

Some Notions of 'Purity' and 'Impurity' among the Zulu<sup>1</sup>

Among the traditional patrilineal Zulu of South Africa,<sup>2</sup> women are more often associated with mystical experiences than men are. While on the one hand as daughters or sisters, women may be associated with the positive mystical forces as diviners, on the other hand as mothers or wives, women are often related to the negative polluting mystical forces. It is the logic behind these notions that I want to examine in this article.

In Zulu, pollution is expressed by the term umnyama which literally means 'darkness of the night'. The darkness is symbolically seen as representing death while the daylight represents life. Umnyama as a term used to represent death or 'near death' can be translated as pollution because of lack of a better English word to convey this very complex Zulu concept. Pollution then for the Zulu can be seen as a marginal state believed to exist between life and death.

It is conceptualized as a mystical force which diminishes resistance to disease, creates conditions of misfortunes, disagreeableness and repulsiveness. The behaviour pattern observed by those who are in a state of pollution is known as ukuzila and it entails withdrawal from social life, fasting, silence and abstinence from pleasurable experiences. People with umnyama or pollution are expected to speak in low tones and only when necessary. Since umnyama is graded according to its intensity, the extent of ukuzila is dependent on the intensity of the particular phase of pollution.

The source of pollution is a happening that is associated with birth on the one hand, and death on the other. Both birth and death are mysteries associated with the 'other world' from which people come and to which people return. Although 'this world' and the 'other world' are viewed as separate entities, the beginning of life whose source is believed to be in the 'other world' happens in this world and the cessation of life in 'this world' is believed to mean continuity of life in the 'other world'. Notionally, there is an overlap between the two worlds - and such an area of overlap is marginal and dangerous to both worlds in the same sense as analysed by both Mary Douglas (1966) and Leach (1964, 1971).

All situations which are a manifestation of reproductivity or cessation of life are polluting in differing degree of intensity, this being measured by the extent of the contagious nature of each state of pollution. Reproductive emissions such as seminal fluids, or menstrual blood, are therefore polluting and so is gestation,

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1. My thanks to The Philip Bagby Fund and The Ioma Evans-Pritchard Fellowship which made it possible for me to write this article.
  2. Research work was done mainly among the Nyuswa/Zulu of Natal in the Valley of a Thousand Hills 1964-71.

lactation, parturition, death, bereavement or treatment with black medicines which symbolize death.

Since space does not allow me to go into details regarding all these states of pollution, I will focus my attention on the phases of pollution which have the highest degree of intensity, these being birth and death. It will be seen that pollution is much more closely related to a married woman because there are a number of ways in which her role is distinctive and these relate to her marginal position, not only because as a wife she is a link between two corporate groups in a lineage structure, but also because as a mother her marginality is manifested in situations which give rise to pollution.

As the child enters the body of the mother at conception the mother begins to move into a marginal state. Although the child is identified with the mother as it is dependent on her for its development both before and after birth i.e. during gestation and lactation, it is nevertheless different from her as it belongs to a different patrilineage. The mother is only a channel through which the child comes into this world. This is more cogently expressed in the Zulu understanding of conception and patriliney. To quote one of my respondents: "The woman receives, takes in the seed which grows to be a baby - just like the seed of the maize which because of the warmth of the fertile soil, germinates and takes root. The child belongs to the man because it is he who has sown."

A newly delivered mother (umdelzane) is considered to be highly polluted, and her pollution is contagious and particularly endangers men's virility, cattle, and crops. For this reason she withdraws from society. In the house of confinement only married women may keep her company. For ten days, whenever she goes outside the house she is covered up in a blanket. After ten days, she removes the blanket, but she smears her exposed parts, such as the arms, legs and face, with red ochre whenever she goes to the shop, river, or anywhere away from home. She is not only a threat to men, crops and cattle, but she is regarded as weak, and likely to contract all forms of illness. She is also dangerous to her baby as in her state of vulnerability she may pass on the contamination to the baby. For this reason she must stay at home. She remains umdlezane with intensified form of pollution until she stops post-partum emissions. She then stops smearing her body with red ochre and her pollution is no longer contagious. But as long as she is lactating she is polluted, and this is comparable to her gestation period when her vulnerability, though not contagious as far as other people are concerned, is nevertheless a threat to her baby. A lactating mother and a pregnant woman avoid contaminating situations. As a protective measure against unforeseen contamination pregnant and nursing mothers often smear red ochre on the soles of their feet.

