

# ***What is a Woman? A decolonial African feminist analysis of womanhoods in Lesotho***

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## **Abstract**

Feminists across a variety of contexts have written extensively about womanhood. Recently the question of difference — to account for the cultural, ethnic and racial diversity among women themselves — has become a highly contested issue in feminist theories. Tensions have ensued where ‘western feminisms’ have been criticised for bias that is embedded in the objectification of ‘different’ women regarded as ‘other’ as ‘traditional’ and therefore inferior. Several African feminists have also questioned ‘western’ concepts such as gender and their relevance to the African context. Womanhood — a set of socially defined attributes appropriate for women - holds different meanings depending on the context in which it is defined. Drawing on decolonial feminist approaches, this qualitative study aimed to understand the meaning of ‘womanhood’ from the perspectives of never-married women (*methepa*) in Lesotho, where womanhood is defined in terms of marriage. In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty *methepa* from various contexts in Lesotho. As opposed to the ‘traditional’ definition that accounts for a single attribute — woman as ‘wife’ — *methepa* defined ‘womanhood’ in different ways. By foregrounding respectability, sexual empowerment, mothering and personhood, these women deconstructed binarized gendered categories. This paper builds on the indigenous and also draws from the indigenous for knowledge production. In so doing, it deconstructs metanarratives and reconfigures knowledges around women’s sexualities, agency and ‘womanhoods’ in Lesotho, as a contribution to pluriversal knowledge production.

## Introduction

Oftentimes, the construct ‘Woman’, as well as the meanings thereof, go unquestioned, given that it is essentialised to particular attributes aligned with the hetero-patriarchal<sup>1</sup> climate that governs many communities. Relatedly, in many contexts including the African continent, heterosexual marriage is considered to be a critical pathway to womanhood (Caraivan 2019, Chikafa-Chipiro 2019, Van der Heijden, Harries, and Abrahams 2019, Sennott and Mojola 2017). Schaan et al. (2016, 174) confirm that womanhood is affirmed through “‘being a wife and being a mother’, or ‘belonging’ and ‘reproducing’” in African contexts. In Lesotho, where the marriage rate for women remains high, the notion that womanhood is tied to marriage is a reality. Unlike other sub-Saharan societies, such as Botswana (see Mokomane 2006) and South Africa (see Rudwick and Posel 2015), the marriage levels of women in Lesotho have remained high.

Interestingly, recent studies (Harrison, Short, and Tuoane-Nkhasi 2014, Khau 2012a, Matsúmunyane and Hlalele 2019) conducted amongst Basotho confirm that this pro-marital necessity has remained deeply embedded amongst the Basotho. While the marriage institution may somewhat have changed over time, pro-marital ideologies continue to mark marriage as highly prized for women in Lesotho. As such, Harrison, Short, and Tuoane-Nkhasi (2014, 2) acknowledge that “marriage and motherhood are near-universal experiences among women in Lesotho”. This implies that, for those not meeting the demands of hetero-patriarchal notions of womanhood, such as the ‘never-married’ woman, one is deemed inadequate and is subsequently marginalised within the community and society at large. In accord with the deconstructive tone embodied by this paper, I opt to use the Sesotho term – *methepa* (singular: *mothepa*) to refer to the participants of this study. Basotho use the term *methepa* to refer to all female persons – young and old, married or not. This de-centers the heterosexual marital norm – a fundamental force upon which the marginalisation of ‘never-married’ women is pinned (Mohlalane 2020).

This paper interrogates normalised, exclusionary conceptions of womanhood that are fixed to marriage in post-colonial Lesotho. It also problematises the exclusion of never-married women from hetero-patriarchal conceptions of womanhood in Lesotho. To achieve this, I draw on de

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<sup>1</sup> I draw the concept of ‘heteropatriarchy’ from M. Jacqui Alexander’s usage to describe the link of heterosexualisation with patriarchal power in the constructions of many postcolonial nationalist imaginaries. I use it to illustrate a climate wherein gender identity is constructed in normative terms that are prescriptive and exclusionary.

Beauvoir's deconstructive voice invoked by her question, "What is a Woman?" This paper also makes a claim for the need to reconsider the notion of womanhood as described by Basotho through the term *bosali*<sup>2</sup> and to do that, through decolonial African feminist lenses whose goal is to expose and address concealed colonial biases. This is linked to a realisation that coloniality — of gender, of knowledge — plagues current conceptions of womanhood in Lesotho.

The paper contributes to the numerous debates fashioned by feminisms of the Global South that challenge essentialist, negative and disempowering western-centric constructions of womanhood amongst African people (Aleck and Thembhani 2016, Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018, Coly 2015). This scholarship prioritises and places as central the realities of the African context and pays close attention to how women's experiences are shaped by the diverse identities that they embody and ultimately, inform complex and multiversal definitions of womanhoods in the African context. Further, the paper expands the scholarship by positing decolonial African feminist analyses that seek to reveal, challenge and address the persisting modernist colonial logics that shape contemporary conceptions of womanhoods in African contexts.

In the five main sections, I will briefly reflect on feminist debates on womanhood to elucidate their relevance for the questions raised in this paper. Yet, I also draw the reader's attention to the shortfalls of de Beauvoir's concept 'Woman' particularly, for its exclusionary and eurocentric tendencies. Further, in taking up the African feminist contention that 'African womanhood'<sup>3</sup> is a colonial construct, I illustrate that through the processes of political-economic colonisation in Lesotho, a particularised Christian conjugal-type womanhood was created and remains a fixed, potent standard according to which *methepa* are marginalised. This paves the way for positing decolonial African feminist analyses to reveal, challenge and address coloniality that plagues the notion of womanhood amongst Basotho, addressed in section two. The methodology that is outlined briefly in the third section paves the way, in section four, for a detailed decolonial African feminist analysis of the narratives on identity construction of women in Lesotho. This section

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<sup>2</sup> The word *bosali* is an abstract noun literally referring to that which pertains to women or the feminine. The word for woman is *mosali* (plural: *basali*). I discuss *methepa*'s use of the construct *bosali* later.

