Ke mosali oa Mosotho: reflecting on indigenous conceptions of womanhood in Lesotho

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Abstract

This paper challenges the invisibilisation and silencing of indigenous conceptions of womanhood in feminist scholarly work. It argues that "Mosotho woman," as we know it today, is a colonial construct for it is located within and fixed to hetero-patriarchal binarised hierarchies. It further argues for the reflection on historical narratives of women the likes of 'Manthatisi of the Batlokoa as exceptional representations of precolonial conceptions of womanhood in Lesotho. As we interrogate the current invocations of "woman" in Lesotho, we ought to use these herstories as springboards to understand the silenced indigenous conceptions of *bosali* (womanhoods) that are not only complex but multifarious and beyond the confines of binarised hetero-patriarchal constructions. Drawing on the narrated life stories of 20 "never-married" women – *methepa* – the paper discusses *boithlompho* (self-respect), *mosali oa 'mankhonthe* (perseverance), sexual empowerment, and *botho* (personhood) as underpinning the indigenous definitions of *bosali*. This paper argues for retrieval, elevation, and continuation of indigenous languages, rituals, and spaces as sources of knowledge and theory on womanhoods in local contexts.

Keywords: Womanhood; sexuality; indigenous; historiography; Lesotho; decolonial African feminism

Introduction

Womanhood and what it entails has been a long-contested matter in feminist debates. Arguing against the patriarchal and essentialist definition of womanhood, French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir insisted that womanhood is a social construct as opposed to an innate attribute (de Beauvoir 2009). While Beauvoir acknowledges the dynamism embodied by gender identity, she unwittingly essentialised the definition of "woman" to particular attributes pinned upon the experiences of a particular group of women. The Beauvoirean[1] scholarship has been labelled as Eurocentric and exclusionary and, thus, rejected by feminists of the Global South who, instead, insist that womanhood is shaped by various intersecting factors (Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018; Chaney 2011; Coly 2015).

In this paper, I challenge the silencing and invisibilisation of indigenous conceptions of womanhood in feminist scholarship by showcasing indigenous womanhoods – *bosali* – drawn from the narrated life stories of 20 never-married women to whom I refer as *methepa* (singular: *mothepa*). This is an age-old Sesotho term used to refer to all female persons of all ages who may or may not be married. This is part of my attempts to challenge the normalised patriarchal constructions of womanhood that centre around heterosexual marriage – by

which force *methepa* are excluded from the identity and status of womanhood in Lesotho. Thus, the term *methepa* is inclusive and all-encompassing of the multiple identities that the participants embody. In conceptualising indigenous womanhoods, the herstories of legendary matriarchs are important benchmarks which, I argue, are representations of indigenous womanhoods prior to colonial invasion in Lesotho. African feminists' reflections on Africa's colonial history are critical to our understanding of the complexities that underlie the constructions of womanhood in Africa, including Lesotho.

"African woman" is a colonial construct

Colonisation in Africa has been central to the African feminists' debates on womanhood. According to this school of thought, colonial invasion of societies in Africa is seen as a key event that shaped and reshaped conceptions of identity on the continent, including womanhood (Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018; Chuku 2018; Coly 2015). Noteworthy is that this era was undergirded by a racist, sexist colonial logic according to which dichotomous oppositional, hierarchical categories such as human/non-human, coloniser/colonised, man/woman were constructed (Lugones 2010). According to Wynter (2003), humanity was determined in biological and racialised terms wherein the European coloniser was mythically defined as the epitome of humanity, and civility whilst Africans represented non-human, animalist "things" that were inferior to the "human" coloniser. Relatedly, the fixing of gender identities in the image of European society, with men assumed to be superior over women, was a colonial project that also relegated Africans to an inferior position.

Further, compared to Europeans, African people were considered as uncivilised. This racist colonial narrative underpins the portrayal of African womanhood as oversexed, primitive, ugly, and beastly compared to European womanhood (Nelson, Cardemil, and Adeoye 2016). Thus, the Christian civilising mission that was enforced by imperialists not only forced African people to convert to Christianity but also to abandon all cultural practices including rites of passage aimed at initiating African girls into the realm of womanhood (Mohlabane and Tshoaedi 2022). Thus, in the name of civilising us, Christian imperialism completely destroyed traditional African structures that shaped our subjectivities and social relations. However, it is interesting to note that while the majority of the Basotho nation continues to embrace Christianity, some customary practices including ancestral worship – defined in Christian terms as heathen – are persisting amongst Basotho people (Mokotso 2015).

African feminist, Oyěwùmí (1997, 2016) criticised the colonial imposition of "gender" – that is defined in biological, patriarchal hetero-sexualist terms – to African societies. She argued against the distortion of social relations amongst African people that were originally premised upon the principle of seniority – in terms of chronological age and positioning within the kinship structure – yet these have since become gendered as a result of colonial modernity. This led to the creation of the category, "*woman"* which in relation to "*man"* is perpetually subordinate and inferiorised. Therefore, the colonial notions of "*gender"* and "*woman,"* that have since become not only predominant modes of analysis and theorisation in feminist scholarship but also in shaping invocations of identity, constitute major misrepresentations of womanhoods in African societies.

Likewise, Nzegwu (2020) makes similar arguments against persisting colonial legacies and the resultant distortions of African identities. This school of thought argues that prior to colonisation, women in Africa wielded power that was invested in their roles as mothers.[2] Nzegwu refers to the *Omumu* – "the force of creative life of mothers" (2020, 13) – which is characterised by African values of relationality, interdependency, and cohesion. This matriarchal power which informed women's ascendency to powerful positions in their communities was destroyed through colonisation. Owing to the dynamics of the colonial mission context in Lesotho and elsewhere in Africa, indigenous cultural practices were distorted, and the empowering aspects of our cultures were denigrated. Further, colonial administrators imposed gendered regulations that, subsequently, removed African women from public spaces and stripped them off their leadership roles – ultimately disempowering them and forcing them into a state of dependence on men. This status quo that resulted in an inferiorised notion of "African woman" has outlived colonisation and continues to prevail in contemporary societies and feminist scholarly work.

