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CHAPTER ONE

GENDER RELATIONS IN THE SWAZI CONTEXT: AN INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Although gender, the historical and social construction of the differences between women and men, is a fluid variable, it is generally believed that it is learnt rather than inherited. Individuals are socialized to behave in socially accepted ways and to conduct themselves in accordance with socially approved patterns. Of the crucial components that constitute human conduct is gender which is a product of society in which culture and religion play a dominant role. Religion as a belief and value system, and cumulative tradition, has often influenced reality, “all reality, including that of gender [for] it encompasses the deepest level of what it means to be human” (King, 1994:4). Hence, the confluence between religion and gender, and its influence on secular expressions of male and female power. Nonetheless, the role religion plays in the gender relations has often been ambivalent. On the one hand, it has the potential of playing a liberatory role since soteriology of a religion is always gender inclusive (Young, 1987:16). And yet, on the other hand, it has often been used to legitimate and buttress such values as women’s obedience and deference to men, conformity to social norms, sacralising the social ordering and women’s position in it, and structuring people to accept as a practical logic “an unconscious ‘learned ignorance’ or habitus” (Gilchrist, 1994:14).

It is due to the pervasiveness of religion and gender that a mutually constitutive relationship has existed between them. As King (1995:2) puts it, “Gender and religion are closely interrelated as our perceptions of ourselves are shaped by and deeply rooted in our culturally

shared religious and philosophical heritage". It has been through religion that spirits and divinities commingled with ordinary life as is manifest in ritual as the primary method of realising integration of the sacred and secular. It is also religion and culture that have moulded women's and men's spheres of influence and world of meaning. Precepts have, however, especially in world religions tended to marginalise women by relegating them to the periphery of history and assigning them subordinate positions.

Notwithstanding the dominant religious and cultural ideology that gives unequal status to women, there were moments when women irrupted into history, sometimes at the centre, and more often along edges and played prominent political roles. There was, for instance, Deborah, a popular judge in ancient Israel, and there was Muhumuza, a woman who founded the Nyabingi cult in the intelacustrine Kingdom of Rwanda, and in the context of Swaziland there was the famed Labotsibeni Gwamile. Due to the moments of alternatives when women held institutional authority, it is not possible to generalise about women in religion. It would however be fair to state that while male gods and male dominance are by no means a universal feature of all religions, patriarchal religions like Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity, for example, assign different roles to women and men. Their dominant portrayal of women has been that of a people in a subordinate position relative to that of men. And once these positions and roles are given, they are reinforced and sanctified by religion and made to appear immutable to such an extent that "women's position in religion is often a reflexion, however oblique, of women's status in society" (King, 1995:15).

In the context of Southern Africa, and Swaziland included, the social construction of gender takes place in a predominantly patriarchal culture and that has meant that women are ascribed a minority status, both in custom and law. For as Shope (1992:2) has observed:

With a few exceptions, the African society is patriarchal in character which relegates women to a minor position and subjects them to guardianship of a male partner... As a result women had no decision making right in the upkeep of the family or in the affairs of the community.

The unequal relationship may particularly have become entrenched during the wars of conquest and consolidation of the kingdom thereby leading to an increase in male authority and a strict separation of the spheres which were later justified by ritual (Young, 1994:10). The strict separation of the spheres meant that women were restricted to the home and family, while life outside it, including defence of the nation and work-place became a sphere of men. The cultural ideology that accompanied the separation of spheres demarcated areas of influence that women and men occupied, and there was a clear division of labour in which women became sources of love, care and nurture, while men became protectors of the family. Consequently, women experienced an asymmetry of power due to the cultural and religious structuring of gender roles.

However, why women should occupy such a position cannot be explained in terms of biology for gender differences are not an inevitable product of female biology (Haralambos, 1993:522). Nor is it a creation of gods and goddesses. Rather, it is a product of cultural engineering, reinforced by social institutions and structures. Gender therefore becomes a relationship structured by power, a process in which religion as “a matrix of culture and history” (King, 1995:4) plays a handmaiden role to such an extent that both religion and culture have played a vital role in the reproduction of the dominant ideology of what constitutes gender. In economics and politics, it has meant that Swazi women have had limited and unequal access to

productive resources, like land and credit, and an equally limited access to positions of power; they have insufficient mechanisms at family and national levels to promote their advancement, and have narrower employment opportunities. They struggle to reconcile their economic activities outside the home with traditional roles, and have little say in decisions that affect their lives. At the same time, it has meant that women who constitute the numerical majority of the national population do not exercise approximate control of the social, cultural and political development of the country.

But why should women as active social agents accept gender relations that constrain their participation in nation-building? Are they coerced or unwilling accomplices in their own subordination? What is being done to redress the situation? What is the role of religion? These and related questions form the basis of this study.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Women constitute over 52 percent of the national population of Swaziland (1997 Census), but they do not enjoy equal rights with men both in law and custom more especially in the decision-making process. According to Armstrong (1985:6,31), a woman in the Swazi traditional society was regarded as “a ward under guardianship”. Traditional customs and values inculcated amongst women obedience, submissiveness and humility. Equally a woman was expected to perform the roles of wife, mother, child-bearer, food producer and household manager. Women’s lives were subject to constant and close scrutiny by their husbands, and both their own and their husband’s relatives (Adepoju, 1991:34). A woman could not enter into a contract without the written consent of the husband, and if unmarried, the father. In marriage, husband and wife were similarly unequal partners both in customary and civil rites marriage because the husband was

invested with marital power of administration of the joint estate as head of the family (Wanda, 1991:67). With regard to access to social and economic resources, women inescapably faced constraints which were rooted in the nature of the Swazi society (Adepoju, 1991:34). However, women were expected to perform the domestic roles. Due to a sexual division of labour, there was a separation of spheres on basis of gender. The women's control of affairs was in the domestic sphere, while men's work outside the home was regarded as "superior to that of women because men fought battles while women were confined to the less [sic] hazardous domestic environment" (Nkambule, 1997:133).

The subordination of women did not however come with capitalist economy nor indeed with colonialism. Even before the advent of colonialism, there had been no formal gender equality in general. Power and authority were concentrated in the hands of men and due to social structuring, women helped to perpetuate a patriarchal value system and their subordinate position in it. As Schmidt (1992:16) found with reference to the Shona women of Zimbabwe:

Women exercised authority over other women in ways that both served their own interests and that of the patriarchal system as a whole. If a man took more than one wife, the first wife assumed a position of authority over those who followed.

Schmidt emphasises that with the coming of colonialism, there was collaboration of African and European men in regulating women's mobility and sexuality through the distorted use of customary law (Ibid:12). Even the Christian missionary presence and education did not radically transform the traditional gender relations but rather perpetuated a gender ideology that emphasized domestication of women and girls. With the coming of capitalist economy, however:

African men were anxious to keep women and girls at home under the authority of fathers and husbands. Antagonistic as they may have been to other aspects of colonial rule, African chiefs, head men and older men in general welcomed the state's efforts to

restrict women to rural areas (Ibid:2).

However, social changes in Africa have given rise to an ideological search for gender equality in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of life. In the process, gender has increasingly emerged as a contested terrain in which the condition and status of women are challenged and redefined in a bid to empower women. It is particularly recognised that women are important social actors because of the heavy economic burden that they bear in production and reproduction of human labour. However, this crucial role has often been constrained by social and cultural factors.

That notwithstanding, women have sought material power over a world which they can master. Attempts have been made to seek this power through formal education and entry into the labour market, participation in income generating activities, and social advocacy. In spite of their involvement in economic development, however, their presence has remained largely invisible in such areas as politics, religious leadership, and in decision-making. That this has been the trend is appreciated in a number of countries, not least South Africa where overt formal attempts at ameliorating the situation are far advanced in form of the progressive laws on gender and women's rights. In Swaziland, however, change has been slow due to the conservative nature of the privileged male elite who invoke culture and religion to legitimate the position of women and men in society. Consequently, the role of women in Swazi society has largely been determined by traditional values which nonetheless have relegated women to a subordinate position, although there are variations within this position. Due to the cultural lag and the politics of traditionalism, issues surrounding gender equality have not received adequate attention and support to such an extent that the traditional male elite are on record saying that women who want equality with men

should go back to Beijing (*Times of Swaziland*, 20 May 1997). Beijing was the venue of the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995.

Nonetheless there were token acts of integrating women in the national economic development in the wake of the United Nations Women's Decade (1975-1985). It was realised that women contributed a great deal to the national economy although their contribution had often not been acknowledged. However due to the internal weaknesses of the Women-in-Development initiative, other attempts have been undertaken especially by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which among other things seek to empower women by giving them access to credit, training and leadership skills in the hope that economic empowerment would lead to social power and gender equality. The efforts of the NGOs can be seen through the rising number of women's groups which have undertaken income-generating, self-help projects. But whether women have attained economic power and self-empowerment in form of autonomy and active participation in decision-making remains an unknown quantity.

While it is thought that the concept of women organising is an old one, it has however not yet spread all over the country. As a result, it is feared that the available labour force especially that of women is not fully utilized. The underutilisation of women's labour is however partly a consequence of socio-economic and cultural factors which deny women sufficient opportunities for active participation in the spheres of work and politics. Among the constraining factors have been the factors of culture and religion which are interrelated and influence each other. Culture and religion by their emphasis on the domestic roles of women in society have been known to impact on women's participation in development and their status.

This study conceives culture and religion as two crucial factors in the moulding and signification of gender. These factors may enhance or hinder the development efforts of countries which strongly adhere to them and in particular when these twin factors are allowed to influence access to economic, productive resources and fruits of labour. This is particularly pertinent to Swaziland, a country in which both culture and religion feature prominently.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study has been motivated by the visible absence of any studies on gender and religion in Swaziland, and more importantly on how religion and culture impinge on women's search for equality in a society that is predominantly religious, and culturally rich in traditions that are lived and institutionalised in annual national ceremonies and ritual. It also draws on the inspiration from a recent study on women's income-generating groups and the apparent disjunction between women's economic empowerment and gender equality (Zigira, 1998:118) which suggested that the crucial factor in women's empowerment is the cultural and religious context in which gender is lived, contested and mediated.

The study hopes to recover women's experience, voices and visions to show that the story of the Swazi women's search for equality has had some moments of success. Special attention and discussion will be given to the role of women in Swazi religion and ritual, their co-participation and innovations at crisis times in the history of the kingdom, and their search for social and economic empowerment. In doing so, the study hopes to show that the search for equality is not a question of either women's economic empowerment or cultural deconstruction and reconstruction, but both, if the search for equality is to be all inclusive and have impact on

society. Cultural and religious legitimation of women's presence and contribution to nation-building and social well-being are essential because "inherent in any system of prestige is the relative social value that attaches to male and female, such a value is perhaps always fundamental to the whole system" (Keyes, C.F, 1986:67).

Given the complexity of the interrelationship between culture and gender, and gender and religion, the major purpose of the study is to investigate the interface between religion and gender equality, economic power and equality, and to explore the positive role that religion can play in enhancing the construction of an all inclusive community in which women's voice, economic power and presence are respected, legitimated and translated into lived experience.

1.3.1 Objectives

This study assumes the cultural dimension of gender and that society is not a seamless web with cast-iron determinants for human action. Rather, there are gaps and disjunctions in the social framework within which we exist. It is in these spaces that there has been the locus of resistance and struggle which have taken various forms, either through organised economic work, collective action or acts of rebellion which may be individual and isolated but nonetheless a significant phenomenon. The overall goal of the study is to break through the traditional boundaries and to explore new ways of reconstructing the search for gender equality in the context of Swazi culture and religion. The objectives of the study are:

- (a) To investigate the various forms of Swazi women's struggle for equality.
- (b) To establish the impact of religion and culture on women's economic empowerment.
- (c) To find out the role of religion in promoting gender equality; and
- (d) To show change and continuity in the women's search for equality.

1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The quest for gender equality is basically a quest for new meaning and self-definition in the ever-changing social context, for no aspect of gender can be understood without appreciation of its place in the larger system of symbols and meaning (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981:69). This is particularly important because the social and cultural reproduction of gender encompasses individuals and it embeds them in social contexts and processes. Thus, meaning and interpretation play a vital role in the social terrain. As Taylor (1985:45,47) has ably put it:

Human beings are self-interpreting animals... our interpretation of ourselves and experience are constitutive of what we are, and cannot be considered as merely a view of reality, nor as an epiphenomenon, which can be by-passed in our understanding of reality.

Due to the centrality of meaning in gender relations, it becomes inevitable to premise this study on the fact that the definition of what is regarded as normative for men and women, their roles, position and status in society has predominantly been a product of society. Therefore, what gender is, what men and women are, what sorts of relationship do or should obtain between them, all these notions do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological 'givens' but are largely products of social and cultural processes.

Therefore if one has to recover the women's presence and struggles for self-definition, there is need for a theoretical perspective that is able to probe deep into history, culture and religion. I therefore propose to adopt an interdisciplinary critical theory that combines gender perspective with "a critical hermeneutics of liberation" (King, 1995:5). In the words of Ursula King (1995:5):

The perspective of gender is of increasing importance in theoretical and empirical studies ... Until very recently, the study of religion has been undertaken in general terms, without specific attention to gender. Now many new questions arise and new knowledge is discovered in relation to the gendered dimension of religious phenomenon.

It is imperative to bear in mind that the critical hermeneutics of liberation has several moments of suspicion, deconstruction and reconstruction of key elements. Simply put, the moments constitute the three Rs of re-reading, retrieving and reconstruction. Through the various stages, the hermeneutics of liberation is able to uncover and reveal the underlying layers of significance previously unsuspected. The critical approach requires that the social script, oral traditions and written sources be subjected to critical interpretation since they are a product of historical process, power relations and social interests in which women's experiences have been largely excluded or at best editorialised. In the words of Paul Ricoeur(1974:13),

The hermeneutic task is that of deciphering ...the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning; in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning..

The strength of the critical theory is that it allows the researcher latitude to penetrate the facade of culture and tradition to uncover circumstances, influences and factors that underlie the present presumptions and sex role stereotypes, and the effect of power and cultural ideology in legitimation and distortion of gender relations. Although the meaning of ideology is elastic, Giddens (1979:6) provides a useful guide when he refers to it as "the capability of the dominant groups or classes to make their own sectional interests appear to others as universal. Such capability is therefore one type of resource involved in dominance". It manifests itself in the manipulation of the weak group, and is an instrument of power relations for it is used to justify the interests of the dominant group and legitimation of social relations to appear to have a fixed

and immutable character of their own. At the same time, the theory affords us an opportunity to see women as agents of change, co-participants in history and religion, and to recover their unfettered use of non-patriarchal power. This way, gender becomes a variable for critical analysis.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

Preliminary research for this work began in 1995 when *The Times of Swaziland* launched a weekly “Women’s Forum” page. For three months, May to July, the litany of women’s voices on the topical issues of inequality, sex discrimination, and domestic violence sharpened my interest in the status of women in Swaziland. This interest was further heightened in 1997 when I undertook a research project for the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) on the role of NGOs in women’s economic empowerment. Contrary to my expectations, the study found that there was a gap between women’s economic empowerment and gender equality. The disjunction between economic power and gender equality set me on a route that sought to enquire into the Swazi women’s struggles for equality and in particular to seek an explanation of the riddle posed at the interface between culture and religion, on one hand, and economic empowerment on the other hand.

The collection of information followed a multi-stage approach (Hashemi, Schuler & Riles, 1996:637). In 1997, a survey of women’s perception of gender relations in Swaziland was undertaken. In the survey, 200 women from diverse socio-economic background, young and old, married and single, employed and unemployed, literate and non-literate were asked to respond (on anonymous basis) to an open-ended questionnaire on the position of women in the Swazi society, their perceived state of the relationship between women and men, forms of gender

inequalities, and the various forms of women's search for gender equality. Data gathered from the survey (which forms the basis of chapter 4) was collated and qualitatively analysed and synthesized to construct a profile of the present condition and position of women and their quest for equality. The indicators considered were: economic security, control and access to productive resources, ability to earn and spend money without interference from the family members (whether immediate or extended family), degree of women's contribution to family sustenance, involvement in family decision-making process, mobility outside the home, and awareness of critical issues that relate to women's condition and ascribed status.

The responses to the questionnaire, while pointing to the crucial areas of women's concerns, served as a guide to the next stage of the study, namely the search for the sources of the persistent state of inequality and to explore what women had done to overcome it. Attempts at having recourse to archival material at the National Archives had limited success perhaps due to the recency of discourse on gender. Consequently, this study has relied heavily on secondary literature (on anthropology, history and political economy of Swaziland) and interviews. While there is ample secondary literature on the topic, however, the literature was a product of days gone by. As a result, one had to read against the grain and with a critical eye to recover women's presence however tangentially they were mentioned. It was also realised that the available secondary sources suffered from the basic limitation of their focus on androcentric points of view. Therefore, these sources were used with caution. Hence, the necessity of the critical hermeneutical approach to recover ideas, beliefs and practices that lay hidden in the social and written texts.

However, discourse on gender and religion remains a new phenomenon in Southern Africa, if not the whole continent of Africa. Consequently, the available literature on the subject was at the best of time abysmally meagre. Hence, the adoption of interviews as a research instrument. The target groups included the leaders and several members of four NGOs which were chosen as case studies of women's search for gender equality. The four NGOs were chosen because of their different historical origins and yet they share the common goal of the social transformation of women's position and status. The interviews proved to be a rich source of information on women's contemporary struggle towards equality. Whatever information availed was inevitably subject to critical interpretation, most especially their role in the deconstruction of deeply ingrained ideas on gender and gender roles.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

Although both gender and religion are ubiquitous factors in our daily lives, there is a dearth of literature on these subjects. This might be due to the relative recency of public discourse on gender, or it is according to some writers because the sources have predominantly been written by men, and even:

Sources written by women were preserved by a male cultural system. They have to be looked at from a perspective of the woman's internalization of patriarchal ideologies or editing of her views to make them acceptable to official models of women's "nature" and prescribed roles (Ruether & McLaughlin, 1979:16)

That said, however, there are a number of sources which bear on this study. Almost without exception, these sources emphasize the social construction of gender as a historical and cultural specific. (See, for instance, Firestone, 1972; Ortner & Whitehead, 1974; Figs, 1986; Hampson, 1988; Gilchrist, 1991, and King, 1995). King (1995:15) goes a step further to argue

that “women’s position in religion is often a reflection, however oblique, of women’s status in society”. It is in the same context that Eileen Power (1979:401) writes that:

The position of women in society has been called the test point by which civilisation of a country or an age may be judged, and although this is in many respects true, the test remains one which it is extraordinarily difficult to apply because of the difficulty of determining what is it that constitutes the position of women. Their position in theory and law is one thing, their practical position in everyday life another. These react upon one another, but they never coincide, and the true position of women in a particular moment is an insidious blend of both.

While Power’s litmus test points to the difficulty of matching rhetoric with reality, it is at the same time realized and conceded that the position of women has predominantly been defined by the dominant group. Both Power (1979:401-433) and Ruether (1987:216-218) show that in antiquity and medieval ages, in Europe, the position of women was determined by the ruling aristocracy and the Church, which was then a dominant force. Both the aristocrats and the church lords however portrayed women as subordinate to men. In deuterio - Pauline writings and medieval Christianity, a virtuous woman had above all to be obedient. The explanation afforded to us by Ruether is that:

The theology of subordination is based on the “male” headship of creation. This notion basically identifies patriarchal social order with the natural or divinely created order. Male headship is thus regarded as rooted in the intrinsic nature of things and willed by God. Any effort to upset this order by giving women autonomy or equal rights would constitute a rebellion against God.... This notion that male headship is the order of creation usually carries with it the hidden or explicit assumption that God is male or at least properly represented by symbols of paternal authority (Sharma, 1987:208).

Thus the legacy of Christianity from antiquity to the Reformation has been the absence of a theology of equivalence (Ruether, 1987:216-218) and the dominance of the ideology of “male headship” as the norm. Both Roman and Canon laws were prefixed on the doctrine of

subordination of women to men. In law, a woman was not legally “a free and lawful person”, and had no share in the public as distinct from private rights and duties, although medieval women played an active and dignified part in industry, albeit the low wages and male exclusiveness (Crump, 1974: 432-433). Therefore gleanings from the history of religion while pointing us to the ubiquitous nature of religion as a signifier of gender, also show that “Religion was invariably male dominated; and that it reinforced female stereotyping and restricted women” (Holden, 1983:4). In *Women's Religious Experience*, Holden (1983:8) points out that men are more prominent in formal religion, while women spiritualise the home, and she argues that although women were at times acknowledged as prophets and visionaries, rarely did they play an important role in religious organisation and leadership. On the contrary:

The visions of women (and men) were carefully regulated and rigidly examined. It is arguable that control over female visionaries was particularly scrupulous, with the uncontrolled female visionary labelled as a witch mad woman (Holden, 1983:1)

A similar sentiment is echoed by Thatcher (1993:1) who argues that patriarchy was found in every society, and that it is certainly older than the Judeo-Christian tradition. She focuses on Christianity and argues that throughout much of Christian history, there has been and there remains:

..... an entrenched set of attitudes which has systematically discriminated against women and infected relationships between men and women, and between men and men. The name of this amalgam is patriarchy... an ideology that brings about exclusion of women from the public sphere by legal, political and economic arrangements which favour men.

However, Neuberger (1983:132) has been more cautious and taken a position that even in such a predominantly patriarchal religion as Judaism, there are ample examples of women who through charisma, sheer strength of their personality or scheming were able to transcend the

“normal” social constraints and Jewish society’s praise of women’s domesticity, gentility, obedience and hard work. Sarah is for instance shown as a woman who had prophetic insight that God would raise descendants from Isaac (Holden, 1983:132). Similarly Deborah was an outstanding prophetess and charismatic leader of Israel during the time of judges . Besides, these examples, however, there were other categories of (i) the sweet, gentle, quiet women like Rachael and Ruth who were nonetheless real people who held their own views, and (ii) the idyllic perfect woman of the proverbs who works hard, is a home-maker and a woman of valour (Crump, 1993:133-143).

The ambivalence of religions towards women is apparent but it was not peculiar to biblical times and Christian antiquity. The situation in sub-Saharan Africa has parallels. Schmidt’s historiographical study of the Shona women (1992) shows that while power and authority was concentrated in the hands of men, women helped to perpetuate the patriarchal values and subordination.

Schmidt is emphatic, and rightly so, that the subordination of the African women did not come with the European capital economy nor with colonialism. Even before the dawn of colonialism, the cultural construction of gender meant that there was no equality between women and men although the colonisation of Africans exacerbated the position of the African women and in a number of significant ways transformed it through formal education. The dominant refrain however remains that of “collaboration between African and European men in regulating African women’s mobility and sexuality..... [through] their use of a distorted version of customary law to achieve these ends” (Schmidt, 1992:12), and that Christian missionary education in spite of its beneficial influence perpetuated a gender ideology that emphasized the domestication of women

and girls. With the coming of capitalist economy, however,:

African men were also anxious to keep women and girls at home under the authority of fathers and husbands. Antagonistic as they may have been to other aspects of colonial rule, African Chiefs, headmen and older men in general welcome the state's efforts to restrict women to rural areas (Schmidt, 1992:2)

Her conclusion is enlightening when she writes that:

Shona society was a highly patriarchal one in which older men controlled most of the valued social resources and positions of authority. While women were of demonstrably lower status than men, a hierarchy among women existed. Age, marital situation, and socio-economic position were important determinants of women. Young wives were answerable to the authority of their sisters-in-law and senior co-wives. Grandmothers, mothers-in-law and older women were freed of some of the disabilities that had plagued their earlier years (Schmidt, 1992:42).

The situation pertaining to Swaziland was not far different from that in Zimbabwe. According to Armstrong (1985:66), a woman in the traditional Swazi society was regarded as "a ward under guardianship". The Swazi society inculcated women's deference to men. Most importantly women were expected to play the vital roles of wife, mother, producers of food and to perform domestic chores. In marriage and family, husband and wife were unequal partners both in customary and civil rites marriage for marital power, unless excluded by antenuptial agreement, resides in the husband as head of the family (Wanda, 1991:72). With respect to access to social and economic resources, the Swazi women experienced inescapable constraints which are rooted in the nature of the Swazi society (Adepoju, 1991:34).

It is in this context that Miles (1991) addresses the question of women who migrated into South Africa to seek work, money and independence. These women's migration and entry into paid employment has been interpreted as a form of protest against traditional patriarchal control and dependence on men, and male-in-laws, who often mistreated women whose husbands were away from home as migrant labourers in the South African mining industry.

Miles' work is very important in identifying three periods in the work experience of the Swazi women. She shows that in the pre-colonial times "women were primarily responsible for the household's subsistence", and that in that period the Swazi homesteads enjoyed relative self-sufficiency (1991:63). Between 1900 and 1930, however, the homesteads' self-sufficiency was undermined by the colonial policy of land alienation and an outbreak of rinderpest which killed most of the cattle. Due to the shortage of male labour (as a result of labour migration), a small number of women went into informal sector, such as beer brewing, to support their families. Finally, after 1930 due to accelerated rural poverty, there was increased women's mobility from the poor, rural areas into urban areas. It was during this period that a substantial number of women migrated to the Rand in South Africa to work as domestic workers for South Africa in spite of its control of race relations offered higher wages than were available in Swaziland.

The study of "The Missing Women", by Miles, is uniquely useful and relevant for it shows that there were Swazi women who challenged and defied their marginalisation in rural areas and broke away from both Swazi traditional and colonial patriarchal control to seek employment and earn economic independence. Besides the protest from the margins of the mainstream of society, historians are now re-reading and uncovering the irruption of history into Swazi women's lives. In Ivone Gebara's words:

the irruption of history into lives of women... [means] the irruption of historic consciousness into the lives of ... women, leading them to the liberation struggle by means of an active participation in different fronts from which they had previously been absent (in King, 1994:53).

It is in this context that the pioneering paper by Kanduza (1995) should be understood. The paper focuses on Labotsibeni Gwamile (c. 1858-1925) and shows how she, in her various roles as Queen mother and regent, used the sheer force of her personality, intelligence, charisma and foresight to manipulate Swazi tradition to her and national advantage, and overcame intricate challenges to “contain power struggle and unite the Swazi nation during the minority of Prince Mona” (Kanduza, 1995:5,8).

These two works by Miles and Kanduza show that there has been a gradual interest in Swazi women’s presence and co-participation in nation-building, both at the margins and centre of society. What is an unknown quantity however remains whether their contribution to nation building has yielded recognition of women as active participants and with equal rights. Neither is the prominent role played by culture and religion discussed ostensibly due to the authors’ other interests, namely migration and women in history. Hence this study which, while drawing on the insights of relevant writings, goes beyond them to explore the interrelationship between religion, culture and gender. In other words, this is an attempt to move beyond “thinking about gender as an essential, immutable property of individuals or as a coherent package of conventional, cultural expectations” to seeing women “challenge, resist and create their own gender strategies” (Thompson, 1993:567).

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Writing an 'Introduction' to *Women in New Religions*, Ursula King (1997:1) opens with these words:

Women have always been the biggest "consumers" of religion, but on the whole have been badly served, disparaged and oppressed by religions themselves. In most organised religions to be born a woman is valued as [sic] punishment, either for misdeeds in a previous life or for the sin of the first woman..

This study while appreciating the hitherto negative impact of religion on gender relations hopes to show that in the context of Swaziland, religion equally had a positive role vis-a-vis gender by showing how some women claimed their dignity and exercised non-patriarchal power through religion and how religion can, in its prophetic function, contribute towards the enhancement and legitimation of women's power. In so doing the study hopes to show a new vision of a society in which religion is a useful handmaiden in the women's search for equal rights and equal consideration. Hence, the liberative value of this work most particularly at this time more than any other time when Southern Africa is abuzz with lofty ideals of non-discrimination, equal opportunities and women's empowerment, a task that would have been easier to accomplish if it could be embedded in the socio-cultural ethos of the communities. Therefore the significance of the study lies in its vision of a new epistemological possibility of a koinonia in which religion plays a liberating role. At the same time, it is but a modest contribution to the genre of literature on religion and gender.

1.8 LIMITATIONS

Gender is such a vast area that it cannot be adequately covered in any one study. This study is therefore limited in scope to the exploration of the role of culture and religion in legitimisation of gender roles and at the same time its potential prophetic role of liberating men and women from their engendered stereotypes and prejudices. Relevant examples will be drawn from the family, Swazi religious tradition, and ritual. With reference to women's organising and economic empowerment only four organisations, namely Lutsango lwaka Ngwane, the Women's Resource Centre, the Council of Swaziland Churches and Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse are discussed. This kind of focus inevitably means that a number of aspects are not covered for they merit full-fledged studies in their own right.

Lastly, it is common practice nowadays to indicate one's positionality in as far as it bears on the study. This means that as a male researcher I enter dialogue with human experience, but my interpretation might at times be influenced by androcentric lenses. As much as is humanly possible, the researcher assumes the relational nature of gender and will focus as much as possible on women's experiences and meaning in the total context of the Swazi cultural setting. Objective interpretation, if there is such a thing, will remain my guide.

1.9 DEFINITION OF TERMS

Three basic concepts, namely religion, gender and equality, are widely used in this study and should be clarified. Let us begin with religion. Although there is no unanimity on what religion is, it is generally held that it is a belief system. Consequently Barnhart (Cox, 1992:10) defines religion as a "belief in the supernatural". While this theistic definition is attractive because

of its preciseness, it is narrow and exclusive to the extent that it would exclude such religious traditions as Buddhism which does not believe in a supreme being outside human beings that regulates them. The definition also restricts the subject matter of religion to a psychological attitude. To overcome the narrow parameters set by Barnhart's definition, it is pertinent to refer to the etymological origins of the word. The word religion comes from the Latin *religare* which means "to bind". It refers to a system of beliefs, values, practices and institutions that bind people together. It thereby creates a bond uniting those who share it closely into a fellowship or community. To the believers, religion is therefore a way of life and basis of the meaning of life. It is in this context that Ian Markham (1996:6) posits that:

Religion is a way of life (one which embraces a total world view, certain ethical demands, and certain social practices).

Religion is therefore a root value that informs and moulds people's lives. It is all pervasive (Mbiti, 1992:3) and influences all aspects of life, including gender. To distinguish it from other human political orientations and ideologies, Cox (1992:15) has suggested a broad definition in which "Religion is a varied, symbolic expression of that which people... appropriately respond to as being of unrestricted value to them". Due to the cultural and historical evolution of religion, across the passage of time, it will also be understood as a cumulative tradition, which is experiential. Individuals and communities relate to it and live by its precepts.

The other concept is that of gender. In this study, gender is used to mean the social construction of the masculine and feminine roles and character traits. It is recognised that while sex is a biological fact, gender is cultural. This distinction is important because the cultural definition of maleness and femaleness is far from being natural; on the contrary, they are culturally determined for gender is division of society into men and women according to social and

institutional requirements, and includes social attributions, characteristics, roles and expectations. Nonetheless, the differences and similarities between men and women are experienced in a variety of contexts and they impact on a person's position and status. It is the culture of a society which exerts most influence on the creation of the masculine and feminine behaviour.

Finally, there is the concept of equality. The Oxford English Dictionary (Volume 5, 1989:347) gives at least three definitions of "equality", namely:

1. The conditions of having equal dignity, rank or privileges with others;
2. The condition of being equal in power, ability, achievement or excellence; and
3. Fairness, impartiality and equity.

However, in fact human beings are not equal in dignity, privileges, power, ability and excellence. Indeed human beings are not clones. In most social organisations, however perfect, some inequalities do exist and some are natural yet no egalitarian society can have an easy conscience about inequalities within it. There is a sentiment, however inchoate, that no matter how unequal people may be in their abilities, yet in a deeper sense all human beings are equal. Equality therefore becomes a principle and practice which ensures same opportunities, expectations and support for all.

According to Felix Oppenheim (1968:102), the concept of equality refers sometimes to "certain properties which men hold to have in common but more often the treatment which men either receive or ought to receive". In spite of the sex bias in Oppenheim's definition, it points to an important idea that human beings share some qualities, including among other things the soul, and that they should therefore be given corresponding rights. In the Lockean liberal

tradition, “men are by nature equal”. Despite the androcentrism of the liberal expression, the Lockean principle implies that human individuals have to be treated equally. There should be equal shares for all. Every body should count as one, nobody more than one, in the allocation of benefits. However, while equality is a social philosophy that was clearly demonstrated, for instance in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, equality has been consistently denied to “half the human race (women)” (Kramarae & Treichler, 1985:40). Nonetheless, the deviation from the norm of equality, notwithstanding:

the language of equal rights ... is associated with the feminism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which exploited the logic of liberal philosophy to argue for extension to women of rights claimed of all individuals, but which defacto and even explicitly excluded women and other categories of persons (Andermahr, et al, 1997:78).

Since then the feminist battle has taken the form of the struggle for equal rights which have been advanced in such areas as access to employment, equal pay, civil and political liberties and representation, self-determination, and rights to bodily integrity, including the right to reproductive health. However, while the liberal wave of feminism advocated equality and focused on winning legal, civil and political rights for women, the search for gender equality in Swaziland goes on along plural lines. The women have struggled for participation in the making of history and at times defied the subjective limitations imposed upon them in the name of irreducible differences. There is however tension between the Swazi women’s fight for equality and the assertion of sexual differences. Their search for equality has not been a search for sameness with men; rather it has been a search that accepts that “equality is not elimination of difference, and that difference does not preclude equality” (Andermahr, et al, 1997:81).

Thus, the concept of equality plays a variety of roles and has a number of facets, namely

equal treatment, fundamental equality, and social equality. While there is no fine line that separates the three facets, this study situates in the fundamental equality for in it we find the ideas that all human beings are of equal worth, have equal fundamental rights, and should be given equal respect and consideration. Therefore even if there was no way in which all human beings were as a matter of fact equal, there are some inalienable rights which make people equal. Equality is used to convey an ethical judgement that while people profoundly differ in capacity and character, they are nonetheless equally entitled to respect and consideration. It is these considerations that influence and inform the present study which while respecting the gender differences nonetheless argues for equal shares for all, men and women, without undue discrimination on basis of gender.

While equality, as defined above, may be achieved by overcoming the asymmetry of power relations, there are some indicators which are useful in trying to conceptualise it. Hashemi, Schuler and Riley (1996:638) have argued for eight indicators, namely “mobility, economic security, ability to make small purchases, ability to make large purchases, involvement in major household decisions, relative freedom from domination within the family, political and legal awareness, and involving in political campaigns and protests”. These factors combine to challenge conventional, socio-cultural norms that prescribe a subordinate position to women in a number of situations. Briefly, a word about the indicators. Mobility means that a woman is free to go outside, freely, and without the need for the husband’s permission. Similarly, it means that she enjoys relative freedom from the family in the control of her own resources, like land, livestock and her own labour. At the same time, a woman has economic security if she enjoys ownership of land and other economic resources which give her economic autonomy from the husband. Due to her economic standing, she is able to contribute to the family income. Often times, she may

be the breadwinner, and that brings her respect and may increase her status and gives her bargaining power in the family.

Economic security is often also reflected in the woman's ability to make small or large purchases of goods, either for herself, the family or both, without having to seek the husband's help. The economic base is also hoped to increase her involvement in making major decisions, either individually or jointly with the husband. Due to her relative autonomy, she is empowered in making decisions on taking control over her reproductive function and her labour. The final set of indicators are the political and legal awareness, and participation in the political activities. It is important that women should have knowledge of laws that impact on the family, inheritance, and property and be able to participate in the political process through exercising the right to vote, in social advocacy and campaigns, and in raising consciousness against domestic violence, rape and child-abuse. According to Hashemi, et. al (1996:650), "women's empowerment can only be achieved by increasing women's consciousness about gender and class relations, and organising them to engage in grassroots struggles for women's rights". The overall measure of equality is their equal access to opportunities and productive resources, and thereby to challenge the existent power relations. The goal of the search for gender equality should be the transformation of women's lives by "increasing women's mobility, their ability to make purchases and major household decisions, their ownership of productive assets, their legal and political awareness, and participation in public campaigns and protests" (Ibid:650). In other words, the search for equality means that women should be able to negotiate gendered barriers, to increase control of their own lives and to improve their relative positions in society.

1.10 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

This work is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the problem under study. Chapter 2 discusses the social, historical and cultural background in which gender is constructed, lived and contested. Chapter 3 provides a glimpse of women's position and role in Swazi religion and in particular shows the depiction of women in Swazi mythology and their participation in healing and mediumship. Chapter 4 analyses the sources of gender inequality as perceived by a broad spectrum of women. Chapter 5 explores previous attempts in women's search for equality during the pre-colonial and colonial eras. Chapter 6 extends the discussion to present times. It focuses on four NGOs to illustrate the contemporary search in the specific areas of economic empowerment, consciousness raising, and social advocacy. Building on what is adduced, Chapter 7 discusses change and continuity in Swazi women's search for equality, with special attention to the ambivalent role of religion in the preservation and deconstruction of cultural ideology. Chapter 8 is the conclusion.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

To appreciate women's status and condition, and the nature of their struggle, it is therefore essential that we understand the social and cultural context in which Swazi women contest gender relations and struggle against ideology as an instrument of power. This background affords us an opportunity to appreciate women's progress and the constraints encountered against the historical and cultural milieu within which gender is constructed and contested. In the Swazi social setting, it is a context characterised by a network of social relationships, cultural values and specific cultural attitudes, deeply entrenched social practices and gaps in social policy (Somjee, 1989: ix).

Our key to the social and cultural context is the family, and the position of women within it. The basic assumption here is that the family is the basic unit of social organisation, an agent of social and cultural reproduction of appropriate gender roles, and that it is within the family that women are most vulnerable. It is within the family that social construction of "womanhood" is engineered and perpetuated, a process in which women become unwilling partners for no woman has been willing to critique culture. However, the family operates within a cultural context; hence the contents of this chapter.

2.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The establishment of the Swazi kingdom goes back to the early eighteenth century. It was during the Mfecane ('time of crushing') era when new nations were forged out of old societies uprooted during the Zulu wars of expansion (Booth, 1983:8). The kingdom that came to be called Swaziland was founded by the Dlamini clan who had migrated from the present day Mozambique. The Dlamini was a Nguni clan and was led by leaders like Ngwane who became the first king of what was then KaNgwane, and later his grandson (Sobhuza I), who is popularly known as Somhlolo. The Dlamini group conquered and incorporated some of the autonomous clans that previously lived in the land. These autonomous clans were mainly of the Sotho and Zulu origins (Ndlovu, 1993:5), and are referred to as *Emakhandzambili* (those found ahead). Through conquest and integration, there evolved in Swaziland a distinct political system that was characterised by a dual monarchy, in which the King and his mother rule together.

