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**Author(s):** Torunn Sørlic

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# Women in the Zulu state: *Reviewing Eurocentric interpretations of polygamy and its supposed hyper-masculinity*

By *Torunn Sørli*

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The cult of personality of Shaka Zulu and the conception of masculinity that characterises it, has today become a symbol of the patriarchal nature of pre-colonial states in Southern Africa. These states were supposedly constructed in a way that enslaved women through the system of polygamous marriage, with a form of reverse-dowry known as Lobola, acting as payment for the bride-to-be. However, this narrative relies on two questionable premises. Firstly, that the concept of marriage as defined by the European Christian church is the comparative through which polygamy should be linguistically and culturally translated. And secondly, that the institution of polygamy only placed men in a position of authority and power. This essay aims to explore these premises through questioning the way in which the narrative of Zulu masculinity has allowed for the construction of a historiography that has ignored the political and economic structures of polygamy. Furthermore, I will explore the idea of all-female polygamous unions, and what their role within the centralised state structure of the Zulu state might tell us about the role of women - even prior to Shaka Zulu's consolidation of power. My aim is to allow for an informed reflection on cause and affect of gender-based inequality and the role of masculinity within post-colonial societies through investigating the pre-colonial past.

Within historical discourse there is a continuous perpetuation of the narrative of the male Zulu brute.<sup>1</sup> This image of the 'Zulu Man', personified by the image of Shaka Zulu as a bloodthirsty and relentless leader, gives little room for the

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Torunn Sørli is a 4th year undergraduate student at the University of Glasgow, completing a Joint Honours in History, and Film and Television. Her research interests include the history of sex-work, pornography, and new media's impact on structures of storytelling

<sup>1</sup>J. T Tallie, "Queering Natal: Settler Logics and the Disruptive Challenge of Zulu Polygamy" in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2013), 174.

understanding of women's role within the Zulu state beyond that of submission. Colonisers, missionaries, and scholars today who rely on these sources to make their arguments, place the Zulu male and his practice of polygamy in cultural opposition to that of the monogamous European man.<sup>2</sup> Cultural practices of 'marriage', such as Lobola (also referred to as Ilobolo or Ukulobola) and polygamy were by many European sources described with disdain.<sup>3</sup> This contributed to the establishment of a hierarchy of morality that would later justify European policies of domination, such as the 1891 Natal Law Code,<sup>4</sup> as means to help African peoples through teaching them a more 'civilized' way of life. This included controlling cultural, economic, and political systems. 'Marriage' within the Zulu State embodied all three systems. I write 'marriage' because the use of the word is problematic, as it connotes a mainly European and Christian concept of two people bound together through the 'holy union'. Applying this concept to a non-Christian culture and state structure constructs an inaccurate image of the political and economic significance of the practice of moving a woman from one homestead to another.

This essay aims to contrast the image of the hyper-masculine and oppressive Zulu male, which has mainly been perpetuated through colonial and missionary sources, with theories around the economic functions and political positions of women within the Zulu state. Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate a more nuanced perspective on the place Zulu women held within pre-colonial society. I will firstly look at the narrative of the 'Zulu Man' and the way in which 'marriage' practices, and its prescribed function as a tool of gendered oppression, was used to demonstrate the characteristics of this narrative. Secondly, I will look at the political and economic function of these 'marriage' practices, such as lobola and women marrying women, in order to counter – and by extension complicate – this narrative of oppression. After this I will look at the way sex and sexuality were viewed and practiced within the Zulu State, and what this indicated in relation to the concept of 'marriage'. Finally, I will look at the impact of

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Robert Morell, "Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies" in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, (1998), 629.

practices, such as the introduction of monogamy through conversion to Christianity, economic reform, and redistribution of wealth, which disrupted systems of ‘marriage’, arguably leading to a masculine culture that is more toxic than the one which was demonised by colonial narratives.