This represents "coloniality of gender" – the persistence of racist, gendered colonial ideologies beyond formal colonisation – that continue to shape identity construction, including womanhood in post-colonial contexts (Lugones 2016). In addition, it reflects "coloniality of knowledge" in that western feminisms depict themselves as the bearers of knowledge around womanhood whilst silencing and marginalising knowledges around other formations of womanhoods. It is for this reason that Oyěwùmí (1997) insists concepts such as "woman" ought to be interrogated in any analysis of identity in local African contexts. Sylvia Bawa and Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin remind us that "[a]nalysing women's identity, desires and sexuality on the [African] continent entails a rigorous process of engaging the legacies of colonialism in the present in order to deconstruct essentialist, binary and totalising claims on women's subjectivities on the continent" (2018, 6). Thus, the need to Africanise, historicise, and indigenise phenomena such as womanhood in local African contexts is critical.

Against this backdrop, this paper draws the concept *uMakhulu* – the isiXhosa concept loosely translated as grandmother – to conceptualise indigenous womanhoods amongst Basotho. Decolonial African feminist Magoqwana (2018) conceptualises *uMakhulu* beyond the nurturing and socialising role bestowed onto grandmothers within the African matriarchal homestead. Instead, it represents an indigenous knowledge hub purposed for the creation, storage, and transfer of indigenous knowledges to younger generations, including those related to womanhood. Central to this knowledge hub is the indigenous African values of solidarity, complementarity, collectivity, interdependence, survival, compassion, and personhood which not only inform social relations but also identity construction amongst African people. Therefore, considering the invisibilisation of African womanhoods in feminist scholarship, *uMakhulu* will allow theorisation of womanhoods in Lesotho through endogenous lenses. This will not only open room for re-imagining conceptions of womanhoods in Lesotho beyond biological, heterosexualist, patriarchal, fixed, and binarised terms but also allow the re-centring of indigenous conceptions of womanhood in strive for pluriversal knowledge production systems.

Thus, I propose the need for deeper interrogation and understanding of indigenous womanhoods in Lesotho through decolonial African feminist lenses. This requires us to deconstruct absolute truths through "deep herstoricisation of knowledge[s]" (Magoqwana

2021, 99) about women in Lesotho as well as the re-centring of indigenous knowledges about womanhoods in Lesotho. In relation to the latter, we are reminded of the "ritual archive" (Falola 2020) which houses and represents the traditional and ancestral knowledges that have been silenced through colonisation of African states, including Lesotho. Both processes will entail "digging up," re-reading, and re-representing the narratives of women in Africa as well as rituals and practices that they engage in to inform their definitions of womanhoods from their own indigenous world-senses.

However, the excavation of African "maternal herstories" is not new. Scholars from all corners of the African continent and beyond have taken on the task of "digging up" these herstories (Bam and Muthien 2021; Zungu et al. 2014) in efforts to recover and re-awaken what has long been discarded and invisibilised in historical texts. For example, the narratives of matriarchs in Africa who contributed to the making of their nations and societies prior to and during colonisation, the likes of Yaa Asante Waa of Ghana, Queen Zinga of Angola, Mkabayi of the amaZulu people, and Princess Magogo ka Dinizulu, to mention a few, have been reflected upon in several texts (see Brempong 2000; Gunner 2002; Ribeiro, Torres Moreira, and Pimenta 2019). Recently, Magadla (2023) documented South African women's acts of bravery and contributions to the liberation armed struggle. These herstorical representations allow access to what shaped configurations of women's identities in the past. Moreover, they prompt us to reconsider how the identities of women in Africa should be re-articulated in the present and future.

Zeleza (2005) has been critical of the silencing of African women's narratives in historical texts – whose representation merely characterises them as reproductive beings who played no significant roles in the making of their societies. The inclusion of women in this prescriptive and essentialist manner, according to Thozama April, is as if "it is the effect of the generosity of male figures" (April, n.d.) – the "so-called" owners of the history. The history of the Basotho and Lesotho is no different, it predominantly features "the life of a great man," Moshoeshoe, and completely ignores women. Therefore, the essentialist representation of women merely as mothers and wives confined to the domestic and reproductive roles ignores not only their assumption of multiple roles including leadership roles within their communities but also the multiple constructions and versions of womanhoods linked to the identities and roles embodied by women in Africa.

The paper is divided into three sections. In section one, I reflect on the herstories of women who were influential in the history of Lesotho to suggest that they reflect constructions of womanhood prior to colonial invasion. My use of these herstories as a springboard in pursuit of interrogating colonially imposed conceptions of womanhood in Lesotho is based on the drive to re-centralise significant maternal narratives that represent silenced and submerged knowledges of *bosali*. In section two, I briefly reflect on the methodological considerations undergirding this paper. This is followed by section three with an analysis of *bosali* – indigenous womanhoods in Lesotho. It consists of four sub-sections, namely, *boithlompho* – self-respect, *mosali oa 'mankhonthe* – perseverance and authenticity, erotic power – sexual empowerment and agency, *botho* – personhood and humanness. Finally, the paper concludes with a reflection on the main arguments as well as implications for decolonial African feminist scholarship.

Herstories of *basali ba Basotho*[3]

Digging up these herstories was no easy task given that this is a limited archive based on the reasons outlined earlier – the patriarchal invisibilisation of women's narratives in historical texts. This process required piecing together "dribs and drabs" of information to make up a substantive narrative which Norman Etherington nonetheless considers as representing a "significant anecdote" (2001, xix). This, he argues, serves a purpose of extrapolating a historical overview of the agency of individuals. Indeed, according to Eva Jackson, regardless of how limited the archive may be, it allows us to foreground the narrative of an individual "with the understanding that their experience may represent a trope" (2014, 14). Therefore, my drawing on the herstories of regents 'Manthatisi of the Batlokoa, 'Mants'ebo of the Bakoena, and others including 'Mantsopa the prophet serves as a means of flagging an exceptional narrative that deserves recognition not as universal but for its uniqueness. These narratives represent an unacknowledged and unique plot pertaining to *bosali*. Failure to do this would have meant being complicit with the grave injustice committed against *basali ba Basotho* and knowledges about *bosali* that have been passed down to us by our grandmothers (*bo nkhono*).

