AOSIS

The Queen of Sheba and daughters of Africa: Reimagining redemptive matriarchy in 2 Chronicles

Check for updates

Author:
Dorcas C. Juma[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Old and New Testament, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Dorcas Juma,
dorcaschebetjuma@gmail.com

This article advocates for a reimagining of matriarchy through the lens of redemptive matriarchy, which critiques and destabilises oppressive structures perpetuated by both patriarchal and matriarchal systems. Patriarchy often co-opts women, using their voices to oppress other women and marginalise vulnerable male voices, thereby creating systems that hinder the flourishing of all. By engaging with the concept of redemptive matriarchy, this article challenges these oppressive dynamics, arguing for a liberative framework that fosters gender parity and mutual flourishing. The encounter between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon in 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 exemplifies redemptive matriarchy, celebrating the Queen's wisdom, agency and wealth as a paradigm of Afro-feminist power. Her role as a bearer of knowledge, a nurturer of alliances and a catalyst for transformative justice reclaims African women's voices in leadership and cultural influence. Rethinking matriarchy entails envisioning a society where leadership, economy, politics, and culture operate on principles of mutuality and shared responsibility.

Contribution: This article situates redemptive matriarchy within a liberation theological discourse, naming and exposing oppressive structures while amplifying transformative matriarchal voices like that of the Queen of Sheba to envision a society rooted in justice, equality and shared leadership.

Keywords: Queen of Sheba; daughters of Africa; redemptive matriarchy; Afro-feminist lens; transformative justice; liberation theological discourse.

Introduction

The story of the Queen of Sheba in 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 has long captured imaginations as a tale of wisdom, wealth and cross-cultural engagement. Mamman Musa Adamu (2009:472) highlights enduring debates surrounding the Queen of Sheba's legend, questioning her identity, origins and historical reality. Key inquiries include her true name, the location of her kingdom, her racial or ethnic background and whether she bore a son with King Solomon. Additionally, scholars question her governance, the rule of her alleged son Menelik in Ethiopia and the reasons for the legend's preservation, including its role in shaping Ethiopian identity through texts like the *Kebra Negast*. Nevertheless, the Queen of Sheba is a historical figure rooted in the 10th century BCE who hailed from the ancient kingdom of Saba (modern-day Yemen). Like many women in the Old Testament, the Queen of Sheba has no name. Just like the Queen of Sheba, a number of notable women in the Old Testament though unnamed, play crucial roles in their respective narratives and contribute significantly to the theological and cultural themes of the Old Testament. The wife of Lot Wife in Genesis 19:15–26 is a significant figure known for turning into a pillar of salt when she looked back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:8–16 provided for the prophet Elijah during a famine and experienced a miraculous replenishment of her food supply. In 2 Kings 4:8–37, one encounters the Shunammite woman, a wealthy and hospitable woman who showed kindness to the prophet Elisha and was blessed with a son whom Elisha later revived. Exodus 2:1–10 documents the story of Pharaoh's Daughter, the Egyptian princess who rescued and adopted the infant Moses from the Nile River. The tragic story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 serves as a prelude to significant events in Israel's history, highlighting themes of violence and justice. 2 Samuel 14:1–20 records the story of the wise woman of Tekoa who acted as a mediator for Joab to convince King David to reconcile with his son Absalom. 2 Samuel 20:14–22 is the story of the wise woman of Abel Beth Maakah who negotiated with Joab to save her city by delivering Sheba, a rebel leader. 2 Kings 5:1–4 also records the story of the Servant Girl of Naaman's wife, an Israelite captive who directed Naaman to the prophet Elisha for healing from leprosy.

Thus, the namelessness of the Queen of Sheba in the Old Testament is not unusual and does not diminish her exemplary contributions to the socio-economic, political, theological and cultural themes of the text. According to Naomi Lucks (2009:21), 'the name Sheba was the name of her country Saba (in Hebrew, Sheba), a Kingdom in South Arabia known for its trade in important natural resources'. Saba is a region renowned for its immense wealth and strategic significance. Saba thrived as a hub of commerce, controlling lucrative trade routes for spices, gold and frankincense, which linked the Arabian Peninsula, Africa and the wider ancient world (Hancock 2021:3). This affluence provided the backdrop for the Queen's legendary journey to meet King Solomon, as recounted in biblical, Qur'anic and Ethiopian traditions (Adamu 2009:469). Of relevance to the analysis of the concept of redemptive matriarchy is the fact that the Queen of Sheba, the legendary figure in biblical and historical texts, is closely associated with Africa, specifically the regions of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Ethiopian traditions refer to her as Makeda. She is celebrated in the *Kebra Nagast*, a foundational text that links her lineage to the Solomonic dynasty. Some scholars argue that her story reflects the ancient trade networks and cultural exchanges between East Africa and the Middle East, suggesting that Sheba (or Saba) could have encompassed territories in modern-day Ethiopia, Eritrea and Yemen (Goodman 2021).