However, as Hilda Kuper (1980:13) has shown, the idea of dual monarchy was not a result of the king's benevolence. On the contrary, it was the fruition of the Queen mother's innovation. It was during the wars of conquest, which were executed with ruthlessness by Ngwane's successors (Ndvungunya and Sobhuza I) that Sobhuza's mother, Somnjalose of the Simelane clan, intervened to restrain her son from the excesses of plundering and through her intervention "won for the mother of the Dlamini ruler a special place in ritual and government" (Kuper, 1980:13). Hence, the origins of the institutional role of the Queen mother and dual monarchy.

Under King Mswati II (1839-1865), the kingdom was consolidated and firmly established. One of the greatest Swazi warrior kings, Mswati consolidated what kings before him had conquered and added more territory. More clans were incorporated through persuasion and coercion. And it was during Mswati's reign that social differentiation crystallised into two main classes, the aristocrats and commoners, and this social distinction was maintained largely through centralised distribution of land, tribute labour, arranged marriages, and the claim of ritual supremacy (Bonner, 1980:89-91).

These social achievements provided an enhanced basis for royal authority. As Booth (1983:10) puts it:

Mswati achieved this basis by recasting the Swazi society and by instituting new measures that both practically and ritually centralised his authority and strengthened the Dlamini legitimacy.

Mswati's reign therefore saw the most pronounced changes in Swazi class formation and use of class as a basis for reproduction of the monarchy.

Broadly speaking the Swazi, according to the ideology of the dominant group, fall into three categories. There are those who claim to be the true Swazi (*Bamdzabuko*), those found ahead (*Emkhandzambili*) and those who came later (*Abafik'emuva*). The true Swazi are paradoxically not the original inhabitants of the land but the Dlamini conquerors, the followers of Ngwane, who settled temporarily at Eshiselweni (literally meaning 'the burning place' which refers to their method of forceful incorporation). This group included thirty-one clans. The dominant clans in this group being the Dlamini, Magongo, Ginindza and Mabuza, who according to various interpretations were one clan that eventually split for strategic reasons. The other clan that is politically significant is the Mamba clan, which is often referred to as "a kingdom within

a kingdom” (M. Mamba: Oral Interview, 12 February, 1996) and is the only clan, besides the Dlamini royal clan, that is allowed to perform their own *Incwala* (ritual of kingship). Chief Maja of the Mamba clan is therefore addressed as *Inkhosi* (meaning ‘king’) and saluted with “Bayethe”, an honour only reserved for a king. There is a mythical belief that the Mamba clan was denied kingship through a secret plan abetted by elders who had required both the Dlamini and Mamba families to kill and skin a cow with bare hands. Secretly, however, the Dlamini group was given a knife to speed up the slaughter and were predictably the first (M. Mamba, Oral Interview, Kwaluseni, 12 February 1996). So they became the ruling house. However mythological the explanation, it shows the significance of the Mamba clan and yet at the same time it legitimates the Dlamini dynasty of rulers. Apart from the Mamba’s right to celebrate their own *Incwala*, due to their unique social standing, Chief Maja (*The Times of Swaziland: 21 April 1995*) is on record to have recently demanded:

security as powerful as that of the king because in terms of customary law and tradition, he is second in command to the Ngwenyama, King Mswati III.

Those found ahead (*Emakhandzambili*) include the Gama, Magagula, Maziya, Maseko, Mnisi, Maphosa, Shabalala, Gwebu, Shabangu and Kubonye clans. Due to their lack of military organisation and strength to resist the Dlamini rulers, they accepted incorporation and thereby retained their identity, and paid tribute to the Dlamini feudal lords (Kuper, 1980:13). In return they were promised the benefit of having their own hereditary chiefs as long as they were loyal to the Dlamini house. As H. Kuper (Ibid:15) puts it:

The Dlamini emphasised the sanctity and power of chieftainship, and as long as a chief or his heir survived, the Dlamini rulers acknowledged him as the foundation on which the conquered group could be built.

Those that resisted peaceful incorporation were plundered and defeated. Their “men were slain and the women and children were assimilated by marriage and adoption” (Kuper, 1980:14).

The third group are “those who came later” (*Ebafik’Emuva*), and include thirty-five clans of the Sotho, Nguni and Tonga origins. Such clans as the Nkambule, Hlatshwayo, Dladla, Masuku, Nxumalo and Vilakati belong to this group. It is the Nguni stock however who are the largest, with no less than twenty-three clans. Kuper describes this group as *tinkhondzi* (lieges) or vassals.

This kind of categorisation of the Swazi, on basis of when they entered the country or the place (in or outside the kingdom) at its formation, only shows the emergence of the Dlamini as the ruling and dominant group with all the privileges and power. In course of time, the ideology of the dominant clan seems to have been accepted as the dominant ideology and the Dlamini became the divine rulers of the country, with extensive control over national ritual and resources. They had, and still have, special ritual duties to perform ostensibly to enhance the power of the ruling household.

A similar social stratification has obtained at production relational levels leading to class-foundation. As H.S. Simelane (1992:28) explains:

The highest strata of this class was the royal family, made up of the King, Queen mother, their children, and the descendants of various past Swazi kings. The royal family is not directly involved in the process of production, but exists largely through expropriation of surplus from the peasantry in form of material tribute and labour... Below the royal family is found all Chiefs, their *indvunas* and the other functionaries. Presently there are over 200 chiefs heading different constituencies. Although chiefs are hereditary traditional administrators, they are formally appointed by the King. Chiefs are enforcers of the will of the monarchy in rural areas; they are the extension of the authority of the King and, therefore,

legitimatised their presence through upholding royal traditions and values.

Quite apart from these classes, and clans, there is a social, political power structure in which the Dlamini play the leading role. At the head of the political hierarchy is the Ngwenyama, the King, who is the official head of state. He is the “symbol of corporate unity of the Swazi” (Marwick, 1966:5). The nation revolves around him.

He controlled the army, was the supreme judge, disbursed wealth, and possessed ritual. All officials were dependent on him for their positions: princes, chiefs and councillors emphasised his power. At the same time, they were in position to stop him from abusing his privileges. His mother in particular acted as a check, and on occasions, as leader of the opposition (Hilda Kuper 1980:17).

The king inherits his position, a position of unique privilege and authority, for he represents the line of the nation's patriarchs, the past kings, who are remembered in the national ritual as spiritual ancestors and guardians. Not only is the king therefore a link to the past, he is also the spiritual link, the priest and mediator between the people and the national ancestors. His significance in ritual hierarchy is illustrated in the annual festival of *Incwala* in which he is strengthened, and he together with the Queen Mother make petition and offering to the nation's ancestors, and 'make' rain that fertilises the land. In a symbolic way, not only does the monarchy control land, it also controls its fertility through rain-making; hence the centralisation of land and national ritual.

It is common to hear people say that the King and Queen Mother are twin-rulers of the kingdom. In practice however, the King remains *primus inter pares*, the first among equals. Thus the Queen Mother becomes the second highest person in the land. She is most importantly regarded as the mother of the nation and the custodian of the sacred, ritual objects. She receives

preferential treatment above the others, and “speaks to the dead in the shrine hut of the capital and provides beer for libation” (Kuper, 1980:55). However, there is clear spatial separation of spheres: the King’s and Queen mother’s villages - are distinct. Lobamba is the national capital, the Queen mother’s village and focus of national ritual celebrations, including two main culturo-religious events, namely the *Incwala* and the Reed Dance (*Umhlanga*). It is distinct from the King’s modern, multi-storeyed palace at Lozitha. Ideally, each king is supposed to establish his own village and King Mswati III has a palace in Mbabane, the administrative capital, but this is far from the Queen mother’s village at Lobamba, where there is also the parliament and House of Senate. It is therefore for convenience that the present King chose Lozitha as his village due to its proximity to Lobamba and its centrality as opposed to Mbabane which is away from the country’s centre, near the border with the Republic of South Africa.

Next to the Ngwenyama, the King, comes the Queen Mother, the Ndlovukati (She-elephant). She is the mother of the King and the nation; her son is the child of the people. The concept of dual monarchy means that they both enjoy unique positions and privileges and are regarded, at least at the present, as the only two persons in the Kingdom that are above law. They have political and social power sanctioned by law, ritual and tradition, and are vested with unique authority. They are the focus of national existence and are, in varying degrees, active in national events. They are the highest court of appeal in the land as the practice of *Kwembula ingubo* (to hide in his/her majesty’s blanket) illustrates. For instance, a person can escape the King’s sentence by fleeing to the Queen Mother. At family level, the grandmother’s hut is also a place of refuge.

It is however the King who summons the nation to national meetings (*libandla*), which every adult male Swazi is free to attend; both of them may allocate land, disburse wealth, preside over important national events, and take precedence in ritual (Kuper, 1980:55). Until the reign of Bhunu, the monarchy exercised absolute power, including the power of life and death over his subjects but things have since then changed due to the introduction of British overrule and the residency of the British Commissioner, in 1907. The Commissioner assumed the powers of appellate in the land, and decisions of the Swazi national leaders and courts were subordinate to him. Thus, a new layer, in form of colonial administration, tempered the authority of the Swazi monarchy to the extent that the King became a Paramount Chief (Genge, 1999:244,249). However, through the King's Proclamation in 1973, the monarchy has since then regained the traditional absolute power, and can banish persons considered dangerous to the state into exile. Even Chiefs can expel unwanted subjects, usually men, who then have to look for refuge in another chiefdom, a rather common form of punishment for any form of dissidence. Thus, in the modern nation-state, the King still holds power, including the prerogative of mercy in crucial cases (including capital punishment), and has increasingly been appealed to in several disputes, between labour unions and government, students and university administration, chief and chief, as final arbiter. In brief, the powers and functions of the monarchy are extensive and all pervasive in the lives of the people. Once the King speaks, the matter is closed for his is "the mouth that never lies".

Next to the King and Queen mother, in a descending order, are the princes and princesses. The *Bantfwabenkosi* (children of the King). They are the aristocrats who derive their status through the hereditary line of kings. They possess royal blood, and are accorded respect in accordance with their proximity to the centre, the ruling line. The King under normal

circumstances relies on the support of his close relatives, especially the uncles, half-brothers and senior princes and princesses. The senior princes, in effect, form part of the King's counsellors, and mentors. In contrast, commoners are appointed to the King's council mostly on basis of their distinction in their disciplines and often by proximity to one of the royal family members.

The most common practice has been to give princes power over local administrative units, including chieftaincies. Sons of the most senior queens receive principalities as their birth-right (Kuper, 1980:57), and also to perpetuate the Dlamini political and economic control of the country. For instance, Kuper noted that in 1980, of the 169 chiefstainships, the Dlamini occupied 75. Chieftainships are hereditary, and so pass from father to son; thus keeping the traditional political and civil power within the Dlamini royal household. Nonetheless, we have already noted that clans that were formed ahead and were peacefully incorporated still retain their own line of chiefs. When there are disputes over chieftaincy, and there have been several cases in the 1990s, the rival claimants often appeal to and send deputations to the King for the final decision. For instance, in 1992, there was a dispute over Ko-Ntshingila chieftaincy, in Shiselweni district. Because the brothers were still minors, Gelani Zwane (laSimelane) became the only female chief in the country, and immediately there were male-inspired challenges to her authority which led to the death of five of her subjects. To date, she still holds the fort and there has been no decisive solution to the rivalry due to the slow wheels of the decision-making process (*The Times of Swaziland*: 18 July 1993).

Besides the princes and chiefs, there are the *tinsila* (peacemakers) who mediate in disputes with the authorisation of the King. They try to promote peace and harmony between conflicting sections of society, and their office goes back to King Sobhuza I, although during his time they

were mainly associated with the annual ritual of kingship, *Incwala*. The monarchy also counts on the services of *tindvuna* (councillors) of the royal villages, who are in essence the King's representatives in those areas for royal villages are spread all over the country. As a rule *Indvuna ye tinkundla* (the Governor of the royal court at Ludzidzini) is chosen from a clan other than that of the Dlamini.

In addition to these differentiated classes of political elite, the King has a royal council, which includes first of all the King himself and the Queen Mother. The council serves the purpose of being advisors. It is like a family council whose aim is to ensure smooth and effective governance of the nation. Finally, there is the *Libandla* (the national parliament). *Libandla* includes all chiefs, leading counsellors, princes, cabinet ministers, headmen, and any Swazi adult male who wishes to attend. Every adult male Swazi is potentially a member of the *Libandla*. In recent times, King Mswati III has called the nation to the Ludzidzini kraal, the traditional seat of power to make important announcements of national magnitude, like the appointment of a Prime Minister (which seems to be always to the *libandla* rather than to parliament and Senate) or to announce national initiatives on issues like economic policies and more recently the Constitutional Reform. Usually the King announces the committee to *vusela* the country gathering views. *Vusela* literally means "to visit", and so the committee members go around the country (on the king's behalf) to listen to the people. Occasionally, the *libandla* becomes a national parliament where adult male Swazi are given the opportunity to speak freely on matters of national interest, although previous experience suggests that their views do not have to be included in the final report. Moreover, *who* speaks at *libandla* can always be influenced by the presiding elder or prince, as was the case in 1996 when a young prince (King Mswati III's son), 5 years old was chosen to speak against multi-party politics while adults with known political views were

deliberately not invited to contribute to the debate although they were present.

Parallel to the traditional social organisation, and under the King, the Queen Mother, and the cabinet is the civil service. Appointment into the civil service is based on educational merit. There is no position that is a monopoly of any clan, religion, race or gender. As a result, it is commoners who predominate the highly coveted positions in the service. It is through the civil service that a balance is struck between the Dlamini aristocracy and members of other clans who are fairly present in all government departments.

2.2 COLONIAL ERA

Circumstances surrounding the coming of white settlers, Christian missionaries and colonial administrators greatly differed. The Boers had long coveted the “lush Swazi pastures...[but] had been kept in check by their respect for Mswati’s armies” (Booth, 1983:11). They were however quick to take advantage of the weak leaders that succeeded him. Nonetheless, it would be hasty to give an impression that Mswati’s reign had been trouble-free for Mswati had ceded to the Transvaal Boers in 1845:

a large piece of territory in the south-west, inhabited by Vassal Sotho and astride the historic invasion route of the Zulus... Ten years later, another large area had been ceded to the Lydenburg Republic to the north-west, and in 1864 Mswati’s regiments had assisted Boers in suppressing some of the Lydenburg peoples (Booth, 1983:11-12).

Nonetheless, it was after Mswati’s reign that the Boers made attempts to get involved in the Swazi domestic politics and manipulate events to their own advantage. To compound the situation, the Swazi got caught in the Anglo-Boer strategic rivalry. The British did not want to see the extension of Transvaal influence in the region, yet they did not want to confront the Boers.

One way out of the impasse was to:

involve the Swazi, both militarily and diplomatically, in their solution. ...In November, 1879, the British enlisted Swazi assistance in a revived campaign against Sekhukhune, on the assurance of British protection forever against the Transvaal threat to their independence (Booth, 1983:8).

King Mbandzeni reluctantly agreed to bolster the British attack on the Pedi. His regiments fought bravely and, in spite of the casualties, won the encounter. True to their word, the British included in the Pretoria Convention, in 1881, a clause recognising Swaziland's independence within the delineated borders, a provision that was re-stated in the London Convention of 1884 (Matsebula, 1972:56).

However the discovery of minerals in Swaziland re-awakened Boer interest. The Boer concessionaires came to Swaziland in their hundreds, and so did the British prospectors. The net result of this European invasion was that they bargained for and obtained licences and monopoly of Swazi industry, agriculture, commerce, insurance, land and minerals. As Booth (1983:14) noted:

In the history of a continent where concessioning was a dominant theme in the colonial era, the case of Swaziland was without parallel. The beguiled King and his council in the end signed away the entire country and all authority over future development.

King Mbandzeni, at the time, signed concessions not because of his weak position but his banality and naivety (Simelane, 1992:22). Consequently, the country's "means of production were thereby bargained away, and with them the control of its people over their own destiny" (Booth, 1983:14). It is significant to note at this stage that after the death of Mbandzeni, and in the minority years of Bhunu (1890-1894) and later Sobhuza II (1899-1921), there stood a woman who worked hard to reverse the trend of "eating up of the Swazi land". As the Queen mother,

and later Queen Regent, Labotsibeni Gwamile sought to reverse what had been done. She refused to sign the 1894 Convention which made Swaziland a political dependency of the Transvaal (Booth, 1983:16). Nonetheless, the British implemented the laws of Transvaal in Swaziland without the prerequisite of Swazi royal consent. Contrary to the Swazi perception of the British as deliverers, the Swazi royalty found themselves subordinate to the Resident Commissioner from 1907 up to the time of political independence in 1968. As Booth (1983:20) observes:

The traditional Swazi government, the district chiefs and the Queen regent and the council at Lobamba, were kept in place but were made conspicuously subordinate to the British administration.

Moreover by the establishment of the British protection (although the country was never declared a British protectorate), the question of land moved out of the domain of Swazi authority. Hence, the 1907 Resident Commissioner's partition proclamation (Kuper, 1980:43) which awarded two-thirds of the land to white settlers or simply left it undesignated, while one-third was reserved land for the Swazi. The Queen Regent and chiefs were put on salary, and the colonial administration forbade the use of the title king in reference to the young Sobhuza (Booth, 1983:20). Thus, by the might of the colonial overrule, the European settlers and concessionaires had by July 1914 become legally landlords, while the Swazi who lived on what was designated as white-owned land became squatters in their own country. The colonial administration was content with expropriation of Swazi land and reducing the indigenous population to employees on white farmers' land. In the words of the Resident Commissioner, in 1908, "I want many of the Swazi to stay on the farmers' land and work for them" (Booth, 1983:21).

The one-third of the land allotted to the Swazi was, not unexpectedly, poor land on steep slopes and often untillable, while most of the land given to the white settlers was ideal for crops and ranch farming. In spite of Gwamile's protestations and sending a deputation to London, in 1907, to further her protest against what she correctly perceived as relegation and marginalisation of the Swazi by the Boer concessionaries, white settlers and the colonial élité, her appeal fell on deaf ears of a determined colonial bureaucracy. Instead, the Colonial Office secretary, Alfred Milner, defended white settlement not only as important but that it was bound to grow (Booth, 1983:24). As H.S Simelane (1992:22) rightly observes, the colonial land policy was geared towards satisfying Europeans' desire for land accumulation, with very little political will on part of the state to accommodate the Swazi needs for land. Thwarted by the colonial land alienation policy, Gwamile sought to reverse the events by urging young men to go and work in the gold mines in South Africa and contribute part of their earnings to a royal fund whose main purpose was to repurchase the land. Thus, Swaziland found herself entangled in a web of economic transformation of Southern Africa, which Sir Alfred Milner talked of as "a European reserve based on a tightly controlled African labour force" (Booth, 1983:19).

In this social transformation, we find an emergence of yet another social class whose membership was predominantly determined by the colour of their skin, which in turn entitled them to large tracts of arable land that had been expropriated from the Swazi. These were mainly commercial farmers, on whose land the Swazi lived as tenants and workers, and they were owners of capital. Their social, economic and political influence was phenomenal. They had their own European Advisory Council, established in 1921, whose main goal was to protect the interests of white settlers. The council lobbied the colonial administration often successfully. For instance, they were able to obtain from L. S. Amery, Colonial Secretary (1924-1929), "loan guarantees of

up to £128,500 for credit to settlers, capital development and administration” (Booth, 1983:26). This new class of settlers had their own legal system over and above the traditional courts, and perceived themselves as a class higher and above royalty since they were landowners who were held in esteem by Swazi tenants and were closer to the colonial administration, the new locus of power. In a way the presence of white settlers was the beginning of divided loyalty; the tenants paid respect and loyalty to their immediate landlords, on whose land they were squatters, while those Swazi living on the land reserved for the native population owed their allegiance to chiefs and the king.

Like Gwamile, when Sobhuza II was enthroned as king, he too pursued the question of land, by leading a deputation to London in 1923, which delegation was however rebuffed by the Colonial Office. The King even engaged the services of a lawyer, Dr. Pixley ka Izaka Seme, to pursue the matter in Swazi court. The substance of the legal suit was “to reverse the ejection of some of his subjects from lands covered by unallotted lands concession” (Booth, 1983:30). When the court dismissed the case, an appeal was made to the Privy Council in London but the leave to appeal was denied.

However, the large number of Swazi in, and overstocking of, the so-called “Native Areas” became so serious that, in 1941, Sobhuza II was left with no option but to petition the British monarch for redress. Due to the pressure of the second World War, the Colonial Office was more conciliatory. Funds were earmarked for repurchasing some of the European held land, which together with the Crown Land were to be reserved for the Swazi. At independence in 1968, the Crown Land (including land that had been repurchased from some concessionaries) became the Swazi Nation Land and is under control of the King who holds it in trust, on behalf of the Swazi

nation.

After the second World War, there was a large capital influx into the country and development by foreign companies. Among these was a South African group of companies which, with the help of British financing, opened up the Usuthu forest in 1947. The Colonial Development Corporation, in 1950, funded the irrigation projects in the middle and low veld which produced citrus fruit and cane sugar. Sugar soon became the main export, and there was also some manufacturing and food processing at Matsapha. Thus, the post-war period saw Swaziland on the way to industrialisation and development of infrastructure. The period also saw the consolidation of white settler control of commerce and industry, and change in national politics. The British colonial office thought it expedient to maintain Swaziland's autonomy outside the Union of South Africa. Instead, the colonial administration promoted the "power of the Swazi monarchy to act as its agent in the perpetuation of indirect rule" (Booth, 1983:32). Nonetheless as King Sobhuza II grew in age and stature, he became more and more shrewd, cunning and diplomatically astute enough to manipulate the changed circumstances to enhance his position. Consequently, the Swazi monarchy was stronger than the monarchies of Lesotho and Botswana by the time of political independence. The King regained his political authority to initiate and control local administration, and make and enforce laws on the Swazi, which led Booth (1983:33) to conclude that:

It is fair to say that the power over the traditional sector enjoyed by Sobhuza upon approaching independence was in every important way greater than that held by his father... That power, in turn, would lead to the securing of royal dominance over the political economy during the 1960s and 1970s, an outcome that had been by no means predestined. Control over the traditional society was especially important because in Swaziland, traditional institutions and customs play such powerful roles in the regulation and conduct of daily life.

The situation remains more or less the same at present, under Sobhuza's son and successor, King Mswati III.

To conclude this section, it is pertinent to state the salient points. First, the founding of the kingdom of Swaziland goes back to the eighteenth century when various clans were moulded and integrated into a unified political entity either through conquest or a combination of coercion and persuasion, by what became the Dlamini ruling house. Second, the process of the political making of Swaziland was long and it gave rise to social differentiation of the people into commoners and royalty. The commoners gave loyalty, tribute and obedience to the ruling elite, who in turn were to protect their subjects. In this social set-up, the Dlamini royal household exerted political power and influence, and had absolute control of the land, and access to it, until the colonial era which was characterised by the influx of white settlers, colonial administrators and missionaries, who for all intent and purposes formed a class of their own, a new layer of social stratification over and above the traditional Swazi differentiation of commoners and rulers.

Third, during the colonial era, the privileges that were previously invested in the monarch were progressively denuded and maimed by the colonial state élité, who together with the white settlers became a distinct privileged group with unlimited access to arable land and economic resources. The Ngwenyama was reduced to a paramount chief since there could only be one King and that king was in England. Nonetheless, the presence of the settler population and contact with modern farming and capital economy meant inevitable changes in society. One thing that hardly changed was the social reproduction of gender roles in a system permeated with sexual division of labour and gender inequality. It is to this process of social engineering that we turn in the following section.

2.3 CULTURE

Our ideas, values, attitudes and acts, even our emotions are cultural products, which products are manufactured out of tendencies, capacities, and dispositions with which we were born but nonetheless manufactured (Geertz, 1973:50). It is therefore the social context which gives meaning to gender relations for it provides the framework within which women contest, accommodate and negotiate relationships with men (Haj, 1992:761-778). Culture constitutes the semiotic web which, though spun by the human society, is nonetheless significant in the definition and regulation of gender relations and differences for cultural patterns give form, order and direction to our lives. As Geertz (1973:52) put it "...the cultural patterns are not general but specific-...about what men and women are like, how spouses should treat one another or should properly [sic] marry whom".

Although there is no unanimity of what culture *is*, it is "an acted document" and "a context" (Geertz, 1973:14), because culture is a product of human creation which nonetheless in turn regulates and sustains human society. Undirected by cultural patterns, human behaviour would almost be ungovernable, shapeless and chaotic. Culture is therefore a total way of life. In the words of Clyde Kluckhohn (1952:181):

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts: the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand be considered as products of action, [and] on the other hand, as conditioning elements of further action.

Thus while culture is not power, it is a powerful mechanism for normative regulation of behaviour and at the same time a technique for adjusting to the world around us. It consists of the accumulated fund of significant symbols for:

human beings are incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture... Man's great capacity for learning, his plasticity, has often been remarked but what is even more critical is his dependence upon a certain sort of learning: the attainment of concepts, the apprehension and application of specific systems of symbolic meaning (Geertz, 1973:49).

It follows from the quotations above that culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols and inherited conceptions, which includes moral values, codes of manners, dress, language, rituals, norms of behaviour and a system of beliefs. The various facets of culture constitute what Geertz calls instructions encoded in flow charts and blue prints, hunting lore, moral system and aesthetic judgements: conceptual structures moulding formless talents. Or in Kluckhohnian terminology, culture is the social legacy the individual acquires from his or her group. Some of this social legacy no doubt is historically derived, while other aspects of it may have no concrete historical origins and at most are mythological in origin, but nonetheless accepted without question. That these observations hold true with respect to Swazi culture will be evident as we discuss the annual ceremonies of *Incwala* (ritual of kingship), the *Umhlanga* (Reed Dance) and the traditional religious beliefs most especially the male and female in the Swazi spiritual hierarchy. Notwithstanding the mythical origins, however:

Most Swazi tend to accept or submit to customs and traditions without question... To most of them, culture and customs represent the accumulated wisdom of their forefathers. They set decent and acceptable standards of human behaviour in society (V.M. Simelane, 1990:1).

Culture is therefore important because it sets goals and at the same time acts as a guideline for members. Hence, the idea of culture as a blue-print. It sets criteria and parameters, whether explicit or implicit, rational or non-rational, in terms of which choices are made. In the Swazi society, acquisition of social values, norms, codes, knowledge and beliefs, is a lifelong process but it is a process that begins very early in life, is gradual and constant effort is made to inculcate these values both informally and formally. *Buntfu* (wholeness/humanness) was not assumed to be a gift from God:

It was learnt, acquired, but above all, granted to an individual by others because of demonstrated attributes and behaviour towards others. *Umuntfu ngumuntfu ngebantfu* (Simelane, V.M, 1990:2).

At the heart of Swazi culture lies the social goal, call it the hidden curriculum, of moulding the individual into a *whole* person, with socially acceptable conduct, disposition and outlook to life. One of the factors that comes into play in the moulding of the individual and in reinforcing the social values upon the individual was religion, for it permeates all aspects of life, and there is no distinction between the sacred and secular. Rather, the sacred and the non-sacred interpenetrate in varying degrees at all points of existence (Kasenene.P, 1993:26) to such an extent that religion lies embedded in every domain of culture, for it is an integral aspect of culture. It is in this context, that the monarchy, land tenure system, kinship, ancestor veneration and mystical authority, should be understood as forming an interlocking system of sacred and secular values.

The Swazi celebrate life, and this is the observable part of culture which is enacted often through rituals. The rituals may be informal and private, or formal and public. The major formal and public rituals are *Incwala* and *Umhlanga*. These elaborate and significant social events are

relevant to the social structuring of gender relations and therefore deserve discussion.

2.3.1 *Incwala*

Incwala is a ritual of kingship. It is a national, social, political and religious ritual of kingship whose origin in Swaziland is attributed to Tsandzile (also Thandile) laNdwandwe, Queen mother to Mswati II, whose innovation also led to the introduction of what was previously a Ndwandwe tradition of regiments. The introduction of regiments in the past ensured continued availability of a standing army at the royal capital. In peaceful times, the regiments performed domestic roles like cultivating the King's fields, building royal villages which were established in strategic places all over the country, and in hunting (Ndlovu, 1993:6). The introduction of regiments in effect meant that able-bodied men would be summoned for royal duties, and was therefore a means of extracting surplus labour, through tribute labour that is often required during *Incwala* when the *emabutfo* (regiments) weed the king's fields, which is justified through ideological mind control under the guise of tradition (Davies, 1985:39). Another innovation at the behest of Thandile was *Incwala*, participation in which was obligatory on all male Swazi and whose major object was to centralize and sacralise power. This power was predominantly derived from the feudal control and allocation of land for the land in reality belongs to the King, as a trustee for the nation.

Incwala lasts up to a month, around December, in which period the king goes into seclusion and at the end of which he is ritually strengthened, which in turn is believed to "strengthen the people and bless the whole nation... During this ritual, the King dedicates the nation to the national ancestors" (Kasenene, 1993:96). Because of its political symbolism of the renewal of the King's power, *Incwala* is regarded as the most sacred event of all the national

ceremonies and much of what actually takes place is shrouded with secrecy. It is this secrecy and mystical attributes of its potency that gives it aura and hallow.

It must be said however that *Incwala* symbolises and promotes the unity of the people. It is the one event that celebrates the Swazi corporate existence and social solidarity. At the time of public incorporation of the King, from the liminal stage, all male Swazi come together to dance the big *Incwala*, which is a public drama in which the King plays the dominant role together with regiments, and princes. The ceremony reflects a balance of power. The main actors are the King, and the Queen Mother, who assists in ritual making and is custodian of the ritual objects of the nation (Kuper H, 1980:190). Beyond the facade of rhetoric, *Incwala* secures and strengthens the Dlamini royal hegemony over the nation. As Brian Marwick (1940:47) has observed:

The *Incwala* reinforces the legitimacy of the monarch. The King is central to its facet. When there is no King, there is no *Incwala*. For anyone else to perform *Incwala* is treason. On two occasions in Swazi history when princes made such attempts, they paid with their lives .

Marwick's observation is however tempered by a syllogism in logic that "a King is a King by his people", for he too has to respect his subjects by conforming to the traditions, customs and laws established by the national ancestors, notwithstanding the reality of the absolute powers of the monarchy.

2.3.2 *Umhlanga*

The Reed Dance (*Umhlanga*) is a counterpart to *Incwala* and is the Swazi maiden's ceremony. It too is celebrated annually in July or August. Ideally every young girl and woman without a child (*litjitji*) is free to take part. Originally, the participants had to be virgins due to the belief that anyone who had lost her chastity would be exposed by the reeds which would fade. The ceremony consists of the *tingabisa* (maidens) gathering at the Queen Mother's residence from where they are dispatched to Luyengo (for young girls) and Sidvokodvo for adults to collect reeds for repairing the Queen Mother's fences (*emaguma*). The *tingabisa* go and cut the reed and rest overnight. The following day, they return to Ludzidzini, the Queen Mother's capital, dance before the Queen Mother, who often speaks to them on their importance as young women and how they should conduct themselves to preserve bodily chastity and Swazi culture.

The Reed Dance is a pageant of colour. The girls are beautifully dressed in woollen tassels, leaving the breasts bare, and they wear beads to conceal their reproductive parts. They dance in their thousands in public before the King, Queen Mother, regiments and the nation. The climax comes when the King, accompanied by his regiments, goes around the maidens, dancing and beating the shield on the ground, to acknowledge them. Traditionally, this was the occasion when the King used to choose a future wife and could not be celebrated when there was no King, or when the King was a minor. Apart from the old tradition which is gradually being set aside, moreso during the present King's reign, the collection of reeds and the Reed Dance was a women's event and a sign of the maidens' loyalty to the monarchy. At individual level it was a celebration of youth. It also echoes the Swazi myth that their ancestors burst out of a bed of reeds; hence the significance of the reeds.

Various taboos surround the Reed Dance in order to control the girls and instill in them the virtue of chastity. One often quoted belief is that if any of the maidens engaged in sex, or had a child, the reeds would wilt or dry. Thus, as long as a girl wanted to continue participating in the *Umhlanga*, she had to be constantly reminded to maintain a chaste life. And there have been occasions when chiefs have been heard complaining against girls who behaved oddly during the ceremony to the extent that the chiefs suggested a physical check on the woman's virginity.

Umhlanga is closely linked to *Umcwasho*, which is often instituted in honour of a young princess. *Umcwasho* is ideally meant to protect young girls from male pinching, tickling and sexual harassment. For instance, King Mswati III instituted *Umcwasho* in honour of his daughter princess Sikhanyiso in 1995 to encourage the preservation of girls' virginity.

Like the *Umhlanga*, *Umcwasho* is worn by virgin girls, who exude pride in their choice to remain virgins till a suitable period, probably marriage regardless of age (*Times of Swaziland*, 17 September 1995:9).

Beyond its ritual significance of protection of the *Inkhosatana* (principal princess) and her age-group, the rite has important educational role. In the past, once the *Nkhosatana* was named, all the girls of her regiment had to take an oath to respect their bodies, to remain chaste, and refrain from marrying until after a specified length of time. In the words of one newspaper:

To be the *Inkhosatana* is an honour bestowed by the King upon one of his daughters, who immediately becomes the principal princess for her age-group (*libutfo*) (*Times of Swaziland*, 3 September 1995:13).

The young girls are taught to honour their oath of *Umcwasho* and are taught Swazi customs, morals, sex education, etiquette and prepared for the adult roles of motherhood and womanhood. Emphasis is on becoming *true* Swazi, (as they grow up) who adhere to the Swazi traditional values, laws and customs (cf Kasenene, 1993:97) •

In the conundrum of social relations, it is the family as an agency of cultural reproduction that becomes the most immediate focus of the gender inequality for it is in the family that gender is lived and contested. While there is no one all inclusive definition of 'family', Boudon and Bourricaud (1989:169) suggest that the family constitutes a *fait social total* (total social fact), and a system of relations between spouses, their children and relatives, and between the system they constitute and other systems, especially the economic and political ones. In other words, the family is the basic social unit which usually derives from marriage, and includes the husband and wife, children born from the union, and members of the extended family. Marriage becomes a mechanism that legitimises a marital union in a heterosexual relationship.

Although there are variations in forms of family in Swaziland, a number of features are certain. The first feature is the patriarchal nature of the family and the unequal positions that women and men occupy in it. This is partly due to the custom and law which vest marital power in the husband, and the cultural ideology that it is the men who marry; women are simply given in marriage. This theme is best illustrated by Berglund (in Verryn, 1975:4) who uses the allegory of a seed. The male is the carrier of life: he gives the seed and the woman receives and nourishes it. The husband as the sower of the seed has personal relationship with other carriers of life, and defends the wife and takes care of her fertility because she is the mother of his children (Verryn, 1975:4-5). In spite of Berglund's biological reductionism, the allegory points to the subordination of women in the family. A similar conclusion is expressed by Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) who argue that "all problems faced by women seem to be related to the position they occupy in the family" (WLSA, 1998:7). In the family, the men are regarded as superior and

dominant whilst the women are regarded as subordinate.

The seed analogy and the practice of bridewealth has meant in actual fact that family units established by women are not recognised as families. Moreover, even when a family formation is initiated by a woman, this still happens “within the parameters of subordination and unequal positions of women and men” (WLSA, 1998:19). In fact, a woman who overtly initiates marriage between herself and a man is ostracised by society as having loose character. This negative attitude to women marrying men is also rooted in the practice of bride wealth (*lobolo*) and ritual of smearing of red ochre (*libovu*) which are regarded as essential ingredients to recognition of a marital relationship as a marriage. Traditionally, the smearing of red ochre (*libovu*) had to be carried out at the male partner’s cattle-byre by the grandmother which symbolised the woman’s incorporation in the new family, and the bride’s family expected social and economic benefits in form of marriage gifts (or bride wealth). It was essential that in course of time, the formalities of bridewealth be carried out before the marital act was given legal and social recognition for in a way *lobolo* legitimised the relationship between a husband and wife.

Consequently, the second feature of the Swazi family is that most of them are male-headed. Whether a marriage is customary or by civil rites, the marital power is vested in the husband. The Marriage Act No.47 (1964) explicitly stipulates that marital power resides in the husband (S.24). Marital power simply means that the husband has rights over his wife, her reproductive abilities and the family estate. Even when marital power has been excluded by pre-nuptial contract (which is allowed in a civil rites marriage), the woman does not become an equal partner with the husband (WLSA, 1998:22). It is the husband who remains the head of the household and the woman is treated by the members of the extended family as if exclusion of

marital power did not take place, thus while at common law the exclusion is legally recognised and binding upon the people, the social effect remains negligible. As a result women are marginalised in the decision-making process which is evident in such practices as arranged marriages (*Kwendzisa*), levirate marriage (*Kungenwa*) and marriage without the women's consent (*Kuteka*) in which the male friend arranges for the girl to be smeared with *libovu* without her prior knowledge and consent and in the inheritance laws which at present do not protect the widow and her children, except in those situations where the deceased husband had left a will or the woman had adult male children to defend her interests.

The third feature of the Swazi family is that it remains an extended family both in time and space, in spite of economic constraints. It extends in time to include parents, grandparents and the ancestors (who have become human spirits) and extends in space to include the patrilineal blood relations however distant they may live. *Lusendvo* (the extended family unit) is therefore a network of kinship with a common ancestor, traced through the male line.

Finally, the Swazi family has always played a significant social and economic role. The making of a family brings about a bond in which social, economic, religious and other related obligations, rights and taboos obtain. Social solidarity by members of the extended family has been, and continues to be, a common goal. The solidarity takes the form of mutual support, collective defence of members and their interests, interdependence and help as and when need arises. Although family solidarity is at present under constant pressure due to the economic strains that members experience, it is nonetheless, socially expected.

Regardless of the changing economic fortunes of the family, it remains a bastion of cultural traditions, and a crucial agent of socialisation. It is in the family that children, male and female, learn through association and apprenticeship attitudes towards authority, cooperation and often times competition, social expectations and the so-called gender appropriate roles. Among the traditions that the family imparts, directly and covertly, is that “a woman is a minor that must cringe with fear before her husband like a child” (Mkhonza, 1987:2). “It is what shapes a woman’s outlook on life, thereby narrowing her perspective with a string of customs that impinge on her freedom, self-awareness and awareness of her rights, making her totally subservient to the man with a docility that can at times be likened to self-enslavement” (Mkhonza, 1987:2). Thus, society moulded women into being obedient to their husband, to persevere in spite of the difficulties they may encounter, suffer silently and pretend that all is well in their relationships, regardless of the conflict and strains.

In a nutshell, the socialisation of a girl to become a woman who is humble, soft-spoken, obedient and subservient begins quite early in life and goes on throughout her life through differential treatment. It is in this context that WLSA argues that discrimination against women does not start at the point of marriage, but at birth. According to WLSA (1998:66):

The interests and position of a family member are compromised by being born a female. From birth she is seen as being a less permanent member of the family. Her family primes her for marriage. However, when she does get married and joins her married family , instead of gaining acceptance as a permanent member she again occupies an inferior position as a new comer, an outsider and non-blood member.