## The Zulu Man

The overtly hyper-masculine traits that have been attributed to the Zulu man, using Shaka Zulu within this narrative as the source of this development, is still a part of the discourse around Zulu identity. It was first asserted by European settlers as a way to characterise the people they wished to undermine as persons outside of socially acceptable practice.<sup>5</sup> In relation to polygamy, missionaries and settlers used the language of abolitionists and equated polygamy to that of female enslavement.<sup>6</sup> An example of this can be found in a letter from the *Natal Witness*, urging people to spread the word of this injustice and “tell the wives already held bondage, that England will have no slaves residing on her soil”.<sup>7</sup> As the practice of paying lobola was seen as a purchase, the woman who was getting married was, from the perspective of the white settler, enslaved. Hence, when missionaries such as Hyman Wilder preached the “Divine Institution”,<sup>8</sup> that is Christian marriage between two people of the opposite sex, he is not only seen as a saviour of man through spreading the Christian faith, but he is also seen as a liberator of the oppressed. This identity as a liberator aids in the justification of colonial control. As white men in South Africa restricted the political and economic power of African men, their natural conclusion was that this would aid in the liberation of African women.

It is important to note here that the European societies that these missionaries and settlers were trying to emulate were in themselves patriarchal. Carol Christ argues that there is a clear contradiction in the way colonisers claimed that:

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<sup>5</sup> Tallie, “Queering Natal: Settler Logics and the Disruptive Challenge of Zulu Polygamy”, 184.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

the signs of the inferiority of conquered peoples was their alleged backwards treatment of women. [...] while at the same time reinscribing the domination of masculine over feminine both at home and abroad.<sup>9</sup>

This means that the gendered distinction made by colonial thinkers is not between masculine and feminine, but rather between acceptable and unacceptable masculinity. T.J. Tallie explains this distinction as that of a queer one.<sup>10</sup> The masculinity that characterises the European settlers in Natal is that of a heterosexual monogamous one. When comparing their practice of marriage and sexuality to that of the Zulu, the distinct difference is the blatant sexual fluidity that allows for more than one sexual partner. While still within the parameters of heterosexual relations, this was regarded as something morally abhorrent as it indicated an overindulgent sexual life.<sup>11</sup> This meant that the Zulu male, while still asserting masculine features, was rather seen as expressing the 'wrong' form of masculinity. This 'wrong' form of gendered expression was seen as an indicator of 'barbaric' tendencies that connoted subhuman characteristics.<sup>12</sup> This later allowed for historians such as Robert Morrell to connect violent events in the history of the Zulu state to this inherent aggressive masculinity.<sup>13</sup> Rather than looking to violence-inducing factors, such as the political threat of the British continuously destroying and enslaving African societies throughout the region,<sup>14</sup> historians such as Morrell can use this narrative of hypermasculinity as a way to explain the violent nature of events such as the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879.<sup>15</sup> Due to the high utility that this narrative

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<sup>9</sup> Carol Christ, "Whose History Are We Writing? Reading Feminist Texts With a Hermeneutic of Suspicion" in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (2004), 77.

<sup>10</sup> Tallie, "Queering Natal: Settler Logics and the Disruptive Challenge of Zulu Polygamy", 170.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Morell, "Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies", 616.

<sup>14</sup> Julian Cobbing, "The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo" in *The Journal of African History* (1988), 489.

