

# **PLOTTING RITUAL: RITES OF PASSAGE IN CONTEMPORARY KWAZULU-NATAL**

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I

When South Africans want to describe a place as far removed as conceivable from the noise and dislocation of cities like Johannesburg, what they say is that "Cofimvaba is in 'deep rural' Transkei" or "Green Valley is in 'deep rural' Mpumalanga". The first ritual event I describe took place in Mfanefile, an area situated in 'deep rural' KwaZulu-Natal. A young South African scholar, Hylton White, has been doing research there as part of his work for the Ph.D at Chicago. The following description of a marriage ceremony that took place there in November, 1997 is taken from his account.

Mfanefile lies at the core of what was the Zulu Kingdom of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and today is a journey by express combi-taxi of about two hours from Durban, the nearest industrial city and the source of most money that comes into Mfanefile. The wedding took place in the yard of the bride's sister Mama Beauty, who runs a shebeen there that serves the men alighting from the taxis that bring them home after work. The boundary conveniently adjoins the taxi and bus route that runs along the top of the property. Before the wedding could take place, however, the yard had to be transformed into an area of appropriate spatial relations so that the ancestors would be able to recognise the events taking place there as a marriage.

White describes KwaBeauty, as the property is known in recognition of the prosperity and standing of its owner, as follows:

"[It] is a roughly rectangular yard, closed off by strong fence-poles except for a large gate at the top of the yard that opens onto the road, used by customers and residents alike, and a much smaller entrance at the bottom for a footpath down to a stream in the valley below, where the girls of the household fetch water every day and do the laundry once a week. There are seven houses ..... built in a hybrid admixture of styles and material, ranging from internally divided rectangles of cinderblock under sheets of corrugated iron, to round mud-walled houses with roofs of thatch. Almost all of these are built with doors that face upwards at the road, directly or obliquely, with the notable exception of the tavern

house itself, which faces downwards onto the other houses and beyond them into the valley. .... The tavern ..... is a seemingly ramshackle affair: a mud-walled square built on a wooden frame under thatch, with a pounded clay-and-dung floor on which upturned beer-crates and rough wooden benches seat the clients."<sup>1</sup>

It was this unremarkable building that became the "great house" of the homestead due to its traditional construction and its fortunately-placed opening facing down the hill towards the small gate at the bottom. In the time of Shaka, visitors noted that the homesteads of the more considerable cattle-owning men were arranged with a "great house" at the top of a sloping yard with other dwellings placed in two arcs surrounding the cattle *kraal* [byre] in the middle.<sup>2</sup> These were, of course, the expression in space of an agnatic lineage system that depended on wealth in cattle for the appropriation from other lineages of wives, their children and the labour of both.<sup>3</sup> The respect due to all men in this patriarchal system was expressed in the elaborate avoidance practices of women. Apart from avoidances observed in speech and body language, women's physical movements were confined to certain places and paths. For example, they were not allowed in the *kraal* until after they had ceased menstruating; the one-roomed houses were divided into a men's side on the right and a women's side on the left. This sexual division extended to the outside of the structure so that women going about their duties in the homestead would avoid walking past that part of the exterior where, on the inside, was located the space of men.

The observation of these practices is, today, variable and unpredictable but rarely as rigid as it has been described for the past. In the case of KwaBeauty, given perhaps the primacy of a woman, MaBeauty herself, as homestead head, observation of traditional rituals was non-existent except on the occasion when the yard was reformed in order to make it appropriate for conducting a ritual sacrifice to show the ancestors that one of their daughters was departing to marry. The wedding that required the recognition of the ancestors was that of MaBeauty's youngest sister, MaNgudi, to her long-time partner with whom she lived on the coast.

A month before the wedding, MaBeauty's son brought in a group of friends to help collect poles and saplings and construct a small oblong frame large enough to contain a single cow – the *kraal*. The *kraal* was built near the bottom gate with an entrance on its lower side. This, as White describes it, had the effect of rotating the yard through 180 degrees, so that its whole layout was transformed to focus towards the *kraal* - down the slope, turning its back on the road. The *shebeen* ceased to operate and the thatched structure that normally housed it, facing down towards the sacred space above the *kraal*, became the 'great house' or *indlunkulu*<sup>4</sup> - the centre of

<sup>1</sup> Hylton White (1999) 'Feeding Persons, Reforming Homes: Cattle *Kraals* and Commensal values in Post-Apartheid Zululand', University of Chicago, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Krige, Eileen (1936) *The Social System of the Zulus*, Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter. pp 43ff.

