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E Jackson March 2010

## **Exceptions that Prove the Rule?**

*Women and chiefship in precolonial and early colonial southeast Africa:*

*a review of scholarly gaps and debates<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> This is intended to become a draft MA chapter.

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*She is...deserving of every respect for her constancy and fidelity to the memory of the departed Lord...There is one thing to be said; she could not retain the Sovereignty did she take a husband.<sup>2</sup>*

*When Musi came to the Emthandeni, Hetshepi said, pointing to Musi, "He is my own self and he is the one to stand in my place as the heir of Pakatwayo". The men to whom this was said expressed their satisfaction and consent.<sup>3</sup>*

*A man named Faku residing I believe on your mission station applied to me some time ago for permission to marry "Talita" formerly the "Inkosikazi" of the Amaqadi tribe —This application I forwarded to the Diplomatic Agent, and received that Officer's reply thereto, together with certain instructions which I was desired to see carried out before the marriage occurs. I accordingly summoned Mahlukana (the chief who now represents the Amaqadi tribe) and Talita to appear before me to make the necessary arrangements according to my instructions—Certain conditions were drawn up and distinctly understood and agreed to by them both in my presence—One of the conditions agreed to was that Talita should deliver over [her] cattle to Mahlukana—This, Mahlukana has just sent over to inform me, she has refused to do.<sup>4</sup>*

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2 Robert Garden speaking of Vundlazi, ruler of the Izinkumbi. Garden Papers, KCAL, Vol. 1, Diary entry 28 June 1851.

3 Evidence in the Qwabe succession dispute between Musi kaGondolozzi and his son Meseni. PAR. SNA, 1/1/277, Fokazi kaGodolozzi, 20 February 1893. 121-122.

4 L. Mesham, Resident Magistrate, Inanda, to D. Lindley, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1851, PAR SNA 1/3/1.

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The experiences of Mbalasi Makhanya, Dalida Dube, Vundlazi MaSenca, and Hetshepi kaPakatwayo reflect the considerable political heterogeneity of Natal in the 1840s. The third excerpt above refers to Dalida Dube (see Chapter Two). She and another woman, Mbalasi Makhanya, invoked great censure and opposition when they took their children and left their communities for American congregational mission stations north and south of Port Natal in the late 1840s. They were grandmothers respectively to John Langalibabele Dube, and to the second black doctor in South Africa, John Nembula. Mbalasi was the widow of a chief called Duze Makhanya, a clan under the greater umbrella of the Qwabe kingdom. Dalida had been a wife of the chief Dube of the Qadi, living around Daniel Lindley's Inanda mission station. She may have moved to the mission station to avoid an *ukungena* marriage to her dead husband's brother. She took with her her children, and eight cattle; some of which she held in trust for her son, and five of which were hers, exchanged for sorghum she had grown. Over almost thirty years, the Qadi rulers made various attempts to get these cattle back and to maintain a hold over her children; the chief was prepared to stop her from remarrying (a Christian man) in 1851 unless these beasts were returned, and the lobola from her childrens' future marriages were also promised to the Qadi chief. Dalida ultimately chose to retain her property rather than marry and give up these cattle, which the chiefs saw as "stolen".

Vundlazi, to whom the first excerpt refers (see Chapter Three), reigned as paramount chieftainess of the *Izinkumbi* polity at Umtwalume in southernmost Natal from about 1839 until 1865 and remained politically active and influential until her death in 1890. (The *Izinkumbi* had been formed through Henry Francis Fynn's and his brother Frank Fynn's involvement in Natal, the expansion of their homestead life and African families – as well as the accretion around them, from the late 1820s onward, of followers from many different destitute groups.) Vundlazi took power after Henry Fynn had left Natal and her husband Frank had died.

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Finally, Hetshepi kaPakatwayo was in the 1840s the only direct heir to the Qwabe throne. The Qwabe kingdom had posed an increasing political threat to Zulu predominance in the 1820s. After the chief Pakatwayo died in the 1820s, his brother Gondolozzi took over and was killed by Shaka in 1828. Most of the Qwabe moved into Natal under the leadership of the final brother and successor Nqeto, who died during this journey. The royal house survived more or less as a group of indunas in Natal. Phakatwayo's unmarried daughter Hetshepi was still alive in Zululand, and so were her aunts (Kondhlo's daughters, Phakatwayo's sisters) who had lost their husbands to the conflict with the Zulu: among them Ziyendani and Ziqgili.<sup>5</sup> All of these women were brought to Natal and the remains of the Qwabe royal house planned further, to resurrect the chiefship. Gondolozzi's young son Musi was brought from Zululand by 1846. The extract shows how Hetshepi (though she was the descendant of the true chiefly line) then designated him the Qwabe ruler, thus allowing the process of *ukuvusa* – the purposeful resuscitation or awakening of an “extinct” chiefly line, through which the kingdom regained a leader, subjects, and material wealth – to take place under Musi in Natal. Chapter Four looks at the context surrounding Hetshepi's action, and discusses how her later marriage, her lobola cattle, and the cattle of her widowed aunts made this *ukuvusa* possible and became important bones of contention in the dispute over the Qwabe succession, in the 1890s.