Nkhono 'Manthatisi assumed the role of regent from 1913 to 1922 for her son Sekonyela when her husband Mokotjo died. Noteworthy is that in patriarchal Lesotho, the institution of *borena* or *bokhosi* (chieftaincy) is a highly contentious matter and the presence of women within this space presents a contradictory narrative. To confirm my point, Mahao (2007) states that *borena* is governed by patrilineality, meaning that it is exclusive to men in Lesotho. Thus, the presence of women as renowned leaders amongst men had great significance to the history of the Basotho. As the Batlokoa chief, nkhono 'Manthatisi led the Batlokoa during wars, and she sat with men in *khotla* (court) to deliberate on governance matters. Notably, *khotla* was and continues to be regarded as an exclusively male defined space in which women are not allowed.

However, this unusual phenomenon, wherein a female leader-like nkhono 'Manthatisi attracted scores of followers contrary to custom, was not only intriguing for many but also highly opposed by the colonial administration. Phohlo (2011) attests to the characteristics that nkhono 'Manthatisi embodied and thus, underpinned her ascendency. He points out that she was "strong, brave and intelligent, qualities commonly associated with men of the likes of Moshoeshoe" (2011, 26). More recent reports of nkhono 'Mants'ebo and nkhono 'Mamohato who also assumed regency during and after colonisation in Lesotho – notwithstanding their scantiness – are worthy of acknowledgement.

Nkhono 'Mantsopa continues to be regarded as our great ancestor. She was a healer, prophet, and rainmaker. As the adviser to king Moshoeshoe, she was known for her accurate predictions on the outcomes of battles fought by Basotho. As such, king Moshoeshoe relied on her prophesies to make decisions as the leader. She fought against the Christian doctrine that transformed Basotho ways and advised Moshoeshoe accordingly. However, she later converted to Christianity, but she remained steadfast about drawing spiritual guidance from *Balimo* (ancestors). Although nkhono 'Mantsopa practised a combination of Christian and traditional African rites, she challenged many Christian assumptions, particularly in relation to the idea of singularity and exclusivity. Instead, she insisted that the road to spirituality was

not narrow as had been preached by missionaries, but she considered it to be wide (Ngobese 2018) and, thus, representative of multifariousness that characterises African ways. The role that nkhono 'Mantsopa played in the spiritual leadership of Basotho ought to be commended as significant contribution not only to the history of Basotho but spirituality on the African continent.

The narrative of nkhono 'Manthatisi and the other remarkable matriarchal figures speaks to indigenous constructions of womanhood and how they are characterised differently from what we are informed of them today in postcolonial Lesotho. Further, the association of their attributes with masculinity comes as no surprise given the colonial remnants which have forced us to consider everything in gendered binarised oppositional and hierarchical terms. On the contrary, I read the characteristics of bravery, strength, intelligence, spiritual leadership as representing African femininities that, however, have been invisibilised through foreign conquest in Africa and Lesotho in particular. The resultant distortions of African womanhoods have led scholars such as Karabo Mohlakoana (2008) to define "'Mosotho woman,' [as] mother, Christian, wife." Moreover, "Being a Mosotho woman is a very loaded status, and her sexuality is constructed as one full of passivity and innocence (or, ignorance)" (2008, 75). As shall be illustrated in subsequent sections, *bosali* constructed from the world senses of *methepa* is distinct from this image.

Methodological approaches

This paper draws on data from a completed doctoral project that explored the construction of womanhood amongst *methepa* in Lesotho. The details of the methodological processes of the project are contained in the thesis (Mohlabane 2020).[4] All the quotes are drawn from the life history interviews with *methepa*.

The paper centralises indigenous languages, practices, rituals as means through which women's identities and agency are constructed. Magoqwana (2021) reminds us that this ultimately contributes towards a better understanding of indigenous women's ways of being and theorising their realities in their own right. In reading the women's narratives "from the ground up," I gave priority to indigenous languages, ways of being and knowing, and, in that way, I captured and privileged the lived realities and, as well, the embodied symbolic meanings in all their complexities around identity constructions amongst Basotho. It is noteworthy that "languages develop and [meanings] change from time to time" (Nhlapo 2021, 1). Thus, the meanings of Sesotho words that I use may have changed over time from their pre-colonial construction and usage. Through this methodological approach, four distinct aspects of indigenous womanhood in Lesotho became central, including questions of respect (*boithlompho)*, resilience (m*osali oa 'mankhonthe*), erotic power, and personhood (*botho)*.

Boithlompho – complexities of self-respect

When considering self-respect, I am reminded about the politics of respectability that characterised the colonial era in Africa. Civilising the African woman meant enforcing a racialised, gendered, sexualised script according to which women were judged as respectable or not. Aligned with the racist sexist colonial logic, this prescript was meant to differentiate

those considered to be "ideal" respectable women suited for the colonial hetero-patriarchal climate from those who were not. According to Hungwe (2006), in colonial Rhodesia, the latter referenced the unmarried "unattached" woman loitering urban streets whilst her married counterpart who was confined to the rural homestead, represented the ideal respectable woman. In Lesotho, the gendered-term *matekatse* – in reference to persons considered to have loose morals – was used to label women who provided sexual services to mine workers as a means of survival (Epprecht 2001). These women challenged the Christian respectability moral code and thus represented unrespectable womanhood.

