

# Setswana proverbs within the institution of *lenyalo* [marriage]: A critical engagement with the *bosadi* [womanhood] approach

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Setswana proverbs point to the rich oral history of the Batswana people, their cosmology, morality, indigenous knowledge system, rituals, drama, sayings and memo scripts which are deeply embedded in memory. They emerged from reflections on existential experiences and animal behaviour. In her analysis of Proverbs 31:10–31 found in the Hebrew text, Masenya rereads this text in conjugation with her Northern Sotho proverbs regarding women from a *bosadi* [womanhood] approach. It is in this approach that she attempts to engage structures of 'patriarchy' and the marginalisation of women's identities. In so doing, the approach grapples with issues such as the mythological thinking of male dominance, cultural subjugation, gender equality, political marginalisation and economic transaction. The decolonial turn as a theoretical framework acknowledges the particularity and universality of cultures and knowledge. Whilst there is particularity among African cultures, there is also universality. In this article I will refer to Setswana proverbs in the context of marriage to engage the *bosadi* approach. It is the intention of this article to argue that proverbs such as *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* need to be contextualised within their historical location as well as within the context of the institution of *lenyalo* that is anchored in the practice of *bogadi*. Furthermore, there is a need to critically engage with terms such as patriarchy, oppression, structure and hierarchy. The paper will use the decolonial turn as a theoretical framework. A conclusion will be drawn from the discussion above.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article has an interdisciplinary approach, it touches on Historical analysis of Setswana Proverbs, the missionary era and the transition between 'Setswana traditional' worldview and 'Euro-Christian' worldview. Furthermore, it pertains to the understanding of the Proverbs within the custom of *Lenyalo* (marriage), boards between anthropological, sociological and African philosophy approaches. The fundamental theoretical approaches used in this article is translational theory and decolonial turn, which is social sciences.

## Introduction

According to Masenya (2010), it is imperative to locate the definition of womanhood within its particular culture. It is for this reason she maintains that:

Every culture has its own definitions of what a worthy woman is. These definitions include the expectations of society concerning the roles which women are expected to play in order to qualify as worthy women in their communities.<sup>1</sup> (p. 256)

Scholars in the fields of the New Testament, classics, law, sociology, theology and religion continue to grapple with notions of masculinity, womanhood, slave bodies, and sexuality in antiquity. Other scholars, particularly African scholars, use theories such as post-colonial and *bosadi* [womanhood] hermeneutics in their attempt to reflect on how European culture infused in Western Christianity constructed identities, hierarchy of being and the demonisation of what are essentially African cultural norms and traditions. Ntloedibe-Kuswani argues that, in the making of the so-called receptor language transport and conveying the biblical message, African and other nonbiblical cultures are hijacked (2001:80). She maintains that the identities and supremacy of nonbiblical cultures are sacrificed to make room for the source text. Ntloedibe-Kuswani (2001) states the following regarding the inequality of the source text and nonbiblical cultures:

In fact, it smacks of both gender and colonial relationships, in which the man and coloniser are regarded as the sources of knowledge, power, and leadership, while the woman and colonised are the subjugated, the silenced, the ruled, and those guided to receive the coloniser's knowledge. (p. 81)

1. Masenya, in her engagement with Mbiti (one of the leading African theologians on African theology) on his assertion that 'to die without getting married and without children is to be completely cut off from the human community ... to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind (sic). Everybody must therefore get married and bear children: that is the greatest hope of the individual for himself (sic) and of the community for the individual' (Masenya 2010:256). Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) argues that patriarchy affords a bachelor an advantage over a spinster in that he can or is expected to initiate a marriage proposal.

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What Ntloedibe-Kuswani is arguing in the above citation can be extrapolated from the writers in *Mahoko a Becwana 1883–1896*.<sup>2</sup> These writers were Batswana Christians and at the same time they struggled with the question of how their new faith required them to abandon their former lifestyles. The debates regarding *bogadi* brought serious conflicts between the Batswana and the missionaries as I will later discuss. The ambivalence is reflected in their letters in which they express general concern about a variety of practices and customs (Mgadla & Volz 2006:123). This ambivalence can be summarised by the argument of Ntloedibe-Kuswani that the relationship between the source text and receptor language is grounded on inequality, subjugation, domination of the targeted languages and cultures.

