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Breaking the Glass Ceiling: The Strategies of Royal Women in Ancient States

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> Few women in history have achieved a dominant position in the working world, and even fewer have competed with male politicians and become political leaders. . . . (Rosaldo 1974: 37)

Under certain conditions women became political leaders in the ancient world. In which ancient societies was it easier for women to rule, and why? I begin this essay by presenting two Old World societies in which women rose to power. In one society, female attributes were thought to be desirable for rulership; in the other, rulership was considered so "gender male" that a queen literally had to be depicted as a king. Having established the two opposite ends of the continuum, I then situate Mesoamerican societies between those extremes, evaluating the degree of difficulty that women had in becoming rulers. By looking at the two Old World cases first, we can begin to develop a framework for the comparative study of Mesoamerican women, and we can focus on those Mixtec, Maya, and Aztec women who broke through the "glass ceiling" to be rulers in their own right.

Male rulers dominated the records of ancient states. Their names and faces are well known to us from the many monuments they commissioned. Most women who became politically powerful were members of royalty. Many were the mothers of kings, wives of kings, or temporary regents who kept the throne warm for sons too young to rule. Countless royal women influenced political decisions through advice and persuasion, but remained invisible to history. Their role was to be "the whisper behind the throne" (Cohen 1993: 191). Among Africa's Ashanti, for example, the whisper came from the *ohema*, or "queen mother." Her son, the king, sat upon a stool that was defined as a male artifact on which no woman, save one, could sit. When the Ashanti king went off to war, his wife took her husband's name and sat upon his seat. This occasion was the "only exception," according to Robert Rattray (1969: 83), "to the rule that

no woman may sit upon the male stool." Nevertheless, his mother's words were said to have profound influence on his political decisions.

Each society discussed here defined gender differently, and each had its own history (Gero and Conkey 1991). Such histories reveal that programmatic statements like "history is androcentric" or "men make states, women make babies" are too rigid and stereotyped to be useful. As anthropologists, we must analyze each culture in its own terms before we search for general trends. As Lynn Meskell (1995) argues, our goal must be to discover the truth about past societies without imposing a modern political agenda.

THE LOVEDU OF SOUTH AFRICA

I begin with a society in which rulership became "gender female," the Lovedu of South Africa (Fig. 1). According to the ethnohistory of this Bantu-speaking group, their last male ruler held office around 1800. He was followed by three female rulers named Mujaji I, II, and III (Krige and Krige 1943).

Key to the Mujajis' success were five attributes—order, peace, prosperity, nurturing, and appeasement—all intimately associated with women by the Lovedu. On the other hand, the Lovedu connected chaos, aggression, and strife with men. "Politics that works was feminine," says Ronald Cohen (1993: 194), and "politics that leads to dispute or even violent conclusions was masculine."

The Lovedu regarded women as nurturers, associating them with harmony and peace. Their last male ruler, they explained, was a leader during times of war, but after him they needed a leader to bring peace and prosperity, and a woman was considered to possess more of the necessary qualities. "The Lovedu case is instructive," says Cohen (1993: 195), "because womanly qualities are the cardinal virtues associated with political skills even when, as they usually are, the practitioners are men."

The Lovedu version of how they came to have queens undoubtedly combines legend with history, but it reveals a worldview and a political ideology in which women could rise to power. The regime of the last male ruler, they say, was marred by internecine strife. At the end of his reign, this ruler predicted that a new era would begin and that a woman would rule. He confided this vision to his daughter, who later became Mujaji I, asking that she bear him an heir. Since the first child of this incestuous union was a son, he was strangled; the second child was a daughter who lived to be Mujaji II.

Mujaji I, known as the Rain Queen because her name literally meant "Transformer of the Clouds," was on the Lovedu throne from ca. 1800 to 1850. This period was noted for its peace and prosperity, a relief from the chaos of her father's reign. Mujaji I spent most of her life secluded from her own people,

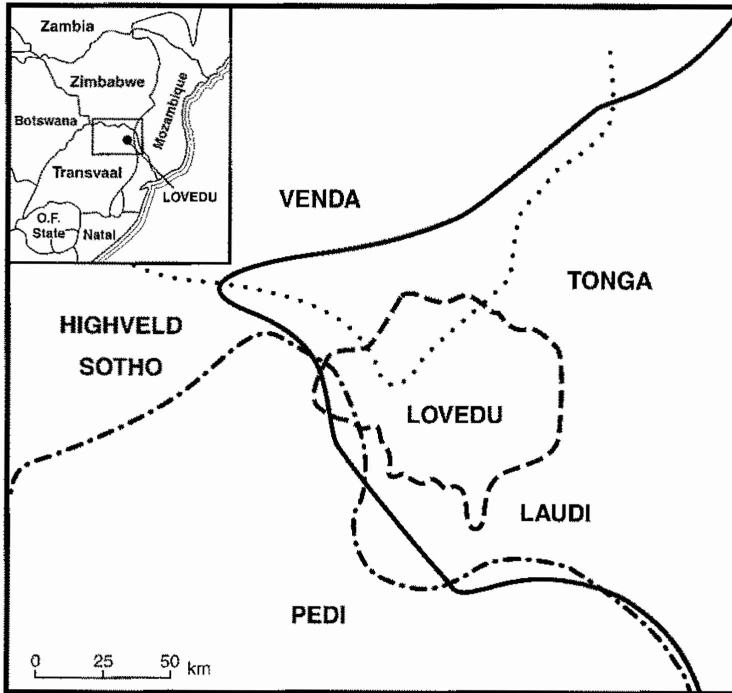

Fig. 1 Location of the Lovedu in South Africa (redrawn after Krige and Krige 1943: endpaper).

which gave rise to legends about her fair skin, her wisdom, and her immortality. In her court she received ambassadors from the neighboring Zulu and Swazi, who gave her gifts of young women as "brides." In return, the Mujaji was supposed to send rain to the territories of these foreign visitors. Her reputation as a rain-maker was great, with the Zulu regarding her as "the greatest magician of the north." Among her neighbors, the Mujaji was considered "immortal, inaccessible, mysterious." She was described as the "queen of locusts and of drought, a four-breasted marvel, her name struck terror in the hearts of would-be enemies, and her fame surpassed even that of Mantatisi, the ferocious female tyrant who . . . laid the foundations of the Rotse empire" (Krige and Krige 1943: 1).

The young women received as "brides" by the Mujaji were used by her in a strategy of alliance building; she married them out to most of the one hundred district heads ruling below her in the political hierarchy. By allocating wives to district heads, the Rain Queen became "parent-in-law" to all (Krige and Krige

1943: 175). This web of fictive kinship extended to other spheres, and many offices were considered "gender female." For example, the intermediaries who came to the Lovedu capital, and through whom political and legal matters were brought from the districts to the Rain Queen, were called "mothers" of their districts. This was a hereditary post that could be filled by either men or women. In 1940, 86 percent of the "mothers" were biological males whose role it was to "nurture" their respective districts (Krige and Krige 1943: 180). Many "mothers" were relatives of the Rain Queen, whose job it was to settle disputes among her "children."

It should be noted that, although the Rain Queen was the *de facto* head of the judicial system, she never appeared in court because it was located in the men's courtyard. She was, however, "always in the background, and in theory all decisions at the capital should be reported to, and confirmed by her" (Krige and Krige 1943: 186).

The Lovedu queen had no official husband, but maintained a secret male consort by whom she bore offspring. Mujaji II, allegedly the incestuous offspring of Mujaji I and her father, was secretly entrusted with the scepter of office around 1850. Because Mujaji II was barren, her "wife" bore her successor, Mujaji III, who ascended the throne in 1896. By then, there were so many Europeans living in South Africa that we have written histories independent of the oral accounts of the Lovedu themselves.

These European histories confirm the queen's reputation for being able to bring rain and good harvests. They tell us that her emotions were thought to affect the rain. For example, when she was upset there was drought, and during droughts the "mothers" of the districts approached her with gifts, pleading for rain and a good crop. "It is doubtful," write Eileen and Jacob Krige (1943: 273), "whether any one other than the queen herself is in possession of this secret [of bringing rain], for it is bound up with the title and power to succeed to the throne." This secret of rain making was imparted to the queen's successor just prior to the queen's death.

Without question, the likelihood of female rulership among the Lovedu was increased by that culture's positive view of feminine qualities such as nurturing and peacemaking. "The queen does not fight," say the Lovedu (Krige and Krige 1943: 284), who consider appeasement a strength and a source of prestige, rather than a sign of weakness. Nowhere else in South Africa, according to the Kriges, were so many women found in so many important political positions, especially considering the fact that kinship was patrilineal. Lovedu worldview and ideology may be contrasted, for instance, with those of their neighbors, the Lozi, for whom leadership was considered a masculine role. The

Lozi at that time had two capitals, with a man ruling the northern capital, and a woman the southern. All Lozi considered the leader of the southern capital to be a man, including the ruler herself. "When I go into council," said a Lozi princess to anthropologist Max Gluckman (1951: 24), "I change—I am a man." This revealing statement prepares us for the case of Egypt's Hatshepsut.