The subservient position of women who must show deference to and rely on men is reinforced by what looks like the Swazi feminine mystique of beauty, obedience, long-suffering and endurance, which in a way were the ideals society set for young girls. Public ceremonies, like

the Reed Dance, in a subtle manner consolidated this mystique. The Reed Dance is therefore in a number of ways an occasion for instilling the normative values among the young girls, more especially that of chastity and conforming to traditional gender roles. Traditionally the sequel of the dance was the announcement of the King's choice of a future queen, who had to be chosen from amongst the gathered female youths. Thus, while for the young girls the Reed Dance celebrates their nubility, the traditional roles for women of procreation and domesticity are emphasised (Booth, 1983:43).

Nonetheless, the Swazi feminine mystique's emphasis on obedience and subservience had implications for women's proprietary rights. According to customary law, the husband has a duty to support his wife and children. Men are regarded as pillars and therefore heads of their respective families, with the onerous task of providing for their families. However this responsibility varies considerably: in some families this responsibility is extensive and includes providing, protecting and representing the family. Men were usually breadwinners and therefore occupied positions of power and authority over the family, wives and children. Yet, men did not occupy the same privileged positions in the wider family unit and community, since elders, senior members of the family (and at community level the chiefs) exercised much more authority and power in the family as custodians of family traditions and rituals.

A wife traditionally owned the household utensils and two cows and their offspring: these cows are *liphakelo* (a cow given to a married woman by her in-laws which entitles her to eat sour milk), and *insulamnyembeti* (a cow given to a mother of the bride to wipe away her tears by the groom's family). Although for all intents and purposes, the two beasts belonged to the woman, their control was under the husband but he was not to dispose of them without her consent

(Armstrong, 1985:33). That is the ideal situation. In praxis, women's access to economic resources and sites of power were circumscribed. Access to land has been a contentious issue. It is men who pay allegiance (to *khonta*) to the chief who are entitled to a piece of the communal land. Any Swazi adult male may seek and obtain a piece of the communal land but to hold a title deed over land remains out of reach of many due to the unique land tenure system. "Swazi nation land constitutes wealth, therefore it is communal; and it is not husbanded and improved as is individually tenured land" (Booth, 1983:54). Thus land itself and access to it has been one of the roots of social and gender inequality.

Similarly, women's access to the cattle-byre (a sacred place where family decisions are taken) is restricted due to women's reproductive cycles whose issue was regarded as danger to cattle. Yet in the past, the family grain stores (large-flask-shaped-pits) were centrally located in the homestead's cattle-byre which act inextricably put control of these resources (cattle, grain) in the hands of men since women were excluded from the cattle-byre family meetings and from coming into contact with cattle. Exclusion from the cattle-byre in actual fact meant exclusion from the decision-making process in the family, for it was a symbolic site of power relations in the family, in which women's voice was remarkably absent.

Lastly, it should be noted that polygamy was allowed, though in no way a norm, although every marriage had the potential of becoming polygamous. In spite of this arrangement, and there was a number of material, social and traditional factors involved, however only one woman, the favourite wife, enjoyed preferential treatment (WLSA, 1998:47), and polygamy fomented competition and often unhealthy rivalry between wives.

2.5 CONCLUSION

In summary, the status of women as mothers, wives and partners was that of minors. In marriage, as in the family, women were regarded as junior partners responsible for the bearing, nurturing and welfare of the children. A wife was “expected to look after the physical and emotional needs of the children, parents-in-law, her man, and other family members. She is the home-maker responsible for carrying out daily domestic chores...[and] also has the duty to, above all, respect her man at all times”(WLSA, 1998:47). Even women living with their male partners outside marriage were expected to conform to the ‘conventional’ family norms and mores. Even when women were prepared to take on what was regarded as traditional male roles in the family as and when need arises, they were not expected to be tough, questioning and competitive outside home. Therefore in spite of the ascribed minority status and subordinate position, women have borne and still bear, the heaviest burden of reproduction of the human species, their nourishment, and are increasingly taking on the roles of earning income either through paid employment or group activities. Whether this changing scenario has enhanced women’s economic resisting power (Barton, 1996:239), status and position in society are but some of the questions that this study hopes to probe.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN IN SWAZI RELIGION

Mbiti (1992:2) strongly posited that in traditional Africa, religion permeated all aspects of life to such an extent that it was difficult to separate the sacred from the secular. This is a view echoed by Oduyoye (1979:109) when she argued that “traditional life was permeated in all aspects by religion, any appeal we make to traditional values and practices is ultimately religious.” In this chapter, we focus on the inter-connectedness between religion and gender by examining the place and roles attributed to women in Swazi mythology and in ritual. Let us begin with male and female in Swazi religiosity as illustrated in the story of Lomkhubulwane.

3.1. LOMKHUBULWANE

Lomkhubulwane is a spiritual being whose identity and functions have gradually sank into the dim memory of history. At best she has been scantily depicted as a capricious, female spirit who wrought sickness, drought, pestilence and death, a conception which sharply contrasts with that of her male counterpart, Mlentengamunye, who has been portrayed as a messenger of good news and blessings to the Swazi nation. This section aims at recovering the female divinity as a manifestation of divine activity.

From the outset, it must be argued that Swazi traditional religion is essentially monotheistic. At the centre of the religion is Mvelinchanti, the creator of the universe and of everything that is. Mvelinchanti is the ultimate source of being, authority and power. Not surprisingly, the creator is conceived as a male spirit being. Everything flows from him for he is

the one who was there from the beginning (Kasenene, 1990:3), he is the originator of life, the ancient of ages, and creator of time and space. Order in the universe is attributed to him. But Mvelinchanti has been conceptualised as a remote God, *Deus otiosus*. It is implicit that after creation, the creator withdrew from his work and became a transcendent, if impassible, God who from time to time communicated his intentions and will through messengers.

Take for instance the myth of the origin of death. The myth in brief says that the creator wanted to convey his will to the Swazi that they would live for ever, or according to some variant account that they would die and rise again. He sent a chameleon with the good news to the people. It is hard to ascertain whether the chameleon was the fastest messenger available at the time, but that notwithstanding, the chameleon sojourned to earth. He tarried for a while to eat some wild berries that grew abundantly in the pristine land of the Swazi. In the meantime, Mvelinchanti changed his mind and decided to send another messenger, the lizard (commonly referred to as “the blue-head,” *intfulo*), with a message that the people would die and never rise again. The lizard hurried and delivered the message to the Swazi ancestors, and returned to the creator. When the chameleon arrived later with the message that people were to die and rise again, the people chose to hold steadfast onto what the blue-head had told them. Variant accounts however suggest that the people were angry and that they beat up the chameleon; hence his slow walk.

The significant point to note at this stage is that due to the great distance between the transcendent God and humanity, there was need for mediating spiritual beings. In Swazi spirituality, the ancestors are the most immediate and popular channels of communication with the spirit world, because they were once human and are believed to be bi-lingual, speaking the

language of both the spirits and human beings (Mbiti, 1992:82), and therefore with good credentials to act as intermediators.

Nonetheless, while the ancestral spirits are the society's immediate link to the spirit world, there has often been mention of two spiritual beings who ontologically belong to a category uniquely different from that of the ancestors. These two spiritual beings, I propose to call "divinities," because they seem to have occupied a position higher than that of ancestors in the Swazi spiritual hierarchy. This proposition is supported by and reflected in the Swazi social organisation. In the Swazi social organisation, there is a social pyramid, with the king and Queen mother at the apex, the commoners at the bottom, with the princes and chiefs in the mediating position. It is useful in this context to remember that our perception of the spirit world is often a reflection of society.

In a similar manner, the spiritual beings (hereafter referred to as divinities), namely Mlentengamunye and Lomkhubulwane, through whom Mvelinchanti communicated his will and purpose to the Swazi, occupy more or less a princely position. The divinities are however scantily mentioned in extant literature on Swazi society and religion, and so I intend to read meaning into the very few references that are made to their hierophanies that is, manifestations of the sacred expressed in symbols, myths and supernatural beings (Eliade, 1987:315).

In these hierophanies, Mlentengamunye is conceived as the "one legged one" (Kasenene, 1990:14). He is the male divinity, a messenger who is often referred to in lofty terms as if he were the manifestation of God. Tradition holds that he used to appear on misty days, on top of mountains, and that "people [were] able to see his one leg while the rest of the body was

concealed in the clouds” (Kasenene, 1990:14). That Mlentengamunye appears to people seems an overstatement since variant stories say that Mlentengamunye appeared to children, who would then tell the parents that they had seen a one-legged person on the mountain-top. Nonetheless, Kasenene (1990:14) usefully adds that Mlentengamunye is:

a messenger of good news and blessings to the nation. Whenever he appears people welcome him with sacrifices and ritual performance ... for example, all children are taken to the river and buried in the sand leaving only their heads above the ground. This is a symbolic offering of the children to Mlentengamunye. The adults wear a rope made of a certain ... grass (*intsambo yelutindzi*) obtainable from the mountains as a sign of devotion. At the same time, *umnikelo* sacrifice is made to him by roasting goats and chicken, with smoke ascending to him. Then the children are unburied and taken home but on the way no one may turn to look behind.

A similar view is held by Marwick, who emphasizes that Mlentengamunye arrived in a cloud of mist. The people feared to go near; instead they wore necklaces made of mealies threaded on grass for a month. He also mentions the ritual of symbolic offering of children, the mothers’ wailing, and that after a time the mothers would come and take the children home, and that sacrifices of chicken and goats were made at home to appease Mlentengamunye (Marwick, 1966:229).

Most recently, a similar view was expressed by Ben Dlamini (*Times of Swaziland*, 13 October 1996:11), who wrote that Mlentengamunye would normally appear on high mountains, covered with mist. Young children would see him and report to the elders. Dlamini, then gives it a royal touch, when he adds that:

The King would send a messenger to all parts of the country that Mlentengamunye had come. All homesteads would brew beer and bring it on the appointed day. Young children would also be brought to the spot. Holes would be dug where the children would be half-buried. Their mothers would run away leaving them buried in the ground. The children would cry, and their cry reverberates in the mountain

and forests ... After a time, the mothers would go back to dig the children out of the ground. They would know that Mvelinchanti has heard the cry of his people. Then would follow a great feast, with meat and beer, that had been brought by each of the families. The feast would last for days.

Although the three writers do not agree in detail, they all recount an oral tradition about a strange, if mystical happening. None of the accounts attempts to describe the physical appearance of this divine messenger because in most religions some things are mysterious, invisible and misty. Nor are we told what glad tidings he bore, and to whom the message was given and how it was divined. For all that we know, Mlentengamunye is reported to have appeared in 1889. (Note how myth was transformed into history!). It was a critical time for Swaziland and the message could have been all but bad news: the death of a King, continued expropriation of the Swazi land by white settlers and the introduction of Colonial rule during which time the Swazi monarchy was “maimed and almost disappeared from the political landscape of the continent before it was fully recovered at independence under the leadership of King Sobhuza II” (Kaniki, 1997:2).

While that may be the case with the male divinity, Lomkhubulwane’s portrait and roles are even more obscure. According to Ben Dlamini, “Unomkhubulwane” is a Zulu variant for Mlentengamunye. This statement could mean that she is a female divinity whose functions in the Zulu religiosity are more or less identical to those of Mlentengamunye. That notwithstanding, Lomkhubulwane is a distinct divinity, in Swazi traditional religiosity, who has been depicted as a messenger of evil, sickness and death (Marwick, 1966:230). Whenever, there was an epidemic, it was attributed to her. People responded to her appearance, and rumour of her appearance, by making offerings of traditional beer or sour porridge which were taken to a hill where she would

receive them so that she could remove the sickness. Thereafter, the sickness would be withdrawn or continued depending on whether or not she had been properly propitiated. Crop infestation was also attributed to her. In the event of a crop infestation, there was a reversal of roles.

The girls took over herding of the cattle, and went about their task naked. The boys and men stayed at home quietly. After some days, the girls took ears of the infested corn to the river, where there was a waterfall and threw the seed over the fall. The crops were by this means cured of the pest (Marwick, 1966:230).

Apart from these gleanings, very little is said about the divinity whose functions determined good health or sickness, bumper harvest or pestilence, safety or danger. In all probability, Lomkhubulwane was part of the Swazi hierophanies, and acted like an early-warning signal of an impending catastrophe. The early-warning system that scientists are now applying to forecast drought, storms, earthquakes, ..., it appears was the function of the Swazi female divinity. To what extent this would explain the prevalence of a significant number of female diviners remains a question.

The way Lomkhubulwane is depicted, even in the scanty references, however, contrasts with that of Mlentengamunye. In my opinion, the stereotyping of the Swazi female divinity demonstrated the male-female dualism in Swazi culture and religion. In the Swazi traditional religion and ritual, there is a partiality and preference for the male divinity, who is given the attributes of benevolence and herald of good news. His given qualities come closer to resembling those of a son of God. No doubt a son was a favourite in Swazi oral tradition. In the Swazi symbolic world, the female divinity is portrayed as the very anti-thesis of the male divinity, sadly without any justification. She is depicted as evil-incarnate, author of sickness and death despite the fact that death was willed by Mvelinchanti since time immemorial. One also notes a gradual

diminishing of the female divinity's role, while Mlentengamunye was increasingly identified with if not mistaken for, God the creator.

This portrait contrasts with the Zulu depiction of Nomkhubulwana who was conceived as “the princess of heaven (*inkosazana yeZulu*)”, a maiden and type earth-mother who was associated with agriculture and fertility. “Her worship [took place] in spring time when mist commonly occur[ed] on high places. During this time, girls [would] make beer and temporarily take over cattle herding duties... She [could] be appealed to in time of drought or flood” (Thorpe, 1966:37).

By applying the hermeneutic of suspicion to these stories, it becomes clear that both Mlentengamunye and Lomkhubulwane occupy the same mediating position, far above the ancestors. They are the messengers of the Creator. None of the divinities nor the ancestors can cause death nor change the course of events without God's will. It is inconceivable therefore that Lomkhubulwane can be blamed for sickness, ageing and death any more than the mythological lizard (blue-head) that hastened to announce the loss of immortality. Since that primordial time, death has been a fact in human existence despite the diverse cosmologies. The interpretation is reasonable, and gains support from J.S.M. Matsebula (1990:3) when he observed that:

Mvelinchanti was utmost good and he expected his creatures to be good and do good. Should the created beings misbehave, Mvelinchanti was displeased and he might punish them with all kinds of afflictions - illness, famine, drought ... when he strikes with these afflictions people may turn to him [and] plead with him for pardon.

Human beings are endowed with imagination and creativity. So in their quest for meaning, the Swazi sages invented Lomkhubulwane and Mlentengamunye. The two beings, one female and the other male, became two axes in explaining the reality of life: sickness, death, drought and

pestilence, and blessings, prosperity and well-being. As one can see, these are facts in human existence, which have exercised human mind for a long time as the stories of Job in the Old Testament and Socrates show. In trying to explain what is essentially incomprehensible, and to give meaning to the reality of death, there had to be the blue-head and Lomkhubulwane. For all we know, it could have as well have been Nambi (the wife of Kintu in Ganda mythology who is blamed for bringing death to earth) or the woman believed to have hidden death in her skirts when God came to hunt it down.

Given that the Swazi society is predominantly a patriarchal one and that the spirit world is a replica of the human society, Mlentengamunye, a male divinity, is given attributes that were valued in society. For it is a male-made culture. Lomkhubulwane, a female divinity, however is the yin of Swazi religiosity. She is the antithesis of male benevolence, goodness and blessedness, and therefore conceived the way she has been depicted as a messenger of evil. The monotheistic nature of the Swazi traditional religion, however, means that she could only be a messenger of God; and so the two divinities only reveal the people's dual conception of God as the giver of blessings, life and prosperity, and yet at the same time with the prerogative to recall humanity, punish them and try them with hardships. In this divine scheme, Lomkhubulwane's function is that of prophecy. Her role was to warn of impending danger, and she must therefore be understood in more positive light as the divinity of prophecy who forewarned and inevitably made people realise that all was not well. It must have been in situations when catastrophe loomed, and punishment hung like a dark cloud that the female divinity appeared to sound the alarm. If this thesis is true, it would be consonant with her caring character to warn God's children of disasters ahead. Her warning of danger ahead is something similar to what the Old Testament prophets did, namely pointing to hidden icebergs ahead and calling for change of direction.

Therefore a religio-cultural analysis suggests that Lomkhubulwane of Swazi spirituality was a divinity who cared for traditional morality, social norms and values. But this divinity had been invisible and eloquent in her silence. Perhaps there may come a time when she will be known more fully than has hitherto been possible. My emphasis is that her stereotyping as a malevolent spirit, a conception that seems prevalent, is misleading and yet a predictable product of patriarchal structuring. We should emphasize that the gendering of the spirit beings into male and female, with human attributes, reflects the human society and in this instance the Swazi attitude to women, which attitude was then projected to the spirit world. The process still continues. Hence, the story of the mysterious woman who reportedly hitches rides from unwary drivers in Ezulwini Valley, which story may be a product of human creative imagination, but is accepted and re-told, not least by women themselves who depict her as a capricious and malevolent spirit.

The conclusion that the stereotyping of Lomkhubulwane is a product of patriarchal social engineering has implications for the search for gender equality. The Mlentengamunye-Lomkhubulwane dichotomy represents the male-female dualism in Swazi symbolic world, although conflict is not played out as in Greek mythology (in which gods and goddesses engage in mortal combat). Nonetheless, this dualism reflects the subordinate roles and status given to women, at both family and national levels. Lomkhubulwane's invisibility symbolises the women's invisibility, if not deliberate exclusion, from the public sphere. It illustrates that women in general have been ascribed lesser status. It means their exclusion and marginalisation in the family, ancestral veneration, ritual, and in decision-making. It also points to a culturally gender-specific bias that extols male offspring, as the story of Princess Sengcabaphi shows (Kuper, 1980: 238-239). This gender-specificity permeates various aspects of life, and often accompanies the women

from the cradle to the grave. It is evident in the division of labour on basis of sex and in paid-employment, in which most women occupy the lower rungs of the employment ladder, and yet they have to shoulder almost single-handedly the burden of nurturing families.

3.2 WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS RITUAL

Although the engendering of religion in Swazi society has been remarkable, it has not been total. Hence, the women's significant presence in ritual. Ritual becomes one of the important spiritual outlets for both women and men. While it has been previously thought that the cultic events in which women take complete control are few and far between (Oduyoye, 1979:112), there is a significant number of events in which women participate in the religious life of the community. Often as leaders or co-participants. That this has been the case is particularly evident in such activities as rain-making, spiritual possession and mediumship, healing, and in family and national rituals. As Iris Berger (1976:161) has observed, mediumship offered women the greatest avenue for active participation in religious life. Spirit possession implies control by a spirit external to the medium and is:

a sign that a god has chosen a person to be inhabited by him periodically for the good of the community (Hafkin and Bay, 1976:162).

This indwelling has often meant that mediums became agents of communication between the social community and the spirit world.

Often female mediums have been concerned with women's activities, such as fertility, child-bearing and health. They nonetheless enjoyed high social status and respect that were accompanied by legal immunity, rights and privileges either permanently as part of one's profession or in temporary spells and therefore situational. The spirit that inhabited a person,

whether male or female, did not discriminate on the basis of gender or class. On the contrary, the spirit possessed whom it willed and empowered that person with authority to speak in its name and act on its behalf. Moreover with possession comes suspension and often reversal of existing norms. A woman medium may for instance wear men's ceremonial clothes, carry a spear, sit on the stool, and preside over disputes (Hall, 1994:20).

For the sake of drawing a parallel, let us make reference to Nyabingi. Berger (1976 :169-181) cites the case of Nyabingi, a female divinity who became famous in northern Rwanda and southwestern Uganda at the close of the nineteenth century up to 1935. Her name, Nyabingi means "she who possesses many things." "Her prestige allowed her to walk about in her ceremonial dress and claim any cow she wished; no one refused" (Berger, 1976:176). Women possessed by the Nyabingi spirit were equally regarded as Nyabingi herself and were greeted with royal greetings, like "Kasingye" ("O, victorious one") and given praise names like "Rutatangirwa" ("She who could never be stopped along the way, the invincible one"). Because of her attributed invincibility, she assumed social and political leadership in the resistance against imposition of colonial rule, though her successors (the mediums) were fought with guns. Consequently, some of her priestesses were either killed in battle or captured and imprisoned, but the cult lived on. Although her activity has since then been confined to the spiritual realm, she is still remembered as a divinity who allowed women prominence in both ritual and political leadership against colonial overrule.

In theological terms, the Nyabingi cult helped to institutionalise female authority. The chief priestess was without exception always a woman. However the same could have been true of women elsewhere. Hence Berger's conclusion that:

regardless of religious or social structure, a small number of women everywhere emerged in institutionalized positions of religious leadership ... Although their exercise of power and authority was restricted to ritual situations, they could acquire wealth from their positions and apparently commanded respect at all times because of their religious powers (Berger, 1976:180).

That this conclusion applies to women in Swazi ritual is the main focus of this section. While Swazi cultural ideology exalts leadership of older men who inherit their social rank from ancestors, and women stood outside the centre of power, there were and have been occasions when women broke from the edges of society. Nowhere has this been more visible than in the area of ritual and healing.

3.2.1 NATIONAL RITUAL

In the area of ritual, the monarchy is a major actor and is believed to possess the most potent medicine (*umutsi*) and ritual. This belief is rooted in historical events which led to the establishment of the Dlamini dynasty. From the wars of conquest and integration, the Dlamini monarch emerged with many prerogatives, including power of life and death, right to distribute land, to wage wars, and the possession of mystical ritual power. The king's power was only balanced by that of the Queen mother who "acted as a check and, on occasions, as leader of the opposition" (Kuper, 1980:17). In the absence of a king, the Queen regent held the highest traditional power which as will be shown later was a position earned through the effort of one queen mother. It was only with the coming of colonisation and white settlers that the new locus of power became a counterweight to royal power and even curtailed it. But the monarch's ritual power remained undiminished.

The Swazi tradition espouses a unique practice of dual monarchy in which the Queen mother (the *Ndlovukati*) is “the mother of the country and her son, the child of the people (Kuper, 1980:54). Her council advises the son, and she is the custodian of the national ritual objects. She therefore enjoys the prerogative of speaking to the ancestors in the national shrine at eLudzidzini, and provides beer for libation. Due to their association with national ritual, a number of queen mothers, for instance Gwamile, have been attributed legendary powers of rain-making (Booth, 1983:39). In practice however, it must be said it is the king and Queen mother who jointly invoke the national ancestors to bless the nation with general well-being, prosperity and peace.

The main national ceremonies are the ritual of kingship (*Incwala*) and the Reed Dance (*Umhlanga*). Of the two ceremonies, it is *Incwala* that demonstrated women’s role in national ritual. To begin with a king cannot perform the ritual until he has attained the age of majority and married a woman from the Matsebula clan. In practice, it is this marriage that confers upon the king the majority status and prerogative to participate in the invocation of the national ancestors. The other important woman in the life of a Swazi king is a wife from the Motsa clan, who together with laMatsebula ritually strengthen the king (Kuper, 1980:198). However, the most important actors in the *Incwala* remain the King and the Queen Mother. In spite of the prominent role of women in the ritual, *Incwala* cannot be held in the absence of a king. “Throughout the period of regency, there is no *Incwala*; the prince and Queen regent have not got the full status of a King and Queen mother” (Kuper, 1980:197).

According to tradition, when the *Incwala* is to be celebrated, it is the Queen mother who signals its start by sending the ritual priests, the *bemanti* (“people of the water”) to go and draw sea-water. The sending of “the people of the water” formally marks the beginning of the king’s

seclusion from public life, a state in which he remains until the dancing of the *Incwala*. This period lasts over six weeks. In ancient times, the journey to the Indian Ocean to fill the ritual vessels used to take several weeks for it was on foot but it was an essential undertaking because of the belief that the sea is powerful and full of unknown mysteries. Hence, sea-water was an important ingredient in ritual-making. On return from the sea, preparations commence for the climax of the ritual. Although much of what takes place remains shrouded in secrecy, there is no doubt that the Queen mother plays a crucial role up to the main dance. In the main ritual dance, there is an overt spatial distance that separates men from women, but the two groups dance facing each other at the opposite sections of the royal cattle-byre. The occasion is however open to everyone, male and female, high and low, and therefore symbolises the irrelevance of gender in ritual. Besides, it marks the end of the year and the beginning of a new one which people symbolically entered united and renewed at the national shrine. It is important to emphasize that *Incwala* was usually associated with rain-making, an act for which the twin-rulers are held in high esteem as the supreme rain makers. Often the day has been characterised by torrential rains.

In addition to the three women who play a vital national role in ritual, there is yet another one: the king's full sister. Traditionally, a king's full sister was considered very important. She was next in importance only to the Ndlovukati and the king's wives (*emakhosi-kati*), the queens. Often she was given the title *Inkhosatana yelive* (the nation's princess) and usually had a voice in the council that chose her father's successor. On marriage however she took less active part in the national public life and was no longer obliged to attend royal court.

3.2.2 FAMILY RITUAL

The study of the Swazi family by Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) found that discrimination against women began at birth (WLSA, 1998:66). This notwithstanding, however, women play an important role in family ritual more especially as they grow older and therefore more permanent as members of the family, and with children of their own. While a woman does not preside over ritual, she plays an essential role in assisting the sons if the husband is deceased. The mother's knowledge of ritual is always sought and drawn on in such circumstances. In a way, the sons are for sometime apprentices in ritual and she acts as a mentor.

Moreover, the grandmother's hut (*kagogo*) is the centre of ritual. It is in the grandmother's hut that all family decisions are made. The honour given to the grandmother is widespread and practical for while women ancestors are rarely invoked, the grandmother in the twilight of her life virtually becomes a *lidloti* (spirit), and is the effective link between the family and the ancestral spirits. That she is towards the end of her earthly life means that she is closer to the world of the spirit than any other member of the family. In biological terms, the blood taboos are no longer applicable to her and she in her own right has an increasing share in leadership of the family (Kuper, 1980:135-136). Thus in spite of the formal subordination of women in tradition, custom and law, women played an essential role in family and community ritual. Another important area where women performed a vital role was in the domain of healing.

3.2.3 HEALING

Mercy Oduyoye (1994:369) has noted that women are the “rearguard of prayer and ritual performances at all life’s many war fronts”. As vanguards of ritual, they battle against any threat to the family and ensure individual and community well-being. It is particularly in healing that the monopoly of who speaks and acts breaks down considerably, and women play critical roles. As Kuper (1963:64) observed:

Although very few women practise as herbalists more women than men appear to be “possessed,” and there are a number of well-known women diviners. The difference in the number of women herbalists and diviners is a consequence of sexual division of labour and the relative statuses of male and female. A woman’s duty is the care of the home and children. A herbalist who must wander around the countryside to dig roots and collect plants is brought into intimate contact with strangers, and this is contrary to the norm laid down for female behaviour. As a result, girls are rarely taught medicines by their fathers, the heir to the family bags is always male, and no husband encourages a woman to practise medicine. Possession, however, is a different category. A woman does not fight against the spirit of an ancestor that wishes to “turn her around,” and even her husband is afraid to intervene and must submit to her “calling.”

Due to the phenomenon of possession, the number of female diviners and healers is proportionately higher than that of their male counterparts for the spirit chooses whom it wills. Hall (1994:20,35), himself an initiated diviner-healer, has noted that there are more female than male *sangomas* (diviner-healers) in Swaziland. At this stage, it is essential to explain the terms used in reference to healers. The Swazi use the term *inyanga* to refer to a specialist in a profession. Among the specialists are those who are gifted with deep knowledge of the mystical world, including ability to bring wholeness to life. Using this knowledge, they make spiritual powers all pervasive and often will manipulate them to effect healing and give solace; they are therefore admired, respected and feared (Kuper, 1980:162). Among these specialists are diviners

(*sangoma*), the most powerful and respected, who attain their position through possession followed by lengthy training. They are regarded as gifted (“with a hole in the head”) and that they possess outstanding discernment and understanding of the causal factors of things and events, usually with the help of ancestral spirits who enter them and endow them with power. As Kuper (1980:165) has noted, men may resist possession, but women do not. Hence, the proliferation of female diviners and healers who command respect because of their healing gifts and ability to heal mind and body.

Due to women’s belief in the benefit of sacrifice for the well-being of the community, they accept spirit indwelling far more readily and use their spiritual powers in a non-patriarchal way to help others. They use their powers and mystical experience to heal broken and fragmented souls, and often in healing relationships. They deploy the divinely given gifts to promote health and wholeness of communities in which they live. Wholeness means that bodily, mental and spiritual needs are ministered unto to ensure that people are at one with themselves.

Nonetheless spirit-possession enhances the women’s status far above the normally ascribed position of women for the mediums belong to a special category of religious savants. In the words of Hall (1994:4,35,20), they are endowed with “supernatural healing abilities, psychic insights and precognition ... [often the spirits] require them to dress in unusual garments, perhaps in a foreign skirt or a man’s loin cloth,” and they command and are treated with respect, and bring prestige to the family. Therefore once a person is possessed, all other considerations (including gender) fall away:

her family and her husband and his kin must accept the spirit’s way. When during a seance a woman is inspired, she has control over her husband as well as other inmates of the homestead. As a diviner, she brings them prestige, wealth and

promise of security (Kuper, 1980:166).

Thus through spirit indwelling and possession, women are recognised as leaders, organisers and protectors (Kuper, 1980:168). They become articulators of religious and moral authority. Besides combating acts of sorcery and malice, women savants demonstrate a kind of spirituality of sacrificial love. "All women believe that because they are, that is why we are" (Oduyoye, 1994). Therefore the African women's strength lies in the knowledge that the spirit world is on the side of those who protect life and combat all that might cause death or injury to health. Therefore:

African women believe in and operate in the context of human links to the spiritual world, and it is this that empowers them to cope with, combat, and control the harshly oppressive physical, economic, psychological and political conditions of their continent (King, 1994:376).

Therefore, in a significant way, the female diviner-healers live a life that is in every sense sacramental. But Oduyoye (1994:375) has cautioned that :

... much of what empowers African women may be described as a spirituality of sacrifice. Commitment to community well-being, beginning with the immediate family and expanding to the wider community, gives women a sense of participation in the life-giving and life-protecting processes. Women's absence from overt displays of power and authority does not seem to affect women's sense of self-worth.

3.3 CONCLUSION

The excursus above shows two portraits of women in Swazi religiosity. To begin with, there are women who often transcend the socially ascribed status through spirit possession and play the role of mediums and diviner-healers. They play a vital role in the community. To that extent religion does provide avenues for and recognition of women's power. Through the charisma of office, women were and still are able to exercise leadership and have often been accorded appropriate respect and therefore enjoyed a status, derived from their office, far above that of ordinary men and women, and they were visible in dealing with threats to human life. Through religious ritual, they can be said to have been recognized as having overcome the normal constraints of gender and they used the divinely given mystical powers in a non-patriarchal way to bring healing, health, and well-being to their communities. But it is abundantly clear that their significant role in society did not bring about a symmetry of power. On the contrary, it is the Lomkhubulwane legacy that has reigned supreme.

The myth of Lomkhubulwane is therefore a tacit commentary on the Swazi society. The stereotyping of the female divinity mirrors that of many a woman and her life. Her invisibility is the invisibility of women and their marginalisation in the public sphere. Her intervention in human life is parallel to women's ability to intervene often effectively on the edges. Moreover her manifestation, whether actual or mythological, was a moment of liberation. It proximates women's dissatisfaction with the ascribed status, position and roles, and it points to a vision of new humanity in which there is a reversal of patriarchal values and there is co-participation.

In summary, the discussion of Lomkhubulwane and religious savants shows at least two diverse portraits of women in Swazi culture. On the one hand, they are vanguards of community well-being, and on the other hand they are blamed for all ills that befall society. These portraits show that the definition of women and their roles in the Swazi society is fluid and constantly being defined, contested and re-defined, and is therefore a flexible social construction. To arrive at this position however requires us to look beyond the usual annals to the more unconventional sources that give glimpses of lives of women, and try to compose a picture from the fragmentary evidence regarding people who belonged to anything other than the elite class. The implications are that we should read “against the grain” (Sawyer, 1996:4) by examining the contexts that produced the oral and social texts. Our critical enquiry has therefore revealed that there have been moments of free and unrestrained visibility of women in Swazi ritual, whether this ritual relates to mediumship, healing or the mythologically transient moments like the female divinity’s hierophany. Derivatively, it is in religious ritual that Swazi women have been visible in the public sphere, for in mediumship and healing women play an active, socially recognised and respected roles, and their position whether transient or permanent is culturally legitimated by the ritual itself.

At the same time, it emerges very clearly that there is no uniform, across board, social definition of “women”. On the contrary, there is a broad continuum of assumptions about what constitutes a “woman”. It therefore appears that there is no essentialist definition of being female, although the mystery of women’s reproductive powers is often implied, because gender, maleness and femaleness, is a product of “a combination of conscious and unconscious social and cultural construction” (Sawyer, 1996:5). It is in such construction that Lomkhubulwane represents social dissonance for she subverts the traditionally given status and cultural construction of gender roles. The female divinity overturns the dominant group’s definition of womanhood and what a woman

is allowed to do, and points to what women can do. She transforms the relationship between women and men by putting them on a transient equality with respect to control over cattle and who goes out and who stays at home. Similarly, women mediums and healers are symbols of power; they displace immediate consciousness and raise women to a new consciousness by demythising the monopoly of power. Nothing looks immutable. They bring about equality in concrete situations to society in which they, as specialists, live and are recognised for what they do rather than who they are. Hence, the fluidity of the concept “women”. Often the hierarchical construction of gender relations is subverted, reversed and transformed thereby confirming our contention that gender is not a fixed category. In the presence of the female divinity and women endowed with spiritual powers, gender becomes irrelevant.

Kinsley (1989:ix) has noted that “Some goddesses, as one might expect in the male dominated cultures in which they exist, provide paradigms for female subordination to male. This is not always, or even typically, the case”. Lomkhubulwane proves the exception. The story of Lomkhubulwane is therefore a rare example of the role of religion in the social reconstruction of gender, and a demonstration of “an ethic of concern” (Heine, 1988: 129), in which the lowly are raised up and roles reversed in a moment of liberation. The myth of the separation of roles on basis of sex and relegation of women to the privacy of the home is deconstructed and wholeness restored upon the community. The hierophany becomes a liberation from the polarity of the sexes. Yet at the same time, the hierophany deconstructs the traditional norms associated with the traditional symbols of power, the cattle, by giving young Swazi women free rein and control of that economic resource although for a time.

That notwithstanding, however, gender roles, nuances and ideology prevalent in the Swazi society continue to portray women as subordinate and often dangerous due, in part, to their reproductive capacity which is hallowed as mystical but conceived as a source of danger to cattle and has been associated with ritual impurity that is linked to the menstrual flow. It would therefore be artificial to analyse the influence of religion on the articulation and construction of gender in isolation from other factors that inculturalize and socialize individuals. Hence, the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF SOURCES OF INEQUALITY

The idea that gender is a product of social construction has been shown in the last two chapters. However, apart from the socio-cultural construction of the differences between male and female, there are patriarchal practices, traditions and structures whose interplay compounds the Swazi women's search for a meaningful equality. This chapter analyses these factors as a requisite to understanding the nature and magnitude of the quest for gender equality. To begin with, the history and life of the Swazi show a patriarchy that has operated and flourished at several levels. During the pre-and post-colonial times, there was a feudal class system of royalty and commoners, with chiefs representing the feudal interests in every location. This arrangement was transformed with the advent of the colonial agency. In the colonial days there was a colonial patriarchy that virtually became a superstructure over and above the traditional Swazi hierarchy, and there was at both national and family levels the subordination of women.

4.1 COLONIAL PATRIARCHY

Colonial patriarchy was based largely on the material and cultural differences between the Europeans and Africans, and unmistakably on race. It was a form of patriarchy that became entrenched through the coming of white settlers, and a sprinkling of white missionaries. With the coming of the Resident Commissioner, who was the head of the colonial administration, the Commission became an embodiment of European patronage for the Commissioner in various ways was the big brother in the Swazi social pecking order. This unequal relationship was given legal basis in several conventions. For instance, the 1894 Convention for all intents and purposes meant that the British colonial administration could, and did act, without "the necessity of seeking

agreement of the Swazis” (Jones, 1993:xxxiii).

The subordinate role imposed upon the Swazi was further exacerbated by the process of land alienation. In the history of Swaziland, land concessioning became a dominant practice without parallel, especially during the reign of Mbandzeni. Due to King Mbandzeni’s insecure position, he courted white settlers to the detriment of the indigenous population. Besides seeking powerful allies, concessions were a source of income to the royal house. But the foreign capital put the Swazi royalty and people in a subordinate position. So when, for instance, Mbandzeni made attempts at controlling the behaviour of the European settlers, they “behaved as chiefs, and treated traditional authority with disdain... They came to be, in truth a law unto themselves, moving boundary beacons, demanding tribute, seizing cattle, even children” (Booth, 1983:21).

Faced with their threatening behaviour, the King sought help from the Secretary of Native Affairs in Natal, T. Shepstone, who sent his son “Offy” Shepstone to act as a resident adviser to the King and Swazi nation. Offy’s presence did not alter the privileged position of the settlers. Neither did it end the land concessions. Instead, European patriarchy assumed ascendancy as was clearly demonstrated by the Nsibandze incident. After the death of Nsibandze, in suspicious circumstances, King Bhunu was implicated, and summoned to the court jurisdiction of Transvaal. Rather than suffer indignity and humiliation in the court, Bhunu fled to Zululand in 1898 but was through British intervention and assurance persuaded to return because they saw in him some advantage in preserving a semblance of an independent monarchy. He was fined £500 (Jones, 1993: xxxiv), and re-instated. That a king could flee his kingdom however demonstrated most visibly the diminution of the power of the Swazi king (Booth, 1983:26). Neither did the British assumption of the role of protector in Swaziland, in 1902, change the situation for the white

settlers, capital developers, and mining groups on the Rand simply reduced Swaziland to “a labour catchment area” (Booth, 1983:28).

Consequently, under the British overrule, “the traditional structure of Swazi governance, the district chiefs, and the Queen Regent and Council at Lobamba, were kept in place but were conspicuously subordinate to the British administration” (Booth, 1983:28). There were native courts but the appellate authority resided in the British commissioner. The Queen Regent and chiefs were put on salary as a means of economic and political control, and the colonial administration forbade Sobhuza II from using the title of “King” until 1967; Sobhuza was simply regarded as a paramount chief. For the colonial agents, there could only be one king, namely the king of England, and every other claimer to the title had to be cut to size.