<sup>3</sup> I use quotation marks around 'African womanhood' because in itself the construct bears racist colonial biases wherein it was constructed as negative in relation to 'European womanhood'. It reflects the inferiorisation of colonised women whose sexualities, and gender identities were posited as inferior in relation to that of European women. Thus, 'African womanhood' and 'Mosotho woman' (reflected upon later) bear racist connotations according to which these identities were defined in particularistic ways — hence the African feminist contention that it is a colonial construct. I discuss this issue in more depth later.

consists of four thematic sections: *Boithlompho* – the narrative of respectability; The erotic as power – sexually empowered *mosali oa Mosotho*; Successful provider-mothering and finally, *Ke Motho!* the narrative of personhood. In section five, I reflect on the main arguments, and the implications for decolonial feminist scholarship and pluriversal knowledge production on womanhoods.

### ***What is a Woman? Feminist debates on womanhood***

The question of womanhood has been hotly contested within feminist scholarship. In view of this, de Beauvoir challenged patriarchal and essentialist conceptions of ‘Woman’ and its constituents. In posing a provocative question, “*What is a Woman?*” in her foundational book *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir (2009, 23) sought to highlight the complexity and ambiguity of the gender identity ‘Woman’ (Hekman 2015). Later in the book, she states “One is not born, but rather *becomes*, woman” (de Beauvoir 2009, 295 emphasis added). By insisting that womanhood is a ‘becoming’ she challenges the assumptions of fixity and essentialism often pinning it to specific attributes, such as wifehood, motherhood – including femininity. While I find de Beauvoir’s work useful for the questions I am raising in this paper, it is problematic on two counts.

Firstly, in attempting to challenge the essentialist patriarchal construction of ‘Woman’, de Beauvoir and her followers unintentionally universalised the definition of ‘Woman’ – premised upon the experiences of white middle-class European women. By presenting the experiences of white, middle-class European women as representative of those of *all* women, yet disregarding those of differently bodied women, the concept ‘Woman’ is not only universalist, but also exclusionary. Thus, contesting the universalist assumption of women’s experiences of subordination – linked to the oppressive construction of ‘Woman’ – Black Feminist Audrey Lorde (1997) emphasises the need to account for differences on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture and class amongst women that not only shape their experiences but also their constructions of womanhood. Secondly, ‘Woman’ is also eurocentric in that it evokes power relations of superiority/inferiority, first-world/third-world, West/Other (Nkealah 2016, Nnaemeka 2013). Relatedly, alongside the image of a ‘First World Woman’ assumed to be superior and agentive in hindsight, there is a monolithic ‘Third World woman’ in western feminist literature portrayed as

overly oppressed and impoverished (Mohanty 1988). This “feminist arrogance” (Nkealah 2016, 7365) – constantly ‘speaking down’ on ‘African womanhood’ by western feminists – has resulted in persisting misrepresentations of womanhoods in the African context.

African feminists have argued that this inferiorised image is linked to colonial distortions of women’s identities in colonised states including those on the African continent (Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018, Oyěwùmí 1997, 2016). As such, they have insisted that ‘African womanhood’ – as we have come to understand it today – is a colonial construct. Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin (2018, 2) point out that, in the name “of civilising the ‘wild and sexually uncouth native’ from her barbaric nature”, the coloniser institutionalised a particular inferiorised and domestic ideal of womanhood. Through a racialised, gendered tenet that defined ideal respectable womanhood – colonised women were judged as civilised and respectable or not. Van der Westhuizen reminds us that this canon was articulated as a “sexual ideology... with an emphasis on sexual control, restraint and prohibition” and purposed to “set apart, to differentiate” between the ‘ideal’ and its non-conforming others (2017, 33). According to Hungwe (2006), being married and confined to rural homesteads whilst the husband sought employment in urban areas, was considered a mark of respectable womanhood and civility. By contrast, ‘unmarried women’ roaming urban streets were considered to be ‘prostitutes’ and thus, ‘unrespectable’ and uncivilised.

Similarly, in Lesotho, women’s debarment from migrant employment in neighbouring South Africa, ultimately forced them into a state of perpetual dependency upon men for sustenance (Epprecht 2001). Further, through Christian mission institutions established in Lesotho, chastity, dependency and domesticity norms were reinforced for converted women. This resulted in the construction of an ideal respectable womanhood that was well-suited for the hetero-patriarchal Christian climate that remains predominant in Lesotho. Thus, through the racist, sexist and capitalist colonial administration that sought to control the bodies, sexuality, reproduction, and production of women in Lesotho – an inferiorised, conjugal, Christian-type ideal womanhood was created (Mohlalane 2020). For example, Mohlakoana’s (2008, 75) definition of ““Mosotho woman”, [merely as] mother, Christian, wife... her sexuality is constructed as one full of passivity and ... ignorance” – reflects the colonial-mission conception of ideal womanhood that persists in

post-colonial Lesotho. Notably, this is in stark contrast to the realities documented in various contexts across the African continent.

Evidence from across the African continent illustrates the complexities embodied by constructions of womanhood in African contexts. There is consensus amongst scholars (Matshidze and Nemutandani 2016, Ngcobozi 2017) that the lived realities of women in Africa follow non-linear trajectories, and as such reveal multiple understandings of womanhood. Further, the various roles that women assume within African households, rupture the limits of gendered pro-marital conceptions of womanhood. For example, Matshidze and Nemutandani (2016) point out that the *makhadzi* (“paternal aunt”) hold an esteemed status among the Vhavenda as custodians of religious and traditional knowledge within and outside the family. In addition, *rakhali* (“paternal aunt”) amongst the Basotho – regardless of her marital status – participates in the negotiation of *bohali* (“dowry”). This is a male dominated space, yet *rakhali* is entitled to take part because of the power that is bestowed on this role within families in some societies in Africa. These dynamics and, by extension, constructions of womanhood deconstruct essentialist and normative definitions of womanhood tied to marriage, wherein ‘Woman’ is constructed as necessarily and perpetually subordinate. In so doing, they represent alternative images of womanhoods in Africa, that are distinct from the fixed colonial norm cited by Mohlakoana (2008).