<sup>3</sup> Guy, Jeff (1990) 'Gender oppression in Southern Africa's pre-capitalist societies', in Cheryl Walker (ed) *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, Cape Town, David Philip.

<sup>4</sup> This means both the 'grandmother's house' – the mother of the headman of the homestead - and the 'upper house' because it is sited, where the landscape allows, above the other dwellings and the *kraal* ( White, 1998 note 5)

ritual observances. Traditional beer was served here to guests, the bride and her companions sat in seclusion at the rear and the space was strictly divided between men on the right, women on the left and elders near the opening. It was in this structure that the ancestors clustered most thickly but their presence altered people's everyday movements elsewhere too, in the several weeks before the wedding. Everyone fell in with the rule that every dwelling has a women's side and a men's side and they confined themselves accordingly inside the various houses. Women who lived in the yard and others involved in the extensive wedding preparations also abandoned the direct paths across the yard from one building to another. They honoured the sacred space above the *kraal* by using circuitous routes around the perimeter and steered clear of the outside of dwellings on the "men's side".

The re-orientation of the whole yard to face the temporary *kraal* meant that the large gate onto the road at the top was supplanted as the main entrance by the small gate at the bottom leading to the valley and the stream below. This had an unforeseen consequence for the departing wedding guests, who, having exited through this gate, found that they could not get round the yard and up to the road to their waiting transport through the thick bush. After heated debate about how to avoid angering the ancestors, they retraced their steps back through the lower gate and, keeping close to the boundary fence, made their way up to the road through the large gate.

## II

Tin Town, as its name suggests, is a shanty town or shack settlement. Although the dwellings have tin roofs, they are made of mud with stick and stone infill. Tin Town is a sub-section of one of the four 'tribal areas' located in the scenically dramatic Valley of a Thousand Hills about 20 km north-west of the Durban Metropolitan Area. In South African terms it is a 'peri-urban' area from which people commute daily, if they are lucky enough to have jobs, into the city and its industrial areas. Fiona Scorgie, a young anthropologist now studying at Cambridge, did fieldwork there for a masters thesis on women's experience of menarche. She attended the *umhlonyane* or *umemulo*<sup>5</sup> of a woman called Kethiwe and obtained a video of the occasion.<sup>6</sup> The ceremony was begun by her father slaughtering a cow to mark her emergence into womanhood.

Although Tin Town is densely settled with the shacks of different families cheek-by-jowl with one another, it is not electrified, and water has to be drawn from a standpipe in the yard. Food for everyday consumption is cooked indoors on paraffin stoves. Cooking for ritual occasions must be done in iron three-legged pots over wood, outdoors, however. In order to cater for the large number of people and to

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<sup>5</sup> Eileen Krige, relying on Bryant's *Dictionary*, describes *umemulo* as the ritual whereby the father recognises his daughter's marriageable status and gives her tacit permission to look for a husband (*The Social System of the Zulus*, Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter, 1936 [4<sup>th</sup> edition 1962, pages 103 - 104]. Scorgie explains that what we see commonly today (and in this case) is a combination of two previously separated rites of passage for young women as described by Krige. These are *umhlonyane* to mark first menstruation and *umemulo*, which used to take place several years later. The two words were used interchangeably by Scorgie's informants.

<sup>6</sup> The following description is constructed from the video made by Mbongeni Ngcobo, a local commercial video maker and an email conversation with Scorgie.

give time for the freshly slaughtered beef to be stewed tender, the day of the *umemulo* began at daybreak, with lighting the fires and setting the pots to cook. Some neighbour women arrived early on to lend a hand with the cooking others to keep the old lady company indoors. The men began the serious business of drinking early too. After a brief appearance in the morning, Khethiwe remained secluded until the late afternoon, when she emerged from her shack dressed in the ritual clothing for the occasion. She wore an *isidwaba* with a beaded girdle on top and a patterned cloth over the back of the skirt. Over her white tee-shirt and round her shoulders she wore the caul of the slaughtered cow. In her hair were black and white beads over the right eye and bank notes pinned all round like the brim of a hat, covering her eyes. White leg decorations covered her calves.

Her father, with a stick in one hand, led her in a procession that took them round the neighbourhood and back to the yard, collecting more participants on the way. Immediately behind her were her 'supporters', women of her own age, also dressed variously in what could be called 'traditional' garments.