<sup>15</sup> Morell, "Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies", 617.

had for European settlers, and later for Eurocentric scholarship, the cultural concepts that are associated with this queer hyper-masculinity is hence still perpetuated in modern media as morally abhorrent. This can be seen in the way Jacob Zuma was treated during his state visit to the UK in 2010, where one journalist even asked him whether he would recommend polygamy to Mr. Brown<sup>16,17</sup> This question, which was posed by a Daily Mail reporter, was meant as a way to demonstrate the clear superiority of western institutions of marriage that emphasise equality due to their monogamous nature. This is interesting when considering the fact that, compared to South Africa, the UK are much less progressive in their policies supporting queer people's legal and social rights.<sup>18</sup> There is usually a correlation between the protection and recognition of queer rights and women's rights, as they both are products of a society's conceptualisation of gender. I hence find it interesting that we still characterise countries like South Africa as inherently misogynistic, when this perception is based on a reductive colonial narrative. The refusal to see the functions of polygamy beyond that of the oppression of women to the point of slavery hence prevents us from understanding the role of women within the Zulu state beyond that of a victim. We hence need to reinvestigate the practice of polygamy by looking at the practice beyond the parameters of western morality.

## The Political and Economic Function of Marriage

The concept of marriage when applied to the Zulu state, and many other states that are today defined through colonial narratives, is at best inaccurate. The

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<sup>16</sup> James Gordon Brown served as the Prime Minister of the UK between 2007 and 2010

<sup>17</sup> Tallie, "Queering Natal: Settler Logics and the Disruptive Challenge of Zulu Polygamy", 182.

<sup>18</sup> South Africa: Same-sex marriage legal since 2006; Same-sex adoption legal since 2002; Gender transition law in place since 2003; Discrimination in the military based on sexual orientation illegal since 1998.

UK: Same-sex marriage legal since 2013 (with the exception of Northern Ireland, where it is still not recognised); Same-sex adoption legal since 2005-2009 (since 2009, both parties in a female same-sex relationship are allowed to place their name on the birth certificate of a child); Gender transition law in place since 2005; Discrimination in the military based on sexual orientation illegal since 2010.

concept of marriage is seen through the Christian concept of a holy union between two people of the opposite sex, who only engage in sexual activity with one another.<sup>19</sup> While this may not have been the reality of many European marriages of the time, monogamy was the message preached by European missionaries and was hence understood as the moral norm. Thus, when talking about lobola and the movement of a woman from one homestead to another, and by subsequently describing this relationship through the roles of husband and wife,<sup>20</sup> the relationship and the function of this exchange is misunderstood through its European cultural translation.<sup>21</sup> The function of the Zulu ‘marriage’, as described by Mark Hunter, was rather as a way to achieve an economically strong umuzi homestead.<sup>22</sup> This was done through the accumulation of wealth, which means being able to take on several wives and hence build a successful homestead. While European marriage had previously served a similar economic and political function, the marriage that Christian missionaries were preaching and using in order to oppose polygamous marriage was based on the Christian holy union and the restrictions put on the bodies within this union. This made this form of marriage more individual and spiritual, relying on a specific understanding of the body as an extension of God and was to be kept ‘pure’. The Zulu ‘marriage’ union was, on the other hand, less restricted in its expression through the physical body both in regards to gender and sexuality.

In addition to one person being able to take on many wives, there were also less restrictions on who the person taking wives could be. Zulu women who possessed the wealth to marry were able to take on wives and were hence able to accumulate labour and the children of these women.<sup>23</sup> These ‘women-to-women’ marriages were not often recorded by European sources as they were

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<sup>19</sup> Tallie, “Queering Natal: Settler Logics and the Disruptive Challenge of Zulu Polygamy”, 174.

<sup>20</sup> M.L. Sherman, “Zulu Women” in *New York Observer* (3 June 1875), 173.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Weir, “Chiefly Women and Women’s Leadership in Pre-Colonial Southern Africa” In *Women in South African History*, ed. Nomboniso Gasa, (HSRC Press, 2007), 6

<sup>22</sup> Mark Hunter, “Cultural Politics and Masculinities: Multiple-Partners in Historical Perspective in KwaZulu-Natal” in *Culture, Health, and Sexuality* (2005), 212.

