

OBITUARY

HILDA KUPER, 1911–92

Hilda Kuper, a Swazi citizen since 1970 (when King Sobhuza II personally gave her citizenship), died in Los Angeles on 23 April 1992 at the age of eighty. She was born in Bulawayo on 23 August 1911; she was trained at the University of the Witwatersrand and the London School of Economics (under Malinowski), and started her Swazi fieldwork for the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures in 1934, her first major articles appearing in 1935 in *Bantu Studies* and in *Africa* in 1937. She and her husband, Leo Kuper, left South Africa in the early 1960s but she was later to travel as a Swazi national on her Swazi passport. She was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Swaziland in 1990.

Margo Russell, of the University of Stellenbosch, writes:

I first met Hilda Kuper in 1953 when I was a gauche undergraduate at the University of Natal and she, already an internationally recognised social anthropologist with two books and numerous papers to her credit, was apparently a housewife, mother to two small daughters and wife to the sociologist Leo Kuper, with whom I was privileged to be studying and who would take me, unannounced, home to lunch or tea. I found her rather intimidating. The Kupers' house was open house to the Durban intelligentsia of the liberal left. I hovered at the edge of this charmed circle of Jewish lawyers and doctors, visiting American academics, Black educationalists, and Indians. The talk was all of politics and police raids, of shrinking freedom of speech and association, and the tardy complacency and compliance of the Natal English. Hilda seemed always at the centre of a bevy of educated Indian ladies in shimmering saris. She was about to begin her four-year study of Indians in Natal.

New to Durban, she had been immediately attracted to the Indian community; the Indian intellectual elite provided a social circle where she could feel politically comfortable despite the hardening apartheid regime which was to drive her into permanent exile. The Indians' political response to their situation through non-violent resistance accorded with her own political views; she was active at this time, with her husband Leo, in the founding of the non-racial Liberal Party in 1953, whose ideals of tolerance she never abandoned, despite the subsequent vicious attacks from the left which became popular in academic circles in the 1970s and '80s.

Indians in Natal is not an orthodox anthropological monograph but a record of the distinctive cultural practice of Hindus in a Durban suburb in the 1950s, as it had developed within the racist structures of Natal over a century of isolation from mainland India. The research on which it is based was sponsored by the Family Research Unit of the Institute of Community and Family Health, who were anxious to establish why Indian infants from economically deprived communities in Durban survived so much better than African infants in similar circumstances. They thought that part of the

answer must lie in the local Indian culture, and that an anthropologist was called for. Hilda explicitly rejected the notion that the culture of a segment of society could be thus recorded without taking into account the fuller context, political and historical. Her manuscript was completed in a happy wet cold term at the University of Manchester in 1958, where she was visiting as Simon Fellow.

Indians in Natal is an exciting book to return to after thirty years, not just for its innovative flouting of disciplinary boundaries but for its remarkably vivid portrait of Durban in the 1950s. The Indian community is approached as a racial minority systematically excluded from the central power of the state. This shapes Indian society, with its waning interest in caste, its new elites, its resurgent interest in the vernacular. In her careful record the Tamil and Hindi rituals at birth and death, in sickness and health, are enacted by historically real individuals who are seen constantly adapting a received cultural repertoire in order to manage and make sense of their economically deprived lives. With its scrupulous regard for accuracy and completeness it is a valuable historical document—a fact happily recognised by Greenwood Press, which reissued it in 1974.

Her term at Manchester had been unsettling. The South African political situation in 1959, with its routine terror, its increasing use of force, bannings, deportations, mass trials, and arrest without trial, was deteriorating and frightening to return to. As leading members of the Liberal Party the Kupers found themselves harassed by police surveillance. More depressing was the political indifference of the University of Natal, with its racially segregated campuses, where Hilda now took up a senior lectureship and found herself battling with reactionary colleagues. In 1960 she was conspicuously excluded from a University of Natal team working in Swaziland, despite her international reputation as an expert in Swazi society. The stream of visiting international academics was drying up. The best people were leaving. In 1962 the Kupers had had enough and gladly accepted an invitation to the United Kingdom. Within two years they were at the University of California in Los Angeles, where they were to remain till Hilda's death in 1992.

Hilda loved California. She found the university well endowed and generous, the students enquiring and uninhibited. But the rising salience of race in America deeply disturbed her South African liberalism. Despite the distance now involved, she continued to take advantage of every opportunity to return to Swaziland. In 1967, with Swaziland's independence less than a year away, she made an offer of traditional allegiance to King Sobhuza. In 1970 she was granted Swazi citizenship. She was delighted when she was approached in 1972 by representatives of the Swazi royal family to write an official biography of King Sobhuza II. All this I know only from Christmas cards and very occasional meetings when, as her travels transected mine, we dined together. I remember one such dinner in a rented London apartment in the 1970s. She was deep into Sobhuza's biography, enchanted by the new experience of working in the Public Records Office. Sobhuza's private secretary was there, and so was one of Sobhuza's sons, who had been sent to further his education but was believed to be spending far too much time away from the classroom. Hilda was

advising the young man, who, ill at ease, spent the evening making mono-syllabic replies from behind the racing pages of the *Evening Standard* while she caught up on the intimacies of the lives and fortunes of various members of the Swazi royal family she had known so well since the 1930s. I was later to look back with some amazement on this evening. It was only after I had lived in Swaziland that I appreciated how hard such intimacy with the Swazi royal inner circle is won.