The subordination of the Swazi monarchy clearly meant at one and same time that the question of land was no longer in the province of the King’s legitimate authority. On the contrary, it was the Resident Commissioner who granted the white settlers’ demand for freehold tenure of the concessioned land for capital development. A one-man commission (predictably a white man) was empowered to determine the claims and delineate land boundaries, and the results were predictable. The Commission only served to entrench the white settlers’ unfettered tenure and security to more than one third of the land reserved for them. Any unallocated land was to be “held in reserve as Crown Land, available for future grant or lease by the High Commission” (Booth, 1983:30). The Swazi who were living on land designated as white farms were given up to five years’ grace to move to the reserved land, after which period they were removed by force. Those that did not move were reduced to the status of squatters on what was previously their own land, for as the Resident Commissioner put it, in 1908, “I want many of the Swazis to stay on the

farmers' land and work for them" (Booth, 1983: 31).

Thus the British colonial policy led to the legitimization of land concessions and the restriction of the Swazi population to inadequate land, thereby creating local, cheap labour. Due to the alienation of the Swazi nation land, most fertile and productive land was owned by a small white settler community and the Boer concessionaires while the Swazi were marginalised to the largely unproductive, hilly and poor areas. The total effect of the land alienation was that the Swazi could no longer produce enough food for their subsistence and had to depend on shops; hence the decline of the homestead's self-sufficiency and the dawn of dependency on imported food products. Coupled with a multiplicity of taxes, the Swazi people were reduced to "a nation of migrant workers.... A nation which had been self-supporting until the cattle epidemic of the 1890s became a chronic importer of grains. Swaziland's dependency on imported foodstuffs continues today" (Booth, 1983:3), yet reduced agricultural output was blamed by the colonial authorities on Swazi backward methods of cultivation and cattle management. This apportioning of blame is not surprising for it sums up the Eurocentric stereotyping of Africans, a feature that was not restricted to Swaziland.

In toto, the colonial legacy in Swaziland has been a creation of a class of people, within the borders of what is now an independent kingdom, whose position in the history and economy of the country has been that of privilege, partly aristocrats and owners of freehold land. The implications of that arrangement were that they were people closely allied with the colonial administration by virtue of the colour of the skin and a shared ideology. Their unrestricted access to land and capital also meant that they were uniquely placed to engage in agricultural and dairy farming, industry and trade. They were a small yet economically and politically an empowered

group whose loyalty was never to the Swazi King but to the Resident Commissioner. Their very presence partly explains the development of a dual legal system, in which Swazi customary law applied to the indigenous population, while the Roman Dutch law applied to the white settlers for no settler would have willingly submitted to customary law.

During the colonial days, the settler group clearly identified themselves with the colonial establishment. Besides, it was the same colonial establishment that had encouraged some of the soldiers returning from the world war to relocate to Swaziland to “strengthen the country’s white population, with English-speakers in particular, to counterbalance the preponderance of Afrikaner farmers especially in the lowveld” (Booth 1983:34). Although only a small number of retired second world war soldiers eventually came to Swaziland, even those who came sold the land sooner rather than later to the Afrikaners at a profit. Those Europeans that stayed were however helped by special financing schemes and access to the South African capital. To date the white and coloured Swazi predominate in ownership and control of capital in contrast to the majority of the black population who remain an economic minority, without any significant economic power except for those whose access to formal education has helped them climb the socio-economic ladder. In the context of gender, it has unfortunately meant another layer of patriarchy over and above the traditional one.

4.2 MONARCHY

The next dominant group has been those who derive their power from the claim to divine kingship. Since Swazi kings by tradition marry several wives, the royal house is quite a large, extended family of the Dlamini dynasty. The royalty, due to their control of land and access to it, command loyalty which flows from the king, who holds the land in trust for the nation, and

disburses it through a hierarchy of traditional elite, from the senior princes, chiefs to the chief's runner (*umgijimi*). The royal aristocracy particularly gained economic muscle during the regency of Gwamile who introduced a levy to build up the Swazi Nation Fund. The miners in the Rand mines made an annual, obligatory contribution of £5, and there were internal contributions in form of cattle or cash which helped the royal treasury to grow healthy. In the decades that followed, especially during the reign of Sobhuza II, the setting up a business enterprise, in the name of Tibiyo Taka Ngwane, meant that the monarchy was capitalized. The economic wealth (commonly called the "National Treasury") and land which is an economic resource have put the monarchy and a number of elders in a class of their own. The monarchy commands every one's respect and loyalty, not only due to the claim to divine origins but most importantly due to the absolute control over land.

In contemporary Swaziland, the monarchy has clearly ascended to a position and class of its own, perhaps some rungs above the white social elite for the king is not only the dispenser of land but also the chief priest and intermediary between the people and the national ancestors. The royal cattle-byre has become a national forum, the source of authority and legitimacy, and the focus of national ritual. The sacralisation of kingship, while an innovation, has nonetheless served the purpose of lifting the monarchy from the mire it was once thrown into by Mbandzeni and Bhunu to an institution vested with honour, respect and power.

While the ideal is that the king rules with his mother, and that both of them are above the law, it is instructive to note that in course of time the king becomes the first among equals. The Queen mother holds unfettered power during the minority of her son but this hold on power gradually decreases as the king grows and attains more and more power. It is essential to realise

that in the Swazi symbolism, the Queen mother is depicted as the moon, and the king as the sun. While the position of the stars plays a significant role in Swazi ritual, the origin of astral symbolism is less clear. However, science tells us that the moon has no light of its own and that it reflects light from the sun. This would symbolically mean, without going into the Confucian concept of yin and yang, that it is the king who gives aura to the mother, rather than the reverse, although Swazi political myths perhaps due to the syllogism in logic holds that the mother is more important because she is chosen before a king is (*Times of Swaziland*, 26 April, 1996). This is paradoxical since the choice of a Queen mother is inevitably linked to the choice of who becomes a king. It is also important to recall that the ritual of kingship reaches a climax only when the moon is dark. The Incwala can never be danced when there is a full moon. This probably refers to the gradual waning of the mother's power at the time when the son is being renewed and strengthened. Nonetheless, in case of conflict of interpretation, it is important to hold that "the believers are always right"!

It is also important to note that while the choice of the Swazi king conforms to tradition, the crown has never gone to a princess within the royal household, and there is no indication that it has ever been contemplated because the Kingdom has since its foundation always been under the monopoly of a male hierarchy, with the women playing a supporting role, most especially in ritual and ceremony. Not surprisingly, even the Reed Dance is a female festival only insofar as the cutting and collection of the reed is concerned. The maidens collect the reed and bring it to the Queen Mother who gives them parental advice on the eve of the dance. On the day of the national Reed Dance, which is a movable public holiday, the Ndlovukati and the queens preside for a while and then comes the king who becomes the focus of attention. Traditionally the Reed Dance was an occasion for the king to choose a new bride and many of the young female beauties

nursed the hope of joining the royal harem. At least that was the practice during the time of King Sobhuza II, who in his later years, perhaps due to his advanced age, used to choose not necessarily for himself but sometimes for his loyal officers.

The crucial factor in discussing the Reed Dance then becomes that in spite of its colour, pageantry and beauty, two underlying cultural factors remain. It is a form of paying tribute to the mother of the nation, and traditionally an occasion for choice of a King's future wife. Its gender specificity therefore becomes unmistakable. The ritual instils among the young nubile girls the virtue of chastity until marriage, and the ideology of marriage as the highest goal to be achieved. It exhalts motherhood, chastity and marriage as the cultural norms. The same applies to the wearing of the golden-yellow woollen tassels (*umchwasho*) by young girls who were protected by the royal command from sexual harassment by any man as long as they wore the habit. The aim was to protect them until they reached the marriage age; then they were free to remove the colours. Unfortunately, this ideal of protecting the young women from undue harassment is not backed by strong sanctions for would-be transgressors. The envisaged punishment for any one who violated the young girls' oath to remain chaste was a token, not enough to act as a deterrent. Only a cow was the maximum penalty that could be imposed, which shows the weakness of the traditional system of justice with regard to protection of rights, be they children's or women's rights.

4.3 FAMILY AND MARRIAGE

Closely related to the social reproduction of Swazi femininity are family and marriage. It is in the private sphere of the family and marriage that much ought to change. There are traditional practices associated with the ideal of marriage and motherhood that accompany a Swazi female from the cradle to the grave. Throughout the transition from a girl-child to a married woman, her status is that of a minor only that marriage changes the set of male seniors. Needless to say, however, the ideology of marriage, motherhood and family plays a crucial role in the socialisation of every Swazi woman and determines their life chances. While it was a social obligation for every normal person to undertake marriage and found a family, it was more imperative for a woman to fulfil that expectation. With the loss of immortality, in the mythological past, the finitude of human life became an accepted fact in human existence. To offset the effect of death, marriage was instituted as a social obligation and an anti-dote against the effects of death (Mbiti, 1992:130).

The purpose of marriage was to perpetuate and increase the human society. While death destroys life, marriage begets life. The underlying principle is that since the loss of immortality, the Swazi (like other people) realise and value personal immortality through bearing children and rearing them into adults. Children are therefore regarded as a blessing from God and torch-bearers of life. As Mbiti (1992:130) has observed, in marriage three layers of human existence meet. In his words:

Marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those not yet born. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalised. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress, and not just a spectator. Therefore marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in

which everyone must participate.

To ensure that the young Swazi would take the socio-religious obligation to marry seriously, a child was socialised from infancy through childhood into gender appropriate roles. It has been argued (WLSA, 1998:66; Mudekunye, 1979:81-88), for instance, that from the outset boys and girls were prepared by society to travel different paths. Mudekunye goes further to show that a girl's informal education primed her for marriage. The socialization of a girl in many ways aimed at a gradual transformation into an adult, who was a wife and mother, with good conduct which included obedience to the father and later to the husband. She was expected to grow into an ideal home maker, and with knowledge of sex taboos and able to exercise self-control in sexual relations. She had to know child-care and upbringing, and show appreciation of the dominant position of men in society. To excel in being a mother and wife, she was also expected to have mastery of working in the fields (Sowing, weeding, harvesting and storing food crops), of weaving and tanning skins for clothes, making kitchen utensils such as clay-pots and plates, and excellent personal hygiene most especially with regard to her monthly cycle (Mudekunye, Loc.cit).

Because of the socially constructed mind-set, women came to cherish marriage as an ideal to be achieved (WLSA, 1998:23). Combined with the social premium attached to children in marriage, it was not surprising that the customary recognised age for a girl's marriage was only 16. A man could marry a young girl without her consent through arranged marriage, *kwendzisa*, which only required mutual agreement of the two families rather than the two persons concerned. The import of this practice was that women were denied the right to choose their marriage partners, yet marriage is a serious lifelong undertaking. A woman could not divorce nor sue her

husband in the traditional system of justice for she was a minor, who could neither sue nor be sued. At common law, she had to be represented either by her father or husband. Hence, her perpetual minority status.

Moreover the emphasis on the goal of marriage as the increase of society often implied that a man with many children enjoyed a fuller personal immortality. This social concern usually led to polygynous marriages. Notwithstanding Marwick's suggestion that under customary law, "all men aspired to be polygynous" (1940:38), polygyny seems to have been motivated by economic considerations and social status for wives were a source of wealth and status. One had to be wealthy to afford the bridewealth, and in turn having several wives conferred social status because a large family meant availability of labour from the wives and children who increased production in the fields, and they kept the man's name alive and allowed him ultimately to become an ancestor of a large clan (Armstrong, et al, 1985:23). In the words of Ferraro, polygamy was "highly valued because it maximised the number of children per husband" (1984:59). However, it is important to emphasize that polygyny was never the norm. As Schapera (1938:13) observed:

Probably even in the olden days most of the men had only one wife; and a few commoners had more than two, or in exceptional circumstances three. Large polygynous households of four wives or more were met with only among the chiefs, their relatives, important headmen, and other prominent or wealthy people.

It can therefore be contended that polygyny was an exception, and perhaps a product of social and economic transformation. As Armstrong, et al(1985:55), have argued:

Marriage and family have been shaped by socio-economic conditions which prevailed in the pre-capitalist African societies. Within this context, marriage and family served social and economic functions that went beyond the immediate concerns of the parties to the marriage.

Due to the emphasis on biological reproduction, barrenness and sterility were regarded as a misfortune to be fought through ritual offering and use of medicine (*umutsi*). Usually, a diviner was consulted and healers investigated the nature and cause of the situation, and prescribed remedy. If however, it was found that it was the woman unable to bear children, the man was allowed to marry other women. Traditionally, it was even possible for the man to ask his wife's family to provide him with another wife since the one for whom he gave bridewealth had "failed" in one of the basic functions of marriage. And, it was not unusual for such a man to be given the wife's sister or relative as a wife, *inhlanti*, to help raise children for the sister. Whether the wife or sister consented to this arrangement or not was inconsequential for the family considerations were paramount and final. If however the woman was unable to bear children due to the husband's failure, either due to infertility or impotence, the man's family would make secret arrangements with the woman so that one of the man's brothers could render the conjugal services and bear children for his brother. The essence in such an arrangement was strict confidentiality.

It is important to note the unequal treatment of women, even in cases of infertility. The woman's inability to bear children was never kept a secret but for the man everything had to be secret. Society did not treat the spouses equally. The situation was no better for a woman whose husband died leaving her young. Tradition prescribed a remedy. After two to three years of mourning the husband, she was inherited in a levirate marriage (*kungenwa*). It was believed that the widow had to remain active in her sexual life but only within the family since in traditional thinking, marriage was not an individual affair. It was a community affair and society ensured that it remained so.

In traditional marriage, as well as in the 1964 Marriage Act, the husband had marital power over the family estate. Marital power means “the power of control that a husband exercises over his wife during the subsistence of the marriage. More specifically, it refers to the husband’s control over his wife’s person, his headship of the family, and his powers of administration of the joint estate of the spouses as the head of the family” (Wanda, 1991:67). The investiture of marital power in the husband no doubt has engendered inequality. The husband was by all means the senior partner in marriage, and can virtually do what he pleases with the matrimonial property. Thus, “marital power renders the wife a quasi-minor in that she is deprived of *locus standi in judicio*, contractual capacity and proprietary capacity.... Any property the wife acquires during a marriage comes under the control of her husband” (Armstrong, 1985:33). In practical terms, therefore, marriage does not alter the status of a woman. She is a minor before and during marriage. Moreover, custom and tradition have essentially meant that a woman marries into a community of property, which in turn means joint but unequal ownership.

Children too belong to the husband for he is the head of the household, and according to Swazi custom and law, he is the “natural guardian of all children born to the spouses”. By virtue of his rights as guardian, the husband has:

legal authority to assist them in performance of judicial acts and in the administration of any property they may own. In this way, the mother is excluded from the exercise of the incidents of guardianship over her children (Armstrong, et al, 1985:36).

Land ownership, under the nation land tenure system, has also been largely limited to men. Access to the nation land in Swaziland is usually through the man. On death of a husband, the widow ideally was provided for. She received the small piece of land attached to the husband’s family and small personal items. If an heir, usually a man, was appointed he had the duty of

supporting the widow and any dependent children, and therefore had to inherit both the property and the deceased man's obligations as well.

It is evident that the dominant theme in this discussion is undoubtedly that of unequal gender relationship at family and national levels in economics, law and politics. Moreover the ideology of marriage and family had its impact on girls in formal education who often fell prey to the greed of men who, under the guise of benevolence, enticed girls out of school into early marriages. Yet these unwary girls had no adequate knowledge of nor preparation for the demands of founding a family for they were after all children themselves. Not infrequently some of these immature mothers are abandoned without due consideration of their plight. Due to the social expectations and definition of female roles, girls are therefore more likely to leave school at an earlier age than boys to get married, or indeed as a result of teenage pregnancies. This situation has not been helped by cultural constraints to the use of contraceptives which in turn impinges on women's control of their reproductive health and abilities, assets which nonetheless work against women's progress into higher levels of education.

4.4 BRIDEWEALTH

Besides colonial patriarchy, social stratification and women's subordination in the national and family structures, there is the tradition of bridewealth. Bridewealth, defined as "an institution through which a man pays some property for the right or privilege to marry a woman" (Armstrong, 1985:28), has become an all pervasive feature of many traditional marriages. Its legal and social functions are so strong that it is deeply entrenched in a significant number of African societies. This entrenchment is further buttressed by a variety of roles determining rights and obligations of persons who are parties in marriage.

The social origins of the institution of bridewealth go back to the remote past when the practice was to swap sisters. However, it often happened that a male suitor had no sister, and so the man had to compensate by either performing bride-service(cf Genesis 29:20-21), or giving marriage gifts. However, with the introduction of livestock and money economy, bridewealth took the form of cattle or money. “Without payment of bridewealth, which in course of time assumed greater importance than bride-service and exchange of sisters, marriage was not recognised to have taken place. Therefore bridewealth, far from being a price had social and legal functions in marriage. It never meant purchase of a woman, together with her rights and privileges, into another family and therefore reducing her status to that of a domestic servant in the new home, although this has been the classic understanding for a long time” (Zigira, 1990:15).

But bridewealth was more than a transfer of wealth. It included exchange of gifts by the two families, over a time, since both families needed to know each other and to maintain the bond established by the marriage between two of their members. In Swaziland, payment of bridewealth is a complex and prolonged process since it is customary accepted to marry a wife through *kuteka* (to take a bride by surprise) before any payment of *lobolo* (bridewealth) is made. However, *kuteka* is formally recognised as one of the forms of customary marriage, and bridewealth is paid after the event and in some circumstances over a long time. Even then, however, living together never constituted marriage in the public eye until the agreed amount of bridewealth had been given to the wife’s family. Thus, if a man had been living with a woman for a number of years and the two had children together, the relationship still lacked social recognition and legitimacy because bridewealth had not yet been paid. But the children born to the couple would legitimately be his own on finalisation of bridewealth. So bridewealth had important social and legal functions. Besides these functions, bridewealth was also perceived as a form of compensation to the

woman's family for the loss of an active member who, though not stolen, was going to join another family. Yet, in another way, bridewealth was and remains a token of gratitude to the bride's family for her upbringing, training, and nurture. The marriage - gifts were to remind the family that although she was leaving, she was a valuable member to the husband's family. In a sense, it conveyed the value attached to the bride for her poise, grace, beauty and industry. It was therefore not unusual to find a village belle' attracting so many would-be suitors that the father would exploit the interested parties by demanding a big amount of bridewealth.

At the same time, bridewealth had the function of acting as a social insurance that kept the marriage going. Since in the event of a complete break-down of marriage, part of the bridewealth had to be returned, there was always a two-sided pressure on the couple to be more accommodative and to avoid ending the marriage on trivial grounds. When there were tensions and storms within the marital relationship, the two families acted as interested parties in counselling, mediation, and conciliation to ensure its survival. It was an accepted principle of the unwritten law that if the breakdown was due to the husband's unbecoming conduct, his family would forfeit part, if not much, of the bridewealth.

It was also a common practice for the women's brothers to use the cattle, sheep or goats, and any other forms of bridewealth, in obtaining wives for themselves. Therefore any instability in the sister's marriage would have repercussions for their own marriages if the breadwealth had to be returned. As a result there was always pressure on the sisters to suffer vicariously so as not to be responsible for the termination of the brothers' marital relationships. Everyone knew that the stakes were high and stood with others to ensure the stability of marriage, whether it had been a result of an arranged marriage or the couple's choice.

Nonetheless, the implications of bridewealth for the woman were total. She was bound to her husband and his family for a number of reasons.

Firstly, if the payment of bridewealth is a price of acquiring her procreative capacity, she becomes obliged to produce children for her husband. Secondly, since the payment of bridewealth was and is dreaded in the event of divorce, a wife would be hesitant to leave her husband for fear of being castigated by her family for bringing dishonour to them (Armstrong, et al, 1985:30-31).

To sum up, bridewealth with all its social and legal functions could easily become a way of commoditizing women if women were to be valued in terms of cattle and goats rather than as persons. Pushed to its extreme, this commodification of women was predominantly a monopoly of men, and women themselves have had little, if any, say in determining the amount of marriage gifts. Yet as already indicated, these gifts become a mill-stone tied around a woman's neck. Thus, in contemporary times, bridewealth is an institution laced with problems that need critical re-evaluation and new expression for it is better to have a viable, loving, vibrant marriage relationship than a marriage whose very existence is hinged on cattle. It is largely due to bridewealth that women were often obliged to be inherited by a brother of a deceased husband in a levirate marriage, yet the very practice of widow-inheritance tends to usurp a woman's individual liberty, including the right to choose to remain "single" or if she was still young to marry someone else of her choice. It is also due to the practice of bridewealth that some husbands claim absolute control and authority, as paterfamilias, to inflict punishment upon members of the household, including the wife and children.

4.5 CONCLUSION

To conclude, let us emphasize that there are a number of traditions and practices, both past and present, which in various ways and combinations impinged on woman's status and right to equality. These practices, some of which are firmly entrenched in custom and law, range from restricted access to and control of economic resources, cultural ideology of woman's subservience to men to institutionalised practices like bridewealth and leviratic marriage. How women have responded to these challenges is the focus of the next two chapters.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANTECEDENTS OF WOMEN'S SEARCH FOR EQUALITY

Gleanings from the pre-colonial and the early part of the colonial era show that gender has been contested and negotiated in Swaziland for a long time. There were women who engaged in a dialogical search for equality either by taking on authority within the patriarchal set up or by seeking economic independence away from perceived sites of subordination. At least two such groups of women are discernable from the extant historical sources and they represent two forms of the struggle for egalitarian relationship between women and men. Besides these two forms, on which this chapter focuses, there were also struggles through formal education and entry into paid employment, including the Civil Service.

In the first group were women whose struggle was at the centre of the Swazi social organisation. These were Queens, Queen mothers and regents who at different times in the formative period of the Swazi monarchy exerted their influence and wrested power, at least temporarily, from the predominantly male establishment. This group included such charismatic women as Somnjalose laSimelane, Tsandzile laZwide, and Labotsibeni Gwamile laMdluli who engaged the male hierarchy of their time and attained a high degree of equality and dialogical relationship with men. The second group consisted of women who fought at the margins of society for autonomy and economic independence. These were women who protested against traditional patriarchy and colonial land alienation and the subsequent erosion of traditional subsistence economy by migrating into South Africa to seek employment and thereby gained economic power.

Let us now look at the two groups in more detail.

5.1 THE STRUGGLE OF THE QUEENS

One of the women who made significant contribution to the making of Swaziland was Tsandzile laZwide. Born Khuthandile in 1806, in northern Zululand to Chief Ndwandwe of KaLanga, she was chosen a bride by Sobhuza at Zwide's cattle-kraal and taken to Swaziland when she was 8 (Matsebula, 1987:25). She was installed in the royal household to await marriage. When she reached puberty, she was married to Sobhuza I. She however could not bear children of her own but had brought with her no less than four half-sisters as attendants who according to customary practice could bear her children in a manner that has parallel in the Old Testament when, for instance Hagar, bore a child to Abraham at the suggestion of Sarah (Genesis 16). The half-sisters were therefore potentially *tinhlanti* and one of them became the mother of Mavuso who later on became King Mswati II.

When Sobhuza passed away in 1839, Tsandzile exercised her uxorial seniority to become the putative Queen mother to Mswati II (ca 1825-1865). Mswati was barely 14 when he acceded to the throne. Since he was a minor he could not assume leadership responsibilities. These responsibilities instead fell upon Tsandzile as Queen Mother while Somnjalose laSimelane became Queen regent, together with Malunge and Mbukwane who acted as regents (Jones, 1993:xx). Thus, "the most important decisions were to be taken by the Queen Mother" with the help of the regents (Bonner, 1979:63). It was in that capacity that Tsandzile exercised power until 1845 when the young king was circumcised and thereafter able to assume an increasingly more dominant role in state affairs.

However, Mswati II faced threats from within and without during his reign. There was the threat of Zulu invasion and there was internal disaffection within the royal household. One of the king's elder brothers, Fokoti, led a rebellion in southern Swaziland around Mahamba but it was put down by regiments under Malunge's command. When the rebellion ended, Tsandzile turned to initiating reforms that aimed at consolidating the power of the monarchy through creation of a system of age regiments throughout the country, and a network of royal villages to coordinate military and political activities (Bonner, 1979:64). The regiment system in time proved to be a powerful mechanism of social and political control. Induction into the regiments required the initiates to take the oath of fealty to the monarchy, a practice which in turn helped to develop a loyal fighting force to contain rebellions within the kingdom and threats of invasion. In addition, the regimental system meant control over the regiments' fertility: only the king had the authority to allow members of "a particular regimental group to marry, decisions which affected household formation and economic life of the country" (Jones, 1993: xxii).

The most significant point remains that it was through the regiment system that the king personalised central authority and the monarchy became strong both at the centre and at the periphery. The other values of the regiment system included organisational cohesion and discipline within the regiments, partly due to fear of execution for any acts of disloyalty and through promises of reward for loyalty. The regiment system in effect functioned as the main tool of political and economic control, and it led to the consolidation of power in the hands of the monarchy. It became an effective military organisation (Jones, 1993:xviii). In the words of Matsebula (1987:44, 57), by building up and strengthening the regiment system, Mswati "waxed rich and the fame of crack regiments such as Nyathi and Malalane" spread to neighbouring tribes.

In modern times the regiment system has continued to perpetuate the dominant social values (Ndlovu, 1993:85) and has remained a means of political and social control. In Ndlovu's words:

The process of induction into a particular regiment took place at one of the royal villages where the initiate had to make a public oath in which he pledged loyalty to his king. This public declaration of loyalty to the monarchy was, and still is..., irrevocable (1993:86).

Thus, the regimental system, training and service suited the royal ideology by reproducing social relations which enhanced loyalty to the monarchy and that was further reinforced by the feudal land tenure in which the majority of the Swazi were, and still are, dependent on the traditional leaders for their livelihood (Ndlovu, 1993:88). At a different level, however, the regiment system gives a veneer of popular participation of commoners in a political, economic, and ritual duties which enhance the image of the monarchy. Due to the king's control over economic resources, including land, the commoners have to be obedient and loyal to the dominant royal ideology which might at times verge on the extreme. As Ben Dlamini put it: "The Dlaminis are closer to God than other human mortals" (*Times of Swaziland*: 5 May 1996), which statement encapsulates the stranglehold of the royal consciousness. However, to placate those at the bottom of the social ladder, the praise singers of the institution of divine kingship remind the people of the slogan that "the king both leads and is led by his people" (Ndlovu, 1993:88). All said, because of their formal loyalty to the monarchy, the regiments (*emabutfo*) give unquestioning obedience and support to the king and may serve as a barometer of the strength of the sovereign.

Another innovation at the behest of Tsandzile was the adoption of *Incwala*, previously a Ndwandwe clan ritual, as a national ritual. The annual ritual of Kingship was ostensibly introduced to enhance the power of the king by inculcating obedience and loyalty. *Incwala* as Kuper has observed is a symbolic expression of the Swazi Kingship. It is a dramatization of the “actual rank developed historically: it is a play of kingship” (Kuper, 1980:191). Sociologically, it served as a graph of traditional status on which, mapped by ritual, are the roles of the king, his mother, princes, chiefs,...., commoners, young and old.

As has been indicated elsewhere above, while the ritual of kingship centres on the king, the crucial role played by the Queen mother is unmistakable for she is the custodian of the ritual objects and an important player in the strengthening and preserving the monarchy. Through ritual, as with spiritual possession and in healing, women’s roles were legitimized and entrenched. The Queen mother’s role has therefore become unquestionable for the king rules with the Queen mother; hence the talk of dual monarchy which has become an essential feature of governance in the Swazi realm.

What we can distill from the period is that it was through social and political reorganisation at the instance of Tsandzile that Mswati II was able to rise to the occasion and stamp his authority upon the nation. In the words of Bonner (1979:73), although Mswati was:

the best placed of the Swazi kings to emerge as a despot, he never assumed despotic powers, preferring to draw on the wisdom of elder statesmen [sic] like Tsandzile and Malunge in the wider interests of the Swazi aristocracy and state.

No doubt Tsandzile held extraordinary power and influence which proved vital to the consolidation of the monarchy. She has been described as a woman of remarkable weight. As Bonner puts it:

Swaziland has had a tradition of exceptional Queen mothers, but even amongst this distinguished company, Thandile stands out. A leading figure in Mswati's early struggle for survival, she had gone on to initiate a series of crucial reforms and was accorded enormous respect (Sanders, 1979:105).

Another queen who played a significant role at the centre was Labotsibeni Gwamile LaMdluli (ca 1858-1925). Born at Luhlekeni in Hhohho region, in northern Swaziland, Gwamile grew up to be a phenomenal woman in the history of Swaziland. When her father died, she was brought up by her uncle, Mvelase Mdluli. She moved to Ludzidzini in 1870 and caught the attention of Mbadzeni who married her in 1874 after he had been installed as king. She was mother to Bhunu (who later became King Ngwane V), Malunge, Lomvazi, and a daughter by the name Tongotongo. When Mbandzeni died in 1889, Bhunu became the crown prince. According to tradition, a Swazi king was expected to have no brother but Gwamile manipulated tradition to have her son succeed to the throne. However, Bhunu was alleged to have a fondness for alcohol and that virtually meant that Gwamile took much control of the state affairs and became the real ruler of Swaziland. According to the April 1899 issue of the *Times of Swaziland*:

She is a real ruler. In spite of her years, she is hale and hearty woman, alert and active, and displays untiring zeal in the government of the Swazi nation (Jones, 1993:401).

And that was not all. When after a brief reign, Bhunu died, the throne was once again up for grabs and there were many contenders, including Gwamile's own sons. But Gwamile, through tact, influence and diplomacy, chose Prince Mona who was an infant, four months old, as the crown prince. She had acted as a "shrewd and clever politician" (Jones, 1993:401), and acted as

Queen mother to her grandson for twenty-one years during which she carefully trod her path through the quagmire created by the Anglo-Boer wars, and the British came to regard her as an ally, and “commander of the ninth column” (Jones, 1993:401).

As Queen Mother to Sobhuza II, she helped to consolidate the Swazi nation due to her Charisma, self assurance and assertive personality. Hence, her hold on reins of power which continued until 1921 when she formally handed over to King Sobhuza II. It as during this long period of regency that we see her contribution to the making of the Swazi nation. According to Kanduzi (1995:2), Gwamile, “rose to fame because of a combination of factors. Some of these circumstances she did not create but she was able to understand or manipulate.”

A number of examples serve to illustrate this point. To begin with, she manipulated Swazi tradition to national advantage especially in the succession contests particularly in the choice of Mona as heir to the throne when he was still a baby. When confronted with rival claims to the throne, she was resolute and would not waver until the opposition had to give way. She was so determined in ensuring national cohesion that even her political detractors, including white settlers (in the likes of Allister Miller) were obliged to acknowledge that the Swazi were never more united than under the Queen regent (Crush, 1987:155).

She was also involved in the struggle for land. During the struggle between the British and the Boers for Swaziland, in the late 1890s Gwamile took a nationalist stand and was opposed to Swaziland being ruled by the British Commissioner resident in South Africa. When the British representative came to visit her at her royal residence at Nkanini, “Mdluli clearly declared her opposition to the administration of South Africa” (Jones, 1993:400). Even when Enraight

Mooney arrived as the colonial government's special commissioner, she protested at what she correctly perceived as her country's loss of independence (Jones, 1993: 402). Neither did she hold back her displeasure when the country was in the throes of land alienation. During the colonial administration's alienation of most of the Swazi land to white settlers, she rallied the Swazi nation around her and organised a deputation to Pretoria and later to London with a petition to Queen Victoria. She surmised that the Swazi had been placed in a "very difficult and unjust position, and their rights [had] been most seriously encroached upon" (Matsebula, 1987:176). In her words:

You are tearing away my skirt. My people are just like the land that is said to have been sold. Where am I going to live with this people of mine? Have they also been sold? (Crush, 1987:159-160).

She then designed a strategy of buying some of the land back by setting up the Lifa Fund into which Swazi miners in South Africa were required to contribute money, while ordinary citizens were to contribute livestock. The strategy was continued under Sobhuza II and it yielded some dividends.

With regard to formal education, Gwamile was a visionary. Although she was at loggerheads with the colonial administration, she appreciated the need for modern education. In the tradition of Somhlolo, and regardless of the opposition from the royal male elite', she held on to the idea that the power whites held was linked to education and founded a national school where Prince Mona and his attendants completed early education before they were sent to a boarding school, in Lovedale, South Africa, for further education. The founding of the national school was aimed at steering away the future king from missionary influence since the monarchy in Swaziland was, and continues to be, an embodiment and bastion of Swazi culture. The

companions who went with Prince Mona to school were deliberately chosen “so that on his return to Swaziland, he may have around him during his term of office men of ability to assist him in furthering the development of his country” (Kuper, 1978:49). In 1918, the crown prince was recalled to assume reins of power and since that time the country had an enlightened and wise monarch in the person of King Sobhuza II. This renown king was Gwamile’s legacy to the Swazi nation and a jewel in the crown.

Gwamile died on 5 December 1925 and had been described in 1913 by the colonial resident commissioner, R. T. Coryndon as “a woman of extraordinary diplomatic ability and strength of character, an experienced and capable opposition with which it [the colonial administration] was for some time incapable of dealing with” (Jones, 1993: 402). She had a keen perceptiveness and force of personality which may have arisen out of “her early exposure to royal politics... that she was able to make an imprint on circumstances which created her. She was a highly sensitive person who manipulated her foes into greatest admirers” (Kanduza, 1995:2-3).

Thus, we find that Swazi women through such queens as Tsandzile and Gwamile emerge from the dusty pages of history as heroines, or matriarchs if you will, who fought for control of and exercised power as a mother would in a non-patriarchal manner, and for the consolidation and development of the kingdom. Their contribution, measured against the times in which they lived and across centuries, was immense although it has yet to be fully recovered from the dim memories of history. In them, we find a perceptive brand of women who were self-confident, assertive and yet persuasive, and able to influence the course of national events even if that meant calling into question the dominant cultural ideology. They were innovators and avante-garde of nation-building and development and yet they never achieved what they did on men’s terms but

on their own terms, and they legitimated their authority by creating a tradition through dialogue and reconstruction of the old traditions. Their approach may therefore serve as a challenge, and at the same time an inspiration, to the contemporary search for gender equality.

5.2 THE “MISSING WOMEN”

The strategies adopted by Swazi women in the quest for gender equality have not always been homogeneous. Rather, the search took different forms. As we have seen, Tsandzile and Gwamile undertook their struggle in the umbra region of society. They used force of personality and charisma to influence national, social and political events. Their contribution to national development and revitalisation of the monarchy stand out prominently.

But there was also a number of women who sought equality and autonomy by way of economic empowerment. These women were referred to as “missing women” in the national censuses. According to Miles (1991:77), by 1960 there were 15, 300 Swazi women who were regarded by the colonial administration as “missing”. Of these 7,240 were in the urban areas while 8,060 were in the rural areas of South Africa. This fact is born out by the 1966 National Population Census which reported over 30 percent of Swazi women as absent from the country. Their absence was blamed on the traditional chiefs’ failure to control women’s mobility and the Swazi National Council complained to the Resident Commissioner that employment of Swazi women and children had led to the “breakdown of tribal and parental control.....and discipline” (Miles, 1991:85).

Although there was no one common reason that can account for Swazi women's migration into South Africa, most of them went there for employment. It was a time when there was little room for female labour in Swaziland. According to Miles (1991:i):

Many women were forced, under varying circumstances, to migrate to South Africa, especially to the greater Johannesburg area...where wages were higher, in search of employment, or any means of maintaining a living. The dominant employment avenue open for African women was in the domestic service.

But why did women migrate into South Africa? No doubt, one of the major reasons that lurks behind women's migration was the colonial policy of land alienation. Land was given to white settlers and Boer concessionaires, most especially during King Mbandzeni's reign, and the Swazi were left with little arable land and they were confined to areas reserved for the natives. The policy of land alienation specifically affected women for it meant that women could no longer produce enough food for the family. In pre-colonial times, the task of producing food and feeding the family lay in the hands of women, and "most Swazi homesteads enjoyed relative self-sufficiency" (Miles, 1991:63). However, when the fertile land was expropriated and the Swazi confined to the semi-arid land, women bore the brunt of having to sustain their families. The only way women could reproduce and nurture the family was through subsistence agriculture yet women owned no land under the customary land tenure, and had to depend entirely on family plots of land. Due to the limited nature of land and the hardships they faced as a result, some women abandoned the rural areas and migrated into towns as a means of struggling against rural poverty created by the colonial redistribution of economic resources.

Their movement into towns was at one and same time an expression of resistance against women's subordination to the rural patriarchy of family elders and chiefs. In most cases female-headed households had no direct access to land and cattle. They were therefore vulnerable and frustrated since access to communal land was, and still is, predominantly through men (fathers, husbands, brothers or sons). Therefore:

Women became migrant [workers] because, faced with the struggles against poverty in rural areas, and with hardships of heading a household in the absence of their spouses, the search for [paid] work became a coping strategy (Miles, 1991:15).

Over and above land alienation, the migration of men to the gold mines in South Africa meant that women carried more and more responsibilities in family subsistence, it also weakened marital relations (Kuper, 1947:67). Migration of Swazi males created social and psychological problems of anger, jealousy and disaffection due to concubinage that most married men working in South Africa practised which in turn meant irregular financial and emotional support for the wife and children who were left in Swaziland. The men became "missing" fathers. As Mbiti (1989:221) has observed:

The geographical separation of families creates great strains on the emotional, psychological, sexual and marital life of husband and wife. In addition, the children grow up without a father at home, so that their image of the father is simply someone existing in a distant town from where he occasionally sends them money for clothes and school fees, and comes home once a year or every two years.

For the wife, the husband is simply a person who descends upon her once a year or less often to quench his sexual passion, fertilise her and disappear like a frogman. He hardly shares in the daily responsibilities and concerns of raising a family. It is inevitable that such family life produces a serious strain upon every member.

That the breakdown of family life led to women's migration into South Africa has been documented. Miles (1991:2) gives an example of Them bani Dlamini, a teacher in a rural school, who got married in 1943. After three years of bliss, everything turned sour. The husband who worked for the Immigration Department took on more wives and abandoned her in the rural home to nurse his sick mother. The marriage broke down. Forlorn and without means, she could not support the invalid mother-in-law, herself and two children from the small plot of land her mother-in-law held. When the mother-in-law died, Them bani was forced off the land. Under Swazi land tenure system, she had no right being there. Relations with her husband had deteriorated to such an extent that Them bani was compelled to flee the country, leaving behind two small children.

Therefore women's migration into towns was a coping strategy. While some women coped with marital problems with courage and fortitude, like vicarious victims, and became pillars of the African families, there was a break-point. That some Swazi women chose to migrate to South Africa was deeply rooted in accurate assessment of their own situation. They found themselves trapped in situations in which they suffered subordination, abandonment and yet at the same time they were subjected to exacting demands of the traditional home in which every woman's move was circumscribed by patriarchal control, and they opted out. Here we find a perceptive though restless group of women who saw their exploitation by the extended families for what it was and ventured out in search of practical solutions. One of these options was to seek paid employment and thereby gain economic independence. Although the work place, in the apartheid South Africa of the time, was not ideal, they were determined to succeed, and succeed they did.