As they arrived back in the yard, drumming started and the crowd burst into song and ululations. To the accompaniment of the drum and hand-clapping, Khethiwe and her 'supporters' and then other women, showed their prowess in traditional dancing, taking it in turn to dance alone or with two others. After a while, a procession of men of Khethiwe's age arrived, carrying sticks and shields, and took their turn to dance. Then a trumpet blew and the crowd subsided into relative quiet for the speeches.

At dusk a taxi full of Khethiwe's father's relatives arrived from Nongcolose. They descended, the women hoisted their gifts on their heads and with the men in front, advanced in procession, singing. They carried crates of beer, pockets of oranges and other containers. Everything was heaped up to make a single demonstration of largesse and a little later the distribution began. Khethiwe, seated on a mat, was handed an open umbrella and draped with blankets, towels and clothing. Next to her was placed a basin overflowing with soaps and other toiletries. Her close female relatives were given fancy pinafores which they donned and danced around ululating. Her father, seated on a chair, was turbaned with a blue towel and also presented with a basin of toiletries. After all this had been admired, activities moved to the marquee which had been hired for the occasion – being winter it was too cold to stay long out of doors after sunset. Music, eating, drinking and dancing continued until the early hours, the young men falling into a stupor on commercial beer, old men and women content with plastic jugs of *umqombothi* (home-brewed millet beer).

Much of what happened that day was spontaneous, negotiated on the spot, but several aspects are definitive markers of this particular ritual, which is a rite of passage for a young woman at or soon after the onset of puberty. Khethiwe is not, however, a young girl just past menarche. She was aged 37 at the time and was the mother of four children between the ages of 12 and 17. She had never married but lived with her parents, her five younger sisters, her partner and their four children. Unemployed, she spent much of her time taking care of her chronically ill mother who was blind and paralysed.

## III

Late one spring afternoon, three young white men from the University of Natal in Durban and the Natal Museum in Pietermaritzburg travelled up to Mfanifile for the 'home graduation' of Sifiso, a good friend and informant of Hylton White, one of the party. They had been asked to bring gowns and hoods with them, though only one of them had managed to borrow a gown, but without a hood. None of them owned these academic paraphernalia. Other friends of Sifiso from Mfanifile, also graduates and now teachers scattered in rural schools around KwaZulu-Natal, were invited too. They all own their gowns and hoods and brought them along for the event.

The celebration began with a procession round the boundaries of the little settlement. In front was Sifiso, dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and tie and carrying a shield and stick. Flanking him were two men in two different 'traditional' styles with all the regalia of head-ring, stick, shield and furred skins of various animals over their shoulders and made into kilts and shin ornaments. Behind were men all carrying sticks and clad in a motley array of clothes: green and blue cotton work clothes, a white lab coat over trousers and jumper, white shirts and flannels, etc. There was also one woman dressed in full 'traditional' kit of *isidwaba*, married woman's headdress made of hair and a red cloak fashioned out of Indonesian cloth. Two other significant women wore dresses of "German blue" cotton and white brocade and the others more everyday clothing.

At a certain point the procession stopped to sing an invocation, raising their sticks in the air and then hitting them rhythmically on the ground. Then it made its way up to the *indlunkulu*, the hut at the highest point. The platform round it was set with chairs. To the sound of ululating, the graduates, dressed in gowns and hoods (those who had them) processed onto the platform and took their seats, with Sifiso, clad now in his black gown and hood, arriving last. Several hours then passed with speeches praising the graduate, his family, those who had paid for his education. The opportunity was not lost for reminding him of his obligations, not only to those who had directly made sacrifices for his education, but also to the community as a whole. Once over, the assembled people could devote themselves to the serious business of eating and drinking far into the night.<sup>7</sup>

## IV

Why hold a ritual to tell your ancestors you are leaving your father's homestead when you have been living together elsewhere for nearly ten years and have children already? Why get married according to traditional rites when you are both Christians? Why have a ceremony to mark the onset of menstruation when you have a steady partner and four children and the event being "marked" by ritual happened 16 years ago? Why hold an imitation of a graduation ceremony when you have already done "the real thing" with all the pomp and ceremony a university or technikon can muster?

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<sup>7</sup> I am awaiting a response from Hylton to my email requesting more specific details about this event.