EIGHTEENTH-DYNASTY EGYPT

Egypt's eighteenth dynasty (1550–1300 B.C.) offers a sharp contrast to the Lovedu. It would be difficult to imagine an ancient state in which a woman had less chance of becoming ruler. The ancient Egyptians considered kingship "gender male," because Re (the sun god and father of the pharaohs) was male, as were both Horus (the falcon sky god) and Osiris (god of agriculture, death, and rebirth). There was, in fact, no word for "queen" in early Egyptian hieroglyphic texts; the only titles open to royal women were "god's wife," "king's wife," and "king's sister." To be recognized as a ruler in eighteenth-dynasty art, one had to wear a *chenjyt* or kilt, a false beard, and a *nemes* headcloth—all male garments. To rise to the top, a woman literally had to become "king."

Out of Egypt's roughly three hundred pharaohs during three thousand years, we know of four who were women—Nitocris, Sobek Neferu, Tausret, and Hatshepsut. Of these four, the best-documented case is that of Hatshepsut, who ruled from ca. 1479 to 1458 B.C., during the eighteenth dynasty.

Hatshepsut's Rule

Hatshepsut's father was Thutmose I (1504–1492 B.C.). Upon his death, Hatshepsut's husband (and half-brother) Thutmose II came to power; when her husband died in 1479 B.C., Hatshepsut's stepson (and nephew) Thutmose III acceded to the throne. Within a few years of Thutmose III's reign, Hatshepsut usurped the throne of Egypt. For perhaps twenty to twenty-two years, she was the supreme power. Her young nephew Thutmose III did not disappear, but seems to have remained as junior co-regent, while his aunt was senior co-regent (Murnane 1977: 32–44). In her monuments, Hatshepsut backdated her reign to 1479, the date of her husband's death; she also made sure that her monuments were set up within Egypt's boundaries, while Thutmose III's were erected outside.

Scholars believe that Hatshepsut had been planning her takeover as king for some time, but shrewdly kept her male relative on as junior partner (Murnane 1977; Naville 1906; Redford 1967: 21; Uphill 1961: 251). She clearly knew how Egyptian kingship worked. Prior to her takeover, Hatshepsut had borne three principal titles—"god's wife," "king's wife," and "king's sister." Of the

three titles, the crucial one was "god's wife," which provided her with divine credentials that helped pave the way to kingship (Robins 1983: 76–77; Troy 1986). The title "god's wife" seems to have referred specifically to a priestly office for which a woman wore a short wig to conduct special temple rites.

Even as co-regent, "Hatshepsut reinforced her authority by drawing on kingly iconography, titulature, and actions" (Robins 1993: 46). In seizing the throne, Hatshepsut began to refer to herself with masculine pronouns such as "he," "him," and "his." Compensating for her role as usurper, she commissioned more than two hundred statues of herself, a behavior reminiscent of usurpers in Mesoamerican cultures as well (Marcus 1974: 83; 1992b: 306, 351). Most of these statues and reliefs come from Hatshepsut's funerary temple at Deir el-Bahri on the west bank of the Nile at Thebes; these reliefs were carved before her death.

On most monuments commissioned by Hatshepsut, she is shown wearing male attire. Not only did Hatshepsut wear a *nemes* headcloth, a kilt, or a fake beard, but she had herself portrayed with the body of a man, as is evident when she is shown naked to the waist (Fig. 2). On other occasions she had herself depicted as a sphinx (Winlock 1942). Of scenes carved on the walls of her temple, Edouard Naville (1906: 5) says, "She knew that her sex was an obstacle to her recognition as king; the Egyptians would not allow a woman to occupy the throne, so she had to appear as a man." Gay Robins (1993: 50–51) concurs, "Since there was no provision for a female king within Egyptian ideology, she had to adapt to a male gender role, appearing on her monuments in male costume with the figure of a man."

Strategies of Hatshepsut

As had many male usurpers before her, Hatshepsut followed a multifaceted strategy to legitimize her reign. The main components of her strategy were as follows:

1. First, she "rewrote history" to claim that she had originally been crowned king by her father before his death (Redford 1967: 21; Robins 1983: 74). In her temple at Deir el-Bahri she claimed to have received the artifacts of kingship in a ceremony called "the appearance of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt," held on New Year's Day toward the end of her father's reign (Naville 1906: 23–24).[1]

We know that this claim is revisionist history, since other texts—written during her husband's reign and the first years of her nephew's reign—refer to

[1] An alternative reading of the same text holds that she was merely designated "heiress to the throne," not king.

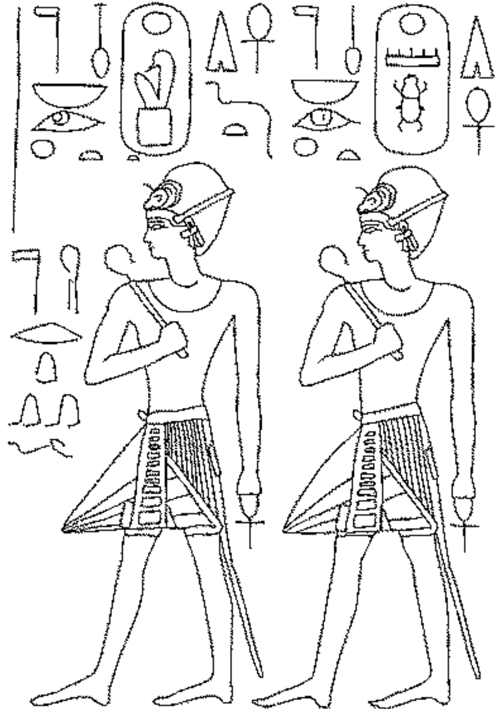

Fig. 2 Chapelle rouge, Hatshepsut Block 26, Karnak. Hatshepsut (*left*) and Thutmose III (*right*) are both shown as males, naked to the waist, wearing the kilt of rulership. The only way we know that the figure on the left is not a biological male is by reading the name of Hatshepsut in the cartouche above her head. Drawing by Kay Clahassey.

Hatshepsut as the "king's wife." A more likely "true" coronation date for her is recorded in the temple at Karnak. In the latter text, Hatshepsut claims that during the early years of her nephew's reign, she was confronted by the god Amun who told her that she was "king of the two lands," and crowned her. Following her usurpation, Hatshepsut kept her nephew absent from Egypt for extensive periods, conducting foreign wars, while she attended to internal affairs. Later we see carved reliefs in which Hatshepsut, in male attire, appears as the protagonist, while Thutmose III plays a less prominent role.

2. Hatshepsut's claim that her father had chosen her as his heir was a good beginning; but she also needed divine parentage. So, in her funerary temple reliefs, she had herself variously portrayed as (a) the offspring of the god Amun

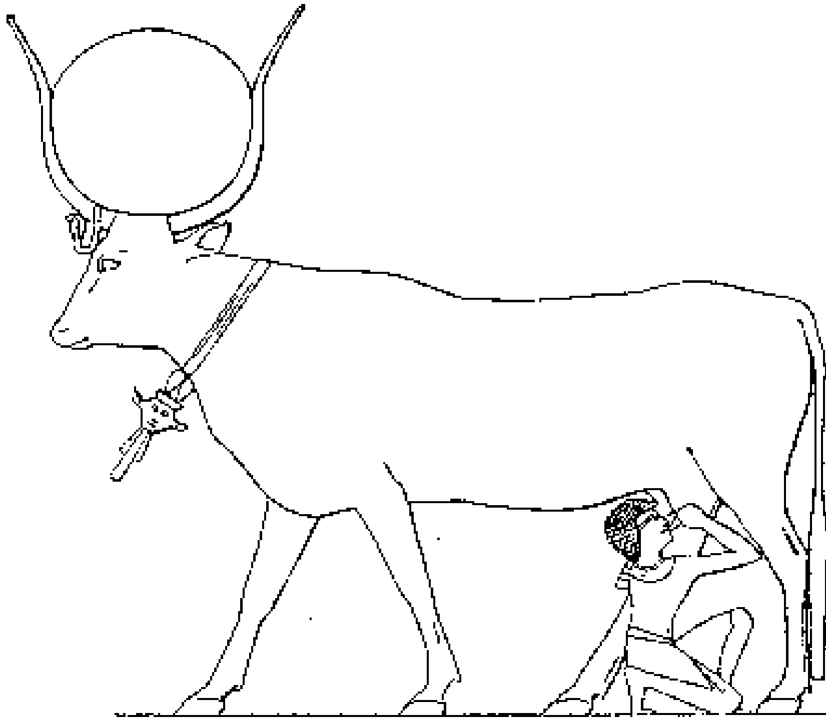

Fig. 3 Hatshepsut, depicted as a young boy, is shown drinking at the udder of the cow goddess Hathor (redrawn after Naville 1906: 58).

and her human mother, Ahmose, or (b) the offspring of the cow goddess Hathor and her human father, Thutmose I. One scene shows her drinking directly from Hathor's divine udder (Fig. 3); another shows her being created as a male infant and his double, or *ka* (Fig. 4).

3. Hatshepsut allied herself with loyal men, some of whom had also served her father and husband during their reigns. These men included the steward Senenmut; Ineni, her father's chief advisor; Ahmose *pa-nekhbit,* a treasurer and professional soldier; and Hapuseneb, a high priest of Amun.