Despite writing from a particular context and basing her conception of ‘Woman’ on the experiences of a particular category of women, de Beauvoir’s arguments resonate with those fashioned by feminisms of the Global South. The examples highlighted above confirm de Beauvoir’s argument that ‘Woman’ cannot be essentialised to heterosexual marriage but instead can take any format depending on the context. However, I also take heed of the exclusionary, inferiorising, homogenising and eurocentric logics in which ‘Woman’ is embedded and that, consequently, submerge and invisibilise the diversities and complexities of womanhoods in Africa and their multiple constituents. This prompts me to locate constructions of womanhood within deeper analytical approaches that will reveal the complexities and nuances of women’s varied identities in Africa. In light of this, decolonial African feminisms, which undergird this study, constitute a reclamation theoretical approach which seeks to recuperate and reclaim historically submerged women’s identities and subjectivities in the face of western feminist hegemonies.

## Decolonial feminism

Decolonial feminism is a response to ‘coloniality of gender’<sup>4</sup>, a phrase coined by Maria Lugones. Lugones (2007, 190) draws on the work of African feminist Oyěwùmí and other anti-colonial feminists to argue that the current invocations of ‘gender’ – anchored upon “[b]iological dimorphism, heterosexualism, and patriarchy” – bears colonial biases. For Oyěwùmí, in western culture, “a person’s biology determines [their] social position and status, so that bodily differences are used to set up social hierarchies” (Coetzee 2017, 28). Accordingly, the imposition of these ideologies to colonised states reshaped social relations such that ‘gender’ became the supreme organising principle. In other words, ‘Woman’ – defined in biological, and hierarchical, oppositional terms – to ‘man’ reflects colonial biases and thus, the persistence of this ideal in post-colonial contexts is a reiteration of hegemonic gendered racialised colonial logics.

Reflecting on these racialised, sexualised and gendered colonial ideologies, Lugones (2010, 745) reminds us that the construction of the binarized categories, coloniser/colonised, human/not human and man/woman also informed the idea that, “colonized woman’ [was] an empty category: no women are colonized; no colonized females are women” since gender identity was only assigned to those whom colonisers regarded as human beings. In other words, the racializing logic that Europeans imposed on the colonised robbed non-Europeans not only of their status as human but also as gendered beings. Notably, while ‘gender’ did not apply to the colonised, their persistent and intense subjectification resulted in a colonised internalising of ‘gender’ – itself a binarized hierarchical hetero-patriarchal category ‘man/woman’ – as a normative marker of identity (Lugones 2010). This ‘coloniality of *mind and being*’ according to Lugones (2010, 748) “is constantly renewed” through various processes in post-colonial states of which Lesotho is one.

Therefore, the essentialist, hetero-patriarchal understanding of what many describe by the category ‘Mosotho woman’ and from which *methepa* are debarred, reflects a colonial racialised,

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<sup>4</sup> Coloniality of gender is linked to and is an extension of Quijano’s concept of *coloniality of power* in which racialised and hierarchical forces of power shaped dimensions such as labour, sexuality, subjectivity and authority (Quijano 2000). However, as Lugones (2010) points out, while Quijano acknowledges both race and gender as constituents of hierarchical and oppositional power relations of coloniality/modernity, his discussion tends to downplay the role of gender. For instance, race determined the hierarchised and oppositional definition of sexuality in terms of superiority (European as chaste) and inferiority (non-European as grotesque). Thus, for Lugones, in as much as colonial/modernity is racialised, it is gendered.

hierarchical binarized category, ‘woman/not-woman’. Accordingly, ‘woman’ – the hetero-patriarchal married ideal – is posited as hierarchical and oppositional against ‘not woman’ – the ‘othered’ *mothepa*. In addition, ‘woman’ is necessarily defined as oppositional, inferiorised and hetero-patriarchally linked to ‘man’. This reflects the *coloniality of gender*. Thus, the ‘Mosotheo woman’ that many have described and come to understand harbours colonial biases and it ought to be decolonised.

As Mignolo (2007) indicates, *coloniality of knowledge* is characterised by eurocentrism in which European knowledges are privileged whilst all others are marginalised; and this manifests particularly in feminist knowledge production about constructions of womanhood. Concomitant to the contestations of ‘gender’ as an imposed distortive canon to African realities, Oyěwù mí also challenges eurocentrism that plagues knowledge production. She insists that: “[t]his global context for knowledge production must be taken into account in our quest to comprehend African realities and indeed the human condition” (Oyěwù mí 2002, 1). As alluded earlier, indigenous knowledges on womanhoods in Africa are submerged under eurocentric universalisms. This calls for deconstructive decolonial African feminist analyses for revealing, interrogating and rectifying persistent colonial biases that plague constructions of womanhood in identity construction and knowledge production.