The marriage and the *umemulo* were both explained by the participants as being important to celebrate because of signs received from the ancestors and interpreted by an *isangoma* (diviner) who advised what should be done to satisfy them. They were propitiatory, intended to win the ancestors' approval. Thus appeased, the ancestors would enable a sick kinsman or woman to get well, or remove some or other particular hardship or cease to send disquieting signals of their disapprobation. Often what the ancestors seem to require is that a ritual that was not performed at all or that was incorrectly done should be done and done properly.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of MaNgudi, her marriage was to be a Christian one, but her kin wanted to carry out certain customs to tell her ancestors that she was no longer living in her father's yard but in that of her husband. To accomplish this, a cow was killed to invoke the ancestors' presence and tell them that their daughter was finally leaving her father's *kraal*<sup>9</sup>. MaBeauty had to buy the beast and brew plenty of traditional beer. She also had to lay in stocks of commercial beer and food to accompany the ritually sacrificed cow - a costly business even though the relatives brought piles of gifts with them to help the festivities along. In addition, though, a few days before she went home for the wedding, MaNgudi suffered severe chest pains, which are commonly interpreted as signs that the ancestors want to be heard. The *sangoma* she consulted described the problem as being one of her mother's making - she had converted to Christianity and taken off her *isidwaba* after her husband's death and was being debarred from entering the house of her husband's ancestors because she was naked and an insult to their eyes. Two goats had to be sacrificed prior to the wedding to put this problem to rights - at a further outlay of cash. MaNgudi went along with the 'traditional' components of the wedding, and asked for the skin of the cow to be set aside for her in case she was "compelled" at some stage to put on an *isidwaba*, as she had a history of ancestral possession.

The *umemulo* Scorgie recorded was organised because Khethiwe's mother was very ill. The diviner called in for advice diagnosed that the illness had been visited on the mother because she had never performed an *umemulo* for Khethiwe. The advice was to propitiate the ancestors by enacting the ritual despite the protagonist being neither a teenager nor a virgin. It cost a lot of money: R2000 for the cow that must be slaughtered. Then there had to be enough food and beer, both traditional and commercial. This is a considerable amount, for relatives were summoned from afar to participate, and any neighbours who feel like taking part or want to profit from the occasion and enjoy a bit of meat and a lot of beer must be made welcome and satisfied. Her father's people helped by bringing copious gifts but the main expense had to be borne by Khethiwe's brother, the only employed person in the immediate family. Khethiwe and a few of her friends wore *izidwaba* [black oxhide kilts] which were hired for the occasion - very few women in a place as urban as the Valley would own and continuously wear these garments today<sup>10</sup>. Ideally all her age mates

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<sup>8</sup> White is particularly interested in these "re-constructions" that put right what was not done or done wrongly in the past. He described several of these which then seemed to tally with Scorgie's account. Personal communication.

<sup>9</sup> MaBeauty had in fact taken what White calls the 'ingenious' step of "waking up" the home of her deceased father, 'as if she were herself a man'. White, 1998, 'Ritual hegemonies: a moral politics in the Zulu countryside' paper for the African Studies Workshop, University of Chicago.

<sup>10</sup> I saw a new *isidwaba* on sale in a small tourist information centre in rural KwaZulu-Natal at a price of R2000 (more than twice an average labourer's monthly pay).

who accompanied her in dancing should also have worn *iziindwaba*, but they are too expensive for those not directly affected by the ancestors of the protagonist.

The graduation ceremony, is not a propitiatory ritual in the same way and has no obvious 'traditional' antecedents. However, there is no reason why it should have, given that rituals are innovative, negotiated and contingent as well as traditional, repetitive and formulaic. It should not be surprising that people adapt or invent rituals to deal with changed circumstances. Certainly there are precedents for celebrations and a sacrifice in thanks to the ancestors on the return of migrant workers, for example. The migrant returnee would dress in the latest fashions of the Reef, township style: a felt hat, two-tone shoes and a sharply tailored city suit. The new graduate (whether a man or woman) also wears a suit, redolent of the city, of business and of political office. A suit is also emblematic of worldly success, money and status. She or he mounts a raised platform dressed in a graduate gown, hood and mortar board and joins the ranks of the other local graduates who are similarly clad in their "robes of educational status". It is not just a good excuse for a killing a beast and having a beer drink. It makes manifest to the gaze of kin and neighbours that the time away and the money spent has been a good investment.

