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## Jacob Zuma: Ladies' Man

**ACCORDING TO MOST DICTIONARIES** A ladies' man is a man who strives especially to please women and to attract their attention and admiration. Hence the possessive apostrophe: the man belongs to the ladies; he gives them his undivided attention and is a slave to their manifold desires. He does this, no doubt, because of his erotic desire for women and because his only pleasure *is their pleasure*. It's a nice idea, and may often be genuinely expressed. However, to shift from this reasoning into acceptance of polygamy is probably a segue too far in which a positive and personal desire is transformed into a social institution which expresses the superiority of men in general, and invites us to assess the status of a particular man by the number of women he can take possession of.

This brings us to Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma the 67 year-old President of South Africa. Zuma is a Christian polygamist whose many marriages are ratified under South Africa's Customary Marriages Act (1998), which attempts to recognise the equality of the spouses. He has married five wives: one divorced him, one committed suicide, leaving him with three current spouses, 13 legitimate children, and another seven or so born to different women, some of whom are described as fiancées and some of whom are simply girlfriends.

The South African Communist Party (SACP), the African National Congress (ANC), and the Congress of South African Trades Unions (COSATU) have found all this to be perfectly acceptable for a number of years. After all, Jacob has been a comrade for five decades, joining the ANC in 1959 and the SACP in 1963, rising to the heady heights of the Party's Politburo in April 1989. He is a reliable comrade; imprisoned for many years by the Apartheid regime he

was entrusted with the ANC's 'underground structures' and subsequently did a stint during the late eighties as Chief of the ANC's Intelligence Department. So, in a manner of speaking, Jacob Zuma 'knows where the bodies are buried'. He has been both Deputy President and President of the ANC, and was elected President of South Africa in 2009.

The man has an impressive record of sacrifice and struggle against the racial oppression of the black masses in South Africa. He has also possessed some cultural advantages of strategic importance to the SACP and the ANC. As a Zulu born in Zululand, now part of KwaZulu-Natal, he was able to fend off the worst of the attacks by Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's *raison d'être* during the eighties and early nineties was to carve a space for Zulu nationalism in whatever settlement was to be reached during the eventual collapse of the Apartheid state. This led to ferocious warfare between the ANC and the IFP, and the various 'fronts' and armed groups sponsored by both sides, and in some cases by the Apartheid regime itself, which was, of course, busily stirring the pot.

It was in these circumstances that Zuma's position as a Zulu, who in his personal life, expressed many of the traditional patriarchal virtues of Zulu culture, like paying dowries for multiple wives, became of critical importance to the stability and success of the ANC, and to the commitment of both the ANC and SACP to a non-tribal settlement in South Africa. Jacob Zuma fought tooth and nail against Buthelezi and his Zulu nationalism at the same time as presenting himself as a very traditional Zulu leader with many wives and many personal 'connections'.

So it is not at all surprising that he should become the focus of corruption concerning five billion dollars of arms shipments, or that he should be charged with rape, and most recently – last week, in fact – become embroiled in a new scandal concerning revelations about the birth of yet another 'love child'. However, he

has survived all this with aplomb. He has a great populist following, which renders him Africa's *Teflon Man*: nothing sticks to him. During his trial for rape, of which he was acquitted in May 2006, he sang along with crowds from the ANC Youth League and SACP's Young Communist League outside the court; they sang the old militants' song *Lethu Mshini Wami, Bring me my machine [gun]*.

The woman, who had accused him of rape, had apparently consented, so all was well as far as the boys were concerned. The judge admonished her for giving false witness, and chastised Jacob for his high spirits and intemperate behaviour, but what else could you expect from such a vigorous, virile, and charismatic man of the people? However, for some in South Africa, Jacob's latest 'love child' is a step too far. They expect that as the President of the Republic he should set a moral example by endorsing, in practice, the Youth League's slogan of "One boyfriend, One girlfriend" in their anti-Aids campaigning. While others are concerned by what they regard as the President's attempt to camouflage his downright promiscuity with a blanket of African traditionalism.

The absurdity of charging somebody with several wives, at least two current fiancées, numerous girlfriends, and twenty-odd children, with "promiscuity" reveals some of the deep problems that beset the *Rainbow Nation*. The same could be said of the ANC's Youth League leaders who refuse to criticise the President while calling on the country's youth to practice continence and fidelity in the fight against Aids.

The country continues to find millions steeped in poverty, underemployment, and unemployment. The housing conditions of great masses of people are truly wretched and the hopes of many, that Zuma, because of his radical and communist credentials, would re-dedicate the ANC government to set about solving these fundamental problems have not been realised as Zuma has continued Thabo Mbeki's policy of giving

full rein to the interests and priorities of South Africa's business elite and their international partners.

Consequently, many people fear the emergence of oligarchic relationships, which will most certainly be incapable of addressing South Africa's seemingly intractable housing and jobs crisis. As tensions rise amid riots and demonstrations mounted by the very poor in the face of the apparent indifference of the ANC's elite what better time for the President to present himself as a traditional African man with many wives and many children, indeed, as the father of the nation. One cartoonist has already urged Zuma to avoid kissing babies at public events in case an infant suddenly cries "Daddy!"

However he will survive the uproar with consummate ease, and if he encounters any difficulties all he will need to do is burst into a verse of *Lethu Mshini Wami* to be sure of expressions of wild adulation from ANC youth, or make implicit appeals to traditional patriarchal authority in order to garner support among significant sections of the population, whether Zulu or not, committed to the most reactionary and backward of Africa's traditions.

The most serious problem about Jacob Zuma's personal sexual relations is the practice and justification of polygamy. It is truly astonishing that the ANC and the SACP can have tolerated and supported this sort of carry-on in their leadership for all these long years. For parties supposedly committed to the equality of women allowing the practice of polygamy, complete with *lobola* or dowry payments, in their leading circles means that they can never have had any serious intention of full female emancipation. Despite the struggle to grant legal equality to wives in customary marriages, and the presence of many significant and powerful women in their movement, the ANC's failure to fight for the practical equality of women is glaring. If the President of the Republic sincerely believes in the equality of women he would be fighting 'traditional African practices', not endorsing them.