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Some Linguistic Reflections on the Translation of the
Motto**

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*“Is a Woman a Rock
or a Female a Grinding Stone?”
Some Linguistic Reflections
on the Translation of the Motto*

The purpose of this essay is to examine the accuracy of the translation of the South African women’s motto: *Wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo*, rightly or wrongly translated as: “You strike the woman, you strike the rock.” Before I continue, I wish the following to be taken into consideration about the Zulu version of the motto: Firstly, the ironic reference to women as *abafazi*. In Zulu, the word *umfazi* is used coexistensively with the word *inkosikazi*. *In illo tempore* the word *inkosikazi* was used as an antonym, or precisely for a female counterpart of *inkosi*, a king, and its meaning was complemented by such words as *inkosana*, a prince, and *inkosazana*, a princess. Through semantic evolution and overuse, the word *inkosikazi* has come to designate any (respectable) woman and the idea of noble birth no longer plays a decisive role. On the contrary, the word *indlovukazi*, literally a she-elephant, is now used when referring to a queen. *Inkosana* and *inkosazana* have now acquired the meaning of *the first-born*. On the other hand the word *umfazi* was used to designate a woman of an inferior condition and belonging to a despicable class. With the waning of South African feudality the word *umfazi* is now used in reference to a disdainful woman married to *umfokazana*, a cowardly man, a pauper or a peasant. The word *umfazi* seems to be derived from the word *isifazane* for *womanhood* in which the emphasis is placed on gender rather than on social status. In this manner the word *umfazi* seems to be the rightful equivalent of the Latin *mulier*, which according to Isidore of Sevilla’s *Etymologies*, is derived from *mollities* for softness whereas the man

draws his name *vir* from his force, *vis*. The alleged woman's softness is based on ancient physiological treatises which present a woman as an inverted male.¹ And at the same time, the man (*vir*) derives his strength from his *virus*, semen. The Zulu word for man is *indoda* and it comes from the word *isidoda* or manhood and semen.

Secondly, the word *imbokodo* is translated by the word *rock* which appears inaccurate to me. In Zulu the word *rock* corresponds to the word *idwala* and the word *imbokodo* is the equivalent of a round stone and a grinding stone. A rock, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is "a large mass of stone forming cliff, crag, or natural prominence on land or in the sea."² Obviously, a stone is a small component of a rock as the same dictionary defines it as "a piece of rock or hard mineral substance (other than metal) of a small or moderate size."³ At this level it is interesting to note that *imbokodo* is a smooth, slippery rounded stone that is usually picked up from a river. In other words, such a stone has been continually exposed to erosion and is no longer likely to undergo further diminution. Of course the choice of such stones is to ascertain that sand particles do not defile or spoil the food that is being prepared. Hence *imbokodo* is a resistant and beautiful

¹ Cf. Avicenna: "I say that the instrument of reproduction in the woman is the womb (matrix) and that it was created similar to the instrument of reproduction in the man, that is to say the penis and what goes with it. However, one of these instruments stretches outwards, whereas the other is smaller and held on the inside, to some extent constituting the opposite of the male instrument. The covering of the womb is like the scrotum, the cervix (vagina) like the penis. There are two testicles in women as in men, but in men they are larger, turned outwards and tend to be spherical in shape; in women they are small, of a rather flattened roundness, and they are located on the inside, in the vulva." (Book III, fen 20, trans. I, c. I) and the *Anatomia vivorum*: "God created the womb to be the instrument and place of reproduction in the woman; the cervix of the womb (vagina) can be compared to the penis, and its membrane that is, the envelope of the interior cavity, is like the *oscheum*, that is the scrotum. One can compare the relation which exists between the instrument of reproduction in the man and the instrument of reproduction in the woman to the relation which exist between the seal which leaves its imprint and the impression in the wax. The woman's instrument has an inverted structure, fixed on the inside, whereas the man's instrument has an inverted structure extending outwards" (21).

² *The Oxford English Dictionary*, under the word "rock."

³ *Ibid.* under the word "stone."

stone. The resistant nature of the stone as represented by its hardness and durability contrasts it with the character of biological things that are subject to the laws of transformation and decay as well as dust, sand and stone splinters. The beautiful round form of the stone is the symbol of unity and strength.

The word *imbokodo* is semantically linked to the verb *bhokoda*. *Bhokoda* means to stab and grind. The word describes the process where the object is stabbed and the spear or the lance is stirred so as to cut up into pieces the internal organs of the victim. A different intonation of the word *imbòkodo* indicates clearly that the word may take the meaning of that which is used to stab and grind. Hence during the apartheid era, the South African police who were known for their brutality earned the title of the red grinding stone (*imbokodo ebomvu*). Certain covert government operations aimed at crushing liberal movements' activities were named *imbokodo*.

Imbokodo is not used for grinding food only but also for grinding herbs for brewing spells and hence *imbokodo* may by extension mean spells. The traditional Zulu army was taught to shun women and that they should never kill them. Hence when the warriors approached huts inhabited by women, the latter sallied forth and exhibited their private parts and the army retreated in shame. The Irish saga of the boyhood exploits of Cú chulaind, records a similar incident of a hero who is seized by his *riastarthaë*, or battle fury, and has to be cooled off in a vat of water and his shyness in the presence of bare-breasted women:

When they arrived at Emuin, the watchman said "A man in a chariot is approaching, and he will shed the blood of every person here unless naked women are sent to meet him." Cú chulaind turned the left side of his chariot towards Emuin, and that was a geiss to the fort; he said "I swear by the god the Ulaid swear by, unless a man is found to fight me, I will shed the blood of everyone in the fort."

"Naked women to meet him!" shouted Conchubur. The women of Emuin went to meet Cú chulaind, and they bared their breasts before him. "These are the warriors who will meet you today!" said Mugain. Cú chulaind hid his face, whereupon the warriors of Ulaid seized him

and thrust him into a vat of cold water. This vat burst, but the second vat into which he was thrust boiled up with fist-sized bubbles, and the third vat he merely heated to a moderate warmth (*Irish Myths* 146).

Women's bodies provoke the hero's shyness and thus lead to his defeat. Traditionally the hero's petrification in front of the women warriors is attributed to a *geis* in Celtic lore, a word that translates the English *spell*. The theme of the petrification caused by a woman's body is universal and the Zulu language equates the effect to the action of being struck by a grinding stone.

While the rock is also a symbol of solidity and unity, in the light of the above reflection on the socio-anthropological significance of the grinding stone and the use of ironical reference to women as *abafazi*, it seems to me that the motto should read: "You strike the female, you strike the grinding stone."

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⁴ UNISA, Po Box/392, Pretoria 0001 (South Africa).

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