The work of decolonial African feminist Babalwa Magoqwana critically informs my analyses and conceptualisations of indigenous womanhoods in Africa. Magoqwana (2018) introduces the Nguni concept of *uMakhulu* to refer not only to a protective matriarchal figure but also a knowledge production base that prioritises values such as communality, solidarity, survival, spirituality, personhood and complementarity all of which are central to social relations in many communities in Africa. Magoqwana’s introduction of the concept is based on the ideas of African feminists such as Ifi Amadiume (1987), Nkiri Nzegwu (1994) and Oyèrónké Oyěwù mí (1997) who theorize in terms of principles of indigenous African matriarchal systems. Shifting the theorisation of African indigenous realities beyond racialised, gendered and hierarchical binaries, *uMakhulu* represents a deconstructive, decolonial analytical framework which allows us to re-imagine, re-cover and re-claim identity construction processes in indigenous societies. In so doing, it serves a significant purpose of contributing alternative knowledges of womanhoods in Africa beyond exclusivist



hetero-patriarchal binarized thinking. This decolonial African feminist lens, therefore, allows me not only to deconstruct metanarratives around the ‘Woman’ question but also to indigenise, historicise and re-center constructions of womanhood drawn from the world senses of *methepa*.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on findings of a completed doctoral study (Mohlabane 2020). Fieldwork was conducted from June to December 2017 in various contexts in Lesotho, a small mountainous kingdom that is completely surrounded by South Africa. This study was designed in a manner that allowed in-depth engagement with *methepa*’s experiences of being unmarried in a context that necessitates marriage as key attribute of womanhood. The country is predominantly rural and houses approximately two million inhabitants. The qualitative study employed decolonial African feminist approaches, which are informed by the key concerns such as revealing and addressing colonial biases according to which marginalised *methepa* are deemed ‘voiceless’.

The decolonial African feminist perspective has the potential to elicit in-depth and multidimensional explorations of womanhood and agency in previously colonised contexts, such as Lesotho. In addition, decolonial African feminist lenses allow the revelation of the perpetually silenced ‘voices’ of *methepa*. They also allow the recovering and foregrounding of indigenous knowledges of the Basotho, as well as ways of being *mosali* through *methepa*’s world-senses. The voices of twenty *methepa* were gathered through life history methods. Life history methods provided space for *methepa* to voice their own constructions of identity and agency from within their social, cultural and historical contexts (Smith 2017). A combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods was used to select participants of diverse backgrounds from diverse contexts in Lesotho. The narrated life stories were analysed through narrative analysis and followed a process of storying stories<sup>5</sup> (McCormack 2004). Considering the sensitive nature of the information that *methepa* shared, I have used pseudonyms to safeguard their anonymity. The study obtained ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria Research Ethics Committee.

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<sup>5</sup> In *Storying stories: A narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations* (2004), McCormack details the process of storying stories. Storying stories incorporates both analysis of narrative as a phenomenon under study and narrative analysis as a methodology. This involves extracting descriptions of events and experiences as data that are then used to construct stories through ‘emplotment’. Emplotment is the process of piecing together events under a specific theme.

The interviews were conducted in Sesotho and, in doing so, *methepa* were afforded the space to articulate and construct *bosali* from their cultural world-senses. I paid close attention to their use of Sesotho expressions, idioms and proverbs. The Sesotho transcripts were translated into English. However, it was critical to pay close attention to how this was done to avoid misrepresenting *methepa*'s narratives. I present the rich narrated stories as direct translations of the verbatim in an attempt to retain their expressiveness and depth. For complex terms, I have retained the Sesotho verbatim as well as the direct English translations in the text and footnoted the explanation. Notably, translating *methepa*'s narratives into a foreign coloniser's language – English – is problematic in itself. I felt, to a great extent, that doing this distorted the “rich cultural connotations, ambiguities and multiple meanings” of womanhood (Tamale 2011, 19) that were expressed in the Sesotho narratives. This highlights the difficulties of doing decolonial African feminist research in a context of stringent knowledge production systems that are plagued by coloniality<sup>6</sup>.

As part of the decolonial project embodied by this article, I opt to use Sesotho concepts because “language represents a specific worldview and ontology” (Ntuli 2002, cited by Magoqwana 2018, 76). Heeding this assertion, I opt to employ concepts such as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* (lit: girl of a Mosotho) instead of the commonly used “Mosotho girl”, *mosali oa Mosotho* (lit woman/wife of a Mosotho) instead of “Mosotho woman” and *bosali* (lit: womanhood) rather than “Mosotho womanhood”. In so doing, I seek to capture and privilege the lived realities and the embodied symbolic meanings in all their complexities around gender identities constructed by *methepa*. Thus, the Sesotho concepts that I use are re-representation of the Sesotho world-senses upon which the voices of *methepa* and re-articulations of identity are based. This, however, does not suggest that there is any one essentialist way of expressing and enacting Sesotho, nor am I suggesting that Sesotho is static. Instead, my use of Sesotho rather than English language concepts serves to capture the indigenous Sesotho aspects that are tied to certain cultural practices central to identity construction processes.

### **Constructions of *bosali*: Deconstructing gendered binarized categories**

The constructions and reconstructions of *bosali* flowing from the *methepa*'s narratives are analysed in four thematic sections: *Boithlompho* – the narrative of respectability; The erotic as

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<sup>6</sup> A discussion of these conundrums is worthy of another paper on which I am working

power – sexually empowered *Mosali oa Mosotho*; Successful provider-mothering and finally, *Ke Motho!* the narrative of personhood.