Elizabeth Eldredge pointed out twenty years ago that “It will be impossible for scholars to derive accurate theories and generalizations about women in African history until there have been many more case studies of African women.”<sup>6</sup> Many more case studies of women's lives are still needed for colonial Natal in order to flesh out our sense of the possibilities and limitations that existed here for different women.

The studies aim to fill a specific historiographical gap. The last two decades have seen debate on what we can legitimately say about the nature and extent of precolonial southern African women's “power”. This has come to focus more recently upon the lives of “prominent” women, “royal” women,<sup>7</sup> especially in the Zulu kingdom. Yet we know very little about what happened to women royals in colonial Natal. How did such women negotiate their relation to chiefship? What were the possibilities for women to occupy chiefly positions? The experiences of precolonial “prominent” women have been presented as an antidote to theories of structural gender oppression. But there has been little focus on the experiences of such women in colonial Natal, or wider meanings of their experiences.

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5 PAR. SNA, 1/1/277, Fokazi kaGodolozzi, 20 February 1893. 122-123. And Guy, “The Resurrection of Mthandeni”, 2.

6 Elizabeth A. Eldredge, “Women in Production: The Economic Role of Women in Nineteenth-Century Lesotho”, *signs*, vol. 16 No. 4, Women, Family, State, and Economy in Africa (Summer, 1991), pp. 707-731, p. 711.

7 “Royal” women are understood for the purposes of this thesis as comprising the group of “divers mothers, half-mothers, grandmothers, aunts, half-aunts, great-aunts [of a chief] and the like” (A. T. Bryant, *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal* (New York, 1929) 574.)

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The story of Vundlazi's rule, for instance, contributes an important puzzle piece, in comprehending the fate of female chiefship in colonial southern Africa. She appears to have been the only female chief to rule for so long in colonial Natal. My research so far agrees, essentially, with Michael Mahoney's assessment that female chiefship in Natal died with her by the late nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> However it is not clear that it was so very rare in the first two decades of colonial rule of Natal. Perhaps as late as the early 1860s, a woman named Macibise headed the Abakwamacibise; Makosikazi led the "Wasemacindaneni"; Mamtunzini led the Abalumbi.<sup>9</sup> Outside the southern boundary of the colony, Mamjucu, widow of the Bhaca chief Ncapai, ruled at the Umzimvubu.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1880s there may have been a woman chief in Klip River magistracy.<sup>11</sup> It is striking that there were as many as three instances of leadership by widows in chiefdoms that had been established by early intermarrying white traders, in southernmost Natal. In the 1850s a woman named Bekuni who was one of the widows of Henry Ogle, had taken leadership of Ogle's family and followers.<sup>12</sup> As late as 1884 Vundlazi's successor, George Fynn was briefly succeeded as chief of the *Izinkumbi* by his widow Maria Ogle, in an ill-fated colonial appointment. The officials involved displayed an interesting mixture of faith in and sexist dismissal of her abilities.

An examination of Vundlazi, Hetshepi and her aunts, Mbalasi and Dalida can suggest how these individuals negotiated a world where the articulation of chiefship with colonialism is often said to have eroded/negated women's power. This thesis does not set out to make claims about how representative these subjects are. Nor does it necessarily dispute existing analyses of the impact colonialism had upon women; but case studies, as is usual, complicate the picture and swell our store of such narratives. The evidence used is fragmentary, but in dealing with these particular subjects, this is unavoidable.

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8 Michael R. Mahoney. Forthcoming (Duke): *The Other Zulus: The spread of Zulu ethnicity in colonial South Africa*. p. 80

9 See Natal Legislative Council No. 22 (1890: NLC printing for general information, the "Report of the Select Committee (No. 7, 1862) appointed to consider message No. 8, 1862, from His Excellency Lieutenant-Governor Scott, on the subject of granting to Natives Documentary Tribal Titles to Land."). Shepstone drew much of this information from Lewis Grout's Evidence before the Harding Commission 1852-3. See J Wright Phd. It is possible that some of these women were not in fact chiefs by the early 1860s, as Shepstone's 1862 Report drew on older sources of information from the 1850s. Subsequent drafts will include more information on these female chiefs.

10 Fynn Papers, Vol.

11 SNA I/1/78

12 Garden Papers, Vol. 2, 1851 – 1853, KCAL

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Different commentators on the precolonial and colonial history of women in southern Africa have had very different views about what wider conclusions we can really draw from “prominent” women’s experiences and status, regarding the status of other women. What extrapolations and generalisations can be made or should be avoided, how does one approach and weigh class divides in relation to gender divides, how significant is the “masculinisation” of a female leader, in praises, memorialisation, and in her self-presentation? Scholars’ different positions in the debate shape, and are shaped by, their very different approaches to what can be said to constitute “status”, “recognition”, “power”, and “influence”. It is clear that this study raises very significant comparative and theoretical questions. Laying these out is beyond the current scope of this thesis. What is attempted here builds off of what has been written already on this region, and questions understandings of “power” that have been applied to women’s history here.