Senenmut's close relationship with Hatshepsut is reflected in his titles, "governor of the royal palace" and "superintendent of private bedrooms and bathrooms." In anticipation of becoming king, Hatshepsut sent Senenmut to the Aswan quarries to procure red granite for two enormous obelisks to be set up in the eastern part of the temple at Karnak. Once these obelisks were erected,

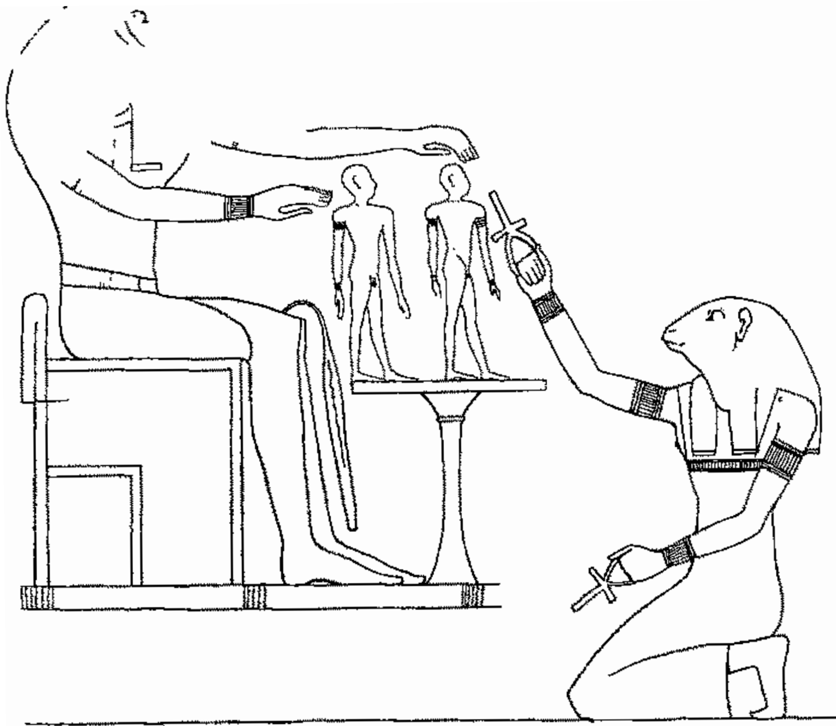

Fig. 4 The divine creation of Hatshepsut. On the left the god Khnum (the supernatural potter) is seated with outstretched arms, in the act of creating two infants who stand on the "god's table." The male infants are Hatshepsut and her double, *ka* (redrawn after Naville 1894–1908: pl. 48).

Labib Habachi (1957: 96) assures us, "it is certain that [Hatshepsut] was known as 'king', for such monuments as obelisks were only erected by reigning kings." Hatshepsut later commissioned two more obelisks of red granite, which showed her offering those monuments to the god Amun-Re. Significantly, the hieroglyphic text reads, "The king himself [*sic*] erected two large obelisks for his [*sic*] father Amun-Re" (Habachi 1984: 68).

4. In Egypt, kingly behavior included victory in battle and the taking of captives. There is evidence to suggest that war and captive taking became part of Hatshepsut's strategies as well. Donald Redford (1967: 62) cites an inscription, carved by Hatshepsut's artist Amenmose, that was found on the island of Sehel near Aswan; this text indicates that Hatshepsut was victorious in a war with Nubia. Referring to Hatshepsut only with masculine pronouns, an eyewitness account by an official named Ty describes the battle as follows: "I saw

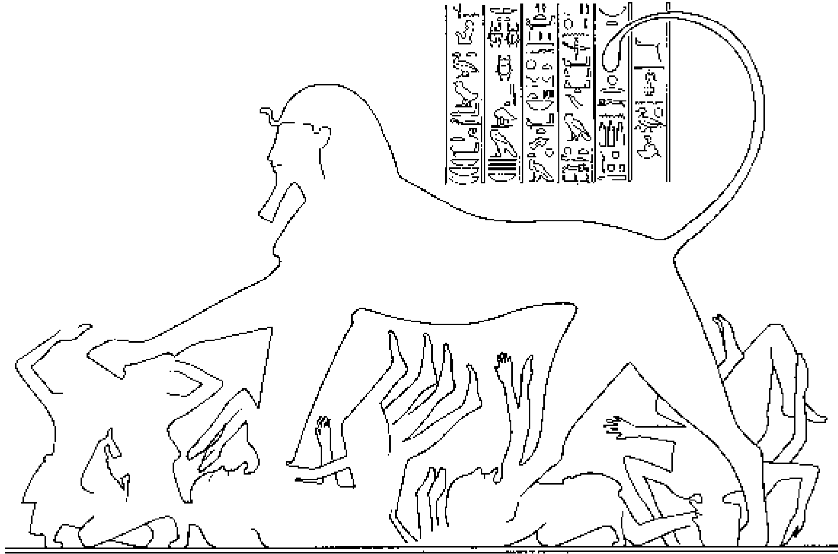

Fig. 5 Hatshepsut shown as a sphinx (head of a man and the body of a lion) trampling the bodies of her many enemies (redrawn after Naville 1894–1908, VI: pl. 160).

him [*sic*] overthrowing the Nubian nomads, their chiefs being brought to him [*sic*] as prisoners. I saw him [*sic*] destroying the Land of Nubia, while I was in the following of his [*sic*] Majesty. Behold I am a king's messenger doing what is said" (Habachi 1957: 99–100, 102, 104).

Reinforcing Hatshepsut's role as victorious general is a scene carved in her funerary temple at Deir el-Bahri; it shows the Nubian god Dedwen leading Nubian captives to Hatshepsut (Naville 1894–1908: VI, pl. 152). In the same part of her temple, Hatshepsut is depicted as a sphinx crushing enemies beneath her feet (see Fig. 5; Naville 1894–1908: VI, pl. 160). Further evidence comes from the stela of Djehuti, a man who claims to have seen Hatshepsut collecting booty on the battlefield itself (Habachi 1957: 104; Redford 1967: 60).

While these texts surely contradict earlier views of Hatshepsut's reign as devoid of foreign wars (Wilson 1951: 174–175), one wonders whether Hatshepsut actually was present on the battlefield to receive prisoners and booty. Like the depictions of the Mixtec *cacica* 6 Monkey, discussed below, Hatshepsut's texts are probably royal propaganda—a mix of fact, exaggeration, and fiction.

In support of this statement is the fact that Hatshepsut claimed to have expelled from Egypt the Hyksos, invaders from Palestine who ruled Egypt for

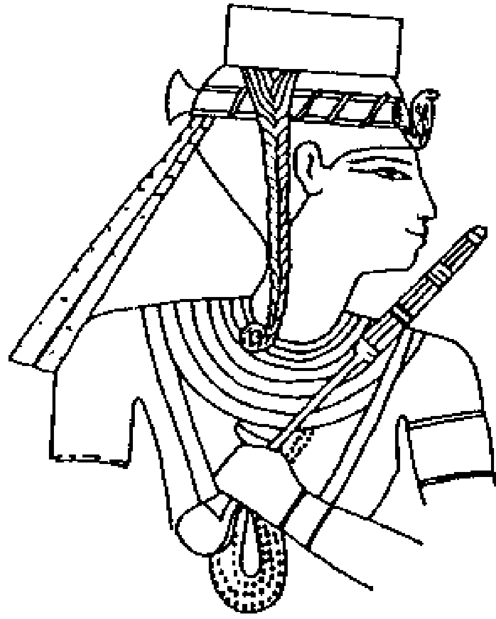

Fig. 6 Hatshepsut's daughter, Neferure, with her hair in a single side braid, the hairstyle typical of the royal male child (redrawn after Troy 1986: fig. 55).

a time. This claim ignores the fifty to seventy-five years of prosperity that Egypt had enjoyed since two earlier rulers, Ahmose and Kamose, had repelled the Hyksos at the end of Egypt's Second Intermediate period (ca. 1555 B.C.). Hatshepsut simply took credit for the victories of her predecessors.

Hatshepsut also tried to lay the groundwork for her daughter to succeed her as king. In a text from Sinai, carved in the eleventh year of her reign, Hatshepsut asserted that her daughter, Neferure, would succeed her in office. In preparation, she bestowed on her daughter the title *hmt ntr,* "god's wife" (Gardiner and Peet 1952–55: 179). Her daughter, significantly, is shown in the accompanying scene with a single braid hanging from the side of her head (Troy 1986: 136), exactly as a royal male child would be depicted (Fig. 6). Further evidence of Hatshepsut's effort to reverse gender roles was her appointment of a male steward, Senenmut, as her daughter's "caregiver"—a role defined as female by Egyptian society (Fig. 7). Unfortunately for Hatshepsut, her attempt to establish her daughter as heir apparent by portraying her as "gender male" was unsuccessful. As Redford (1967: 85) puts it, "Hatshepsut was making a supreme effort by the sheer weight of her personality to modify the basis of Egyptian kingship and succession. But her personality was not sufficient, and her ancillary measures were not thorough enough. Nor were they

Fig. 7 Granite statue of Senenmut, Hatshepsut's steward, in his role as "caregiver," with his arms wrapped around Neferure, Hatshepsut's daughter. Drawing by John Klausmeyer.

logically conceived: her assumption of *kingly* attributes was, in fact, a concession to patriarchy."

The Execration of Hatshepsut's Name

For the better part of two decades, Hatshepsut succeeded in portraying herself as divine king and victorious general. But she was swimming against the tide of Egyptian culture, and "an aura of illegitimacy always surrounded the person of Hatshepsut" (Redford 1967: 82).