### ***Boithlompho* – the narrative of respectability**

Emphasis on *boithlompho* (literally: self-respect) reflects how *methepa* not only negotiated space and eluded the stigma associated with ‘unmarriedness’ within a marginalising context, but also anchored their self-evaluations as *basali*. However, before engaging with *methepa*’s accounts of *boithlompho*, noteworthy are the ‘politics of respectability’ alluded to earlier which bear considerable significance for understanding womanhood and sexuality beyond colonisation. Consequently, the concept, *letekatse* – meaning persons with ‘loose morals’ – featured in many of *methepa*’s accounts. This reflected their awareness of being stigmatised and labelled as ‘unrespectable’ compared to the married ideal. Thus, many grappled to acquire some sense of ‘respectability’ and worth, by paying strict attention to the ‘sexual’ respectability norm. For example, ’Me Mphoza<sup>7</sup> stated that:

I do not consider myself to be separate from others...I consider myself to be the same as them because...I always tell them that ...I... amidst all people considered to be promiscuous, they will never find me. ... despite being unmarried ... you will always find a woman tucked away securely in her home... I also tell them that I am *mosali oa Mosotho*...I tell them that I am *'me oa Mosotho*<sup>8</sup>...Yes...I am *'me* with respect! (*ke 'me a hlonephang*) ... I consider myself to be...I don’t know how others perceive me. Because they never say anything based on the ways in which I respect myself...it is not easy for someone to say such things to me. (’Me Mphoza, 07 June 2017)

’Me Mphoza undertakes constant self-surveillance which reflects how she negotiates space within a context that continuously marginalises her. However, noteworthy is her insistence “I do not consider myself to be separate from others...I consider myself to be the same as them” which also reflects the sense of communality despite being aware of her ‘othered’ status. Her reading of self through an objectifying hetero-patriarchal gaze is not surprising given the deep-rootedness of remnant colonial ideologies according to which women like ’Me Mphoza are defined as ‘not-

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<sup>7</sup> ’Me Mphoza was born and bred in a rural context, she is 60 years old and is the eldest of four siblings, three girls and one boy, born to an unmarried mother. She has three children, two sons and one daughter.

<sup>8</sup> ’Me is used to refer to mother. Thus, the direct translation of *'me oa Mosotho* is mother of a Mosotho. It is a revered identity that is commonly used for elders regardless of marital status.

respectable' and 'not-woman' in relation to the married ideal. Yet, in stating that "it is not easy for someone to say such things to me", I also read how her status as an elderly community member is a critical token through which she is afforded reverence not only because she is self-respecting and respectful. Because according to the seniority norm that guides social relations in African communities (Oyēwùmí 1997), *baholo* ("the elderly") are respected regardless of their marital status. Further, over and above the principles of communitarianism and seniority, decolonial African feminisms reveal the complexities of *boithlompho*. In viewing *boithlompho* through indigenous Sesotho world senses, we are reminded that according to the indigenous Sesotho socialisation processes, *ho hlonepha*<sup>9</sup> ("to respect") and *boithlompho* ("self-respect") are instilled as part of the transitory process from childhood as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* to adulthood as *mosali oa Mosotho*.

'Me Ponto<sup>10</sup> confirmed this by stating that "*ngoanana oa Mosotho* is someone who is well behaved, who shows respect to her parents and all elders" (08 Sept 2017). Therefore, by embodying attributes such as obedience, humility, morality and respect for self and elders, one is affirmed as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* and later *mosali oa Mosotho*. Letseka (2013), Obioha and T'soeunyane (2012) confirm that according to socialisation processes enforced by Basotho, the young – regardless of gender – are taught to respect elders and ancestors as well as to be self-respecting persons. Thus, a reading of *methepa*'s accounts through decolonial African feminist lenses allows an analysis of *boithlompho* that goes beyond the confines of binarized hetero-patriarchal logics. *Boithlompho* holds deeper meaning beyond a gendered hetero-patriarchal notion of 'self-respect' or a redemptive sexual canon for *methepa*, instead, *boithlompho* and *hlonepha* are attributes of a socially respectable adult, co-existent with being sexually empowered, functional, resilient and perseverant. Most *methepa*, including 'Me Mphoza, underwent this socialisation process.

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<sup>9</sup> While *ho hlonepha* literally means to respect, many Basotho use the term primarily to describe what children must learn in relation to how they should treat their elders. However, many Basotho also argue that respect goes in both directions, from younger to older persons and vice versa.

<sup>10</sup> 'Me Ponto was born and bred in a rural village. She is 30 years old and is the eldest of four siblings, three girls and one boy. She was brought up by an aunt who worked as a teacher in a missionary school. She has one daughter who lives with extended family in the village whilst she pursues paid employment in Maseru town.

## The erotic as power<sup>11</sup> — sexually empowered *Mosali oa Mosotho*

In some communities in Lesotho, young girls undergo an indigenous practice of labial elongation just before the onset of menarche. Through this process they are introduced into the realm of *bosali* wherein their sexual bodies are prepared for their marital roles (Batisai 2013). The practice takes place either in the privacy of the home during bed-time or as part of young girls' game playing. Sometimes it takes place when girls are performing daily chores of collecting wood in the forest, picking wild herbs in the fields or doing laundry by the river banks (Khau 2012b, Mohlabane 2020). Peer support is critical in ensuring conformity to the process and oftentimes older girls take the responsibility of teaching and supporting the younger initiates. Self and mutual pulling of inner labia allowed *ngoanana oa Mosotho* to identify sexual pleasure-inducing sites and ultimately, she became sexually empowered (Mohlabane 2020). Successful completion of the process was expressed with pride by *methepa* as having achieved the goal of 'becoming' *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. 'Me Lisebo<sup>12</sup> mentioned that:

I did it...and I do not regret that I have them .... I feel that they make me ...I do not know because I like my culture<sup>13</sup>... I have a thing for culture...I am really happy that I have them ...I am happy that I am *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. I managed to do the things that *banana ba Basotho* (plural for *ngoanana oa Mosotho*) ...that are done in our culture... ('Me Lisebo, 15 June 2017).

In adulthood, elongated labia are highly regarded as an indication of having achieved *bosali* and are critical within the *pitiki*<sup>14</sup> space. *Pitiki* is an exclusive ritual in which the birth of a child is

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<sup>11</sup> "The Erotic as Power" is part of Audre Lorde's (1978) commonly cited manuscript titled *The Uses of the Erotic; The Erotic as Power*

<sup>12</sup> 'Me Lisebo, also born and bred in a rural context, and she is 31 years old. She is the eldest daughter of four siblings, two boys and two girls. She has no children of her own.