This literature review will mostly focus on unpacking a particular debate: in the late 1980s, Jeff Guy made a case for the basic separateness of male and female worlds of labour, male control of female labour, and male accumulation (through cattle) of the means to appropriate more female labour in a manner essentially repressive along gender lines, using a materialist, Marxist framework that confronted gender divide as class divide. Though his thesis does not emerge from a vacuum, it has been a crucial turning point and has sown debate: consensus (from scholars such as Cheryl Walker) and critique.<sup>13</sup> Responses to this position in recent years have come from Jennifer Weir, Sean Hanretta, and Sifiso Ndlovu via very different arguments and theoretical starting points. These three writers have focussed on excavating women’s relation to structures of political dominance and leadership, in precolonial (and early colonial) southern African societies.<sup>14</sup> For Weir and Ndlovu especially, this has meant telling the story of royal women in this region, emphasising what they see as a crucial omission in Guy’s thesis. Their interventions, and also the contribution of this thesis, must be viewed against the backdrop of a bigger and older trend in the writing of African history; one that has focussed, for better or for worse, on “great” women.<sup>15</sup>

According to Iris Berger’s mapping, from the 1970s “Like many other early second-wave

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13 Guy, J. ‘Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies in Southern Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Oct, 1987) 18-37; these arguments became more widely known from their presentation in Guy, “Gender oppression in southern Africa’s precapitalist societies, In Cheryl Walker (ed) *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990) 33-47; Cheryl Walker, ‘Gender and the Development of the Migrant Labour System c. 1850 – 1930: An Overview’, in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*.

14 Sean Hanretta, “Women, Marginality and the Zulu State: Women’s Institutions and Power in the Early Nineteenth Century”, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 39 (1998), No. 3, pp. 389-415 (Cambridge University Press) 389-415. Jennifer Weir, “‘I Shall Need to Use Her to Rule’: The Power of “Royal” Zulu Women in Pre-Colonial Zululand”, *South African Historical Journal* 43 (Nov. 2000), 3-23; Weir J. (2006), “Chiefly women and women’s leadership in pre-colonial southern Africa”. In Nomboniso Gasa (ed.), *Women in South African History: Basus’imbokodo, Bawel’imilambo/They remove boulders and cross rivers*. Cape Town: HSRC Press. [Online] accessed from: [http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za/full\\_title\\_info.asp?id=2186](http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za/full_title_info.asp?id=2186) on Oct 16 2008; Sifiso Ndlovu, “A Reassessment of Women’s Power in the Zulu Kingdom”, in *Zulu Identities*, Carton, Laband and Sithole (eds) (Univeristy of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008)

15 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni is critical of this approach, seeing it as elitist: “Can Women’s Voices be Recovered from the Past? Grappling with the Absence of Women’s Voices in Pre-Colonial History of Zimbabwe”, *Wagadu*, Vol. 2, Summer 2005, 6.

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feminist scholars, African historians focused especially on prominent women then neglected in historical literature—queen mothers, merchant princesses, spirit mediums, and participants in resistance and nationalist movements and in revolutionary struggles.”<sup>16</sup>

This scholarly resuscitation of prominent individuals, then – an act of redress with a strong precedent in the writing of African histories – has only been seriously undertaken more recently for southern Africa.<sup>17</sup> Arguably, instead of being a neatly elitist, nationalist or feminist project, it has here been riven by political/theoretical differences, and always contains an important implicit question: what are the real implications of such “royal”, “elite” women's lives for the experience of non-elite women in these societies? Different approaches to class, gender, gender power and generalisation, in this debate, are discussed below.

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch's foundational 1997 work grounded in the Annales school, *African Women: A Modern History* (1997), devotes a section to “Powerful Women”. Here she first locates African women's “power” in the “procreative capacity and motherhood...female identity linked to fertility.” She then points out that “In [African] subsistence societies, where women's role was key to survival, men certainly asserted their political supremacy, but women always retained opportunities for power.” This seems straightforward, but in fact is quite vague and does not help us to understand why and how, structurally, some women may be subject to male supremacy while others grasp hold of “opportunities for power”. Coquery-Vidrovitch proceeds into an account of differences in these opportunities between matrilineal and patrilineal societies, and then mentions a wide range of African female leaders from the 1500s to the twentieth century, in which southern Africa and the Zulu princesses have their own brief section. She refers several times to specific female leaders as having wielded “real” power, or “active” political power.”<sup>18</sup> But we must ask what is meant by this: in the sense Coquery-Vidrovitch uses it, and in the senses the word has been used in this more local debate.

Discussions about precolonial southern African women's societal status have long been informed by and reacted against anthropologist Max Gluckman's much-quoted claims that, for example, women in this region were universally oppressed, that their “rituals of rebellion” iterated the status quo rather than being able to oppose it, and that even their ancestral shades were not honoured.<sup>19</sup>

Guy's 1987 argument turns on, among other things, the fact that the transfer of lobola, in precolonial southern Africa, was contingent upon a wife carrying out productive responsibilities, bearing children and being faithful; and that if she did not fulfil these

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16 Iris Berger, “African Women's History: Themes and Perspectives”, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4:1, 2003.

