

Full Length Research Paper

Between tradition and the requirements of modern life: *Hlonipha* in Southern Bantu societies, with special reference to Lesotho

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Linguistic taboos are still quite widespread in Southern Africa, confronting women with the dilemma of either contravening tradition or agreeing to a radical self-censorship in their communication. This paper, which is exploratory in nature, examines possible rationales for *hlonipha* and discusses the linguistic, social and ethical implications of *hlonipha*. It sketches the dilemma young women are faced within a rapidly changing society, bringing together material from unpublished sources and data from informal interviews and discussions with students and academics at the National University of Lesotho and in South Africa.

Key words: *Hlonipha*, linguistic taboos, women in Southern Africa.

LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

In the last decades, linguistic sub-disciplines, such as Sociolinguistics, Feminist Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics, and Cognitive Linguistics, all recognise the importance of language *use* and *behaviour*, and the conceptualising power of the word. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 129), for instance, observe that “[w]hen people converse with one another, they are making various kinds of social moves.” Language is a social phenomenon, and as such it reflects the society which uses it as “gender structures people’s access to participation in situations, activities, and events, hence to their opportunities to perform particular speech acts legitimately” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 129). By analysing the language use of a particular group of speakers, linguists can make deductions about the gender and power structures of that particular speech community. At the same time, however, the way people use language – consciously and subconsciously – influences the views held by the members of the society. In some cases, this has even led to conscious linguistic change in an attempt to change people’s attitudes, such as the introduction of the term *Ms.* in the late 1960s (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 53). Thus, language

use can reflect and also influence social attitudes, and this becomes particularly evident with regard to language and gender (Smith, 1985: 170) – and tradition¹.

In addition, language issues have played a major role in debates concerned with Human Rights and Women’s Liberation in many parts of the world and feminist linguists have begun to discuss the tension between the *status quo* and their desire for liberation: language customs seem to act as reinforcing elements, which seem to assist in maintaining the *status quo*. On the other hand, changes in language customs might indicate social change. Thus,

[...] feminists must have faith in the capacity of language to empower as well as oppress; linguistic resources may very often have been denied us and used against us, but there is nothing immutable about this or any other form of

¹ Due to its contentious nature, the term ‘culture’ is avoided here (Dunton, 2007 for a critical review of how this term has been used to justify oppressive practices).

² According to Lopez-Claros and Zahidi (2005: 4), the degree to

sexism. To place women 'outside language' in our theories is to deny ourselves something of crucial importance: the power to shape new meanings for a different and better world. (Cameron, 1992: 227)

The linguistic aspect of *hlonipha*, that is, the replacement of syllables and words which are taboo for married women (see below), is an example of how some societies deny women access to certain linguistic resources. It marks women's language as special and different, which can result in a certain tension for the affected women. In the present paper, an attempt will be made to highlight some of the rationales behind *hlonipha* and to explore this dilemma as well as some of the implications for those who are required by tradition to observe certain restrictive rules imposed by their communities while, at the same time, negotiating a practice which allows them to make a meaningful contribution to their transforming societies.

The issue of *hlonipha* was first pointed out to me by my colleague Francina Moloi, in the context of a course called 'The Sociology of Language', which we were co-teaching at the National University of Lesotho in 1996. I was intrigued, started to read and gather as much information about the phenomenon as I could. I also discussed it with a number of Basotho students and colleagues, mainly in the context of my 'Sociology of Language' and 'Language and Gender' classes, and also in the context of a Theatre for Development Project, the Winter-Summer-Institute, which brings together students from Lesotho, South Africa and the United States. The present paper is the outcome of this exploration of *hlonipha*, based on some unpublished sources and many years of discussions with staff and students at the National University of Lesotho.

RESPECT IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Rudwick and Shange (2006: 474) point out that:

[a]mong isiZulu-speakers *ukuhlonipha* (to respect), as a social custom, entails an entire value system based on specific social variables. The understanding and respect for these social variables is an essential part of the propriety of the social order.