Birth and death are seen as belonging to the two sides of one coin. That is why the chief mourner in cases of death is always a married woman and never a man or an unmarried girl. She mourns the death of her husband, her children, her daughter-in-law

or her mother-in-law. For instance, when her husband dies, she prepares the corpse into a sitting position helped by other women who are married into the lineage. By tradition the corpse is tied while it is still supple with knees and arms bent up, each hand touching the chin. In this position it is made to sit, leaning against the main pillar of the hut, and facing the upper part of the hut. The widow sits silently next to the corpse, covered in a blanket.

In the meanwhile men, who may not come into the hut, dig the grave, a round hole with a niche on the side - large enough to receive the corpse. The chief mourner helped by other wives or married women, carries the corpse to the hut doorway where it is received by the lineage men (but not the sons of the deceased) who convey it to the graveside and place it down beside the open grave. The chief mourner cuts off the cord that ties the corpse. She then descends into the grave and receives the corpse from the men above which she carefully places within the niche seated upon a mat and facing towards the cattle fold. Having placed the corpse she sits silently covered up in a blanket next to the grave, while the grave is covered up. She then removes the blanket.

The day following burial is a day for a ceremonial wailing, when the married women from the immediate neighbourhood gather at dawn and wail in the company of the chief mourner at the entrance to the homestead. The widow observes ukuzila or mourning behaviour for a period of one year, while the other members of the family are released sooner from mourning by performing a hunting ritual.

The above abbreviated account suggests several parallels between birth and death in relation to the role of a woman.

When the widow delivers a corpse to the lineage men at the doorway her action represents delivering a baby to the lineage at birth.<sup>1</sup> The corpse is tied up in such a manner that it more or less represents a foetus in the womb - with its knees and arms bent up. The hut in which the corpse and the mourners are, symbolises the confinement hut as well as the womb itself. (That the round hut is sometimes thought of as analogous to the womb was often brought home to me when respondents explained the seniority of twins. I was told that if two people enter a hut, the first one to enter sits away from the doorway while the second sits nearer the doorway. So when they leave, it will be the one sitting nearer the doorway who will go out first. According to this logic the second twin is therefore senior. Furthermore, the uterine siblings are said to belong to the same hut - which is sometimes expressed as the womb (abendlu yinye, abesisu sinye - They are of the same hut, they are of the same womb.) It is because of such analogies that I see the handing of the corpse to the men as symbolising delivering a baby).

Having delivered the corpse to the men, in a dramatization of birth, soon afterwards the conception is dramatized, when the

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1. This is my own interpretation which arises from association of rites and analogies of the hut and the womb, referred to later on.

chief mourner enters the round hole (representing the womb), receives the corpse from the lineage men and places it in the niche - to be born in the other world. The earth here represents the woman who identifies herself with it by sitting down on the bare earth while the grave is covered up.

In other words, while a Christian minister in the performance of funerary rites says, "You are dust and into dust you will return", this being a reference to the creation of the first man who was moulded with clay, the Zulu symbolically say, "You entered into this world through a woman and through her you will return to the other world". This is also a reference to the emergence of the first man when the reed on the river bank became bulky and ultimately split and out came the first man. The reed which is hollow and fixed to the soil symbolizes a woman through whom life is believed to come into this world and returns to the other world.

One can draw parallels between birth and death by looking at the different phases of pollution (umnyama) which are recognized by different degrees of intensity.