Sometime around the sixteenth year of her reign, Senenmut, her loyal supporter, disappeared from the written record; not long after, her daughter, Neferure, died. Her nephew and stepson Thutmose III, a successful general, was more often at Hatshepsut's side, and he began to assume more and more of her duties. Although the early years of Thutmose III's reign had been claimed by Hatshepsut as part of her reign (Murnane 1977; Redford 1967: 55), he finally ruled on his own after his aunt died.

Following Hatshepsut's death, most of her monuments suffered the deliberate defacement, which Egyptologists call "execration." "One by one her reliefs were hacked out," Redford (1967: 87) tells us, "her inscriptions erased, her

cartouches obliterated, her obelisks walled up. Egypt was to know her no more." The erasure of Hatshepsut's name from her monument on the island of Sehel near Aswan was done in a manner identical to the erasures of her name at Deir el-Bahri, suggesting that most of the destruction can be attributed to Thutmose III after his aunt's death (Habachi 1957: 91). Redford (1967: 87) explains Thutmose III's actions as being "motivated not so much by a genuine hatred as by political necessity. His own legitimacy stood in need of demonstration. . . . To leave the glories of Hatshepsut's reign open to view would, in any case, invite invidious comparison with his own accomplishments, a comparison that the new monarch just would not brook."

Nor did the execration of Hatshepsut end there. An official king list, commissioned by Seti I more than 150 years after Hatshepsut's death, does not mention her (Kemp 1989: fig. 4; Marcus n.d.b). Nor, for that matter, does the king list mention any of the other female rulers we know existed. Because of this deliberate "defeminization" of the Egyptian king lists, we probably cannot answer the question, "How many women ruled Egypt?" The simplest answer is, "More than Seti I wanted us to know."

MESOAMERICAN STATES

Now let us turn to the Americas and examine the careers and strategies of some royal Mixtec, Maya, and Aztec women. Our excursion into the Old World has provided us with a comparative framework and a means of evaluating royal women in the Americas. As shall be demonstrated below, royal women of the Americas were intermediate between the Lovedu and eighteenth-dynasty Egypt in terms of the difficulty of breaking through the glass ceiling.

6 Monkey "Serpent Quechquemitl": A Mixtec "Warrior Queen"

By the eleventh century A.D., the Classic Mixtec states of southern Mexico had broken down into smaller Postclassic polities known as *cacicazgos*, *señoríos*, or principalities. While these societies retained kingship and social stratification, their rulers generally controlled territories no larger than that of a small chiefdom.

The Postclassic Mixtec had a bilateral descent system with Hawaiian kinship terms (Spores and Flannery 1983: 340), which allowed nobles to reckon their descent through whichever parent had the bluest bloodlines (Spores 1974). Many lords and princes inherited titles through both parents. In theory, the father's title was to pass to the first-born son of his first wife, but when no male heir was available, it could go to the first-born daughter. Sociobiologists would undoubtedly see this as a case of the ruler wanting his title to pass to a close genetic relative, regardless of gender.

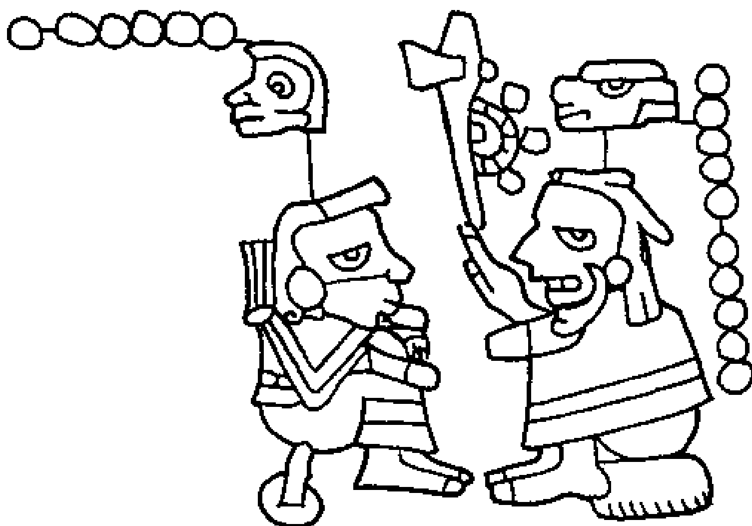

Fig. 8 The Mixtec *cacica* 6 Monkey (*left*) shown conferring with a priest 10 Lizard "Dead Man's Hair/Jade Axe" (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 11.19).

Unlike the Aztec system of succession, in which the title was likely to pass to a brother, uncle, or nephew, the Mixtec system produced a lot of *cacicas*, or female rulers. From the painted books, or *codices*, of the Mixtec we know the names of at least 951 noble women (Marcus 1992b: 203, Whallon 1992). It is likely that the small size of many Mixtec principalities served to limit the pool of noble males, thereby increasing the likelihood of a woman rising to power.

The royal woman 6 Monkey, nicknamed "Serpent Quechquemitl" for her decorated overblouse, was born into this eleventh-century culture (Caso 1964; Spinden 1935). Her story is told in the Selden Codex, a painted book believed to have been written in Magdalena Jaltepec in Oaxaca's Nochixtlán Valley (Smith 1983, 1994). Six Monkey had three older brothers, 1 Reed, 12 Water, and 3 Water, all of whom were ahead of her in the line of succession; but all three were defeated in battle and apparently sacrificed by their enemies. This left 6 Monkey as heir apparent, but in need of showing her military prowess.

The Selden Codex then follows 6 Monkey's career. She is first shown conferring with a priest named 10 Lizard "Dead Man's Hair/Jade Axe" (Fig. 8); they probably discussed what she needed to do to claim the throne of "Belching Mountain," the place ruled by her father. The priest 10 Lizard sent her to a second priest, 6 Vulture "Planting Stick," who in turn sent her on a pilgrimage to a sacred cave (Fig. 9). Following this, 6 Monkey selected her future husband,

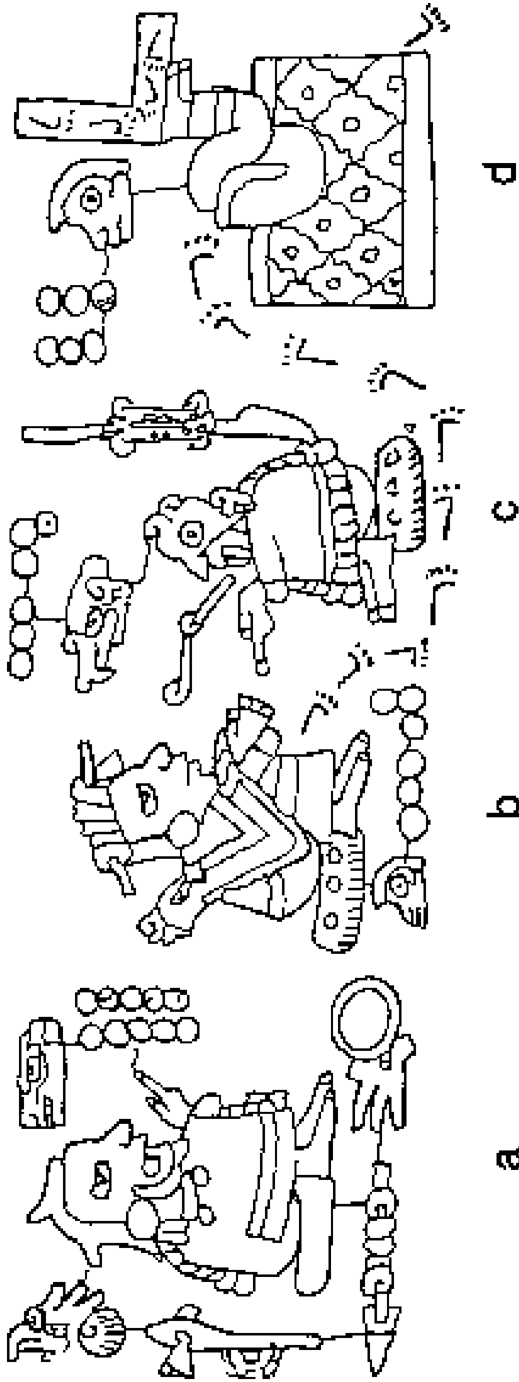

Fig. 9 The priest 10 Lizard (a) sends 6 Monkey (b) to talk with a priest named 6 Vulture “Planting Stick” (c). Footprints indicate that 6 Monkey traveled to, and entered, a sacred cave (d) (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 11.20).