In other words, respect is one of the underpinnings of Nguni (and Sotho) societies:

Respect among the Nguni is held with such great esteem that children are taught from a tender age to avoid the use of what is regarded as impolite words which when used might be regarded as disrespectful (Ntuli, 2000: 33).

Respect is expected from everybody, women, men and children, and respect is shown verbally and non-verbally. However, "[a]lthough women, children, and men *hlonipha*, women have a greater load to carry" (Zungu, 1997: 179), or, in the words of Ntuli (2000: 35),

[...] if it were possible for one to put all forms of respect on a measuring scale together with the people interacting in it, the end-product would undoubtedly fall more on the side of women. It appears as if women are expected to pay more respect than their counterparts.

In a response to Ntuli, Zulu (n/d) agrees with Ntuli's observations with regard to *hlonipha*, but disagrees with Ntuli's conclusions: "The Zulu system is patriarchal [...] in the sense that it apportions respect according to *seniority* first and *sex* second" (emphasis in original). Zulu argues that in almost all patriarchal societies, women act as "curators of these systems that entrench male domination" and that, consequently, "the problem is not with *ukuhlonipha per se*, but with patriarchy." Interestingly, the author likens patriarchy to apartheid as both systems privilege some and disadvantage others and the author concludes that patriarchy needs to be abolished.

In the context of other symptoms of the patriarchal character of Southern Bantu traditions, such as *bohali* or *lobola* (bride wealth) and polygamy, which are still quite wide-spread in southern Africa and which are perpetuated in initiation schools in the region (Moseitse, 2006 review these practices in the education sector in Lesotho), *hlonipha* may be a contributing element in maintaining the gendered imbalance of power in traditional societies.

LINGUISTIC TABOOS IN SOUTHERN BANTU SOCIETIES

In most societies around the world, women's language use differs from that of men in terms of sociolinguistic behaviour patterns (Coates, 1993), in terms of interactional behaviour in discussions, and in terms of the use of politeness strategies (Holmes, 1995). This can be attributed to a number of different reasons, all of which are social in nature, as language reflects the social position of women in their society—inferiority, dependence, lack of access to resources². In many Southern African societies, the struggle for economic participation

which women are denied access to participation and resources varies, but, so far, full gender equality has not been realised anywhere in the world:

[...] no country in the world, no matter how advanced, has achieved true gender equality, as measured by comparable decision-making power, equal opportunity for education and advancement and equal participation and status in all walks of human endeavour.

is if further complicated by certain taboos or discriminatory discursive practices and norms that affect the use of language.

Taboos exist in many societies and they can take many different forms. For the purposes of the present discussion, Allan and Burridge's (2006: 27) definition of *taboo* will be used: "[...] a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of people, for a specified context, at a given place and time." According to the authors, taboos are supposed to avoid "discomfort, harm or injury", either to an individual or to the community; their regulatory function is expected to have a protective effect. On the other hand, the regulatory nature of taboos also implies that they can have a restrictive effect on certain members of a society, namely on those who are required to observe them for the benefit of others.

Linguistic taboos can lead to intriguingly far-reaching differences in male and female language use – and even in terms of linguistic structures and phonology. The practice of *hlonipha* – respect through avoidance – is still quite common in a number of speech communities in Southern Africa³ belonging to the Southern Bantu language family, the two largest sub-groups of which are the Sotho-Tswana group (comprising, among others, Sesotho, Setswana and Sepedi) and the Nguni group (including Swati, Ndebele, isiZulu and isiXhosa). Although respectful verbal and non-verbal behaviour is expected from all members of the society, married women are more strongly affected than men by these avoidance strategies (*hlonipho*, *hlonipha*, or *isihlonipho sabafazi* – Finlayson, 1995, or *ukuhlonipha* – Ntuli, 2000⁴). Following Thetela (2002: 180), this paper will use the term *hlonipha*, as she argues that this is now the most commonly used term.