17 As noted in Sifiso Ndlovu, “A Reassessment of Women's Power in the Zulu Kingdom”, in B Carton, J Laband and J Sithole (eds.) *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu, Past and Present* (University of Natal Press, 2008) p. 120 19n.

18 Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Women*, 34, 36.

19 Max Gluckman, “Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa”, in *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa* (London, 1963), 115.

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expectations, her father would not have the right to ask for the lobola to be paid in full or else would have to return the lobola cattle to the husband.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the movement of cattle “between homesteads was in fact the transfer of cattle against the productive and reproductive capacity of women” and can be seen as a transfer of labour power. Children, and young men and young women before marriage are seen as contributing productive labour as a part of this overall process, and ultimately themselves heading into and perpetuating this process of exchange. The transfer took place between men who headed their respective homesteads; “these societies were all organised around the creation, and the control, of labour power” – by men.<sup>21</sup> Guy sees this divide – between those men, married homestead heads, who “appropriate[d]...surplus labour”, and the women, children and young unmarried adults whose labour was being appropriated – as essentially a class divide.<sup>22</sup> Male children made a transition from one class to the another, on their marriage. Within the subjugated class, “individual chronology was of central significance, and thus the emphasis in the historical records on age, youth, young men, the rights of the aged and the obligations of the young.”<sup>23</sup> To be young was to be “propertyless.” This class exploitation, however, could be resisted – through for example fleeing a forced marriage.

Guy's thesis works to get at structural underpinnings, at very broad principles: “The differences between Southern Africa's pre-capitalist farming societies, at different times in their history, were differences of degree and not differences in kind”; “[b]oth sexes were involved in domestic manufacture, but the fundamental division of labour within the homestead was based on gender and age – the married man on the one hand, and wives and children on the other.”<sup>24</sup> He denies that his analysis struggles to account for female owners of property, for female chiefs and for female executors of state authority; stating that, although exceptions can be found to the broad principles he describes, any female heads of homesteads were “aristocratic, infertile, women, appointed by men it should be noted” and where women had more independence, this was in “areas...climatically unsuited to high cattle populations.”<sup>25</sup> As discussed below, research in the last twenty years has shown that this was not necessarily the case. My assessment will also suggest, however, that some responses that seek to overturn this thesis go too far in the opposite direction without sufficient substantiation.

Cheryl Walker, too, has referred to prominent women in the Zulu state as “exceptional rather than representative...[and] honorary males.”<sup>26</sup> As discussed below, Marc Epprecht (who has examined the long history of female chiefship in Lesotho) takes the same position.

Carolyn Hamilton's 1980s Honours and Masters theses see these individuals as more significant; hers is among the earliest scholarly work to highlight women who occupied positions of political power. Hamilton's research has presaged and also provided material for

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20 Guy, “Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies”, 21.

21 Guy, “Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies”, 22.

22 Guy, “Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies”, 24.

23 Guy, “Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies”, 34.

24 Guy, “Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies”, 21.

25 Guy, “Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies”, p. 24 n13

26 Cheryl Walker, ed., *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, 1990), 29.



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the work of Weir and Ndlovu,<sup>27</sup> and she and John Wright have suggested that Guy's account of precolonial gender relations is too static.<sup>28</sup>

Africanist responses to this materialist approach have questioned its portrayal of gender contestation and argued that in fact precolonial gender relations were characterised by co-operation, what Sifiso Ndlovu today calls an “everyday collaboration between the sexes.”<sup>29</sup> Simon Maphalala described precolonial gender relations in a very similar way in his 1985 history of the Zulu kingdom.<sup>30</sup>

Weir, Hanretta and Ndlovu, in responding to the thesis and seeking to complicate the picture it presents, deal primarily with the precolonial Zulu state, though Weir has more recently extended this to a wider southern African discussion.<sup>31</sup> These authors critique the analysis for overlooking certain opportunities for women's leadership. They have successfully, overall, indicated that Guy's arguments need to be leavened by an acknowledgment of a wider range of possibilities for women's political involvement in the state. They argue also that this political involvement cannot be simply dismissed as exceptional.

While Ndlovu's “reassessment” of Zulu gender relations is in many ways a recitation of older Africanist positions and responses to the materialist arguments of the 1980s, Hanretta and Weir take new directions. Both set out to question static accounts of gender relations, and take on the ambitious task of identifying shifts in the construction of gender in the Zulu kingdom over time. As Helen Bradford has done for another context (in her commentary on Nonqause and the roots of the millenarian movement that shook Xhosa society in the 1850s), looking at Zululand Hanretta and Weir have confronted a period of social upheaval, and started from the assumption that such a period must be, crucially, an “era of gender and generational turmoil”; in which closely held ideas of maleness and femaleness undergo drastic change or are shaken.<sup>32</sup> Both Weir and Hanretta find what they consider compelling evidence to show that, as Zulu society centralised most powerfully in the early 1800s, there came significant changes in “how women's power [was] produced and exercised”; in “the cultural and intellectual ways in which gender was constructed”. The following outlines these divergent arguments in more detail, and their approaches to the concept of women's “power”. Central issues they confront, such as women's influence upon chiefly succession and women's legitimisation of chiefly rule, “celibacy”, “masculinisation” and age among prominent

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27 I have not yet read these theses and they will likely have major implications for this chapter: C Hamilton, *A Fragment of the Jigsaw: Authority and Labour Control Amongst the Early 19th-Century Northern Nguni* (Honours thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1980); C Hamilton, *Ideology, Oral Traditions and the Struggle for Power in the Early Zulu Kingdom* (Masters thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1986).