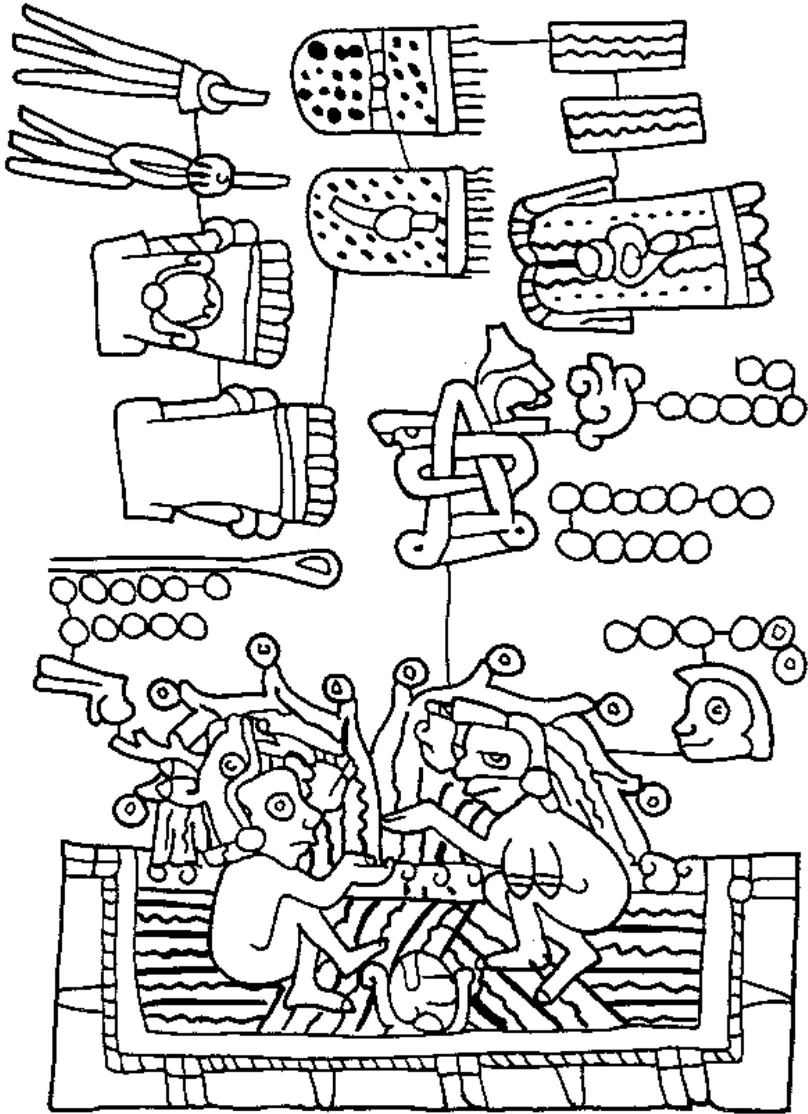

Fig. 10 The royal couple 6 Monkey (*right*) and 11 Wind (*left*) are shown in a "bathing scene," one of the Mixtec conventions for marriage ceremonies. The wedding presents are shown above them (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 11.22).

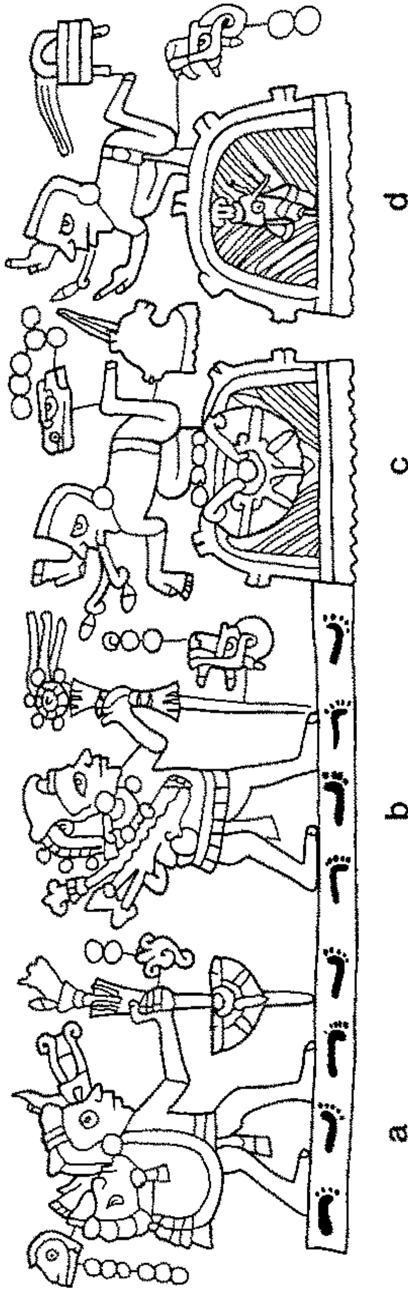

Fig. 11 6 Monkey sends out two ambassadors (a and b); they pass through Hill of the Moon and speak with its lord, 6 Lizard (c); then they pass through Hill of the Insect with its lord, 2 Crocodile (d). These two lords (c and d) insult 6 Monkey's ambassadors. The insults are indicated by flint knives attached to their speech scrolls, a depiction of their "cutting words" (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 11.23).

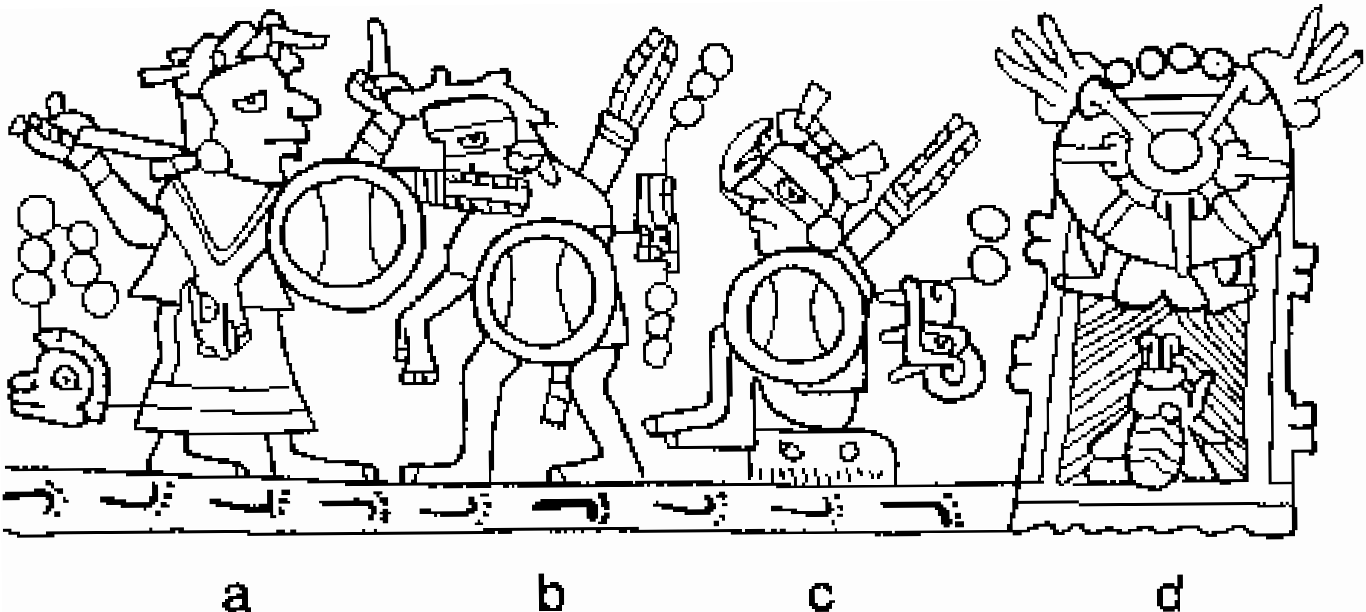

Fig. 12 6 Monkey (a) is shown grasping the hair of her enemy, 6 Lizard (b), followed by 2 Crocodile (c); these prisoners are the two lords who insulted her ambassadors. Behind them is the compound place-name of Hill of the Moon/Hill of the Insect. Flames in the upper corners of the place sign indicate that those two towns were burned (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 11.26).

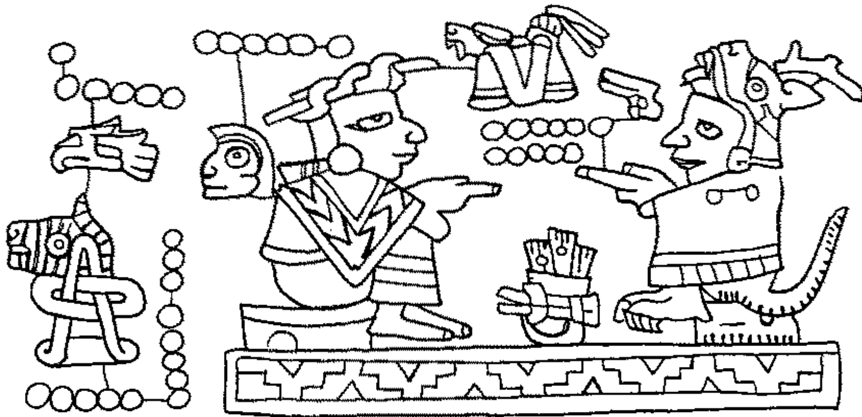

Fig. 13 Two days after sacrificing her enemies, 6 Monkey is shown (*left*) wearing a new overblouse, *quechquemitl*, decorated with the chevrons associated with war. Her former attire and nickname, "Serpent Quechquemitl," appear before her face. 6 Monkey and 11 Wind have been installed as rulers at Bundle of Xipe (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 11.30).

a prince named 11 Wind "Bloody Tiger," heir to the throne of a place called "Bundle of Xipe."

The engaged couple visited a priestess named 9 Grass at "Skull Temple," probably seeking her blessing before their wedding. They were married on the day 7 Flower in the year 12 House. The bride and groom are shown bathing nude together, one of the Mixtec conventions for a royal wedding (Fig. 10).

Now, having strategically married a prince with good bloodlines and the support of his warriors, 6 Monkey set about claiming her throne (Marcus 1992b: 379–380). On her way to her husband's town, she and her ambassadors passed through two communities, "Hill of the Moon" and "Hill of the Insect." There, her ambassadors were insulted with "cutting words," shown in the codex by speech scrolls tipped with sharp flint knives (Fig. 11). These "cutting words" were used by 6 Monkey as the pretext for declaring war. After consulting again with the priestess 9 Grass, 6 Monkey launched an attack that left Hill of the Moon and Hill of the Insect in flames. Although it is unknown whether 6 Monkey actually accompanied her troops into battle, the Selden Codex shows her personally taking captive the two princes who had insulted her (Fig. 12). This scene may be compared with Djehuti's "eyewitness" account of Hatshepsut collecting booty after the battle in Nubia (Habachi 1957).

