I could what I wanted to do among her people and how long I was planning to stay. After my first meeting with the chief, I had to wait for the local political elections to take place and for the *libandla* (the local general council) to be held, so that I could be granted permission to live there; only then could I transfer to 'my' area.

I was eager to see which homestead had been chosen for me by the *libandla*. The chief was very positive about the matter, leaving no room for further discussion: my *umuti* (homestead) was to be one of the richest in the area, 'the most suitable for me'. It had a concrete house, many fields and a large cattle byre. The headman, who was employed by the railway company, was a counsellor to the chief and a very prominent man in the community. He had probably had a part in the decision taken by the *libandla*, and was certainly a 'trusted' man who could assume the responsibility of looking after me. I arrived on a Saturday, and early on the Sunday

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I undertook fieldwork in Swaziland for my doctoral dissertation at the University of Siena, Italy. In Swaziland, I relied on the help and assistance of the staff of the Social Science Research Unit, University of Swaziland. Here, I found a most stimulating and friendly environment, which was more than essential for the success of my research. I wish also to thank two friends, Joan Knowles and David Collett, for the help they provided in discussing this paper.

*babe* (the father and head of the homestead) left for his job. I was left with *make* (the mother) and an ever-changing number of children.

What did *make* expect of me? Her husband had been happy to have me as his guest, as an opportunity to raise his social status, but now *she* was left to deal with me, the *umlumbi* ('white'). Her expectations were in reality rather simple and primarily based on the fact that I was an *umlumbi*. I would not and could not eat the food she normally cooked, I would not eat with my hands, sleep on the floor, or use their lavatory. Therefore, she cooked rice for me, gave me a spoon, and provided me with a mattress, though in the case of the last, she did not know what I was going to do. She could not forget that first and foremost I was an *umlumbi*; but she also needed to give me a status known to her and through which she could define and try to control me. The most obvious thing I could be was a guest, even if a white one.

However, I did not behave as a guest. I remember clearly the very first night in my *umuti*, when *make* came with a metal tray (I do not know how and where she had found it) with a dish and a spoon upon it. She left it on the floor, but then came back with a chair for me. Very much confused and embarrassed, I simply refused to eat alone, on a chair, with a spoon. I walked into the kitchen and sat down on the floor with the children. *Make* stared at me, not knowing how to react to this strange, rather astonishing *umlumbi*. Sitting on the kitchen floor, that very first night, I upset the cultural stereotype of an *umlumbi*, leaving *make* in a state of complete uncertainty. But at that time I was not able to grasp what was happening and what my behaviour meant for my new mother.

I went even further. Helped by my interpreter (a Swazi girl I hired to work for me), I learnt how to be useful and cooperative in the 'house': first I helped to wash the dishes, then the two of us offered to take turns sweeping the floor in the morning; one afternoon we went and fetched water from the communal tap. I also started to take care of a little child, the son of one of *make*'s sisters who worked in town. Finally, one morning I saw *make* washing her clothes. Wanting to be of use and hoping to have a chance to talk to her, I offered to help. She looked at me with surprise, then handed me the shirt she was washing and walked off, leaving me with a huge pile of dirty clothes. Afterwards, when the washing was on the line, she welcomed me in the house, calling me *mntfwane* (her daughter). It was the first time she had ever referred to me in this way. At first I was delighted to be 'accepted' as one of the family, ignorant as I was of the real meaning of my new position. This, however, soon became clear.

We had heard *make* complaining that she had too many small children and no daughters old enough to help. But from that day, *make* treated me as her daughter, and my interpreter became my assistant, so *make* could rejoice at the unexpected gift of having two grown-up daughters.

From then on, *make* started to behave very differently: she would leave in the morning, saying we could feed the children;

she stopped fetching the water; and one morning we woke up to find that the fire had not been lit and the children had been left on their own. Little by little, she gave up all her responsibilities, praising our good nature and efficiency with her friends, who started to be invited frequently to our *umuti*.

