Life experiences lead to doctorate for academic

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As a child, Makho Nkosi saw bride abductions in KwaNgcolosi, a rural area near Hillcrest.

The girl who grew up to be an academic continued to wrestle with the abuse of the custom of ukuthwala in KwaZulu-Natal, and decided to make it the subject of her PhD thesis.

Yesterday, Nkosi graduated from the University of KwaZulu-Natal with a doctorate in gender studies, concluding what was a “very emotionally taxing and challenging” chapter of her life. Nkosi’s thesis argues that in the legitimate practice of ukuthwala, the consent of the woman (not child), is sought before the marriage negotiations begin – without the threat of physical violence or sexual abuse.

“Anything beyond this is an abuse of the custom of ukuthwala and I call it ubugebengu (criminality), and it should be unlawful,” she said.

“In many cases, abductors target poor families with no strong household structure, no father figures and with guardians they know may connive with them in the exchange of lobola. Now people know that they have to report the incidents of (the abuse of) ukuthwala to the police. The more we talk, write and publish about ukuthwala, the more we raise consciousness about the issue.”

In her thesis, Nkosi argues that opponents of ukuthwala should first distinguish between the custom, and the abuse thereof, before passing judgement. She said that not much had been done to investigate the practice among Zulus living in rural KZN in post-1994 South Africa, and so her research (which first began in 2005) was focused on exploring the social meanings of the custom in KwaNgcolosi, Zwelihomvu and Bergville.

“In (legitimate) ukuthwala practice, a young woman’s consent is sought before the marriage negotiation process is opened up. That is why, after umkhongi (the negotiator) has been to the woman’s parents’ house... a messenger is sent to seek consent from the woman.

“If she says no, then a penalty fee (inkomoyokuthwala) is paid and that is the end of the story. If she gives consent, then lobolo is immediately paid to her parents and the marriage negotiations are opened up.”

Nkosi argued that bride abduction was carried out by emasculated, powerless men wanting to punish and control women. Her study recommended that further research be conducted into culture, sex, gender, sexuality, masculinities and ukuthwala to intervene in how boys were being socialised.

She said that like many other Zulu cultural practices, information about ukuthwala had been conveyed through word-of-mouth, and the original intentions had, at times, been distorted.