

Eileen Jensen Krige (1905–1995)

A noticeable feature of social anthropology, especially in South Africa, is the prominent role women have played in its development, and Emeritus Professor Eileen Krige, who died on 18 April at the age of 90, was among the most distinguished of them. She was indeed the last survivor of a truly remarkable trio, the other two being Hilda Kuper and Monica Wilson, who were key figures in the growth of the subject here, and their collective contribution is unlikely ever to be rivalled, let alone surpassed. They produced substantial works on three of the Nguni peoples who, in Eileen's case, happened to be the Zulu. So, in a journal such as *Natalia*, it is worth paying particular attention to that part of her contribution, especially since it has been her other work on the Lovedu which has attracted most professional notice.

Eileen once told me that in its earliest version her compilation on the Zulu was prepared as a dissertation for her part-time honours degree in Social Anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand, which she completed in 1929. Her enrolment for this degree was due to the influence of Winifred Hoernlé who had initiated the formal teaching of social anthropology at Wits in 1923 and was later described by the Kriges in their dedication of *The Realm of the Rain Queen* to her as 'the mother of Social Anthropology in South Africa', yet another indication of the feminine, if not matriarchal, influence in the growth of the subject here.

Condensing the existing literature on a people for an honours dissertation is one useful way of preparing to do further research amongst them and so it might have been expected that Eileen would go on to do field-work amongst the Zulu. However, in the long vacation during her honours course she had already chosen to make a field-trip to the Lovedu, a choice of which the ultimate origins might be traced back to a childhood spent at Pietersburg in the north-eastern Transvaal, where she heard tales about the Lovedu 'Rain Queen'. A more immediate influence, though, was a brief private visit to them in 1926. That visit had included a meeting with the reigning Queen Mujaji which marked the beginning of a more profound and enduring relationship between Eileen and the Lovedu people.

However, the further development of that relationship required support that was never easy to obtain in those days and became even scarcer during the economic depression of the early 1930s, so that Eileen and her husband, Jack (whom she married in 1928), supported themselves by working for an organization in Pretoria called the University Correspondence Courses, one of several such private bodies which offered distance teaching for, amongst others, students taking the external examinations of the University of South Africa which did not then provide tuition, as it does today. This rather unremitting form of teaching did not allow much opportunity for research, but Eileen was able to manage a third vacation trip to the Lovedu in 1932.

She also completed the conversion of her honours thesis into the book that appeared in 1936 as *The Social System of the Zulus*. Quite often, this work is referred to as an 'ethnography' of the Zulu, but it is not one in the sense of a report based on intensive research in the field by its author, and the opening sentence of its preface indeed asserts that it is 'primarily' a synthesis of earlier published materials. Yet the reader is also told in the rest of the preface that she collected a good deal of supplementary material from Zulu informants, and I learned from her that some of them had been students whom she taught through the correspondence courses. One of them, G. Mahlobo, was a court interpreter

and he is extensively acknowledged in the preface and the rest of the book. Indeed, Chapter 5, on the 'Transition from childhood to adulthood', originally appeared in 1934 as an article with Mahlobo as the co-author. He had also written an account of Zulu marriage ceremonies which provided the basis for Chapter 6. Other sections which derived from original material are those on kinship behaviour in Chapter 2, on legal procedures in Chapter 10 and on sacrifice in Chapter 13.

It is clear that this 'distance fieldwork', as one might call it, added a good deal to the value of the work and that could only have been managed by someone with the knowledge to recognise the major gaps in the existing literature and the training needed to fill them. Furthermore, on re-reading *The Social System*, I have been repeatedly impressed by the way in which it manages to convey a sense of the integration of Zulu society at all levels. This achievement is undoubtedly due in part to the 'underlying theories' which Eileen acknowledges in the preface she had absorbed from Mrs Hoernlé and, even though she does not actually mention any of them, it is clear from the book that one of them must have been 'structural-functionalism'. Since this approach is now frequently disparaged, it is worth stressing its beneficial influence on works like this one which, whatever its limitations, can never be now superseded, since the 'system' it describes has largely ceased to exist.

The knowledge of Zulu society and culture that she had acquired in this way also enhanced the value of her teaching at the University of Natal, Durban,

where, from 1948, she and her husband formed a particularly effective team of which a notable achievement, especially for that time and place, was the encouragement of an interest in anthropology amongst African students. Several of them went on to do fieldwork in the Valley of a Thousand Hills, a setting which was partly an outcome of the devoted service which both Jack and Eileen gave over many years to The Valley Trust. One of Jack's postgraduate students was Absolom Vilakazi whose thesis was published as *Zulu Transformations* and, later, Eileen taught Harriet Ngubane whose research was eventually awarded the Cambridge Ph.D and which appeared as *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine*. So far, no comparable works have appeared on any other African people in this country.

This always productive partnership of some thirty years came to a premature end with Jack's early death in 1959, but Eileen continued her teaching and research, including fieldwork amongst the Lovedu, during the next decade. Even after her retirement from the Chair of Social Anthropology in 1970, she continued making long, difficult and even dangerous trips to the field, well into her seventies and went there for the last time in April 1993 to attend the funeral of her friend and principal informant. It was therefore especially fitting that amongst those at her own funeral was a delegation of Lovedu men and women who drove through the night to Durban so that they could be there in time.

During this latter part of her career, she again added to the Zulu ethnography, with two articles on Zulu female fertility rituals which were widely supposed to be extinct, and her long interest in kinship and marriage generated substantial contributions to her last major (co-edited) publication, *Essays on African Marriage in Southern Africa*, a co-operative and comparative work which included new material on Zulu and other Nguni marriage patterns, some of it from former students of hers. It is well worth the attention of those who may not be familiar with it.

So her contributions to Natal, where she spent the last half of her long life, and to its peoples, were numerous and beneficial. In emphasising them, I do not mean to diminish the significance of all her other work and indeed her total achievement was one which has not often been matched in South African scholarship and rarely exceeded.

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