

## Cultural Practices and the Bondage of Women in Swaziland

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### Abstract

*The crux of this article is that the social structure and cultural practices of Swaziland has placed women in excruciating bondage. Women are greatly discriminated against and go through highly degrading rituals because of the cultural laws of Swaziland. The objectives of the study are to evaluate the cultural practices and circumstances that have placed women in this bondage of gross marginalization and abuse. The research questions of the study are: What are the cultural practices of Swaziland? How are the customary laws abetting the marginalization of women? Why are women compelled to face degrading rituals? What are the prospects and ways of reducing this bondage on women? The study is guided by the theoretical framework of Cultural Feminism with proponents such as Margaret Fuller, Frances Williard, Jane Addams, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The study concludes that cultural traits have inflicted much ill treatment on women and makes Swaziland to rank 148 out of 187 on the Gender Inequality Index. The study recommends that in line with the Swazi leadership tradition where the King co-rules with the Queen Mother, husbands should allow their wives in particular and women in general to have discretionary powers. Aspects of the culture and tradition of Swaziland that treats women like nonentities should be discarded. Concerted efforts and programmes should be designed to uplift and empower women while at the same time abolishing some of the cultural traits that engenders the bondage of women.*

### Introduction

The social structure and cultural practices of Swaziland has placed women in excruciating bondage. These strongly entrenched cultural traits encompasses marriage, sexuality, access to property, access to children, kinship etc. Swaziland is a small country located in southern Africa between Mozambique and South Africa with its capital at Mbabane. Swaziland is Africa's last absolute monarchy and this is very unique because it is the only country in Africa whose government is the traditional absolute monarchy that was practiced before colonialism. (Davies, O'Meara, and Dlamini 1985)

The Ngwenyama (presently King Mswati III) is the head of state with supreme powers over the country. Sixty percent of the land of Swazis is owned by the Ngwenyama. It has a population of 1.4 million people in the ratio of 53 percent women is to 47 percent male. Unfortunately, the women who are far higher in population are grossly marginalized and mistreated with the backing of customary law. (Booth, 1983)

The objectives of the study are to evaluate the cultural traits and circumstances that have placed women in this bondage of gross marginalization and abuse. The study is guided by the under listed research questions. What are the cultural traits of Swaziland? How are the customary laws abetting the marginalization of women? Why are women compelled to face degrading rituals? What are the prospects and ways of reducing this bondage on women?

The study is guided by the theoretical framework of Cultural Feminism. The theory of cultural feminism holds the view that society needs women's virtues such as cooperation, caring, pacifism and nonviolence for smooth operation, development and settlement of conflicts. Major proponents of the theory are Margaret Fuller, Frances Williard, Jane Addams,

and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Cultural feminism extols the positive aspects of the female character and personality. (Ritzer, 2008; Donovan, 1985)

The qualitative research methodology was adopted for the study. It consists of content and documentary analysis whereby data was gathered mainly through secondary sources and reviewed. The article is divided into four sections. We are already in the first section which is the introduction. The second section would discuss the cultural traits in Swaziland while the third section would discuss the bondage of women in Swaziland. Section four is the conclusion and recommendation.

### **Cultural Traits in Swaziland**

There are a couple of interesting cultural traits in Swaziland such as cows been worth their weight in gold and the most valued means of exchange. Purchase of land, marriage etc. is valued in cows. A standard cow cost around \$500 USD. The lobolo is the exchange of the customary cattle dowry for marriage. (Culturetrip.com 2018; Wurnrn 2016) The uncommon practice is not legalization of polygamy or the fact that a man must marry more than one wife or be prosecuted but that the main heir in the polygamous family is seldom the oldest son.

Most African societies place much premium on the first wife and the first Son but in Swaziland the emphasis is the rank of the mother. The rank of mother takes precedence over order of marriage and time of birth. A woman from a prestigious clan has a higher status in the marriage over other wives even if she is the last. Also, the first son of a woman from a prestigious clan becomes the heir of the family at the expense of the oldest first son of the family where the oldest first son is begotten from a wife from a lower clan. (Matsebula, 1987; Everyculture.com 2018)

The ranking of clan is predicated on relationship with the King. The highest ranked clan is the *Nkosi Dlamini* Clan. This Clan is the royal clan and produces all the kings of Swaziland. Clans that have provided Queen Mothers are second in the ranking. Infant Care is another uncommon tradition of Swaziland because infants are viewed as ‘things’ and not ‘persons’ until the age of three months. The infant child of less than three month is not viewed as a human being in Swazi culture. In the third month after the birth of a child a special ceremony is performed to initiate the child into personhood. (Everyculture.com 2018)