Notably, this complex discourse has outlived the colonial epoch in Lesotho and many other colonised states, and this was evident in the accounts of the *methepa*. *Methepa* were aware of the stigma attached to their unmarried status, and many emphasised that they are self-respecting women. For many, this meant paying strict attention to and conforming to the "sexual" respectability norm to avoid being labelled as *letekatse*.[5] Further, some would insist "I am a woman with self-respect" (*Ke mosali a ithlomphang!*), elsewhere, "I am a woman with respect" (*Ke mosali a hlonephang!*). While this may simply reflect women's conformity to a hetero-patriarchal respectability norm – as expected in a hetero-patriarchal context, a re-reading of the narrative through decolonial African feminist lenses reveals complexities that underlie the notion of *boithlompho* in local contexts.

In particular, as reflected elsewhere (Mohlabane 2020; Mohlabane and Tshoaedi 2022), *ho hlonepha* (to show respect) and *boithlompho* (self-respect) form part of the grooming of younger generations to become respectful and self-respecting community members. Through a concerted effort by kin and community networks, the young are taught to respect elders and ancestors as well as be self-respecting persons in the communities regardless of gender. Further, *ho hlonepha* is used not only in reference to respecting elders but many Basotho also argue that respect goes in both directions, from younger to older persons and vice versa. This complex display of *boithlompho* and *hlonepho* contrasts with the gendered notion of self-respect articulated by some scholars as a patriarchal notion of ideal womanhood (Matsila 2020; Rudwick and Posel 2015; Rudwick and Shange 2009; Sennott and Mojola 2017). For Rudwick and Posel (2015) and Rudwick and Shange (2009), *hlonipha*[6] represents a patriarchal attribute that disadvantages and disempowers women in the context of marriage in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal.

By contrast, decolonial African feminist lenses allow us to read and understand *hlonepho* beyond gender binarism. Instead, I contend that *hlonepho* acknowledges "co-existence with others" – an aspect that forms part of the socialisation processes in indigenous African communities as reflected below; *"Ngoanana oa Mosotho* (Mosotho girl) is someone who is well behaved, who shows respect to her parents and all parents" ('Me Ponts'o, September 8 2017). African scholar, Katide (2017) confirms that in African culture, *hlonepho* is not gendered; instead, it is an attribute demonstrated through intergenerational and mutual respect – for elders, ancestors, God, and oneself. Therefore, *hlonepha* is constructed as a critical feature through which one is affirmed as a socially acceptable person and respectable community member.

I consider the gendered reading of *hlonipha* to be reflective of coloniality of gender that has successfully concealed and wiped out the indigenous understanding of concepts such as

hlonipha. This is evident not only in how they are articulated by scholars but also their invocation in everyday conversations within some local communities. In essence, the endogenous meanings have been lost to binarised gendered colonially infused understandings – as suggested by Oyěwùmí (1997, 2002, 2011, 2016). By contrast, considering the multiversity that characterises indigenous contexts, *boithlompho,* and *hlonepho* are attributes that affirm one as *mosali oa Mosotho* but also co-exist with several others including resilience, authenticity, and functionality necessary for a socially respectable adult and community member.

Mosali oa 'mankhonthe – resilience, perseverance and authenticity

Over and above *boithlompho*, resilience, authenticity, and strength were constructed as attributes of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* which would later affirm her as *mosali oa 'mankhonthe*.[7] For example, 'Me Mpale stated that:

> You know, I realised that back home [*hae*] the expectation is that [*ngoanana*] a girl should be…. she needs to be a "real" woman – [*mosali oa mankhonthe*]… a woman with respect, who can distinguish between good and bad… she should be a person with self-respect. ('Me Mpale, June 14, 2017)

Elsewhere 'Me Mpale and several others like 'Me Lifutso, 'Me Keneuoe, and 'Me Lisebo alluded to the significance of diligence and strength that characterised their upbringing as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* where they performed multiple duties such as herding livestock, milking cows, as well as cooking. Reading these experiences through a lens of *uMakhulu*, that posits a "rejection of binary thinking" illustrates that these duties are tied to the need for survival and continuity in these indigenous contexts.

Further, diligence is linked to being authentic, respectful, and demonstrating self-respect as key features embodied by *ngoanana oa Mosotho* who is transitioning into *mosali oa Mosotho*. This illustrates that indigenous socialisation into the realm of *bosali* undergone by *ngoanana oa Mosotho* disrupts the binarised patriarchised order through which they would become fragile and inferiorised women – as is reflected in the western-centric construct "woman." Notably, diligence, strength, and multitasking are attributes that Collins (2000) considers to be characteristic to constructions of femininity in communities in Africa which are in contradistinction to the western ideals that demand passivity and dependence.

Likewise, drawing on Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Magadla (2017) points out the unique features that underpin the construction of womanhood – *ubufazi* – in African communities. This includes a woman's capability to "run an independent economy that contributes to the building of the household" – *umzi* – part of which is providing for the children. Further, reflecting on the multiple roles that her grandmother undertook, Magadla affirms her as "the economic heartbeat" of not only their household but the entire community. In Zimbabwe, Ezra Chitando, Chitando, Chirongoma, and Nyakudya (2023) also detail attributes embodied by *Chihera* women who descend from the Mhofu lineage. The *Chihera* embodies independence, leadership, and assertiveness – attributes that digress from the ethic of passivity – constructed in European terms as ideal womanhood. Thus, *ubufazi, Chihera, or bosali* – indigenous womanhoods – affirmed through communality, reciprocity,

independence and diligence are multidimensional and complex. The decolonial African feminist lens endorsed by this paper has allowed the revelation of indigenous womanhoods that have been silenced and concealed below coloniality.