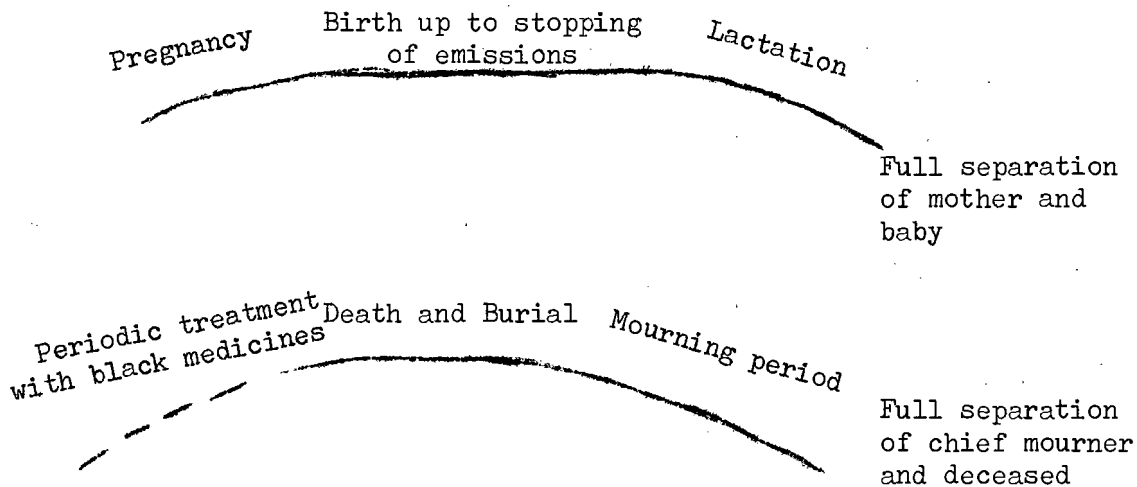
Table I: Showing Phases of Pollution

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| Phase 1. | (Birth : From conception to parturition<br>(<br>(Death : From periodical treatment with black<br>( medicines to death                                      |
| Phase 2. | (Birth : From birth to the disposal of the after-<br>( birth emissions<br>(Death : From death to the disposal of the corpse                                |
| Phase 3. | (Birth : Lactation period<br>(<br>(Death : Mourning period   |
| Phase 4. | (Birth : Mother and child fully separated after<br>( weaning<br>(Death : Chief mourner and deceased fully separated<br>( after mourning period             |
| Phase 5. | (Birth : Child a full member of this world after<br>( first sacrifice<br>(Death : Deceased a full member of ancestral world<br>after integration sacrifice |

This can be illustrated as a curve of rising intensity during the different phases of pollution in both situations of birth and death. From conception to childbirth the pollution is believed to gradually increase and this is demonstrated by much greater withdrawal from the public arena by the pregnant mother. The intensity is on a high plateau from parturition until the mother stops bleeding; it fades away during lactation as the baby gradually feeds more and more on solids and less on the mother's milk.

If the death is a result of a long drawn out sickness the patient is periodically treated with black medicines and during such treatment all the members of the family are also treated and while thus treated, they observe ukuzila behaviour whereby people withdraw from society. This means that death is often preceded by phases of pollution during treatment with black medicines. The curve would start with treatment with black medicines, reach its high intensity at death to burial and fade away until the end of mourning. It can be illustrated thus:

Fig.1: A curve reflecting the degree of  
intensity of pollution



The institution of divination provides another instance of a woman's marginality as she is a point of contact between "this world" and "the other world". The diviner is not polluted with "darkness" (umnyama). On the contrary she is in a state of light and purity. Her problem is how to reconcile her state of purity (unamakhosi - being with ancestor spirits) with the profane world she lives in. Her whole behaviour is governed by this awareness.

She also goes through three phases but in her case not phases of impurity but of purity. The first phase begins with the manifestation of her contact with the spirits - when she dreams of them, hears voices whispering in her ears, prefers solitude, neglects her appearance, eats very little and chooses the food she eats, has an urge to go and plunge herself in the river where she see a huge snake that coils around her, and finally she runs away to a diviner to be trained as an ithwasa - a neophyte.

Being a neophyte marks her second phase during which she withdraws from the society almost completely. She devotes most of her time to ecstatic experience by singing spiritual songs of her own composition to which she dances. The whole effort is concentrated on promoting her closer contact with the spirits. A series of sacrifices and treatment with white medicines are

all calculated to promote her illumination. She is painted with white clay and has ablutions twice a day for the same reasons. The intensity of contact is measured by the extent of her clairvoyance. The neophyte is notionally in a process of becoming permanently pure and full of spiritual power. When she graduates as a diviner she has attained the maximum clairvoyance which means that her contact with the spirits has reached its highest point which marks her third and final phase.

She maintains her state of purity by various observances such as constant sacrifices and avoidance of all situations which are regarded as unclean. She maintains her ascetic and ecstatic experience by singing and dancing and moving more in the circles of the diviners. She is in general considered a moral and upright person and she endeavours to live up to these expectations. It is very rare for instance to find a case of a diviner accused of sorcery, while on the other hand, ethno-doctors who practise medicine, but not being diviners, are readily accused.

While a mother experiences pollution phases of fluctuating intensity, a diviner's acquisition of spiritual contact increases in its intensity until it reaches a maximum where it remains on a more or less constant plateau.

The diviner remains permanently marginal. This is expressed by her attire, more particularly the white strips of goat skin strapped crossways over her breasts. These are calculated to protect her against the dangers of those who are not diviners.