All this happened during the first month of my fieldwork. While it was happening I had no way of realizing what was going on, and the situation got out of control. Despite my new role as a daughter, I was determined to continue with what I felt was my 'real' research. Every morning there would be dishes to wash, children to be looked after, wood to be cut or collected; but I would also go out with my interpreter to do 'research', walking to new homesteads, meeting new people, collecting new data, sketching new genealogies. Then in the afternoon, back at our *umuti*, we would become daughters again, and as such fulfil all our tasks.

At this time, I wrote in my diary:

I have lost control of the situation and our position in the *umuti* is becoming unbearable. *Make* is really going too far: she considers us her servants and she shamelessly orders us to do anything she wants. But I cannot see how I can change what is happening.

I was wrong: *make* did not consider us servants; she just considered us her daughters. But the situation remained unbearable; I felt my research was suffering from it, because I did not have enough time or energy to devote to it. Soon after writing this note, I firmly decided that I could not accept the existing situation any more. But how could I change it? My interpreter and I tried to talk with *make*, but all she replied was that she was very pleased to have us with her ('I bet she is', was my comment).

I finally realised that the situation was quite simple, and very much at hand. Every time I visited a homestead, I would ask about any *makoti* (wife and daughter-in-law) living there; I was particularly interested in a *makoti*'s status *vis-à-vis* a *gogo* (grandmother and mother-in-law). I very soon discovered that the distinctive characteristic of a recently married *makoti* was that she did not have a kitchen of her own, and therefore had to cook with *gogo* or, more precisely, *for gogo*. Her status completely changed when she was allowed to set up her own fireplace.<sup>1</sup> More-

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<sup>1</sup> Even if it is commonly assumed that a *makoti* will be allowed to have her kitchen after delivering her first child (and this was the usual statement Swazi informants would make), I found that the 'rule' is not followed in any strict way. I met daughters-in-law with a number of children who still had to cook for *gogo*, and newly married girls who already had their own fireplace. The decision as to when to let a *makoti* have an independent kitchen, and therefore a more independent status, lies entirely with her husband or his father (if he is the head of the homestead). However, a *gogo*'s position in the *umuti* (depending, for instance, on

over, I found that, from a *gogo's* point of view, a daughter lost through marriage was not replaced by a daughter-in-law acquired by her son and brought into the homestead. This was because, as one *gogo* told me, 'my daughter would fetch water for me, collect wood for me, do my washing, look after my other children, and cook for me in my kitchen'.

After a long conversation with a *makoti*, I suddenly realised what the solution to my problem was: I was *make's* daughter, and I ought to become her daughter-in-law. It was obvious that what I needed most was a kitchen. I just had to find an excuse to justify such an innovation - after all, I was an *umlumbi* and, in the eyes of my hosts, still had some independence - and I would have solved my problems.

I told *make* that, because of my research, I had to wake up very early in the morning and come back home very late at night, as I would be spending all day from dawn to sunset with another woman, following her in all her activities and daily tasks; therefore, I had to have a very early breakfast and very late dinner. I pointed out the inconvenience of my schedule for the whole family, and suggested providing myself with a small gas stove to cook for my interpreter and myself. *Make* did not understand the purpose of my research, but she understood very well what a new kitchen in the house would mean. However, there was no way she could object to my decision.

Within two days, I had provided myself with a stove and sufficient food. As I expected, my status suddenly changed, together with my responsibilities in the homestead. It was now fully accepted, and what is more, expected by everyone, that I would wash only my own dishes and clothes, fetch only the water I needed, and cook only the food for myself and my 'dependant' - my interpreter.

*Make* accepted the change - but she stopped calling me her daughter. Nevertheless, the transformation was not so sudden for her that she had to resume her full responsibilities when I abandoned them. By a curious coincidence, on the same day that I set up my new kitchen, two of *make's* daughters, aged 12 and 14, came home from the boarding school they attended. They stayed with us for a couple of days, and as true daughters, naturally replaced me and my interpreter, allowing *make* to behave as she had for the month and a half since our arrival.

But the weekend was soon over, and the two girls left. Early next morning, *make* woke me up and started the fire, cooked the porridge for all the children, filled up the water-tank and started complaining about not having any daughters to help her. Only one of her previous duties was not taken up by *make* again: she would not look after the little child, her sister's son, who by then had become very devoted to me. In fact, having a son - as the child practically became for me - fitted in with my new family role as a *makoti*.

