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Distant Companions

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Preface

“When I was taught anthropology,” wrote James Murray, who from 1929 on spent over thirty years in the colonial service in Northern Rhodesia, “we learnt how to put bird seeds in skulls, about totemism and exogamy, and a Mr. Malinowski startled us all with a theory about ignorance of paternity. We also read little bits in a long book called ‘The Golden Bough.’ I do not think anybody taught us about masters and servants. Certainly I cannot remember Dr. R. R. Marett doing so.”¹ And Shirley E. Roberts added this perspective when responding to my request for information about her life and times with servants: “I would find it exceedingly difficult to explain to a modern American the kind of life led by a colonial child of 50 years ago without writing a treatise on the subject—and I haven’t the time.”²

Between these two statements lies the troublesome story I have been concerned in this book to retrieve and unravel from about 1900 in Northern Rhodesia through the mid-1980s in Zambia. Masters then assumed that they defined both the identity of servants and the nature of their relationship. The new anthropologists of the post-World War II era ask different questions about the structuring of social relationships from those asked by James Murray’s teachers. Relationships long taken for granted are today becoming problematized in research enterprises that are informed in fresh ways by history, the other social sciences, and literary criticism. The study of gender relations, in particular, has not developed from any one single theoretical tradition. This has offered me a challenging range of frameworks

1. James Murray, personal communication, October 19, 1986.

2. Shirley E. Roberts, personal communication, November 1, 1986.

Preface

from which to choose in constructing an explanation of questions of power, ideology, and economics.

Masters and servants are both the products and the makers of this story, and their relationship persists, in a transformed shape, in postcolonial Zambia. While masters and servants were not studied in Murray's days, the very fabrication of these terms and of men's and women's place in the evolving social order and their contemporary changes is one of the central objects of this book. I use these—and many other words such as primitive, houseboy, and piccanin—without quotation marks or italics not because I accept their normative weight, but because I wish to acknowledge their role in structuring relationships of domination and subordination by race, gender, and class. The practices these terms helped to structure were anchored variously in time and space. To situate my study in those contexts, I have used the contemporary place names and English orthography. My observations close toward the end of 1985, just before a major International Monetary Fund-induced devaluation of the Zambian currency and the introduction of a foreign-currency auctioning system set a severely depressed economy on a further economic downslide. Later economic developments in Zambia may have adversely affected the already strained relationship between servants and their employers which I describe in this book. A hard-earned way of making a living is likely under these circumstances to become even more difficult, and the vexing relationship between this book's two main sets of actors who meet at a distance in the private household may become even more troublesome in its changed reenactment.

The terms employed in the colonial discourse flattened servants out, rarely allowing any sense of servants as individuals, as persons with lives and desires of their own, to enter. Yet although the colonial employer had the upper hand, the relationship between servant and master was a product of their joint interaction, and servants participated crucially in structuring it. I am concerned to restore that sense of life and agency to servants and to depict them as individuals rather than invisible working hands, and so I seek where possible to identify them by their names and to anchor them beyond the locus of work in the context of their own social lives. I identify their employers by name wherever possible as well. The exception to this occurs in my discussion of a large sample survey I conducted in Lusaka from 1983 to 1984, in which anonymous respondents were selected at random.

The Zambian case is but a variation on the story of domestic labor which has no final, or single, conclusion, for it is still unfolding. Domestic service is not an archaic remnant of feudal practices persisting only in remote corners of the late twentieth-century world. It represents a labor process that takes many different forms, and it employs growing, not decreasing,

numbers of workers in an advanced capitalist economy such as that of the United States today. The book's relevance must be seen in this context. As a study with comparative implications, its findings pertain not only to southern Africa, Africa as such, or the Third World, but to our discussion in the West about ongoing changes in the gender division of labor in the wake of the transformation of the postwar world economy. To highlight my work's pertinence in this wider context, I take the kinds of calculated leaps at which a trained historian might wince: from past documents to observations from the early 1980s, and from Zambia's capital to the metropolitan United States. I hope the challenge this offers to conventional thinking about domestic service will balance the possible loss of detail in the progression of the sequential narrative of the Zambian story.

