

# Gender and Person in African Societies: The Role of Hermeneutics<sup>1</sup>

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Perhaps the greatest gains that have been made in feminism relate to the interpretation of western value systems, rather than those of indigenous societies, which traditionally form the grist of anthropological research. Writing in honour of Audrey Richards, generally acknowledged as one of the most distinguished English female anthropologists, Pat Caplan (1992:70) berates the failure of what she terms 'feminist anthropology' to make any significant impression in the discipline as a whole. She notes that many have argued that anthropology is inevitably hermeneutic, an approach which Ricoeur defines as 'the comprehension of the self by the detour of the other' (in Rabinow 1977:5). But, she adds, we need to acknowledge, and this happens only rarely, that in making this detour the self also changes. Heidegger is reported to have said that what is decisive is not to get out of the hermeneutic circle, but to come into it in the right way, for in the circle is hidden the possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. For Heidegger truth is to be found in silence, or the spaces between words. This paper is an attempt to investigate gender and person in some African societies, what Edwin Ardener (1972:135) has so cogently termed 'Belief and the Problem of Women'. In his seminal paper Ardener (1972:140) notes that in terms of the then prevailing functionalist orthodoxy,

... it was hard for anyone with fieldnotes on women to see that they were effectively missing in the total analysis, or more precisely, they were there in the same way as were the Nuer's cows, who were observed but also did not speak.

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Writing in the same volume as Caplan, Jean La Fontaine (1992:90) remarks in 'The Persons of Women' that the universality of gender symbolism has an immense intellectual appeal, and one which in the 1970s first seemed to offer a real chance of making generalisations which would be applicable world-wide, while at the same time allowing scope for the understanding of cultural differences. Human biology provided a seemingly invariant base upon which different clusters of concepts linked gender with a wide range of other cultural representations. The analysis of these clusters of ideas would offer a new understanding of myth and ritual as well as explaining the universal 'fact' of inequality between the sexes, ultimately providing fundamental insights into the nature of human society.

La Fontaine notes that today such expectations would be considered naive, for there has been a move away from elaborating abstract dualities towards a focus on the context in which ideas of gender are elaborated. She writes:

... it is increasingly obvious that to link the categories of gender, especially as they are symbolically displayed in myth and ritual, directly with the social behaviour of living individuals *creates* problems of interpretation, rather than solving them (La Fontaine 1992:91).

She concludes that cultural analysis is inadequate without a consideration of the social structural context in which ideas are embedded.

La Fontaine argues that in order to provide a framework for apparent contradictions between images of African women in ritual and in the reality of their own lives, attention needs to be paid to two topics of investigation: one, the social construction of the person, and the other, kinship. Both personhood and kinship are critically implicated in the understanding of women, she says. La Fontaine begins by pointing out that Western thinking is characterised by a particular concept of the person, which Mauss (1938), among others, drew attention to. This concept gives unique moral worth and independent social identity to each living human, conceived of as unique. The human being and the social actor are the same, since the concept of the person contains both meanings.

Yet in other societies the concept of the person differs from that given above in important respects. La Fontaine notes that while Fortes argued that Mauss was wrong in declaring the Western concept of the person to be unique, Fortes' ethnography of the Tallensi shows that they envisage human beings who are not persons and persons (crocodiles incorporating ancestral spirits) who are not human, and this observation can be generalised to most African societies. John Middleton (1960) shows that for the Lugbara, women lack an essential element of personhood, as do some Lugbara men. Harris (1978) notes that among the Taita of Kenya the

personhood of women is limited in that the full range of ritual powers is not open to women. What Harris stresses, notes La Fontaine (1992:92), and it is clear in the other accounts of African notions, is that personhood refers to a moral career, to the completion of a lifespan replete with the 'proper' statuses and social attributes.