The translation of the Bible into Setswana in 1857 by Robert Moffat illustrates the above argument by Ntloedibe-Kuswani that the gendered God expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity domesticated the gender neutral, *Modimo* (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2001:81). The translation of the Bible into Setswana then domesticates *Modimo* and locates rituals within the paradigm of manhood both in the public domain and in the household; an example is *bongaka* (traditional healers). Ntloedibe-Kuswani (2001) further states that:

Some of these concerns focused on the translation of *Modimo*, the divine figure of Batswana and the ways in which *Modimo* was colonised and gendered in Setswana biblical translations. At issue is how these translations undermine the positions of women in the spiritual and social spaces. (p. 81)

The gendering of *Modimo* by London Missionaries Society's Bible translators such as Robert Moffat and A.J. Wookey had implications in the understanding of masculinity, ritual performance and the role of women in the public arena. *Mahoko a Becwana* provides us with a historical context of these issues of tampering with women's female identities. According to Ntloedibe-Kuswani, the implications of the colonisation and gendering of *Modimo* has supported the exclusion of Batswana women in church and other spheres of power. According to Amadiume as cited in Ntloedibe-Kuswani prior to colonialism, women had their own goddess, *Idemili*, crops, and they ran their own marketplace (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2001:92). The challenge emerged with Christianity; it condemned indigenous religious beliefs and replaced them with Christian beliefs; this I will outline in the section dealing with the debates in the letters to *Mahoko a Becwana*. This was done systematically through the church, schools, and colonial job market (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2001:92).

2.Themba Mgadla and Stephen Volz (2006) describe the newspaper in the following manner: '*Mahoko a Becwana* (News/words of Batswana), a Setswana-language newspaper; published by missionaries of the London Missionary Society at Kuruman between 1883 and 1896. The majority of the writers were members of congregations in what are today South Africa's Northern Cape Province and Northwest Province, but many also wrote from as far away as the Transvaal, Orange Free State and the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Most of the writings were letters to the editor, but their intended audience was primarily other Batswana readers of the newspaper. They wrote on a wide range of topics of concern to literate, mission-educated Batswana at that time, including mission work, theology, standardisation of written Setswana, cultural change and the European colonisation. Their letters were also often written in response to other letters or missionary articles, producing lively debates on a number of controversial issues. These writings offer a rare and revealing glimpse of the conversations that took place among literate Africans during a crucial period in the formation of modern South Africa and Batswana's (Mgadla & Volz 2006:cover page).

Ntloedibe-Kuswani argues that the same can be found with Batswana. The outcome of this was the move from a largely gender-neutral religious space and symbols to male-centred substitutes (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2001:92). I would argue that the first readers of the Setswana translated Bible – particularly women – might have found it difficult to read texts such as Ephesians 5:21–24. When such a text is read images of inequality, subjugation, social hierarchies, domination and the undermining of positions of women in both spiritual and social spaces emerge. It is worth quoting the 1857 English-Setswana Bible as translated by Robert Moffat. Ephesians 5:21–24 in the Setswana Bible thus reads:

Go utluana mo poihoñ ea Morimo. Lona basari, utluañ banona ba lona, yaka Morèna. Go ne monona ke tlogo ea mosari, yaka Keresete e le tlogo ya ekelesia mi ki éna muluki oa melc. Ki gona yaka ekelesia e utlua Keresete, le bona bane yalo mo banoneñ ba bona mo lilon cotle.<sup>3</sup>

The above citation points to how the first listeners would have heard the text read to them, and how they would have read and understood the biblical passage. It is without doubt that such a reading could have sparked debates on the traditional roles of women and men.

Furthermore, the above text points to the misconceptions about the culture of the people. The product of such an activity, I would argue, led to the misreading and misunderstanding that Ephesians 5:21–24 suggests complete submission of women to men. Such a misreading and misunderstanding of the text points to the argument made by Ntloedibe-Kuswani that the missionaries' attempts to translate the Bible compromised the cultural beliefs of the audience and, as a result, produced a patriarchal society based on the notion of a gendered God (p. 88).