Adam and Eghubare (2010:402) critique Euro-American scholars for attempting to de-Africanize the Queen of Sheba, emphasising instead the need to preserve her Africanness as reflected in biblical, Ethiopian, Arabian and Yoruba (Nigerian) traditions. This connection underscores the significance of East Africa in the historical imagination of ancient civilisations. Seen this way, the Queen of Sheba emerges as a symbol of female empowerment and intelligence, challenging traditional gender roles in an era vantage point and locations like the Kenyan society dominated by patriarchal structures (Juma 2024a:118). The Queen of Sheba's story offers a powerful redemptive matriarchal concept in Kenyan society, where patriarchal structures often dominate social, cultural and religious narratives. As a woman of wisdom, wealth and political acumen, she challenges the notion that leadership and influence are exclusively male domains. Her celebrated encounter with King Solomon demonstrates her capacity to engage in diplomacy and intellectual discourse as an equal, highlighting the potential of women to shape society's moral and spiritual compass. Robin Gallaher Branch (2022) argues:

> Although some scholars question the Queen of Sheba's historicity and visit and see them as legendary, the interaction between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba was a meeting of equals in rank, education, bearing, and statesmanship. (p. 1)

In a Kenyan context, her narrative can inspire the re-imagining of gender roles, affirming the transformative leadership of women in breaking cycles of oppression and fostering inclusive societal structures. Her intellectual prowess, as seen in her dialogue with Solomon, exemplifies wisdom and critical thinking. Her leadership of a powerful nation defied stereotypes, illustrating that women could govern with competence and command international respect. Her story is therefore an inspiration to issues of the daughters of African women's agency and influence in a historical context often devoid of such representations.

An Afro-feminist reading of 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 for the daughters of Africa

An Afro-feminist reading of 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 interprets the story of the Queen of Sheba through the lens of African feminist thought, highlighting the agency, wisdom and leadership of an African woman in a biblical context. African feminist thought is an African women's lens of creative biblical interpretation that centres the experiences, histories and voices of African women while addressing the intersecting oppressions they face, including patriarchy, colonialism, racism and economic exploitation. For Amina Mama (2019):

> African feminist thought refers to the dynamic ideas; reflections, theories and other expressions of intellectual practices by politically radical African women concerned with liberating Africa by focusing women's liberation, and as such cannot be easily defined or captured. (p. 1)

Even though Mama (2019:1) observes that African feminist thought cannot be defined or captured, its broader liberation concepts inform Afro-feminist reading of 2 Chronicles 9:1–12. African feminist thought critiques Universalist approaches to feminism that often ignore the cultural, social and political realities of African contexts (Nnaemeka 2004:364). Instead, African feminist thought emphasises indigenous knowledge systems, communal values and the agency of African women in shaping their societies. Rooted in the principles of justice, equity and liberation, it advocates for transformative change that dismantles systemic injustices and affirms the dignity, rights and contributions of African women across diverse spheres of life.

An Afro-feminist reading of 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 situates the Queen within a cultural and historical framework that celebrates African women's contributions to governance, diplomacy and intellectual discourse. The historical setting of 2 Chronicles 9:1–12, which narrates the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, positions the text in the context of ancient Near Eastern royal interactions. The Queen of Sheba, often associated with the kingdom of Saba (modern-day Yemen or Ethiopia), embodies the archetype of a powerful and wealthy African monarch. Her journey to Jerusalem reflects the interconnectedness of African and Middle Eastern cultures through trade, diplomacy and intellectual exchange. The narrative of 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 recounts the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon, highlighting themes of wisdom, wealth and divine blessing. The Queen of Sheba arrives with questions to test Solomon's

famed wisdom, a significant act in the ancient Near Eastern context where rulers often sought knowledge from others to enhance governance and legitimacy (Barré 2023:221). The passage's emphasis on her journey with lavish gifts as seen in v. 1 aligns with the portrayal of Solomon's reign as the pinnacle of Israel's wealth and divine favour as shown in 1 Kings 10:1–13. Her acknowledgement of Solomon's wisdom as divinely inspired as indicated in v. 8 affirms the covenantal promise that Israel's king, if faithful, would serve as a beacon of God's justice and blessing to the nations as in Deuteronomy 4:6–8. Three things stand out in the historical setting of the narrative of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon that can be empowering to the daughters of Africa. Firstly, the Queen of Sheba is the one who initiates the visit to King Solomon as indicated in 2 Chronicles 9:1. Typical African societies often confine women to the domestic sphere, making it uncommon for them to embark on long journeys in pursuit of transformative opportunities.