At the birth of a boy child there is splendid joy and jubilation in that Swazi community. The expectation is that the lineage and fathers name will continue and there will be concrete bases for inheritance. Symbolic names such as *Vusumuzi* (rebuilder of the home), *Bhekumuzi* (minder of his father's home) etc. are reserved for the boy child. The reverse is the case if the baby is a girl child. The countenance of the parents and relations would be gloomy as if it was a stale birth. She is perceived from the date of delivery as an outsider because it is expected that in no time she will move away to another home. In some cases parents express their disappointment and misgivings by naming the child as *Jabhisile* – which literally means disappointment. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

Cultural marginalization of women is widening despite the fact that traditionally the second in command in the leadership structure of Swaziland is the *Ndlovukati* or Queen-Mother who is either the mother of the King or the first wife of the King. The structure of the monarchy is dual and there cannot be a King without a Queen-Mother. When the King dies the Queen-Mother becomes the Regent thereby depicting co-leadership by men and women in Swaziland. As a matter of fact if the heir apparent or crown Prince to the throne is too young, the Queen-Mother rules until he comes of age.

The importance of women in the tradition of Swazi is further reinforced by the fact that a Crown Prince cannot be King until he has married wives from designated clans. (Khathwane, 2018) Despite these crucial roles the powers of the Ndlovukati is limited and not visible in the real politics of Swaziland. Marriage in Swazi is called *umtsimba* and “marriage between

members of the same clan is forbidden.” (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998) A man is at liberty to marry as many wives as he can afford because polygamy is legal. The cultural practice around marriage has the propensity of humiliating women and perpetually enthrone the men.

The *Kutekwa* – which is a Swazi cultural practice whereby a bride is smeared with red ochre is a good example. The festival begins with the stabbing of the ground with a spear in the groom’s cattle kraal. Smearing of red ochre on a bride is considered as the high point of marriage in Swazi tradition and no woman can be smeared twice. (Armstrong and Nhlapo 1985) The rituals associated with the kraal and the smearing of red ochre is to the effect that the woman is permanently chained to the imperfections of the husband. (Sibandze, 2017) This tradition however violates the right of choice by women and “verifies that women do not have decision-making powers even over matters which affect their lives.” (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

*Kwendziswa* is another marriage cultural practice that debases women. It is such that the father of the girl seeks for and negotiates for his daughter. It is a forced marriage that is not predicated on love. Like traders in the market, if he gets a good bidder he gives the daughter away for marriage without seeking her opinion or consent. “Most girls who are married this way are very young and are still minors, under 16. They are usually married off to older men as second or third wives or to widowers.” (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

There is also the degrading marriage cultural practice called *inhlanti* whereby a woman is forced into a conjugal relationship because the married sister or aunt is barren. It is expected that a wife should not have challenges with her reproductive functions and if this is the case there would be a substitution through the *inhlanti* practice or end of marriage and return of the *lobolo* (bride price in cattle). It is humiliating in many ways because the woman that is forced into the marriage as substitute bears children but the children does not belong to her and the stigma of the barrenness persists on the main woman. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

This is also the case if the woman dies. The younger sister or paternal niece of the late wife would traditionally be given to the man as substitute. Women must be hardworking and fertile with regard to bearing children for their husband. Men are quick to make assessments of a woman. If there are complaints of indolence or barrenness there would be refund of the *lobolo*. “In order to prevent that, under customary law, the woman's younger sister or paternal niece is given to the husband by the woman's family.” (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

Widowhood cultural practices in Swaziland are also very pathetic and humiliating as widows are left destitute. Swazi custom dictates that a “widow must mourn for at least six months, during which she is forbidden to leave the home, preventing her from working to support her children and compounding the vulnerability of the family.” (Refworld 2010) The mourning rite for the late husband is called *Kuzila* in Swazi tradition. It is such that the widow must wear a black gown for more than two years. She is stigmatized as somebody with bad luck and on that premise proscribed from doing a lot of things while assuming a mandatory mournful posture. The implication of the bad luck stigma is that she is not to mix with others and should walk behind other. Despite these constraints on her sequel to disbandment she is expected to provide for the needs of her children. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

Testing of virginity is another cultural practice that humiliates females in Swaziland. It traditionally takes place in the annual *Umhlanga* festival or Reed Dance Festival. The King would normally tests the virginity of girls and publicly celebrate their chastity. Thereafter the King will select a new wife from the tested girls. (Girlsnotbrides.org 2014)

In the cultural practice of Swazi is also a practice of forced marriage on a widow. This practice called *levirate kungenwa* has been described by Booth (1983) as “the most extreme expression of the absence of a concept of respect for the personhood of the female in our societies.” In this practice, the family of the late husband meets and decides who, amongst the siblings of the deceased would take over the wife. The meeting to decide the fate of the widow

is done after the cleansing period of mourning. Without the knowledge or consent of the widow and new husband is imposed on her. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

