Botho/Ubuntu and "Unsettling patriarchy": *Go Laya* in Gaborone Bridal Showers

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Abstract

This article's analysis of data from Gaborone Bridal showers used theories of agency propounded by Ashivat and Saba Mohammed, drawn from religious women. They highlight "agency as resistance that might also appear as "negotiation with oppressive social structures, and partial compliance" thereby

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indicating that "docility does not necessarily compromise agency" (Ashivat, 2016:67). Gaborone Bridal Showers are undoubtedly about women encouraging and accompanying another woman to enter a very patriarchal institution: heterosexual marriage, hence its agentic angle has to be interrogated carefully. The analysis of data collected from Gaborone Bridal Showers asked the following questions from interview guides: How does go laya (counselling of a bride) in the cultural setting and the urban-based bridal showers of Gaborone construct and reconstruct gender? How do they create new female spaces? Granted that they still buy a woman household items and that some voices are outright conservative, there is sufficient evidence-based conclusions that Gaborone Bridal Showers are still embrace patriarchy. Yet the analysis of the context and content of the Gaborone bridal shower, with its insistence on "outright freedom" and that every woman is welcome and must be free to talk, regardless of age and marital status, creates an inclusive space that resists equating women's full humanity with heterosexual marriage. Even the most conservative voices acknowledged radical inclusivity as a change brought by Gaborone Bridal Showers in the go laya female space. Content wise, evidence-based findings indicate iconoclastic twists in go laya—insisting that a married woman must keep her voice, keep her friends, wear what she wants; hold the man accountable financially, insist on faithfulness, insist on shared household chores, watch out for intimate partner violence, enjoy her sexuality and pursue her profession.

Keywords: *agency, Ubuntu resistance, gender, feminism, bridal showers, bridal counseling, Gaborone, Botswana*

Introduction: Shower the bride!

As used here, the Setswana phrase *go laya* refers to the group counselling of the bride or bride-to-be by elderly married women in preparation for entering the institution of marriage in Botswana. Traditionally, *go laya* is a ritual of crossing that either occurs the day before the marriage or during the afternoon of the wedding day. It is strictly carried by married or elderly women, speaking to a new bride about marriage. Gaborone bridal showers, hosted by younger generations for their friends, also undertake *go laya.* The aim of this paper is to assess the content of *go laya* in Gaborone bridal showers so as to understand how it confronts, reconstructs or co-habits with patriarchal structures, as well as to note their agency. The data was part of a larger study[4] sponsored by John Templeton Foundation. A group of University of Botswana researchers spent a year (2016-2017) collecting data from Gaborone, Botswana showers.[5] There were four different

[4] The project was named *Botho/Ubuntu* and Community Building in the Urban Space.

[5] The project used mixed method to collect data, but the study was primarily qualitative. First, we reviewed literature concerning the area of study, particularly to establish how traditional Setswana handled the arrival of the daughter-in-law, son-in-law and a new baby. The project sought to establish both continuity, discontinuity and hybridity. Our instruments for collecting data included an interview guide, self-administered

showers: The Naomi, Laban, Bridal and Baby showers. The Naomi and Laban are showers for parents, the in-laws, who will be receiving new daughters and sons-in-law in their families. Naomi and Laban showers originate from Botswana and are open to both men and women. They tend to be attended by elders, although in actual fact it remains predominately female. The bridal shower is for the Bride-to-be, often held a few weeks before the wedding and is exclusively female (Setume et. al., 2017: 173-191). The Baby shower is held for an expectant mother, to prepare for the forthcoming baby, to rejoice with the expectant mother and to prepare her for motherhood (Motswapong et. al., 2018: 3-13). It is also largely female, although increasingly, men are urged to attend.

The overall aim of the study was to explore how *Botho/Ubuntu* is expressed in Botswana urban areas, using the case study of Gaborone showers. While there are several ways of defining *Botho/Ubuntu* (Munyaka and Motlhabi, 2009), the working definition used in the study was *Botho/Ubuntu* as a philosophical understanding that equates one's human identity with the capacity to respect, welcome, care for and empower another person.[6]

questionnaire, recorded data in video and audio as well as an observation instrument.

