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# In search of Swaziland

**H**ILDA KUPER, the incomparable ethnographer of the Swazi, professor emeritus of Anthropology at UCLA, has died aged 80. Warm, generous and sensitive, she was most unusual in her combination of literary and scientific gifts, writing plays, poems and novels as well as numerous scientific books and articles which always had the feel of living people in their pages.

Born in Bulawayo into a family of Viennese Jews, she grew up in Johannesburg and went to Witwatersrand University in 1927 to read English, French and History. There a friend persuaded her to attend Winifred Hoernle's course in Anthropology. Thanks to Mrs Hoernle's excellent teaching and the intellectual company of Max Gluckman, a fellow student, Hilda switched to anthropology and became a devotee of Durkheim. On graduation in 1930 she joined Mrs Hoernle at the Indian Joint Council to work among Indians in the slums of Johannesburg. Next she studied the social effects of liquor laws among Africans for the Institute of Race Relations, helping African women in prison with their children at home.

In 1932 she came to the LSE to study anthropology under Malinowski, then at the height of his powers as a teacher. She learnt a lot from him, especially the art of fieldwork; but having been inoculated with Durkheim she remained aloof from his functionalism.

In 1934 she was awarded a grant by the International African Institute to study the Swazi. Thus began two years of fieldwork and her lifelong association with the Swazi, their chief and the queen mother. She became a Swazi citizen in 1970.

In 1936 Hilda married Leo Kuper, then a lawyer in Johannesburg, and left Swaziland in 1937. Illness delayed her dissertation for five years, during which she searched for some way in which to pull together her field data and render the whole Swazi experience coherent. She found such a theme in social stratification, but that obliged her to write two books on rank among the Swazi, *An African Aristocracy* (1947) and *The Uniform Of Colour* (1947). Together the two books helped to awaken anthropology from its beliefs in the consensual nature of "tribal states", founded on conquest, and the "benevolence" of colonial rule.

Hilda then taught for several years at Witwatersrand and became active in South African politics, writing letters, pamphlets, stories and poems with increasing urgency. By then Leo had decided to abandon the law for sociology, and to study in the US. With their young children they went to the Uni-

versity of North Carolina in 1947, then to Coventry for Leo to work on the city's post-war reconstruction. In 1952 the Kupers returned to Durban, where Leo had been appointed head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Natal. Hilda meanwhile contributed accounts of *The Swazi* (1952) and *The Shona* (1955) to the Ethnographic Survey of Africa, and attached herself in Durban to the Institute of Family and Community Health to study the Indians.

In 1957 Leo had a sabbatical and she accepted a year-long Simon research fellowship at Manchester, offered by Max Gluckman. Hilda enjoyed Gluckman's seminars and lively group of colleagues, from whom she got comments on the draft of her next book, *The Indian Peoples Of Natal* (1960). In 1958 the Kupers returned to South Africa, where the Nationalist government by then had spies in the anthropology department at Durban, and they were harassed and persecuted.

In 1961 Leo accepted an appointment as Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles. That year, Hilda was awarded the Rivers Memorial Medal for field work by the Royal Anthropological Institute. In 1964 she too was appointed to a chair at UCLA. During those years she wrote several poems, a novel, *The Bite Of Hunger* (1965), an English version of her play, *A Witch In My Heart* (1970), as well as a brief account of *The Swazi: A South African Kingdom* (1965). In 1968 she returned to Swaziland to gather data for a revised version of that book.

Four years later she found herself invited to write the official biography of Sobhuze II, her lifelong friend. For post-modernists and others who now seek to discredit the work of classical anthropologists, this unsolicited tribute to their ethnographer by the Swazi is the best reply.

Hilda retired from UCLA in 1977, but besides teaching numerous courses she particularly enjoyed running seminars on current issues and topics.

Hilda's exceptional literary gifts were combined with an enquiring mind and a quick critical intelligence that did not readily accept theories that claimed to resolve genuinely difficult questions concerning human nature or society. For her the search for such understanding may well have seemed more important than the answers. All her life she remained young in spirit, bubbling with interests and ideas, and this is how we shall always remember her.

**M.G. Smith**

**Hilda Kuper** (Hilde Beemer), born August 23, 1911; died April 23, 1992