<sup>13</sup> The following verbatim reflects 'Me Lisebo's use of both English and Sesotho in her account. "*ke ne ke iketse... fela I don't regret hore ebe ke nale tsona.. kee ke utloe li nketsa kebe ..ha ke tsebe ke hoba ke rata culture..ke nale this culture thing. Kee ke utloe ke li thabetsa ..ke thabile hore ke ngoanana oa Mosotho. Ke khonne ho etse lintho tseo banana ba Basotho kapa culture ea rona.. li etsuoang cultureng ea rona..*" Notable is her use of the term 'culture', including adding a locative suffix to create the word *cultureng* (within culture; *cultureng ea rona* means within our culture). This reflects a colonial imposition of a mis-/abuse of Sesotho that persists amongst some Basotho in their use of English to describe their indigenous practices.

<sup>14</sup> Translated as "feast" wherein the birth of a child is acknowledged and celebrated by married mothers, particularly those that assisted with the birthing process and post-natal care to see to the recuperation of the new mother. It also marks women's acknowledgement that mothering is a shared, communal responsibility (Thobea n.d). This ritual is performed in seclusion and women sing and perform erotic dance (*litolobonya*), either naked or wearing short fibre skirts to remind the new mother of the erotic movements she is expected to perform when she resumes her wifely role of sexually pleasuring her husband. Within this space, women equip each other on matters of sexuality, relationships and indigenous knowledges. In modern day practice, *pitiki* is performed with or without a child but information sharing remains central to the practice.

celebrated, traditionally by married mothers in the community (Mohlabane 2020, Mokala 2020). Although the space of *pitiki* traditionally admitted only married mothers, contemporary forms of the practice have become increasingly flexible. This flexibility was acknowledged by 'Me Libu<sup>15</sup> who proudly announced that “I participate in *pitiki*”<sup>16</sup> to declare herself as a legitimate participant within this traditionally exclusive space. *Pitiki* represents what Amadiume (2002, 43) calls a “matriarchal umbrella”, one wherein women learn about sexuality, motherhood and various other aspects through intergenerational and peer mentoring. Within this space, the solidarity and collectivity fostered opens room for women’s self-assertion and self-actualisation. In this analysis, I seek to demonstrate the ways in which the indigenous practice of labial elongation is used by *methepa* – as a powerful tool for self-affirmation as *basali* within spaces like *pitiki*.

For example, 'Me Libu has the required tools for this forum – elongated labia – which she uses to distinguish herself from other women, married or not, who do not have elongated labia. She uses this as her license to objectify other women without elongated labia: she states

... So, you will find that a crazy woman will just appear naked ... and you find that this woman does not [have] the things that you have ... she is not like me ... so I ask myself ... a grown-up woman like this honestly, does not have these things! And she is from here ..... when we see a woman like that, we were just surprised ... [and thinking] where did you grow up? What happened? What is going on with you?... ('Me Libu, 10 June 2017).

She draws from her successful participation in the practice of labial elongation during adolescence, which she constructs and embodies as a resource that necessitates and qualifies her full participation in this forum. Consequently, not only does 'Me Libu objectify those women without elongated labia, but she also self-identifies as a ‘complete’ *mosali* within this context. Within this indigenous space, *methepa* not only redefined the meaning attached to the exclusive space but also the exclusionary hetero-patriarchal definition of ‘Mosocho woman’ – that Mohlakoana (2008) argued is necessarily married and sexually naïve. Further, within the *pitiki*, Basocho women are ‘taught the tricks of the trade’ in relation to being *mosali oa Mosocho* who is a sexual being, is

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<sup>15</sup> M'e Libu, was born in a rural village, she is 50 years old and is the eldest child amongst five children born to a single mother. She was brought up by her maternal grandmother and she has one daughter with who she lives in Maseru.

<sup>16</sup> M'e Libu claimed that “...*Ke motho oa pitiki!*...” (I am a person of the *pitiki*) which spells status as one’s qualified ‘uncontested’ access to the space. This captures the expressiveness and sense of pride that characterised the narrated verbatim.

sexually empowered as well as a mother in as much as she may be a wife. Within this context, *methepa* rupture the binarized colonial hetero-patriarchal category – woman/not woman – where ‘woman’ represents the married ideal and exclusionary of the unmarried ‘other’. Instead, within this indigenous space, *methepa* open room for multiple and diverse forms of *basali* tied to *pitiki* and labial elongation that are outside the premises of marriage, constructed from their world senses. *Methepa*’s experiences of provider-mothering were similarly constructed as significant underpinnings for self-identifications as *mosali*.

### **Successful provider-mothering**

The experience of mothering, as narrated by *methepa*, can be summed up as an event that was initially bitter, then it became sweet. Considering that a pre-marital pregnancy is associated with shame for the girlchild, her family and the entire community (Mokobocho-Mohlakoana 2008) – *methepa* constructed their experiences as ‘bitter’. Moreover, some women recalled being belittled and labelled as ‘spoilt goods’ – *o senyehile* (you are/have been spoilt/ damaged)– for engaging in premarital sex and subsequently jeopardising her chances for marriage. In other words, childbearing out of wedlock is demonised because in hetero-patriarchal terms “bio-motherhood arrive[s] through wifhood” (Muhonja 2017, xxv) and therefore, *methepa* are punished for transgressing this prescription. Nonetheless, in adulthood, ‘unmarried’ mothering experiences became a significant source of pride and affirmation for *methepa*’s self-identifications as revered *basali* and *bo ’me* (mothers).