Following her military victory, 6 Monkey's nickname was changed from "Serpent Quechquemitl" to "War Quechquemitl," and she and her husband

were installed as rulers in his hometown, Bundle of Xipe (Fig. 13). Reading between the lines, we suspect that the marriage uniting 6 Monkey and 11 Wind—a marriage that united their warriors as well—consolidated their grip on both hometowns. Her second son, 1 Crocodile, went on to be ruler of Belching Mountain.

Royal Maya Women at Palenque and Yaxchilán

In contrast to the small principalities of the Postclassic Mixtec, the Classic Lowland Maya (A.D. 250–900) lived in state polities often considerably more extensive (Marcus 1995b). To be sure, these Maya polities went through periodic cycles of consolidation and breakdown, and during their periods of dissolution they might break down into provinces no larger than a principality (Marcus 1989, 1992a, 1993). At their peaks of consolidation, however, Classic Maya states covered thousands of square kilometers and had large pools of male nobles from which rulers could be chosen (Marcus 1973, 1983).

Although more than seventy royal Maya women are depicted or named on stone monuments, very few left behind complete records of their lives and deeds (Berlin 1959; Marcus 1976, 1992b, 1992c; Proskouriakoff 1960, 1961; Schele and Freidel 1990). When a Maya woman is mentioned in texts, it is usually because of her relationship to a man. A male ruler might mention his mother, especially if she came from a more important dynasty than his father's; for example, Copán's ruler 18 Jog (Waklahuntah Kabah Kawil) claimed that his mother was from Palenque, but never mentioned his father (Marcus 1976: 145; 1995a: 13–16). A male ruler might also mention his wife, especially if she came from a more important dynasty than his own (Marcus 1976: 176–179; 1992b: 250–255). Only rarely do we see a royal woman described as the ruler of a major city, and when we do it is usually because she served as regent until her son was old enough to rule. Among the Maya, "the whisper behind the throne" was often the queen mother.

One of the most widely publicized male rulers of Palenque was Pacal, "Shield" (Fig. 14). He claims to have ruled from A.D. 615 to 683, but, interestingly, no hieroglyphic inscriptions from the first thirty-two years of his reign have been found. This is remarkable enough to start us thinking, especially since we know that in Egypt usurpers sometimes execrated their predecessors' monuments and extended their reigns back in time to account for the gap (Berlin 1977).

Of further interest is the fact that Pacal refers to his mother in what Linda Schele and David Freidel (1990: 227) have called a "mysterious and unusual way." He uses the name of a mythical goddess to refer to his mother, thereby

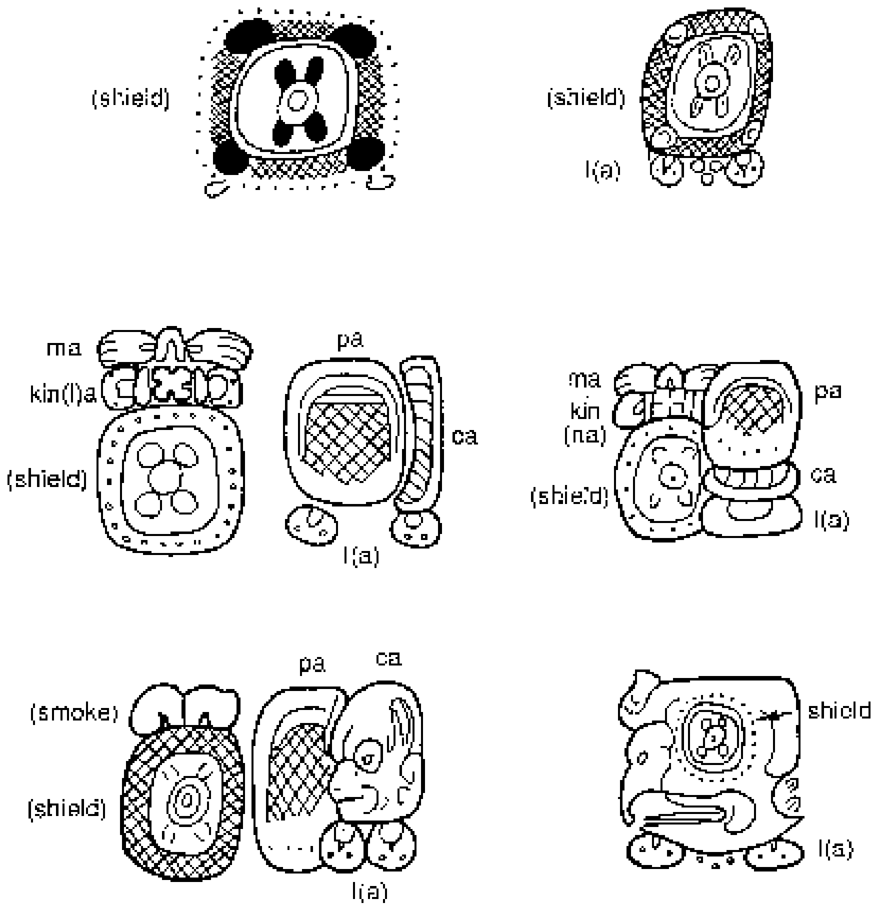

Fig. 14 The name Pacal, "Lord Shield," is recorded in different ways in the Palenque inscriptions (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 7.17).

creating for himself a kind of divine right to rule, as Hatshepsut did when she described herself as the child of Amun. Pacal gives his mother's name as Zac Kuk, "White Parrot," and says that she assumed the Palenque throne in A.D. 612, turning it over to him three years later (Fig. 15). The fact is, however, that no monuments dating from White Parrot's alleged reign have yet been found; we know her *only* from texts commissioned by her descendants. In fact, before the thirty-second year of Pacal's reign, we have no contemporaneous records.

Pacal asserts that his mother lived for twenty-five years after he took office. What was her status during those years? Was she co-regent with her son, and is

Fig. 15 Oval Palace Tablet from House E, Palenque. It was commissioned by Pacal (*right*) to show him receiving the "crown of rulership" from his mother, White Parrot. His father is not depicted or mentioned (redrawn after Marcus 1994: fig. 12.5).

that why no monuments from the first three decades of her son's reign have yet been found? We know little about Pacal's father, except that he never ruled Palenque. Was Pacal a usurper who, like Hatshepsut, created his own semifictional divine ancestry? Or were his mother's monuments later obliterated because, like Hatshepsut, she was a female ruler in a man's world?

The mystery continues with Pacal's son, Chan Bahlum ("Snake Jaguar"), who acceded to the throne of Palenque in A.D. 684. In the three temples comprising the Cross Group, Chan Bahlum presents his own hieroglyphic version of Palenque's dynastic history (Schele and Freidel 1990: 237). Although Pacal had only extended his dynasty back to A.D. 431, Chan Bahlum extended it back to supernatural ancestors who lived thousands of years ago. He used a mythological prologue to link himself to a goddess allegedly born in 3121 B.C. (Berlin

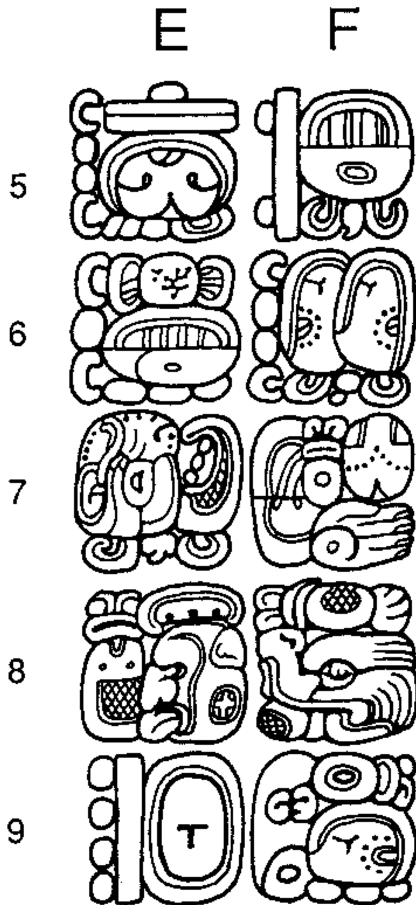

Fig. 16 Inscription commissioned by Chan Bahlum, who asserts that a mythological ancestor was inaugurated thousands of years before his own time. This passage can be paraphrased as follows: "At the age of 815 an ancestor/goddess took office on August 13 in the year 2305 B.C." (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 9.20).

1963, 1965; Kelley 1965; Lounsbury 1980), and took pains to make it appear that his father's date of birth was an anniversary of hers. This supernatural ancestor, Chan Bahlum asserted (Fig. 16), took office in 2305 B.C. at the age of 815! Like Hatshepsut, who showed herself drinking from the udder of Hathor, Chan Bahlum created his own divine credentials.

The scribes of Palenque leave us with an interesting ambiguity. On the one hand, they reveal no ideological barrier to having a woman on the throne. On the other hand, they have so far provided us with no monuments that date to, and confirm, the alleged reigns of either Kanal Ikal (Pacal's great-grandmother) or Zac Kuk (Pacal's mother).