The argument I have given above about the mother and the chief mourner being channels through whose bodies spiritual beings pass across from the other world to this world and from this world to the other world, fits in with the diviner who is a point of contact with the spirits who return to this world. Through a woman the transition of spiritual beings is made. This point is crucial in that it explains why diviners are women and why men must become transvestites to be diviners.

The diviner, however, belongs to the same patrilineage as the spirits that possess her, while a mother or a mourner is an affinal relation with the spiritual beings with whom she is in contact.

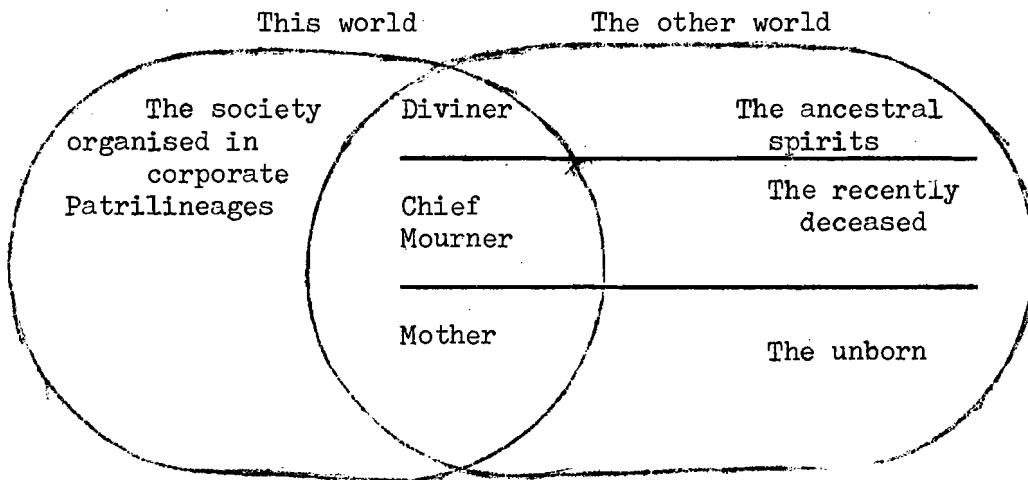
If we use Durkheimian language and regard 'this world' as profane and the 'other world' as sacred, the sacred world for the Zulu could further be qualified as sacred with spiritual power over the living, and sacred with no spiritual control over the living. The sacred and powerful would in this sense refer to the desired ultimate - which is the ancestral spiritual body; while the sacred and powerless refers to the incomplete spiritual states represented by the unborn and the recently deceased.

A woman as a "mother of birth" (umdelzane) and a "mother of death" (umfelokazi) is dangerous not only because she is marginal, she is also dangerous because she is impure - her impurity arises from the fact that she straddles this world and the section of the other world which is sacred but powerless.

The diviner on the other hand is pure and her purity arises from the fact that she straddles this world and the section of the other world which is pure and powerful. She is not dangerous to us, but we as normal people are dangerous to her because we are not as pure as she is.

This could be illustrated in the following way:-

Fig. II The marginality of the women who represent the overlapping of 'this world' and 'the other world'.



I find the basic contrasts in the Radcliffe-Brownian sense between normal and abnormal useful in giving a better understanding of the marginality of a woman as a diviner on one hand and as a 'mother' of birth and death on the other hand.

'Abnormal' conditions are signified by either having too much or too little, by being too strong or too weak, or by being excessively clean or excessively dirty, or by any other form of extremity.

In this sense the diviner's purity = excess of spiritual power confronts the mother's impurity = deficiency of spiritual power. There is a paradoxical conjunction of these two apparently opposite extremes in that as both of them are an index of abnormality they can not live properly with normal people who strike the balance between the two extremes.

The contrasts between diviner and mother can further be tabulated in the following way.

Table II: Showing 'The Diviner' and 'The Mother' Contrasts

| Diviner                                      | "Mother" of birth and death                  |
|--|--|
| Excess of spiritual power<br>Daughter/Sister | Deficiency of spiritual power<br>Wife/Mother |

| Not polluted                               | Polluted   |
|--|--|
| Protects herself from pollution by society | Protects herself from further pollution by society |
| --   | Protects society from her pollution                |
| Permanent purity                           | Temporary impurity                                 |

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The **above** table may give the impression that the diviner and the mother are two different people. This may be true for an unmarried girl who may be a diviner but even then she ends up by being a mother. In most cases that I know of, women were possessed, or at least became neophytes, when they were already married. This means that a woman who is a diviner has the double responsibility of coping with her role as a diviner as well as that of a mother. The most successful diviners that I know had passed the child-bearing stage.