However, in 2 Chronicles, the Queen of Sheba defies these norms by initiating a visit to King Solomon, breaking barriers of culture and religion that marginalise women in patriarchal settings and seeking to establish diplomatic and socioeconomic relationships. She does this after hearing about Solomon's fame. The Queen of Sheba journeyed an estimated 2000 to 2500 km from the southern Arabian Peninsula (modern-day Yemen) or Ethiopia to Jerusalem, a trek that would have taken months through rugged terrain and harsh climates. According to Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania (2024):

> [T]he trip from Sheba to Jerusalem must have been grueling for the queen. She was used to living in luxury. Now, she was trekking at a camel's pace on a journey of 1,500 miles [2,400 km], much of it through the burning desert. (p. 1)

Notably, 'according to one estimate, her travels would have taken some 75 days to complete, and that was just one way' (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2024). This extraordinary distance highlights her unwavering determination to seek wisdom and test Solomon with her probing questions. For the daughters of Africa, her journey symbolises two things: a legacy of intellectual curiosity, resilience and the courage to challenge male-dominant narratives that present African women as passive, naïve and subjective (Namulondo 2010:4). Her pursuit of truth and understanding, offers a profound model of agency and empowerment for the daughters of Africa. The second issue is that the Queen of Sheba's ability to initiate a long-distance journey redefines the narrative of women's agency in African contexts, challenging the patriarchal relegation of women to the domestic sphere. Her journey embodies the potential for matriarchal leadership to be visionary and boundary-crossing, inspiring the daughters of Africa to reclaim spaces of influence and intellectual engagement. It signals a re-thinking of matriarchy as a model rooted in courage, autonomy and the pursuit of transformative relationships that transcend cultural and religious limitations.

The third issue is that the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon invites a re-thinking of matriarchy, displaying a powerful African queen who defies patriarchal norms by engaging in intellectual dialogue, asserting her authority and embodying leadership. Her agency challenges traditional notions of power, emphasising matriarchy not as subjugation but as a dynamic, wisdom-centred model of influence and governance. The Queen of Sheba's role highlights the inclusivity of God's kingdom in the Old Testament beyond gender, ethnicity race and boundaries. Her admiration for Solomon's governance and the acknowledgement of Yahweh as the source of his success in v. 8 echo the prophetic vision of nations bringing their treasures to Jerusalem to honour God as in Isaiah 60:5–7. The encounter reflects the fulfilment of Abraham's promise that through his descendants, all nations would be blessed as in Genesis 12:3. By analogy, all women are blessed too with the ability to be leaders and to acquire material blessings just like King Solomon as indicated in the affluence of the Queen of Sheba. By placing an African queen at the centre of this story, the Chronicler subtly emphasises God's global mission, bridging ethnic and cultural divides and acknowledging the active participation of Gentiles in divine purposes. The intersection of wisdom and leadership attracted the Queen of Sheba to travel long distances in pursuit of it. This implies that women too have the right to pursue wisdom and material wealth just like their male counterparts.

The story of the Queen of Sheba in 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 offers profound insights into the relationship between wisdom and leadership, with significant implications for the daughters of Africa. It is tempting to focus on the Wisdom of Solomon, as highlighted in verses 1–2. Yet, it is equally crucial to recognise the wisdom embodied by the Queen of Sheba. Her refusal to passively accept the reports of Solomon's achievements and wisdom without firsthand verification, as seen in verses 5–7, reflects a model of critical engagement and discernment. In her words, 'I did not believe what they said until I came and saw with my own eyes', she demonstrates the importance of seeking truth through personal experience and critical inquiry. According to Wilharm (2024), 'the Queen of Sheba was already wise. She posed challenging questions to King Solomon. She listened when he talked. She observed all that he did'. Thus, the narrative highlights the strength of a woman who is neither passive nor easily swayed. She is instead an active participant in discerning reality (Wilharm 2024). Such matriarchal wisdom calls the daughters of Africa to embody similar critical engagement and agency in challenging narratives, questioning systems and pursuing redemptive structures that promote justice and flourishing for all. By following the Queen of Sheba's example, African women are reminded of their transformative potential to lead with wisdom, courage and integrity, shaping societies that honour the dignity and well-being of every individual. Shona Bezanson (2018) observes, 'When African women come together to discuss transformative leadership, one can't help but feel amazed, inspired and energized'. Solomon's wisdom often understood as a divine gift in 1 Kings 3:12 is tested and affirmed through the Queen's probing questions,

highlighting the importance of discernment in ruling with justice.

The Queen's autonomy, authority and ability to engage Solomon in intellectual dialogue challenge patriarchal structures, suggesting a broader recognition of women's roles in leadership. This dialogical encounter, therefore, enriches the theological and ethical understanding of mutual respect, wisdom and divine blessing across gender, race, cultural boundaries and political spheres. In an Afro-feminist perspective of 2 Chronicles 1:1–12, the re-reading of the story of the Queen of Sheba puts emphasis on her agency as a woman of authority who navigates socio-policies, economic, religious cultural spheres that subordinate women. Diko (2023:615) discusses in detail how, 'in the Old Testament, women are recurrently portrayed as subordinate to men, subject to patriarchal norms and deprived of agency and autonomy'. The intelligence, wealth and ability of the Queen of Sheba to engage Solomon in a test of wisdom challenge traditional gender norms to portray her as an equal participant in a sphere often dominated by male rulers. Additionally, by reclaiming her African heritage, the daughters of Africa get an opportunity to embody her as a symbol of African leadership, wisdom and cultural sophistication. Coulter-Harris (2013) argues:

> Even if it cannot be proven conclusively that she and the Pharaoh were the same person, the Queen of Sheba was a divine princes who existed as a heavenly symbol of feminine power. (p. 3)

Seen this way, ways in which her historical and cultural readings have often minimised her role or exoticised her presence are interrogated and exposed. Thus, critiquing patriarchal and Eurocentric interpretations in an Afro-feminist reading underscores the Queen of Sheba's role as a symbol of transformative power and mutual respect. This perspective also links her story to the lived realities of the daughters of Africans today, drawing parallels between their struggles for recognition and the broader quest for justice, equity and liberation.

Re-imaging matriarchy in the Queen of Sheba for the daughters of Africa

Matriarchy is a social system in which women, particularly mothers, hold primary power and central roles in authority, decision-making and resource management. In a matriarchal society, lineage and inheritance are often traced through the female line, and women play dominant roles in shaping cultural, religious and political life. According to Juma (2024b:71–72), 'matriarchy should be understood from the perspective of a society in which women are empowered to awaken to the potential and gifting bestowed on them by God'. According to Juma (2024b:72), 'this is in reference to the power and vulnerability of women that have the potential to transform society in ways that enables the lives of both men and women to flourish'. Modern interpretations of matriarchy sometimes conflate it with female dominance. Hasty, Lewis and Snipes (2022) for example define Matriarchy

as 'a rule by senior women where women exercise authority throughout social life and control power and wealth'. For Hasty et al. (2022), 'like patriarchy, matriarchy is a gender ideology'. Of relevance to the daughters of Africa in contemporary society is the way Hasty et al. (2022) frame matriarchy as a gender ideology akin to patriarchy. This arguably exposes how matriarchal systems, while redistributing power along gendered lines, can replicate hierarchical and exclusionary practices. This article builds on their critique by advancing redemptive matriarchy as a transformative paradigm that seeks to destabilise oppressive structures embedded in both patriarchal and matriarchal systems. Isife (2023, p. 4) observes, 'In traditional Africa, patriarchy and matriarchy are seen not as evolutionary or contradictory terms as seen in the Western conception, but as complementary spheres of power control'. Isife (2023, p. 4) argues, 'Traditional matriarchy is about the scope and status of political power available to women in traditional African societies'. Unlike traditional matriarchy, which may simply invert power dynamics, redemptive matriarchy reimagines authority as relational, inclusive and non-exploitative, prioritising the dismantling of power systems that perpetuate inequality, irrespective of gender. This approach challenges essentialist notions of gendered leadership, fostering egalitarian social frameworks that transcend rigid ideologies.

Traditional matriarchal systems often emphasise balance, nurturing and communal well-being rather than hierarchy. The Mosuo people of China for example follow a matrilineal system where women control family property, and societal leadership is grounded in maternal lineage. Feng and Xiao (2020:1) highlight the fact that in Mosuo culture, women head households, make decisions and control property and finances. According to Feng and Xiao (2020:1), the Mosuo practice 'walking marriages' ('Zouhun' in Chinese) instead of formal civil marriages where men visit their partners at night and return to their maternal homes by morning. Similarly, the Minangkabau of Indonesia, the largest matrilineal society globally, entrust land and property management to women while maintaining a cooperative partnership between genders. Mutolib et al. (2016) observe:

> The Minangkabau social structure is guided by adat (way of life), a behavioral code and worldview that sets the rules on matriliny in terms of village organization, group membership, residence, and the inheritance of property. (p. 24)

Thus, re-imaging matriarchy implies envisioning societies that challenge matriarchal norms of dominance and patriarchal norms that perpetuate power imbalance to demonstrate that power can coexist with nurturing a gender equity community-focussed leadership. It is important to note that Mutolib et al. (2026:23) decry gender inequality and the oppression of women within the Minangkabau Matrilineal society. Notably, despite its matrilineal structure, the Minangkabau society reveals how cultural practices, patriarchal power and dominance can subvert women's inheritance rights and leadership roles, perpetuating gender inequality and the systemic oppression of women.

Re-imagining matriarchy involves reinterpreting and revitalising the concept in contemporary contexts to address issues of gender equality, social justice and ecological sustainability. This perspective moves beyond the idea of women simply replacing men in power to envisioning systems where values traditionally associated with matriarchy such as cooperation, care and inclusivity are integrated into leadership and societal structures. Feminist theologians like Mary Daly (2016) for example have called for a re-imagined matriarchal spirituality that reconnects humanity to eco-feminist ethics, valuing the Earth as a nurturing mother. In Africa, movements such as Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement reflect matriarchal principles by empowering women to lead environmental conservation efforts, fostering communal resilience. According to the Green Belt Movement (2024):

> [S]hortly after beginning this work, Professor Maathai saw that behind the everyday hardships of the poor environmental degradation, deforestation, and food insecurity were deeper issues of disempowerment, disenfranchisement, and a loss of the traditional values that had previously enabled communities to protect their environment, work together for mutual benefit. (p. 1)

The example of how Maathai encouraged African women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, and provide food and firewood for life sustainability is a good example of how to re-image matriarchy for mutual co-existence. Re-imagining matriarchy thus transforms ancient frameworks into dynamic, progressive ideologies that address contemporary global challenges.