As *basali ba 'mankhonthe*, *methepa* self-defined as resilient and perseverant. For example, 'Me Keneuoe stated that,

> I can handle every single thing … every single thing that relates to *bo 'me* [literal translation is mothers, but it also refers to older women] I can handle. Whether it is good or bad … I can handle it … I can handle it. I am a person that can endure [*'na se ke le motho a ka khonang ho mamella*] … I can persevere through problems. [*nka mamella mathata*] ('Me Keneuoe, June 8, 2017)

The notions of *mamello* (resilience and perseverance) were constructed by many *methepa* as critical to what it means to be *mosali*. Through perseverance, many were able to provide for their children despite hardships (Mohlabane and Tshoaedi 2022). The Sesotho idiom '*ma ngoana o ts'oara thipa ka bohaleng* (direct translation is "a mother handles the sharp end of the knife") bears relevance here. This idiom refers to the courage, strength, and tenacity of mothers who ensured that they always protected and provided for their children despite the economic, and social challenges they faced. By providing education for their children despite meagre resources, *methepa* expressed a great sense of pride for an achievement which they constructed as a prize for being resilient and perseverant – attributes that were taught during childhood.

Further, through education, they believed that they could not only provide better futures for their children but also enforce independence and self-sufficiency for their daughters. These attributes are acknowledged not only for survival but critically inform womanhoods in communities in Africa (Matsila 2020; Mohlabane 2020; Nelson, Cardemil, and Adeoye 2016). In this regard, I read perseverance, resilience, independence, and self-sufficiency as critical attributes that informed *methepa's* constructions of *bosali* based on their lived world-senses. Further, this analysis goes beyond the simplistic reading of motherhood as gendered and burdensome. Instead, it highlights how perseverance benefitted *methepa* not only for self-affirmation as *bo 'me* (direct meaning is mothers, also used as a revered manner of addressing elder women) but also ensuring better livelihoods for their children.

This positive display of perseverance is reflected by Lihle Ngcobozi in her book, *Mothers of the Nation: Manyano women in South Africa* (2020). She illustrates how Manyano women – praying women of the church – constructed perseverance not only as a key attribute of *ubufazi* but also a survival strategy with which they foster a spirit of community as they work towards transforming the lives of people in communities, churches, and families. Notably, this was undergirded by spirituality and prayer for *oomama* (mothers of the church) and likewise *methepa*. Thus, spirituality and faith are used as valuable resources by women to foster endurance and strength during adversity and uncertainty.

As an aside, it is noteworthy that *mamello* can be a "double edged sword." Over and above its positive articulation outlined in the preceding paragraph, it is often problematised as a gendered canon of "real womanhood." Whilst many women have been taught by mothers,

grandmothers, and aunts to be courageous and tenacious during adversity in their lives, at times these attributes can be problematic and detrimental for women. Across various African societies there are idioms used to reinforce the ideas of perseverance. For example, amongst Basotho the idiom, *mosali o ngalla mots'eo* (direct translation is "a wife sulks around the hearth") are often reiterated in the context of marriage to remind a woman of the expectation to persevere despite hardships.[8] Read simplistically, such idioms reinforce gendered expectations in which women embody docility even during abusive situations. This is reflected in 'Me Kotseng's account,

> in marriage definitely … from a long time ago … even with my mother … my mother used to say that a long time ago … she said that women persevere … they endure problems because you would see that others are enduring problems … [you realise that] here, there is no life … ('Me Kotseng, June 19, 2017)

Matsila (2020) observes that the discourse of perseverance (*ukubekezela* in Nguni languages and *ho mamella/ho tiisetsa* in Sesotho) during difficult situations including abuse, resonates with the expectation to conform to the idea of the "strong black woman.[9] In essence, proverbs and idioms that reinforce the gendered ideal of perseverance in ways that disadvantage women have grave implications for gender inequality, gender-based violence and femicide – the killing of women – and should be challenged. Failure to do so means tolerating and condoning femicide, the end result of abusive relationships.

As *basali ba 'mankhonthe*, some of the women also narrated their roles as community builders. For example, 'Me Ts'ido mentioned that she is a very prominent and highly respected community member who is often entrusted to hold community meetings. *Methepa* mentioned their contributions to community farming projects which not only benefitted the community but also ensured the livelihoods of vulnerable groups including orphaned children. Notably, in the context of extreme unemployment, poverty, and political instability, community projects that are initiated by community members are alternative income generation options which also reflect the values such as communitarianism, caring, solidarity, interconnectedness, and interdependence that characterise indigenous communities in Africa. In addition, these values are reflected in the accounts about their participation in the church group as *bo 'Mabana* (Sesotho term for Manyano). Thus, embodying various attributes such as *mamello*, *boithlompho*, *ho hlonepha*, and strength, leadership, and spirituality informed what 'Me Mpale referred to as *mosali oa 'mankhonthe*. I consider these to be a reverberation of those exemplified in the herstorical narratives of bo nkhono 'Mantsopa, 'Manthatisi, 'Mants'ebo, and 'Mamohato.

Erotic power – sexual empowerment and agency

Erotic power refers to sexual empowerment and agency that is embodied by *mosali oa Mosotho* through her participation in an indigenous practice of labial elongation. This practice informed the upbringing of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* wherein her body was prepared for her sexual role in marriage. Elongated inner labia are believed to occlude the vaginal opening and thus, retain warmth inside the vagina. This "heat" is believed to enhance sexual pleasure during intercourse with a future husband (Khau 2012; Mohlabane 2020, 2022). From the period just before her first menstruation, *ngoanana oa Mosotho* was socialised into the realm

of *bosali* through labial elongation. This process entailed a collective effort and was spearheaded by elders, both within the family and the community. Moreover, conformity was reinforced through peer-to-peer surveillance, support, and mentoring (Mohlabane 2020). The value of the practice for the young girl was her exposure to the "invisibilised" and "tabooed" subject of sexuality as well as a means through which she embodies sexual empowerment.