## V

Three different rituals with different contents and purposes taking place in different contexts – why put them together at all?

All the rituals I have described partake, in some way, of the general category of ceremonies known as 'rites of passage'. The graduation ceremony is the only one, however, that took place at the "proper" time in the lifecycle in that Themba had recently been at university and graduated. Khethiwe's *umemulo* and MaNgudi's wedding did *not* mark the actual moments of menarche or achieving marriageable status or of the bride moving from her father's to her husband's residence. Instead, the rituals took place when they did *because* they had not taken place at the right time and there was now something that had to be put right.

Following Van Gennep, Turner<sup>11</sup> divides rites of passage into three phases, the phase of separation from society, the liminal phase for the duration of the ritual itself and finally the re-incorporation of the individual into society with a new social status. In the cases of Khethiwe and MaNgudi, however, both had been behaving and been accepted as though they had already achieved the statuses with which the ceremonies were supposed to invest them. Indeed, they had been occupying the 'new' status for several years.

One reason for looking at all three together is to address a rather basic question that applies to them all: how and why do people spend the money involved on something so apparently ephemeral? All the people involved in the events described are living in great poverty (even MaBeauty is "well off" only in comparison to her desperately poor neighbours) and all stretched their financial resources considerably beyond their means to perform the rituals properly. A beast, sacrificed on each of these occasions, costs between R2000 and R2,500 when the monthly wage of a manual

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<sup>11</sup> Victor Turner (1969) *The Ritual Process*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

labourer is generally less than half of that. Traditional beer for the elderly participants is brewed at home, but it needs refined sugar and purchased sorghum; then there are the vegetables and mielie meal that must be bought to accompany the freshly slaughtered animal and there is wood to cook it all with. The most expensive single item, after the beast is the commercial beer drunk by the young in large quantities on these occasions. The total adds up to two or three months' wages or more. Why would a poor person contemplate spending so much on a ritual event?

One answer is that many people believe that traditional rituals MUST be carried out to ensure the protection of the ancestors. If a young woman's *umemulo* does not take place, her marriage or health or that of her children and other close relatives could be compromised. Indeed, this is what Khethiwe was told by the *sangoma* about the reason for her mother's illness. And so the family put their meagre resources together and paid what was necessary in order to cure the mother's illness. The omission of a ritual or even a detail of a ritual can cause problems much later. Another marriage ceremony that White<sup>12</sup> observed took place because Thokozana, a widow of many years was suffering from chest pains. The *sangoma's* diagnosis was that, when she married 40 years before, her father had not given her the highly symbolic *kist*<sup>13</sup> to accompany her. So the marriage was re-enacted with younger relatives taking on the roles of her husband, father, etc and she spent the night before, as she should have done so long before, sleeping alone in a hut with the *kist*.

Another kind of answer is that rituals create social solidarity and that social solidarity is particularly necessary in creating the networks of mutual help and obligation that enable very poor people to survive. How do they do this? In two ways, I believe.

One is the creation of reciprocal obligations through hospitality. The guests at any contemporary African rite of passage event include relatives who may be dispersed but will be invited and will themselves make every effort to be there. The other category of guest is the neighbours, for all these occasions are open to all: whoever has a mind to it can come and partake of the food and drink that is freely available on these occasions<sup>14</sup>. Kin are by definition those upon whom one is entitled to call for help in times of need and from whom one can expect an unstinted response.<sup>15</sup> When people's access to kin is reduced or non-existent because they are living in another context, it is imperative to cultivate relations of reciprocity and sharing with them whenever possible.

My own work and that of others involved in a nationwide anthropological study of the use of energy in poor township households contains overwhelming and detailed evidence that kin networks are vital for survival amongst those living in poverty. When money runs out (unemployment or death of the breadwinner) children are

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<sup>12</sup> Hylton White, personal communication.

<sup>13</sup> An Afrikaans word to describe a wooden box in which a bride takes her trousseau into her marriage. It is heavily inscribed with both material and symbolic meaning.

<sup>14</sup> Hence the anxiety about having enough to go round – though limits to hospitality are tacitly observed, except by hardened drinkers who lack any sense of propriety.