I will return once again to the diviner; the mother, and the mourner. At the moment I want to examine the role of a woman not as a link between 'this world' and 'the other world' but as a link between one patrilineage and another, and see to what extent her role as a wife compares with her role as a diviner, a mother, and a mourner.

A woman in a patrilineal society such as the Zulu provides a bridge which links through kinship ties some members of one corporate unit to another corporate lineage unit. In other words, in a polygynous family the man's children are united as siblings, but divided by their maternal relationship (see Fortes 1970). This means that while a woman on the one hand represents her lineage and forms a bridge between her lineage and that of her affines, on the other hand within her affinal corporate lineage group, she forms boundaries and not bridges - boundaries between her own children and those of her co-wives or between her children and those of her husband's brothers. In this sense she is a threat to the continued unity of the corporate group.

Her marginal position is manifested by the fact that jurally and legally she is under the control of her affinal group, whose ancestors also partially protect her as a wife, but her own lineage ancestors continue to protect her as a daughter. This is evidenced by the fact that if she becomes a diviner she is possessed by her own ancestors even if she is married.

The result of this situation is that while the descent group into which she is married is enjoined by religious sanctions against practising sorcery to harm each other, such religious sanctions are not applicable to her because she is not a full member of her husband's group and therefore out of reach of the complete and entire control of her husband's ancestors. With regard to sorcery, only secular sanctions apply to her. Since one can be charged with sorcery only if there is adequate evidence, the logic is that it is safer to practise sorcery as long as one



is not found out while one can not hide an evil deed from the ancestral spirits.

This means that within the extended family only married women can practise sorcery without fearing the consequences of ancestral punishment. What this notionally means is that every woman within the homestead is potentially a sorcerer and particularly a threat not only to her co-wives - but to their children as well.

Women in this sense do not only represent points of segmentation and therefore a threat to the integration of a corporate group, but they also threaten the continuity of the lineage in that sorcery between co-wives or brothers' wives is often said to be calculated to deprive the victim co-wife of children.

The above observations suggest that while the social structure places a woman as a wife in an ambiguous position, religious notions further isolate her as a source of danger.

The question that arises is: Why is the society making such demands on women? The answer to this can be found in the type of 'power' involved in each given situation.

Leach in his paper on "The Nature of War" has this to say in relation to power.

"Society, however we conceive it, is a network of persons held together by links of power... Viewed in this way power does not lie in persons or things, but in the interstices between persons and things that is to say in relations ... Power, the influence of relationship, is ambivalent. On one side it is dominance; on the other submission. In human affairs one man's advantage is always balanced by some other man's disadvantage. Power in itself is amoral, bringing benefits to one, disaster to another. But from the point of view of the individual, power always lies on the outside; power is the influence I have on others, the influence others have on me. It is what joins me to the others, it is betwixt and between, and it is dangerous stuff ... On a grander scale the same is true of society; we recognise what we are as a community, by seeing how we differ from, and how we are related to the others." (1965: 168-169).

This logic of discrimination does not only lead the Zulu to make category distinctions such as 'our lineage' versus 'other lineages' or 'this world' versus the 'other world', but there is also a special category of persons, namely diviners, wives, mothers, who have the very important function of forming a bridge between this world and the other world as well as our lineage and their lineage, which could be illustrated in the following way:

Table III: Showing the Role of  
Women as Bridges

- 
1. 'Our' lineage - 'Our' wives who are marginal - 'Other' lineages  
because they are affines and  
daughters of other lineages
  2. 'Our' lineage - 'Our' wives as channels - 'Our lineage  
through whom our children in the spirit  
enter this world from the world  
other world and through whom  
we return to the other world
  3. 'Our' lineage - 'Our' daughters who are - 'Other' lineages  
in the spirit diviners through whom in this world  
world other lineages benefit
- 

In relation to the first category, i.e. our lineage linked by our wives to their lineages, the ideology is that men exercise jurial and legal power over the women. This means that men are dominant and women submissive. But the power of men is challenged by the fact that women who are from outside their lineage do divide them. This is a manifestation of power which contradicts the ideology of submission associated with womanhood. It is this contradiction which is dangerous and which is cast in terms of sorcery operating within the homestead.