Further evidence of the ambiguity surrounding female rulership among the Classic Maya comes from Yaxchilán. That city erected stone monuments

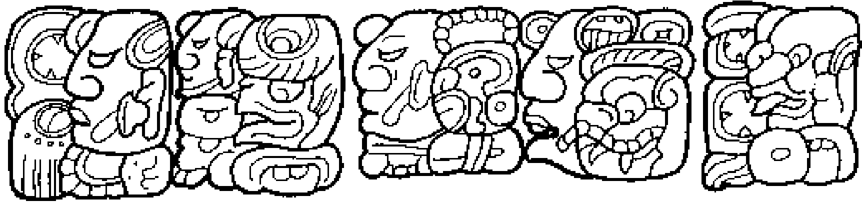

Fig. 17 Stela 10, Yaxchilán. A phrase giving the name Lady Ik Skull of Calakmul; in the third and fourth hieroglyphic compounds, we read the title *k'ul ahau caan/chan* ("Holy Lord of Calakmul") (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 8.28).

from A.D. 514 to 808. Some of Yaxchilán's rulers claimed that their dynasty had been founded in A.D. 320, long before the earliest known royal inscription.

Most of the Yaxchilán texts and monuments revolve around the reigns of two rulers, Shield Jaguar and Bird Jaguar. From A.D. 681 to 742, Shield Jaguar ruled Yaxchilán. Following a ten-year gap, his son Bird Jaguar ruled, from A.D. 752 to 771 (Marcus 1992c: 236; Proskouriakoff 1963). This gap in succession is hard to explain, since Bird Jaguar claims to have been thirty-two years old when his father died. Why, then, was Bird Jaguar's inauguration delayed for a decade?

Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1963: 163) was the first to discuss the ten-year gap, arguing that there might have been pretenders to Shield Jaguar's throne. More recently, Carolyn Tate (1987: 822; 1992: 125) has suggested that a woman may have ruled in the interim. With the recent discovery of hieroglyphic texts as well as the reanalysis of other extant texts at Yaxchilán (Stelae 10, 11, and 35, and Lintels 32 and 53), I can now suggest that a royal woman from Calakmul named Lady Ik Skull (also called Evening Star) may have ruled Yaxchilán during the ten-year gap (Fig. 17). In support of this suggestion is the fact that Lady Ik Skull bears titles usually associated with male rulers, such as *mah k'ina*, *k'ul ahau*, and *batab* (Tate 1987, 1992; Schele and Freidel 1990; Marcus 1976, 1992b, n.d.b).

How did a woman from Calakmul come to rule Yaxchilán for a decade? Limited data suggest at least one possible scenario. This Calakmul woman came to Yaxchilán to marry Shield Jaguar, although she was not his first or second wife. When Shield Jaguar died in A.D. 742, there may have been serious competition for the throne among the sons of his various wives (Bardslay n.d.; Proskouriakoff 1963; Tate 1992). Lady Ik Skull may have prevailed in this competitive environment, precisely because she was from the ruling lineage of Calakmul, a dynasty more powerful than Yaxchilán's. She therefore outranked

Fig. 18 Stela 11, Yaxchilán. Bird Jaguar, ruler of Yaxchilán, reviewing captives. His parents are shown facing each other (*top*). Seated on the left is his mother, with text (*behind her*) giving her name as Lady Ik Skull. Seated on the right is his father, whose text (*behind him*) is largely illegible but does include the glyph for jaguar and the titles "captor of *ahau*" and "Lord of Yaxchilán," both associated with Shield Jaguar (redrawn after Marcus 1992b: fig. 11.5).

Shield Jaguar's other wives, which allowed her (perhaps with the backing of Calakmul) to take over as regent until her own son, Bird Jaguar, could get himself in position to be inaugurated. Lady Ik Skull died on 13 March in A.D. 751, apparently leaving the throne empty. Even though Bird Jaguar had been waging war to obtain high-ranking captives and had produced an heir of his own, it was still almost a year before he was inaugurated as ruler of Yaxchilán on 10 February 752 (Fig. 18).

Although I originally thought that the marriage between Shield Jaguar and Lady Ik Skull was isogamous—that is, a marriage between equals (Marcus 1992b: 255–256)—I now believe that it must have been another case of Maya hypogamy. In hypogamy, the bride outranks the groom. Such marriages seem to have been a major reason why Maya rulers mentioned their mothers (Marcus 1973, 1976, 1992b). It is highly significant that we learn about Lady Ik Skull of Calakmul *only* from inscriptions commissioned by her son (Marcus n.d.a, n.d.c).

I conclude that royal Maya women played important roles in marriage alliances between major cities, that they held thrones open for their sons, and that there were brief periods when they served as regents or even rulers. They occasionally became rulers in their own right when there were gaps in succession or bitter disputes over succession. *Almost never, however, were monuments erected to such women while they were on the throne.* That honor was reserved for men, leaving royal women to be mentioned only in the inscriptions of their sons or their lower-ranking consorts.

Ilancueitl and Atotoztli: Royal Aztec Women

The Aztec empire of A.D. 1520 was the most territorially extensive of all Mesoamerican states, exceeding in area even the largest Maya polities (Barlow 1949; Berdan et al. 1996). Once vassals of Azcapotzalco, the Mexica or the Aztec traditionally began their king list in A.D. 1376 with a ruler named Acamapichtli. They had a kind of dual rulership in which the *tlatoani*, "he who speaks," was in charge of external relations, while the *cihuacoatl*, or "snake woman," was in charge of internal affairs. Despite his female title, the *cihuacoatl* was usually a man. In fact, the sixteenth-century documents portray Aztec kingship as almost exclusively male, although many Aztec ethnohistories also make it clear that there were important roles for royal women. As in the case of the Classic Maya, women played such major roles because of hypogamy, that is, the marriage of a male ruler to a more highly ranked woman (Marcus 1973, 1976, 1992b).

Such seems to have been the case with the royal woman Ilancueitl. In the ethnohistorical documents she is variously described as the aunt, mother, foster mother, wife, or wet nurse of Acamapichtli, the first Aztec king. Most sources agree that Ilancueitl was from Culhuacan and hence a member of the Culhua dynasty, who were descendants of the Toltec. As such, she was a source of legitimization for Acamapichtli, linking him to the imperial Toltec dynasties.

According to some sources (*Anales de Cuauhtitlan* 1938: 174; *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* 1941: 227–228; *Origen de los mexicanos* 1941: 268; *Relación de la genealogía* 1941: 249–251), Acamapichtli began his career as the husband of

his aunt Ilancueitl. He could not immediately assume office, because Ilancueitl herself was the *tlatoani*, or external relations ruler, of Tenochtitlan (van Zantwijk 1985: 99). Only later did Acamapichtli become her *cihuacoatl* or internal relations minister, and the progenitor of a ruling line, putting himself in position to become the first male ruler of the Aztecs.

As often happens in legendary histories, there are conflicts among the various accounts of Acamapichtli's role as the founder of the Aztec royal line. It appears that he needed the prestige of Culhua ancestry to legitimize his son; hence the story that he married his aunt. Ilancueitl, in the words of Susan Gillespie (1989: 26), "gave the fledgling dynasty its nobility; in an act of 'royal incest' with her husband-son [Acamapichtli], she demonstrated that the power of kings is beyond that of their subjects." Indeed, some sources (*Origen de los mexicanos* 1941: 270; *Relación de la genealogía* 1941: 252) consider Huitzilihuitl—the half-Culhua, half-Mexica son of Acamapichtli and Ilancueitl—to have been the first true male *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan.

This story of royal incest, of course, reminds us of the Lovedu mating of a king and his daughter. Marshall Sahlins (1985: 79) adds that the dynasty of sacred chiefs in Hawaii began with a similar incestuous relationship of father and daughter, and he argues that incest, patricide, and fratricide are common elements in the legends of "founders" and the origins of rulers. Sahlins (1985: 80) concludes, "The king must first reproduce an original disorder. Having committed his monstrous acts against society, proving he is stronger than it, the ruler proceeds to bring system out of chaos." While Ilancueitl, the incestuous Culhua aunt, looms large in Aztec legends, her role in real life is still being debated (van Zantwijk 1985: 102).

Equally mysterious is the royal woman Atotoztli, another member of the Culhua dynasty. Documents left by Domingo Francisco Chimalpahin (1965: 182), a resident of Chalco in the southern Basin of Mexico, assert that Atotoztli was the daughter of the ruler of Culhuacan and the mother of Acamapichtli. J. M. A. Aubin (1886: 318) suggested that Atotoztli and Ilancueitl were the same woman, while Gillespie (1989) has proposed that they might simply have become conflated into one person over time.

In Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's accounts (1975: 297–303), Ilancueitl and Atotoztli are described as sisters. Atotoztli is said to have married Huetzin, heir to the throne of Coatlichan, while Ilancueitl married Acamapichtli, ruler of Tenochtitlan. The *Codex Xolotl* (Dibble 1951: pl. III) shows Ilancueitl and Atotoztli as the daughters of Achitometl, ruler of Culhuacan; in this codex (Fig. 19), we see each daughter leaving her father's town and traveling to her husband's community. This represents a typical pattern of Nahua hypogamy:

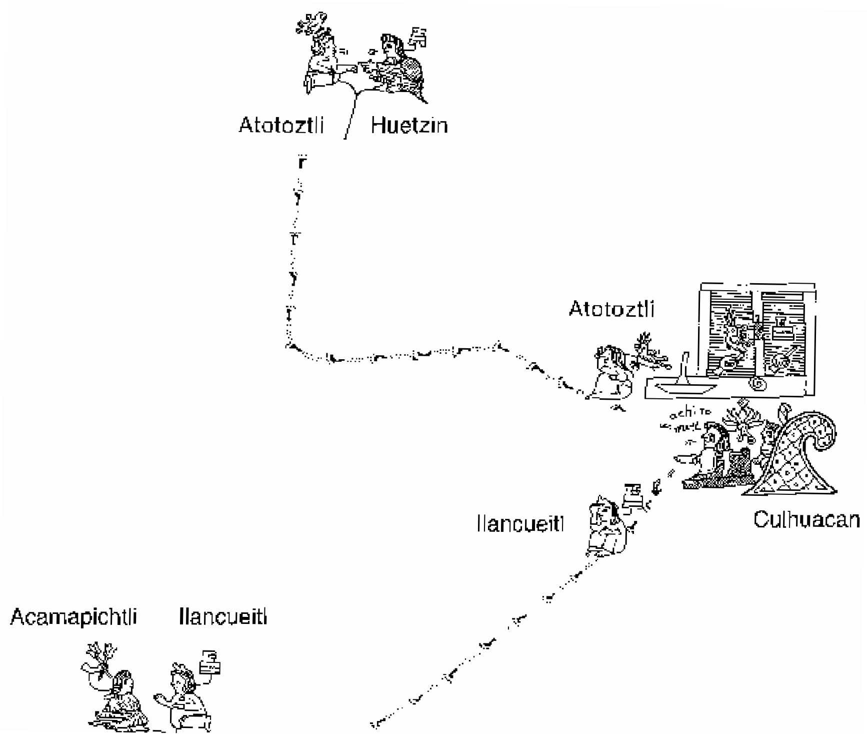

Fig. 19 Achitometl, ruler of Culhuacan, is shown (*far right*) with his daughters, Atotoztli and Ilancueitl (*in front of him*). Footprints show them leaving to marry lords of other towns. Ilancueitl marries Acamapichtli (*lower left*), and Atotoztli marries Huetzin (*upper left*). Each daughter brings *chinampa* lands (shown above Achitometl's head) (after Dibble 1951: pl. III).

princesses from the highly ranked dynasty of Culhuacan are "married down" to princes of the lower-ranked communities of Coatlichan and Tenochtitlan (Carrasco 1984; Marcus 1992b: 223–229). Any sons resulting from the marriages would probably mention their highly ranked mothers in their genealogies.

Indeed, there are suggestions that the male recipients of such hypogamous brides might even claim them in their histories as mothers. The *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (1941) gives Ilancueitl as the first ruler of Tenochtitlan, with Acamapichtli as her successor. "Since Acamapichtli was to begin the dynasty," says Gillespie (1989: 50), "Acamapichtli's wife became his mother so that he would be her descendant, for it was she who was noble, and it was from her that he derived the right to rule, as some accounts explicitly state."

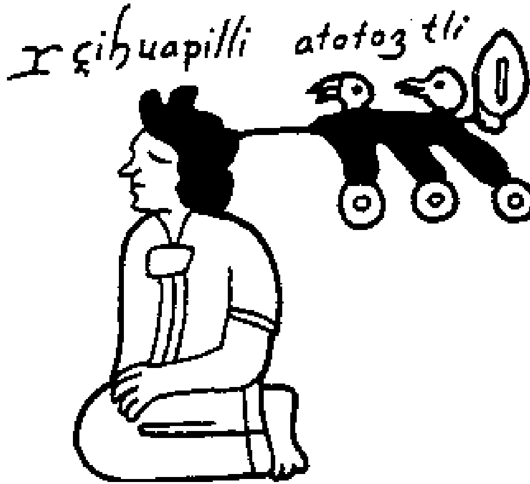

Fig. 20 Atotoztli's name is given both in European script and in Nahua writing. Above her head, we read *çihua* (woman) *pilli* (noble) *atotoztli*, or "noblewoman Atotoztli." Her hieroglyphic name, attached to the back of her head, is composed of three signs: (1) water (providing the initial sound *a* or *at*); (2) two bird heads (*toto* [*tl*] or *to* [*totl*], "bird" + *toz* [*nene*] "yellow parrot"); and (3) a feather (*ihuitl*) or obsidian blade (*iztli*, the final sound "*tli*") (redrawn after Caso 1958).

The association of the names Ilancueitl and Atotoztli with the founders of dynasties is not limited to Tenochtitlan. For example, a woman named Ilancueitl is given as the dynastic founder of Azcapotzalco (*Los Códices de México* 1979), and a woman with the two-word name Ilancueitl Atotoztli is given as the dynastic founder of Texcoco (Muñoz Camargo 1978).

Much later, yet another woman named Atotoztli (Fig. 20) may have served as *tlatoani* of the Mexica during a six-year gap between the reigns of Motecuhzoma I and Axayacatl, from A.D. 1466 to 1472. This possibility is raised by a document *Los Anales de Tula* (van Zantwijk 1979). Another document, the *Relación de la genealogía* (1941: 254), goes even further, claiming that this Atotoztli actually ruled for more than thirty years. Rudolf van Zantwijk (1985: 188, 191) argues that we know little about Atotoztli's reign because the official Aztec scribes—almost all of whom were men—neglected to mention the female *tlatoani* since female rulers were so uncommon. Thus, rather than mentioning Atotoztli, most scribes filled this gap between male kings either by extending

the reign of Motecuhzoma I beyond his death, or by pushing back the beginning of Axayacatl's reign to a date before his actual inauguration. Earlier in this chapter, we saw the same "defeminization" of the Egyptian king lists by their scribes (Marcus n.d.b).

CONCLUSIONS

What general patterns can we derive from the histories of these royal women who broke the glass ceiling? To begin with, each woman must be understood in the context of her own culture and political system, without the universal stereotypes sometimes seen in gender studies—stereotypes that usually tell us more about the author than about gender (Meskell 1995).

Furthermore, gender is not a static, permanent status; rather, it is a changing and moving target, and therefore much more difficult to pin down for a specific time and place without the aid of historical and ethnographic data. As Martin Whyte (1978: 170) concluded in his comparative work, one "can no longer assume that there is such a thing as *the* status of women cross-culturally. . . . each aspect of the status, roles, and relationship of women relative to men must be examined and explained separately, unless future research shows a cross-cultural reality that is very different from the patterns we have discovered."

We have seen that the route to the top was much easier for a woman among the Lovedu, where qualities such as nurturing and appeasement were considered appropriate for a ruler. It was much more difficult for a woman to become ruler in Dynastic Egypt, where rulership was considered so much a male prerogative that Hatshepsut had to depict herself either as a man or as a sphinx.

The route to the top started with having a father who was the reigning king. It also helped to come from the most highly ranked dynasty around. Many of the Mesoamerican royal women I have examined in this paper held office only because their bloodlines were bluer than those of their consorts. Even incest was not considered out of bounds, if it led to an heir who outranked everyone else (as we saw among the Aztec and the Lovedu).

Still, one had to be lucky or opportunistic. The Mixtec princess 6 Monkey inherited the throne of Belching Mountain only because her older brothers had been killed in battle, and she married an appropriate male ruler before claiming that throne. Some Maya women ruled only because their husbands died while their sons were too young to ascend the throne. Some Culhua women may have ruled Tenochtitlan while their lower-ranking Mexica husbands waited for an heir who was half-Culhua. Even in societies where rulership was conceived of as "gender male," many kings preferred to be succeeded by a

daughter who was their direct descendant rather than by a nephew or a male cousin (Goody 1966).

When a king had more than one wife, each wife often fought to ensure that her son succeeded him on the throne after his death. Lady Ik Skull, mother of Bird Jaguar of Yaxchilán, may have held the throne for her son until the dispute over succession could be resolved. It also seems clear that in all these societies, at one time or another, royal women held office during gaps in succession. It was usually a thankless task, since later Egyptian, Aztec, and Maya scribes omitted them from the king lists. Hatshepsut's own nephew execrated her monuments.

We have also seen, in many of these cases, some interesting reversals of gender roles. The Rain Queen of the Lovedu made "mothers" out of her male district heads, and in the ritual aspects of her marriage she received "wives" and performed in the role of a man. The Aztec "snake woman" was a man. Hatshepsut made her male steward into a "caregiver." And Hatshepsut gave herself the ultimate "makeover," appearing with the false beard, kilt, headcloth, and bare chest of a man.

In cultures where having a female ruler caused cognitive dissonance, "defeminization" of the king lists has probably led us to underestimate the number of women who reached the top (Marcus n.d.b). At the same time, those very cultures' legends of dynastic origins are filled with royal women—queen mothers, incestuous aunts and daughters, and women who fought alongside male soldiers in battle. These epics suggest that the low numbers of documented female rulers do not necessarily reflect the actual *political power* of royal women in their roles as hypogamous brides who raised the status of their grooms, as widows who held thrones for their sons, and as queen mothers who were "whispers behind the throne." As Queen Mkabi of the Zulu explained it to Cecil Cowley (1966: 28), "And have we wives and mothers of the Zulus not the greatest power over our kings and princes, when we talk to them in the silence of the night?"

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