In order to re-image matriarchy in the Queen of Sheba for the daughters of Africa, it is important to underscore the historical and theological layers beneath the story of the Queen of Sheba in 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 and 1 Kings 10:1–13. Re-imagining matriarchy through the Queen of Sheba offers a profound framework for empowering the daughters of Africa by reclaiming and celebrating African women's leadership, wisdom and autonomy. The depiction of the Queen of Sheba as a sovereign ruler and intellectual equal to King Solomon embodies a model of matriarchal leadership rooted in dignity, agency and the ability to foster alliances through wisdom and dialogue. For the daughters of Africa, her narrative challenges patriarchal constructs and oppressive matriarchal ideologies by presenting an opportunity to re-image matriarchy as a system of nurturance, community-oriented governance and spiritual authority. In African contexts, her legacy parallels figures like Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba, who resisted colonial forces with strategic brilliance (Serbin et al. 2015). Yaa Asantewaa of the Ashanti also led her people against British imperialism; and Mekatilili Wa Menza, the Giriama freedom fighter from Kenya, mobilised her community against British colonial oppression through her courage, spiritual leadership and profound commitment to cultural preservation (Badu-Amoah 2024:259; Mugi-Ndua 2000). By re-imagining matriarchy through the Queen of Sheba, African women are invited to see themselves as custodians of culture, shapers of justice and bearers of transformative

leadership deeply embedded in African heritage and spirituality. This re-imagination serves as a clarion call to uplift narratives of women's resilience and ingenuity, affirming the rightful place of the daughters of Africa in shaping Africa's future.

The story of the Queen of Sheba is a profound narrative that speaks to the possibilities of rethinking leadership, gender and power through the lens of redemptive matriarchy. At its core, redemptive matriarchy critiques systems of oppression that, while often perpetuated under patriarchal rule, can also emerge within matriarchal structures co-opted by patriarchy to marginalise and silence vulnerable voices, including those of women and minority men. Notably, the intersections of privilege, oppression and the responsibilities of those in positions of relative power whether male or female, White or black, poor or rich, with the privilege of education or economic power can foster and exacerbate discriminatory systems. Mamta Motwani Accapadi (2007:208) notes, 'The notion of privilege is complex, especially whether we have privileged or we do not have'. White women contribute to the oppression of women of colour when they uphold or perpetuate racist attitudes and systems. Straight women contribute to the oppression of gay and bisexual women when they reinforce homophobic beliefs or practices. Cisgender women oppress transgender women when they engage in or support transphobia. Similarly, wealthy and middle-class women contribute to the marginalisation of women living in poverty when they advocate for policies that restrict access to education, healthcare or basic survival based on income. In religious settings especially the Church, for example, women's associations are a major site for women's oppression by fellow women as noted by Macule and Nadar (2012).

Redemptive matriarchy is therefore a liberation theological discourse that offers a transformative framework for challenging both patriarchal and oppressive matriarchal systems that stifle human flourishing. Drawing on the Queen of Sheba's encounter with King Solomon, this study illuminates her wisdom, agency and wealth as a paradigm of Afro-feminist power which can help reclaim African women's roles as custodians of knowledge and justice and also serve as an avenue for fostering redemptive societal structures that enable all to flourish. African patriarchal societies are structured in ways that deny women the opportunity to acquire wealth the way Queen Sheba is portrayed as wealthy. Some women who acquire wealth, unfortunately, perpetuate gender imbalance by asserting power over fellow women and vulnerable men. Redemptive matriarchy is a reimagined concept of matriarchy that critiques oppressive forms of matriarchy, viewing them as distortions or co-opted extensions of patriarchal systems. According to Amal Awad (2019), 'some of the most damaging kinds of oppression stem from the rules women enforce upon females'. As Juma (2024b) aptly observes, rethinking matriarchy is about envisioning a society where leadership, economic participation, social equity, political decision-making and cultural practices are shared in perfect mutuality.

Positioning the Queen of Sheba as an archetype of redemptive matriarchy, this article seeks to amplify her voice as a critique of systems that perpetuate inequality while advancing a liberative theological discourse. In doing so, it highlights the potential of Afro-feminist interpretations to reclaim sacred texts as tools for justice, equality and shared leadership.