[6] In the forthcoming paper "Mother Economies: *Botho/Ubuntu* and Community Building in the Urban space, a Focus on Naomi/Laban, Bridal Showers in Gaborone" we dwelt much on defining the concept and assessing how the showers may be driven or may express *Botho/Ubuntu.* To avoid repetition in this

Fieldwork was preceded by desktop research that investigated cultural practices and celebrations surrounding the preparations for a marriage and a new baby – how they indicated *Botho/Ubuntu* and how they may be the foundations of current urban showers (Dube et. al., 2016: 1-22). Two of the four[7] specific objectives of the study sought to investigate how shower participants construct and reconstruct gender and how they contribute towards building and maintaining "justice loving communities" that counteract the encroachment of poverty in the urban space. Mixed methods were employed to collect data in Gaborone using such instruments as observation form, interview guide, self-administered questionnaire, and video and audio recording. Altogether 31 showers were covered, 13 of which were bridal showers. This article focuses on the Gaborone bridal shower, particularly on the above stated specific objectives of the study, including how they contribute towards building justice-loving communities. The article, therefore, seeks to analyze the agency of Gaborone women in undertaking self-

paper, we shall not dwell on this aspect of the study, since it is already covered.

[7] The rest of the objectives sought to: 1. Explore the theological and spiritual base of *Botho/Ubuntu* values/ethics, 2. Examine how *Botho/Ubuntu* was understood and manifested in traditional Batswana communities 3. Analyze how the *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic is expressed in contemporary urban settings in Botswana 4. Highlight how *Botho/Ubuntu* spirituality can inform the building and maintenance of justice loving communities. These objectives are covered in the various articles of this special issue and in previously published articles of the study.

initiated communal projects to empower one another and how such an act may be reconstructing or maintaining patriarchal gender roles, and in the process counteract poverty and contribute towards building justice-loving communities. The structural process of the article involves defining and discussion of gender; Gaborone bridal showers participants, theories of agency, processes and content of Gaborone Bridal showers and highlighting the creation of a liberative space for Batswana women in the midst of a patriarchal institution—marriage.

Gender as a social construct

In her article, "We should all be Feminists," C. N. Adichie writes that "Gender matters everywhere in the world" (2014: 25), and that "gender as it functions today is grave injustice" (21). According to Susan Archer Mann (2012: 69), "a major contribution of the second wave liberal feminists was to make gender a core concept in feminist analysis. By highlighting the distinction between biological sex and socially learned gender, they focused on how gender roles could be transformed through conscious social and political action to foster a more egalitarian society." Similarly, Musa W. Dube argues: "The fact that gender is culturally constructed needs to be underlined. This means that gender is not natural; is not divine; has to do with social relationships of women and men; can be reconstructed and transformed by the society for it is culturally constructed […and] gender overlaps with "other

social, cultural, economic and political factors" (Dube, 2003: 86).

The 2017 report on "Progress towards Sustainable Development Goals" features gender and poverty concerns and the need for empowerment. Goal number 1 of Sustainable Development Goals is: "End Poverty in all its forms everywhere." It is an imperative voice underlining urgency. Thus the 2017 report states,

> Social protection systems are fundamental to preventing and reducing poverty and inequality at every stage of people's lives, through benefits for children, mothers with new borns, persons with disabilities, older persons and those persons without jobs. Preliminary data show that in 2016 only 45 per cent of the world's population was effectively protected by a social protection system and the coverage varied widely across countries and regions (2017: 3).

Concerning the Africa region in particular, it is noted that "42 percent of people in Sub-Saharan Africa continued to subsist in conditions of extreme poverty in 2013," hence the report underlines that "intensified efforts are required to boost the incomes, alleviate the suffering and build the resilience of those individuals still living in extreme poverty in particular in Sub-Saharan Africa." (2) Goal 5 of the sustainable development goals is on gender. With an imperative voice, it states that nations should seek to: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women

and girls," again underlining urgency and a call for action. The 2017 report notes that "gender inequality persists worldwide, depriving women and girls of their basic rights and opportunities. Achieving gender equality and empowerment of women and girls will require more vigorous efforts… to counter deeply rooted gender-based discrimination that often results from patriarchal attitudes and related social norms" (2017: 5).

According to the *SADC Gender Protocol 2012 Barometer, Botswana*, "The proportion of female-headed households living in poverty is higher than that of male-headed households, on average 33% and 27% respectively (2001: 39)." The *Barometer* continues to note that, "According to the 2007 National Population Policy review, almost 50% of households are female-headed, and they make up the majority of poor households… There are no special policies for women to access credit (2001:46). Gaborone showers are not formal social systems that are government imitated, rather they are community-based initiatives that become some form of social capital to participating members. Since they are community initiatives, they suggest agency among participants, which may contribute towards mitigating pockets of poverty and they may provide a space where "gender-based discrimination that often results from patriarchal attitudes and related norms" may be discussed and possibly reconstructed—or embraced strategically. Consequently, two objectives of our study sought to "Investigate how *Botho/Ubuntu* activities in the

urban space construct and reconstruct gender," as well as to investigate if they contribute towards mitigating poverty.