Likewise, in various other societies across sub-Saharan Africa, the practice has been acknowledged as sexually empowering for young African girls and as a means through which they enter the realm of womanhood (Batisai 2013; Talakinu 2018). For Brigitte Bagnol and Esmeralda Mariano, "these practices are related to notions of femininity, *womanhood, eroticism, pleasure* … . They are an expression of *female strategic [erotic] power*" (2008, 2, emphasis added). Therefore, not only is the practice harnessed to a woman's identity as a "real" woman in practising communities in Africa (Batisai 2013; Talakinu 2018; Venganai 2017) but it also affirms women as sexual beings capable of tapping into the "forbidden" erotic and pleasurable sex.

Reflecting on her participation in the practice of labial elongation and its salience to one's identity as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* transitioning to *mosali oa Mosotho*, 'Me Mphoza stated that:

> You need to do it … for girls to demonstrate that they are *baroetsana* (Mosotho maiden), *mosali oa Mosotho* was identified by elongated labia that indeed she is *mosali oa Mosotho*… she was identified by having them… [NM: so we should say that it demonstrated that she was transitioning to *bosali*?] Thank you *'me*!… yes … she is transitioning to *bosali* now … it means that you will achieve the state of *bosali*. ('Me Mphoza, June 7, 2017)

African feminist scholars have reflected on initiation practices and their role as the underpinning for women's identity in African communities (Talakinu 2018; Venganai 2017). For example, Carina Talakinu (2018) wrote about the *chinamwali* practice among the Chikunda in Zambia which shapes women's collective identity and also allows them membership into a particular group of knowledgeable women. The fact of undergoing the initiation allows one to gain knowledge and wisdom into what it means to be a woman in that particular context and culture. Therefore, having undergone the practice of labial elongation for 'Me Mphoza not only affirms her as *mosali oa Mosotho* but also allows her full membership with other women who have undergone the practice in her community.

The benefits of these "hidden pleasures" are significant in adulthood when women partake in practices such as *pitiki*. This is a celebration of the birth of a child by married mothers in the community (Mohlabane 2020). Within this space, the new mother is taught self-care post-delivery to enhance healing as well as how to re-invoke her sexuality after a long pregnancy and post-birth period. This highlights the significance of women's sexuality amongst the Basotho and the concerted effort of ensuring that a woman gets sexually re-energised following childbirth. Thus, I consider *pitiki* to be an indigenous space that serves as an all-inclusive knowledge hub for women's sexual empowerment and reproductive well-being (Mohlabane 2020). Within this "matriarchal umbrella" (Amadiume 2002, 43) indigenous knowledges about *bosali*, sexuality, and motherhood are shared amongst women, with the

elderly conveying knowledges to the young women. This space is characterised by sisterhood, solidarity, and compassion, and, thus, like the practice of labial elongation, the *pitiki* is a space where women "eat out of one pot" as suggested by Amadiume (2002, 43). Further, this space reminds us that *mosali oa Mosotho* is a sexual being and is sexually empowered as much as she is a mother, wife, Christian, and community member – contrary to the image portrayed by Mohlakoana (2008).

Speaking of sexual empowerment and agency forces me to reflect on how *ngoanana oa Mosotho's* participation in the practice of labial elongation also informed her sexual agency as *mosali oa Mosotho*. For example, 'Me Mphoza mentioned that she recently developed strong sexual desires which she states have recently caused an undying need for a sexual partner:

> Do you know that I recently started feeling like a real person … I started to experience [sexual] desires … It made me wish I had a [sexual] partner … I was not bothered by it until recently … it all changed recently … and I had a strong desire … it was a strong heat! I felt it in my heart and my soul … ('Me Mphoza, June 7, 2017)

'Me Mphoza's account is amidst those by 'Me Lila, 'Me Puseletso, and 'Me Lisebo that reflect the tabooed aspects – sexual desires and sexual pleasure. This contradicts the image of "Mosotho woman" portrayed by Mohlakoana (2008) earlier who embodies, amongst other aspects, sexual "passivity and innocence." Being an elderly *mothepa* born and bred in a rural context, her expression of sexual desire challenges the notion of sexual naiveté associated with western-centric constructions of womanhood. Indeed, African feminist Amadiume (2006, 8) confirms that "traditional African settings were not that inhibited about sexual enjoyment" contrary to common belief. Instead, within African communities, as is reflected in the *methepa*'s testimonies – women's sexuality and in particular pleasurable sex is permissible.

'Me Mphoza's free expression of sexual desire, and 'Me Lila's revelation of sexual pleasure tied to labial elongation, are powerful and intriguing revelations that speak loudly of *mosali oa Mosotho* in contradistinction from Eurocentric constructions of womanhood against which the *methepa* are posited as "non-woman." Therefore, this resonates with Amadiume's reference to indigenous African practices such as labial elongation as "subversive alternative" (2006, 9) with which to challenge the status quo pertaining to women's sexuality – as is revealed by these findings. Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin's impression of the African world-senses is that they allow us to re-visibilise "the complexities of … African women's identities and agency as dynamic, evolutionary and complicated" (Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018, 12) and, thus, ill fitted for the notion of Christian Mosotho woman that bears western-centric biases.

Further, a reflection on the racist and sexist colonial biases about African women's sexualities as hypersexual, immoral, and promiscuous is warranted here. In labelling our sexuality in negative terms and, ultimately, prohibiting indigenous practices that empower *banana ba Basotho*, the colonisers eliminated indigenous womanhoods. Sadly, these disempowering discourses about our sexuality prevail in modern day life, and women who express sexual desire are labelled as *matekatse* and, thus, reflect the coloniality of gender – and ought to be

challenged. This also calls for re-discovering and re-centring indigenous practices, rituals, and spaces in which the complexities of indigenous conceptions of sexuality, identity, womanhood – *mosali oa Mosotho* – are revealed. In fact, in many communities, some indigenous practices are being revived not as measures for enforcing the chastity norm to curb HIV and teenage pregnancy – as observed with virginity testing (Chisale 2016a; Chisale and Moyo 2016; Mdhluli and Kugara 2017) – but as a reflection of the significance of healthy, uninhibited sexuality for women in Lesotho.