<sup>15</sup> For example, maternal grandmothers are extremely commonly the carers for children that have been weaned. Children whose mothers are in urban areas, whether working or not, will often be sent "home" to be looked after by grandmother. Parents in acute hardship may disperse their children amongst several kin-related households as a survival strategy.

sent away to relatives in various parts of the country, to whoever can manage to keep them until the position of their parents has improved. Provisions are given unstintingly from the often almost equally meagre resources of nearby kin. Pensioned parents in the countryside send pitiful but vital postal orders to help maintain their destitute children in the city. The felt obligation to give help extends to even quite distant relatives: we found a mother's cousin who was giving one of our informants regular handouts. In one case we came across, just the idea that they might be related because of a shared surname was sufficient basis for a sharing relationship.<sup>16</sup> Participation in family rituals is a way of strengthening and reminding each other of these ties and obligations.

The other survival mechanism that rituals create is a 'moral community'. Durkheim has provided a persuasive explanation of the social-cum-psychological process whereby rituals create social solidarity.<sup>17</sup> Durkheim argues that what happens in the performing of any rite is the "excitation" of "mental dispositions", which are

the same in every case; they depend on the fact that the group is assembled and not upon the special reasons for which it is assembled.....The essential thing is that men [sic] are assembled, that sentiments are felt in common and expressed in common acts. .... The necessary thing is that [the group] partakes of the same thought and the same action. .... So everything leads us back to this same idea: before all, rites are means by which the social group reaffirms itself. .... Men who feel themselves united, partially by bonds of blood, but still more by a community of interest and tradition, assemble and become conscious of their moral unity." (1915: 386-7).

Although Durkheim was writing here about totemic rituals whereby men [specifically, in the Warramunga case] create a sense of identity between themselves and the plant or animal totem, he was using this case of the "simplest" form of ritual to shed light on ritual and religious behaviour more generally. Indeed, he draws a direct parallel with the Catholic mass, by implication at the opposite end of the simple-complex spectrum.<sup>18</sup> By coming together and performing ritual acts, people become conscious of themselves as a social entity. Over and above the creation of identity, though, Durkheim emphasises the development around rituals of a sense of *moral* cohesion amongst the grouping that assembles and thus it becomes a grouping with shared values and obligations.

Most black South Africans live in conditions that would appear severely to militate against social and moral cohesion. The material base of their former way of life, a pastoral and agricultural economy, has been destroyed by colonialism and industrial capitalism. From a world in which most of their needs were met and people rarely starved, they live today in a global economy in which most of their wants, driven by

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<sup>16</sup> White, C et al (1996) *Social Determinants of Energy Use in Low-Income Township Households*, Report prepared for the Dept of Minerals and Energy, EO?????. See also reports by Bank, L, Jones, S and Mehlwane for East London, Durban and Cape Town, respectively EO?????

<sup>17</sup> Emile Durkheim (1915) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London, George Allen and Unwin.

<sup>18</sup> Durkheim (1915) page 386.

advertising and “Dallas”, now remain unsatisfied.<sup>19</sup> Without wishing to romanticise “tribal” life or deny its over-valuing of old age and maleness, there is no doubt that its predictability ensured a high level of psychic comfort for children and adults of both sexes. Although kinship ties may seem onerous to some, having to live apart from loved ones because of the necessity to earn a cash income too small to support urban family life is a bitter hardship. All the ingredients for social and moral collapse are there and yet there is no evidence of anybody living like Turnbull’s description of the Ik,<sup>20</sup> snatching food from the mouths of their own children. On the contrary, both the urban and rural ethnographies speak of much sharing and mutual aid amongst close kin and even very remote kin<sup>21</sup> and neighbours.<sup>22</sup>

My contention, based on Durkheim, is that it is precisely the kind of ritual that I have described (as well as those more conventionally timed and less innovative) that creates the “moral unity” which generates the impulse to mutual support. And it is the practice of long-term reciprocity that ensures survival in rural villages that depend on pension payouts and intermittent remittances and in urban and peri-urban townships where unemployment levels run at fifty percent or more.

The maintenance, under changing and precarious economic circumstances, of mechanisms for survival is clearly critical and a sufficient reason for the effort and money expended in mounting ritual events. I now want to turn from the creation of solidarity and obligations to some more individual, status-enhancing functions of public ceremonies.