<sup>23</sup> Weir, “Chiefly Women and Women’s Leadership in Pre-Colonial Southern Africa”, 6.

either not recognised, misinterpreted, or even outright rejected.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, there is evidence that women in Southern Africa were a natural part of the economic and political power structures. With the reign of Shaka, there was a period of social transformation that placed women in positions of power independent of their relationship to a man.<sup>25</sup> Through the establishment of the isiGodlo, which was an enclosure within the royal kraal that consisted of women of the royal family (amaKosikazi) and women who had been ‘given’ to the king (umNdlunkulu), a central part of the consolidation of power was purely female.<sup>26</sup> While women of the amaKosikazi were married away in order to cement relationships within and outside of the state, they also functioned as the overheads of the isiGodlo.<sup>27</sup> This meant that they were in charge of the umNdlunkulu in a similar way to a husband ruling over his homestead. In addition, women of the amaKosikazi were used as heads of permanent military settlements (amaKanda).<sup>28</sup> As the Zulu state system used the system of the household as the basis of its wider social structures, an amaKosikazi acting as a leader of an amaKanda entered the role of umNumzana (homestead-head).<sup>29</sup> In European terms this was a ‘polygamous marriage’ where the role of the husband was filled by a powerful woman. This structure shifted gender relations to a less constricted format and changed the status quo to a distribution of power less dependent on gender. This means that the historical view of the family unit and the significance it has for Zulu state order needs to be defined beyond the heteronormative gender constraints of Eurocentric interpretations made through the concept of marriage. Jennifer Weir argues that theories concerning the division between dominant and subordinate groups should be reconsidered in order to recognise the actual position of women.<sup>30</sup> Weir goes further, using

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>25</sup> Sean Hanretta, “Women, Marginality and the Zulu State: Women’s Institutions and Power in Early Nineteenth Century” in *The Journal of African History* (1998), 397.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 399.

<sup>30</sup> Weir, “Chiefly Women and Women’s Leadership in Pre-Colonial Southern Africa”, 9.



evidence of leaders such as Mnkabayi<sup>31</sup> to prove that women within the Zulu state held positions of power even prior the rule of Shaka.<sup>32</sup> The system of polygamy, and wider reaching policies of communal living stemming from the tradition of polygamy, should hence be seen as a part of the reason why women were able to independently assert their power within Zulu society. Hence, compared to that of the Christian system of monogamy, polygamy was a system through which women were more likely to access positions of power.

Another way in which the Zulu polygamist union was less restrictive than the Christian union of marriage can be seen in the sexual behaviour of individuals. While the homestead was the centre of reproduction, there were few social restrictions on sexual behaviour beyond this.<sup>33</sup> Within records of court cases, early ethnographies, and the oral testimonies collected by James Stuart, there is evidence of a disregard for any sexual behaviour that did not jeopardize the family unit.<sup>34</sup> Mark Hunter goes so far as to argue:

before the introduction of Christian notions of “the body as the Temple of God” the essence of *ukangana* (a verb translated sometimes too quickly into “to marry”) was childbirth and building an *umuzi* and not sexual fidelity for its own sake.<sup>35</sup>

Forms of non-penetrative sex was beyond the institution of Zulu polygamous unions, as it did not lead to offspring and hence had no further implications beyond its function within courtship.<sup>36</sup> It is hence a very different arrangement from that of the Christian marriage, which emphasised sexual commitment to one person. Christianity dictated that the body and the sexuality that it enabled

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<sup>31</sup> Shaka Zulu’s father’s sister.

<sup>32</sup> Weir, “Chiefly Women and Women’s Leadership in Pre-Colonial Southern Africa”, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Julie Parle and Fiona Scorgie, “Bewitching Zulu Women: Umhayizo, Gender, and Witchcraft in KwaZulu-Natal” in *South African Historical Journal* (2012), 858.

