

Macho and the Okavango Swamps

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In the early 1990s, my husband was commissioned by Struik Publishers to write a coffee-table book, entitled, *Fly-Fishing in Southern Africa*, with photography by Peter and Beverley Pickford. The objective was to include as many conceivable types of fly fishing, fly-fishing locations, fly fishers, and fly-tiers as feasible, and, as comprehensively as possible, to delve into the history of fly fishing in this part of our world. I was assigned the research and initial editing.

For the next two years, between other mundane tasks of making a living, we would set out, sometimes for weeks at a time, to explore. Always driving, we covered more than 50 000 kilometres of South Africa, Namibia, the Okavango Swamps and Zimbabwe. Often I was the only woman fishing amongst men, and this afforded me close scrutiny of how fishermen of opposing categories confront each other.

Believe it or not, I am not one of those traditional feminists. I cook, I clean, and I have even been known to wash and iron, all functions men expect of their gentler partners. But there are places where I draw the line. I have no raging, teeth-baring, salivating, soul-invasive paranoia about the use of gender-specific terms like choirmaster, chairman or fisherman. In my book they are the innocent and familiar signposts of the English language, comfortably embracing both the male and female of the species. If, as the ardent feminists argue, such terms make the men feel better, even a little more important, so be it. But, every now and again, there comes a time when a gender distinction has got to be made.

Being an untraditional feminist who wields a fly rod, I found myself largely in the company of traditional men wielding fly rods. This gave me the perfect socio-biological opportunity to observe and wax philosophical on the essential differences that exist between the men and the women who fling the feathers, the bait, the spinners and whatever else fishermen cook up to cast into fishy-looking waters.

There is something intrusively primitive lurking in the blood of every fisherman I've ever met; a trait few women, thank God, possess. It's called machismo, a word defined in the dictionary as being: 'the cult of male virility and masculine pride' or, in short, just plain old macho, to mean those 'aggressively male: ostentatiously virile'. It was the words 'masculine pride' which intrigued me particularly as machismo is an essential part of all sport to do with huntin', shootin', fishin' - and drivin' 4X4s.

On a visit to the Okavango Swamps, I witnessed the machismo of fly fishermen versus spinner fishermen in all its testosterone-laden glory. A sight to behold; amusing, vexing and sometimes just plain old jaw-dropping.

It was the much-vaunted and fearsome tiger fish, swimming aggressively amongst those other beasts of the reedy waterways, the hippo and the croc, which became the subject of something called, The Battle of the Rods - Flies versus Spinners.

On the fly-fishing side, we were a party of three, two men and a woman. On the other side,



Dulcie Kirby releases a trout in one of the dams at Fisantekraal in the Du Toits Kloof valley.

three men: loud-mouthed, case-hardened Gauteng executives on their annual holiday. Around the campfire one evening, the subject of fishing for the Tiger reared its razor-toothed snout. That, after all, was what the next day was to be about. What followed is what can only be termed, 'The Machismo Dance' men disguising their contempt through joshing, their barbs interspersed by little forgiving laughs. Part of the chit-chat went something like this: -

Spinner naiveté. "What lures are you guys using tomorrow?"

Fly pomposity. "Lures? Flies, mate, flies."

Spinner, feinting. "Oh, you're *fly* fishermen. You mean those little rods with wisps of feathers at the end?"

Fly, left hook. "You should try it sometime, you might get lucky."

Spinner, body blow. "I'm always lucky."

And so it continued. Knowing what was happening, and although not being possessed of machismo, I nonetheless began to feel an irrational loyalty to feathers. The battle of understatement was being won by The Spinners, and the air around them was thick with knowing sideways glances, smug half-smiles and visibly swelling chests. The Flies became increasingly tight-lipped and disapproving.

A new day dawned and with it the unspoken challenge of the evening past, and a tacit understanding between the fly fishermen that there was much to prove. Under a bright and relentless sun, the opposing teams fished in full view of each other - a situation, I suspect, deliberately pre-arranged by the guides of the opposing teams. For The Flies it was a hard but profitable day. It spoke of sweat, strained muscles and taut lines, of line-burnt fingers, heated reels and whoops of triumph. There were fish lost, more than enough fish landed, and weights and measures recorded in voices sufficiently deafening to carry all results across the water.

Of the The Spinners I have little to say, except to note they caught comparatively little - and certainly not, as was later proved, 'A Fish Called Humility'. Around the campfire that night machismo continued to lurk. Interestingly though, as inebriation and bonhomie increased through the evening, what became apparent was a painfully-casual curiosity from The Spinners about the intricacies of fly fishing; and particularly where schooling in this particular pastime might be bought.

What I learned from such scrutiny is, if you're fly fishing and others are extolling the virtues of spinning with all the bluster they can muster, hold your peace and often beyond wildest expectation, softly, softly catchee macho spinning monkey.

"Rivers course through my dreams, rivers cold and fast, rivers well-known and rivers nameless, rivers that seem like ribbons of blue water twisting through wide valleys, narrow rivers folded in layers of darkening shadow, rivers that have eroded down deep in a mountain's belly, sculpted the land, peeled back the planet's history exposing the texture of time itself", Harry Middleton, Rivers of Memory, Pruett Publishing Company, 1993.