Open-handed hospitality, laying on large quantities of food and drink, music and dancing demonstrate to a wide public of neighbours the material capacity to provide despite the outward appearance of poverty. It is saying “I/We have the means to do these things properly. We are not as poor as we look. For the duration of the event and a while after, we have asserted our superiority over those who receive from us.” We know from Mauss that social relations are constituted in the process of exchange. Equal exchange creates equal relations but also the person who gives raises their status (even temporarily) above those who receive. The relationship is only returned to one of equality when the receiver gives back an equivalent<sup>23</sup>. To demonstrate largesse to a whole community or neighbourhood is to raise one’s status above the rest, at least until someone else puts on a similar event. It is expected of one’s kin to contribute to the demonstration of family pride and competence by bringing food, clothing, blankets, etc, which are processed to the venue on women’s heads and then piled up in a public display of sheer quantity. All of these – the hospitality, the show of material goods - serve to enhance a person’s or family’s standing in the village or neighbourhood.

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<sup>19</sup> This is, of course, an extrapolation to a “tribal” economy of Marshal Sahlins’ notion of the “affluence” of hunter-gatherers. Sahlins, M (1974) *Stone Age Economics*, London, Tavistock Press.

<sup>20</sup> Colin Turnbull (1972) *The Mountain People*, New York, Simon and Schuster.

<sup>21</sup> such as “homeboys”, “homegirls” (people from the same village) and those who share a common surname or clan name.

<sup>22</sup> See White et al, Bank et al, Jones et al, Mehlwana et al (1998-9); Ellen Hellman (1948) *Rooiyard: a sociological study of an urban slum yard*, Rhodes-Livingstone Paper no 13, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Marcel Mauss (1915) *The Gift*, London, Cohen and West, 1966

All public ceremonies thus involve an element of display: that our household (or lineage, village, chiefdom, neighbourhood) can put on a good show, doesn't stint its hospitality, has money to spend on these important events. They also, as discussed earlier, maintain and create social solidarity and moral unity (to use Durkheim's phrase) which underpin the long-term bonds of reciprocity on which very poor people depend for survival.

Another element which is particularly present in the local graduation ceremony is that of enacting and hence reminding people of, relationships of power, authority and the obligations of high status.

Turner usefully draws attention to the fact that rites of passage not only invest the initiate with a new and enhanced social status but that in the third stage – re-incorporation into the community – the “subject.....has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others [and is] ...expected to behave in accordance with ...norms and ethical standards”.<sup>24</sup> In the case of the new graduate, the process of learning, the examinations, the obtaining of the degree are all accomplished away from the neighbourhood or village. As a result the process is not transparent to the view and is, indeed, little understood in places producing graduates for the first time. Having a local version of the graduation clearly serves the purpose of marking out those individuals who have undergone this process, but in the nature of being a rite of progress from one status (local child, someone's daughter or son, school educated) to another (university graduate) other functions are also being served. Amongst the rights of the initiate are those of being treated with the respect due a graduate, a learned person for whom other career opportunities have become available beyond those of migrant worker and farm labourer.

In addition, however, it is a reminder that the graduate still belongs to the local community and that he or she now has different and greater obligations to those they have grown up with that spring from their status, their increased job opportunities and influential networks. Anyone from a rural community living in a city is expected to provide help and hospitality to “homegirls” and “homeboys” who come looking for work. A degree and a good job with a reliable, even high income will carry increased expectations of help and support. The graduation ceremony marks this and reminds the graduate in a public way.

It also marks the superiority of being educated over being uneducated since, like all rites of passage, it propels a person from a lower to a higher position in society. The rite of passage takes a person from their existing status, removes them from society for a period and then, by means of a public ceremony, re-incorporates them into society with an enhanced social status. In the past, as described by Krige<sup>25</sup>, social positions were clearly defined: a boy was turned into a man by a ritual of initiation; young women and young men achieved full adult status through the ritual of marriage. In an analogous way, the local graduation ceremony marks off the graduate as different and superior to other young people who have not been to university or have not yet achieved graduate status.

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<sup>24</sup> Turner (1969) page 94.

<sup>25</sup> Krige, Eileen (1968) 'Girls' puberty songs and their relation to fertility, health, morality and religion among the Zulu' *Africa* 38: 173 – 198.

An interesting and unexpected development is the alignment of the 'traditional' and the 'indigenous' with the graduates who have been through the 'modern' and 'Western' process of higher education. As we saw in the photographs, the 'traditional' is visibly allied with the graduate during the ceremony. Men dressed in skins accompany the graduate in the procession and in the preliminary dancing. The suit and the skins are each emblematic of different kinds of power, often seen as being in conflict with one another. Here, on the contrary, we see them aligned, the one endorsing the other.