Masenyia outlines the images of women in the Northern Sotho proverbs according to Rakoma's collection of Northern Sotho proverbs and argues that in many proverbs the presence of a woman can be inferred from the word *mosadi*, meaning parent. Furthermore, one can deduce that the woman's role is that of an educator and moulder. She further points out that another disturbing observation is that only six proverbs refer to woman and there are 15 proverbs that mention the word *monna* (male/man). Her conclusion in this regard is that:

the above examples reveal that the Northern Sotho culture seems to go out of its way to serve the patriarchal status quo in which the men's interest are always catered for. (Masenyia 2004:139)

It is worth pointing out that some of the proverbs that she refers to are also used by the Batswana. Based on what Masenyia is arguing, could it be then that the removal of women from public space, the adoption of Christianity and European culture at the time could have necessitated the marginalisation of women's identities, or that prior to colonialism women were already marginalised? The answer

3.The cited verse from the 1857 Setswana Bible could literally be translated in the following way: 'To agree in the fear of God, you women, listen to your husband, like the Lord. Because man is the head of the woman, like Christ is the head of the church and the saviour or protector of the body. Like the church listens to Christ you too are to do the same to your husbands in all things'.

to the former question, according to Masenya, would be emphatically yes. This is because, according to Masenya, 'even before the coming of the whites with their colonial imperialistic policies, the African culture was patriarchal' (Masenya 2004:47). The statement by Masenya that African culture prior to 'capitalist/patriarchal/Western-centric/Christian-centric/modern/colonial world-system' Africa was a patriarchal society cannot be completely disputed. Whilst one cannot dispute the notion of patriarchy in Africa, however, one cannot indubitably claim that, prior to colonialism, there was only one system: patriarchy. This is because African languages, particularly languages such as Setswana, Zulu, Xhosa, South Sotho, Northern Sotho, were only reduced into written form during colonialism by the missionaries (cf. Doke 2007:82–99). At the same time writers such as John Barrow, John Burchell and Henry Lichtenstein, as well as missionaries such as Robert Moffat, John Campbell and David Livingstone, provide us with European views into how people in South Africa lived, practiced their religion, their house structures and their social hierarchies. Thus, it is imperative that, in engaging with such proverbs, we take into account these historical realities.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni defines decoloniality in the following manner:

By decoloniality it is meant here the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:14 in Mothoagae 2014:12)

For the sake of this paper not all proverbs outlined in Masenya's book will be dealt with. However, I argue that we cannot look at these proverbs outside the practice of *bogadi* as, according to Masenya, they relate to the value/worth of a woman in the context of *lenyalo* [marriage].

## Subverting the language of power within the Tswana proverbs

Masenya defines *bosadi* hermeneutics as an approach that critically analyses the African culture, which is one of the factors that have shaped many of her readings. She sees *bosadi* as a positive element (liberatory aspects) of the African culture regarding women (Masenya 2004:10). Chapter 4 of her book has a subtitle that reads 'Images of women in the Northern Sotho proverbs'. She outlines these images in the following manner: first, women as mothers; second, women as wives; third, the industry of a wife; fourth, women are quarrelsome; fifth, woman as cowards; and last, women cannot lead. Under each subheading Masenya points to proverbs that suggest images of women in that manner (Masenya 2004:129–140).

In unpacking the proverb *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, Masenya (2010) states the following:

The tone of the preceding proverb reveals that once a husband dies a widow is neither expected to return to her father's household nor to make an independent decision to marry. (p. 256)

Thus the proverb *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* is imbued with a lot of meaning, especially with regard to the well-being of the wife, since ultimately she belongs to her husband's family even beyond death. One wonders about the intention of such proverbs, whether good or bad, since they also perpetuated a sense of belonging, not belonging and destitution (see Masenya 1998). From the above citation it can be deduced that women had no rights to self-determination. Their self-determination relied on whether a woman had a husband or not. The narrow analysis of the proverb, *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, presents us with questions such as: Were women not allowed to marry beyond the husband's family? Was there no divorce? Which Northern Sotho clan is she referring to? In other words, when did the proverb emerge and what prompted the people (Sotho-Tswana)<sup>4</sup> to use such a proverb? How did the Sotho-Tswana people prior to coloniality understand *lenyalo*? How did the practice of *bogadi* influence the roles of men and women as well as their identities within the immediate family, and the community at large? The contexts of such proverbs are essential as they will provide us with answers surrounding proverbs such as these.