Gaborone Bridal Showers participants

Although Gaborone bridal showers are open to women of all ages, our data indicates that the age range of bridal shower participants is predominantly youth oriented. 90.4% of them were between 20 and 40 years, while only 9.6% participants were 41 years and above. Educationally, they ranged from form three to PhD, with the highest number of participants having a degree and postgraduate (41.4%). The marital status of the bridal shower indicates that the majority of participants are single (76.8%) while only 20.7% are married and 2.4% widowed. The bridal showers are dominated by youths who are mainly friends and non-relatives such as workmates, church mates and neighbors of the bride-to-be (89%) while blood relatives constitute only (11%, mostly sisters), which is statistically significant because it highlights that bridal showers are driven by the *Botho/Ubuntu* community-building spirit than by blood relations.

This chapter's analysis will dwell particularly on the responses given in the interview guide to the following two questions: The first one sought to assess the production of cultural roles and efforts to reconstruct them. This question asked respondents to compare bridal showers with traditional activities surrounding preparation for marriage. Participants were asked to share what they think is the unique contribution of bridal showers. Lastly, in a more specific way, participants were

asked how roles of men and women are changed from the traditional ones. The second thematic question drawn from the interview guide concerns community building, and it asks how bridal showers "build or divert from African ways of community building." Some data is also drawn from theme of character building, where respondents were asked to discuss how bridal showers build the characters of participants. The overall picture of Gaborone bridal showers as an exclusively female's space is that there is an unsettling of patriarchy. It is a space of women on the margins of society making movements in and out of the cultural boundaries of patriarchy—unsettling patriarchy, in small and big ways.

"Unsettling Patriarchy"

If Gaborone bridal showers have become such strong female-centered movements and spaces dominated by largely younger women who are relatively educated, how do these showers unsettle patriarchy? How do they construct and reconstruct gender in the content of their *go laya*? To be unsettled can be described at various levels. First and foremost, it means to be uneasy—to be out of one's comfort zone. Second, it can refer to that eerie feeling that comes with the uncanny knowledge that something is no longer what it used to be, or not what it seems to be. It is the state of detecting threats of change. Lastly, it is to be uprooted, moved from the comfort zone to some strange space where one is forced to see things anew. To be unsettled is to be disturbed.

The ever-growing Gaborone bridal showers have been unsettling to some men. One often hears that, "*Kante dishowera tsa lona, go tholwa go etswe teng ruri* (complaint and suspicion—you women why are

you always going to these showers)?" or "*dishowera tseo tsa lona dithuba malwapa* (outright accusations—your showers destroy marriages)" or "*Nna wame mosadi ke mmoleletse gore ga a ye ko dishowereng* (taking control—I have told my wife/girlfriend that she will not go to the showers)". In these comments there are some fears, suspicions and attempts to stop women from going to the showers, for they are thought to be dangerous.

In the rest of this article, we shall analyze some of the findings from the interview guides, highlighting how bridal showers as exclusively female spaces are "unsettling patriarchy." We will investigate how they construct and reconstruct gender by focusing on the content of their act of *go laya* in the data collected from interview guides. Initial data analysis has uncovered the unsettling encounter with patriarchal persistence in an exclusively female space. Consequently, in our earlier analysis (in the chapter "Mother Economies") we pointed out that the bridal shower is possibly the most complex shower in reading the nuanced spaces that are created to subvert patriarchy. Age conflicts between speakers and participants, their different ethics as well as how new spaces of liberation are created need to be explored closely (Dube et. al., 2021).

In short, we may not always find an outright rejection of patriarchal marriage and its patriarchal norms and values because the purpose of a bridal shower is to prepare "the bride-to-be" for her new role as a new wife, and to be a good one for that matter—one who