This book is a product of my long-term research interest in Zambia, which took me to Lusaka, first between 1971 and 1972 and again in 1981. This particular study draws on two periods of fieldwork carried out in Zambia during 1983–1984 and 1985, made possible by a grant from the United States National Science Foundation, no. BNS.8303507, 1983–1985. During all my stays in Zambia I have been a Research Affiliate of the Institute for African Studies at the University of Zambia in Lusaka. Different stages of the research were supported by a grant-in-aid from the MacMillan Fund of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota for archival research in England during the summer of 1982, and by two faculty research grants from Northwestern University, facilitating my return to Zambia in 1985 and additional archival work and interviews in England during the summer of 1986.

For advice and help in the launching and completion of this study I am indebted to many individuals in Zambia, the United States, and England. Among them are university colleagues at all points of this triangle, the professional staffs of several libraries and archival collections, former Northern Rhodesians now living in England, directors and support staffs of the Institute for African Studies at the University of Zambia, my host households in Lusaka, and my research assistants. Simon Ottenberg and Pierre L. van den Berghe whetted my interests in politics, ethnicity, and race relations in graduate school, and Sue Ellen Jacobs taught me the importance of considering gender as an analytical category. Susan Geiger, Allen Isaacman, and Charles Pike encouraged the first conception of the research. Special acknowledgments are due to Dick Hobson for mediating many contacts with former Northern Rhodesians in England and for cheerfully responding to my many questions; to Arnold Epstein and J. Clyde Mitchell for scrutinizing their memory and research notes for information about domestic servants during the 1950s; to Deborah Gaitskell and Andrew Roberts for historical advice; and to Ilse Mwanza for facilitating my

Preface

activities as a research affiliate in Lusaka. But the servants and their employers in Lusaka who tolerated my curiosity deserve more than my gratitude, for without their participation this study would not have been undertaken. Among the many special persons to whom I owe so much I do wish to recognize one by name: Norah Rice of Mtendere township in Lusaka, my assistant, confidante, and chaperone in a variety of activities between 1971 and 1985, who during all these years has played the singlemost important role in making me understand what autonomy means from a low-income woman's perspective in urban Zambia.

Because this project has spanned some years, some of my observations have found their way into print. My article "Domestic Service in Zambia," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 13 (1986), summarizes some findings from Part I and Chapters 6 and 7 in Part III. "Household Work as a Man's Job: Sex and Gender in Domestic Service in Zambia," *Anthropology Today* 2 (1986), draws in part from Chapters 3 and 7. The song on pages 163–164 appeared in Peter Fraenkel, *Wayaleshi* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1959), pp. 51–52, and is reprinted with the publisher's permission. Plate no. 2 is reproduced from a photograph in the Rhodes House Library at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, and reproduced here with the permission of S. R. Denny, who owns the copyright. The remaining plates are reproductions of photographs from private collections and appear with the permission of the individuals who own them.

Several persons influenced the shaping of this book at various stages. Judith Buttermann, Kusum Datta, Susan Geiger, Maria Grosz-Ngate, Dorothy Helly, Hugh McMillan, Jonathan Ngate, Ibrahim Sundiata, Robert Welsch, and Judith Wittner read individual chapters, and Susan and Henry Antkiewicz, John Comaroff, Carol Stack, Margaret Strobel, and Pierre L. van den Berghe read the entire draft. I wish to thank them all for the interest they took in reading, commenting, criticizing, and advising me in their concern to keep my tendency to ramble within manageable bounds. If I have not listened well enough, they know whom to blame. The book is dedicated to my mother, who gave me the kind of home and preparation for working life I would wish for all servants in Zambia: devoid of hierarchy and with freedom to choose.

K.T.H.

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