This practice further intensifies the spread of HIV as tradition does not care about the cause of the death of the man but the more concerned on how the brother will continue to engage in sexual intercourse with the maybe infected widow so as sustain the benefit of the *lobolo*. (Sibandze, 2017) The surname of Swazi people is the clan name of the father and women retain membership in their paternal clan. (Everyculture.com 2018)

The implication is that "Even though women marry into families, they remain 'foreigners' to those family lineages, at the same time they are unable to access their natal family lineages." (McFadden, 1994) The cultural practice of retaining your father's clan name traps married women in the dilemma of surname to bear.

Inheriting their father's clan also makes them to lose control over their own children. This culture makes Swazi women to be outsiders in their marital homes. As outsiders they cannot be involved in crucial discussion and most rituals except services such as providing food and decorum. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998) This is compounded by the fact that the family of the deceased husband inherits all marital property. (Refworld 2010)

There are lots of taboos targeted at debasing and depriving women. It is a taboo for females to eat meat or drink milk but males are at liberty to enjoy them. It is also the norm for women to eat last after the men have consumed the best portions of the meal. Females are also prohibited from eating eggs but everybody is barred from eating fish. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

It is also a taboo for a woman to eat the head of a cow or feet of a cow. It is believed that a woman would become too intelligent for the husband if she eats the brain of a cow; if she consumes the tongue of a cow she will talk back at her husband. Finally it is a taboo for a wife to eat the feet of a cow because that may encourage her to run away. It is for the same reason that men must not buy a pair of shoe for their wife.

The culture of Swaziland dictates that ownership of land is the exclusive prerogative of men. A woman can neither buy land nor lease land for use. "Women lack the legal rights to administer their own assets. Most married women are denied equal status as legal adults: they cannot buy or sell property or land, sign contracts or conduct legal proceedings without the consent of their husbands." (Macdonald, 2016)

Men are the link between women and access to land for any purpose. The entitlement to land is given to men on the supposition that they head families and women are subordinate to them. In circumstance where a woman is not married, widowed or divorced she would need the services of a man or boy to gain access to the land through the land chiefs but women cannot buy, sell, or own land. Apart from land women in Swazi society are deprived the right to own property or even make vital decisions that border on the control of resources they worked for or inputted on. (McFadden, 1994; Sibandze, 2017; Brogna, 2018)

Cognizant of the customs of Swaziland banks do not give loans to women. For a bank to give a loan to a woman it must be with the written consent of the husband. Even if a woman is a worker and earns very high salary the "customary law forbids women to register property in their own names." (Kitten, 2010) As a matter of fact women are treated as minors and denied the right to have access or control their resources except through husband, father, brothers, sons or any male relatives. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

The procedure for acquiring land in Swaziland is generally intricate and hinged on the customary land tenure system. The customary land tenure system is predicated on the concept of *Kukhonta* whereby male citizens are given portions of land for use by the area chief who expect in return rents, allegiance and obligations. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998) "The land belongs to the King, and Swazi's reside on a piece of land at the pleasure of their chief. ..."

(Refworld 2010) However, men have access to the land and can even purchase designated lands but women cannot because “Swazi Nation Land is only accessible to men.” (Khathwane, 2018)

### **The Bondage of Women in Swaziland**

The bondage of the Kungena cultural norm is such that women are forced to marry the brother or uncle of her deceased husband. (Khathwane, 2018) Polygamy is a bondage to Swazi women especially when there is no limitation as to the number of wives a man can marry. Legislation in place, makes it an offence to have only one wife in Swaziland. King Mswati III of Swaziland (head of Swaziland) recently made a declaration to the effect that men will be required to marry at least two or more wives or face jail with effect from June 2019. (Akinyoade 2019)

King of Mswati III (head of state) has 15 wives at the moment and is entitled to a new wife every year, chosen at the eight day of the Umhlanga festival. His father and predecessor had more than 70 wives. The Swazi head of state is encouraging men to marry at least five wives and the government would put in place procedures and actions to pay for the marriage ceremonies and buy houses for them. The King warned that any man or woman that challenges the decision will face a life sentence in prison. (Akinyoade 2019)

Unfortunately, as expressed Princess Sikhanyiso – an 18 year old daughter of the King said that “polygamy brings all advantages in a relationship to men, and this to me is unfair and evil.” Polygamy is perceived by women as a cultural fig leaf cloaking infidelity because men will normally use the pretext of additional wife entitlements to have extramarital affairs with as many girlfriends as they desire under the guise of seeking for additional wives.