28 Wright, “Control of women's labour in the Zulu Kingdom” in J Peires, ed, *Before and After Shaka: Papers in Nguni History* (Grahamstown, 1981), and Wright and Hamilton, “Traditions and Transformations: the Phongolo-Mzimkhulu region in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” in A. Duminy and B Guest (eds) *Natal and Zululand from the Earliest Times to 1910* (Pietermaritzburg, 1989).

29 Ndlovu, “A Reassessment”, 111.

30 Simon J. Maphalala, *Aspects of Zulu Rural Life During the Nineteenth Century* (KwaDlangezwa, 1985)

31 Weir J. (2006), “Chiefly women and women's leadership”.

32 Helen Bradford, “Women, Gender, and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony in Its Frontier Zones, c. 1806–70,” *Journal of African History*, 37, no. 3 (1996), 351–70

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women, are directly relevant to my few case studies.

According to Hanretta's 1998 paper on *Women, Marginality and the Zulu State*, both materialist and Africanist approaches to women's social standing in precolonial southern Africa have homogenised female experience, and have viewed it as essentially static over large periods of time.<sup>33</sup>

Focusing on the early nineteenth century, Hanretta posits that during this period women neither became increasingly oppressed, nor benefited by "complete co-operation with state centralization." Rather than seeing women as making up a subjugated class, Hanretta is much more inclined to see the category of "women" as itself stratified/shot through by significant class divisions, and states that this became more marked from the period of Shaka's rule onward:

[The] social, cultural and material conditions of women became highly stratified during the early nineteenth century. The potential for both exploitation and the acquisition of power and prestige increased dramatically as women's lives became integrated into the Zulu state. Affecting the degree of stratification in general, as well as determining in part the fate of individual women, the vagaries of political power struggles between Zulu kings and lineage elites began to play a large role in women's lives.

Hanretta also sets out to describe shifts in the social construction of gender, during the early nineteenth century. He argues that women experienced far more moments of marginality, of "liminance" – whereas men were "structurally oppositional": men's roles were focussed on succession and the attendant opposition between fathers and sons.<sup>34</sup> Drawing on Harriet Ngubane's writing on menstruation taboos, Hanretta suggests that menses, as a reminder of female fertility and thus of male inadequacy, had to be cordoned off from male spheres. "Women's powers rested on the nature of male dominance, because male domination in its reliance on virility remained incomplete and profoundly dependent upon the powers of women"; "[w]omen's power and women's marginality were structurally linked."<sup>35</sup> No doubt in response to these arguments about male dominance, Ndlovu states that Hanretta "grapples with but ultimately accepts the terminology of the gender oppression school [Guy and Walker]."<sup>36</sup> According to Hanretta, women's transitions, into puberty or into motherhood for example, were "more likely to be accompanied by anxiety on the part of society about their successful completion." This anxiety solidified around spiritual concerns: at times of dangerous transition especially, women were gateways through which the "other world" could enter this one. Hanretta reaches these conclusions primarily from reading Ngubane and extrapolating from the stories in Henry Callaway's *Nursery Tales*, a "key source".

Jennifer Weir questions the materialist position on strict gender division of labour, male rights

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<sup>33</sup>Hanretta, "Women, Marginality and the Zulu State", 390.

<sup>34</sup> Hanretta, "Women and the zulu State", 395.

<sup>35</sup> Hanretta, "Women and the zulu State", 395.

<sup>36</sup> Ndlovu, "A Reassessment of Women's Power", p. 120 3n.

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of ownership over land and cattle, and women being generally barred from political authority; mentioning, rather than expanding on, diverse individual cases to suggest that the exceptions to Guy's are numerous and significant. Her 2000 article focusing on the political roles and importance of precolonial 'royal' Zulu women argues that "certain amakhosikazi and amakhosazana", far from existing on the edges of politics, "traditionally" held a specific kind of power which Weir classes as "independent power."<sup>37</sup> Using a typography of different kinds of "power" laid out by Richard Adams in the 1970s, Weir applies the label of "independent power" to the ritual and symbolic influence certain women were thought to possess. Weir focuses especially on Shaka and Dingane's delegation of control over some military homesteads to certain royal women, and the regencies of Mnkabayi, sister to Senzangakhona and aunt to Shaka and Dingane. She argues that Shaka, and after him Dingane, placed certain royal women in positions of authority in order to "incorporate" their symbolic power into state structures and thereby "aid[] integration and legitimacy." She also posits that Dingiswayo and then Shaka gathered unto themselves the symbolic importance, the "independent" power which these women were seen as possessing, by pretending to go through menstruation.