will manage to maintain the marriage despite its well acknowledged challenges. However, many respondents call for change, bringing bridal showers into the creative and continuous tension of cultural norms and the call for transforming gender roles, as one respondent said, "We teach old ways and new ones." Another respondent captures this in-between space by saying the purpose of bridal showers is, "*go laya*, though with a modern twist." She went on to say, "so we teach a woman to ask her husband where he was and what he was doing. We teach mutual respect." She compared the cultural and urban Motswana man, stating that, "Yes, the roles are the same, but in cities men cook, buy grocery, change nappies because at times the wife is busy at work, has travelled for a meeting etc. But a woman is still a man's helper, and the man is still the head of the household." The creative tension and its seemingly contradictory stance towards gender reconstruction is endlessly attested in the data. The material gifts, for example, that are given to Brides-to-be seemingly suggest that she must accept her gendered role as a homemaker. One respondent stated, "Gifts give tips about marriage, e.g., A plate means 'serve a decent meal,' and all gifts have a meaning." She added, "*Mosadi o bonwa ka dilwana,"* (that is a wife must have utensils). Clearly there are seismic moves upon the patriarchal cultural rock upon which the Setswana marriage is based in Gaborone bridal showers. It is a troubled, cracking rock for there is a "twist"; there is asking about a husband's whereabouts, which is a direct affront to the cultural constructions of a Motswana man as a free bachelor,

married or not; and there is acceptance that a married Motswana woman is also a professional woman whose duties must be attended to. Be that as it may, the "man is still the head of the household" in Gaborone bridal showers! Thus, the question of agency and empowering women in the bridal shower space becomes central and requires a nuanced theoretical framework to appreciate the twisting of gender roles and its magnitude.

Agency, empowerment and bridal showers

According to Ian Buchanan, "agency is the degree to which a subject is able to determine the course of their actions" but points out that Karl Marx held that "people make history, but not in conditions of their own choosing' (2010:10-11). Karl Marx puts suspicion into our so-called choices, as choices to do what we have already been socially constructed to choose and to do, according to our class, gender, race and ethnicity as subsequent studies have shown. According to Joseph Childers and Gary Henzi, "the term is often used interchangeably with the similar yet distinct concept of the subject…the subject is capable of thought and critique, and thus is also capable of choice and action" (Childers and Henzi, 1995: 6). However, they note that

> The difficulty with this concept of agent and agency has to do with theorizing change, especially political and social change. If the individual is always subjected to ideological and discursive constraints, and all his or her actions—even the ones that seem

> oppositional—are always accountable in terms of those ideologies and discourses, how then is it possible that anything can change? Some new historicists, like Louis Montrose have argued that agents and their concomitant agency are both constrained and enabled by the interaction of these power structures (Childers and Henzi, 1995: 6-7).

These definitions of agency and subjectivity imply two opposing but also intersecting perspectives about Botswana women of the bridal shower movement. First, it highlights that we cannot rule out that Batswana women of the Bridal shower movement are indeed constructed by patriarchy which they fully embrace and serve, although not without resistance. They have been taught that a woman must grow up and be married and that a married woman should try to please her husband, cook and clean—and so they buy her household items, teach her to respect her husband and to sexually satisfy him. At the same time, we cannot rule out that the same subjugation is the seed of possible resistance. That is, women in patriarchal relationships, whether married or not, experience the oppressive structures that govern such relationships and, consequently, they seek to empower the Bride-to-be with skills of survival, perhaps subtle resistance, and at times overt resistance. It is this range of resistance that we seek to articulate or tease

out and how such agency functions through embracing patriarchal roles at the same time subverting them.

In her article, "Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases," Orit Avishai writes that

> Agency, a key concept in social thought, has challenged feminist theorists to discern its limits when individuals interact with oppressive social structures. What kind of agentic action, decisions, preferences, and choices can be expected from subjects who are constrained by their environments? …The late 1990s are a turning point from emphasis on resistance, empowerment, and negotiation within oppressive social structures to frames that unmasked secularist biases and expanded the definition to include self-authorship (Avishai, 2016: 265).

Avishai points out that the first feminist understanding of agency has been highly critisised for being "steeped in secularist, liberal, Western biases that disregard local, national cultural arrangements" (267). Using an example of Muslim women who remain within their patriarchal religion while remaining as "thinking, strategizing and planning individuals" has led to an expanded understanding of agency as "resistance, negotiation with oppressive social structures, and partial compliance making many subtle ways of resistance," indicating that "docility did not necessarily compromise agency" (267). Citing Saba Mahmood,

Avishai says that "Women may be agentive in ways that do not align with feminist expectations—such as choosing not to resist unequal social arrangements; embracing the family, nation, or other social structures that feminism sees as a location of oppression or even contributing to the subjugation of others" (Avishai, 2016: 268).