Closely associated with marital breakdown was the problem created by widowhood at young age. In an ideal situation, a woman who lost her husband could always count on the support of the extended family. But when circumstances proved difficult to bear, it became a matter of necessity for the woman to enter paid employment as soon as the period of mourning was over. For instance, Diana Khumalo's early widowhood led her to seek employment in Witwatersrand where she worked for thirteen years in domestic service rather than succumb to the traditional practice of widow-inheritance. After thirteen years, she returned to Swaziland and stayed with her own daughter whom she had to educate to a point of attaining relative economic independence (Miles, 1991:90-101).

In similar circumstances, though perhaps for different reasons, did other women go to South Africa as migrant workers. They tried their hands on various possibilities either in domestic service sector, running groceries in black townships or in the textiles industry until 1963 when the Aliens Control Act made it impossible for them to continue in employment. Most of them returned to Swaziland. But even today a substantial number of women ply between Swaziland and major South African cities to buy goods (eg. Shoes, shirts, jeans, etc) which they then sell at a profit.

Three periods in the Swazi women's work experience have been identified (Miles, 1991:63). The first period was in the pre-colonial days when women were primarily involved in subsistence cultivation. There was a buoyant pastoral farming and shifting agriculture and the Swazi homesteads experienced self-sufficiency. The second period, 1900-1930, witnessed the decline of the homestead's self-sufficiency due to land alienation which was aggravated by extraction of male labour in the homesteads. The hardships that characterised the period led to

a number of women into initiatives of creating their own employment in the informal sector, like brewing beer, hawking and the ancient trade of prostitution. Regardless of the official criminalization of women's initiatives, these were survival strategies that women devised to save their families from starvation. It must be said therefore that if a few women engaged in what men considered the unholy profession, it was as sacrificial victims.

The third period was after 1930. There was accelerated rural poverty and decline in food production which led to increased mobility of women from rural to urban and peri-urban areas. It was during this period that migration into South Africa reached its peak to such an extent that within the mid-1930's, African women constituted half the number of domestic workers in Witwatersrand. Most of the "missing" women worked on the Rand.

There is no doubt that the Swazi migrant workers, whether they were men or women, came face to face with yet another patriarchy during the colonial era, which was enshrined in the racial segregation policies of South Africa. Women nonetheless withstood the crushing weight of apartheid and relegation to the bottom rungs of employment because they found that they were paid higher wages than was available to their counterparts in Swaziland. At the same time, migration meant an escape from the patriarchal control of the traditional elite and the colonial state. They were acutely aware that it was through hard work that they would gain a degree of economic independence. Their entry into paid employment should therefore be seen as a protest against their subordinate social status and dependence on men and in-laws who more often than not mistreated them.

Due to their selfless and caring nature, most of the women usually came back with money, gifts and above all enlightened ideas which were a beneficial influence to their families. Some of them became pioneers of women's education. They knew the value of formal education and were keen to send their daughters to schools in order that their children could derive full benefits from formal education and be able to stand on their own feet. As Betty Ntshangase has observed:

Women have never appreciated themselves, and have to learn to do so now, in order to free themselves from the burden of being dependent on others, and see to their own wealth.

She continued that:

Sharing is wonderful, but accepting that if that helping hand is withdrawn, one will be able to see to herself, is a sign of independence, and women have to achieve that on their own (*Times of Swaziland*: 23 July 1995).

In retrospect, it must be acknowledged that the Swazi female migrant workers achieved a measure of success. To begin with, they achieved a degree of economic autonomy for themselves and to some extent, in some cases, for their daughters who were deliberately enabled to pursue formal education knowing very well the fruits of such education. In empowering their children with formal education, they sowed seeds for yet another struggle for gender equality in the arena of learning and the professions. The other success which cannot be measured quantitatively lies in the realm of enlightenment and mental liberation.

Away from the bonds of Swazi traditional patriarchy, and in towns where there was no one particular culture that acted as the norm, the migrant women could no longer be fettered by the Swazi traditions. The movement from Swaziland to South Africa, while a physical exercise, was also experiential. It was a liberating experience. In towns, the Swazi women came into

contact with other women and men, from diverse cultural backgrounds, and they had to change their outlook on life. They learnt from the new situations and social set-up that they could no longer remain subservient to men by virtue of their maleness. On the contrary, they saw men as equals and partners in the transmission of life, and in some cases in building a home and family. While some of them chose to get married and found families, it was their own decision. Yet others chose not to marry but had children whom they knew they were able to care for and nurture into productive persons. The practice of single parenthood, while it had some disadvantages, had the effect of giving women liberty of experiencing aspects of married life without having to be under constant patriarchal control. The difference was that lovers enjoyed equality rather than domination.

Thus, the “missing” women in final analysis were missing in two ways. Physically, they were missing from the Swazi homesteads, the family and their fields. More importantly they were also missing in the intellectual and ideological sense from the Swazi traditional rural male control over their actions, conduct and mobility. Away from home, they experienced autonomy and a personhood that was characteristic of any one living in town, although their self-determination was not total since it was circumscribed by white patriarchy.

The missing women therefore represent a daring group of Swazi women who, rather than resigning themselves to being passive victims of circumstances, acted creatively to transform their situation. They had worked the land as long as it was productive and meaningful to do so. Alienation of the land, however, increasingly meant rural pauperisation, and these women opted for a new strategy of combining the onerous tasks of domestic service and wage-earning, often with motherhood. Since domestic service in Swaziland was a small market, they migrated into

the South African labour market which was large and paying more. The women were courageous because they were actors who took decisions to venture out into the unknown social terrain where racial divide and legislation to protect white privilege were the order of the day.

But women's entry into paid employment had its antagonists, not least the ruling political elite and migrant male workers. The political elite saw women's entry into the labour market as a challenge to patriarchal control and urged the colonial administration to control women's mobility by legislation (Miles, 1991:86). Even the migrant male workers expressed outrage. They claimed that:

when we return home, our wives are independent and disrespectful, they have found other men to plough for them, feed them and give them children. When we beat them, they run to the court of the European and complain that we mistreat them (Kuper, 1947:19).

In spite of the male migrant workers' outrage, however, it is important to see the women's movement from rural into urban areas as a liberation trajectory in the history of women in Swaziland. They were a group of individuals that was ready, determined and courageous to stand up against patriarchal control of their lives. In spite of the odds, they manoeuvred their way out of the traditional social setup and had to overcome a number of obstacles before they could enter the job market either in the domestic service sector or by creating their own employment through profitable economic activities like beer brewing, sewing, cooking food for sale, selling fruits and vegetables and used clothes.

5.3 CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

It is difficult to quantify the role played by Christian missions in the women's quest for equality, but it must be noted that since the introduction of Christianity in 1844, the churches have gradually made in-roads in the Swazi society. The Christian gospel particularly found ready acceptance among Swazi women than amongst men. This pattern was however not peculiar to Swaziland as there was a similar trend in the early church in which women's conversion was one of the significant factors in the spread of the gospel in the days of the Roman Empire. As it were, the Swazi women were quick to perceive the import of the Christian preaching on such issues as marriage, family, equality and freedom which aspects were radically different from what was obtaining in the Swazi society. A number of women saw the potential benefits of the gospel in transforming their own situation only perhaps that their aspirations were lofty and far exceeded what the pioneer Christian missionaries were able to offer. In fact, the missionaries were themselves products of their own history and culture which among other things were imbued with Victorian values, which relegated women to the private sphere of the home and family.

However, due to the Christian missionaries' disdain for and lack of appreciation of the Swazi traditional beliefs and practices, it was not uncommon for them to help Swazi women to resist some of the practices which the missionaries considered detestable. For instance, missionaries were opposed to arranged marriages and marriage into polygynous families and they sought protection from the colonial administration for women fleeing from such practices (Booth, 1992:262). It is pertinent to bear in mind that the missionaries were most active in Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in what was clearly post-Darwinian era. Social Darwinism had come to regard Africans, and Blacks in general, as people who were still at the bottom of the evolution tree while the Whites had already reached the top. It was not surprising

that they saw it as a white man's burden to civilise Africa. Their opposition to some of the Swazi beliefs and practices should therefore be seen as an essential part of that burden rather than an enlightened egalitarian approach to the status of the Swazi women.

Moreover both the Christian missionaries and white settlers owned land and that very fact enhanced their prestige and set them apart as a powerful group who could only be compared to the ruling aristocracy and the colonial administrators. That missionaries could hold land unfettered by feudal control made them attractive role models who in their own right competed for Swazi allegiance. In course of time, the mission centres became an alternative locus of power and centre of counter-culture. In addition, the Gospel, in its foreign garb, to some extent began to erode some of the mystique that Swazi traditions had held in the lives of individuals and created a gap, or more correctly a room, at the intersection between Christianity and Swazi religion and culture for innovation.

Nonetheless, it would be too rash to depict the white missionaries to Swaziland, and Africa in general, as champions of women's emancipation (Walker, 1990:251-272). Their role was an ambiguous one: they were missionaries for the Gospel but in the public eye, they were the kindred of the white settlers and colonialists. Although they were heralds of the Good News, they were predominantly a white male elite' who looked at Africans in a condescending manner. They were opposed to some African practices yet they knew little about them. They preached love, equality and service but they behaved in all ways as masters.

The contention that the Christian missionaries were not angels of liberation of the Swazi women is also reflected in the introduction of formal education. In some African countries, pioneer missionary education had targeted the sons of chiefs. In Swaziland, chiefs were steeped in tradition and custom. So the missionaries initially focused on the coloured population. For instance, St Marks and St Michael's schools were initially for coloured children. From our vantage point, we clearly see that kind of approach to education as part of the Eurocentric patriarchy which aimed at social reproduction of inequalities between coloureds and the rest of the Swazi population. At the same time, pioneering missionary education favoured boys more than girls. They assumed that girls and women had to remain in the private sphere of the home to produce food and reproduce human species. In this instance, European and Swazi male interests coincided in a kind of a hidden curriculum that inculcated that women did not need much of formal education, an idea that was propagated by men and, unfortunately, internalised by women. Even the girls that eventually got into formal educational system received only minimal education and did not stay long because of their belief in the popularised idea that "women did not need education". Sadly this is an idea that still shackles the psyche of some men and women, even in the post-Beijing era.

The emphasis thus far has been that women's conversion to Christianity was not necessarily a liberating experience. As Gaitskell (cited in Miles, 1991:107) has noted, African women's involvement in prayer groups was:

an attempt by African women converts to internalise new domestic norms or perhaps lament the difficulty of doing so under the destructive influence of South Africa's industrial revolution.

Similarly, Schmidt (1992:13) notes that while missionaries trained African girls to be good Christian mothers and wives, European capitalists were, on the other hand, interested in training them for domestic service in European homes. In addition, the missionaries were:

reluctant to allow African girls to leave paternal protection of their male guardians, fearing that they would succumb to 'immorality' of urban life. Moreover missionaries discouraged African girls from becoming economically independent, fearing that young women of independent means would become spoiled and insubordinate to their husbands (Schmidt, 1992:13).

Neither was the presence of white women missionaries any source of comfort. To begin with, they too were subordinate to their male partners, and married women were anxious to protect their own interests and many of them supported the restriction of Swazi women's mobility. They were even not happy with the employment of African women in their households and often gave support to the colonial attempts to keep Swazi women under control of the male authority. As Schmidt (Ibid:13) found, in her study of Zimbabwe, the white women became the "self-appointed guardians of the European race purity.... [and] employed culture as a defensive weapon delineating the boundaries between the coloniser and colonised".

The motive underlying white women's attitude to the African women was fear. They had come to Africa with legendary tales about the African women's unique sexual passion and felt "threatened by the notion that the African women might replace them in their bedrooms as well as their kitchens ... Egged on by a racist ideology that vilified African women, European women starkly demonstrated how racism divides gender identity and experience, and how sisterhood failed to cross the racial lines" (Schmidt, 1992:181).

Even when the Swazi women made their presence evident in schools, education though a powerful force in women's enlightenment, the resultant economic empowerment did not translate into gender equality. Rather mission educated women became part of an emerging African elite who enjoyed enhanced socio-economic position but lacked complete emancipation from male control. Thus, it can be argued that in spite of missionaries' negative attitude to Swazi customs and traditions, missionary schools only succeeded in grooming women for the traditional roles of being wives and mothers. That way, a specific gender ideology was perpetuated through missionary education and church women's organisations and that ideology resulted in the domestication of girls and women. The missionaries particularly tried to recreate African women along the lines of the Victorian middle class housewives, and socialized them to bear the social costs of production of food, caring for the sick, disabled and retired workers, and raising the next generation of labour. Nonetheless, it must be emphasized that the subordination of the Swazi women did not come with the white settlers and missionaries nor did it come with the European capital economy and civilisation. Even before their advent, there was no formal equality between men and women, royalty and commoners, due to the social structuring of society which went back to the founding of the Dlamini dynasty.

The view that missionaries to Swaziland were paternalistic is reflected in Parker's *Mission to the World* (1988:121) when he wrote that:

The impact of the Gospel upon the Swazi social structure was pronounced. Their native clothing and hairstyles were closely related to worship of the ancestors and to witchcraft. The practice of polygamy and the degrading status of women also ran counter to the gospel message. New converts literally washed the witchcraft off their bodies and out of their hair and discarded the heathen clothing. The outward badge of the Christian came to be the wearing of western-style clothing, along with physical cleanliness .

Regardless of the lofty ideals of Christianity, however, we need to emphasize that in practical terms the colonial and missionary elite did recognize the Swazi male authority structures and the position of women as minors was deemed appropriate. As a result the practical results of missionary education were “the creation of hardworking, virtuous wives, suitable companions for the emerging African elite” (Schmidt, 1992:154). The formal education system reproduced the traditional gender relations in which women were obedient wives and mothers, while husbands were expected to work to feed their families. The missionary education instilled such values as industry, discipline, obedience to authority (including fathers and husbands) and had the total effect of socialising women into a subservient role of housewives.

As a result of their received Christian tradition, most graduates of the mission schools espoused the ideal of Christian marriage and home. Thus, while formal education had the beneficial effect of enabling women to gain independent economic base as teachers, nurses, clerical workers and domestic helps, the ideology of marriage as the norm drove the women back into the patriarchal cage. Several stories abound of women who were intelligent at school but were persuaded to leave school, with promises of rosy future, to get married only to find it was an illusion. It must be borne in mind that apart from a few exceptions, the conversion of the Swazi males was far from complete: they remained Swazi at heart and only became formal Christians to such an extent that the white wedding did not preclude the smearing of red ochre (*libovu*) performed in the privacy of the home to complete the marriage rituals.

Therefore the attainment of formal education and a job, while essential ingredients in the search for gender equality, did not necessarily alter the status quo. Even in the post-Beijing era, it is not uncommon to hear of husbands and their families who demand control of a woman's

earnings. One respondent to a questionnaire (Appendix A) mourned the fact that she was neither free nor a slave. She complained that although she was a university graduate free to work wherever she wanted, she became a prisoner of her husband's family who demand monthly economic support as "their rights" which goes to show the arduous struggle ahead.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CONTEMPORARY SEARCH FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Women's search for equality did not end with the colonial era. The struggle has continued in new forms. The last decade has particularly witnessed what Gebara (1994:53) would call "irruption of history into the lives of women". This expression does not mean an eruption of women into history since they have always been there. Rather, it means an eruption of a new consciousness in the lives of women; which consciousness has found expression in a number of non-governmental organisations which seek to empower women and promote their quest for gender equality. Among these have been Lutsango lwaka Ngwane (loosely translated as women's regiments), the Women's Resource Centre (Umtapo wa Bomake), Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA), and the Justice, Peace and Reconciliation arm of the Council of Swaziland Churches. This chapter focuses on the work of these organisations. The common features of these organisations is that they are all independent of the state and work towards influencing state policy and their activities are organised on a level above the sphere of primary family bond. They work with groups that join in common effort to create various forms of civic capacity which can be used to inform and influence the state.

6.1 LUTSANGO LWAKA NGWANE

Although Lutsango lwaka Ngwane (loosely referred to as women's regiments) is the oldest women's organisation, in the kingdom of Swaziland, it is the least documented. According to Mary Mdziniso, founding member and President of the organisation, Lutsango lwaka Ngwane

was founded, just before the attainment of independence, in 1967. It was a time of great expectations as the nation looked forward to independence. However, the wind of change that blew across the continent created uncertainty. Post-colonial political life seemed open-ended: the past was fast passing away and yet the future was not clear. In particular, the departure of colonial administration, while a welcome event, threatened to create an uncertain future in which political parties vied against one another for people's support. Political activity gave rise to rivalry, cleavage and heated debates which divided the citizenry. It would appear like the women's organisation was founded to ensure continuity and a degree of certainty.

The seeds of the women's organisation were sown by a group of enlightened Swazi women, who on a number of occasions visited the High Court in Mbabane in session. They were impressed by the decorum and grandeur of the men who presided over the proceedings. Of all the court officials, however, there was not a woman on the bench. Beyond the admiration of the court officials, there was a realisation which dawned upon these women that women had been left behind, and that something had to be done if women were to make an entry into a number of professions, including the legal profession. The pioneering women, who included among others, Mary Mdziniso and some members of the royal household, decided to hold meetings with other women, usually on Sundays, to share views on the possible way forward. The meetings were held in people's houses and had no fixed venue. Instead members moved from house to house until they thought that they had aroused significant interest to warrant the convening of a national assembly of women. It was, however, realised that individual women could not convene a national gathering. Only the king had the power to call such a meeting. The pioneering group, through women of royalty, who belonged to the initial membership, sought and obtained audience with King Sobhuza II, and they requested him to call women to a meeting at Lobamba. In those

days, mass communication was in its infancy. Even though Radio Swaziland was readily available, only a few people had radio sets. It was therefore decided that in addition to a radio announcement, the message had to be spread by word of mouth until it reached the rural communities. Regardless of the constraints, news of the meeting spread far and wide.

According to Mary Mdziniso (Oral Interview: 18-02-2000), the inaugural meeting, in October 1967, was a mammoth gathering. Thousands of women from all corners of the country, from far and near, converged at Lobamba. Some came on foot, and “some good men provided women with free buses”. Women, irrespective of age, educational attainment, social status, young and old, came together, and that meeting marked the birth of the first women’s organisation in Swaziland. The occasion was graced by the king who offered the women the choicest bull to bless the event. The king then enquired if the women had thought of a name for their organisation. It was found that they had not. The king therefore gave them a name. The organisation was to be called “Lutsango lwaka Ngwane”. “*Lutsango*” means a “fence”. In a number of ways, the Swazi women were to act as a protective fence for the country. Since the fence around the cattle-byre had one entrance, the organisation was to be all embracing of all Swazi women and to symbolise their unity. All Swazi women were free to belong to the organisation to develop the nation.

Lutsango lwaka Ngwane has therefore essentially been an all women’s movement rooted in high social ideals of “protecting the nation”. In spite of their loyalty to Swazi tradition, symbolised by the women’s preference for the traditional dress, they were progressive in outlook. The organisation’s stated objectives were:

- i) To form an organisation that will embrace all women of Swaziland.

- ii) To be the official body that liaises with national and international women's organisations, institutes, agencies and centres.
- iii) To find a common meeting ground to enable the women of Swaziland to get to know one another.
- iv) To draw the women of Swaziland together for unity and coordination of their activities in relation to various problems which face them and the people of Swaziland.
- v) To create a forum through which the voice of the "mothers of the nation" can be expressed and heard.
- vi) To ensure full integration and participation of women in national development through the involvement of women in policy-making at all levels.
- vii) To launch educational programmes for women aimed at enhancing their awareness of political, economic and social issues, as well as their rights and responsibilities.
- viii) To stimulate discussion among members on the problems affecting women and children of Swaziland and take steps to bring about solutions of these problems.
- ix) To promote the welfare of mothers, children, the sick and disadvantaged.
- x) To stimulate the interest of mothers, girls and children in the duties of citizenship, national service as well as voluntary service to the community, taking care of the sick, aged and the poor.
- xi) To stimulate the mothers and instil in the young the dignity of labour, hard work, and earning of an honest living by all healthy and able-bodied citizens.
- xii) To stimulate and start home industries by encouraging members to make, produce articles for sale.
- xiii) To promote qualities of patriotism, honesty, tolerance, and goodwill towards all mankind.
- xiv) To revive the libutfo (age set regiments) system.

- xv) To identify and conduct research into the cultural and traditional attitudes, beliefs and practices which are conducive or detrimental to the status and advancement of women with a view to eliminating or reforming them.
- xvi) To coordinate activities and programmes for women undertaken by government and non-governmental bodies in the kingdom, and to ensure that laws affecting women and children are in their best interests.
- xvii) To develop and improve the status and conditions of life for women and girls in Swaziland by:
 - a) social intercourse
 - b) self-help through service and cooperation with others.
 - c) instruction in new techniques to improve methods of production and the standard of living within each home.
- xviii) To strengthen the programmes of existing voluntary women's organisations by providing them with technical assistance and, where possible, financial assistance.
- xix) To unite to fight the three arch-enemies of humanity, viz:
 - a) ignorance,
 - b) disease,
 - c) poverty

(Mdziniso, Letter: 1999)

It is evident that while the organisation focused on the role of women as “mothers of the nation”, it was developmental in character with three-quarters of its stated objectives aimed at improving women's status, conditions of living, enhancement of women's advancement (through educational programmes and income generating activities), and promotion of their social, political

and civic awareness. Seen against the 1960s when the organisation was formed, these were lofty ideals which put women at the centre of national development for as the name *lutsango* - explicitly suggests women were to be the fence and anchor of the Swazi nation. The formation of the organisation *inter alia* aimed at seeking solutions to women's issues within the context of Swazi social milieu. Their approach can be described as womanist for they intended to seek the rights of all women within the parameters of the Swazi cultural context.

To familiarize women in Swaziland with Lutsango lwaka Ngwane's objectives, the organisation through the national organising committee (NOC) organised visits to all the constituencies (*tinkhundla*) to explain their goals, hopes and ideals. However, the visits did not take the form of one-way communication. On the contrary, there was dialogue and a great deal of listening as women expressed what they perceived to be their urgent needs. Among the needs identified was the lack of skills by girls who dropped out of school due to one reason or another, not least due to premarital pregnancies. Consequently, and on basis of the expressed needs, Lutsango lwaka Ngwane established two vocational skills centres in Mbabane, at Thokoza, and in Manzini. The centres grew out of women's efforts and planning: they raised the funds for putting up the structures and paid the teachers until a time when government agreed to help them with the paying of the teachers' salaries.

At the same time, it was felt that the girl children had no female role models to emulate. It therefore became imperative that the organisation took up the challenge of educating a limited number of girls up to the university level. Two pioneering students, one from Ezulwini and one from Shiselweni schools were selected on basis of their outstanding performance in the national primary leaving examinations and the organisation paid their high school fees. Both of them

completed Form 5 (O'level) but were not able to continue due to pregnancy and early marriage. The organisation was disturbed by the turn of events for their experiment had not yielded the expected results largely due to cultural factors. It therefore decided to focus much more on vocational training for female school-leavers. The girls who went through vocational training were offered courses that ranged from domestic science, knitting and handicraft to designing and sewing. Using these skills, some of them were able to support themselves and their families.

In 1975, a number of women from Lutsango lwaka Ngwane were chosen to represent the country at the Mexico Conference as part of the United Nations-sponsored International Year for Women. The theme of the conference was "Development, Peace and Equality". Among the resolutions reached was one that required each country to create an office for women. Energised by the resolution of the conference, the delegates on their return entered into dialogue with government on the need for such an office from where the organisation could coordinate women's concerns and developmental activities. As it turned out, however, the organisation has thus far had no office in spite of the fact that their bid had the blessing of the Queen Mother and that the request had been on the government's files for over two decades. Instead, a Gender office was created in the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1994, and Lutsango lwaka Ngwane has been represented on the Swaziland Committee on Gender and Women's Affairs (SCOGWA).

Notwithstanding the absence of an office, the organisation has continued to organise and hold women's meetings at the various community centres throughout the country with the twin aims of raising women's awareness of their contributions to national development and the need to educate the girl-children. Education for girls was particularly emphasised because as the saying goes, "when you educate a woman, you educate a nation". Nonetheless, Lutsango lwaka Ngwane has been quick to adopt new strategies according to changing exigencies of the time. For that

reason, the organisation has since 1998 been involved in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns amongst women as one of the most vulnerable groups. The organisation, and the President in particular, spent a lot of time moving from one community to another with the message of how to protect themselves against the AIDS pandemic. The President strongly held the view that “every one had a responsibility to spread the message since failure to do so had its consequences: caring for the sick until they left this world”. The AIDS awareness campaign was carried out purely on voluntary basis by the members, who held follow up meetings on monthly basis at the National Museum (Conference Room) to coordinate their activities and plan future strategies. Their major preoccupation at the dawn of the third millennium was active involvement in the fight against AIDS which was in line with their mandate to act as a fence against any threats to the nation.

The disproportionate attention given to AIDS awareness has however not distracted the movement from other objectives, like encouraging the education of girls as future torch bearers and trying to maximise women’s contribution to the task of nation building for development and protective roles have remained central to their work. Besides that, the movement has continued to articulate and enhance the role of women by creating new opportunities to fulfil the ever changing roles and expectations. Regardless of their social vision, however, the hallmark of the organisation has been the promotion of Swazi cultural heritage and to improve women’s position within it. In practical terms, members have worked closely with the Queen Mother in maintaining the fences around her official residence at Ludzidzini. They relate to her because of her ritual power and political influence which has grown considerably.

Perhaps due to its acceptance of the traditional social structures and the relational nature

of gender, Lutsango lwaka Ngwane has struck root in the village communities and therefore has a large following at grassroots level. This might be due to its loyalty to tradition. But it would like women to have a voice in the home, community and at national level. Not surprisingly the President and founding member, Mary Mdziniso, was the first woman to hold the office of the Senate Deputy President. At the same time, Lutsango lwaka Ngwane describes violence against women and children and has been working for change in the law on domestic violence. Unlike some NGOs, who often maintain a respectable distance from national events, Lutsango takes active part in all national cultural events, like the Reed Dance and Incwala. That unique relationship with the royal house is symbolised by the cutting of the reed for the fences at the royal residences. This takes place in the month of June.

Nonetheless, the organisation has encountered a number of constraints in carrying out its mission to the women of Swaziland. According to an undated paper, they have identified four major problems, namely;

- “(a) Lack of [government’s] clear cut policy on women affairs;
- (b) Lack of infrastructure;
- (c) Lack of a well-defined administrative structure; and
- (d) Lack of funding and administrative personnel”.

(Lutsango lwaka Ngwane, n.d)

Consequently, there were plans for a national coordinating office, with a board of directors, and specialised and ancillary staff to implement the organisation's policies which have thus far not been implemented. Movement towards that goal has been stalled by government bureaucracy, although negotiations with the office of the Prime Minister were still underway. It is however important to emphasize that even without the enabling facilities, the movement has continued to carry on its mission predominantly due to its dynamic leadership and ability to be creative, adaptable and willingness to confront difficulties. Moreover, Lutsango lwaka Ngwane, unlike women's political organisations like Maendeleo yaWanawake in Kenya and Umoja wawanawake wa Tanzania which became political appendages of the national political parties (Hirschmann, 1991:1684), has continued to enjoy a high degree of independence from the political establishment although it has been closely aligned to cultural sources of power. It has, on occasions, tried to voice women's concerns against exploitation and certain repressive customs and traditions within the context of the Swazi culture, and has focused on all women as a category. It can, to a certain extent, be referred to as a women's movement, although there have been some voices who have expressed concern over the organisation's lack of a constitution and absence of regular elections of office bearers (Dludlu, Interview:24-02-2000).

Leadership has not changed since the organisation's inception in 1967. The consequences have been an internal cleavage between the young and old lutsango. The young women members decry lack of vibrant activity in the organisation and cry out for changes in leadership and direction. If the young members eventually have their way, they would perhaps give the organisation new impetus in their struggle for women's rights.

Suffice to say, at the moment, that Lutsango lwaka Ngwane, the oldest women's organisation, has pursued, whether knowingly or unknowingly, an all inclusive, womanist approach which recognises women's embeddedness in the Swazi social and cultural context, and accepts the women's traditional roles of mother, wife and household manager. They observe the foremothers' ritual and survival tools. However, the organisation has albeit tentatively been trying to find ways and means of engaging the nation over women's issues and concerns. It has nonetheless been apparent that they had yet to enter critical dialogue with Swazi cultural ideology of womanhood. There was a realization that Swazi culture and cultural attitudes towards women would not change overnight and that the situation required a more subtle approach that is holistic, and yet bold enough to make a dent in the cultural glass ceiling. It is due to the tentative nature of Lutsango's working within the parameters of culture that has led to disquiet and restlessness amongst the young members who criticise the present traditional approach of socialising women to be "feminine" as defined by the traditional society. A number of them felt that the organisation had to interrogate the social construction of womanhood and issues that affect women more critically (Dludlu, Interview:24-02-2000) if it were to improve the Swazi women's quality of life. It can also be observed that the organisation had yet to critique the nature of power and distribution of resources in Swaziland. However, the organisation's strength lay in its all inclusiveness which accommodates the diversity of women in Swaziland. But its willingness to accept and work with other more liberal-oriented women's groups showed signs of potential important changes within the movement which may in course of time lead the group to take on gender equity concerns and work for institutional changes.

6.2 COUNCIL OF SWAZILAND CHURCHES

6.2.1 Origins

In 1929, the Christian missions to Swaziland formed an organisation which they named Swaziland Missionary Conference (SMC). In course of time, the organisation evolved into a “body of churches, missionary societies and other Christian organisation,” (Kasenene, 1987:100). The organic growth continued until 1964 when the Swaziland Missionary Conference transformed itself into the Swaziland Conference of Churches and comprised of churches that believed in:

- i) the Divine inspiration of the Bible;
- ii) the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Godhead;
- iii) the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, His Virgin birth, His Resurrection and His return in power and glory;
- iv) the necessity for the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, in the salvation of the lost and sinful men; and
- v) the one Holy, Universal Church, which is the body of Christ and to which all true believers belong (Article 3).

In spite of the organisation’s post-Nicene confession and evangelical accent, its doctrinal basis was strongly in the tradition of Christian exclusivism which saw no salvation outside Christianity. No doubt its perspective was condescending. Prominence was given to the inspirational nature of the Bible without due regard to interpretation and there was a narrow focus on the divinity of Christ almost in the manner of the Antiochene school. Consequently, the Conference was preoccupied with evangelism, with little, or no concern at all for the social, economic and political issues that impacted on the day to day life of the ordinary Christian. Besides, the leadership of the organisation was dominated by a handful of white missionaries, who

formed the executive arm of the Conference, monopolised power, and were unwilling to surrender their positions, authority and privilege to the indigenous church leadership. Rather than promote cohesion within the organisation, leadership was distant and separate from the member churches, and the churches remained disparate members with little or no communication between them and the Executive Committee and between churches, except for the annual General Assembly to which every member church was expected to send six delegates. However, instead of discussing substantive issues that could promote growth, the Assembly often took the form of an annual revival meeting and fellowship. At the same time there was no flow of information to the ordinary church members. The disparity between ecumenical rhetoric and reality became particularly evident in post-colonial Swaziland. After the country had attained political independence, it became clear that there was need for a reformed Conference of Churches.

The situation was exacerbated by economic and political factors. To begin with, the national economy was largely in the hands of “a significant and well organised settler bourgeoisie” (Davies, 1975:4). Commercial farming and mining were controlled by foreign interests while most Swazi lived on 63 percent of the national land which was in most cases not fertile and could not adequately meet their basic needs. (For instance, income per capita in 1977 was R 53 for a Swazi living on the nation land, while it was a whopping R 1783 for the settler community [Kasenene, 1987:125]) As a result of economic hardships more than thirty percent of active young men had to migrate to South Africa in search of employment. In a way political independence had not transformed the religious and socio-economic situation in any significant way. On the contrary, the economic dependence on South Africa continued to the extent that the Swazi economy looked like an enclave of the economic powerhouse in the neighbouring Republic of South Africa.

Another factor that bears on the founding of the Council of Swaziland Churches was the problem of refugees. The problem of refugees particularly became urgent in the late 1970s in the wake of Soweto shootings in South Africa and the civil war in Mozambique. The result of both political events was a marked increase in the influx of refugees into Swaziland. However, some member churches of the Swaziland Conference of Churches felt that the ecumenical body had neither responded adequately nor timeously to the plight of refugees. Due to the Conference's pre-occupation with evangelism, it had been willing to accept for relief only bona fide refugees that had registered with government. A number of church leaders, like Bishop Zwane of the Roman Catholic Church, were not satisfied with the state of affairs and especially with the lukewarm attitude the Conference had towards the refugees. These churches wanted immediate response and care for the refugees and practical involvement in their situation. They noted that refugees were helpless persons who needed urgent help without having to wait for the granting of refugee status by what was perceived as a slow state apparatus. They therefore decided to form a council that would carry out work which in their opinion the Conference of Churches had failed to do.

The Council of Swaziland Churches was therefore born out of three considerations: namely, the white missionary domination, need for pro-active intervention in the refugee problem, and felt need for active participation in the development activities that would help economically disadvantaged Swazi. These three priorities were instrumental in the moulding of the character of the Council. The final break with the Conference came in 1976 when leaders of the Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, namely Bishop Mkhabela, Rev. Mndziniso and Bishop Zwane respectively, decided to withdraw from Swaziland Conference of Churches. They had come to the conclusion that "SCC had no advantage for their respective churches, either in terms

of ecumenism, brotherly spirit, evangelisation or material advantage” (Kasenene, 1987:129).

The Council of Churches formally came into being on 12 August 1976. Membership was open to all churches and Christian organisations which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. According to the General Secretary (Oral Interview: 4 October 1999), the Council’s broad aims were:

- i) To strengthen member churches and to be a service arm of the church;
- ii) To help leaders of member churches to deepen their dedication and sharpen their skills in assisting their people to achieve a more responsible and rewarding human existence; and
- iii) To help rural people to gain more and more control over the forces operative in their environment (cf Sowazi, 1996:22).

Due to its concern for the economically disadvantaged Swazi, there was emphasis on development and social upliftment of the rural poor. The Council participated in development activities by enabling people to improve their quality of life. As a witness to the Lordship of Christ in every aspect of life, it was all embracing. Improving people’s quality of life was a holistic concept that embraced the physical, cultural, social and spiritual needs of the communities; it was a combination of material well-being as well as social justice. The Council especially participated in rural development on grounds that the Swazi society was mainly rural. The purpose was to meet the basic needs of the people, especially food, clothing, housing, safe-drinking water, education and health care. Although it made effort to engage in the human situation, through a number of poverty alleviation activities, it did not bring about immediate change to rural pauperisation. Needless to say, the Council targeted agriculture through

Community Assisted Projects (CAPs) and tried to help farmers to improve their subsistence agriculture to semi-commercial agricultural projects owned and ran by the rural poor. For instance, community projects were started in such areas as Lomahasha, Kaphunga, Ntondozi and Mafutseni, and they took the form of vegetable growing with two aims of raising the people's nutritional standards and some income generation. The Council's role was to provide funding, training in cooperative effort and provision of appropriate technology.

Besides active involvement in rural development, the Council of Swaziland Churches also participated in the provision of clean drinking water. Water sanitation in Swaziland has been a complex issue for there are no easy sources of and therefore no adequate water services. In a great number of rural areas, there is no piped water and many rural people have had to travel long distances to collect water from a river or well. These natural sources of water are however far from being safe from water-borne pathogens yet water is an essential element in people's life and a vital resource. The Council therefore has been involved in initiating Spring wells' protection, drilling waterholes, building storage tanks and installing stand-pipes. Particular focus has been on providing water facilities within communities and educating people on the importance of clean drinking water. This provision has been supplemented by provision of community health services, and construction of pit-latrines in populated areas as part of community health-care. It has been emphasised that one needs a healthy body to participate meaningfully in development. However, the Council encourages people-driven initiatives. To sustain the development projects, it gradually weans the communities of dependence. Emphasis is on community participation and self-reliance. The communities have therefore had to gradually contribute some money, labour and other resources in increasing proportion, and have actively participated in the maintenance of the projects. In the scheme of things, most of the funding from the donor community has been

dedicated to installation and purchase of material. Maintenance has been the responsibility of the community.

In addition, the Council has been active in promoting social welfare of the rural people through occasional relief aid to communities in need and provision of care for the refugees. In cases of crises like Cyclone Domoina in 1984 and the 1991/92 drought in Southern Africa and storms, the Council joined hands with other NGOs and government to provide relief in form of food, clothing, construction materials to offset resulting states of homelessness, starvation and deprivation. In this regard the Council ministered to the people's needs and helped them to achieve a measure of respectability and self-reliance (Sowazi, 1996:70).

Due to the important role of education in human resource development, the Council has encouraged and promoted formal education in both secular and theological studies either through loans and sponsorship or T.E.E. (Theological Education by Extension). The focus group has previously ranged from primary and secondary schools to the university and other tertiary institutions. Looking back, one notes with satisfaction that the Council has been able to help a significant number of refugees and some economically disadvantaged Swazi to obtain access to education at the University of Swaziland and other tertiary institutions like Swaziland College of Technology and the teacher training colleges of William Pitcher, Nazarene and Ngwane. In the 1981/2 academic year alone, the Council sponsored thirty such students and disbursed various amounts of money in form of loans to a number of other students (Kasenene, 1987:144-145).

Another financial service provided by the Council has been a loan scheme which began in 1982. Known as the Swaziland Ecumenical Church Loan Fund (SECLOF), the loan scheme has had the

goal of availing loans for development to groups within the member churches. These repayable loans were, as a rule, availed to groups of people that had obtained the approval and support of their own local churches.

6.2.2 Women and Development

Since its founding, the Council of Swaziland Churches has been development-oriented, and has in the past ten years (in the 1990s) been supporting a number of women's initiatives in development. The practice has been that the participating churches (namely, the African Apostolic Faith Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church, Independent Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church, the Methodist Churches of Southern Africa, Okukhanya Okutsha, and the United Christian Church of Africa) take the responsibility of helping women to organise and identify projects. The groups are then given basic training on how to start, manage and sustain a project by the Council staff. The Council's emphasis has thus far been on sustainable development skills, and often it has acted as an intermediary in raising funds for the groups, which funds may be grants or loans depending on the donor's wishes. The women's projects at the present time include poultry, piggery, sewing and gardening. Like its sister organisation, Umtapo wa Bomake, the goal has been to empower women economically. The progress of the groups has so far been modest: the members have been able to uplift their families' standard of living and to generate an income to keep the projects going. It was however conceded that there were often problems over group ownership, and that it would be ideal if the groups were to become strong enough to make the members enjoy some degree of independence.