<sup>34</sup> Hunter, “Cultural Politics and Masculinities: Multiple-Partners in Historical Perspective in KwaZulu-Natal” in *Culture, Health, and Sexuality*, 212.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 212-213.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

was based in sin, as God was the owner of your physical presence and you should regulate the use of your body as such.<sup>37</sup> Marriage, enabled by God, was hence the only situation in which the sexual nature of the body could be enjoyed. What Europeans described as Zulu ‘marriage’ was hence not a marriage but a union between different families investing in a sustainable homestead. Lobola was not a way of purchasing women as slaves but, as Keletso Atkins argues, a way to solidify communal living arrangements.<sup>38</sup> Lobola functioned as an investment in the household that would enable economic growth.<sup>39</sup> Women were hence in a position of power, as they were vital for the agricultural production of the household and the birthing of children.<sup>40</sup> Economic prosperity, as well as social prosperity in terms of respect as a leader of a homestead, was impossible to achieve without the labour of women. Sexual freedom can hence be interpreted as an expression of this position of power, as individual women were in their own right to have sexual relationships outside of marriage.

## The Erasing of Zulu Women Through Economic Reform

Zulu polygamy, as it has been recorded through linguistic and cultural concepts of European origin, has been misrepresented and demonised by its inability to be the ‘marriage’ that it never was. The implication of this is two-folded. Firstly, it enabled colonisers to justify their actions of cultural destruction as heroic or humane. Secondly, by removing the economic and political autonomy of these systems, women were placed in a role of submission as they now were placed within a European patriarchal system that did not allow for their consolidation of power without the accompaniment of a man. Through geographical and legal restrictions, the system that upheld female leaders was abandoned for a system of compounds created to serve the economic prosperity of the colonial

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<sup>37</sup> Tallie, “Queering Natal: Settler Logics and the Disruptive Challenge of Zulu Polygamy”, 175.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

industry.<sup>41</sup> This also meant that the role of masculinity within society changes drastically. The queer masculinity, which had previously enabled men to act as leaders of a household without the need to dominate women, now had become incompatible with the power structures in place. Without accumulated wealth, men were no longer able to pay lobola and hence were not able to build homesteads. The loss of this institution meant that masculinity was no longer linked to the role of the provider, but rather the role of the individual in relation to the concept of masculinity determined by society as a whole.<sup>42</sup> Demonstrations of masculinity through forms of violence such as stick-fighting became more common as industrial complexes restructured society.<sup>43</sup> This indicates that the concept of masculinity was no longer communal, and there was hence no structure within which women could partake and be empowered by the pursuit of masculinity. Instead, today's image of the 'Zulu Man' is embodied by individual accomplishment, as can be seen in the cult of personality built around Shaka Zulu.

In conclusion, the narrative of the 'Zulu Man' can be broken down as a result of a Eurocentric historiography combined with cultural destruction that was enabled by economic reform, resulting in the deterioration of polygamy as a communal institution. By framing polygamous unions among the Zulu as 'marriage', Europeans created a moral framework within which polygamy was characterised as morally abhorrent. Within the description of Zulu masculinity as inherently immoral there was an assumption that the act of polygamy was created to benefit the man, and that the institution enslaved and oppressed women. In this essay I have shown how this is an uninformed view of Zulu women and their position in society, as they held power both in their position

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<sup>41</sup> Worger William, "Workers as Criminals: The Rule of Law in Early Kimberley, 1870-1885" in *Struggle for the City: Migrant Labor, Capital, and the State in Urban Africa*, ed. Frederick Cooper (Sage Publications, 1983), 81.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Hunter, "Fathers Without Amandla: Zulu-speaking Men and Fatherhood." in *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*, ed. Linda Richter and Robert Morrell (HSRC Press, 2006), 103.

<sup>43</sup> Parle and Scorgie, "Bewitching Zulu Women: Umhayizo, Gender, and Witchcraft in KwaZulu-Natal", 858.

within the homestead and within wider society. Polygamy and the practice of lobola should hence be understood and treated as an economic and political institution, rather than a religious or relational one within which moral judgement is inherently applied.

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