As a social concept, the term *hlonipha* refers to respect, including physical signs of respect and politeness (such as, avoiding eye contact), the avoidance of taboo terms (such as, for sexual organs), and the avoidance strategies practiced by married women. Thetela (2002: 180) uses the term in the sense of "discourse choices (for example, lexical, pragmatic, rhetorical) by women in general". She (2002: 180) provides a number of examples of euphemistic terms for sexual organs⁵ and activities. Her analysis of post-rape

police interviews in Lesotho and in the Free State in South Africa shows that rape victims use a number of strategies to avoid explicit sexual references, such as writing the terms down, euphemistic expressions, hesitations, mumbling, pauses, silence and tears (Thetela, 2002: 184f). She suggests that the unequal access by Basotho women and men to sex discourse might be the reason why so many Basotho women's rape cases are lost in the courts of law:

[...] we can suggest that the *hlonipha* culture constrains women from engaging fully in the legal process, in comparison to the kind of freedom enjoyed by male interactants (for example, the police). (Thetela, 2002: 186)

Another aspect of *hlonipha*, and the main focus of this paper, is the discourse system employed by married women who need to show avoidance and substitution of elements of words which (partially) resemble their male in-laws' names⁶.

The impact of *hlonipha* on language use is so strong that, with regard to the variety of Sesotho spoken in Lesotho, Lynn (1994: 29ff) even talks about "two distinct varieties, namely, *Sesali*, spoken by women, and *Senna*, the Sesotho spoken by men" (Lynn, 1994: 29; emphasis in original), with mostly lexical differences. In many families, married women are, for example, still expected to be silent during family discussions, celebrations, and funerals – despite the fact that there have always been the occasional notable exceptions to the rule, for example, the chieftainess 'Mantšebo Seeiso, who acted as regent from 1941 to 1960 (Gill, 1993: 186).

According to Herbert (1995), *hlonipha* even accounts for the way click sounds were borrowed into Southern Bantu languages from neighbouring Khoisan languages – a remarkable phenomenon indeed because phoneme borrowing is extremely rare, and a phenomenon which shows how far-reaching and all-pervasive these traditions used to be. Thus, women's language use was a major

combination with certain voice qualities, to 'personalise' examinations in the context of gynaecological examinations.

⁶ In order to illustrate the practice of *hlonipha*, Finlayson (1995: 140) applies the concept to a fictitious English example:

Robert and Grace Green have three children – William, Joan and Margaret. William marries Mary and takes her home to his family. Here she is taught a new vocabulary by Joan, her sister-in-law, and, where necessary, advised by Grace, her mother-in-law. This is because from now on she may never use the syllables occurring in her husband's family's names, that is (simplistically) 'rob', 'ert', 'green', 'will', 'may' and 'grace'. Thus for a sentence 'Grace will not eat green yoghurt', Mary would have to say something like 'The older daughter of Smith refuses to eat grass-coloured yomix'.

As Finlayson says, this is a simplification because ancestors' names and names of extended family members, as well as future children's names will have to be avoided as well, and, in addition, there is the requirement to avoid references to sexual organs, to avoid certain foods, and to observe certain behavioural and clothing restrictions. We might also add that Mary herself will be given a new name (Sechefo as follows).

³ Interestingly, according to Treis (2005: 292), there seem to have been similar practices in Kambaata, a language spoken in Ethiopia, in the past. However, these practices, called *ballisha*, appear to have become virtually extinct, while *hlonipha* is still widely observed in southern Africa.