In this paper I look in a preliminary way at the 'personhood' of Venda women, especially the status of the father's sister or paternal aunt, the *makhadzi*, and that of the headwoman or *vhamusanda*, as well as the institution of woman to woman marriage, evidently common in much of pre-colonial Africa and still existing in Venda today. The comparative invisibility of women in functionalist analyses, however, is also evident in respect to the ethnographer in places. Stayt's (1931:xi) monograph on the Venda, still (along with the works of Van Warmelo and Phophi) the major work on the Venda, has a foreword by Winifred Hoernle in which she comments on the 'high position given to women in this society, both in the administration and religious ritual', which, she says is 'unique for South Africa'<sup>2</sup>. While Stayt dedicates his book to 'my wife', it becomes apparent that this unnamed person, only mentioned directly in the 'Preface' and 'Introduction', was much more than photographer, map compiler, companion and 'enthusiastic helper' to her blind husband. She was also co-author of the book, as the following remarks reveal:

... of the hundreds of wives possessed by some of the more powerful chiefs a great many ... are little more than slaves; ... in many of the large villages one cannot fail to notice numbers of these old, ill-favoured women carrying enormous loads of wood and water and constantly at work about the kraal (Stayt 1931:201).

Presumably Mrs. Stayt did not consider her own position as an anomaly.

The position of father's sister or *makhadzi* is central to an understanding not only of chieftainship in Venda but of the kinship relations of commoners as well. Stayt (1931:195) comments that:

... metaphorically speaking, the chieftainship is a pie, which, although carried by one member of the family, has the thumbs of four others embedded in it. The relative importance of the owners of these thumbs must be thoroughly understood in order to appreciate the true position of the chief, the man who carries the royal pie.

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<sup>2</sup> Hilda Kuper's (1947) monograph on the Swazi and Eileen and J.D. Krige's (1943) famous work on the Lovedu were yet to appear.

A chief is succeeded by his son, who is appointed by the *makhadzi* and the *khotsimunene*, his father's brother. When these two appoint the new heir, they at the same time appoint one of his sisters to be the *khadzi* and one of his brothers to act as *ndumi* (the official brother of the chief). On the death of their brother these two will take up the positions of *makhadzi* and *khotsimunene*. The respect and obedience due to a father by his son is transferred upon his death to his 'female father' and 'little father' 'and until their deaths they have the right to command the person of their late brother's son, whom they have appointed to represent the family' (Stayt 1931:196).

The *makhadzi* is the late chief's eldest sister, although she may not be a uterine one. The chief is supposed to consult her and follow her judgement on all matters concerned with affairs of his people. She lives at the chief's capital, with her husband and children living elsewhere. She receives a percentage of all taxes given to the chief, who must grant all her reasonable requests. She is treated with most of the respect and formality accorded to the chief. Even men, Stayt says, to whom all other women kneel, must kneel to the *makhadzi*. Her food is prepared, like that of the chief, by one of his wives, and presented to her with the same ceremony as it is given to him. All this respect, notes Stayt, is the outward and visible sign of the real power which she wields in the state. In addition, her home is a sanctuary for criminals and murderers, whom she may reprieve and her consent is needed before war may be waged. In all these matters her judgement takes precedence over that of the chief and he is bound to submit to her decisions.

Huffman (1996:93), commenting on the importance of the *makhadzi* in Shona chiefdoms, writes:

... in the Shona kinship system today, a father's sister is known as *samakhadzi* and she officiates over inheritance proceedings when her brother dies. In 1956 a sister of Chief Maranke in eastern Zimbabwe acquired authority over part of the community when she was installed with him and several cases of headwomen are known among the Manyika.

Huffman speculates that these are 'probably vestiges of a more complex role in the past, for a special sister of a Zimbabwe ruler had similar duties to the Venda *makhadzi*, called *VaMoyo* in Rozwi praise poetry (Hodza & Fortune 1979:15-17, cited in Huffman 1996:64). Shona traditions recall the sister of the founding father as the 'great ancestress', the senior female representative of the ruling clan. Each new chiefdom was supposed to begin with the ritual incest of the chief and his sister. Huffman comments that the documentary evidence on whether the chief and his sister ever married is ambiguous, although he cites Bocarro (in Theal 1964:3.358)

who refers to the Monomatapa<sup>3</sup> as having many chief wives: 'most of them are his relations or sisters ... the principal one, called *Mazarira* ... is always one of the king's sisters'.