Successful mothering tied to women’s fulfilment of their provider-ship roles was constructed as the anchor for self-identifying as *’me*. ’Me Lifutso<sup>17</sup> draws from her experience of provider-mothering and insists on self-identifying as *’me*:

I am similar to every other *’me* who is raising a child even if I am not married ... mothers are people who are entrusted with the role of disciplining [children]... I still manage to achieve that with this one that I am bringing up alone... I alert her to things that may get her into danger ... and things that she should avoid, despite my being alone ... We grew

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<sup>17</sup> M’e Lifutso was born and bred in a rural village. She is the eldest daughter amongst three siblings, one boy and two girls born to a migrant-worker father and housewife mother. She is a teacher at a school in her village and has one daughter with whom she lives.

up with the understanding that 'me should rightfully be provided for ... so I was forced to assume 'me-ntate (literally: mother-father) [implying both mothering and provider roles] who is able to do everything herself ...mmh ... [being an 'unmarried' mother] forced me to work hard ('Me Lifutso, 12 June 2017)

Notably, by emphasising that they are bringing children up 'alone' *methepa* demonstrate their successes despite being 'unmarried' – a state for which they are commonly marginalised. In addition, they sought to refute the notion of the “‘civilised’ ideal husband-provider-headed family” (Mohlabane 2020, 235) – within which 'wife' is necessarily dependent – that is considered to be 'normal' in hetero-patriarchal terms. Contrastingly, *methepa* advocate for and insist on attributes such as self-assertion and independence as the underpinning for *bosali*. African feminists Batisai (2017) and Collins (2005) attest to the co-existence of motherhood and provider-ship roles for many women in Africa, contrary to western culture wherein motherhood is necessarily linked to wifehood and dependency. Further, “as leaders ...[and] visionaries” (Oyěwùmí 2016, 216) these mothers use their own lived experiences of 'unmarried' pregnancy at a young age to project and visualise better futures for their daughters through education and cautionary counsels – all of which are meant to inscribe independent and self-sufficient type womanhoods (Mohlabane 2020).

Drawing on her lived experiences of provider-mothering and successes thereof, 'Me Lifutso insisted that: “I feel that I am *mosali*...regardless of how other people define me...yes...I feel that I am a complete *mosali*...regardless of how Basotho define *mosali*...I consider myself to be important ...” ('Me Lifutso, 12 June 2017). Within a marginalising patriarchal context, provider-mothering affords *methepa* self-worth and respect as well as means through which they self-affirm as *mosali*. By paying attention to the women's lived experiences of mothering, we are able to uncover the significance and depth of mothering in the context of marginality which ultimately, becomes a source of empowerment for *methepa*. This contradicts African feminist literature that argues against the pinning of women's power to motherhood (Bakare-Yusuf 2003, Lewis 2001, McFadden 2003). Yet, if we are to contribute alternative knowledges 'from the ground up' and re-center women's lived indigenous realities as sources of knowledge (Magoqwana 2021) – we ought to consider the historicity, complexity and contextual factors which house these experiences.



Failure to do this means that, not only do we bolster universalist hetero-patriarchal conceptions of motherhood, but we also contribute to the silencing of women's varied experiences of mothering.

Therefore, I argue that, when viewed 'from the ground up', not only do we reveal provider-mothering as a meaningful and empowering lived experience within a marginalising context, but we also get to appreciate the multiple personal meanings that *methepa* attach to *bosali* through provider-mothering. By foregrounding multidimensional views of *bosali* – tied to provider-mothering through *methepa*'s world-senses, essentialist ideologies that fix definitions of womanhood to specific hetero-patriarchal attributes are thus, destabilised. Ultimately eurocentric, hierarchised binaries that inform exclusionary constructions of womanhood are dismantled whilst simultaneously elevating historically denigrated African experiences.

### ***Ke Motho!* The narrative of Personhood**

While the traditional definition that locates *mosali* within a heterosexual marriage is well known to *methepa*, some repudiated these fixed and exclusive gendered norms that marginalise 'unmarried' women. 'Me Mamo<sup>18</sup> disputes the notion of a typical *ngoanana oa Mosotho* or even *mosali oa Mosotho*. For her, identity is more than a simple social prescription. It is based on diverse attributes that are unique to everyone, hence her assertion that:

*[Ngoanana] oa Mosotho ... I think there is none ... because for me every person is different, regardless; hore na ke Mosotho or not...[to say, (whether) I myself am a Mosotho or not...].*  
So, I don't think there is a benchmark for a 'Mosotho girl' ... I don't think there is one way to explain *mosali oa Mosotho*. ('Me Mamo, 06 Sept 2017)

By insisting that there is no benchmark for a *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, 'Me Mamo deconstructs the taken-for-granted normative ideologies that essentialise 'woman' or 'girl' to specific attributes. Moreover, for 'Me Mamo, gendered identity is non-existent; it is mythical, based on one's uniqueness, and tied to the multiple intersecting and complex forces that shape identity. This resonates with decolonial ideas of multiplicity and fluidity with which phenomena such as womanhood should be conceptualised. However, notable is 'Me Mamo's use of both English and

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<sup>18</sup> M'e Mamo grew up in an urban context within an upper-middle class, Catholic male-headed family. She is 29 years old and is the eldest of two children and has not children of her own.

Sesotho in her account, which I consider to reflect coloniality which manifests in the misuse of Sesotho.