Besides income generating activities, the Council has through its Department of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation (in collaboration with other non-governmental organisations like Umtapo, Family Life Association of Swaziland, and Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse) been active in promoting family life education. This programme has encompassed such topical issues as HIV/AIDS, Sexual violence, inheritance, and gender awareness. It has been especially realised that although there was a gradual appreciation of the need for gender equality, the rate of change in gender relations has been slow and that had not been helped by the diverse theological orientations of the member churches and the cultural resistance from the patriarchal Swazi society whose value-system has been sacralised and jealously protected. It is this conservative resistance to change that explains in part why such United Nations covenants like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have not yet been ratified.

The Council also provides counselling and legal aid to women who are deserted by men who were once their legal marital partners. Through a team of lawyers, the women are helped to seek maintenance allowances for themselves and their children. The legal assistance provided by the Council has, in a modest way, given succour to women and the children by enabling them to seek redress through due process of law (Sowazi, 1996:48). However, since the legal process is at times lengthy, the Council has at times obtained the services of lawyers who take up the cases on voluntary basis, and there has been some success. In so doing, the Council has helped in uplifting a number of women from their economic hardships. Yet at the same time, it has began a process of enlightening the women victims of abandonment that the culture of impunity has to be broken.

It is in the same spirit that the Council has, through the department of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation, organised well attended seminars and workshops on Human Rights awareness and carried out civic education. Civic education has been particularly timely and important because it leads to a new consciousness. The timing was important because the country was in the process of collecting views on the constitutional review. The Council was well aware of the significance of the Constitution and the restrictions posed by the absence of collective, group submissions. It therefore became imperative for the Council to act as a catalyst in the mobilisation of the general public, moreso, women, through member churches on the importance of active participation in the work of the Constitution Review Commission by making their submissions. It was hoped that the women's individual submissions would make their way into the draft constitution.

Similarly, it was hoped that the Commission would produce a progressive document that would reflect the will of the people and ensure the rights of women and the principles of equality for all and non-discrimination on basis of gender, sexual orientation or marital status. However, it was realised that a progressive constitution would simply be the first step towards women's legal empowerment, for the promises enshrined in the constitution had to be translated into enforceable laws lest they become rarefied. This was particularly important because at present law perpetuates gender inequality. For instance, even when a married woman has collateral to obtain a bank loan, she is constrained by law from acquiring property without the husband's consent. Nonetheless, the Gender and Development officer at the Council of Churches was aware of the added factor of cultural constraint and emphasized that "culturally men were the heads of the households and that promoted gender inequality". (Simelane, D. Interview: 4-10-99). For women to achieve gender equality, therefore, there was need for culture and religion to be more

open than they have been to change. Ms Simelane suggested that there was need for gender sensitive government policies and a progressive interpretation of the Bible. Although a number of vocal men had expressed concern over the NGOs' preoccupation with the women's cause, the Gender Officer was acutely aware of women's previous exclusion, silence and marginalisation, and that women's issues had been ignored for too long. Time had come when those issues could no longer be avoided. Women had to be brought from the margin to the centre of public discourse. However, as could have been expected, the Council member churches do not speak with one voice when it comes to gender because their theologies are far from being homogeneous. Although inspired by the concern for the poor and oppressed, there was a noticeable cleavage between mainline and independent churches.

In spite of the doctrinal differences, however, the Council as a whole saw its mission in holistic terms and has, of all ecumenical organisations in the country, been the most active in advocating for equality and social justice. Bishop Louis Ncamiso Ndlovu of the Roman Catholic Church has thus far been the dominant prophetic voice in the context of Swaziland. Unlike the Conference of Swaziland Churches which holds that the church had no role to play in the country's political developments, the Council believes that its mission was all embracing. By appealing to Jesus' own holistic ministry to the poor, the sick, the oppressed and the marginalised, the Council stood within a strong prophetic tradition which demanded working for and speaking out for peace, equality, social justice and respect for human rights. In this instance, the Roman Catholic prelate has been unflinching in challenging oppressive social practices. Although a product of conservative doctrinal training, with regard to gender issues, the Bishop has nonetheless been progressively positive in his homilies and public statements. It can therefore be argued that there are several church leaders who have been bold enough to play their prophetic

role in a changing society. Their approach has the potential of unlocking the conservative stance and move the country towards an irruption of a liberated consciousness which gives equal consideration to both men and women.

6.2.3 New Developments

It is twenty-four years since the formation of the Council and the situation has not been static. There have been significant social, economic and political changes in Southern Africa and some of these changes have had an impact on the Council and its perspectives. Among these changes has been the repatriation of refugees to South Africa and Mozambique. Subsequently, the Council has had to review its mission and vision. In the Council's own assessment:

The Council of Swaziland Churches was actually dominated by doing development work instead of enabling churches to do development work by building up their capacity; there was need to strengthen CSC's work along the lines of furthering the unity of God's church; there was need to put more emphasis on issues related to justice, peace and reconciliation as a response to Swaziland's political situation (Annual Report, 1998: v).

The re-examination of its mission was, in part, triggered off by financial considerations. It was in context of intractable financial problems and pressure from the donors that the Council resolved to restructure in 1997. By the end of June, 1999 the restructuring exercise was complete. The Council had decided to reduce its operations to three departments and reduced its personnel. In a revised statement of its mission and vision, the role of the Council was "To enable churches to develop themselves, their community and the nation spiritually and physically in a just and sustainable way" (Annual Report, 1998:1). To overcome the previous lack of cooperation between the Council and the Swaziland Conference of Churches, the Council's general assembly adopted a more open attitude and hoped to "further the unity of God's church

as the Body of Christ by developing strategies that will enable us... to become advocates of justice and peace in all circumstances and dealings” (Loc. cit).

The re-definition of the Council’s objectives meant a re-statement of its aims and goals.

The overall aims for the third millennium were:

- a. Furthering the unity of CSC member churches with the Conference and League of Churches;
- b. Promoting justice, peace and reconciliation; and
- c. Enabling churches to undertake development work.

These aims were reflected in the reconstituted departments, namely the departments of Finance and Administration, Capacity Building, and Justice, Peace and Reconciliation. It was in the department of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation that women’s issues were to be tackled.

Due to a strong emphasis on justice, the goals of the organisation were equally revisited.

They were:

1. To enhance the status of marginalised groups such as women, youths and persons with disabilities, economically, legally and politically.
2. To teach economically disadvantaged women and youth business skills that would enable them to initiate sustainable income generating projects and thus be self-reliant.
3. To promote a culture of respect for human rights and in particular women and children’s rights in the church and society.
4. To raise public awareness on the need to eradicate violence against women and children.
5. To sensitize both men and women on environmental issues.

6. To educate youth and women from member churches on family life issues, including abuse, teenage pregnancy, sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS, to raise awareness so that they can make informed decisions. (Annual Report, 1998:1).

It is significant to note that “women” are mentioned in every goal and that the ministry to women was therefore being strengthened. It was in that spirit that five workshops were held at Mbekelweni, Bikini, Gege and two in Mbabane on the contemporary issues of AIDS and gender violence. A special workshop was also organised for women pastors and pastors’ wives under the theme: “Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women”. The workshop discussed a wide range of issues that relate to the theme and concluded with “a memorial service in memory of those women who died violently at the hands of men” (Annual Report, 1998). Thus, in as far as the Council is concerned, women were no longer on the periphery of its agenda but at the very top. Hence, the adoption of the multi-sectoral approach to gender issues in form of education, promotion of gender awareness, counselling and legal aid, initiating court actions on women’s behalf, and economic empowerment.

6.3 WOMEN’S RESOURCE CENTRE

The founding of Women’s Resource Centre (Umtapo wa Bomake) in 1992 was motivated to a large extent by the social and economic circumstances that obtained at the time in Swaziland. In particular, there was the women’s minority status in both traditional and customary law which made women a disadvantaged and vulnerable social group. In the Poverty Assessment by the Poor report (1997), women focus groups identified three aspects of vulnerability. These were:

- (a) Women's minority status which denied them ownership and control, including their own labour;
- (b) Lack of social, economic and moral support experienced by women: for instance, widows and wives whose husbands desert them, women whose husbands were absent or unemployed, and female headed households could not count on the support of community institutions; and
- (c) Excessive workload imposed upon women to such an extent that they found themselves increasingly responsible for food security and education of large families.

Yet another factor that engendered the formation of the Women's Resource Centre (hereafter referred to as WRC), was the growing realisation of the limits of the state-run rural extension services which were not reaching the rural poor. Special impetus arose from the realisation that women's self-help projects (*Zenzele*) needed the help and support of a resource centre that could adequately facilitate women's self-help activities. It was reluctantly conceded that such a help could not be adequately provided by the Home Economics Department (HED) in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. This combination of factors led various organisations to come together in 1989 to form a Women's Business Resource Centre. Among these organisations were the Home Economics Department, Swaziland Business Women's Association, Swaziland Conference of Churches, the United States based Near East Foundation, and Swaziland Assembly of Non-governmental organisations. According to their "Proposal", the need and subsequent formation of Umtapo wa Bomake (WRC):

grew out of recognition that HED, working alone, could not keep pace with the needs of rural women. This was partly due to the constraints of being a government department, but also due to the sheer volume of work ("Proposal", 1991:1).

Donors were identified and two organisations (namely the Near East Foundation and Private Agencies Collaborating Together) willingly provided funding and a consultant to advise on how to organise the proposed Research Centre. The PACT consultant worked out a plan of action and a steering committee was formed to oversee the coming into being of the Women's Resource Centre. Amongst the main players in the founding of the resource centre were the Swaziland Business Women's Association, the Swaziland Conference of Churches, European Development Fund, the Near East Foundation, the Home Economics Department, the Church Agricultural Projects under the auspices of the Anglican Church, and the Swaziland Assembly of the Non-Governmental Organisations.

The overall aim of the Resource Centre was to address "common problems that women and women's groups face when starting or managing small enterprises and businesses" (Proposal, 1991). The focus was predominantly on rural women's groups. It was perhaps realised by the founding bodies that women were a catalyst in development and that they did the largest portion of work in rural areas. Furthermore, women bore the onerous responsibility of feeding, clothing, educating and looking after the families and children. While the traditional sexual division of labour placed women with "internal" responsibilities, it was clear that women would not make any progress without "improvement in the access to or control of resources they require to fulfil these responsibilities" (Ribeiro, 1979:3-4). And there was the urgent problem posed in the phenomenon of male migration into towns which left women with many responsibilities yet socially and economically, rural women were at the bottom of the social ladder and their economic activities faced increased difficulties. It was realised that in the given circumstances, women's motivation to form groups in rural areas was a "desperate need for some income, combined with a feeling

that starting a project alone would be too difficult for an individual; the group was needed for support” (Proposal; 1991).

Thus, it can be construed that right from the conception of the idea to set up the resource centre, the guiding principle was to assist those at the bottom of the social ladder who nonetheless bore great responsibility for caring for the children, the future of the Swazi nation. In a special way, the idea of a woman’s resource centre was an answer to the issues identified by Armstrong and Russell (1985:92-93). They identified factors constraining women’s economic, domestic and social roles as:

- a. Lack of money which is a basic requirement for their needs, that of their families, and for starting income generating activities.
- b. Time constraints due to women’s double burden of domestic and economic roles which affect women’s performance and health.
- c. Social attitudes and ideology which inhibit women’s earning power, their political participation and decision-making power.
- d. Lack of education and training which in turn limited women’s opportunities to learn skills that were necessary for entry into wage employment; and
- e. Unavailability to women of vital information about their rights, health care and agricultural extension.

The broad goals of the WRC were therefore meant to increase women’s income without making them dependent on donor-assistance, to provide women with a forum for their input in developmental decisions that affect their lives, and to provide a resource centre that would network with other development agencies to increase women’s effectiveness. To kick start women-s group activities, it was compelling to provide them with economic resources and support them in identifying and developing viable projects. The Centre was to act as a clearing house for technical and organisational resources. The idea was to complement government’s efforts in providing rural extension services and to help cultivate amongst women the concept of effective management of the projects. Consequently, WRC’s operations were initially oriented

towards business management skills which ingredient has become a hallmark of its work.

As indicated earlier, above, there were a number of self-help (*Zenzele*) groups at the time of the formation of the Resource Centre. These groups engaged in activities which ranged from improved health, child-care and nutrition to income generating activities, constructing schools and community water-projects. The self-help groups were voluntary associations of rural women whose goal was to raise their standard of living. In the course of time, the groups became multi-functional : they were engaged in income-generating activities like sewing, selling vegetables and handicrafts, weaving and dyeing cloth. They also had health functions which included improved sanitation, nutrition, child-care, personal hygiene and disease-prevention. At that time, the women's groups outnumbered those of men by a 2 to 1 ratio. It is possible that the women's enthusiasm was influenced by a strong Swazi tradition of sharing labour in homesteads (Armstrong and Russell, 1985:87).

In spite of their potential in improving the conditions of life and economic situation, however, the *Zenzele* groups did not receive the necessary financial support and expert supervisory guidance. They lacked systematic support to realise their potential. Thus, the founding of the Women's Research Centre in 1992 was a welcome development. As the name implies, its stated objectives were:

- a) To work for the improvement of the economic, legal, cultural and social status of women.
- b) To help existing women's groups and individual women to improve marketing and profitability of their economic activities.
- c) To provide a forum for women to discuss issues that affect them.

- d) To cooperate and support other development agencies whose aim is to establish or improve small-scale enterprises run by women (Annual Report, 1995).

Right from its formation, the Women's Resource Centre has focused on women. The catchword that best summarises its vision has been women's economic empowerment. In pursuit of this vision, the Centre has encouraged formation and promoted funding of over 65 women's groups. The underlying logic has been the belief that economic benefits would lead to improved social status of women and thereby bring about gender equality. In the words of the chairperson's report (1995), women are "oppressed by gender inequality. Women's opportunities to enjoy their rights and freedom are often hindered by societal and cultural norms and laws that discriminate against women" (Annual Report, 1995:1). To overcome the perceived constraints inherent in the social and cultural situation, the Centre hoped, besides economic empowerment, to raise women's awareness through "aggressive education and training" to enable women to participate more fully in the country's political life. This education was to focus on women and at the same time target the community leaders because gender is relational and enhancement of gender equality required men and women's change of attitude. But the linchpin of women's empowerment was in the income generating activities. As Ginindza (1989:51) observed: "Women's decision-making input is related to the income a woman earns. Greater dependency on a husband for support accounts for greater male domination".

The emphasis on women's economic power, while an underlying philosophy, was made urgent by the number of female-headed households (which was 39 percent of all households according to the 1986 Census). Another serious concern was a large number of families in which women were the sole providers, and there was an equally significant number of women who received little or no support from their husbands. The enormity of women's plight was

compelling, urgent and necessitated the timely intervention of a women's NGO. It was imperative to help women to rise from despair, self-pity, to gain their true worth, confidence and empower them to meet their household needs. It was thought that women's groups were best placed to achieve a considerable degree of social transformation and the Women's Resource Centre was there to help. The Centre set itself the task of mobilising resources and providing skills training that suited each group. While the Centre could not initiate the formation of groups, once such groups were formed, it was ready to assist them and help them overcome obstacles that were likely to hinder the success of the women's micro-projects. In the process, the centre had to play the role of a liaison body to ensure that the client groups received the necessary extra help they needed to succeed. Such help has varied from technical skills, market research and development, advice on organising to donor information.

One of the cardinal goals of the Women's Resource Centre has been to increase profitability of women's income generating projects (Iris Dlamini: Oral Interview, 15 October 1997). For an enterprise to gain growth and bring profit, it was essential that there was proper planning, implementation and appropriate marketing of the products. But this has been a tall order for rural women. As a result the Centre has been heavily involved in helping women's groups with feasibility studies, evaluation and planning by enabling women to analyse their situation, needs, priorities, problems and their solutions. It has also provided technical advice and support by assisting them with the legal requirement of registration, in obtaining funding for them, and in helping the groups to give accurate reports to the donors. For the sixty-odd groups, WRC sets goals to help them attain independence from both the donors and itself but it maintains interest in the groups' growth in an advisory role. At present however there was no group that could confidently boast of having achieved the status of independence from reliance on donor aid.

Besides technical training, the Women's Resource Centre has provided leadership and management skills for group leaders. Workshops and seminars, either on the basis of in-house training or by inviting external consultants, have focused on production, quality control, evaluation, planning, goal setting, delegation of authority, role of office bearers and consultative leadership. Crucial issues like business management, records keeping, accounts, pricing and marketing have also been discussed at these meetings. Through the workshops, women leaders have been exposed to basic elements of good business management since their projects are open to market forces of stiff competition, supply and demand, profit and loss, and accountability to group members. It has been in the crucial area of research and marketing that the Centre's personnel have played a pivotal role.

It is appreciated that the failure of the UN-sponsored Women-in-Development (WID) initiative was partly due to the marketing strategy; the women's produce had been a monopoly of men and women made little if any profit. In contrast, the few men who controlled the marketing of the products had made profit out of the little work they had done. This precedent has meant that the Resource Centre had to move away from marginalising the primary producers by involving them in marketing their produce. The Centre's marketing officers have had the responsibility of helping the groups to assess the markets available and their needs. Market assessment has been very significant especially before any project could start. Projects without marketing potential have often been dropped in favour of projects with comparative advantage. For instance, one group was dissuaded from undertaking making brooms due to lack of transport and the unreliable nature of the grass that was to be used. The group eventually decided to make uniforms for two primary schools in the location, a business in which transport needs were

minimal. The advantage of making uniform was that there was a sure market and a steady demand for the school uniforms. Besides, the community had experienced the plough-back benefits in form of low cost of school uniforms and payment in instalments.

However, the most observable bottleneck in market development has been lack of quality control. Often there is an oversupply of vegetables and yet at other times these produce have been difficult to obtain. This scenario might be due to the scarcity of land resource available to the women which has meant that women have had to do what is possible with the little that is available, at the risk of diminishing returns. During the period of scarcity, the groups have unfortunately had to lose the market that they had already established. This state of things has often been compounded by the availability of high quality produce from commercial farms in South Africa which compete for the same market, and have had the effect of undermining women's centrality in marketing of vegetables. No doubt women on small farms have suffered disadvantage due to their inability to maintain the crop throughout the year. There are also peak seasons when family responsibilities require women to move away from group projects to household work, most especially during the sowing, weeding and harvesting times (Iris Dlamini, Oral Interview: 15-10-1997).

6.3.1 Social Advocacy and Gender Sensitization

The most promising feature of the Women's Resource Centre thus far has been in the area of social advocacy which began in September 1996. It began as a voluntary provision of legal awareness education and gradually grew to become one of the departments at the Centre, with a trained legal officer. One of the methods used in raising public awareness has been radio plays and road shows. Each play lasts thirty-minutes and was broadcast on Radio Swaziland in SiSwati

under the sub-title “*Tentele Make*” (Woman Do it Yourself) twice a week, on Tuesdays and Saturdays at 15:15 and 19:30 respectively. To ensure the play was heard by a significant section of the population, it featured for two weeks before a new play was introduced. Among those featured have been dramas on domestic violence, inheritance rights, and environment. There were plans also to launch yet another radio programme entitled “Onward Women” (*Embili boMake*) and its focus was to be gender.

Besides promoting gender awareness, through plays and radio discussions, the Centre organised gender sensitization and awareness seminars and workshops for both men and women, at both district and national levels. The drive reached its peak in November 1997 with seminars for the traditional ruling elite (that is the chiefs, traditional leaders and other leaders of opinion). Within two months, over 190 leaders had attended the seminars (S. Shongwe: Oral Interview, 26 March 1998). The rationale behind the seminars was to make both men and women aware of the various forms of gender inequalities and to critique the socio-cultural practices that have negatively impacted on women’s participation in decision-making and community development. It has been through these seminars that customary laws and practices that impinge on women’s access to and control of the productive resources like land, cattle and credit have been discussed and contested. The exercise has often provoked heated debates. The ire expressed mainly by the chiefs, who are predominantly male, during the meetings has particularly been revealing for it has shown that they fully grasped the issues at stake, and that they were far from embracing the new thinking on gender. On the contrary, the traditional male elite contended that gender differences were God-given and were quick to point to the Yahwist account of creation (Genesis 2: 4-25). This essentialist attitude to gender however does make the struggle against male privilege very difficult. Given the power of religion as a means of social control, the task becomes complicated.

Thus, in spite of its potential, gender sensitization has become a hotly contested issue but it remains a realistic confrontation of the critical question of gender inequality. The dialogical encounters will gradually create enough social capital to change people's attitudes towards gender. Changed attitudes would in turn have positive impact on such traditional practices as bridewealth, arranged marriages, widow-inheritance, inheritance, women's mobility and access to economic resources.

The resistance expressed by the traditional leadership particularly came to the fore during seminars on domestic violence, rape, and inheritance. While male attendants were quick to decry the new ideas and discussion of what is considered personal issues in public, the women participants were reluctant to speak about such issues due to a culture of silence and denial. "Silence and denial show that the traditional practices and sex roles have been internalised as if they were divinely given and therefore immutable" (Sizakele Shongwe, Oral interview: 26 March 1998). It was the considered view of the Women's Resource Centre that Swazi women were by and large still at the denial stage and would need much more encouragement if they were to speak out. No doubt denial arises from a social engineering that inculcates secrecy and confidentiality on what transpires between men and women. This cultural reproduction has however meant that rape and domestic violence against women has been rising and yet it goes unreported most of the time (*Swazi News*: 23 August 1997). In legal terms, it has meant that women still have to overcome the "minority status" syndrome that has moulded their mind-set if they are to speak out. To do so, however, will require courage and readiness to put up with unsavoury remarks like being called "unSwazi" (an expression that threatens ostracization for those who do not conform with main stream Swazi traditional and customary practices). That a person is unSwazi has been an expression used at all levels of society to stifle dissent.

Another issue that has come within the purview of the seminars has been the practice of bridewealth (*emalobolo*). Bridewealth, in spite of its social functions, has had negative effect on gender relations more especially when it is construed to mean transfer of a woman's rights and reproductive functions to the husband and his kin (WLSA, 1998:175). The Swazi Marriage Act, 1964, clearly discriminated against women by investing the marital power in the husband. Marital power means:

the power of control that a husband exercises over his wife during the subsistence of the marriage. More specifically, it refers to the husband's control over his wife's person, his headship of the family, and his powers of administration of the joint estate of the spouses as head of the family (Wanda, 1991:67).

Moreover, as long as marital power exists, it "subordinates the wife to guardianship of her husband and leaves the wife with very limited active legal capacity" (Loc. cit) In former days, it meant that a husband had a right to chastise the wife, and ability to control her mobility. Today a wife may enjoy more freedom than was previously possible. Nonetheless, Section 24 of the Marriage Act (on consequences of marriage) has been prone to manipulation; much to the disadvantage of women. In effect, there is a formal legal discrimination in favour of men in both customary and civil rites marriage unless the couple had opted out of marriage in the community of property and excluded the marital power and proprietary rights. Without antenuptial agreement to exclude the consequences of Section 24, a woman's status remains that of a minor and payment of *lobolo* appears to confirm a man's rights over his wife and children born in that marital relationship.

Therefore the creation of a Gender Desk by Umtapo and its work of gender sensitization have been crucial. Unlike the Republic of South Africa which has since 1994 had progressive laws that are gender-sensitive and in which gender occupies a high place in national public discourse, gender issues in Swaziland have been peripheral to national policies and public discourse. Consequently, gender has not received adequate attention. Hence, the critical relevance of the Women's Resource Centre's social advocacy and gender sensitization seminars. Given the cultural resilience of the Swazi value system and the privileged male elite's appeal to tradition and religion, it no doubt has been a herculean task to try and make a dent in the conservative character of the community. One major ideological obstacle has been in the enculturation of the Gospel most especially amongst the Zionist Independent Church and the ultra-right wing of the evangelical churches who give literal interpretation to the Bible. The Zionist Churches who draw their inspiration from both the Old Testament and Swazi traditions constitute the majority of the church membership and are heavily influenced by the patriarchal values and norms. Moreover, even the liberal churches (like the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Methodist Churches) seem reluctant players who do not advocate a radical social transformation in gender relations, although they fully support the Legal Aid clinic run by the Council of Swaziland Churches.

However, there was a ray of hope that the Resource Centre and the Council of Swaziland churches would mobilize adequate women's interest in the work of the Constitutional Review Commission to have an impact on the Commission's constitutional recommendations. Realising the crucial importance of the work of the Commission, the two organisations began their own programmes of civic education as the most practical way of mobilising women to make their submissions to the Commission. On top of that the Women's Resource Centre carried advertisements, in both English and siSwati, either on the front or back cover of the *Times of*

Swaziland on gender awareness and women's rights in the hope that it would enlighten the public. It has been a monumental task but an important challenge to women to stand up for their rights and for men to respect women's rights.

To recap, the Women's Resource Centre has had a broad approach to women's rights. Its personnel have dedicated their efforts to transforming the women's economic condition and social position through a number of ways: economic empowerment, social advocacy, gender sensitization and education. All ways, however diverse, focus on giving women power and a voice by creating a new awareness and by deliberately exposing and critiquing any traditional practices and patriarchal ideology that has been previously used to justify the present relations. To demonstrate its resolve to deconstruct dominant traditions, the Centre has through a long and arduous process negotiated its way into commercial farming, and thereby became the first NGO to lease land from government in its own right. That the Centre was able to negotiate direct access to a 7000 hectare farm, in 1995, without going through the traditional process of pledging loyalty to a chief (to *khonta*) has been a revolutionary example of a liberated consciousness for the Women's Resource Centre. The women were able to access and possess a large tract of land for development without the mediation of men. Possession of land previously restricted to male entrepreneurship was subverted peacefully. That feat has been one step towards the deconstruction of possession rights. It has been a novelty and will act as a symbol of women's empowerment. If successfully developed to its optimum, it would definitely help recapitalise the Women's Resource Centre and maintain women's programme of activities. It has been a shining example of what organised force of women can achieve.

6.4 SWAZILAND ACTION GROUP AGAINST ABUSE

A non-governmental and non-denominational organisation, the Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (hereafter referred to by its more popular acronym of SWAGAA) was launched on 12 October 1990, and had a membership of 200 women and 20 men from all walks of life in 1999. It had grown from an organisation run by voluntary staff to having its own personnel of four, namely the Coordinator, Programme Manager (Counselling), Programme Manager (Education), and the Administrator. To augment the work of staff, there were eight volunteers.

SWAGAA, according to its stated objectives, was “committed to the eradication of violence in all its forms, particularly against women and children, ... especially in the form of domestic violence, child abuse and rape” (SWAGAA, 1994:1). The organisation’s broad and long term aim was to pursue peaceful and harmonious living in the Swazi family through sensitizing the wider public to the problems faced by the most vulnerable groups (namely women and children), through networking with other NGOs, education, counselling and social advocacy. Prominent among the organisation’s priorities has therefore been the twin aims of “creating awareness on the problem of abuse through education and advocacy; and to establish a counselling service, including a telephone help-line and [provision of temporary] sanctuary for abused persons” (Shilpa Patel, Interview: 1 August 1996). Focus has been on providing support to abused persons and creating awareness about abuse and its denigrating effects on children and women. SWAGAA holds that it is essential that they participate in and advocate for legal reform in Swaziland to ensure that abuse and domestic violence were neither condoned nor left as silent issues while women and children continue to suffer and die (SWAGAA, 1994:1).

With particular regard to the organisation's perception of human wrongs, SWAGAA conceived domestic violence, wife battery, forced marriages and rape as the major forms of denial and violation of women's rights. In the organisation's short existence, it has been able to produce a number of reports on Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the home (1994), Let's Make it a World of Safe Living (1998), and Perceptions on Child Sexual Abuse in Swaziland (2000), which were handed over to various government ministries and leaders of opinion. For instance, the 1994 report found that the majority of women surveyed on domestic violence saw culture in which women were treated as minors, from the cradle to the grave, as the most decisive factor. Polygyny was seen as one other source of women's abuse, a term which SWAGAA defined in a holistic way to include physical, moral, economic and social abuse.

According to SWAGAA, the Swazi culture inculcated subservience among women to male authority and even made an allowance for wife-beating as an acceptable way of chastisement. Nonetheless, this cultural concession to men had been abused and pushed to the extreme limits. Consequently, a number of women had been battered, gravely injured and physically handicapped. Some had reportedly died as a result of injuries inflicted upon them by their own husbands. According to SWAGAA's 1994 report:

Swazi men have been heard to say, with pride, that a wife is synonymous with his first child and should therefore be chastised appropriately if she should err. Otherwise how will she learn who the master of the home is (SWAGAA, 1994:2).

Unfortunately, violence against women has often gone unreported because women have been socially engineered to believe and feel that they contribute to their abuse. As a result there was a veil of silence that surrounded rape and abuse, which silence may be rooted in cultural reproduction. For instance, just before and at marriage, women were seriously counselled above

all things to respect and love their husbands regardless of their husband's behaviour and to endure the pain and suffering that may be experienced in marriage because that was their lot. It would appear that society had encouraged and idealised women's self-sacrifice, acquiescence and resignation. As Dlamini (in Sienart, 1994:90) has shown the old women who were in charge of preparing a bride would emphasize that "in marriage, she will encounter many problems, and is expected to exercise a lot of patience in order to make a success of it. The many warnings given by the experienced, old women created a pessimistic attitude towards marriage. It is not surprising that the Swazi woman equates marriage with death". When a woman was being smeared with red ochre (*libovu*), she used to weep and sing:

Ngaphum' ekufeni; ngangen' ekufeni
Yebabe ngitawufa mine
Chorus: Yehha!
Yebabe ngitayifel'inkonto,

(Which translated into:)

I am from death moving into death,
Oh my father I will die.
O my!
Oh my father I will die for marriage (Sienart, 1994:90).

Dlamini goes on to explain that it was due to the hardships that were associated with marriage which made women to refer to it using a death metaphor. A woman felt like she was knowingly committing suicide, which turned out to be true when the husband's love for her faded, a practice that has at times been instigated by the husband's family. According to Dlamini (1994:91):

Swazi society is not happy with a man who continues to show his love for his wife. Such a man is ridiculed. He is told that the woman has put a love-portion in his food. He then withdraws all his love from this woman so as to be considered a real man by his family and the society .

The turn of events usually made the woman feel hurt but whenever she tried to raise the matter with her in-laws, she would get no sympathetic hearing. Instead of being supportive, the in-laws would ostracise her. She felt angry and bitter but could not change the situation, and so had to communicate her feelings in satirical songs which did not however alter the situation, because:

Her feelings are not respected. The woman is probably expected to be happy with her status and not worry about the husband. At this stage she has seen that the contextual meaning of marriage is totally different from the illusions she had during the courtship stage. It is a pity that traditionally the woman was forbidden from talking about her marriage situation to people outside her family (Dlamini, 1994:93).

In part, that explains the Swazi women's reluctance to report physical abuse and domestic violence. That reluctance further explains the small number of reported cases in the SWAGAA report of 31 cases in Hlathikulu, 109 in Manzini, and 33 court cases in Manzini (SWAGAA, 1994:5). It has been largely due to the mindset that has been moulded along the traditional gender expectations that women have resisted reporting cases of domestic violence. It is especially revealing to find that some women contributed to violence against women. One woman placed it on record when she said that:

Women forget their place as women; they want to have the last word, and yet it is good for a woman to obey her husband and bow to his authority. (SWAGAA, 1994:6).

The anonymous woman's attitude and the role played by the old generation of women in ensuring conformity to tradition represents a cultural conservatism which breaks down the sisterhood of women due perhaps to the generation gap. Consequently, women who are a powerful force in the country were bound to encounter double opposition in their bid for gender equality from both men and women who hold tenaciously to their cultural heritage. Nowhere has

this been more visible than in the practice of polygyny.

Although Swazi culture allows polygyny largely as a status symbol, polygynous marriages can be typified as one way in which men manipulated women and often turned women against women. In some African countries, a man could not take on another wife without the tacit consent of the first wife. More often than not, it was the first wife who, in light of the heavy demands of raising children, working the land, caring for old parents-in-law, and related domestic chores, suggested that it would be a good idea if the husband would take on a second wife to ease the burden of work. It must be borne in mind, however, that women and children have been traditionally a source of cheap labour. At the same time, there were socially recognised grounds for taking on a second, third, ... wife. For instance, if the couple had no children, or in case of widow-inheritance.

Nonetheless, this time-tested institution easily played into the hands of men who exploited it to mete out emotional pain and economic deprivation onto women whom they felt they no longer loved. In a number of cases, a man simply walked out of the house to live with or to marry another woman, without any adequate arrangements for the maintenance of his first wife and children. The act often led to physical, emotional, economic abandonment and neglect of a husband's commitment and responsibility to wife and children which resulted in infliction of grievous emotional and economic harm to the woman and children. The woman was literally left alone with the onerous task of fending for herself and children, yet she had no independent means of livelihood. Unlike those olden days where it was a social norm for a man to maintain both the first and subsequent wives and their children, there has been an increasing number of men (notwithstanding their educational standards) who on entering a second marriage neglect the first

family.

Criminal desertion of one's family, however, reflects ignorance of the marriage laws by the male partner. Nowhere has this been demonstrated than in the case of Flavius Motsa. According to Alexia Mavimbela (Oral Interview: 9 October 1998), Motsa, not real name, a Swazi male, was pursuing his doctoral studies in Europe when he met a non-Swazi woman who was abroad on a masters programme in computer science. As fate would have it, the two fell in love and arranged for a church wedding outside Swaziland. On completion of their studies, they both came to and resided in Swaziland where they held responsible positions. They lived happily together for four years, and all of a sudden there was rumour of a court action to declare Motsa's marriage to Catherine null and void, because he had been previously married to a Swazi woman according to customary rites, and they had three children. On entering the second marriage, Motsa had completely neglected the first wife and children, and the poor woman had resigned herself to living in perpetual poverty while her legitimate husband lived in luxury.

It was not until a group of concerned women intervened that the matter was heard in a court of law, way back in 1994. The court found against Motsa, and declared the second marriage null and void since it was entered into during the subsistence of another legally valid marriage. (Swazi law does not allow a man who has married under customary law to marry another wife under civil rites regime). Instead of coming home to apologise to Catherine for having been economic with truth when they had first met, the man simply went home after the court ruling and gave Catherine a week's ultimatum within which she had to remove herself and her property from the government house that the two had lived in, with their two young kids. He threatened Catherine with violence if she failed to comply yet she was an innocent party and had

no idea of the basis of the outburst. But the rumour mill was hard at work, and within two days she learnt of the court action. She then applied for a copy of the judgement, packed all her belongings and migrated to another country with her two children.

The Motsa case not only demonstrated inadequate understanding of the law by both men and women, it also showed more than anything else that the aggrieved party, the first wife, while resentful of the husband's second marriage, was unaware, or incapable, of seeking means of redress either in form of legal separation on grounds of the husband's unfaithfulness and bigamy or demanding for a maintenance allowance. The incident again showed how women and children became victims of men's selfish designs. In the incident, two women were grossly wronged and set on a collision course. At the same time, the first wife was willing to acquiesce to an abhorrent situation due to the received tradition which inculcated subservience and deference to male authority regardless of the violation of the law. It has been only a handful of women elite that has been able to initiate divorce either in national courts (which deal with disputes arising out of Swazi law and custom), or the High Court, and these have been women of substance. For instance, Dr Zwane successfully filed a divorce suit against the husband (who was a cabinet minister) for sexual unfaithfulness, in July 1996 (P. Mthethwa, Oral Interview: 27 July 1996).. In February, the following year, yet another highly educated woman had obtained a divorce decree against the husband on grounds of marital unfaithfulness and domestic violence. The woman to whom we shall give the pseudonym of Sonto was an articulate, employed and hard working woman, who had built her own house, owned a car, and supported the family. Unfortunately, the husband was unemployed. Perhaps due to the husband's deflated male ego (due to his dependence), the woman was frequently physically abused to the extent that she at one time sustained injuries and was in hospital for a number of weeks while the husband enjoyed joy-rides.

The interesting thing about that wife abuser was his apparent gentlemanly public image.

Similar stories abound. Hlobisile Hlophe, not real name, has been a successful woman in the banking industry, and owns a house and a car (Cynthia Zwane: Oral Interview, 27 July 1996). But the husband had been unemployed. To give him a semblance of employment, the wife decided that the family car would be used as “a taxi for hire”, after he had dropped the children and wife at school and place of work, respectively. The idea worked successfully for two years, and they bought another second-hand car. Gradually, however, unknown to the woman, the husband began operating a private bank account, and the income from the two cars declined. One of the cars had to be sold for it was thought that the financial losses were due to the second car that was driven by an employee. However, that was not all. The man went to the extent of suggesting that the remaining car needed new parts which had to be obtained from the Republic of South Africa. He would then go for several weeks and return without any spare parts for the car but with the money finished. After several such stories, the wife suspected there was something unusual happening and began to enquire about what was really happening to her husband only to find that he was already living with another woman, in Pretoria. Here was a case of a successful woman, in her profession, being sucked economically by a husband who failed to provide mutual help, comfort and love to a partner who was the family’s lifeline.

Thus examples abound of some men who, in various ways, abused their wives. However, it would not be safe to conclude that it is only men who have walked out of marriages. There have been a few women who have had to walk out of marriage due to domestic violence, lack of economic support and neglect; they entered new marital relationships which have turned out to be more fulfilling (Frances Dlamini, and Busi Mina, Interview: 26 February 1996). This practice

has particularly affected customary marriages. Although custom requires that such women had to return and mourn their husbands, in the event of death, the number of women who were determined to defy what they considered an oppressive tradition has been on the increase since men did not have to mourn women they had separated from.

It was surprising that in the several extended interviews with women who were separated from their first marriage partners and were living in their second marriages that they were unanimous in saying that they were happier than before and had been progressive in the new relationships. One of them had gone into a small private business venture, obtained land through the second husband, and had put up a beautiful house. Besides, she had been able to put her daughters, from the previous marriage, through formal education. In 1998, one daughter had graduated from the University of Swaziland with a degree in Commerce and was proud of her “new dad” (Ginindza Thoko, Interview: 25-2-1999). Nonetheless, there have also been reports of children who have been less fortunate after the breakdown of their parents’ marriages. Some of them continued to live with their less able relatives, most often their grandmothers, aunts or uncles, who had family burdens of their own. This group of children often grows up without the necessary parental emotional support and care in spite of the welcome willingness of members of the extended families to provide for their basic needs. Some of them have turned into street kids.