Re-thinking matriarchy through the lens of redemptive matriarchy

Re-thinking matriarchy through the lens of redemptive matriarchy invites a transformative exploration of leadership and power, framed through the wisdom, courage and influence of figures like the Queen of Sheba and the daughters of Africa. The core values of matriarchal societies centre on fostering support, nurturing intuition, embracing receptivity and promoting collaborative endeavours. Mann (2020) defines matriarchy as 'mother-centered societies, based on maternal values: equality, consensus finding, gift giving and peace building by negotiations'. Redemptive matriarchy reclaims the narrative of matriarchy as a paradigm rooted not in dominance but in restoration, relationality and justice. The Queen of Sheba, with her intellectual curiosity, diplomacy and wealth, embodies the archetype of a leader whose influence transcends patriarchal limitations, reflecting the agency and resilience of African women across generations. Similarly, the daughters of Africa historically and contemporarily demonstrate redemptive matriarchy through their roles as nurturers of community, champions of justice and stewards of transformative change. This rethinking challenges colonial and patriarchal distortions of matriarchy as inherently weak or oppressive, instead affirming it as a model that fosters wholeness, inclusion and flourishing for all. Re-thinking matriarchy means exploring matriarchal historical and cultural manifestations in African contexts. It means understanding redemptive matriarchy as a response to oppressive systems. Salami (2012) denies the existence of matriarchal societies in traditional African contexts, referring to the concept of matriarchy as a myth. She contends that 'claiming the myth of matriarchy in pre-colonial societies also makes it easier to blame colonialism for patriarchy and forget the role of African patriarchs'. Salami (2012) further argues that championing matriarchy:

[R]einforces gender stereotypes and lets male privilege off the hook when inhabited by men who 'at least' are aware of how motherly women warriors once ruled in some distant age. (p. 1)

However, her reference to African motherly women warriors ruling in the distant past can be seen as an implicit acknowledgement of the existence of matriarchal ideologies within pre-colonial traditional societies.

Situating Minna Salami's critique within the concept of re-thinking matriarchy through the lens of redemptive matriarchy invites a nuanced analysis of the interplay between historical realities and contemporary gender discourse. While Salami dismisses the existence of traditional African matriarchal societies as myth, her acknowledgement of 'motherly women warriors' ruling in a distant past reveals traces of matriarchal ideologies embedded within African traditions. Ifi Amadiume (2002:41) explores women's collective solidarity and power in traditional African societies to argue, 'there is tension between traditional African matriarchitarianism and emerging concepts of matriarchy'. That is why this article uses the concept of redemptive matriarchy to reframe this discourse by transcending the binary debates on matriarchy. This discussion instead focusses on the restorative values to offer values rooted in communal leadership, relational justice and transformative power. McGee (2015:1) underscores the impact of a matriarchal tradition and the tradition of an African queenmothership on the ability of African women to advance in political, educational and economic spheres in their countries. By reclaiming the legacy of such ideologies, redemptive matriarchy challenges the erasure of women's historical agency while critiquing systems, both colonial and indigenous, that perpetuate patriarchy. This rethinking does not idealise the past but seeks to reimagine a future where matriarchal principles inspire inclusive and equitable social frameworks.

Amadiume (1997:83) argues, 'Both matriarchy and patriarchy are cultural constructs, but patriarchy is one step above the motherhood paradigm'. Re-thinking matriarchy is an African women's creative narrative that seeks to challenge and transform harmful matriarchal concepts, structures, ideologies and narratives. These often perpetuate gender-based violence (GBV) in subtle ways, remaining unnoticed because of their normalisation within societal frameworks. Many African societies are deeply patriarchal, with social structures often skewed to favour the boy child. Consequently, discussions on GBV, gender disparity and discrimination often focus on the male oppression of women (Astuti & Kistanto 2021:1 & Jousse 2021). Yet intra-gender dynamics also reveal significant power imbalances within the same gender. This limited perspective obscures instances of intra-gender oppression, such as when a mother-in-law oppresses a daughter-in-law. Within patriarchal frameworks, the actions of a mother-in-law are often normalised or justified under the guise of seniority and the assumed right to 'correct' the younger woman. When the daughter-in-law seeks independence and respect within the family, the mother-in-law may feel a loss of control or influence. Nadaswaran (2018:38), for instance, highlights how representations in Nigerian literature portray mothers-in-law as ambiguous figures who, while marginalised by patriarchal structures, can also act as oppressors towards their daughters-in-law. The depiction of mothers-in-law as both marginalised and oppressive complicates the ideal of redemptive matriarchy, revealing how women can perpetuate patriarchal harm within familial structures. This calls for reimagining matriarchal roles not as extensions of patriarchal authority but as transformative spaces for nurturing solidarity, empowerment and healing among women through the concept of re-thinking matriarchy as an aspect of African women's creative writing.