Furthermore, according to her, it has to do with the communal character of marriage within the African context. As a result, a widow would naturally expect her in-laws to support her (Masenya 2010). To illustrate this further she points to another proverb that is found among the Northern Sotho-speaking communities that says *lebitla ga le hlalwe*<sup>5</sup> and argues that the mood of this proverb is similar to the proverb, *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* (Masenya 2010:259–260); both of these proverbs seem to denote some dependency of women on their in-laws. In her article Masenya (1998) explores the Naomi-Ruth story from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Northern Sotho proverbs. She outlines the three conditions of being *ngwetši*,<sup>6</sup> in the following manner:

The woman's in-laws express their gratitude for *sego sa meetse* (a drawer of water), that is, the prospective wife, by giving *lobola* (bride price) to the family of the bride. When marriage negotiations are finalised, the woman leaves her father's house to join the house of her father-in-law. The woman remains in the father-in-law's household until her husband's younger brother marries. Only then can the woman and her husband establish their own household. Traditionally, the new household was established not very far from the father-in-law's household – a setting similar to that of the ancient Israelites. (Masenya 2010:86)

Masenya (1998:86) alludes to the circumstances in which women found themselves throughout the *bogadi* negotiations; this is anchored by the fact that they depended solely on their husbands for survival. According to the Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust, *bogadi* was practised almost exclusively in this southern African sub-region by what is referred to as patrilineal groups (Women and Law 2002:12). Ansell makes the observation regarding *bogadi*

4. By Sotho-Tswana I refer to people speaking South Sotho, Northern Sotho and Setswana, as they too have such a proverb. This concept of Sotho-Tswana I borrowed from Gabriel Setloane in his 1971-book: *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*.

5. It literally means a man's grave cannot be divorced.

6. Meaning: a bride or daughter-in-law.

that it can be interpreted in many ways precisely because it differs from one tribe to another. Furthermore, it also differs in terms of the location of people, those in the urban areas as well as those in the rural areas. Another observation made by Ansell regarding the practice is the complications that emerge from the commercialisation of the custom (Ansell 2001:698). It is for this reason, according to Ansell, that *bogadi* has to be interpreted in view of wider political, economic and geographic contexts (Ansell 2001:698).<sup>7</sup> Plaatje in his book (1916:68) explains the proverb, *mosadi ke tshwene o jewa mabogo*,<sup>8</sup> as follows: 'A woman is like a monkey; you can only eat her hands (labour)'. According to Masenya (1998:86), such a proverb is a classic expression of the hard work expected of the *ngwetši*. She further raises concerns regarding the treatment of the bride by her mother-in-law and the sister(s)-in-law, in other words, she has to prove her worth and that the price paid for her was not in vain. For Masenya (1998:86), this new member of the household becomes a virtual slave. Another observation that Masenya (1998:86) makes is the relationship dynamics between the mother-in-law and the new daughter. She argues that part of these dynamics is the way in which the mother-in-law sees the new daughter as a rival perhaps for the son's affection (Masenya 1998:86). Masenya (1998:86) further maintains that part of this relationship dynamic could also be attributed to the following:

She must dance to the tune of the new place (which normally is that of the mother-in-law) and may not deviate from the status quo. She must know that divorce is a taboo. The proverb, *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, introduced earlier, means that married woman may not expect to be remarried into a family or clan other than that of her husband after his death. A man from the husband's family will be advised to continue the line of his deceased brother. Likewise, if a woman dies or cannot have children, a woman from her family will be called in to bear children on behalf of her sister. This implies that one of the key expectations of a *ngwetši* is that she bears children to continue her husband's line. (Masenya 1998:86)