Further complexity was reflected in the complicated analogy in which 'Me Kotseng<sup>19</sup> foregrounds personhood rather than self-defining as *mosali*. She insisted that:

... I have dignity [*ke na le seriti*<sup>20</sup>] in the same way as a married woman... I am a person who is authentic [*Ke motho a nang le seriti*] ... it all depends on how you behave as a person...I am not married... I don't care about the fact that a person will call me *ausi* [literally: older sister; figuratively: older unmarried woman]...or that I am not married...no...I am proud of being unmarried because marriage ...this time I decided that I don't want it ... 'she is not married'...even if they can say that...I am not bothered. ('Me Kotseng, 19 June 2017)

Notably, the word *seriti* in Sesotho has two meanings: 'dignity' and 'integrity'. In addition, *seriti* also refers to the shadow that one casts. In Sesotho, this bears symbolic meanings that are unique to each human being. Critically, *seriti* refers to one's legacy and holds deeper meanings for one as a person and how one relates to others as a community member. I read 'Me Kotseng's account as reflective of both these explanations. While she attests to being dignified and authentic, a critical re-reading of the account also reveals the symbolism of *seriti*. Articulations of authenticity, personhood, uniqueness, and humanness disrupt gendered binaries that essentialise identity and reduce it to particular features. Instead, by foregrounding personhood, *methepa* insist on a non-gendered manner of self-identification that is expressed as *ke motho* ("I am a person"). What this shows, and as acknowledged by Katide (2017), personhood is relational and it is the underpinning of the collectivity, and communalism required for social harmony in African communities. Relatedly, *botho* ("personhood"), like *boithlompho* ("self-respect") and *hlonepho* ("respect") are attributes that underpinned the socialisation process that groomed younger generations, regardless of gender, to become socially acceptable persons and community members. Thus, self-identifying

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<sup>19</sup> M'e Kotseng is the eldest daughter of five children born and bred by a divorced mother who worked as a teacher. She is 55 years old and has one son.

<sup>20</sup> *Seriti*, in the symbolic Sesotho sense, is read as reflective of personhood, and authenticity which are tied to one's legacy that one leaves behind when they die. However, in Sesotho, *motho* (a person) does not exist in isolation from others and as such peoples' *liriti* (shadows) are cast upon each other (discussion with Dr Possa, September 2018).

as a person, first and foremost, seeks to foreground the attributes that *methepa* embody and enact as socially acceptable community members worthy of respect.

## Conclusion

This paper is informed by my interest of interrogating and deconstructing normative constructions of womanhood. Notably, contemporary invocations of ‘Mosotho woman’ and the meanings thereof can be traced to the historical trajectory of colonisation in Lesotho and resultant ‘colonisation of minds’<sup>21</sup> amongst Basotho. This has led to the construction of a fixed and exclusionary gendered definition of a person commonly but inappropriately described as ‘Mosotho woman’ and according to which *methepa* are defined as ‘other’. Current conceptions of ‘Mosotho woman’ are deeply rooted in coloniality of gender. In other words, racialised, gendered binarized hierarchical categories: ‘woman/not-woman’, ‘human/not-human’, ‘man/woman’ – continue to shape the definition of ‘Mosotho woman’ as commonly described by many in essentialist and exclusionary terms today. Further, ‘Mosotho woman’ is necessarily subordinate to and heteropatriarchally linked to ‘man’. In addition, knowledges of indigenous forms of womanhoods in Lesotho are submerged and invisibilised through western feminist universalist hegemonies. Therefore, I have set out to reveal and address coloniality of gender and knowledge that plague conceptions of ‘Mosotho woman’.

Through decolonial African feminist analyses, I have been able to reveal, challenge and address modernist colonial ideologies that plague conceptions of womanhood amongst Basotho. In particular, I have historicized, indigenized, and re-centered indigenous conceptions of womanhood held by *methepa* – as based on their world-senses. This deconstructive analysis has revealed multiplicities and complexities borne out of *methepa*’s world-senses – tied to multiple aspects. In so doing, it expands our understanding of the many ways that identity according to the world-senses of *methepa* can be re-imagined and articulated beyond exclusionary gendered racialised binaries. In illuminating the indigenous values upon which *methepa* base their constructions of identity, these narratives bring into disrepute definitions of womanhood fixed to “[b]iological dimorphism, heterosexualism, and patriarchy” (Lugones 2007, 190). In particular, the narratives

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<sup>21</sup> While I consider ‘colonisation of minds’ to be critical for how we understand the consequences of intense subjectification of the colonised through the colonial project (Oelofsen 2015), it is an issue worthy of another paper and cannot be addressed here. That is because it requires deeper reflection upon colonial processes and excavation of evidence.

accentuate the values of communalism, solidarity, *botho* (“personhood”), *boithlompho* (“self-respect”), *seriti* (“authenticity”) – upon which *methepa* anchor their articulations of identity and ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ *mosali*. Thus, in accord with decolonial African feminisms, *methepa*’s articulations of identity that are outside the confines of ‘gender’ critically undermine and deconstruct racialised heterosexist categories borne by coloniality.

Further, *methepa*’s insistence on self-identifying as *motho* challenges racist sexist colonial ideologies through which they were denied humanity. Instead, by insisting on self-identifying as a person first and foremost, *methepa* reclaim their personhood which colonial modernist ideologies continue to deny them. Likewise, their claim for power and self-worth through mothering, significantly challenges the racist ideologies through which they were denied their motherhood and instead constructed as nothing but ‘reproductive machines’ (Simmons 2021). In addition, their claim as sexually empowered beings coincides with the racist and sexist colonial narratives that constructed them as “promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful” (Lugones 2010, 743) and thus ‘rapable’ by the coloniser. In so doing, they demonstrate an empowered and embodied relation to their sexual bodies (Tamale 2005) contrary to demeaning colonial metanarratives levelled against ‘African’ women’s sexuality. In essence, *methepa*’s narratives reveal their claim for everything that racist and sexist colonial modernity ideologies denied them – womanhood, integrity, humanity, personhood, motherhood – including existence as respectable community members in contrast to their persisting “thingification” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 6) and bestialisation.

Given this uniqueness that is rooted in the indigenous, I posit that this paper responds to the call for “building on the indigenous” (Nnaemeka 2004, 361), and also draws from the indigenous for knowledge production. In so doing, it deconstructs metanarratives and reconfigures knowledges around women’s sexualities, womanhoods, and women’s agency in Lesotho, as a contribution to pluriversal knowledge production. Thus, not only does the analysis achieve epistemic redress by giving voice to historically silenced and subordinated knowledges, but it also places as central the indigenous world-senses as the new anchor of women’s identity and agency in Africa.

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