Noteworthy is the persisting "colonisation of minds" (Oelofsen 2015) evidenced by how Christianised Basotho speaks about cultural practices that shape our identities.[10] Consequently, identity formations, particularly those connected to indigenous Sesotho practices and institutions, continue to be viewed negatively in contemporary societies as well as feminist scholarship. Scholars like Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon [1952] 2008) reflect on how colonisation corrupted African peoples' self-images and resulted in deep-rooted shame, self-alienation, and hatred. Relatedly, the racist colonial ideologies that constructed African womanhood in negative terms as beastly and ugly remain deeply rooted and continue to shape women's self-images in post-colonial Africa. Since African womanhood was constructed as oppositional and inferior to European womanhood, there is an increasing tendency amongst some women in Africa of idealising and adopting westernised conceptions of self, whilst shunning African formations of womanhood.

Botho – personhood and humanness

The notion of personhood represents *methepa's* non-gendered manner of self-identification that is expressed as – *ke motho* (I am a person/she or he is a person). For example, in articulating *mosali*, Me Ts'ido foregrounds first and foremost personhood and humanness:

> I believe that a person [*motho*] that is *mosali…* is a human being [*ke motho]!* Who has a brain… who should not be oppressed by virtue of being *mosali*… No!… She should be given an opportunity and she should not be oppressed because she is a woman… a woman is not a child… she is a human being like the other one… her brain should distinguish between a bad thing and a good thing, it should identify things that lead to progress… and those that lead to regression… regardless of being married or not… (Me Ts'ido, June 6, 2017)

By insisting that *mosali*, as a human being, is worthy of respect, and critical thinking, 'Me Ts'ido disrupts the colonial sexist and racist assumption that posits European maleness and whiteness as the epitome of critical thinking, rationality, and humanity (Wynter 2003). Wynter challenges the European notion of "human" – equated to "Man" "the master and saviour of all" (Erasmus 2020, 48). This construct contained the justification for the racialisation, universalisation, and normalisation of European Man as the golden standard and the Othering of the African. Instead, Wynter (2003) contends that our human experiential reality incorporates both biological and socio-cultural aspects.

Further, *methepa's* articulations of personhood and humanness disrupt gendered binaries that essentialise womanhood to particular features. Of relevance here is Oyěwùmí's (1997) compelling argument that "gender" need not be universalised, particularly, in relation to

constructions of identity. Like Wynter, Oyěwùmí critiques western "biologism" and the positioning of maleness (man) as essentially oppositional and superior to femaleness (woman). Accordingly, the introduction of gender in Africa – defined in biological dysmorphic, heterosexual, and patriarchal terms – resulted in distorted modes of identification which following colonial conquest have become essentially gendered. Therefore, I read *methepa's* emphasis on humanness and personhood, in lieu of a gendered identity, as a reflection of indigenous ways of self-identity which are instilled from a young age.

Attributes such as *hlonepho*, *seriti* (dignity), humility, reciprocity, authenticity, strength, morality, to mention a few, are instilled during the socialisation of younger generations, regardless of sex, to become socially acceptable persons and community members (Letseka 2013). Thus, through the inculcation of particular virtues and gaining wisdom from the custodians of indigenous knowledge – the elders – one eventually becomes a "person." Many of the *methepa* underwent such a process, and this is reflected in their accounts of childhood and adulthood. Self-identifying as a person, first and foremost, seeks to foreground the attributes that the *methepa* embody and enact as socially acceptable community members worthy of respect.

Notably, the *methepa's* claim to humanness and personhood contradicts everything that the coloniser denied them. According to racist, gendered, binarised colonial thinking, Africans represented bestial existence whilst Europeans fictitiously self-defined as the epitome of humanity. Yet in the African context, humanity and personhood are representations that go beyond material existence and include being, knowing, identity, belonging, and interconnectedness between the living and the dead. These aspects are necessary for social and spiritual harmony in communities in Africa. This view has been discussed extensively by African philosophers the likes of John Mbiti who claimed that,

> In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of the past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group … (Mbiti [1969] 1990, 108–109)

According to African Philosophers, although there may be distinctions, the sociocentric view of personhood remains relevant in how we should understand the individual as part and parcel of the larger group and how one is created and produced through one's interaction with and contribution to the community (Ikuenobe 2018; Molefe 2020; Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014).

However, African feminist scholars have also raised concerns about the androcentrism that remains palpable in African philosophical scholarship on the notion of personhood. For example, the concept of *uBuntu* continues to be articulated in masculine terms wherein it perpetuates male authority and patriarchal values over women (Chisale 2016b). However, Chisale (2016a) also points to the liberative potential of *uBuntu*, which she argues is concealed by discourses that, instead, highlight it's oppressive nature. In her recent book titled *Decolonization and Afro-feminism* (2020), African feminist Sylvia Tamale dedicated an entire chapter to a discussion on *uBuntu* and how the philosophy can potentially address the

conundrums of human rights and gender equality in Africa. She argues that in their current articulation, advocacy for human rights and gender equality is unhelpful in that they tend to perpetuate the exclusionary logic that they seek to dismantle – particularly when it comes to minority groups. Instead, Tamale (2020) advocates for an indigenous "woman"-centred approach to equality and rights that accounts for intersecting injustices along the lines of sexual identity, class, ableness, gender – to mention a few – that shape indigenous women's experiences.

Botho, as it is articulated by *methepa*, resonates with Tamale's conception of *uBuntu* that considers intersectionality as well as multiplicity and diversity. *Botho* is relational and dynamic, incorporates various virtues, and considers the social, spiritual, and cosmological worlds that shape our identities. Because *Botho* represents constructions of identity beyond gendered, hetero-sexualist, biologist, and binarised thinking, it has implications for marginalised persons. For example, transgender persons are often excluded from hetero-patriarchal definitions that necessarily equate "woman" with femaleness and consider "woman" as inferior to man." Thus, considering personhood first and foremost allows for more inclusive conceptions of identity which I believe are, to a great extent, linked with the indigenous African world-senses.

