

Africana Jvol.

Hilda Kuper. An African Aristocracy: Rank Among the Swazi.
New York: African Publishing Co., 1980 (1947). 7x11, 251 pp.,
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Ivan Karp
Indiana University

An African Aristocracy is one of the classics of modern ethnography and it is welcome to have it back in print. It is a work which deserves rereading and I was struck with its contemporary relevance to issues with which anthropologists and Africanists are concerned at present.

An African Aristocracy is one part of a trilogy in which Hilda Kuper examines the orientation of Swazi society and the effects of the incorporation of Swaziland into larger systems on Swazi society and their sense of self. The other two works are The Uniform of Colour, which was written as part of An African Aristocracy but published separately because of restrictions on publishing in the immediate post second world war period, and her recent "official" biography of the Swazi king, Sobhuza II Ngwenyama and King of Swaziland (Africana, 1978). This last work portrays the modern history of Swaziland and the significant changes it has undergone through the biography of her friend, host and informant, Sobhuza II. The three works also provide an unique account of the interaction between anthropologist and the people she studied over a 40 year period. The history of the discipline is etched in her work at the same time as we are given one of the most intricate portraits of an African society on record.

There are any number of reasons why An African Aristocracy has contemporary relevance. First of all Kuper displays a

concern with the historical context that is unusual in many anthropological accounts. She clearly recognized that Swazi society emerged out of ongoing ethnic interaction that was contemporaneous with the European penetration into Southern Africa. She portrays the effects of incorporation and political domination even in the portion of her work that is devoted to indigenous social forms. She shows a lively awareness of organizational problems and understands that the rules and regulations of structures were not unthinkingly carried out. Her chapter on the mechanisms whereby a successor is found and the means utilized to substitute other personnel when a designated heir is not available predates, for example, Firth's essays on problems of social organization. Throughout, but especially in her introduction, she shows a concern with the role of the frame of reference on the kinds of questions asked and the process through which knowledge is produced. It must be added that An African Aristocracy proves, in company with all of Hilda Kuper's writing about the Swazi, that elegant prose and vivid description are not incompatible with good social science.

What is most striking about An African Aristocracy on reading, however, is that it wrestles with a problem that her contemporaries in social anthropology chose largely to ignore and provides a model for current anthropological efforts. The problem Kuper set herself in An African Aristocracy was how to describe the predominant emphasis in Swazi society on rank as a principle both for organizing social relationships and

defining the person without resorting to descriptions in terms of individual psychology and personality development, as American Anthropologists were doing during that period. Within African Anthropology only ^{Jaques} Maquet's The Premise of Inequality and Paul Reisman's Freedom in Fulani Social Life have taken up similar problems and they are, of course, much later works. Kuper's solution is twofold. Firstly she examines rank in a number of separate spheres of Swazi social life, kinship, economics, ritual and so on, to show that social relations are organized and interpreted in terms of the assumptions of rank and that rank often takes precedence over other principles of social relations. Thus in her account of differences of wealth she shows that accumulation does not provide a means of superceeding rank based on birth in aristocratic or non-aristocratic clans.

Secondly she argues that rank can only be understood in relationship to the pivotal institution of the kingship and argues that the kingship is a ritual institution through which Swazi society reproduces itself. In the key chapter of the work "The Drama of Kingship," she argues that for the Swazi continuity in their social and natural environments depends on ritual action. She does not use such modern jargon as "reproduce" but the direction is clear enough. What is crucial is that she concludes that rank is based on kingship and that kingship is central to Swazi identity and, from their point of view, material well being. This analysis provided a basis for the contemporary understanding of kingship as ritual mediation and it is not accidental that the

best article on this subject, Beidelman's "Swazi Royal Ritual," (African, 1967) is a reanalysis that develops Kuper's beginnings and uses her rich material.

I can only end on a personal note. I first read An African Aristocracy, because it was a set work, part of the background of any competent anthropologist who is an Africanist. It has taken me a decade as a practicing anthropologist to realize how important it really is.