⁴ Strictly speaking, we need to distinguish between [*isiHlonipho*, the language of respect, [...] a variety used by women of the Nguni and Southern Sotho cluster [and] [*ukuhlonipha*, [...] the act of respect. The difference between the two terms lies in the fact that all isiZulu first language speakers perform the social act of *ukuhlonipha*, whereas *isiHlonipho* is a sociolinguistic custom which is employed primarily by married women. (Luthuli, 2007: 6)

⁵ Fairclough (1989: 59-61) who points out that, in many societies around the world, euphemisms and deictic expressions are used, in

contributing factor towards language change in the past. According to Herbert, Sesotho adopted its click sounds through intermarriage with neighbouring Nguni tribes, who, incidentally, first introduced the custom of *hlonipha* into their culture. This process was helped by the way in which the Basotho nation was formed under Moshoeshe I, that is, by gathering together and uniting various Southern African tribes left homeless after the *lifaqane* (Gill, 1993).

Traditionally, a woman becomes a member of her husband's family once she gets married. Legally and socially, a married woman is regarded as her husband's 'child'⁷. Furthermore, she should avoid any direct contact with her male in-laws, both linguistic and physical (for example, she must avoid being in the same room with senior male in-laws, she must not touch them, she should never walk in front of them, and there are also other restrictions concerning food, clothing, mourning rituals etc.). At this juncture, it needs to be pointed out, however, that male Basotho are also subjected to certain linguistic taboos, although to a much lesser extent than their female counterparts. For example, men are required to respect their elders and are expected not to talk in their presence (Zungu, 1997: 174).

In terms of their language use, daughters-in-law have to show respect towards their male in-laws and chiefs by avoiding their names and (parts of) words related to, or even just phonetically resembling, these names. This has to do with the significance of the given names in Southern Bantu societies, where the given name (often decided upon by the paternal grandparents) often "reflects the circumstances of the child's birth" (Zungu, 1997: 172). The linguistic rules of *hlonipha* require the wife to replace avoided names and related words with others (lexical substitution), for example, through the use of near-synonyms or loanwords from other languages. The fact that most Basotho names are also 'real words' in the language, for example, *Pitso* 'public gathering', *Mokete* 'feast', *Letsatsi* 'sun', *Thabo* 'joy', *Thuso* 'help', *Khotso* 'peace', *Tšepo* 'hope', can result in a large number of words that need to be replaced. Sometimes nicknames and paraphrases are used to refer to male

⁷ Until recently, married women in Lesotho were legal minors, which meant that they could not purchase cars or property, obtain loans or even apply for a telephone line without their husbands' consent. Legally, this situation changed with the Legal Capacity of Married Persons Equality Act in 2006: "Married women in Lesotho gained equality to men in 2006 under the Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act. Legally any woman can now own land, receive inheritance, and make her own decisions." (LGNPS)

This is an interesting situation in view of the fact that legal provisions usually follow social practice (for example, general suffrage). In this case, however, the legal provisions precede social practice in that, legally, married women are now equal to married men – with the practice lagging behind. This situation is compounded by the fact that, at a local level, legal issues are still frequently resolved by local chiefs in the *likhotla* (local courts), and for a law to be translated into (or, often, summarised in) Sesotho takes time – and requires the chief's understanding and co-operation with regard to its application.

relatives. These linguistic taboos apply mainly to oral usage, that is, it is permissible for Basotho women to write taboo words down, even if they are not allowed to pronounce them. Rudwick and Shange (2006: 477) speak of a "register spoken with an extended lexicon in order to avoid 'forbidden' syllables".

Sechefe (n/d: 22) explains:

A mother-in-law should never call the names of her son-in-law. Consequently, the newly married daughter-in-law is at once given a new name, that of "Ma" or mother of so and so, such as "Malerato" in order to enable the mother-in-law to call the son-in-law the new name of "Ralerato", father of Lerato, even before they have children. [...] A daughter-in-law out of sheer respect and secondly out of fear for some evil that may befall her, will under no circumstances utter the name of her father-in-law come what may even after severe persuasion.