In many rural areas a challenge to the 'traditional' has been mounted by young supporters of the ANC ("comrades") attempting to overthrow the conservative gerontocracy and replace it with their own form of organisational domination. "Comrades" are generally not educated. The graduation ceremony provides an occasion for the elders and people by their dress and bearing representing the 'traditional' to demonstrate their support for education and to call on the community to show that they value education and accord high status to those who have become educated. It is a profoundly political event.

In this way local leaders are able to demonstrate their continuing hegemony, a fact dramatically enacted in the investing of the new graduate with his or her gown and hood by a traditional leader (in the Mfanefile case). The outside witnesses to the event are also participants in this demonstration which articulates the proud statement that 'this is a place that is to be reckoned with; we can also produce graduates from here; we are on the map.'

## VI

Three kinds of explanations for the contemporary observance of rites of passage have been offered in this paper.

The first is a materialist one, that the expenditure required for the proper celebration of a rite of passage is "worth" the outlay in terms of enhancing the likelihood that help will be forthcoming when people fall on hard times and need material support of one kind or another. Accepting hospitality – a particularly conspicuous form of hospitality - creates an ill-defined requirement to reciprocate some time in the future. It serves too to bring kin together for a "family" event that honours common ancestors, refreshing and lubricating relations with the normative source of help in crises so that they can be activated when necessary.

The second is, following Durkheim, that participating in ritual processes creates a sense of moral cohesion, of community, of mutual goodwill and spiritual togetherness. Thus the enactment of rites of passage strengthens the ties within 'communities' of kin and neighbours. and contributes to the networks of support are crucial to survival amongst the poor and marginal in South Africa today.

Finally, there is a sense in which these rituals perform political functions. This was most clearly the case in the graduation ceremony where the juxtaposition of "traditional" and "modern" elite styles dramatised the value of education to the whole community, but also the weight of community obligation is laid upon the shoulders of the new recruit to the educated elite. The ceremony is a clear

injunction not to forget those “back home” who made his achievements possible and to return what he “owes” to the village of his upbringing. The “traditional” leadership, with all that implies about respect for the ancestors and, by association, for the elders, aligns itself with the new source of power: education. The strengthening of the power of the elders is obvious. Less obvious is it, perhaps, in the marriage and the *umemulo*, but nonetheless. I would argue, it is there.

MaBeauty is not a rich person but, in the context of Mfanefile, she is relatively well off and probably one of very few in that category. Her comparative wealth is rather conspicuous, for her business is public and happens in a very public place: one can count the money she makes, in a sense, by the number of commuters that walk through her gate of an evening to take an evening drink in her shebeen. A conspicuous wedding for her sister can be seen as a mechanism to ward off jealousy and ill-wishing.<sup>26</sup> She invites everyone to share in her hospitality, thus paying her dues to the community for the money she has made out of them. Like the better-off peasants in Tepotzlan,<sup>27</sup> she must spend some of her money to the benefit of all, in order to avoid the negative consequences of wealth, which can include being put to death for witchcraft as well as being the target of it.

The strengthening of the power of the elders is rather clearer, however, when we consider that MaNgudi had a history of possession, and it was this that made her not only put aside the skin of the cow sacrificed to the ancestors for her marriage, but it was also what made her have a “traditional” marriage at all. The elders, closer to the ancestors – ancestors-in-waiting, even – are empowered by all activities of a “traditional” nature where the will of the ancestors is invoked. For similar reasons, then, the *umemulo* also endorses the power of the elders: the old mother is ill, the diviner diagnoses the anger of the ancestors and the *umemulo* is performed to propitiate them.

This paper does not argue that there has been any increase in the observance of “traditional” rituals, only that there has been an unexpected maintenance of their observance in unfavourable and unlikely circumstances and surroundings. When we unravel their functions, however, whether in a Marxist-functionalist or a structural-functionalist way, we begin to understand, given the material needs and the existing power structure, why it is not at all surprising that rites of passage continue to be performed with enthusiasm, despite the costs and why the traditional leadership lends its presence and support to a newly “invented tradition” – graduation – and thus incorporates this new source of power – education – within the scope of its “traditional authority”.

Caroline White  
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<sup>26</sup> Often interpreted as the cause of misfortune through witchcraft.

<sup>27</sup> Described by George Foster in his famous article “Peasant society and the image of limited good”, *American Anthropologist*, 1965, 293 – 315.