Stayt remarks that sometimes a chief's wife is addressed or referred to as *makhadzi*, which, he says 'adds another source of confusion to the difficulties that exist for anyone attempting to differentiate the various people called by this term'. However, he has an explanation ready: 'In this case it is readily explained by the fact that the chief's great wife is often also his sister, and so called by the people *makhadzi*, possibly it used to be a marriage injunction for the chief's sister to be his great wife' (Stayt 1931:208). Van Warmelo and Phophi (1948:37) comment that:

Some chiefs even marry daughters of minor wives of their fathers, that is, their half-sisters. The object of these virtually incestuous marriages of chiefs is to ensure that the *musanda* (royal kraal) will be full of princes who know the manners and rules to be observed in the villages of royalty (the real reason is probably a relic of the 'sacred kingship', which can find spouses fit for the king only among his closest relatives (i.e. his sisters).

In an interview with the author (22 March, 1998), Mr. David Malelo, one of the *vhakoma* or headmen of *Musanda*<sup>4</sup> VhoNetshiendeulu, noted that the term *makhadzi* can be translated as 'one who commands, or is in control', an adviser. This meaning of the term *makhadzi* is not found in Van Warmelo's Venda-English dictionary, nor in Stayt, but the usage was reproduced in an article on the Mphephu succession dispute in the local English-language Venda newspaper *The Mirror* of 9 January, 1998. Mr. Malelo commented to me that when a man succeeded his father as chief, all the late chief's wives would be classed as *makhadzi* as well as the actual father's sisters. Mr. Malelo added that when there was a problem in the *musanda*, the *makhadzi* would be summoned and they would offer advice; 'they *must* be there' he said.

Gillian Feeley-Harnik (1997:161f) comments that the women so commonly called 'Queen-Mothers' by early ethnographers of African societies (see for example Roscoe 1911 on Buganda and Rattray 1923 on Asante) were structurally significant,

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<sup>3</sup> Monomatapa was the name given by the Portuguese to the ruler of the Mutapa state, which broke away from Great Zimbabwe and ruled to the north and north-east of the Zimbabwe plateau, as well as much of the Zambezi lowlands in the sixteenth century (Hall 1987:118).

<sup>4</sup> *Musanda* is a title referring to the headwoman. The literal translation is chief, or chief's court (Van Warmelo 1989:235).

not just figureheads but political actors in their own right. She argues that male-centred models of hierarchy and change, brought from Europe, appear to mask more complex assumptions about social reproduction, which, if better known, might provide a wider common ground in which to explore the dynamics of international relations between Africans and Europeans from a comparative and historical perspective. Feeley-Harnik writes of the great nineteenth-century Madagascan female rulers who were disparaged by their French colonial conquerors, and notes that even Maurice Bloch (1986) chooses to analyse the Merina royal bath<sup>5</sup> in generic rather than historical terms, persistently referring to the central royal figure as 'he' or 'the king'. This, despite the fact that from 1828 to the French invasion of 1895 Merina royals were women (with one exception who was strangled after two years in office).

Most scholars, writing of African kings, treat these figures as if they were unitary individuals. The literature on female rulers shows more awareness of polybodied qualities. These qualities encompass gender distinctions and other socially recognised differences such as condition of life, relatedness and locality (Feeley-Harnik 1997:163). As in European instances, these qualities might appear merged in any single manifestation of royalty, but the African data suggest that these apparently unitary composite creatures are better understood as historically situated facets of more complex beings and as the dynamic outcome of powerful unions among these different facets. Feeley-Harnik (1997:163) notes:

... here in particular, African polyarchies seem to show striking differences from European forms in their emphasis on what Weiner called 'sibling intimacy' in Polynesian polyarchies.