Drawing primarily on the published James Stuart Archive and Stuart's original notebooks, and on Carolyn Hamilton's Honours thesis, Ndlovu argues, like Weir, that gender division of labour was not so strict. He believes that analyses informed by western feminism can have no purchase on or applicability to precolonial Africa, where cooperation across gender was the rule, in the shared interest of maintaining social hierarchies. He rehearses the biography of the indomitable Zulu Regent, Queen Mnkabayi, and a handful of her contemporaries, to support his argument that women were not "barred from exercising real political authority in the Zulu kingdom". However, Ndlovu does not at any point elaborate upon what he means by "real political power." Of women who headed military homesteads, Ndlovu says that they were "either old female relatives of the king or senior women appointed from within the ranks of *izigodhlo*. Childless, *amakhanda* leaders had no heirs. Since they were beyond the age of conceiving, they could not push their sons into deadly succession rivalries, and thus were perceived as minor threats in royal intrigues." As we will see, while the question of fertility and symbolic celibacy of politically influential women may have been more significant in the Zulu state, women chiefs in southern Africa in precolonial and colonial times did not all conform to this kind of model.

To place this debate on the Zulu state within a slightly wider regional context, Sifiso Ndlovu-Gatsheni finds that, for Zimbabwe, the history of precolonial and colonial Zimbabwean women is threadbare compared to histories of other parts of Africa; lacking both the romantic, Africanist "peace between the sexes" myth, and the focus that is found elsewhere on "notable, exceptional, heroic women".<sup>38</sup> Ndlovu-Gatsheni greets Marieke Clark's ongoing research into a noblewoman in Zimbabwe's history, Queen Lozikeyi Dlodlo (the senior queen and possibly the constitutional successor of King Lobhengula of the amaNdebele) as an "elitist" history but still a significant contribution to a historiography relatively bare of Zimbabwean women.

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38 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Can Women's Voices be Recovered from the Past? Grappling with the Absence of Women's Voices in Pre-Colonial History of Zimbabwe", *Wagadu*, Vol. 2, Summer 2005, 6.

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For Lesotho, Marc Epprecht, in his 2000 study of gender in colonial Lesotho,<sup>39</sup> has much to say on the *mafumahali*, or women who since precolonial times made up a small but persistent proportion of chiefs and head “men”. Much of Epprecht's focus is on a striking twentieth century increase in the number of female chiefs, which he grounds in an in-depth discussion of the rule of Amelia 'Mantsebo Seeiso ('Mantsebo) who ruled as paramount chieftainess in Lesotho from the early 1940s to the late 1950s. Epprecht states that the *mafumahali*, since precolonial times, had been “regents”, “caretakers” or “chieftainesses”. Two important points should be made in reference to these women chiefs among the Basotho. Firstly, most were wives of chiefs who became regents as widows following their husbands' deaths, and until the “rightful heirs” to the chiefship – their sons – were old enough to rule. Secondly, according to Epprecht, “women chiefs were 'men' in social terms”; they frequently claimed male epithets, and claimed to *be* male. Amongst the Basotho, a woman could be biologically fertile and even “young and sexually active” and occupy the chiefship.<sup>40</sup> Epprecht posits that this “distinction between biological femaleness and social maleness may have allowed women to encroach upon the chieftaincy...almost unnoticed” in the twentieth century. When attention was drawn to this in 1949, one (male) chiefly response was this was not customary; that women had gained rights they hadn't had before.

Colonial views on women chiefs were at variance with the views of many Basotho male chiefs. The colonial administration's machinations, assumptions and outrage at the proactive and resistant rulership of Mantsebo provides a concrete instance of the pronouncedly patriarchal sexism of British officials in regard to women chiefs. Yet the twentieth century “feminization” of the chiefship had gone far by 1955, when women made up 12% of total chiefs and headmen. Epprecht notes that “the *marena* held a remarkably fluid concept of custom which offered women opportunities denied by British expectations.”<sup>41</sup>

Norman Etherington, and Elizabeth Eldredge have written on MaNthatisi, chieftainess of the Tlokwa north-west of present KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>42</sup> MaNthatisi took up the Tlokwa chieftainship after her husband the chief Mokotcho died in the early 1800s while her son Sekonyela, the heir to the chiefship, was too young to rule; for ten years she “safeguard[ed] her chieftainship during a landmark period in Southern African history”. She witnessed the consolidation of the Zulu kingdom, and was a major roleplayer in the upheavals of the early 1800s; raiding for cattle for survival and security, and also providing refuge for thousands of her neighbours at the peak of her polity's strength. Etherington points out that widows with minor sons had often assumed the chiefship, in the past.<sup>43</sup> He refers to MaNthatisi and another early Tlokwa political figure, MaThulare, as “legendary mother[s]”. Relating the story of Zwide's mother, Ntombazi, goading him and causing him to execute Dingiswayo, Etherington argues that “This

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39 Marc Epprecht, *'This matter of women is getting very bad': Gender, Development and Politics in Colonial Lesotho* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000)

40 Epprecht, *'This matter of women'*, 110.

41 Epprecht, *'This matter of women'*, 116.

42 Norman Etherington, *The Great Treks: the transformation of southern Africa, 1815-1854*, (Longman, 2001) Chapter 4

43 Etherington, *The Great Treks*, 77.

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underscores the point...about MaNthasi: in this era women played central roles in chiefly politics.”<sup>44</sup>