And so, it is with Gaborone bridal showers. One can easily get away feeling that there is no change towards oppressive structures of patriarchal marriage—that women are still being taught to cook, clean, submit, respect, their husbands and to live for their children. Such a conclusion may indeed be justified, especially after listening to some invited keynote speakers and some other commentators, but it is not the whole story. Rather, a closer reading of the data using the lens of generative agency reveals a range of movements between those who seem to maintain the status quo; those who inhabit the in-between spaces and those who are seemingly calling for outright change. While we may seem to be presenting these as three separate perspectives, it is more of a continuum, it is a more ambiguous agency characterized by ambivalence towards the patriarchal institution of marriage, but one which is sure unsettling patriarchy!

Outright Freedom! The Gaborone Bridal Shower Female Space

Accordingly, the Gaborone showers are hundred percent female spaces that have almost developed into an urban female movement due to their

frequency and their ongoing state. It may not be an exaggeration to say that if Gaborone women are not attending one shower or another, they are busy preparing for a forthcoming bridal, baby or Naomi/Laban shower. Preparations for one shower may stretch from two to six months, depending on the type of shower the organizers wish to hold as well as the class of organizers. A series of meetings are held by organizers: identifying friends, church mates, workmates, relatives and other associates of the targeted recipient. The organizers decide on contributions to be made by the closest associates and on presents to be bought. They decide on the dress code and venue. They design the invitation cards, state the required gate pass and send them out. They draw the program for the day and invite speakers. They buy core presents, which may be in consultation with the recipient or a close friend of the recipient who knows her needs, taste and wishes—if it is a surprise shower. For the rest of the invitees, the recipient of the shower selects one or two gift shops for household related-items and writes her wish list. One organizer captured the energy that goes with the process thus:

> Yes! Since Baitse is getting married, what can we do for her? From the group, some suggested we make a surprise bridal shower for her. From there, we formed a solid group taking into consideration the number of members. Sometimes we can reach up to forty people. Then we would consider the contribution fee and reach a consensus on

> popping P300 per member. We then contribute our shares towards the stipulated date of the shower. We then approach the Bride-to-be to enquire about the gifts. The bride to be can suggest a sofa, for example, or a stove. Organizers will then meet to purchase the desired gifts. After purchasing the gift, we would buy meat, sorghum meal, voerwoers and other foods needed to have fun with family and friends. Decorations are then taken care of as you can see nice deco on the tables!

As the above quote points out, when the day of the shower finally comes, the organizers decorate the venue, cook elaborately and welcome all the invitees to a great and joyful celebration of the "Bride-to-be". The organizers have their core gifts all wrapped up—they may include a washing machine, refrigerator, stove, coffee table, sofa—depending on the class or ties of the recipient and her friends' financial capacity. They may also give hard cash to the Bride-to-be from their collected contributions for her to use wherever need arises. The rest of the invited guests bring items such as household utensils of sorts, drawn from the recipient's gift list or from other areas. Many others without material gifts come along, bringing the gift of their presence and verbal advice. Although programs differ, there is usually music and great fun and laughing as the program begins with so much casualness, playfulness and such seriousness. Such a mood of the event is indeed intended, desired and created, for the respondent's

state that, every attendant "must participate and MUST never make the shower boring by behaving like a guest—*moeng ko showereng*!" (Emphasis original). The Setswana expression underlines that members should not carry themselves as guests in a shower. It is a welcoming space, a home for all women regardless of their social status--whether they are carrying a present or not—what is important is that they must feel free and actively participate in the celebration. Hence the respondents underlined that we expect "laughter, joy, outright freedom" and every participant to "speak their minds" and "have all the fun!"

And in this mood of playful seriousness, the bridal shower begins. They surround her, or sit her in front on a princess chair, pray, play games, dance, sing loud and laugh a lot. They finally ask, "where and how did you meet this man—your husband to be?" It is a story that is heard and told with much fun as the listeners become participant listeners, interjecting with laughter, questions, commentary and co-telling. They seem to be having much fun. The mood is that of joyful playfulness. This item is followed by words of advice, *go laya,* to the bride-to-be about all things concerning marriage. The theme of *go laya* is definitely the core business of the showers as almost all participants define the purpose of Bridal Showers as *go laya* while others express it in English phrases saying "to give advice," "to give moral support", "to encourage," "motivate", "share experiences" and "give tips about marriage," among others. Repeatedly, the participants underline *go laya*

as the main purpose of the bridal shower. Out of twenty-four answers, twenty identified *go laya* as the prime purpose. Quantitative data collected from a self-administered questionnaire also indicated that only 40.2% thought that the main purpose of the bridal shower was to give presents while 59.8% disagreed, placing emphasis on moral support, giving advice, guidance and social networking, that is, *go laya.* In some cases, there might be an invited speaker, but in almost all cases, all attendants participate, either after the speaker has spoken, or before she speaks. These collated words of four respondents illustrate the point, underlining that bridal showers seek to:

> bid the Bride farewell, bring gifts, advise her, *go laya*…sort of …[to] come together and create friendships… [to] give presents to the bride, share advice with the bride, *go mo laya* and to socialize… [to] share a moment with a friend before marriage, [to] encourage and motivate her, share experience from the married, single and divorced…to make the bride feel special; celebrate her; help her have a glimpse of what to expect in marriage… to come together as women and support the other, share ideas on marriage to make it work.. [to] make the bride feel supported with women encouraging her, without them there is no way, there is no joy!