Okonjo, writing of the Igbo, notes that all the Igbo of each political unit to the west of the Niger were subject to two local monarchs, both of whom were crowned and acknowledged heads, lived in palaces and ruled from thrones. The two monarchs were, one, the male *obi*, who in theory was the acknowledged head of the whole community, but who in practice was more concerned with the male section of the community, and, two, the female *omu*, who in theory was the acknowledged mother of the whole community but who in practice was charged with concern for the female section. She says:

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<sup>5</sup> The 'royal bath' was an annual New Year ritual in which the Merina monarchs of Madagascar reaffirmed the alignment of society, royalty and astronomy in celebrating the fertility of the monarch and by extension the people and the land (Bloch 1987:271-297).

... it is important to note that the *omu* was not a queen in a western sense, she was neither the wife of a king nor the reigning daughter of a king who died without a male heir. In fact, she did not derive her status in any way from an attachment or relationship to a king (Okonjo 1976:48).

European models of political reproduction appear to emphasise queen mothers and sons, and, secondarily wives and daughters. Sisters are scarcely mentioned, yet when these African cases are read more closely, these 'mothers' are so often 'sisters' that Feeley-Harnik says that Luc de Heusch (1958) has to invoke substitution to make his evolutionary Oedipal argument about mother-son incest as the *point de rupture* catapulting kin-based societies into bureaucratic states (Feeley-Harnik 1997:163). The relationships are in effect those between brothers and sisters, but de Heusch chooses to 'convert' them into mother-son relationships to fit his model. In Africa the vernacular term for 'queen-mother' may be better translated as 'female ruler' or it may be a generic term like *kabaka*, applied to the 'king', 'queen-mother' and 'queen-sister' in Buganda. Feeley-Harnik says scholars might like to be more specific about the kinship relations involved, as when Rattray (1923:82,n1) notes that the Asante Queen Mother is 'not necessarily the chief's mother, more often his sister'.

Throughout Madagascar such terms as 'ancestor', 'leader', 'ruler', 'slave' and 'follower' are not normally marked according to gender (as they are not in most languages) and when gender is indicated concordant suffixes are used. While French observers, writing in the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century, argue that the Malagasy prefer male heirs, Malagasy documents from the Merina royal archives emphasise the role of a group called 'brothers and sisters' in deciding succession and a clear emphasis on brother-sister endogamous unions and the heirs of such unions. (Feeley-Harnik 1997:165). We can note a similarity here to the role of the *khadzi* in determining her brother's heir among the Venda.

Ife Amadiume (1997:21) criticises Meyer Fortes' account of the Tallensi of northern Ghana for disregarding the important role played by women in Tallensi society:

... in Fortes' Tallensi data we see the consequences of gender prejudice and ethnocentrism, as a result of the masculinization of language and the imposition of the structures of Greek and Hebrew mythologies on Africa. (The book she refers to is entitled *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion*.) The narrative of the data is in the masculine gender as Fortes writes of 'nature of man', 'mankind', 'gods and men' and so on.

Amadiume notes that the dominant maleness in Fortes' account is contradicted by suppressed and fragmented information in the data, suggesting a missing matriarchal system. She quotes Fortes (1959:27):

But the ancestress of a lineage or segment is almost as important as the founding ancestor, and the spirits of maternal ancestors and ancestresses play as big a part in a person's life as his personal ancestor spirit.