Married women are thus restricted in their expression, which contributes to their linguistic invisibility. Similarly, mothers-in-law must not use their sons-in-law's names, and as a consequence, they cannot refer to their daughters' names either, as traditionally the wife is called by her husband's name. A young wife is, therefore, given a new name, usually a name beginning in *Ma-*, followed by the name of her expected first-born child, and her husband is called *Ra-* followed by the name of his future first-born's name. Tlali (1977: 21) points out that:

[...] women have been known to live beyond thirty years of marriage without ever going in front of their father-in-laws' huts. They greet each other from a distance if they happen to see each other. No familiarity whatsoever is established between the two people. With the brothers of her husband's however the *ngoetsi* [a newly married woman] observes some of the *Hlonipha* customs such as not calling them by their names and not holding hands with them.

In their daily lives, *hlonipha* can be a rather tedious and difficult practice for women, and it makes the woman's language different from that of the rest of the family, she remains a linguistic outsider in her new family. Allan and Burridge (2006: 129) interpret this outsider status of the wife in her new family as the main reason for *hlonipha*: "The wife must avoid drawing attention to herself" and avoidance "marks her as an outsider".

At the same time, consistent linguistic avoidance requires a remarkable presence of mind and it is not surprising that the mastery of *hlonipha* is seen as an achievement. According to Rudwick and Shange (2006: 480), the practice is a source of identity and pride in linguistic skilfulness on the part of traditional rural women

(especially now that it has become a choice for modern urban women in KwaZulu-Natal). Some new names are very creative and Coplan (1994: 46) observes that “[a]n aptly chosen *hlonipha* name may [even] come to replace a man’s original name in general usage”.

Despite the admirable creativity that is often displayed due to *hlonipha*, the fact remains that it is a symptom of patriarchy (Zulu n/d aforementioned). However, oppressive practices usually also involve a certain degree of conspiracy from certain sectors of the oppressed. Rudwick and Shange (2006: 477) observe that “[...] it must be acknowledged that it is primarily females who are responsible for maintaining the linguistic variety and upholding the tradition”. It also needs to be mentioned that, in many families, it is not only the male in-laws but often the mother-in-law who enforces *hlonipha*, because, with the arrival of the new daughter-in-law having achieved a certain degree of freedom after decades of oppression, she can enjoy her new power and refuse to make it any easier for her daughter-in-law than her own life used to be. As to the reasons why women only begin to command respect once they have reached the stage of grandmothers, Ntuli (2000: 36) speculates that this might be because the women now conform to “some of the characteristics of being male because [they have] now passed the child bearing age”. This reasoning correlates to the suspected function of *hlonipha* as a regulator of sexuality, to which we will now turn.

Traditionally, the rationale behind *hlonipha* used to be that incest should be avoided. Finlayson (1995: 143) points out that in addition to showing respect linguistically, married Xhosa women were also expected to avoid physical contact with their in-laws. In practice, however, I suspect that *hlonipha* may have had a very different function: Due to the ‘right of the first night’ of the father-in-law, a woman’s first child was commonly regarded to be his child. There is, even today, a Sesotho saying, “Ngoana ‘e moholo ke thaka ntata ‘e” – ‘The first-born is the age-mate of the father’ (personal communication from a 4th Year student at NUL). This led to a strange and complicated situation for the young mother: She was her husband’s ‘child’, but her first-born was her father-in-law’s ‘child’ and thus her husband’s ‘sibling’. Of course, if her first-born child was a boy, and if he was named after the father-in-law (a decision traditionally taken by the child’s paternal grandparents), the young mother would not even be allowed to call her son by his given name and the young child might initially not even know his real name. Sechefo (n/d 26) explains:

The first-born son is the property of the grandparents. It has to be weaned by a ceremony performed by the grand-father, generally after the lapse of two or even three years suckling, during which period there are no sexual relations between the young couples [sic].