Conclusion

In this paper, I considered how the colonial invasion of Basotho played an instrumental role in reshaping constructions of womanhood in Lesotho and subsequently, resulted in hetero-patriarchal and exclusionary notions of "Mosotho woman." This was propelled through the denigration of indigenous structures some of which are central to identity construction amongst Basotho. Further, the paper addresses the ongoing coloniality that shapes current articulations of womanhood in post-colonial Lesotho. Congruent to the hetero-patriarchal colonial doctrine, conceptions of womanhood continue to equate it with wifehood. Further, "woman" as wife is necessarily subordinate and oppositional to "man" the husband. The imposition of these totalising, binarised hetero-patriarchal logics to colonial states led to the distortion of local social arrangements and, subsequently, the silencing of indigenous definitions of womanhood that were fluid and multifaceted.

Through a decolonial African feminist analysis, this paper revealed the complexities and nuances of indigenous spaces, practices, and rituals which inform identities of African people. This paper, thus, argues for the revisibilisation of concealed constructions of indigenous womanhoods. Part of this exercise requires a reflection on herstories of legendary matriarchs that assumed positions of power in Lesotho prior to colonial invasion. These herstories, I argue, are representations of womanhoods prior to colonial modernity in Lesotho.

Through the narratives of *methepa*, this paper foregrounds attributes such as *boithlompho, hlonepho, seriti, mamello*, and sexual empowerment, as tools which critically inform *methepa's* constructions of *bosali*. The notion of *botho* further complicates how the identity is constructed by *methepa*. These indigenous constructions of womanhoods resonate with those exemplified by legendary matriarchs – nkhono 'Mantsopa, nkhono 'Manthatisi, and many others – which are pinned upon leadership, authority, spirituality, and many other attributes. In illuminating constructions of womanhoods drawn from *methepa's* world-senses

and those embodied by our elders, the findings contribute conceptions of womanhoods which rupture the confines of binarised, hetero-patriarchal bio-logics. Thus, in reflecting on our pasts, we are better placed to re-think and re-interpret the current misrepresentations of our identities and, furthermore, to re-imagine new formations pinned to our indigenous knowledges.

Methepa's conceptions of womanhood are grounded ontologically and epistemologically in Sesotho traditional spaces and practices. This contributes to African feminists' calls for the prioritisation of indigenous world-senses to further local feminist scholarship and knowledge systems. In the words of June Bam and Bernedette Muthien, we need to problematise and rethink disempowering discourses in order to "provide new and different 'herstorical' lenses, philosophies, epistemologies, methodologies and interpretations" (2021, 13). Further, re-centring and re-prioritising our indigenous knowledges – in their varied forms – as valid sources will not only allow us to theorise African realities appropriately but also address the pressing social ills that continue to hamper social justice.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Notes

1. The Beauvoirean scholarship refers to second wave feminisms in Europe and America. This scholarship critiques the patriarchal construction of womanhood and its limitation to specific attributes which ultimately inform and justify the relegation of women to an inferior position compared to men in society.

2. Whilst this scholarship usefully presents a contradictory theoretical stance against universalist, Eurocentric conceptions of identity, including womanhood, its major weakness is its tendency of essentialising African womanhood to motherhood and romanticising African women's power (Bakare-Yusuf 2003) in ways that problematically disregard women's realities in contemporary African societies. In particular, the tendency to essentialise motherhood – as the bedrock of African womanhood and African women's power – marks this conception as exclusionary of those women who are not mothers. Further, in speaking of female, maternal power, this conception is exclusionary of hetero-patriarchally marginalised groups such as transgender women.

3. *Basali ba Basotho* is the plural of *mosali oa Mosotho* and it is directly translated as women of the Basotho. I opted not to use "Mosotho woman" or Basotho women because this is a misuse of Sesotho nouns as English adjectives. In furthering the decolonial break that this

paper is making, I was cautious not to continue this colonial misuse of Sesotho words. Instead, I use women in Lesotho to refer to women generally and *methepa* to refer to the participants of this study. Notable is the different orthography of Sesotho written in Lesotho compared to South Africa, for example *mosali* vs *mosadi* – the latter replaces *li* with *di* yet the meaning remains the same. In this paper, I use the Lesotho orthography for all Sesotho concepts.

4. All principles of ethical research were observed and adhered to. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria Research Ethics Committee in May 2017 (Reference: 04381734-GW20170412HS).

5. *Letekatse* is the singular for *matekatse*

6. *Hlonipha* is the Nguni term which refers to respect, the Sesotho equivalent is *hlonepha*. *Hlonepha* is a verb and *hlonepho* is a noun.

7. *Mankhonthe* holds deeper meaning than "real" or authentic. Instead, it encompasses a range of aspects such as resilience, strength, respect, community building to name a few. For a lack of a better word to translate it, I settled for real or authentic.

8. Important to note is that this idiom holds deeper meanings for a marital relationship, in particular, it acknowledges that the couple may have fights but none of them can terminate the marriage before discussions are held with both families. Traditionally, marriage is a relationship between two families as opposed to individuals. Although its gendered connotations cannot be denied, the idiom also emphasises the need for a joint discussion to resolve the issues before the marriage can be dissolved.

9. The notion of the "strong black woman" is linked to historical accounts of enslaved Black women that emphasise strength. Because they were considered and treated as property, and as strong, enslaved women were subjected brutalising conditions, and to strengthen economic productivity, their fertility was controlled by slave masters to increase labour force (Collins 2004). This stereotype continues to shape conceptions of black womanhood in racist sexist US society, and Black women are expected to embody strength and perseverance at all times.

10. The discussion of "colonisation of minds" is worth mentioning because of its significance in respect to the deep embeddedness and normalisation of hetero-patriarchal, Christianised notions of womanhood in Lesotho. A deeper reflection of these issues is relevant in respect to the arguments raised in the paper, however, this discussion is worthy of another upcoming paper.

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