Many African cultural societies give power to mothers-in-laws to control daughters-in-laws, while society is socialised to believe that it is part of Africa's traditional culture that should not be challenged. This cultural assumption makes it difficult to critique or address the oppressive behaviour of a mother-in-law towards a daughter-in-law, despite its harmful impact (Dele-Ogunrinde 2006). Speaking about African mothers-in-law and the cycle of abuse, Dele-Ogunrinde (2006) observes, 'Unfortunately, this is the lot of most African Women, and many accept these abusive in-law relationships in the name of culture'. Re-thinking matriarchy involves critically engaging with the concept of matriarchy beyond its conventional definitions as female-dominated social or political structures where women hold political power, lead culturally make business decisions and inheritance typically follows the female line (Britannica 2024). It seeks to move past essentialist and hierarchical interpretations, instead emphasising relational, egalitarian and community-centred frameworks. This reimagining critiques oppressive forms of matriarchy that mimic patriarchal power dynamics and aims to reclaim matriarchy as a model for nurturing leadership and collective well-being. Rooted in justice, equity and compassion, re-thinking matriarchy envisions a transformative paradigm that challenges domination while affirming the value of interconnectedness and mutual respect within human relationships and social systems.

Observations and conclusion

The narrative of the Queen of Sheba in 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 provides a fertile ground for three key observations about matriarchy when reimagined through an Afro-feminist lens. Firstly, the Queen of Sheba embodies intellectual, spiritual and political agency, challenging traditional patriarchal interpretations that often marginalise women's roles in sacred texts. Her portrayal as a figure of wisdom and influence affirms the leadership potential and dignity of African women in biblical and contemporary contexts. Secondly, an Afro-feminist perspective highlights how matriarchal systems, deeply embedded in African cultural history, have historically represented values of nurturing leadership and communal well-being, though colonial and patriarchal distortions have often suppressed or misrepresented these systems. Finally, the concept of redemptive matriarchy critiques oppressive forms of matriarchy that replicate patriarchal dominance, instead advocating for a model of leadership rooted in justice, equity and compassion, as exemplified by the Queen of Sheba's respectful and transformative engagement with Solomon. Thus, the Queen of Sheba and daughters of Africa's reimagining of redemptive matriarchy through an Afro-feminist reading of 2 Chronicles 9:1–12 underscores the transformative potential of redemptive matriarchy as a liberative framework. By reclaiming matriarchal values and leadership through an Afro-feminist lens, this reimagining not only critiques systems of oppression but also offers a vision of leadership that affirms the dignity, agency and sacredness of African women, both in the biblical text and in contemporary lived realities.

References

Accapadi, M.M., 2007, 'When White Women cry: How white women's tears oppress women of color', *College Student Affairs Journal* 26(2), 208–215.

Adam, D.T. & Eghubare, E.F., 2010, 'The African queen: Queen of Sheba', *Journal for Semitics* 19(2), 402–420.

Adamu, M.M., 2009, 'The legend of Queen Sheba, the Solomonic Dynasty and Ethiopian history: An analysis', *African Research Review* 3(1), 468–482. https://doi.org/10.4314/afrrev.v3i1.43592

Amadiume, I., 1997, *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, religion, and culture*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.

Amadiume, I., 2002, 'Bodies, choices, globalizing neocolonial enchantments: African Matriarchs and Mammy water', *Meridians* 2(2), 41–66. https://doi.org/10.1215/15366936-2.2.41

Astuti, R.D. & Kistanto, N.H., 2021, 'Women oppression as a result of male dominated culture as represented in Shenoy's Novel "The Secret Wish List"', in *E3S Web of Conferences*, vol. 317, p. 03005, EDP Sciences, Les Ulis.

Awad, A., 2019, *It is women who have most tried to oppress me*, viewed 27 November 2024, from https://www.sbs.com.au/voices/article/it-is-women-who-have-most-tried-to-oppress-me/nc8fli0co.

Badu-Amoah, E., 2024, 'The role of women in colonial resistance in Africa: A Study of Asante and Dahomey in West Africa', *Intercontinental Journal of Social Sciences* 1(3), 250–265.

Barré, M., 2023, *Wisdom, you are my sister: Studies in honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.

Bezanson, S., 2018, *Words of wisdom from African women moving the world forward*, viewed 26 November 2024, from https://mastercardfdn.org/words-of-wisdom-from-african-women-moving-the-world-forward/.

Branch, R.G., 2022, *The Egalitarian relationship of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, viewed 26 November 2024, from https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/the-egalitarian-relationship-of-king-solomon-and-the-queen-of-sheba/.

Britannica, 2024, *Matriarchy: Social system*, viewed 27 November 2024, from https://www.britannica.com/topic/matriarchy.

Coulter-Harris, D.M., 2013, *The Queen of Sheba: Legend, literature and Lore*, McFarland, Jefferson, North CA.

Daly, M., 2016, *Gyn/ecology: The metaethics of radical feminism*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Dele-Ogunrinde, F., 2006, *African mothers-in-law and the cycle of abuse*, viewed 27 November 2024, from https://www.inigerian.com/african-mothers-in-law-and-the-cycle-of-abuse/.