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whether she still has daughters at home or whether she has other and younger daughters-in-law to cook for her in her kitchen) is normally taken into account when making this decision.

Reading through my diary, I can recollect the feelings I had during this period in the field as a daughter, when I did not realise I was one. I felt frustrated, unable to react, and cheated by this woman who was not treating me as an anthropologist. I felt like a servant ('What does she think I came all the way from Swaziland for? To wash her dishes?'). Only later, and probably only after I left Swaziland, could I fully appreciate the meaning of my experience and realise what a valuable and essential insight into the functioning of a Swazi homestead I had acquired.

Because I was an *umlumbi* and in this case, more specifically, a white anthropologist, I was in a powerful position, which I sometimes took advantage of without even realising it. By deciding that I did not want to be treated as a guest, I imposed my new status as a daughter on *make*. When I realised what the new situation meant for me, I once again took the initiative of changing it, and became a *makoti*. As an *umlumbi*,<sup>2</sup> I was always facing the ambiguous position of feeling like an outsider, and yet having sufficient power to take actions which would affect not only me (not always in a desirable way), but also the people around me. It was probably the stubborn passivity which faced me and rejected me everywhere and all of the time that put the greatest psychological strain on me during my whole field experience.

But I also learnt a lot from my actions. Thanks to them - whether they were taken unintentionally or deliberately - I was able in a short space of time to go through the change of status which every Swazi woman experiences in her lifetime. As a result of my exceptional circumstances, I played the roles of both daughter and daughter-in-law, and thus experienced at first hand the consequences of this change in status. I was then able to appreciate what happens when a mother loses a daughter through marriage or acquires a daughter-in-law. The abrupt change of *make*'s way of life following my change of status made me aware of a female (feminist?) perspective of *lobolo* (bridewealth). It is commonly held that cattle received upon a daughter's marriage are meant to compensate the family for her loss, to amend 'a breach of the family solidarity'.<sup>3</sup> However, thanks to my experience, I could clearly perceive how it is that women are also subjected to a form of expropriation: they are the ones who effectively suffer from their daughters' loss without receiving any compensation from the bridewealth paid for their offspring, because 'cattle do not belong to women'.

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<sup>2</sup> During most of my stay in the field I was called *umlumbi*, and it was only a few weeks before my departure that people started calling me *muntfu* ('person', as compared with 'white'). I felt that this was one of the more notable achievements of my fieldwork.

<sup>3</sup> A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, 'Introduction', in A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde (eds.), *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1950, pp.1-85, at p.49.

This direct experience of the functioning of an *umuti* provided an insight into the bridewealth system, which enabled a correct appreciation of the ideological view of *lobolo* as presented by Swazi women. Women are the first to explain that *lobolo* is a good thing because 'we bear our children, we deliver them, bring them up, educate them; then a man comes and takes our daughters away: it is quite fair that this man pay *lobolo*, so that we can at least have something in exchange for our efforts to bring up our daughters'. But all a woman can hope to receive in exchange for her daughter is a daughter-in-law, and as I have suggested, the exchange is not equal.<sup>4</sup>

Despite my feelings of frustration during my 'training' and 'performance' as a daughter, and despite the fear of losing precious time from my 'real' research, I can now clearly see that every minute I spent as a daughter was a profitable learning process. But I must confess that I would not want to be a daughter again.

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<sup>4</sup> I have discussed elsewhere (R. Astuti, "Una donna vale più delle capre": Compensazione matrimoniale, valore della donna e circuiti di scambio in Swaziland', University of Siena thesis 1984) how a woman is gradually assimilated into her husband's *umuti*, and how she eventually becomes a part of her husband's clan. If a woman suffers a loss through the replacement, eventually, of a daughter by a daughter-in-law, it must, however, be remembered that becoming a mother-in-law is a very significant and powerful move in the 'long journey' a woman undertakes in her lifetime (cf. H. Ngubane, 'Marriage, Affinity and the Ancestral Realm: Zulu Marriage in Female Perspective', in E.J. Krige and J.L. Comaroff [eds.], *Essays on African Marriage in Southern Africa*, Cape Town and Johannesburg: Juta 1981, pp.84-95, at p.85).