Yet some attention should be given to the circumstances under which women took power, and even as we uncover the histories of women who wielded political authority, we must not avoid the issue and presence of patriarchy. Overwhelmingly, in southern Africa women who succeeded to chiefship only did so as widows with minor sons. Regency was the norm when it came to female chiefship. This is significant and calls out for some explanation. Weir emphasises that a preoccupation with patriarchy has blinded historians to the lives of prominent women; yet she does not see fit to account for or comment much on the limits of female rule. Indeed, she turns existing analyses on their heads and argues, as we have seen, that in fact certain Zulu royal women had not just political “power”, but “independent” political power – something distinctive and even threatening, that the Zulu kings felt they needed to harness, appropriate and contain. In this way, we are confronted with confidently evocative and yet unsettling and largely unsubstantiated claims about what happened to gender relations in the centralising Zulu state.

### **“Royal” women's spiritual and symbolic importance**

Weir, Hanretta and Ndlovu all argue that women's spiritual and symbolic significance has been overlooked. Weir's entire argument, her concern with establishing that royal women were not necessarily automatically relegated to an indirect exercise of political will and influence, turns on this. She and Ndlovu see the association of women with the spiritual world as an indication of the importance they were accorded. However Hanretta (who is more focussed on delineating the concept of “power”) argues that

women's powers that resulted from their symbolic association with the natural and spiritual worlds did not counterbalance or offset the power of their husbands and fathers (chiefs and kings) over them. Nor did they exist as an “alternate” system of power enabling women to seek “ways out”, ways that existed separately from their subordinate position in the rest of Zulu society.<sup>45</sup>

### **Women legitimising male rule?**

These authors also address the matter of royal women's ability to shape the leadership of the state: to influence the outcome of succession disputes and strengthen or weaken a contender's chances. Could prominent women play an important role in legitimising or delegitimising male rule? How was this related to these women's symbolic importance? Should this form of influence be considered “power”? Arguments that have been made about this have direct relevance for the case study of the Qwabe *ukuvusa*, discussed in Chapter Four.

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<sup>44</sup>Etherington, *The Great Treks*, 82.

<sup>45</sup> Hanretta, “Women, Marginality and the Zulu State”, 392.

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Hanretta argues that “[t]hese women's powers [to e.g. successfully promote candidates for chiefship/kingship – influence over succession disputes] were part of patriarchal Zulu society, they emerged out of the same economy of power which gave men a superior social position.”<sup>46</sup> So while both Weir and Hanretta discuss the approbation and political support of particular women as providing a crucial “ideological justification of male rule”, Weir sees this as a sign of “independent” female power and Hanretta sees it as in fact related to female subjugation. Weir and Hanretta are concerned with/touch on the implications for subject/vassal states of this female legitimation of male rule.

The case study of the Qwabe succession dispute suggests that some of Hanretta's statements on the Zulu kingdom may be relevant for the Qwabe, (though they can also be questioned) specifically his statement that in the Zulu kingdom “the amaKosikazi constituted an important component of the ideological justification for kingship, both within the core nucleus of the Zulu state, and among people more recently incorporated into it.” The narrative of the Qwabe royal house's resuscitation in Chapter Four, which began with the strategic marrying-off of royal women, resonates to an extent with Hanretta/Hamilton's observation that, under Dingane, the Zulu state became fragile and Dingane had to “expend” much of its “wealth” by marrying off umNdlunkulu and amaKosikazi in order to hold the state together.

### **Post-menopausal Princesses, Celebrated Celibates?**

Questions and definitions of celibacy, chastity, fertility, masculinisation, marriage and avoidance of marriage are important to this debate and to this thesis's case studies. Ndlovu, Weir, and Hanretta all suggest that those women to whom power was delegated within the centralised Zulu state; specifically those who were given the power to head up a military homestead or *ikhanda*, occupied a special gendered space/intermediate position. Hanretta writes that such a woman was: “at the same time [the military homestead's] inKosikazi, or great mother, and its umNumzana, or homestead-head”. If one does view gender divides in this context as, broadly speaking, class divides, it is interesting to speculate about where these women would sit. While Guy's materialist analysis focuses on fertile adult women in southern African societies as central and as subjugated, both Weir and Hanretta consider women's “biological” value as a “social construction...that was susceptible...to displacement”. It is important that, in discussing women's scope for power, “fertility” and “infertility” can indeed mask a range of socially significant categories. Ndlovu is more tied to the idea of biological fertility as determining a woman's political influence: he writes that post-menopausal heads of amakhanda “could function as a distinct kind of woman in Zulu society – possessing the customary authority to cross into both male and female domains.” In other southern African societies being post-menopausal and/or or being celibate, were sometimes but not always pre-requisites for political leadership. For instance, Chapter Three discusses the way in which Vundlazi's status as a “chaste widow” may have been essential to her political legitimacy in the diverse polity of the Izinkumbi. But for Basotho women, as discussed below, infertility was not a pre-requisite for a female leader.