In 1982, the year that Sobhuza died, I moved to Swaziland and thus came to know Hilda in a way not possible before. She flew out for the funeral, assuring me that it was to be her last visit to the country. Her romance with Swaziland had begun in 1934 when, as a young postgraduate student in receipt of a fellowship from the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures, she travelled with Malinowski himself by train and bus to Mbabane. Malinowski, in South Africa to deliver a paper to an educational conference at the University of the Witwatersrand, had accepted a spontaneous invitation from Sobhuza, who was attending the conference, to visit Swaziland. For a week Hilda and Malinowski were feted, first by Acting Resident Commissioner A. G. Marwick in the capital, with visits on horseback to royal graves in the Mzimba mountains, and then by the king and his governors, his queens and his mother at her royal capital, Lobamba. Hilda stayed on at Lobamba for almost two continuous years, collecting, as she said, 'innumerable facts', mastering the language and culture of the Swazis, cultivating the trust of a few main informants, inevitably affronting the white settlers with this intimacy, though she was careful not to 'go native', which would have alienated valued white informants. For the work upon which she was engaged was not a general monograph on Swazi culture but an analysis of the principle of inequality—she called it rank—in contemporary Swaziland, both within what she called 'the traditional orientation' and within the broader contours of the colonial state. It was to her everlasting regret that she was persuaded in 1944 by Oxford University Press (who pleaded the need for economy in time of war) to cut and publish separately the first section of her manuscript, that which dealt with the traditional Swazi aristocracy, leaving her impassioned denunciation of the racism of the protectorate to a separate and much smaller print run by Witwatersrand University Press in 1947. It was only in 1969 that *Uniform of Colour* reached a larger audience when it was reprinted by Negro Universities Press, New York.

Sobhuza's official biography offered her the opportunity to present in one volume a more balanced account, and she seized it enthusiastically, though she was to find it very trying to have her work closely vetted, chapter by chapter, by an official editorial committee (whom she suspected of having some hand in the 'loss' of her trunk full of irreplaceable tapes and documents at Matsapha airport). *Sobhuza II* is a valuable history of the prolonged struggle between an African kingship and a colonial power. The personal recollections of Swazi elders are carefully located against the archival evidence, the African voice set against the clipped, self-confident tones of colonial officers and the Colonial Office. As she worked on it her admiration for Sobhuza as a statesman grew. It was fitting, but highly

unusual, that she should be one of only three to deliver an official oration at his funeral. White experts and aid donors, the new settler colonialists, watching the ceremony on their television sets, marvelled at this small grey-haired white woman, so at home amongst the thousands of black mourners, reminding them of how great a king they had lost.

Swaziland was now plunged into a most unhappy political struggle over the succession. Sobhuza had reigned for over sixty years. Scarcely anybody could remember his accession. There was argument over the rules. Hilda's books were in sudden local demand. She had been a confidante of the king. She had written the thing down. Within two years she was back in Swaziland, now deeply caught up in the continuing political struggle, which was beginning to look very ugly indeed, with road blocks, body searches, arrests without trial, hidden arms caches. She could not believe how ill informed I then appeared about the implications for the country of what was happening to the various royal protagonists. Outsiders like myself saw the struggle as taking place within the ruling royal elite and therefore inaccessible. She saw it as completely accessible for that very reason. She had devoted much of her intellectual energy to this very group. She had watched the protagonists grow up, brothers and sons of Sobhuza, this one to be trusted, that one not to be trusted. She took sides. She wrote four new chapters for a reissue of her student text *The Swazi: a South African kingdom*, of which the editors wrote, 'There has never been a publication in anthropology resembling part II of this case study. . . . History and its recorder Hilda Kuper came together in time and space. . . . This case study gives us a perspective on a third world society and culture and its adaptations to the vicissitudes of our times that is unparalleled' (1986, p. viii). Hilda herself was less sure. In July 1985 she wrote to me, 'I have blotted by copybook as an anthropologist by my revision of *The Swazi* . . . I received the proofs in London and realize that the work is a disaster, shoddy, unscholarly, and written without elegance. Unfortunately at this stage I can't withdraw it'. More sadly, but stoically, 'I am acutely aware that my role in Swazi affairs is unimportant now'.

I last saw Hilda in 1990, when she came to Swaziland to receive an honorary degree and to donate her papers to the University of Swaziland. Despite her firm view of herself as a Swazi citizen it was the American embassy at Mbabane who claimed her as their own. At a lavish banquet thrown by them in her honour she contracted acute food poisoning and had to receive her honours the next day sitting down, in a ceremony delayed for four hours by what seemed at first to be the late arrival, but transpired to be the non-arrival, of the university chancellor, King Mswati III. As for the gift of her papers, the university posted the invitations too late; only a handful of people gathered in the hot sun outside the library to witness this probably rash act. It was typical of Hilda's faith in the Swazi that it should be here, rather than in some safe, well endowed archive, that her papers should rest.

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