This also poses so much health challenges to women. The bondage is compounded by the fact that Swaziland has the highest number of HIV and AIDS in the world and forced sex is legal for married couples. (Wurnrn 2016) “In Swaziland, marital rape is legal, which has contributed to the fact that about one-third of Swazi women have experienced some type of sexual violence by the time they turn 18.” (Broгна, 2018) The implication is that a woman cannot say no to the sexual demands of her husband despite his promiscuity in a society infested with AIDS.

Domestic abuse of women and sexual violence are widespread in Swazi society as it is normal and a right for a man to beat a woman (Kuo, 2017) because of the culturally determined inferiority of women. A Swazi woman would be heavily sanctioned and fined if she wears trousers. There is also the bondage tradition of women been the last person to eat when food is served. (Kitten, 2010)

As enshrined in the Swazi Marriage Act (1964) as well as Swazi customary laws; married women require the consent of their husbands to enter into contracts and financial transactions including access to credit facilities. Also a woman cannot deal with marital assets without the consent of her husband. In sharp contrast, the husband can do anything with the marital assets without seeking the consent or even informing the wife. This custom is a major burden on women and gives men all the imaginable advantages. Very recently a woman named Makhosazane Eunice Sacolo, was unable to sell any of the livestock she purchased with her own money after her husband expelled her because her estranged husband must approve of the deal and refused to do so on account of the strained relations. (Zenda, 2020)

A young man with only one lover is derided while the young man that is inclined towards having multiple girlfriends is praised. Conversely, a young woman that has more than one lover would be condemned and castigated as a prostitute even if money did not exchange hands in the relationship. Marriage does not translate to fidelity through restraint of the sexual prowess of males but to their freedom to be promiscuous and desire more wives. (Booth 1983)

Traditionally women are not to use chairs during meeting in community forums and there are limitations to her freedom to express herself. A woman that should speak in a

community forum will be on her knees while speaking but this is not the case for men. When a woman makes a reasonable contribution in a community forum it would be said that she talks like men thereby giving attributes of intellectualism to men alone. (Sibandze, 2017)

### Conclusion

The crux of the matter is that women are greatly marginalized and highly discriminated against in Swaziland and this is bondage. They go through highly degrading circumstances and rituals not just because of the cultural laws of Swaziland but because of their self-esteem. There is a correlation between low status and self-esteem and these are linked to traditions and cultural practices which also affects negotiating power. From cradle women are discriminated against in Swazi culture and denied basic facilities for empowerment hence no negotiating power. “Through the process of socialisation, the girl child is taught to acquiesce to male authority and gender roles are rigidly maintained.” (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

The pendulum swings between a child and a property in the treatment meted on women. A child that has very limited right on the one hand and a property that has been bought and can be used anyhow on the other hand are the best description for women because of culture. Efforts to resist these cultural practices are in futility because the families (natal and maternal), community, clan and state affirms these cultural traits and practices. Women are therefore resigned to traditional roles imposed to them which has the tendency of breeding gender-based violence (GBD), marital rape, intimate partner violence (IPV), forced marriage and other vices. “Amnesty International (2010) estimates that, of women and girls surveyed aged 13 to 24, about a third (33%) experienced at least one incident of sexual violence before they reached 18 years of age.” (Macdonald, 2016)

Also according to the UNICEF findings, one in three females in Swaziland have experienced some form of sexual violence as a child, while for ages 18 years through 24 years women have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime. According to Amnesty International majority of Swazi men regard rape as a minor offence. (Kitten, 2010) The ill treatment meted on women makes Swaziland to rank 148 out of 187 on the Gender Inequality Index. (Brognna, 2018)

The study recommends that the leadership of Swaziland should not overlook aspects of Swazi tradition and culture that holds women in high esteem. Although there is the Queen-Mother ruling side-by-side with King Mswati, her powers are limited as long as he remains alive. Her powers are usually only recognised after the death of the king which is when she takes over administrative powers. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998) In the undiluted culture and tradition of Swaziland the Ngwenyama (King) co-rules with the Ndlovukati (Queen-Mother). The Queen-Mother serves as check on the power of the King but has limited powers. The implication is that the male and the female have executive roles to play. The study **recommends** that in line with the Swazi leadership tradition where the King co-rules with the Queen Mother, husbands should allow their wives in particular and women in general to have discretionary powers. Yes the husband is the head of the family but the wife should have complimentary roles like the Ndlovukati to the Ngwenyama. (Hlanze and Mkhabela 1998)

Aspects of the culture and tradition of Swaziland that treats women like nonentities should be discarded. Concerted efforts and programmes should be designed to uplift and empower women while at the same time abolishing some of the cultural traits that engenders the bondage of women.

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