The work of SWAGAA in promoting women’s voice against violence and abuse has therefore been a welcome development in the lives of women. The organisation has particularly managed to make its presence and outreach visible by sensitizing people to the problem of domestic violence through education. This has been done by using radio broadcasts, workshops, information bulletins, and reports. For instance, in 1997, SWAGAA organised a workshop on

Gender violence for police officers, public prosecutors, media and hospital personnel. The major thrust of the workshop was to help the target groups to appreciate the stark reality of sexual violence against women, and together to work out strategies of tackling the problem. Within a short time, after the workshop, the spin-off from the workshop has been a sympathetic police response to women who go to the police to report incidents of abuse and rape. It has been the policy of SWAGAA to refer victims of domestic violence to the police after they had been counselled. In the estimation of the organisation, it has been important to coordinate their work with victims of rape and domestic violence with the police because subsequent prosecutions have been more successful with little, if any, possibility of women pulling out of the case in middle of the legal process. Another beneficial outcome of the workshop has been the enthusiasm shown by the media houses in reporting cases of domestic violence and rape. In so doing, the media has brought what has previously been a private issue into the public domain. The newspapers, like the *Times of Swaziland*, have particularly done a tremendous job in highlighting, in their columns, the plight of abused women and girl-children. These media exposures have slowly but surely made violence against women a topical, even if controversial, public issue. Rape and violence against women have become a national issue (SWAGAA, 1998:1).

Besides education through the print media and workshops, SWAGAA has hosted a number of radio programmes aimed at raising awareness. Often the organisation has secured time on Radio Swaziland and on Swazi Television for talk-shows, discussions, and phone-in programmes on domestic violence, wife battering, and rape, and it has a number of “one-minute” broadcasts at peak hours when short slogans are used. Take for instance:

Women’s rights are human rights, do not abuse them.
Having sex with a child below 16 is rape even if she is your girl friend.

The combined approach has so far yielded results. This is borne out of the fact that 297 women “came for counselling between August 1997 and March 1998, a 700 percent increase over the previous number. The increase in clientele has been described by SWAGAA as “good and bad at the same time. The bad part is that there is a lot of violence especially against women in Swaziland. The good part is that the people were now willing to come up and discuss their traumatic experience” (SWAGAA, 1998:14). The unexpected response led the organisation to open up an additional counselling service at Mankayane. However, perhaps due to the remote nature of the location, only ten clients made use of the Mankayane service in a year. But the numbers for Manzini and Mbabane continued to rise from 50 clients per month in 1998 to 72 clients per month in 1998. By 2000, the number had increased to 90 clients per month (SWAGAA, 2000:11-12). The counselling offered included unburdening the victims of the load of anger, hatred and low esteem, court preparation and referral to doctors and police. The victims felt betrayed and worthless. The role of counsellors had therefore been to lighten the burden and help women to overcome the culture of silence, and to make informed decisions on what course of action to take. When a decision had been made, the matter would be referred to a doctor for examination, treatment and report or to the police for possible legal action.

Due to the prevalence of child sexual abuse which has been “rife among children aged six (6) and below” (SWAGAA, 2000:9), the organisation embarked on social activism and advocacy. For instance, SWAGAA personnel and membership have held concerted consciousness-raising visits to schools and talked to both teachers and students, in primary and high schools, and to university students, as well as parents during the Parent-Teacher Association meetings. Their basic message has been that children were often abused by people that the children knew and trusted, who usually have been relatives and friends. The year 1999 particularly stood out as the

year when children from a significant number of schools around Manzini were mobilised to highlight the evils of child sexual abuse when they marched through the streets of Manzini carrying placards. That same year, SWAGAA carried out research on child abuse and submitted its report in January 2000, to the Ministry of Health and Social Services for possible action. Thus, there has been a growing realisation that SWAGAA needed to “extend the counselling services to survivors of child abuse because ... the counselling model [in vogue] was geared towards adults” (Ibid:11).

Besides including child abuse in its ambit, SWAGAA had underway plans to move advocacy to the country’s legislators, religious leadership, and government. It was felt that through lobbying the legislators, there was a possibility of some form of legal reform. Lobbying would also be extended to the cabinet which has been the main initiator of national policy. It was hoped that successful lobbying of the cabinet would most likely lead to policy initiatives, notwithstanding that wheels of change in Swaziland tend to move slowly. At the same time, the organisation planned to take advocacy to the church leadership for it had been intimated by some respondents that religion was one of the greatest stabilisers in marriage. As one interviewee put it, “Because we are a Christian family, we are committed to family peace and unity; and we try to keep family matters between the two of us” (SWAGAA, 1994:6). It was this perceived usefulness of religion as a moderating influence that the leadership of SWAGAA hoped to tap into to influence church leaders to address the problem of domestic violence. It was noted that the organisation enjoyed a cordial relationship with the Council of Churches and that a number of churches belonging to the Council could be persuaded to act as a catalyst in the national debate on domestic violence, conflict resolution, and prevention of domestic violence.

That said, however, the organisation had a mammoth task ahead. It had yet to establish a legal aid scheme for women who became victims of physical abuse and rape. Besides the financial constraint, one of the reasons given for the absence of legal aid was the fear of social and political backlash, real or imagined, from a conservative male elite at a time when SWAGAA was still in its embryonic stages of growth. But the organisation had the advantage of having amidst its members some legal practitioners who were willing to provide free legal counselling with a probability that they would be equally willing to take up some of the serious cases for litigation on voluntary basis. The major consideration would be the victim's ways and means, or the ability to pay the legal costs. It was still hoped that SWAGAA would, in due course, be able to raise adequate funds to establish a legal desk and with the help of women in the legal profession (who have been contemplating forming their own legal association) consider setting up a fully-fledged legal aid scheme.

On reflection, SWAGAA has made progress towards making domestic violence a national issue. But it has yet to break out of towns into the rural areas where poverty, physical abuse of women, and domestic violence were reportedly common. At present, the focus has been on women who have been able to come to the organisation for help which in turn suggests that these were likely to be enlightened women who at least knew of the existence of the organisation. One hopes there would come a time when it would be able to reach out to those women in need who may not know of the organisation's existence.

6.5 THE LONE STRUGGLER

While there are various women's organisations that have sought gender equality through varied methods, there have also been outstanding women who have fought for space and a voice almost single-handedly, like Samson in ancient Israel. One such a woman that stood out towards the close of the twentieth century was Lomasontfo Dlodlu, a woman from humble rural background, very traditional and a widow, who evoked disparate responses from the media and her community. To her community, she was a "friend of the poor" and the newspapers simply dubbed her "Firebrand".

Honourable Lomasontfo Dlodlu, the parliamentary representative for Maphalaleni constituency had never been through formal education and yet she outmanoeuvred a field of eight men and another woman to win her seat in the October 1993 parliamentary elections where she represented nine chiefdoms. Previous to her entry into Parliament, she worked as a community social motivator and did attend to the sick, disabled and orphans in her constituency. As an MP, one would have expected her to be economically well-to-do but she went into deficit simply because she tried to help most people in need who came to her for assistance.

She shot into prominence and won great admiration when, on 4th March 1996, the Minister of Housing and Urban Development authorised the semi-private Water and Sewerage Corporation to disconnect stand-pipes which provided water to several communities. One of the communities affected was Msunduzwa where the MP had been temporarily staying. She was moved into action. The following day, she canvassed parliamentary support and on a point of privilege demanded that the relevant minister had to explain why such a basic need like water had been disconnected in a number of communities and moved successfully that the Minister concerned should order the re-

connection of the water-supply before he was allowed to proceed with explanations. Supported by several MPs, she succeeded in having the Minister leave the House and only returned after he had ordered that water to the affected communities be re-connected. And it was. That very afternoon, the people of Msunduzi had their water-supply restored. Thus, in spite of her disregard for parliamentary niceties, she had perceived the situation correctly and acted timeously on the behalf of the communities.

The uniqueness of Honourable Lomasontfo Dlodlu is that she was a woman who knew rural life and identified with her rural constituency. During her tenure in Parliament (1993-1998), she showed a holistic understanding of her community's needs. In her own words:

During my term of office in parliament, telephone lines have been installed. A clinic is in the pipeline. But the needs keep on growing, for instance we need roads, ... we need to upgrade the pre-school into a primary school [and]... we need bridges and more clinics (*Times of Swaziland*, 24 March 1996).

Traditional and conservative she might have been but Honourable Lomasontfo Dlodlu argued for social respect for women. She argued that:

Women must not be treated as minors. If your husband passes away, you have a duty to bring up the children as a woman, but how can you do so if you cannot approach banks for a loan? I am not saying that we should be absolutely equal to men, but we should be respected (*Times of Swaziland*: 24 March 1996).

No other woman, either in Parliament or Senate (a total of six women) had been as successful in articulating the community needs and demanding redress as Dlodlu. That might point to the fact that Honourable L. Dlodlu was an old woman who was respected because of her age and with age comes wisdom rather than for her beauty and decor which other women legislators felt obliged to protect. When people were denied their basic rights, she was righteously angry and outspoken, and had on occasions to pay transport costs for women to go to government offices

to demand answers to their longstanding problems, whether that problem was a feeder road, stand-pipe, or the absence of a bus service to their community.

6.6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this chapter has discussed the work of four non-governmental organisations and their contribution to Swazi women's search for gender equality. Broadly speaking the four organisations represent a multifaceted approach to the search for equality. Their efforts have ranged from acceptance of the dominant cultural definition of womanhood to women's economic empowerment and social advocacy. These diverse efforts show Swazi women's growing awareness of their material conditions and position in society and the need to transform the traditional roles. On the one hand, this has been through women's economic activity which is premised on the principle that women's economic power leads to empowerment and having a voice in the family decision-making process. Advocacy and promotion of gender awareness, on the other hand, are relatively a new initiative which has nonetheless the potential of deconstructing the ideological base of the present gender relations. It is therefore important that gender sensitization has to be sustained if women's strategic needs are to be addressed. Moreover, women's organisations have to be acutely aware that in spite of their moderate gains, more especially towards economic empowerment, the majority of the active female population, particularly at the grassroots level, continues to be less organised and confined to work in the informal sector.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN WOMEN'S SEARCH FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Across the passage of time, the Swazi women have adopted different strategies of coping with their situation. One of these situations has been the experience of an asymmetry of power. Their response to the situation has often taken different forms according to the exigencies of the time. This study has shown the various efforts, progress and success of these efforts during the pre-colonial and colonial times, and in contemporary times. In spite of the differences in time and modes of the struggle, there are a number of similarities and differences. The similarities in the approach show the continuity in the search, while differences in strategies indicate changes. This chapter brings the threads together and discusses continuity and change in the women's quest for equality, and critiques the ambivalent role played by religion.

7.1 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

As has been shown in the previous discussion, especially in chapters 2 and 3, the traditional role of women in the Swazi society was predominantly determined by their biological function of being mothers and child-bearers. As a result, girls were culturally engineered to grow up to play these social roles. But women also had a place in religion, either as participants in ritual or as religious savants. These positions were partly given by society, or usually by transcending the traditional definitions of womanhood. The role of religious personages, that is as mediums, diviners and healers, was acquired often by means of self-transcendence and by

intervention of the spirits. In their role of mediums, diviners and healers, women had overcome their biological function and enjoyed unequalled social status. Hence, the new possibilities. The changed pattern of life meant that there was no one specific role for women since women could transcend their biological selves to engage in acts that liberated them from the traditional roles and they were no longer restricted to the primary roles of mothers and wives (King, 1993:73).

In their new positions, there were two significant changes. The new positions bestowed upon them autonomy and independence in their actions, a voice , sense of satisfaction, and strength. There was also an internal change which took the form of a remoulding of experience and a new consciousness. Their voices were heard either as of authoritative specialists or as mediums through whom the ancestors spoke. Consequently, their positions were respected as sacred and above reproach. They were luminaries who brought the spirit world into the mundane life of individuals. Therefore their contribution to women's struggle was far more significant than their often ostracised functions. They were open to the supernatural world and agents of health, spiritual and physical well-being. They placed themselves at the disposal of both their communities and spirits that indwelt them. They were, on reflexion, to be understood as agents of social transformation, and often exercised power and authority in a non-patriarchal manner. Their ability to overcome socio-cultural limitations usually demanded courage and unshakeable confidence. They underwent a lengthy process of training and on completion of the arduous training became respected experts in their own areas of specialisation. They had a voice which was previously muted by society. They were then able to pronounce healing words and to prescribe actions that would restore wholeness. Their advice was always taken seriously for it came from beyond and promised health and well-being.

As mediumship and healing activities show, women's participation was greater when religion and society were less differentiated. Hence, the social recognition of the religious savants' power and authority. Their positions in society were culturally legitimated and acknowledged as vital to the wholeness of society. Therefore the widespread presence of women as healers, diviners and mediums conferred on them social importance in society. Unlike founded and historical religions which traced their origins to individual men and were characterised by a male-female dualism in which male personages predominated in leadership, the traditional religions displayed a high degree of complementarity which was however often imbued by ambiguity due to the hallow and awe that surrounded the African feminine mystique. In this context, religion was life-giving and empowering to a significant number of women, which was a departure from the popular conception of religion as an institution, authority and power which kept people in a state of dependence (King, 1993:34).

At the same time the battle of the queens shows that women did not always conform to socially prescribed gender roles and expectations, and that there were differences amongst women at individual, institutional and interactional levels. The examples of Tsandzile and Labotsibeni Gwamile show women who were an embodiment of resistance to institutional and cultural scripts. They represent a tradition of women who challenged and resisted the patriarchal social ordering, and created their own gender strategies of power relations. Their achievements confirm what Linda Thompson (1993:567) has observed, that:

People do not simply conform to cultural scripts about gender. They challenge, resist and create their own gender strategies. People use their personal innovations and struggles in everyday family life to transform culture and society.

The message that emerges from the battle of the queens, at the centre of society, leads us to a point of arguing that one should be prepared to move beyond thinking about gender as an essential, immutable property of individuals nor indeed as a coherent package of conventional, cultural expectations for society is dynamic and gender a contested category. At the same time, the battle of queens which bore fruit in the evolution and establishment of a dual monarchy in which the Queen Mother and King lead as twin-rulers illustrates the momentous achievement of one group of women who, whether consciously or otherwise, undertook to transform society. Their achievement is significant for it shows that one can battle against gender inequalities using traditional resources to negotiate a way through the cultural web and that once the battle is won the changed circumstances and gender relations are more readily accepted while struggles outside the cultural web are resisted as attempts seeking to undermine the Swazi cultural heritage. One of the great fears associated with change whether through formal education, organised labour, or political formations has been the perceived challenge to Swazi culture. Yet if one had appealed to culture, there was a likelihood that (s)he would receive social support as has been shown by *Sive Siyinqaba*, a cultural group that transformed itself into a political group and won a considerable number of seats in the general elections held in October 1998, and thereby gained a strong presence in the national political life.

The other form of struggle thus far encountered has been through economic empowerment as the “missing” women illustrate. The missing women were able to stand up to both traditional and colonial authorities who sought to control their mobility by migrating to South Africa where they entered into paid employment. Although the socio-political situation in South Africa was somewhat similar to that obtaining in Swaziland due to the ideology of social Darwinism, yet the missing women were nonetheless free from an ideology that restricted their movement into towns.

They were free to work for money often in a difficult social environment and able to determine how that hard-earned money was used. They enjoyed a degree of autonomy. With respect to the patriarchal ideology of marriage as an ideal, they were free to choose to enter liaisons on their own terms, and some of them chose to bear children whom they were able to support and educate. For those who in course of time retired and returned to Swaziland, they occupied a special social status and were able to live independent lives in their own houses often in towns, or on the periphery of towns. They were so to speak a liberated group that could no longer be pushed too far in Swaziland. In a way, this category of women constituted a protest group that sought to deconstruct the traditional stranglehold on marginalised women. Their example has no doubt attracted a substantial number of followers till this day for women have continued to ply between Swaziland and South Africa in search of employment and merchandise for trade. Their breaking away from the traditional families had given them autonomy to such an extent that they became independent and some of them were often heads of households.

In comparison to these pioneering efforts, the present self-help, income-generating groups display continuity with the past. Like the “missing” women, the women’s groups have sought to bring about changed gender relations through economic empowerment. Like the “missing” women, women in groups seek to transcend their social consciousness as female to actively engage in acts that promise to liberate them from the traditional roles and housewifization ideology. They are driven into income generating activities by the need to ensure the survival of their families but the strategic value of income generating activities does not lie in its being an act of self-sacrifice (which mothers have often done and out of necessity) as in its being a source of economic power, autonomy and independence.

Ideally the incomes generated are supposed to have an enablement role and to serve as a catalyst for change in gender relations. That of necessity has to mean that change is not something that occurs externally. It has an internal dimension for economic empowerment has to be accompanied by a remoulding of experience and consciousness. The new experience should result in the strategic change in women's position so that their voice can be raised and heard. At least that has appeared to be the underlying philosophy.

The difference between the women migrant workers and women in the income generating groups is that the latter operate within the social terrain of the Swazi traditional set up. All the material facts of the family are in place and income-generating activity becomes an added factor. The consequences have tended to be that while the income generated has been welcome in the reproduction of the family, gender relations hardly change. True, income gives women a voice in deciding how to feed and clothe the family without having to depend on the male partner, who nonetheless still has a say in the family as the senior partner in the marriage relationship to such an extent that women's projects often suffer neglect when the family turns their attention to household farming. There is no doubt that some men have been supportive, and a small percentage of men (less than 0.1 percentage of total membership) has joined women's income generating groups either following retirement from the public service or due to unemployment. Most of the other men however, at the end of the day, have only known too well how to demand the right to exercise control over an income that has been earned through hard work and sacrifice to such an extent that a number women may not in fact be enjoying the fruits of their labour. Their autonomy and power to make decisions concerning their income are often circumscribed by cultural practices. This line of argument is borne out by an incident that took place in 1997 when the Women's Resource Centre organised a trip for five women leaders to Harare to share

experiences with their Zimbabwean counterparts and to explore the possibility of marketing some of their handicraft there. Of the five women, two women were unable to travel because they had no passports. Their husbands had refused to endorse their applications for travel documents yet it was a legal requirement for wives to obtain the husbands' consent. In accordance with Swazi law, the immigration officers required the husband's approval before a passport could be issued. The men refused, and the matter was closed. The incident echoes the strong words of Radoli (1998:1) who wrote that:

In the male-dominated societies like that of Africa, women have been socialised to accept male exploitation as their God-given role in society. This has, of course, disadvantaged them in that they have been unable to fully appreciate themselves for who they are; human beings created in God's image and likeness. Many of them have even degraded the dignity of their womanhood by allowing themselves to be used as sex objects (Editorial, AFER 40/3, 1998).

It can therefore be argued that while women's empowerment has become a catchword in Southern Africa, a significant number of women in income generating activities still suffer from the cultural constraints and social disadvantage which the women migrant workers had overcome by migrating. It is therefore pertinent to observe that there has been a vast reservoir of resistance among a significant number of men to women's quest for power, choice and autonomy. At times, this resistance has been reflected in the slow pace of cultural change. Even more in Swaziland where the male elite constantly appeal to culture to legitimate gender inequalities. The legitimisation of these inequalities has been deeply rooted in Swazi mythology, traditions and social text, and in the division of labour which was based on the perceived biological differences. Take, for instance, the separation of roles which has been manifest in such national ceremonies as the Reed Dance, the pageant of beauty, and in the annual ritual of kingship. In these, and other events, a male-female duality, however subtle, is evident.

Unfortunately the asymmetry of power has been supported by both men and women who have blamed gender inequality on the abuse of culture rather than on culture itself as a system of signification and legitimation. It was for that reason that one high ranking female politician recently argued that the Swazi culture and traditions promoted gender equality and called upon women to dutifully fulfil their cultural roles of mothers and wives (*Times of Swaziland*: 27 August 1995). However, that line of thinking might be a reflection of a situation whereby women in conservative and stratified societies tend to cease to develop their own social and political capacity to be able to effectively turn around a situation in which disadvantages are stacked against them (Somjee, 1989:25). Somjee especially noted that instead of developing capacity to enjoy equality and fair treatment, some women accept the ascribed social relationship and derive “deep satisfaction, as a group of submerged persons, cheerfully what in most cases the immediate relations and kin have to offer”. Few grasp the opportunity to invest in self-advancement. Thus, apart from a small, though increasing, number of women, the tendency has been to accept culture and the women’s position in it as sacrosanct and therefore beyond criticism.

It has been out of this recognition that there is need for a dramatic awakening not only of women, but of men as well. Most women have been unequally and unfairly treated at the hands of patriarchal laws and customs, but they are not broken for women still have the strength to organise and struggle together for freedom. Hence, the strategic importance of collective effort and consciousness raising. It is for that reason that a number of organisations, such as Umtapo, WLSA, the Council, and SWAGAA, have taken up social advocacy programmes which would in course of time have the beneficial effect of overcoming the legacy of exclusion, and break the silence on gender issues. For social advocacy to yield the necessary fruit, it is necessary however to increase the number of women involved in the collective effort to a critical mass. The present

membership of women's groups is still small, and women critically aware of the importance of teamwork decried the lack of interest by the mass of women in collective organising. It is by working together, sharing stories and experiences that women are renewed and strengthened.

Raising gender awareness and social advocacy are however new initiatives which are important to both women and men because both approaches generate new knowledge and awareness which are essential ingredients in the NGOs' holistic approach to women's empowerment. The timeliness of this approach is not least due to a high rate of reports of rape, domestic violence and reported instances of disinheritance of a number of widows. More than that is a growing realisation that even if there were positive legislations and liberal legal institutions (as Women and Law in Southern Africa have advocated), only a few women would be able to take advantage of the due process of law to maximise their rights due to entrenched cultural attitudes. Hence, the critical value of consciousness raising and gender sensitisation. It is believed that it is through gender education that there might be a gradual change in the long established attitudes. Wider forces within society which threaten and undermine grassroots women's efforts have to be tackled and this can be effectively done through creation of a new awareness and new institutions.

The adoption of social advocacy shows that the women's movement has become sensitive to women's welfare needs in an unlevelled terrain in which gender is negotiated and contested. Moreover, it is a terrain in which gender has been a fossilized subject. This is evident in the fact that although Swaziland has adopted some United Nations Covenants, including the Vienna Convention, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

Against Women (CEDAW) has not been ratified, and there have been no feint signs that it would be signed into domestic law in the near future. Even the government's progressive policy statement, the National Development Strategy (NDS), has been silent on the national strategies on gender. The only hope, for the time being, seems to rest with the Constitutional Review Commission which was appointed in 1995. In spite of slow progress, it was expected to include a chapter on the bill of rights in the constitution. It must be realised however that for women to influence the constitution-making process, they had to make concerted submissions to the Commission.

Moreover, social advocacy demands "systematic use of information from the grassroots level" (Edwards, 1994) and channelling it to the relevant policy makers. It has to be clear that women's rights do not simply mean participation in economic development and the right to be heard. It is much more. The holistic nature of rights demands that domestic violence and related abuses have to be confronted, and there has to be the struggle for self-determination which includes among others access to reproductive health facilities so that women can, besides economic empowerment, participate in decision making, and take control of their reproductive power and determine the size of their families. Granted that enlightened women have "slowly but surely become aware of the need for a planned family which can be loved, easily fed, clothed and educated" (Dlamini I: Interview, 16-10-1997), most of the rural women have yet to be reached and sensitised. However, the rural women are aware that responsible parenthood required the cooperation of men if they were to succeed because Swazi tradition has been against women's taking of contraceptives without the consent of the "sowers of the seed". Yet a large family more than anything else renders a woman weak, unable to cope with the needs of such a large family, and often fragile in health. Therefore while an independent income to women is an essential step

to empowerment, other facets of gender equality have yet to be given adequate attention.

Although the reproductive health services are available from the Family Life Association of Swaziland (FLAS), government and private clinics, the traditional mindset and its stranglehold on women has been decisive. As a result women in rural areas have been reluctant to embrace modern forms of contraception. Neither are their marriage partners any more willing to encourage them because reproduction has been, and is, a means of male social control over women's lives. This is however an area that demands urgent attention since the country's fertility rate of 3.46 was too high for the country to sustain. However, society has been divided on the issue of population control. Some traditional leaders have cited the Bible on a number of occasions to oppose the use of contraceptives and have no doubt referred to the Bible to justify a large family. On the other hand, King Mswati III has on several public occasions expressed concern over what he euphemistically called 'indiscriminate sowing of seeds'. Given the limited nature of economic resources and the constant factor of land, reproductive health is going to a major area of concern.

Just as there was cultural legitimation of women's position in the traditional setting, the present struggle needs a kind of legitimation. This is possible through legal reform, especially with regard to widowhood, inheritance, right to credit and land, and equal and fair treatment for all. The societal attitude to widows has particularly been depressing for the rituals observed virtually exclude widows from normal life for a long time (up to two years). It has usually been during this crucial time that the family estate has been looted by relatives while the widow was still observing ritual seclusion; by the time she came out of mourning gowns all would have been lost, leaving her and the children without adequate means of subsistence. Therefore whatever

gains women have made through advocacy is something that will need to be made legal in form of a statutory instrument. Although this form of legitimation is not as powerful as the cultural way, it is nonetheless necessary if women's gains have to be safeguarded.

It has to be borne in mind however that "women act together, but usually for personal goals only accidentally related to the fact that they are female" (Hafkin & Bay, 1976:12). As a result the one hundred odd groups of women should be seen as acting on common survival strategy. Often the groups may act in competition due to their focus on economic concerns at the exclusion of symmetry of power. Consequently, it would appear like there is an absence, or at best weak presence, of strong social activism due to lack of a feminist orientation. As a result, the grassroots women have struggled for equality in the sense of equal access to and control of means of production without achieving "equality of access to political roles and status" (Ibid:10). The net result has been that there has been too much concern with the sustenance of the family, a role that has been done with commendable success, and there has been active economic participation in the sacrificial role of motherhood to children whose nurture comes from the women's sweat. Thus, the critical mass of rural women has yet to be involved in the liberal traditional search for individual rights. Moreover the communal values and ideals still bind most women to procreation and production. There is therefore an epistemological gap between the elite' women and the grassroots although they face the common constraints rooted in the patriarchal nature of the Swazi society.

Due to their role in the transmission of culture and societal values, it is hardly surprising that most rural women deny, for instance, domestic violence. It is this group of hard working but conservative women that needs consciousness raising so that they can begin to appreciate their real worth and claim for themselves a personhood that is congruent with their economic power. The dysfunction between economic power and gender equality is bound to persist unless there is engaged discussion at the grassroots level of the nature of gender inequalities and a way forward worked out by the women. However, lest one gets an impression that all women are subservient, one has to recall the lone struggles of Hon. Lomasontfo Dlodlu, MP for Maphalaleni in the 1993-98 parliament. Although acknowledging that women should not stand up against their husbands over petty demands, she was forthright in the fight for her community's needs. One time, she is on record saying:

In Swaziland, there is peace and respect, that is why there are no wars. That is even stated in the Bible. We must not lose our culture and tradition through being misled by other people... what I know is that the right of a woman is to cook for her husband and make sure that the family is happy (*Swazi News*, 23 August, 1997).

While eschewing women's individual rights in the liberal traditional sense, she was however impatient with a number of male bureaucrats who at one time had cut off water supply to her community. Speaking on a point of privilege, in Parliament, she demanded that the Minister of Water Resources had to leave the chambers and instruct his officers to go and restore the water services to Maphalaleni community. Although her demeanour did depart from the normal parliamentary procedure, she could not be silenced until the Minister promised to have the water restored that same day. And it was. Thus, the communal rights were far more readily recognised than individual rights, and the member of Parliament was ready to defend them. The member of Parliament had proved that women can be agents of radical change and should

therefore not be frozen in positions ordained by culture and tradition.

However, the contemporary struggle for women's rights has not been univocal. For instance, in a survey of women's views by the *Times of Swaziland*, in April-June 1995, under the title "Vusela for Women", there was clearly a polarisation of women's views. Of the many educated women who wrote in for the women's page, the dominant position tended towards culture as a point of reference and wealthy stock of social values. It was argued time and again that people had to understand the importance of family values instead of talking about innovations they knew nothing about. Two years on, their stand was; "Let us get real. Whatever happened to our culture?" (*Swazi News*, 23 August 1997). Nonetheless, it was appreciated that:

Women's groups were good but they should stick to their objectives. They should also know the difference between gender equality and women's superiority. It seems as if women want to elevate their status above that of men which is fine but it should be done in a manner that is socially acceptable .

The opposite view was expressed by a Lindiwe Sithole who was of the opinion that women were not pushing the rights issue far enough. She argued that:

In fact, they [women] were not doing enough to voice their stand on the issue. Men have enjoyed the monopoly [of power] for so long, they do not want to understand that women should also have a voice. It would not be right to change everything right now, but all we want is recognition of being an equal sex... Men and all conservative women should rise up to the challenge of being fair to all humanity. (*Swazi News*: 23 August 1997).

To date the struggle continues. That the polarity of views has continued is in itself a sign of healthy pluralism for it would be naive to expect all Swazi women to hold the same opinions on gender which is experienced differently. Nonetheless, it is apparent that there is going to be no revolution. On the contrary, the gradualist approach seems to be at work and gathering pace.

The struggle may be long and drawn out but it is on, and with the conducive atmosphere surrounding the gender debate in the Republic of South Africa, there might be some ripple effect in Swaziland, most especially through legal and social reforms. However, the contemporary lines of the struggle, it seems, will continue to be the same: social advocacy, gender education, and economic empowerment, in various combinations.

7.2 THE AMBIVALENT ROLE OF RELIGION

In the Swazi women's search for equality, religion has played an ambivalent role. From the myth of Lomkhubulwane to religious personages, we discern a liberating trajectory. The mythological appearances of the female divinity played the functional role of reversing the traditional practices, with the girls taking over control of cattle thereby creating a utopian paradise which provided a refreshing and socially invigorating version of reality. The hierophany marked momentous awakening in the consciousness of the marginalised women and girl-children who nonetheless rose to the occasion. They took control of the cattle, which were a symbol of wealth, while men stayed at home. The surreal reversal of roles signified a revolutionary deconstruction of the separation of the spheres, the traditional norms associated with cattle as the locus of economic power, and the exclusion of women from major economic sites. Women could no longer be relegated to the private sphere of the home. For a moment, wholeness was bestowed upon them. It was a moment of transcending the polarity of sexes and an irruption of a new awareness of women's power. It was the climax of a liberating experience.

In the same story, whose critical interpretation suggests was mainly told by women to celebrate what may now be a forgotten ritual, the offerings given to Lomkhubulwane however show that besides being an instrument of liberation, religion was like a double-edged sword. As

Kinsley (1989:ix) has noted, "Some goddesses as we might expect in the male dominated cultures in which they exist, provide paradigms for female subordination to males, but this is not always, even typically the case". Certainly Lomkhubulwane was not such a goddess, but her reception shows a degree of stereotyping of the divinity. The offerings she was given particularly illustrate this contention. She was given food and drinks, but there were no blood sacrifices which were reserved for the male divinity. The stereotyping of the Swazi female divinity moreover conformed to the Swazi cultural reproduction of gender. And so the offerings made to her truly reflect the traditional differential treatment of men and women. The people's response was typical of human response to a divine encounter. People respond in context of their culture. Thus, we see in the religious symbolism, in the story of Lomkhubulwane, antipodal tendencies of liberation and conservative stereotyping of the female divinity. In spite of this attempt at differential treatment, the luminarity of the female divinity and the accompanying unrestrained freedom remain unmistakable.

Similarly, there is the freedom of the spirit to possess whom it wills. During the precolonial times, religion played the more overt role in women's quest for equality. This has been demonstrated in the work of female diviners, mediums and healers. Women in these professions occupied enviable positions and wielded unfettered, non-patriarchal power which was used in the service of the community. They were recognised and respected because of their unique gifts and their recognition meant that their positions were legitimated by both culture and religion. As long as they held the "otherness" of their religious office, no one dared doubt nor question their authority. Religion at its best was a liberating force which empowered these women in the service of the community. It played a vital role in bestowing power upon the religious personages and in legitimating this power. As Skeggs (1997:8) has pointed out,

“Legitimation is the key mechanism in conversion to power. Cultural capital has to be legitimated before it can have symbolic power”.

At the same time, ritual specialization was one of the few significant avenues toward independence and upward mobility open to women. Women played, and still play, an essential role in religious rituals. This has been amply illustrated in such practices as *Incwala*, the ritual of Kingship, in which mutual harmony between male and female, the King and Queen Mother, has been all pervasive for the well-being and renewal of the Swazi nation. At family level, a similar pattern existed between the grandmother and a father in the homestead (*umuti*). While the father is the head of the homestead, with responsibilities and duties, which increase with seniority, he remained the external embodiment of the household in its dealings with everyone outside it. But as Ngubane (1983:107) has argued:

the clearest and most unambiguous seniority... is that of the mother of the homestead head, who plainly will be the mother, mother-in-law or grandmother of everyone else. As it is effectively she, more directly than her son, who regulates the daily affairs of the *umuti* [homestead] and takes responsibility for meeting the material and emotional needs of its members... Her value to the *umuti* is highlighted in a particularly striking manner by maintaining, in many of the large homesteads, a dwelling habitually known as “grandmother’s house” (*Indlu Kagogo*), long after her death. Not only is it kept in good condition, but it is much used for a variety of purposes all to do with the preservation of the homestead unity. It is a shrine and a sanctuary, a meeting place where disputes can be discussed and resolved, the place where the dead lie in state while a wake is kept by the bereaved and from which the body is taken for interment; visions are received here, the whole *umuti* gathers there to share a meal, and children of different mothers may sleep there.

The grandmother's house is regarded as sacred and second in importance only to the cattle-byre, and it is in her house that "important issues affecting the family are discussed" (*The Swazi Observer*, 24 July 1996). In religious symbolism, the "great house" (*indlu nkulu*) is a link with the past and a recognition that the spirit of the grandmother and those other ancestors still watch over their descendants. Nonetheless, the great house is the only location that brought the homestead's members, male and female, together and thereby maintains the unity of a large complex social unit. The hallow and respect that surrounds the grandmother's house symbolises recognition of the ancestors' continued concern for the general welfare of the group long after they have physically passed on to the spirit world.

However, women were often excluded from some important economic sites like the cattle-byre, where the homestead's granaries were kept, and from people's assembly (*libandla*), during the menses, and widows were excluded from all normal activities during the long period of mourning. Moreover, various practices like the Reed Dance had the potential of reproducing virtuous women through ritual observance and thereby controlling both their sexuality and femininity by inculcating moral virtues. There was, and still is, an underlying current that girls could not be left unregulated. The Reed Dance therefore promoted female respectability which was however part of the wider formation of the propagation of home and family values.

Nonetheless, it would be artificial to discuss the influence of religion on the articulation and construction of gender roles in isolation from other factors that inculturalize and socialise individuals. One of these factors was colonialism. Apart from the colonial land alienation, the advent of colonialism greatly undermined the position and authority of the religious personages, most especially the mediums and diviners. There was a clash of cultures: European and African,

and the religious personages were viewed by the colonial establishment as practitioners of witchcraft and often suffered at the hands of colonial law officers. They were harrassed. Their activities hitherto prominent and considered beneficial to society were proscribed, criminalised and suppressed; their voices were either minimised or indeed trivialised. On a number of occasions, they were hurled before courts of law, tried, and convicted to serve time, a practice which often “threw traditional Swazi cosmology into imbalance” (Booth, 1992:225). According to Booth, by punishing and suppressing the diviners and mediums, the colonial administration “putatively laid open society to a plague of evil doers, whose human toll was potentially far greater than any harm the ritual specialists might do”. At the same time, by outlawing their activities, the colonial administrators had unwittingly closed off one of the major avenues towards empowerment of women in society. In an important way, criminal law was used to disempower a large section of society. Yet it was a “cultural project that lay at the heart of efforts by Europeans and Africans to channel social change” (Booth, 1992:256). Consequently, ritual specialists were obsessively followed up because the colonial administration perceived them as “a strongly competitive locus of power which it could not tolerate” (Booth, 1992:265).

In addition to ritual specialists, women’s quest for equality has found expression in various contemporary initiatives by various women’s organisations and NGOs. A number of these organisation like the Council of Churches and Women’s Resource Centre (Umtapo waBomake) have had, as their main goal, women’s economic empowerment. These initiatives, whose roots go back to those pioneering women migrant labourers, who sought economic independence away from home, have yielded modest results in form of women’s ability to sustain their family members and satisfy their needs of clothing, food and education. Nonetheless, the modest achievements have largely been through self-sacrifice for income generation has been over and

above household work, and the traditional roles of being wives and mothers. The extra-burden and the unchanged social conditions have meant that women have been overworked and yet their social status has not changed radically, for as Heine (1988:98) has put it:

As at all events women must be involved in motherhood, their social status depends on whether production and control of products which are necessary for a society can be made to fit in the social conditions of pregnancy, birth and care of the children.

Their situation has not been helped by the contemporary economic pressures on the country in the wake of South Africa's return to the fold of the international community. The changed circumstances have led to the flight of capital, and times have been difficult indeed. However, due to their sacrificial love for the family, women have had to overstretch themselves to ensure the survival of the family unit; sometimes singlehanded. In spite of that great contribution to the family welfare, women have had to struggle against a number of odds in their quest for equality. This has largely been due to the absence of an ideological base. As we have seen, elsewhere, one sure source of legitimation of women's status has been through ritual and religion. For instance, it has been shown that Muhumuza, the founder of Nyabingi used religious ritual to her own advantage and regained her status in Rwanda, where she held political power and extended her political influence in the interlacustrine region to include some parts of north-western Tanzania and South-Western Uganda. Even after her death, her legacy lived on and empowered women in succeeding generations to command respect and unrestricted exercise of power in her name. Their position in society was legitimated by religion and their conduct unquestioned even if it meant requisitioning livestock from the followers of Nyabingi.

The same has been true of the Queen Mothers, in Swaziland, who used charisma and religious ritual to create for themselves and their successors a vital political role in the Swazi social organisation. Their position, since the formative days of the Kingdom, has remained unassailable and secure due to its strong foundation on culture and religion, and therefore above contest. To date, they enjoy unequalled power and status. Nonetheless, while the political and social power of the Swazi matriarchs has been firmly enshrined in the Swazi political culture, it has had little trickle-down impact on the ordinary women. Thus, while the image of the Queen Mother has been a powerful symbol and role model in the Swazi Society, in which she evokes respect and admiration, the ordinary women have yet to emulate their example by drawing on the vast resources of tradition to legitimate their strategic search for gender equality. Instead, with the exception of the religious personages, women have tried other avenues. Prominent among these avenues has been formal education which was introduced, in the colonial period, by Christian missionaries, and it is significant that a number of women have been able to climb the social ladder through it. Christian missions did provide access to new roles for women and promoted women's upward social mobility. However, Cock (1990:95) tempers any over-optimism on our part when she writes that:

The ideology behind the educational policy as regards women was shaped by the convergence of different definitions of education appropriate to Africans, to women and subordinate classes. The dominant stress in each was vocational, domestic and subservient. Thus, education operated largely as a crucial agency of social control and cultural reproduction, defining and reinforcing certain social roles and initiating people into skills and values that were essential for effective role performance. For many African women, this involved a new role as domestic workers....