From the above citation Masenya conflates the two practices, where these two need to be understood within their own contexts. What Masenya (1998:86) seems to raise here is the paradox of being *ngwetši*, that is the subordinate dimension and the status that comes with age and the length of time spent at the place of their in-laws. The assertion by Masenya (1998:86) overlooks the practice of *bogadi* prior to colonialism and the influences of Western culture among Sotho-Tswana people. Furthermore, it is imperative to take into account the communal and the family aspect as integral parts of the process of being *ngwetši*. This view by Masenya is further maintained by Nkomazana in his article (2008), when he argues that women generally depended on brothers, fathers, husbands and uncles for meeting their day-to-day needs. I should point out this is not correct in the light of the proverb that was quoted above: '*Mosadi ke tshwene o jewa mabogo*'. This proverb may seem to be demeaning men, but in actual fact the likening of human beings to animals was not a matter

of demeaning them necessarily; the more important aspect is that *o jewa mabogo*. This is fact and showed that families to a large extent were dependant on the hardworking hands of women. Traditionally women were not passive recipients. Women worked hard to provide for the families. This was particularly so within polygamous relationships – the husband did not necessarily act as a provider for the women in a polygamous arrangement. These women worked hard to make sure that they were providing for their families. For him, *bogadi* was only given by the groom's parents, simply because men were perceived to be the only wealthy and powerful individuals who were able to afford more than one wife (Nkomazana 2008). In the next section I will deal with the practice of *bogadi* and argue that, in order to understand this practice, we need to locate some historical contexts of it prior to colonialism. Such shift to commercialisation impacts how women are being treated as property for which a good price is negotiated (Women & Law 2002). Another proverb is '*kgomo e bapalwa ka namane*'. This proverb relates to women who have children out of wedlock and who may have one or two children. Nkomazana argues that it is in the naming ceremony that one can extrapolate the subordinate dimension of women within Batswana people. He states:

Tswana names such as *Seapei* (the one who cooks), *Khumoetsile* (source of wealth through *bogadi*), and *Seanokeng* (the one who fetches firewood) tended to associate women with domestic chores, as if women are not expected to perform public duties. These names are contrary to those given to men, which are associated with success and wealth and which therefore enhance their social status. Some of the examples are names such as *Mojaboswa* (heir), *Kgosietsile* (the chief has come/is born), *Mmereki* (the worker), *Mmusi* (the leader or ruler), *Mokganedi* or *Modisa* (shepherd). (Nkomazana 2008:266)

I would argue that the above cited names are intended to portray a certain event at the time a child is born. Yet again Nkomazana fails to provide us with the context of the naming ceremony, and also whether these ceremonies were practiced prior to colonialism and how Christianity could have influenced the liturgical aspects of these ceremonies, their legitimacy, and how these ceremonies have evolved over time with the impact of Christianity. The question then follows: do these ceremonies suggest that the naming of young girl with names as suggested by Nkomazana is a form of constructing women's identities?

Furthermore, such proverbs indicate the powerlessness of women and their mothers and further situate women as disempowered, as they may not be in a position to negotiate anything in the relationship, including sexuality and safe sex, as well as the issue of whether or not to have children. This entails their general reproductive health requirements, Nkomazana (2008:21) argues. Since, according to Nkomazana, childbearing in the past 'was an essential element of being human, productivity was seen as contributing to the existence of society. It also strengthened the peoples' offerings and sacrifices' (Nkomazana 2008:268). Again, Nkomazana does not provide evidence in this regard. Therefore, the following observation indicates the mythological thinking of male

<sup>7</sup>When one looks at the trend of the commercialisation of *bogadi*, it has consequences for women and for the marriage as well.

<sup>8</sup>Which literally means a woman is a woman through hard work.