In his 1996 book on power and symbolism in ancient Zimbabwe, Tom Huffman refers repeatedly to the role of the 'ritual sister', which he bases on Venda ethnography. Following designs commonly found on the *hakata* (the Shona term for divining dice), he describes the herringbone pattern commonly found in *dzimbahwe* (stone circles) structures as representing senior female status and the check or chevron design as representing male status. I suggest that instead of the unsatisfactory term 'ritual sister', which does not convey the pragmatic power wielded by the holders of this position, we may adopt the term 'female ruler'. That such a term can be considered legitimate may be inferred from Huffman's own account of the royal burials at Mapungubwe, arguably among the most splendid in sub-Saharan Africa. Huffman notes that three of 23 burials excavated by Fouche (1937) and Gardner (1963) were associated with gold objects. The first one he discusses, Number 14, 'was probably that of a woman, buried in a sitting position facing west. She wore at least a hundred gold wire bangles around her ankles and there were over 12,000 gold beads in her grave'. Huffman notes that high status people were often buried sitting up and that the posture and gold ornaments indicate that the three people buried on Mapungubwe hill were rulers, 'perhaps a king with a 'ritual sister', or a king with his brother and sister'. Huffman (1996:188) does not suggest that the female burial is that of a ruler in her own right, although the 12,000 gold beads, not found in the other burials, are evidence for this. But later he quotes from Theal 'the *mazarira* of the Mutapa king in fact supported Portuguese requests for trade' and adds 'although female status is secondary in a structural sense, actual status would be historically contingent on the forces of individual personalities. Thus there could have been times when a ritual sister and royal mother had greater standing than their male counterparts' (Huffman 1996:109; Theal 1964:368).

Huffman acknowledges a debt to Adam Kuper's book *Wives for Cattle* (1982) in his conceptualising of the social systems of the ancient Zimbabwe kingdoms. Kuper (1987:112), in a later paper on southern Bantu marriage systems, says firmly that 'women were thought to be dangerous to cattle and could not take part in pastoral activities'. Women, indeed, may not have openly herded cattle, but that large numbers of them owned cattle and much other stock, quite independently



of their husbands or fathers, is made clear by Van Warmelo and Phophi (see especially 1948:1217-1234). Kuper (1987:112) goes on to state, referring to the Lovedu, 'Political influence is not exercised directly by the queen, but by her male advisers'. Such was not and is not the case among the Venda *makhadzi* and I doubt very much if it ever was the case among the Lovedu.

The role of the *makhadzi* in Venda can be seen clearly in the matter of succession. Stayt comments that, although in normal circumstances the eldest son of the great wife is the heir, this law is by no means rigid, as, if the *makhadzi* considers him undesirable as the head of the family, she may designate any other son, the choice resting entirely with her.

Her power in this matter often results in the personal equation influencing her choice unfairly, and sometimes she may, for her own ends, pass over the lawful heir on some trivial and invalid excuse, nominating another son over whom she has more influence. If her nominee is accepted, all is well, but this personal element in the appointment of the heir, although theoretically very limited by customary law, is the font of endless family feuds. In the past the death of almost every patriarch resulted in family disruptions, the deceased man's brothers refusing to recognise the *makhadzi's* nominee and attempting to usurp her power by setting up as head of the family the man whom they considered would best serve their ends (Stayt 1931:170).

That matters have changed little since Stayt wrote is shown in a newspaper report of 9 January 1998. Alpheus Siebane, a reporter for the *The Mirror*, wrote a front page story detailing the ousting of the Mphephu royal council and the appointment of a new acting leader, Prince Toni Peter Ramabulana Mphephu, who was to fill the vacuum created by the death of the previous paramount chief of the Venda, Khosikhulu Dimbanyika Mphephu, who had died a few weeks earlier in a car crash. Siebane reported that the new acting chief, a young man, would fulfil the duties of the late king together with his female aide, Khadzi Mavis Mphephu. Prince Toni and Khadzi Mavis were both installed as the chief's assistants during his inauguration in February, 1994. The report continued:

Prince Toni will act as chief until the royal family decides to install a leader. According to members of the family, this is not going to be an easy task. The late Chief Dimbanyika was married to one wife who has only one child, a six year old girl named Masindi. She is the only child that the Mphephu royals recognise .... Another elder member of the royal family, VhaVenda Phophi Mphephu, who acted as acting leader (regent) when

Dimbanyika was still very young, will not be left out in the cold. She will assist the young leaders as an adviser. She is one of the members of the former leadership who, among others, is being favoured by the new leadership (Siebane 1998:1).