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<sup>46</sup> Hanretta, “Women, Marginality and the Zulu State”, 392.

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## **What does masculinisation mean?**

Like Cheryl Walker, Marc Epprecht and Sifiso Ndlovu-Gatsheni consider that female chiefs in southern Africa were exceptional and that their frequent perception or self-presentation as masculine indicated that their societies did not recognise a woman's right to "real", direct or central authority: "'Are these 'Great Women' credible examples of women's power in the pre-colonial era? The evidence suggests not. These women were not icons of proto-feminism or feminine heroism, [but] rather were masculinised into 'honorary males'".<sup>47</sup> (This "masculinisation" is documented in, for instance, the case of Mnkabayi aunt to the Zulu kings, and Mantsebo as well as other women chiefs among the Basotho.)

Weir, however, writes of the precolonial Zulu state that "it would be quite narrow to dismiss the significance of [amakhosikazi and amakhosazana] by arguing that their roles were not related to the structures of power, or that they took on male roles."<sup>48</sup> Norman Etherington, too, suggests that the dues paid to certain women, and their influence, were not negligible: he writes of southeast Africa in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that "The most honoured persons were chiefs' mothers, whose words were taken very seriously, even when they contradicted their sons. Chiefs' wives worked and politicked throughout their marriages in the hope that their eldest sons might succeed to the title. It was not unknown for women to act as chiefs or regents for lengthy periods. The death of a chief's mother was honoured by solemn, elaborate and lengthy rites of mourning."<sup>49</sup>

Weir, too, emphasises this honoring of royal mothers (the mourning of Shaka's grandmother Mntaniya, and of his mother Nandi was on a national scale). Yet we cannot conclude that this kind of treatment and symbolic importance necessarily translates into women's political power and agency. This should be viewed more critically, and a clear link made to the pervasive idea of the "Mother of the nation", present in various societies worldwide: there is frequently a structural linkage between female elevation and female subjugation and Weir never seems to confront this possibility. The contradiction is encapsulated in Weir's insistence that "Nandi's position and her mourning were not simply the result of some psychopathic aspect of Shaka's personality, or guilt, but rather because of the importance of Nandi herself. *The mourning was an opportunity to express, or to enforce, allegiance to the ZULU.*"<sup>50</sup>

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch states that "The important role played by queen mothers or their equivalents, whether in a matrilineal or patrilineal society, is the clear sign of female

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47Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Can Women's Voices be Recovered from the Past?", \_\_\_. Cites Marc Epprecht, 'A 'Beachean' Critique of Recent English-Language Historiography on Gender and Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa' (Paper presented at the University of Alberta, 2000).

48 Jennifer Weir, "I Shall Need to Use Her to Rule: The Power of "Royal" Zulu Women in Pre-Colonial Zululand", *South African Historical Journal* 43 (Nov. 2000), 3-23

49 Etherington, *The Great Treks*, 14.

50 Weir, "I Shall Need to Use Her to Rule", 14. Emphasis added.

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power.” This is a singularly vague yet sweeping statement. Without taking away from the reality, agency and political potency of the women who were chiefs in their own right in precolonial and colonial times, it must be pointed out once more that it is of course possible for one woman, or a few women, to be highly honoured and wield some form of political authority in a society where most women are denied the rights and forms of influence that common men enjoy. A present example of such a scenario would be Swaziland, where the Queen Mother (often called the *indlovukati* or the she-elephant) has the authority to approve cabinet ministers, and both rural and urban adult women suffer (and often work to make a success of entrepreneurship) as legal minors, who may not hold land in their own names.<sup>51</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

This thesis, then, aims in part to flesh out our knowledge of individuals, for whom more information survives than for the noblewomen of the Zulu state over whom there is so much disagreement.

Did some women play an important role in legitimating male rule, or bolstering certain men's political legitimacy? Documents that tell us about the Qwabe revival that began the 1840s give a sense of this happening in the colonial context, and raise questions about the degree to which men and women directed this process.

Who are “Macibise...Mhlase...and Mamtunzini”? Weir mentions these among other women, in passing. They were chiefs in colonial Natal. If possible, we should begin to focus in on them with more specificity as, for example, Marc Epprecht has done for Amelia Mantsebo Seeiso, and Etherington has done for MaNthatisi. Chapter Three is able to do this for Mhlase/Vundlazi. At this stage in the research, it seems that women who were chiefs in colonial Natal were, without exception, regents. To point to this in either the precolonial or colonial period is not to dismiss the reigns of these individuals or to suggest that they were necessarily political puppets, appointed by men. It is rather to highlight that in such patriarchal contexts, the opportunities for *direct* female leadership by women whose leadership capacity was widely acknowledged, typically came about only under certain conditions – in lacunae of male succession. As established above, there was a long historical precedent of female chiefship in southeast African societies, although female chiefs had been in the past and remained in the colonial context – exceptional.

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51 James Hall, “Swaziland women secure right of land ownership”, *News From Africa* March 2002, [http://www.newsfromafrica.org/newsfromafrica/articles/art\\_7884.html](http://www.newsfromafrica.org/newsfromafrica/articles/art_7884.html), accessed on 9 February 2010