Thus, while it is true to argue that missionary education may have worked to “liberate a few individual women who were provided with marketable skills, it operated in the main coercively, as an agency of socialisation, tying women to subordinate roles in the colonial society” (Cock, 1990:95). Moreover, the centrality of motherhood and the sanctimonious elevation of the mother’s role in missionary education became a powerful ideological force that impacted heavily on the women’s status. However, the centrality of motherhood was in tandem with the overall Victorian Christian goal of promoting “female chastity, marital fidelity, and maternal and domestic responsibilities” (Gaitskell, 1990:251). According to that scheme, it was “aberrant for a woman in ‘traditional’ African society to live alone., her productive labour and reproductive power as daughter, wife or widow belonged to her father, husband or son” (Ibid). For the pioneers of formal education, a lifetime of wage labour was never envisaged as the goal of girls’ education. According to Gaitskell, the aim was to transform “the division of labour in African homes in order to fulfil those Victorian ideals of devout domesticity”. Thus, although initially the mission compound was a magnet for young girls escaping from arranged marriage, cast-off wives and widows escaping from the leviratic marriage, they were drawn into missionaries’ own domestic life to learn about Christian womanhood and home-making, both by hard work in service and example.

Like the traditional religion, Christianity offered a contradictory package to the African woman. While Swazi women may have conceived it as a way of escape from pre-Christian society, it firmly anchored them into the domesticity of the Christian family life-by its emphasis on women as child-bearers and home-makers. Thus, if there was any point of convergence between missionary education and Swazi tradition, it was the role of women in the family set up and their position therein. However, this conception of women was far from empowering them

for what determines women's social status, as Heine (1988:98) has suggested, is the manner of their involvement and possibilities of independent direction and action, which independence religion has only partially been able to provide, and undermine, at the same time. Therefore if social transformation of gender relations were to be effective, accepted and entrenched, there would have to be an ideological construction of a new consciousness which would be ready to promote critical collective organisation, and creation of a new epistemology through critical rethinking of the religious and cultural heritage.

Of the two religious traditions, Swazi religion and Christianity, and apart from ritual, Christianity had an enormous battery of resources in the life, teaching and example of Jesus if they were properly appropriated and interpreted. For instance, Jesus' revolutionary attitude to women can be illustrated by a number of incidents, namely the Woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11), the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-45), and the Woman of the city (Luke 7:36-50). Of these examples, the Pericope de adultera is exciting for it was a matter of life and death. This story is missing in the oldest and best manuscripts of the gospel of John. Part of the reason being that it may have created moral problems for the Early Church's missionary effort for it was not a good story to emulate. It first appears in the Greek manuscripts in the fourth century C.E., when the Christian Church was firmly established in the Roman Empire. By that time Christians were legally allowed to practise their religion freely. Hence, their confidence in including the story in the gospel.

In short the story speaks of an incident in the Temple. People were gathered and Jesus sat down and began teaching. His teaching was interrupted by teachers of the Law who brought to him a woman whom they accused of adultery. The law of Moses required she had to be stoned

to death. “Now what do you say about her?” (John 8:5). It was an intricate situation. Jesus did not want to appear as if he was wont on violating the law of Moses. He however turned the tables upon them. He answered, “ Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone”. And they left, one by one. They were honest to themselves and aware of their own sins. Her life was saved.

The story shows how Jesus invited the woman’s accusers to become judges. He invited them to be involved in human situation. While he could not break the law, he could not accept the inhuman treatment of women. It was curious that the Scribes and Pharisees had wanted the death of a woman, yet the man that was her partner in the act was left untouched. Their action was contrary to the letter of the law which prescribed that both of them be put to death. That omission illustrated the prejudice against women and double standards. It illustrated the marginalisation and oppression of women in the Jewish society: they had no access to justice. However, Jesus challenged their legalistic, inhumane treatment of women. Among all those present, Jesus would have been the one to judge. He alone, according to scriptural authority, was sinless. Though he was sinless, Jesus was sensitive to the wretched position of women, and was critical of the patriarchal stereotyping of women as sinners. It was in the circumstances inconceivable that a woman would commit adultery alone. It was the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees that Jesus put under scrutiny and found lacking. While Jesus did not question the commandment that “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14), he was committed to justice and social uplifting of women. By forgiving the woman, he taught the values of equal treatment for all and respect for women. It was true to the character of the Messiah who came to seek the lost to show his followers the way to respect life. He showed that women had a personhood and dignity that had to be respected. Jesus’ action was therefore liberating and saved

life for that was precisely why he was a Saviour.

The moral of this gospel example is that the churches, in Swaziland, would have to apply the Gospel to the advancement of women's rights for to do so reflects the incarnational nature of the Church as the body of Christ. To be able to fulfil this hope however demands a critical reinterpretation of the biblical stories in a more sensitive manner. To derive maximum benefit out of the Bible requires "a hermeneutics that will take the complexity of African women's lived situation into account. Such a hermeneutics would have to be accountable to their African culture and multifaceted oppression" (Masenya, 1995:152). This demands a re-reading of the scriptures in such a way that it leads to unlearning the internalised sexist attitudes, beliefs and patterns by creating new models of transformed social relations between men and women.

At the same time, in Southern Africa, there are vast cultural resources to mobilise in response to challenges posed by unequal gender relations. Apart from ritual and spiritual endowment, there is the enduring spirit of *ubuntu* (which may variously mean humanness and wholeness) for it emphasizes the primacy of such values as good and harmonious human relationship, cooperation, respect and sharing of resources rather than competition against the other. In the words of Pato (1997:59):

Ubuntu is a traditional philosophy and way of life which presupposes that life, human beings and all creation are sacred. It also presupposes that common life is the goal of all life, including human life. As a philosophy, *ubuntu* inculcates a sense of belonging to one another in such a way that love, care and respect for one another become indispensable ingredients.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

This study has shown the dominant role of culture and religion in the construction of gender and the entrenchment of gender roles in the Swazi society. In both tradition and law the status of women has been that of minors. In marriage, women were regarded as unequal partners who were mainly responsible for bearing and nurturing children, and for managing household chores. Consequently, the idealised features of the Swazi feminine mystique were obedience and deference to men, soft-spokenness, humility, marriage and motherhood. However, it has been argued that women did not always acquiesce to the socially given roles and position in society. On the contrary, we found that women, both at the centre and on the margins of society, in groups or individually, adopted a number of important ways and strategies of contesting the social definition of gender, across three different political eras, and we may speculate, and beyond.

Ivone Gebara (1994:53) has used a beautiful expression to refer to such a phenomenon. She has called it the “irruption of history into the lives of women”. The expression does not mean women’s eruption in history since they have always been there as workers, producers and mothers. Rather, it refers to the irruption of historic consciousness into the lives of women (King, 1994:53). It is in the sense of an irruption of consciousness that we can best summarise the several moments of significance in Swazi women’s lives. These moments formed the watershed in the women’s struggle for a voice and some kind of equality. The women did not resign themselves to fate but undertook liberative actions to transform their situation.

8.1 MOMENTS IN SWAZI WOMEN'S SEARCH FOR EQUALITY

Given that the causes of women's condition are rooted in the historical process and that discovery of the causes leads to a new consciousness, change in self-definition and quest for self-realization, as well as the perception of a problem for what it is and searching for a solution, we have identified three momentous epochs (and there could have been more) in the irruption of a new awareness. These moments, manifested in the battle of the queens, women migrant labour, and the search for economic empowerment, no doubt coincide with crisis times in the life of the nation, and yet it has been during these critical times that women have sought solutions to what were threatening events.

As we have seen, the first moment seems to have been associated with the queen mothers. At the time the emergent and fledgling nation was weak, at the centre and at the hems, and looked more like a loose federation of clans with no vital institutions to mould them into a cohesive, united and strong monarchy. Concern for stability and unity behoved Tsandzile to initiate an ingenious method of healing what was becoming a nation of internecine wars, and plunder of life and property by mediating the adoption of what was a Ndwandwe ritual of kingship into a Swazi national organisational system. In doing so, she prevented the breakdown of the Dlamini political dominance. By introducing *Incwala* (the ritual of Kingship) in Swaziland, she enhanced and strengthened the monarchy's hold over national life, and the queen mothers have since that time been custodians of national ritual objects and co-actors in the kingship ritual ceremonies.

According to Kuper (1980), Tsandzile by successfully raising what was a Ndwandwe clan ritual to Swazi national level won for all subsequent queen mothers a position of power and privilege. Much more than that the queen mother became the royal family's priest, and by extension the national ritual priest, who with the king worked as mediators between the community and the spirit world of ancestors. Her ministrations included healing a bleeding nation, and through ritual calming down evil forces, and according to traditional belief the power to invoke ancestral spirits to bless the nation with rains which are vital to the fertility of the land. She as the mother of the King had viewed with displeasure the wars of conquest and plunder associated with them and was determined to bring plunder to an end. While men excelled in plunder of human lives, she was concerned with preserving life and took the revolutionary initiative of restraining her son and invented something to fill the vacuum that was to be felt in the absence of coercive power by replacing it with ritual power in which she played an essential role.

Thus, at a critical time of social and political change, it behoved Tsandzile to protest excessive blood-letting and to renew a monarchy which had become fragile and weak. It was a crisis time that needed insight and far-reaching political and social reform. By introducing the ritual of kingship and the regiment system, she had exercised non-patriarchal power to heal the nation. She became the mother of all people and her son became a child of the people (Kuper, 1980:54). She had understood clearly the plight of the nation, much more than any other person, and was willing to minister to the people's needs. It was no mean feat. On the contrary, it was a revolutionary change in the leadership and governance of the country. From then henceforward, the queen mother was to act as co-ruler with her son and act as a moderating influence. She had power to counsel the son for there evolved the practice of dual monarchy in which the King and the queen mother became twin-rulers who governed the nation jointly. Whether the concept of

dual monarchy meant that the two monarchs were equal in practice and in all aspects has been a contentious issue, but what is certain is that the queen mother has since that time become a symbol of non-patriarchal power, protection and hope. Her council advises the son, and the King, according to tradition, inherits his position through the mother. When there was dispute and the weaker party took flight to the queen mother's capital, the matter was closed, even when the dispute was between her ruling son and a commoner or prince. As her title of *Indlovukati* (She -elephant) symbolises, she possessed the qualities of protection. Not only does she protect the weak, ordinary citizens, but she also protects her son through ritual.

Another prominent matriarch that we discussed was Labotsibeni Gwamile laMdluli who used her office as queen mother, and regent, to influence the course of events. Gwamile manoeuvred her way to the pinnacle of power at a time when the kingdom of Swaziland was experiencing its political bubbles and needed strong leadership. Much of the land had been alienated to a white settler community and the indigenous population was marginalised, and the country was to come under Anglo-Transvaal Colonial rule. The period was also characterised by an erosion of royal jurisdiction due to European inroads into Swazi politics. During her reign as queen mother and queen regent (1889-1921), she became a pillar of Swazi monarchical power and helped to reconstitute "a weak and politically shaky monarchy" (Genge, 1999:254). Among other things, she became the main voice of Swazi resistance against colonial rule and withstood the 1890 Anglo-Transvaal Convention "by which her country would have been governed by the Boers" (Genge. 1999:298). She refused to sign the convention on grounds that she could not sign away her son's future. Besides that, she initiated the scheme of buying back the alienated land, a scheme that was continued during the reign of King Sobhuza II. More significantly, in her we find a person that was willing to manipulate Swazi tradition to her own and national advantage.

She is best remembered for her indomitable character, charisma, outstanding intelligence and perceptiveness, astute capacity to cling to power, ability and experience (Kuper, 1978:26).

The important feature that distills from the discussion above is the prominent place of two women (and there were others) in the life of the monarchy. They acted as pivotal figures in strengthening the Swazi monarchy. The selflessness of the two women discussed is a characteristic that they shared with female personages for they both used their symbolic and spiritual powers for the benefit of others. To date, the queen mother's significance has been, and continues to be, conspicuous in national ritual. At present, she is the one who despatches the ritual priests (*bemanti*), the people who go to collect ritual water from the Indian Ocean, thereby signalling the beginning of *Incwala* period and the associated seclusion of the King from public ceremony until the dancing of the *Incwala*. During his period of seclusion, the king cannot carry out the official state functions which in real sense are invested in the queen mother.

While the *Incwala* may have other important religious and political functions, it above all:

dramatises actual rank developed historically... Sociologically, it serves as a graph of traditional status on which, mapped by ritual, are the roles of the king, his mother, the princes, counsellors, queens, princesses, commoners, old and young... The major adjustment, the balance of power between the king, his mother, princes and commoners is a central theme (Kuper, 1980:225).

Thus, in ritual the queen mother was, and remains, a prominent role player who "speaks to the dead [ancestors] in the shrine ... and provides beer for libation" (Kuper, 1980:55). It is therefore important to note that while there is a male hierarchy in the administration of the country, in protocol the queen mother is over and above everyone else except the king. In the present legal dispensation only the king and the queen mother are regarded as above the law of

the country.

The next moment we have discerned was during the colonial times when the colonial policy of encouraging white settlement in Swaziland and some kings' baneful concessioning of Swazi land to the Boers led to shortage of the fertile land. The impact of land alienation was confinement of indigenous Swazi population to marginal land that was hilly, often mountainous and difficult terrain which situation undermined the family self-sustenance. As a result, families were unable to meet their basic needs and that led to hardships which, coupled with the outbreak of rinderpest in the 1890s, undermined the Swazi food security. It led to population movement and a significant number of women left the rural homesteads for towns. While a number of them joined the informal sector in and around Manzini, some women migrated to the Republic of South Africa where they worked as domestic servants in white households but nonetheless found their experience, to a considerable degree, a liberating one from the colonial and Swazi traditional patriarchy which had constricted their movement and desire to work outside the home to earn a living to sustain their families. The women migrant labourers had been ready to forgo the security of their families and ventured into the new vistas of employed labour. In spite of the hardship they endured, they were successful in enjoying economic independence through their own efforts.

Then there has been the most recent development in form of changing economic circumstances which to some extent has included, among others, economic decline and flight of capital and its relocation in South Africa which situation has been characterised by the rise and involvement of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in attempts to improve women's material condition and status. A plethora of women's groups were founded either as self-help (*Zenzele*) groups or umbrella organisations that hoped to promote women's income generating

groups and through economic empowerment and social advocacy to promote and expand women's rights. But the task of changing women's condition and status has been enormous, and the NGOs have had mixed fortunes. Some have apparently been more successful than others. A number of them boast of economic success and claim that they have made women less dependent on the male folk and that some women have achieved a degree of self-determination.

Both the "missing women" (Miles, 1991) and women's NGOs share common features. Whether the women left the rural homesteads for employment in towns or they formed a group and undertook income generating projects, they have both been engaged in the search for economic power and the associated ability to sustain their families. What was unique about the "missing women" was their strategy of defying male control over their mobility and the cultural ideology of home and womanhood. In going to South Africa, they were physically and symbolically breaking away and liberating themselves from the traditional stereotypical roles of wifehood and motherhood ascribed to them. They ventured into the unknown and got "lost" to the Swazi traditional definition of femaleness. In so doing, they were able to recreate meaning in a new situation. They were independent and had to develop new coping strategies. They did not simply conform to cultural scripts about gender; they challenged, resisted and created their own gender strategies.

8.2 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The path of economic empowerment has brought promises of women's ability to feed, clothe and educate their children. The concrete results being that some women have also been able to use their economic strength to make themselves heard in family matters. However, this has been a minority group. In most other cases, the women's voice (despite their economic power) has been muted by men's culturally privileged positions, and the marital power and proprietary rights that go with marriage. The woman may earn the money through sweat and sacrifice but the husband exercises overt considerable influence and control over the wife and her income. It is not uncommon for men to appropriate women's earnings. Not only has this trend been reported among the women's groups but also by women in both government and private employment who complained that their husbands and husbands' relatives always demanded the right to take control of their income and assets. That this practice has prevailed has largely been due to the cultural script and the fact that marital power has been vested in the husband with all the consequences. Hence, the prevalence of instances of glaring disparity between the women's economic power and gender equality. At times, the women's economic power has turned into a poisoned chalice that has brought marital conflict and domestic violence for some insecure men may become aggressive and violent towards women. In spite of these challenges, however, women have remained resilient in making sacrifices for their families against all odds.

Other forms of women's empowerment have been through formal education and participation in ritual. Formal education has thus far been the most popular and the most effective means of empowerment. Through formal schooling, women have been able to enter the professions and climb into the top echelons of the civil service and academia. It is estimated that women at present occupy ten percent of the managerial positions in Swaziland (Nkambule, 1997).

In other words, women have excelled in a man-made education system in which role models and the intellectual sap imbibed from the fountain of knowledge has been characterised by androcentric bias. It has been a type of education that has, besides empowering them as persons able to participate in the national economy, made them respectable ladies more likely to conform to the middle class Victorian ethics of humility and obedience and to preserve the status quo (Larsson, 1991:169, 196). This has largely been because formal education has neither been gender-sensitive nor value-free. In addition, women role models have been visibly absent from the school and university curricula. Consequently, people (both men and women) and their attitudes towards gender have been least informed by egalitarian principles since education itself has yet to be liberated from the hidden androcentric curriculum.

Finally, there has been the successful struggle for equal participation in ritual. This struggle that cuts across the periods discussed has witnessed success in form of women playing the religious roles of diviners, mediums, healers and rarely as herbalists. These religious savants have played a dominant role in the Swazi society. The uniqueness of their form of struggle has been its reference to a locus beyond the mundane everyday life to the sacred world and in so doing to put their claims beyond the control of the secular forces thereby legitimating the positions and status of women who hold these positions.

Apart from the religious personages, and the queen mothers (who also exercise ritual power), other forms of women's power have been circumscribed by religion and culture. A number of women's initiatives have lacked social legitimation because the symbolic world of religion and culture is rooted in the past and often invokes authority of tradition and custom to justify the present social ordering. Hence, for instance, the pronouncements of the League of

African Independent Churches in Swaziland in April 1995. The assembly of the League, which brings together all the independent churches, met at the national church at Lobamba from 10th to 15th April, 1995. Among its final resolutions was one that “women will never be ordained priests in the country” (*Times of Swaziland*, 17 April 1995). That it was a unanimous resolution reported to the king, who acts as the League’s pontifex maximus, was not surprising because the Zionist churches were steeped in Swazi culture and hardly initiated in the art of exegesis and critical interpretation. Due to the absence of a number of liberal churches which accept women’s ordination, in principle, there was no dissenting voice. However, when the assembly’s resolutions were presented to the king, his reply was measured. The king, among other things, told “the priests to go and read the Bible and come out with a balanced judgement”, but warned that change had not to destroy the Swazi culture. While politely chastising the priests for their lack of holistic understanding of the socio-historical context of the Bible, the king nonetheless cited Swazi tradition as an essential factor in the theology of change, yet Swazi culture and tradition were themselves dynamic and products of the socio-historical processes which processes had to continue since change is a fact of human existence.

8.3 SOCIAL ADVOCACY

The irruption of women into Swazi history has however meant that women have increasingly become aware of the fact that empowerment of women which does not take into account the ideological control mechanism was fraught with problems. It has been on basis of this realization that several women’s non-governmental organizations have embarked on a search for gender equality through social advocacy and deconstruction of cultural ideology by raising women’s consciousness of the social structuring of reality and the structures that buttress male domination. Notable among these have been Umtapo waBomake (Women’s Resource Centre),

the Council of Swaziland Churches, Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA), and to some extent Lutsango lwakaNgwane. Another organisation with similar objectives has been Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA). These organisations, often jointly, have organised a number of workshops for both men and women to conscientize them on the topical issues of gender, domestic violence, inheritance, and creating gender awareness.

While joint effort maximises the strength of the NGOs, there have been individual organisation's initiatives as well. Thus far, the Women's Resource Centre has targeted the traditional leadership who constitute the bastion of the Swazi culture and religion for gender sensitization, and SWAGAA has held workshops aimed at law enforcement agencies. However, the Council of Swaziland Churches had yet to undertake serious dialogue with the League of African Churches which finds so much appeal in ancient Hebrew world view that they often find the Old Testament supportive of Swazi traditional practices and values to such an extent that any movement towards gender equality in this popular religious movement is either stifled to suffocation or entirely disparaged. On the contrary since the Old Testament does give the Zionist churches their distinctive African character and source of Christianness, the churches have stuck to Hebrew tradition without subjecting it to critical interpretation.

Consequently, women's ideological battle for equality is going to be a daunting one, with both the leaders of independent churches and the Swazi traditional male elite dismissing gender equality outright as against divine injunction and Swazi culture. Even the liberal main line churches have not been any more than sympathetic to the women's cause. Neither has the situation been helped by the presence of a significant number of educated women elite in government and public service, who out of respectability have not dared challenge those aspects of tradition that are viewed as oppressive by arguing that there is nothing wrong with Swazi

culture. Hence, Sarah Mkhonza's observation (1987:10) that:

Even educated women are bound by tradition and are forced to suffer ill-treatment by men which seems to be normal because it is happening to everybody. There seems to be little room for criticism in Swaziland.

Rather than critique culture, the argument has been that it was the misuse of culture that accounts for gender inequalities and domestic violence. This has been an argument that has been partly advanced by the few women politicians but it is one that leaves the male elite with glee. Hence, the associated male syllogism in logic in praise of the Swazi feminine mystique of humility, soft-spokenness, deference to men, obedience, motherhood and pleasing to the husband (Mudekunya, 1979) which, in liberative terminology, amounts to tautological inexactitude although it is a goal that many women have striven to achieve. However, even the oldest women's organisation, Lutsango lwakaNgwane, has been satisfied with upholding the traditional structures so faithfully that they have not been able to organise around strategic issues.

8.4 RITUAL LEADERSHIP

Of the women's struggles towards equality, it has been in the area of ritual leadership that women have made an indelible mark. It has been in this area that we find the female diviners, mediums and healers. According to Mbiti (1990:167), the diviners and mediums deal with the spirit world. "The main duty of mediums is to link human beings with the living-dead and the spirits. Through them, messages are received from the other world, or [people] are given knowledge of things that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to know". They deal with cause, nature and treatment of disease or other misfortune, and the diviner adds interpretation of instructions. In their official capacities, they lose themselves and become instruments of the spirit or a particular divinity. While women in churches and NGOs may struggle for power and yet

remain powerless, the diviners and mediums possess power that overcomes and inhabits them, and reverses the roles they previously played. Since most diviners in Swaziland are women, there is a group of women that occupies a position of power and authority in the community. They are able to invoke the world of spirits, chant incantations (which are denied to women in formal, historical religions), and their ministrations include healing, finding out the causes of disease and misfortunes, calming down evil spirits, and thereby maintaining individual and cosmic harmony. Clearly, the diviners, mediums and healers are useful points of critical social change (Southard, 1994), especially in periods when the past appeared to be crumbling away and yet the future was uncertain. Their caring role in such critical times becomes crucial, and yet they remain an embodiment of non-patriarchal power which is community-oriented, flexible and addressed to concrete human situations in a creative way for there is no cultural distance between the religious personages and the source of power.

It may be argued that the non-restricted nature of spirits in using female and male diviners is in itself a critique of culture. While the predominance of female diviners may be explained along the lines of argument advanced by Harvey that “spirits searching for human beings to possess and use as their mediums are particularly attracted to individuals whose soul has been fractured by experiences of exploitation and tragedy caused by others” (in King, 1994:387, note 25), it is however untenable to agree with his conclusion that “spirit possession may be a successful, if costly, coping mechanism for women who find themselves in conflict with their families or society in general” (King, 1994: 388). The patriarchal tinge of interpretation is apparent.

In the Swazi, and African contexts, it would be imperative to acknowledge the openness of the spirit. The religious savants are often inhabited by mystical powers without their choosing to be so used. Pushing the argument to its logical conclusion, one is bound to concur with Mbiti (1992: 197) that:

African peoples are aware of mystical power in the universe. This power is ultimately from God, but in practice it is inherent in, or comes from or through physical objects and spiritual beings.

If the conclusion above is justifiable, we would then argue that the spirit chooses whom it wills to carry out a mission, whether the mission is divining, mediating between earth and the spirit world, healing, or counselling those in trouble. No cultural wall can withstand the spirit. Therefore the spirit has been open and those who received it have had to use it to service the community regardless of sex, gender and race. The diviners and mediums therefore represent a deconstruction of gendered power which dominates, oppresses and exploits. Power in the hands of religious personages brings healing, harmony and at-one-ment within individuals and the community. They therefore represent God's liberating power in practical, concrete situations:

8.5 IN SEARCH OF A MODEL

Therefore, if we are to seek a model for the liberation of the Swazi women, it would not only be to the churches that we would turn. Granted that women constitute a vital force in every church in Swaziland, they remain a silent majority in both mission and independent churches. In most denominations women are marginalised into choristers, announcers, and readers but clearly excluded from the ordained ministry. That this has been the case in Swaziland is not surprising for it has parallels in the nascent church which enjoyed considerable support from women who, besides affording the apostles material help, were faithful followers of Christ and Jesus on a

number of occasions in his ministry recognised their presence and accorded them respect and dignity. Nonetheless, since apostolic times, Christianity has not engendered equality. On the contrary, it maintained the status quo. Consequently, missionary theology in Africa has tended to separate body and soul. Priority was given to the salvation of the soul, almost at the expense of the bodily needs (Kasenene, 1987:79). They tended to follow the Matthean injunction to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Mt 6: 33) and failed to adopt a holistic approach that promoted equality and social justice in the mission field. There was little in missionary theology that aimed at promoting women's aspirations. The spiritualisation of the gospel often meant that even formal education was perceived as "important for preserving and nurturing the faith of those who had been converted" (Kasenene, 1987: 82).

The situation has not been helped by the Bible in the hands of Zionist independent churches which have grafted the Gospel scion onto the Swazi traditional stock. No doubt the independent churches have found plenty of ammunition in the Old Testament to justify the Swazi women's subordination and they have not hesitated to draw on this armada of resources to justify arranged marriages, levirate and sororate marriages, and bridewealth. The missionary attempt to undermine these practices was seen as part of the European cultural imperialism for religious independency in Swaziland was galvanised by "anti-white feeling [which] grew among the Swazis" due to colonial land alienation (Kasenene, 1987:73). Hence, the cultural and nationalistic outlook of the Zionist churches.

Therefore, to arrive at a model for the liberation of the Swazi women from the present forms of gender inequalities, two models are worthy of consideration. For the majority of women who belong to Christian denomination, the Jesus approach which has to be rediscovered in the

gospels is a powerful tool. The gospels contain exciting, liberative passages like the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), and Jesus and a daughter of Abraham (Luke 13:10-17), to quote but a few. In this model, Jesus enters the human situation and restores respect and dignity to women. The approach demands “a hermeneutics that will take the complexity of African women’s lived situation into account. Such a hermeneutics would have to be accountable to their African culture and their multifaceted oppression” (Masenya, 1995). It therefore requires a revolutionary interpretation of the gospels which the privileged male elite who monopolise church leadership has been reluctant, and in some instances unable, to undertake since to do so would, in their thinking, bring into question their hitherto cherished tradition.

The second model which is consonant with, and arises out of, this work is the adoption of a strategy that combines the ideal of a queen mother and economic empowerment. Of all the women in Swaziland, the queen mother stands as a towering role model. She exercises power and authority, together with her son, the King, and acts as a protector of all. She has a council and a voice in the national affairs. She is a powerful role model. Her position and rank are above dispute, and she is an active participant in national ritual. This study has demonstrated that the way the institution of the queen mother was introduced and became part of the Swazi monarchy was a limited revolution. Its revolutionary character lay in the creation of new national institutions (the regiment system, the ritual of kingship and the Reed Dance) and making a woman a central figure in the kingdom. The limitation of the revolution has been that its effects have not trickled down to the majority of women in Swaziland in the last a hundred and fifty years. However, the institution of the queen mother remains central in the Swazi society. The onus is therefore on the young generation of women as the new torch-bearers, with their exposure to formal education, Christian values, technical skills and global human rights trend, to extend the limited revolution

started by the queen mothers if a revolutionary alliance between the Queen Mother and young women in the NGOs is to be born in the warmth of the Swazi cultural jacket.

8.6 THE WAY AHEAD

The way ahead is an onerous one. There is a tough battle ahead. Among other things, there is an apparent disjunction between economic empowerment and gender equality largely due to the culturally specific definition of femininity and the ascription of gender-specific roles. This gap constitutes a major constraint that has to be overcome by giving empowerment a religio-cultural anchor and by exploring resources that can be mobilised to deconstruct the traditional definition of gender roles. It must be recalled that the queen mothers and the religious personages were especially successful in challenging the old patristic attitudes, and in negotiating their way through a strong patriarchal tradition, because they appealed to a point of reference over and above the ordinary, mundane, human experience. Consequently, their positions in society were secured and in course of time became entrenched as part of Swazi culture. The “missing women” (Miles, 1991) who were in actual fact female migrant workers and the women in the NGOs have, on the other hand, striven for and experienced, to a considerable degree, economic independence and have contributed to their families’ welfare and upkeep but they have yet to experience total empowerment, in such areas as control and access to productive economic resources, unbridled ability to earn and spend money without interference from family members, involvement in family decision-making, and in entering critical dialogue with the politics of gender. Progress in these areas has been remarkably slow and change in these critical areas is bound to remain slow and gradual due to the conservative impulse rooted in Swazi tradition. Even with progressive legal reform which a significant number of women hope for, Swazi women, like women elsewhere in Africa, still have a long way to walk to freedom.

Part of this painstakingly slow pace of change can be attributed to religion and culture for religion and culture provide individuals with an identity and sense of belonging. It is through culture that human beings learn the most important lessons of their lives: who they are and what they become. Together, religion and culture are powerful sources of legitimation, social values, norms, and meaning. Nonetheless, it is apparent that institutionalized religion, with the exception of women in ritual and religious personages, has been predominantly male dominated and at best of times inimical to women's quest for equality. As a result, Swaziland has modernised the economy, commerce, transport and education, but there has been no matched radical movement on the status and rights of women. When it comes to women's rights, religion and culture are invoked, not to support women's efforts but to stifle them for what is really at stake is the cultural meaning of womanhood, which is related to the large structure of the Swazi society, the meaning of tradition, the ontology of sacredness, and relations of human experience to the sacred. It can therefore be mooted with a fair degree of certainty that there has been, and there continues to be, a persistence of religious and cultural traditions which hamper women's search for equality. For that matter, women have to contend with prejudices and practices rooted in Swazi social and cultural heritage in their search for equality.

Moreover, it is significant to emphasize that women's efforts have also been constrained by poverty. Although there are poor men, the whole world over, poverty continues to have a female face. Most rural women are poor, and most poor people are women. As the gap between the rich and poor widens, women's relative position declines. Hence, the crucial importance of women's organisations which, among other things, aim at women's economic empowerment. While the various women's organisations may differ in their approaches and complexion, it is imperative that they should stand together to overcome the feminisation of rural poverty for

empowered women are more likely to stand up to a situation and fight for their rights than women totally dependent on their male counterparts. However, for this endeavour to be meaningful, it has to be geared towards all rural women who suffer economic deprivation, and that is a tall order.

It has also to be understood that religion and culture shape and impact on the way a person behaves economically and politically. While religion has at times been a catalyst for change, as in the rise of capitalism, it equally can inhibit the struggle for change. Hence, the critical importance of raising gender awareness and social advocacy which aim at liberating women from ideological mind control and point them forward to life in a transformed society. It is mainly through consciousness raising that women would hope to overcome “internalization of power structures and acceptance of the status quo as the only way of solving the problem” (Mkhonza, 1996:440). A combination of economic empowerment and gender-awareness drive are the twin-track that Swazi women will have to travel. The journey will in all probability be hard and long, but at the end of it there is bound to be some benefits. In this sojourn, the importance of women’s collective effort cannot be overemphasized for it is vital if women are to influence national policy. However, women organising has not yet reached the critical mass level where women can act together and speak with one voice. What is urgently needed, therefore, is a networking that will lead to a critical mass movement that nurtures and supports women. Although the present efforts depict less networking than is desirable, these efforts are the seed of a women’s movement in the making. With more coordination, cooperative action, and mutual respect between organisations, the current initiatives are bound to be productive. There is an ardent need for women’s organisations to closely work together and to recognise the common cause that all of them are involved in. It has to be borne in mind that while women may experience the impact of social structuring, discrimination and subordination differently, due to their different social locations in

the Swazi society, it is important that they take on any forms of inequalities that religion and culture may impose upon them together. In this process, even non-organised forms of resistance to gender oppression should be recognised and respected for unity is strength.

Moreover, due to the resilience of the push and pull of religious and cultural ideologies, there is need to engage in dialogue with religious institutions and their leadership to promote gender awareness amongst leaders of these organisations as they have hitherto tended to be zealous bastions of patriarchal values, practices and authority, and they exert considerable influence on society. There is no need to down-play the significance of the religio-cultural experience in women's lives for therein might lie the key to gender equality in Swaziland. A closer examination of the role of women in ritual suggests the source of legitimation of the important roles of women. In ritual, women perform acts that were typically male roles; often functions shifted and boundaries between men and women became less distinct. As women's participation in *Incwala* and mediumship suggests, women's roles are crucial and complementary, not subordinate, for men and women did not function independently in ritual nor did the various social concerns (economic, political, religious and domestic) exist separately; all were connected and interdependent (Pesantubbee, 1999:403-404). These rituals show that boundaries were fluid to such an extent that we could use these instances to discern women's involvement in other functions of society, away from the appositional dichotomies of the public and private as templates for determining gender roles.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the future direction of Swazi women's struggle for equality is going to be influenced by political developments in the Kingdom. This is because the dynamic for pursuit of social equality lies in the socio-economic and political structuring of

the Swazi society, in which social divisions have been a vehicle of collective consciousness. These social divisions on the basis of the clans' incorporation into what became the kingdom of Swaziland (see chapter 2) led to the royal tradition, in which the Dlamini enjoy a monopoly of political and ritual power, with rights and privileges. Every other clan's importance was determined by its proximity to the locus of power. However, in all groups (with the exception of the Queen Mother), women have been ascribed a position subordinate to that of men; hence the women's search for promotion of their rights. But change is inevitable. Change over the past two centuries has left an indelible mark on society, and the dynamics of class and gender relations have intensified largely due to the increase in the number of educated and professional Swazi women. Decolonization and the second wave of democratization in Africa have given added impetus to women's search for a cultural revolution and pursuit of social and legal equality between women and men, and tactics are bound to change according to the exigencies of the time. There is no doubt that through the NGOs and other initiatives, the Swazi women are committed to a protracted struggle for social, political and economic equality in spite of the political conservatism of the privileged male elite. As Eunice Sowazi (1998: 76, 78), the founding and long-serving General Secretary of the Council of Swaziland Churches has persuasively put it, the future demands "the kind of woman who would dare venture beyond 'home and family' in search of self-fulfilment... Women must really fight hard to relocate themselves from the fireplace and bedroom to the political-cum-economic platform which has for long been the preserve of men".

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APPENDIX A

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER RELATIONS IN SWAZILAND

A. BACKGROUND

1. Name (optional):
2. State whether you are male or female.....
3. How old are you?.....
4. Your level of education, Tick one.
 - (a) Informal
 - (b) Primary
 - (c) Secondary/High School
 - (d) Post-Secondary
 - (e) University
5. Marital status, Tick one
 - (a) Married
 - (b) Widowed
 - (c) Single-parent
 - (d) Single

B. FOR MARRIED PERSONS

6. (I) Type of Marriage, Tick one.
 - (a) Customary
 - (b) Civil rites marriage at a district office or in a church.
- (II) What advantages or problems, if any, do people experience in this type of marriage?.....
.....
.....

7. Was lobola (bridewealth) paid? In what form?
.....
.....
.....

8. Was kuteka and the smearing of libovu (red ochre) done?
.....
By whom?.....
What does this custom mean?.....

9. Who takes the final decisions in the family?
Why?.....
.....
.....

10. Contribution to the family.
What kind of things do you do for the family?.....
.....
.....

11. (i) Are you free to (a) visit friends in the country?.....
(b) join family planning?.....
(c) travel outside the country without any restrictions?.....
(d) spend the money you earn without interference?.....
(ii) Do you need your husband's permission to do any of the things mentioned? Why?.....
.....
.....

12. Do you enjoy full control over some of the family property and resources, like land and cattle? Which ones?.....

.....

.....

13. Do you belong to a women's group?.....

If your answer is "yes", what are the group's activities?.....

.....

.....

14. What do you think is the women's status in the country? Why is this so?

.....

.....

.....

15. Please make any other comments that you would like us to know about the women's status in the Swazi society and their efforts to change their present position.....

.....

.....

C. FOR UNMARRIED PERSONS

16. If you wanted to marry, which of the following forms of marriage would you choose? Why?

- (a) Customary
- (b) Civil rites

17. Do you think lobola (bridewealth) should be paid before the marriage can be socially recognized? Why?

18. Who do you think should make final decisions in the family? Why?

.....
.....
.....

19. Answer "Yes" or "No" to the following statements,

- (a) Employed women have complete control over their money and property.
- (b) Women in Swaziland have free access to family planning,
- (c) Women in my country know their rights,
- (d) Women in this country have freedom to belong to any women's interest group(s).
- (e) Women are free to travel outside their homes without permission.

20. Any comments you would like to make on the status of women in Swaziland.

.....
.....
.....

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE COUNCIL OF SWAZILAND CHURCHES

1. When was the organization founded?

2. Which churches are members of your organization?

- | | |
|-----------|-----------|
| (a) | (e) |
| (b) | (f) |
| (c) | (g) |
| (d) | (h) |

3. What are the objectives of the organization?

.....

.....

.....

4. Who are your main sources of funding?

.....

.....

.....

5. Tell me about the work of the “Social Concerns” and Development units.

.....

.....

.....

6. Which of your organization's activities have been aimed at the women of Swaziland?

.....
.....
.....

7. What are your success stories in your work with women?

.....
.....
.....

8. Any other comments you would like to make on your organization's contribution to women's social status.

.....
.....
.....

THANK YOU

APPENDIX C

LUSTANGO LWAKA NGWANE

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 When was Lutsango lwaka Ngwane founded?

.....

1.2 What specific needs did the organization hope to meet?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. ACTIVITIES

2.1 How has the organization carried out its mission?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2.2 What do you consider to be the unique feature of Lutsango lwaka Ngwane?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2.3 What activities has your organization been involved in?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. **ACHIEVEMENTS**

3.1 What do you think have been the achievements of the organization thus far?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3.2 What problems did you encounter?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3.3 What is your organization's relationship with

(a) Government?.....

.....
.....
.....
.....

(b) Other non-governmental organizations?.....

.....
.....
.....
.....

4. **PROSPECTS**

4.1 What are your plans for the future?

.....
.....
.....
.....

4.2 Any other comments you would like to make on Lutsango lwakaNgwane.

.....
.....
.....