These answers, which are thematically typical, indicate that the Gaborone bridal shower movement

is more than just focused on the recipient of the shower. It is rather a female-centered movement and a deliberate creation of a female space which brings women "together" to "create friendships," "socialize" and "share." A Gaborone bridal shower is therefore women's attempt to accompany one woman on her journey into marriage through presence, presents and words of wisdom. Without these women walking along with her, helping her to cross the bridge from single life into marriage (Kebaneilwe et. al. 2018), they insist, "there is no way, no joy for her." In so doing bridal showers build community in the urban space, show *Botho/Ubuntu*, and create a female space and female movement.

***Go laya:* Woman-to-woman talk**

Asked if the main drive behind holding a bridal shower is to give the Bride-to-be material gifts or verbal advice, the respondents underlined the latter, namely *go laya* (Setume et al., 2017: 12). Out of twenty-four answers given to the question of similarities of purpose between the Gaborone bridal showers and the cultural one, twenty answers out of twenty-four said it is all about *go laya*. How does *go laya* in the cultural setting and the urban-based bridal showers of Gaborone construct and deconstruct gender? How do the Gaborone Bridal showers problematize gender? How do they create new female spaces? And how do they maintain the status quo while they are remaking their world? According to Musa W. Dube**,**

> Gender does not distribute power equally between men and women. Men are constructed as public leaders, thinkers, decision-makers and property owners. Women are constructed primarily as domestic beings, who belong to the home or the kitchen, the mothers, wives. They are constructed to be dependent on the property of their husbands, brothers or fathers. Women are constructed to be silent, non-intelligent, emotional, well behaved, non-questioning, obedient faithful to one partner—be they husbands, boyfriends or live-in partners. And so, we think of a good woman as one who takes very good care of her home, children, husband, one who hardly questions or speaks back to her partner and one who remains faithful to her partner (2003: 87).

Go laya is a cultural practice, held either during the wedding day or the day after (Ellece, 2007). Culturally, g*o laya* occurs primarily in the afternoon, after the new wife has taken off her white western white gown and has been dressed in a cultural dress and wrapped in a shawl (*tshale/mogagolwane)* and given a head gear (*tukwi*) that marks her new status as a married woman. Garbing the Bride with these two items (the shawl and head gear) is sometimes performed to start the counselling session by *Mmamalome* (maternal uncle's wife); at other times they dress her up in private then bring her out to the counselling group. *Go laya* is held in *lolwapa,* a

woman's cooking and sitting veranda or in a closed room. The married women all sit down on the floor with outstretched legs – not on chairs. This sitting on the floor with outstretched legs symbolizes a well-founded, relaxed and calm woman. She does not move a lot and shall not be easily moved by the storms that come along in the marriage institution.

In this strictly woman-only session characterized by a heavily somber mood, married and elderly women with covered heads (*ditukwi*) and wearing their traditional blanket shawls (*ditshale/megagolwane*) that reflect their marital status, surround the new wife and counsel her strictly and painfully about her new role and marriage challenges and how she must endure to maintain it. They draw primarily from their experiences. There is some observed order, since *go laya* begins with *mmamalome* (wife to her maternal uncle), followed by *rakgadi* (sister to her father), grandmother, other relatives and married women – they will all individually give their word of wisdom. The newly married woman has no say, save to occasionally say, "Yes. Yes. I am listening," to some counselor who might ask her, "*A wa nkutlwa ngwanaka"* (Are you listening to me my child?) or to look down quietly and respectfully as they speak to her.