Stayt (1931:215) notes that in Venda

... there are women petty chiefs in their own right, such as Nyadenga of Phiphidi and Nyakhalavha of Khalavha. When the father of the present Chief Tshivhase left Phiphidi to establish his new capital at Mukumbani he made his daughter Nyadenga petty chief in the Phiphidi district; she was his heir, the only child of his great wife, but could not succeed her father as a great chief. At Phiphidi she has the full rights of a man, and is only subordinate to the chief himself. Her position will be inherited by her eldest daughter.

Tshisinavhute of Mianzwi was also a female ruler in her own right. Tshisinavhute is the title of the Mbedzi<sup>6</sup> ruler who has been female since at least the end of the nineteenth century and possibly much earlier. The first female Tshisinavhute, Mufanadzo, had been given the gift of rainmaking by her father but according to oral tradition had had to enlist the help of Chief Ligege Tshivhase to drive out and kill her brother who had also been a powerful rainmaker at Mianzwi. Since then succession to the headship and powers of rainmaking at Mianzwi have been matrilineal (Ralushai & Gray 1977:6), though I am not persuaded that the term 'matrilineal' is entirely a suitable one here, since inheritance is from mother to daughter and not from mother's brother to sister's son. The change in succession from male to female may be partly explained by the increasing incidence of male circumcision, which was introduced from Sotho areas into Venda at the end of the nineteenth century. Ralushai mentions raids on the Mbedzi in search of uncircumcised men who were detrimental to the rainmaking powers of the Mbedzi, as males who had been circumcised were not allowed to hold sacred objects. Tshisinavhute, as a woman, was saved from such raids<sup>7</sup>.

The Mbedzi predated the ruling Singo dynasty in Venda and may have had VhaNgona (aboriginal) antecedents as well as Karanga ones.

There appears to have been some rivalry between Tshisinavhute and Modjadji of the Lovedu. Ralushai notes that the title Tshisinavhute translates as 'one who does not set a price', indicating that payments to her for rainmaking were voluntary, whereas it was known that Modjadji would not use her powers without payment.

In a similar manner to Tshisinavhute, the origin of the Vondwe female chieftaincy appears to lie in a succession dispute involving a sister and her brother, although here the accounts given by local people and that given by the headwoman herself differ considerably. Matshidze (1988:24) dates the emergence of female chieftaincy at Vondwe to the installation of Nyatshitahela in 1914. In this account Nyatshitahela was the wife of Chief Rammbuda of Dzimauli<sup>8</sup>. Following a succession dispute, she fled with her only son to her maternal grand-mother's home and upon the death of her father, Headman Ramugondo of Vondwe, returned to Vondwe and became headwoman there. Some of Matshidze's informants said that the Vondwe ancestors preferred a female ruler; others that Nyatshitahela had engineered the removal of her classificatory brother who had been installed as chief shortly after the death of her father. Musanda Gumani, the present headwoman, told me (26 April 1998) that her ancestor was made headwoman at Vondwe by her brother, a local chief. She said that Nyatshitahela had been married to another chief nearby who had died. The people of his village blamed his wife and wanted to kill her. To save her, her brother removed her to his own chiefdom and made her headwoman of Vondwe.

Although Nyatshitahela was succeeded by several male descendants, their reigns were inauspicious. One died after having been struck by lightning, and his son, who succeeded him, died childless in 1976. It was at this point that the chief's family and the community reached a decision that there should be a return to female rule, since it seemed that Nyatshitahela was asking for a female successor as the males had not fared well. The present headwoman was installed and given the title Gumani at the age of twenty-one in 1976. Musanda Gumani has commemorated her ancestress by naming a local school after her. VhoGumani herself is an educated woman who is a senior officer at the Thohoyandou Central Prison, which is situated not far from her *khoro* or traditional court, where she hears cases on Sundays in the company of her *vhakoma* or headmen.