dominance, cultural subjugation, gender equality, political marginalisation, economic transaction and many others. Nkomazana (2006:272) argues that the betrothal negotiations and agreements meant that the prospective husband has the right to visit the woman's home freely as well as cohabit with her. He further points out a system of *bonyatsi*, which entails the flow of the rights of a man to return his *nyatsi's* (concubine's) hospitality. She in turn looks to him for help with things such as the building of a house or psychological security and other needs. The argument by Nkomazana negates the oral tradition prior to colonialism in that he focuses on the era of colonialism and overlooks how Westernisation in the form of the Western Christian cultural worldview has tampered with Sotho-Tswana cosmological understanding. As a result Sotho-Tswana practices are presented as a culture that oppresses women by nature. Mokomane points to another aspect of the Tswana marriage custom, which is *kadimo* (meaning to borrow). According to him, the *kadimo* practice is when the two families agree to lend the bride to the groom's family. In other words, the groom's family can borrow the bride (Mokomane 2005:205). Whilst Mokomane provides us with a sociological analysis of the practice of *bogadi*, he does not locate the practice of *kadimo* within the practice of *lenyalo* in its proper context. As a result it suggests that such a practice has been around for a long time. As I will show in the next section, the debate of the practice of *bogadi* provides us with a glimpse of the society in transition from traditional to a mix of both traditional and Western, right at the beginning of the spread of Christianity among the Batswana. It is worth pointing out that, although the traditional practices of Setswana culture were influenced by Western Christian culture, it is not impossible to reconstruct how these practices took place.

## Debates in *Mahoko a Becwana* on cultural change and *bogadi*: Whose interests?

The letters to *Mahoko a Becwana* provide us with a window into what was happening during the transition from Setswana traditional practices to Western Christian culture. Furthermore, these letters were written by Batswana who were both Christian and non-Christian, expressing what they saw as an infringement into their cultural practices by Christianity and challenging the misconceptions about these practices. At the same time, those who were Christians would challenge some of these practices such as the initiations of both girls and boys, and rainmaker (*Moroka*). However, they would also refute what they would refer to as wrong teachings about their culture by missionaries. Those who were Christians wrestled with the question of how much of their new faith required them to abandon their former lifestyle. In attempting to answer this question they frequently made a distinction between Christianity and Western culture. As a result they were reluctant to abandon practices on the basis that they met with Western disapproval, unless it clashed with Christian principles of moderation, or trust in God. As members of communities they often had to consider their social obligation. This is because the beliefs and practices

of the Batswana had civic duties as well (Mgadla & Volz 2006:123). According to Mgadla and Volz (2006:123), the spread of Christianity meant that there were new practices and beliefs which were adopted by Batswana communities. These practices and beliefs also presented Batswana communities with a challenge to their existing way of life. At the same time there were those Batswana communities, particularly from the north and west such as the majority of *Mahoko's* letter-writers, who were able to assert greater control over the spread of European culture, given the rise to disagreements concerning which changes were to be embraced and which of those were to be resisted.

As I have argued in the previous section, the proverbs are to be understood within the institution of *lenyalo* (marriage). For marriage to take place *bogadi* has to be given<sup>9</sup>; whilst there are those who prefer to use the word 'paid', I find that the word itself does not encapsulate the real meaning. It is in reading in the letters to *Mahoko a Becwana* that *bogadi* was in the form of cattle or other goods that a groom customarily presented to the family of the bride. According to Mgadla and Volz (2006), the amount was usually determined and donated by the groom's relatives and then distributed among the relatives of the bride. 'This transfer of wealth re-enforced and confirmed the new familial ties that were formed by the union of the couple' (Mgadla & Volz 2006:123). The two contending views regarding *bogadi* were that:

While most Batswana apparently felt that *bogadi* served an important social function, some Christians saw *bogadi* not as a gift, but as the dehumanising purchase of a wife and her children. With the backing of missionaries and their characterisation of *bogadi* as 'brideprice', the latter view eventually gained dominance, but many Batswana, both Christian and non-Christian, continued to see the practice as a beneficial custom. (Mgadla & Volz 2006:123)

It is within the context of the letters to *Mahoko a Becwana* that a picture of life prior to colonialism could be painted as I mentioned in the previous heading. The narrative that emerges from Alfred J Wookey's response to the question surrounding *bogadi* points to how the scriptural texts were used to discredit customs such as *bogadi* and *bogwera*.<sup>10</sup> In this section I will focus on the various debates found in *Mahoko a Becwana* as I mentioned in footnote two, *Mahoko a Becwana* was a newspaper run by missionaries as a tool to catechise and draw awareness to other issues across Batswanaland and other territories. Batswana used the newspaper to raise issues of concern among them, and to debate other issues such as standardisation of Setswana into a written language, cultural change and governmental leadership. It was the missionaries who edited and chose what they wanted to publish.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, since there were no written documents on practices such as *bogadi*, initiation and rainmaking, the closest

<sup>9</sup>I intentionally use the word 'give or given' instead of paid as the word 'pay or paid' suggests a form of a transaction. Furthermore, in Setswana the words that are used are *go ntsha bogadi*. It is important to note that even the word 'give or given' is not a proper word, as there is no English word that encapsulates it.