Rewriting the space of *Go Laya* in the Gaborone Bridal Showers

Asked about differences and similarities, Gaborone bridal shower participants agree that they share the

same purpose, namely, *go laya*. They are also an exclusively female space. However, they point out that there are differences in terms of timing of the event, the mood, the participants, the attire and the content of *go laya*. Time wise, bridal showers are deliberately scheduled at a few weeks before the actual wedding, for the participants say they know that once the wedding comes, they would not have the authority or space to speak to their friend, who would by then be a new wife. One respondent stated that during the cultural counselling done by married women, they are relegated to the kitchens (cooking and serving guests) noting that *"kana gatwe rona bo ma singili le go feta gaufi re seka ra leka!"* (that is, during the counselling session, we the single ladies should not even be seen passing close to the counselling place!). Another respondent, grateful for the opportunity provided by the bridal shower, pointed out "bridal showers are more accommodative of marital status-- "*bo rona nko re se fa*" (otherwise some of us would not be here for *go laya*). While some bridal showers are held in the afternoon, many are also held during the evening or during the night, a fact the participants believe the Setswana elderly married women would most likely problematize as sessions for unruly behavior.

Speaking of the mood, participants described their bridal showers as "more relaxed," "flexible," "jovial" "more casual," "less stressful," "socially welcoming," "counselling fun," while they described the cultural sessions as "strict," "too formal," "too rigid and secretive" and characterized by "serious

protocol," and "orderly," in terms of who participates, who begins to speak and who follows in the process of *go laya*. In the village, the counseling "done by elders," they say, is "too intense." Monyadi (the Bride), even cries" underlined one participant. Gaborone bridal shower respondents acknowledge that they are aware that in terms of participants, *go laya* the bride-to-be or the new wife, is culturally an exclusive role of married women—so much so that if the mother of the bride and some other relatives are not married, they are excluded from the counselling of their daughters. One participant who had such an experience during her wedding said,

> Bridal showers offer close relatives who are not married an opportunity to advice. For instance, in my case, there was no one who was already married in my family: like my aunt and my mother, no one was married. Even among my mothers' sisters, cousins, nothing…I was the first to get married…. So when it got to counselling at home, they were not allowed to advice, but in the showers they are free to advice. I was left with strangers, people I was not close with at all… because only the married can do the traditional counselling.

In some Botswana cultures, where there is some flexibility (in the northern region), they include elderly women in the counselling session of the bride even if they are not married. Here age, namely, seniority, becomes an additional criterion to marital

status for admission into counselling the bride. In the Tswapong and Bobirwa regions, they do open advice, with every guest standing up to give both a gift and advice at the same time. But in such a practice, the counselling is directed to both the bride and the groom.[8] In the Southern region in particular, the *go laya* session is strictly for and by married women. An adult single woman is excluded from *merero ya lenyalo* (communal discussions of marriage), even if it includes her own children.

In the Gaborone showers, as indicated by the quote above, all participants, regardless of their age and marital status, are free to bring words of wisdom from their life experience or from what they know about heterosexual relationships. The openness to all women, regardless of age and marital status is well attested and strongly underlined from the collected data. Under the section where the interview guide invited respondents to state the "Differences between traditional cultural ways of preparing for marriage and bridal showers," out of the twenty-four answers, 17 named the inclusiveness of bridal showers, while the rest identified time, attire and the mood of the counselling. Again, when participants were invited to talk about "Changes brought by bridal showers versus traditional ways, of the 23 answers rendered, 17 respondents identified "participation of unmarried women at showers," pointing out that "traditional

[8] It is unclear to us if they still carry out an exclusive counselling session for the new wife or if age still matters even in the open counselling

counselling is exclusive (only attended by married women) while bridal showers are more inclusive. Therefore, bridal showers have an impact on the attendees, that is, even the character of some other girls/women is moulded and changed." Collected data concur here that "marital status does not matter" because "even those not married counsel."

This is a major departure from the cultural space of counselling, *go laya;* and it is a very significant one. Not only does it open a space for younger women to listen and be moulded and changed as stated above, but it also dismantles patriarchal gender constructions that present unmarried women as inadequate, hence incomplete persons—a myth and a social device that serves to perpetuate the patriarchal institute of marriage. As Adichie (2014: 30) points out, "Our society teaches a woman at a certain age who is unmarried to see it as a deep personal failure. While a man at the same age, who is unmarried, has not come around to making his pick." A single woman is thus characterized as incomplete, that is, a "Miss," as English language graphically labels every single woman, thus creating pressure for women to seek marriage to become Mrs So and So (Dube, 2003: 94). In addition, the exclusion of unmarried women is also a dismissal of the diversities of families that exist in Botswana. For example, it is statistically attested that the Botswana family is primarily made of single-headed families who make up 50% (SADC, 2012: 16). Gaborone bridal showers' dispersal with marital and age requirement in *go laya* is thus a subversive twist and

an iconoclastic move, as it knocks away a major patriarchal pillar from a woman's space by saying "women need not become married in order to be recognized as successful and wise adults." Dispensing with the requirement for marriage also opens the space for recognizing and affirming varieties of families in the landscape of Botswana. In so doing, Gaborone bridal showers create room for a wider transformation.