This observation makes Tlali’s quotation (1977: 21 afore-

mentioned) appear in a new light: *hlonipha* can thus be interpreted as a strategy to prevent the woman from talking about this incestuous ‘initiation’ to her new family by depriving her of the linguistic tools necessary for clearly naming and accusing the perpetrator. One (male) informant confirms this suspicion, but he presents the purpose of *hlonipha* in more euphemistic terms: According to him, *hlonipha* was designed to remind members of the family of the “events” which took place when the young bride first arrived to join her new family and the father-in-law had sexual intercourse with her in order to “teach” her, as her bridegroom was still sexually inexperienced. In addition, the bridegroom might not be in a position to determine whether his bride was still a virgin. According to the same informant, the sexual initiation of the young husband was taken care of by his mother-in-law.

The ‘right of the first night’ may no longer exist, and attitudes seem to be changing. Nowadays, when asked why women are expected to practice *hlonipha*, many speakers do not have an answer. Not surprisingly, the phrase, “this is our culture” is used frequently to avoid any critical discussion of linguistic taboos and other traditional practices. Ntuli (2000: 34f) observes that:

[...] one never finds a satisfactory answer when one asks why [...] men [are] not expected to *hlonipha* their spouses in this particular manner. The only answer one often receives is: ‘It is part of culture, women must respect’.

This, however, does not mean that *hlonipha* is not expected and practiced any more, especially in the rural areas. Konosoang Sobane (personal communication, 02 April 2012) explains that:

[...] *hlonipha* is still practiced widely in Lesotho, particularly in the rural areas. Even women who are educated and stay in town, when they get back home for family meetings they still practice it, and when they are visited by family members also. It’s a practice that is still there and if one ignores it, [one] gets frowned at. Also, even when there are no family members around, sometimes women still practice [*hlonipha*] because they are used to, and because their conscience says it’s the right thing to do!!

Non-observance of *hlonipha* can still result in sanctions: “[...] the woman who does not respect her husband as well as in-laws, not only embarrasses her husband’s family but her family as well.” (Luthuli, 2007: 52) This places an enormous responsibility on married women because the shame will not only be theirs but will affect others in the (extended) family context, due to the view that “[t]he husband will only be respected by members of the community if he receives respect from his family.” (Luthuli, 2007: 53)

On the other hand, breaking a taboo can also be a deliberate provocation, thus conveying a certain feeling of freedom – the “thrill of transgression” (Allan and Burrige, 2006: 252). According to Epprecht (2000: 103), this is what happened in colonial Lesotho in the early 1930s, when, due to the economic depression, female migrancy increased drastically:

By the early 1930s, the behaviour of some of the women involved was so outlandish and unruly, and the breakdown of traditional *hlonipha* or respect so great, that many Basotho men were confounded. Women in the camps swore, they shamelessly mocked authority, they even carried knives and used them. In 1930, for example, it was reported that a female brewer had actually killed a customer for not paying for his beer. Hut-burnings, poisonings, stabbings, while often between female rivals for men’s attentions, exacerbated men’s sense of loss of control over their ‘children’.

Allan and Burrige (2006: 238) also note that taboos are never broken unintentionally but that “[p]eople censor their behavior so as to avoid giving offence when deliberately intending to offend.”

MODERN BASOTHO WOMEN IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

The present study brings together information from unpublished sources from the National University of Lesotho (NUL) Library archives and many years of conversations and informal interviews with both students and academics at the National University of Lesotho. It is thus informed by the opinions of educated middle class Basotho expressed from the late 1990s to 2009. These opinions are reflective of urban/rural contrasts, although this contrast is probably less pronounced than similar dichotomies in South Africa, due to the fact that the NUL is located in Roma, some 35 km south-east of the capital, Maseru.

Nowadays, many young Basotho university students tend to be critical of what they perceive as restrictive practices, such as *hlonipha*. They enjoy a considerable amount of behavioural and linguistic freedom while on campus. Female students at the National University of Lesotho enjoy their new freedom away from home and they express and display this freedom in a number of ways: liberal dress codes, general outspokenness and assertiveness.