In relation to the second category - namely 'Our' wives as a link between 'our' lineage in this world and 'our' lineage in the other world, I will consider the other form of power that men have, in contrast to women.

A very important point which indicates the potency of man is that he is in control of the reproductive fluids. While a woman menstruates involuntarily, a man usually ejaculates the semen when he voluntarily has sexual intercourse. In this sense he is in complete control of the situation. This suggests that the semen is equated with potency. It therefore follows that if a man plans to undertake an uncertain risky enterprise tomorrow, he will not have sexual intercourse with a woman tonight as he needs as much power as he can get hold of. It is not surprising, therefore, that a man is said to abstain from sexual intercourse before such undertakings as going out on a war campaign, performing a sacrifice, going out hunting, and forging spears (in the case of a blacksmith). All these occupations are the prerogatives of males and they are the indices of their power. It therefore makes sense that men should abstain from activities which entail loss of semen - loss of power (i.e. energy, virility, strength).

That the woman's place is submission while that of a man is dominance is demonstrated by the ceremonial wailing (isililo) mentioned earlier on. Weeping and wailing are associated with helplessness and therefore submission, while power is demonstrated

by courage and aggression. Whereas the women wail, the men mark the end of mourning for themselves by a performance of an aggressive act, namely the ritual hunting (ihlambo).

The Zulu ritual hunt is said 'to clean the spears' - spears which are the symbols of aggression, which stab in attack to destroy life, in a sense comparable to the phallus which stabs to create life. The rite of washing the spears lifts the ban on sexual intercourse which had been in operation since the occurrence of death. In other words, what is 'cleaned' and made safe to use is not only the spear but also the phallus. It is the assertion of male virility and male power.

A further insight regarding pollution may be achieved by looking into the notions of fertility. As long as a man is potent he is not considered sterile. If there is no issue it is the woman who is said to be infertile. This explains the elaborate rites and sacrifices associated with marriage most of which are calculated to make the bride fertile. It is the duty of her father to perform such rites towards his ancestors to ask them to make his daughter fertile.

Here again we meet with a paradox where a man who is powerful and manifests it by his virility is dependent on the fertility of a woman. This means that a woman who is ideally submissive and powerless nevertheless exercises some power in that the continuity of the descent group is dependent on her fertility. I believe it is the realisation of this fact which makes a woman's emissions, which are a manifestation of her reproductive powers, particularly dangerous to men's virility. They are a reminder of men's inadequacy in entirely controlling the situation of reproductivity. Women in this sense are ambiguous because they exercise some power that they should not have, and as such they are dangerous to those who are entitled to that power.

I will now return to the significance of reproductive emissions. Compared with the other bodily emissions, they are a class apart. As long as one lives, one defaecates, urinates, produces saliva, tears and mucus as part of the body's functions. But the flow of menstrual blood and seminal fluids can dry up and stop and still a person continues to live. The cessation of such emissions, however, would arrest the continuity of the society. The concern over the reproductive emissions is not only over the good health of the living, but over the replacement of the generations.

If the society must be perpetuated it must have the means of maintaining life, i.e. food. Hence pollution does not only affect the people but it also affects their main means of livelihood i.e. cattle and crops.

In conclusion, what has emerged in this analysis is that pollution is understood to be more particularly associated with situations which marks the beginning and the end of life. These situations are associated with married women who fulfil the important social role of forming a bridge between the two worlds,

and as such they are not only in a condition which is dangerous to themselves as individuals, but they are dangerous to other people.

They are dangerous because they are marginal and ambiguous; their existence generates doubt about the difference between normal and abnormal, health and sickness; they represent, as it were, 'gateways to death' as this is indeed evidenced by the fact that in the sample of 161 cases of infant mortality, 57 of them, or 36%, were attributed to the mother's vulnerability during gestation.<sup>1</sup>

So, new ritual boundaries have to be set out 'to close the gate', to establish a new boundary between the truly normal world and the uncertain world represented by an individual in a marginal state. Hence the use of insulating materials, such as when a newly delivered mother (umdelzane) paints red ochre on the exposed parts of her body - the parts that have contact with the ordinary world. She does this in order to protect herself from the dangers to which she is prone and also because she herself is liable to be a channel of danger to others. By the observance of the right behaviour in her state of impurity she sees herself as engaged in a procreative activity to benefit the society as a whole.

Harriet Sibisi.

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1. See Sibisi 1972.