The position of female headwoman in Venda was a reflection not only of the standing of women in this society, but also of their wealth (see Jeannerat 1997:99). Van Warmelo and Phophi make it plain that women could build up wealth in various ways: by farming, through increase in livestock, pottery and, very often,

<sup>8</sup> The three major chiefdoms in Venda are those of Mphephu, Rammbuda and Tshivhase. Mphephu was created paramount in colonial times but formerly had no actual control over the other two. With the death of the previous Mphephu chief at the end of 1998, Chief Kennedy Tshivhase has taken the opportunity to assert his claim to preeminence in Venda, with well publicised meetings with President Mbeki at Mukumbani.

by skill in herbalism and divining. This wealth was used in the same way as by males, to *mala* (pay bridewealth) for women, either as wives for their sons, or for themselves.

Women of all ages, both wives and widows and unmarried girls, may be the owners of livestock. Nor is there any distinction between royalty and commoners in this regard (Van Warmelo & Phophi 1967:1217).

That this situation was common in many parts of Africa is shown by Amadiume's account of the types of wealth accumulated by Igbo women in Nigeria. Wealth for women included livestock, fowls, dogs, rich yields in farm and garden crops, many daughters who would bring in-laws and presents, and many wealthy and influential sons. Wealth included titles and possession of wives by 'male daughters' who were first daughters, barren women, rich widows, wives of rich men and successful female farmers and traders, the kinds of women, Amadiume (1987:31) says 'whom I shall refer to as "female husband"'.

The most wealth among Venda women was accumulated by herbalists or diviners. Referring to herbalists (*nanga*) as 'doctors', Van Warmelo and Phophi (1967:123) remark:

... the property which a woman acquires in this manner is kept in her household. It is entirely her own because she earned it with her own knowledge of medicine. Her husband does not dispute her right to own it.

Although she must not use her property without first consulting him, it seems that this is largely a formality and that he is in no position to object to her plans.

Ramahanedza's wife, Nyamunawa, is a great specialist in the doctoring of children's ailments .... Through her success in her practice she has in the course of time acquired a herd of cattle larger than that of her husband Ramahanedza.

Unlike the custom in some other parts of South Africa, Venda female diviners were usually married. I asked Mrs. Nyamunene of Tshikambe (20 October, 1987), a well-known diviner who received her calling when she reached puberty, if the ancestors had a problem with her marriage. Mrs. Nyamunene explained that she 'went to her husband as a *maine* (diviner) and that he was quite happy about her profession because of all the goats she received in fees', adding that moreover her clients continued to consult her after her marriage. Mrs. Nyamunene had used her

goats to *mala*<sup>9</sup> two wives for herself. The children of these wives were now married and their children (who were part of Mrs. Nyamunene's extended family) assisted her in collecting the *materia medica* which she needed to continue her profession.

Van Warmelo and Phophi (1948:113) note:

It also happens that a woman gives her son cattle to *mala* (pay bridewealth) for a wife. (Bridewealth payments legitimize marriages, and more especially, the children of marriages.) A wife thus *mala*'d with cattle provided by her husband's mother is termed *tshiozwi*. Many mothers thus provide their sons with marriage cattle earned by themselves.

But the status of these wives is not the same as those whose bridewealth has been given by the bridegroom's father:

Nyamaswidi once gave eight head of cattle earned by her by doctoring people sick with malarial haemorrhage to her son Mutafunari to *mala* with. When the girl so married arrived she was known as the wife of the *tshiozwi* hut (Van Warmelo & Phophi 1948:113).

*Tshiozwi* is a bush or grove which is sacred because the graves of the chief's family are there. The term denotes the wife of a chief, who, when widowed must remain in a village near to that of her late husband until her death and cannot return to her own people. Van Warmelo and Phophi note that by extension it is used of a woman *mala*'d by another woman, so that she (the wife) may not go away with this son to live elsewhere but must continue to live with the old woman, her owner, near the graves (Van Warmelo & Phophi 1948:113).

Wealthy women use their cattle not only to obtain wives for their sons, but for themselves too. Stayt (1931:143) notes that the practice of obtaining wives by the lobola system is not confined to men:

... any woman who has the means may lobola a wife in exactly the same way as a man may do, and although this is not common among the poorer people<sup>10</sup> it occurs not infrequently among the ruling classes. Women in

<sup>9</sup> The term *mala* here is the equivalent to the Zulu term *ilobolo*, known colloquially as *lobola* and referring to custom whereby a payment passes on marriage from the family of the bridegroom to that of the bride.