10.A Setswana word meaning male initiation (circumcision).

11.It is in reading some of the comments of the editors then that one gets an impression of who produces knowledge and who consumes it.

records regarding pre-colonial practices can be drawn from the letters such as those found in *Mahoko a Becwana*.

On 10 October 1883 Alfred Wookey wrote the following letter in Setswana to a newspaper regarding *bogadi*:

The teaching [of Christianity] has encountered the Tswana law called *bogadi* [bridewealth] ... God simply gave Adam a woman in the beginning and also gave him children; there was no *bogadi* at all other than thanking God for his gifts. Today also, God has appointed the man for the woman and the woman for the man, not by payment. If God so pleases, he gives them children; they are not bought. (Mgadla & Volz 2006:138)

From the above statement by A.J. Wookey, one can deduce that there is some form of capitalist/patriarchal Western-centric, /Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system that is nuanced by the use of Scriptures in order to suggest that a woman was given to Adam. At the same time there is no indication alluding to equality between the two. As the letter continues, Wookey refers to Psalm 127 so as to strengthen his argument against the custom of *bogadi*. He goes on to state that *bogadi* is an action of darkness. Above all, a girl child was seen as an object of possession, by which a person can become rich. Furthermore, he states that marriage was also considered to be similar to the actions of animals and cattle. It is therefore not the commandment of God for people to do such things. Towards the end of the letter Wookey makes a distinction between people of 'light' and those of 'darkness' by referring to the salvific role of Christ. He states:

We have been bought by the blood of the Son of God, who is Jesus. And things of darkness should be thrown away, along with each and every one of their remnants. (Mgadla & Volz 2006:139)

The assumption made by Wookey is that *bogadi* as a practice relegated women to the same status as being a possession such as cattle. He uses the Hebrew Scriptures in his argument against the practice of *bogadi*; particularly the creation story and Psalms authenticated domination and subjugation of women by men, thus suggesting that it is the commandment of God to have men superior to women. One could argue that such an attempt by Wookey is an infusion of a colonial worldview.

His letter sparked a huge debate. For the sake of this paper I will focus on one letter arguing for *bogadi*. On 15 March 1884 Oganne Keakopa from *Dikgatlhong* wrote a letter to the editor arguing against the notion that *bogadi* belongs to the people of darkness. He begins his letter in the following manner:

To the editor of *News of the Batswana*,

I have heard that you were advised by a missionary talking about something he doesn't know, namely, *bogadi*. You know, when a person asks about something that you might not know has told you nothing, putting you in darkness...*Bogadi* is not buying; it is Tswana marriage...*Bogadi* is not buying, because I have asked what *bogadi* signifies, and it was said it signifies marriage. *Bogadi* is a symbol of marriage, just as when a person

isn't married formally with a ring, he isn't married, and *bogadi* is like that ... (Mgadla & Volz 2006:140–142)

The above argument by Oganne Keakopa seeks to put into context such a practice as well as its core values. He further refutes the statement by Wookey that such a practice is a form of buying a woman. According to Musa Dube (2012:131), Amadiume revisits and emphasises this point further by assessing anthropological studies that were done in Africa. Her assertion is that scholars came with Western, Greek and Hebraic patriarchal frameworks of doing research and documenting, to the extent that they virtually had no capacity to acknowledge matriarchy within the African gender system (Dube 2012). Dube asserts the observation by Amadiume by stating the following:

There are other ethnic groups such as the Wayeyi from the Okavango area who are also matriarchal. For the rest of the ethnic groups in Botswana, the traces of what could have been matriarchal gendered system among Batswana and other Bantu speaking ethnic groups are only attested by a significant role of the maternal uncle – the brother of any mother as the main decision-maker in the issues of marriage, relationships, and all major decisions. (Dube 2012:132)