However, the situation changes when they return to their homesteads and their families, especially in the rural areas, where a far more conservative behaviour is expected from them: They are expected to dress more conservatively, behave more modestly, display “humility”. Although, Lesotho is considerably less urbanized than

many parts of South Africa⁸, the situation may thus be similar to what Rudwick (2008: 163) refers to as the “discrepancy between urban and rural Zulu society in reference to gender equity” and what she calls “cultural hybridity” (Rudwick 2008: 156). We may be witnessing a process in Lesotho which is similar to what Rudwick (2008: 166) observed about the attitudes of young Zulus, namely that “[...] many young urban women and, to a lesser degree, urban men, have started to critically engage with patriarchal aspects or interpretations of *hlonipha*”.

In her review of the influence of gender stereotypes on the education system in Lesotho, Mosetse (2006: 329) also concludes that many of the traditional practices are outdated and that there is an urgent need for reform – a process which has already begun in more urban areas. Similarly, Luthuli (2007), who conducted an empirical study and interviews on *hlonipha* in isiZulu, found, not surprisingly, that in urban areas, *hlonipha* is being phased out, while it is still observed in the rural areas. Some urban women no longer know what *hlonipha* is, while some urban men even consider it “outdated and discriminatory” (Luthuli, 2007: 82f).

Despite these changes, *hlonipha* still puts a lot of pressure on many women. Ntuli (2002: 32) states that “respect can have erosive or adverse effects if it is not reciprocated or if it is used as a form of ‘tool’ to tame, oppress or [...] ‘put others in their places’.” The topic is often discussed very emotionally, and both female and male Basotho students hold strong opinions. Most female students are very critical of *hlonipha*, and some of the male students have also begun to question this practice. This new attitude became obvious during a class discussion of *hlonipha*, when one male final year student at the National University of Lesotho tearfully admitted getting very angry when thinking about this issue and imagining what his mother had to go through.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Despite some recent changes, *hlonipha* used to be – and still is, for many women – a major cause for worry and anxiety, as failure to comply with the stipulated rules will result in embarrassment and public shame. This is particularly true for rural and less educated women in Lesotho. The obvious asymmetry between men and women in terms of the restrictions which are imposed almost entirely unilaterally on women constitutes sexual inequality. Not surprisingly, Malahleha (n/d): entitled her discussion of the situation of women in Lesotho “Contradictions and Ironies”.

⁸ According to statistical figures published by Unicef (http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/lesotho_statistics.html#77), the 2009 urbanization rate in Lesotho was 26%, as opposed to 61% in South Africa (http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/southafrica_statistics.html).

Respect through avoidance is still common in many Bantu societies, although it is on the decline in urban and professional communities. Clearly, education and economic independence empower women – a development which has been observed with regard to many other gender-related inequalities and injustices as well (for example, issues of birth control and family planning). What Rudwick (2008: 156) calls “cultural hybridity” may be less strongly visible in Lesotho but there are some indications that change may be under way.

What are the consequences for women at the workplace, especially for professional women, whose work is, by its very nature, largely discourse-based? Changing social patterns have led to more opportunities for women: nowadays they can be found in education (both as students and as educators and administrators), and in other professional positions (doctors, judges, researchers etc.). How do these women manage to live in two different worlds, one that is performance-oriented, and one that is determined by family pressure to uphold traditional customs? This is a cause for concern, especially in view of the progress made in the domain of education (in some Southern African universities, such as the National University of Lesotho, half the students are women) and in the workforce.

There is no single or easy answer to these questions. Every woman will have to negotiate her own way around the requirements of her tradition and the requirements of modern life. Professional women often observe *hlonipha* when they visit their families in the rural areas but do not practice avoidance in their professional work environments. In this sense, *hlonipha* may, indeed, have become a register, that is a context-dependent variety which is used according to the situation, not always by choice and not all the time.

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