<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Vusani Ramabulana (1997) told me of her domestic helper who had paid bridewealth for a wife for her son. When the son absconded in the city, his mother kept the wife for herself.

positions of authority such as petty chiefs or witchdoctors, who have been able to accumulate the necessary wealth, often obtain wives in this way, even though they may be married themselves in the ordinary way.

Female husbands were allowed to bring up to three wives to live with them at their husband's home, and might allow their husbands sexual access to these wives, although the husband had no rights over them without his wife's permission (Stayt 1931:170).

Pfarelo Matshidze asked Musanda Gumani if her wife might become a petty or district headwoman and was told that this was a possibility since her wife was also a member of the chiefly family. 'This all lies in the hands of the *makhadzi*, if she so well wishes, or if the headwoman proposes and the *makhadzi* accepts it then she (the headwoman's wife) may become a district petty headwoman (*mukoma*)'. Matshidze (1988:39) quotes O'Brien as referring to the Narene, a small Sotho-speaking group closely related to the Lovedu, who had four female chiefs between 1870 and 1914, of whom one was a female husband, one the widow of a female husband, and the other the widow of a male husband.

Musanda Gumani was somewhat ambivalent about her wife when I spoke to her (April 26 1998). She said that the community had decided after her installation that she needed a wife as she would not have enough time to cook, to look after her home and to attend to her official duties. She had paid lobola, but explained that she and her wife had divorced each other about seven years ago. 'Now I live alone', she said. She added that she had never been married but had a lover who is the father of four of her children. Her fifth child belongs to her wife, whose sexual partner was chosen by Musanda Gumani and who had to be a member of the chiefly family. Close to the time that I interviewed Musanda Gumani on April 26 1998, she was also interviewed by an SABC TV news team for NewsHour. The story was later picked up by *Drum* magazine which also interviewed the headwoman in a story headlined 'As chief she dutifully married a woman—and it works like a charm!' When the *Drum* reporter visited the headwoman, her wife was away on 'fed-up leave', but this did not deter reporter Don Makatile: 'We were determined to meet Matodzi and eventually tracked her down'. Since *Drum* reported Musanda Gumani as being a 'born-again Christian', she may have been somewhat embarrassed by the existence of her wife, or may have actually divorced her. Whatever the case, it was evident that the wishes of the community had been honoured at the time of her accession.

## Conclusion

To return to 'the spaces between words': much of the anthropological literature on Africa spends a considerable time detailing the role of women as objects of

exchange, but relatively little exists on women as social actors in their own right. This article has been a brief attempt to outline some areas in which women in Venda were and are able to wield considerable social and political power

The term 'father's sister' for *makhadzi* does not convey the importance of this position as much as 'one who commands or controls' does. Why should Van Warmelo and Stayt have missed this? Perhaps the answer lies in the proverbial reply given to Rattray by the Asante chiefs when he asked them why they had not told him about the role of women in their society. They said that they thought women were of no account in European society 'for we have seen how you treat your women'.

The *makhadzi* is a force to be reckoned with in her brother's household, an adviser whose presence is necessary at all important times in the life of her brother and the lives of his children (and wives). Through the accumulation of wealth in various ways Venda women can fulfil similar roles to those of men in Venda society and build up families of their own. The respect given to wealthy women may be translated into political and religious status that they hold in their own right. It seems to me that the standing of women in Venda may well have been replicated in most other African societies (see Paulme 1963: *passim*; Amadiume 1987:31), but at the end of the nineteenth century the advent of Christianity and its European bearers, the missionaries, meant that the voices of women were no longer heard in the same ways. Venda was one of the last Southern African societies to feel the effects of mission education and thus we are perhaps able to see in Venda society more clearly the role of women as social actors in their own right.

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