In this view by Dube, asserted by Mokalake Modisapodi from Bloemfontein on 13 March 1884, he states the following regarding the significance of the maternal uncle: '*Bogadi* is not for the father of the girl; it is for her maternal uncle' (Mgadla & Volz 2006:145). One can say that it is through such letters that the aspect of matriarchy as pointed out by Dube is affirmed. Couzens (1987) states the following regarding Plaatje's attempt to portray a pre-Ndebele and pre-white cultural state:

Plaatje began *Mhudi* with an attempt to portray a pre-Ndebele, pre-white, idyllic cultural state where art, culture and life were harmonious and integrated. Marriage, for instance, is called 'an art'; there was fur-making, basket-making, weaving and 'mural decorations', and women 'transacted their onerous duties with the same satisfaction and pride as an English artist would the job of conducting an orchestra'. (Couzens 1987:45–46)

Of this nature, too, were folk-tales where the wisdom of the clan would be handed down from generation to generation. (Couzens 1987:46)

One thing that is evident in the two letters that I have highlighted and with the above citation is that all of them refer to oral tradition as an authority over the Western form of passing on tradition and knowledge in writing. Thus the proverbs cannot be analysed in isolation from the practice of *bogadi*, the institution of *lenyalo* [marriage] and from oral tradition. Furthermore, it is important to note that not all African cultures are patriarchal; for example, one can refer to the Northern Sotho clan called *Balobedu* as a matriarchal clan, ruled by a queen. Furthermore, Wookey attempts to discredit it by employing another tradition as if such tradition is superior from other traditions. In my definition of decolonial turn I referred to decoloniality as the dismantling of relations of power, and the conceptualisation of knowledge that produces racial, gender and geo-political

hierarchies. The letter of Wookey points to the above-mentioned indicators.

## Conclusion

### The need for an indigenous theoretical framework

Maldonado-Torres defines coloniality as follows:

The concept of coloniality of being was born in conversations about the implications of the coloniality of power in different areas of society. The idea was that colonial relations of power left profound marks not only in the areas of authority, sexuality, knowledge and the economy, but on the general understanding of being as well. And, while the coloniality of power referred to the interrelation among modern forms of exploitation and domination (power), and the coloniality of knowledge had to do with impact of colonisation on the different areas of knowledge production, coloniality of being would make primary reference to the lived experience of colonisation and its impact on language. (Maldonado-Torres 2007:242 in Mothoagae 2014:12–13)

In this article I have attempted to argue that there is a great need to critically engage with African proverbs. However, such an engagement needs to take into account the type of theory one is using, since theories are influenced by context. In her 2004-book Masenya argues that she is proposing the *bosadi* (womanhood) approach as a comprehensive perspective that focuses on five things, namely *bosadi* and *positive elements of African culture*, *bosadi and ubuntu/botho*, *bosadi and the significance of the family*, *bosadi and oppressive elements of African culture*, and *bosadi and other oppressive forces*. Whilst these issues that she is highlighting are crucial, the fundamental question is: what theory is she using to do her analysis? She contends that her approach is aligned with the Ukpong call for inculturation hermeneutics. Such a hermeneutical strategy as she states is based on the experiences in an African sociocultural context. Yet her analysis of the proverbs reflects a Eurocentric approach that is characterised by a hierarchy of being, subject and object of study, relations of power and conceptualisation of knowledge, and the reproduction of racial, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world. However, if one goes by what Masenya maintains in terms of the hermeneutical interpretative interest, in her analysis of the proverbs she would point to the rich oral history of Northern Sotho (Sotho-Tswana), their cosmology, morality, indigenous knowledge system, rituals, drama,

sayings and memo scripts which were deeply embedded in memory. The study of these proverbs is essential; however the tools that we use in analysing these proverbs need to be scrutinised as they are not immune from the politics of the construction of knowledge and epistemic privilege. Most of all, they also contain the very oppressive structures that we aim to redefine and subvert. If that is not done, the coloniality of being will continue to manifest itself.

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