Diko, M., 2023, 'Intersectionality and the oppressive incidents of women in the Old Testament and the South African context', *Old Testament Essays* 36(3), 612–634. https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2023/v36n3a5

Feng, H. & Xiao, J., 2020, 'Dynamic authenticity: Understanding and conserving Mosuo dwellings in China in transitions', *Sustainability* 13(1), 143. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13010143

Goodman, L., 2021, *How did the Queen of Sheba come to be seen as Black?*, viewed 26 November 2024, from https://www.brandeis.edu/jewish-experience/history-culture/2021/december/sheba-queen-black.html.

Hancock, J.F., 2021, *Spices, scents and silk: Catalysts of world trade*, CABI, Oxfordshire, GB.

Hasty, J., Lewis, D.G. & Snipes, M.M., 2022, *12.4: The power of gender – Patriarchy and matriarchy*, viewed 26 November 2024, from https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Anthropology/Introductory_Anthropology/Introduction_to_Anthropology_(OpenStax)/12%3A_Gender_and_Sexuality/12.04%3A_The_Power_of_Gender-_Patriarchy_and_Matriarchy.

Isife, E.E., 2023, 'Matriarchy in traditional Africa and its relevance to contemporary feminism', *An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 9(4), 1–21.

Jousse, L., 2021, *Discrimination and gender inequalities in Africa: What about Equality between women and men?*, viewed 27 November 2024, from https://igg-geo.org/en/2021/05/31/discrimination-and-gender-inequalities-in-africa-what-about-equality-between-women-and-men/.

Juma, D., 2024a, 'Feminist cultural hermeneutics and a theology of women empowerment: Musimbi RA Kanyoro's global pilgrimages of justice', in L. Maseno, E. Mombo, N. Muke & V. Kahindo (eds.), *Queen of Sheba: East and central African women's theologies of liberation (Circle Jubilee Volume 2)*, pp. 117–134, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.

Juma, D.C., 2024b, 'Re-thinking "Matriarchy" in the life of Anna Elisha Mghwira: Women in religion and politics in the context of 1 Kings 1:1–2:19', in L. Maseno, E. Mombo, N. Muke & V. Kahindo (eds.), *Queen of Sheba: East and Central African Women's Theologies of Liberation (Circle Jubilee Volume 2)*, pp. 71–87, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.

Lucks, N., 2009, *Queen of Sheba*, Infobase Publishing, New York City, NY.

Macule, S.A. & Nadar, S., 2012, 'Women oppressing women: The cultivation of Esprit de Corps in Xirilo (Women's Association) of the UCCSA in Mozambique', *The Ecumenical Review* 64(3), 357–365. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2012.00180.x

Mama, A., 2019, *African feminist thought*, viewed 07 February 2025, from https://jacquelinebethelmougoue.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/african-feminist-thought.pdf.

Mann, B.A., 2020, *Anthropology matriarchal studies: Introduction and definition*, viewed 28 November 2024, from https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0113.xml.

McGee, K., 2015, 'The impact of matriarchal traditions on the advancement of Ashanti Women in Ghana', in B. Taylor (ed.), *Listening to the voices: Multi-ethnic women in education*, pp. 1–10, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA.

Mugi-Ndua, E., 2000, *Mekatilili Wa Menza, woman warrior*, Sasa Sema Publications, Westlands, Nairobi.

Mutolib, A., Yonariza, Y., Mahdi, M. & Ismono, R.H., 2016, 'Gender inequality and the oppression of women within Minangkabau Matrilineal Society: A case study of the management of Ulayat Forest land in Nagari Bonjol, Dharmasraya District, West Sumatra Province, Indonesia', *Asian Women* 32(3), 23–49. https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2016.09.32.3.23

Nadaswaran, S., 2018, 'Oppressor or oppressed: The m (other) –in-law in Nigerian women's literature', in J. Parnell (ed.), *Representations of the mother-in-law in literature, film, drama, and television*, pp. 37–51, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD.

Namulondo, S., 2010, *Imagined realities, defying subjects: Voice, sexuality and subversion in African women's writing*, viewed 28 November 2024, from https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4630&context=etd.

Nnaemeka, O., 2004, 'Nego-feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning
Africa's way', *Signs* 29(2), 357–385. https://doi.org/10.1086/378553

Salami, M., 2012, *There were no matriarchies in pre-colonial Africa*, viewed 28 November 2024, from https://msafropolitan.com/2012/06/the-myth-of-matriarchy-in-africa.html.

Serbin, S., Joubeaud, E., Balducci, A. & Souindoula, S., 2015, *Njinga Mbandi, Queen of Ndongo and Matamba*, UNESCO, Fontenoy, Paris.

The Green Belt Movement, 2024, *Our history*, viewed 27 November 2024, from https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/who-we-are/our-history.

Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2024, *They did Jehovah's will: A visit that was Richly Rewarded*, viewed 28 November 2024, from https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1999487.

Wilharm, S., 2024, *Queen of Sheba and her search for wisdom*, viewed 28 November 2024, from https://sharonwilharm.com/queen-of-sheba/.