Rewriting the contents of *Go Laya* in Gaborone Bridal Showers

Turning to the content, cultural counselling of the new wife includes taking care of the husband, her in-laws, the disabled, the house, the children, endurance and respecting and serving her husband. The new wife is counseled to forgo her friends and to keep the secrets of her house to herself and to avoid discussing them with her friends. If she needs a listening ear, she must go to *mmamalome* or *rakgadi*. This secrecy includes hiding violence where it occurs. Since the counselling of the new wife is an ancient oral tradition, certain counseling messages have become codified sayings (Dube, 2003: 91). These include, "*monna ga a botswe kwa a tswang*" (do not ask your husband where he is coming from, whenever he arrives home); *monna selepe o a amogwana* (a man is an axe that we all use and pass around); *monna poo ga a agelwe lesaka* (a man is a bull, so do not build a kraal for him). In these Setswana cultural teachings, a man is never married, only his wife is married to him. He remains a free roaming "bull" that mates with many cows; a communal cutting axe that

services several other women; and one who does not need to account for his whereabouts and movements. Sexual faithfulness of a husband to his wife is not to be expected and his unfaithfulness is not a reason for leaving the marriage, the elderly married women tell the new wife. She must focus on building her home and raising her children; she must respect and submit to her husband without fail and not allow anything to destroy her marriage.

Bridal showers space and content are suspicious of the cultural counselling held by married women and seek to counteract it both by action and content. As described above, under the section, "Outright Freedom!" the bridal shower mood of playfulness, laughter, joy and casualness counteracts the rigid, secretive cultural approach and seeks to free every woman to speak and to hear. Participants of the bridal shower sit on chairs and tables decorated according to the theme color. While the married women counsellors come embodying marriage authority and status through their attire (*leteisi, ditsale le ditukwi*); while they welcome the bride into the club by garbing her with the same attire that they come wearing; in bridal showers the say, casual wear such as short skirts, hot pants and jeans are fine. The Bride-to-be sits on a princess' chair and is treated to much laughter, games and joy. Her participation is expected, such as, for example, sharing how she met the groom-to-be. The shower recipient wears a dress of her choice, although several times they had a salmon silk banner across her shoulder written, "Bride-to-be."

"Then there is much attestation that the content of the teaching is also delivered with a "twist". Let us take, for example, the classic Setswana sayings about a husband's freedom from accountability about his whereabouts and his freedom to see other women. The respondents say,

> In the village, they advise that *monna ke selepe* (a man is a freely used cutting axe). This is not said in urban settings, where people do not believe this…traditional counseling *monna oa apeelwa, monna gaa botswe dipotso, monna ke tlhogo* (traditional counselling that says a husband must have his food cooked; he should not be asked any questions and he is the head). In the bridal shower flexibility, they give the bride advice that as much as you are getting married, you have a voice. In-laws must not *tshwenya* (oppress) you. Wear trousers if you want… Emang Basadi may be (Botswana feminist movement). Yes at times the bride is advised to demand that the husband must share roles.

Similarly, the discussion under the topic, "What roles have bridal showers changed or reproduced" indicates a subversive twist to the content. One respondent saw the overall goal of bridal showers as a feminist movement, holding that, "At showers women encourage each other not to be docile. There is a bit of feminism—a peaceful feminism." This perspective is underlined by other respondents who held that

> Time has changed. House chores are now 50/50 for men and women. The Bride should continue to hang out with friends…[to] demand, to expect a man to account financially and for his whereabouts, a man must help share tasks …women should hold men accountable for their whereabouts… women are empowered; namely, be the woman you want to be. Women can now work and have the same status as men. Monna (your husband\) must be your friend, not your father—*gase rrago* (he is not your father). We need to overcome gender stereotypes.

The above responses indicate the "modern twist" at work in the content of *go laya* in the bridal showers. They rewrite the content of cultural teaching insisting that a husband must account for his movements and should be faithful. In addition, they insist a woman must remain a "speaking voice." "She must have a voice" and "she must be empowered." They try to reimagine family headship, suggesting friendship between wife and husband than a fatherly authoritative figure. They suggest that household chores should be shared. Moreover, they insist a woman must wear what she wants. Critiquing the cultural content of silence and secrecy, they point out that in traditional counselling, "a woman is told to be quiet even in the face of abuse. Emphasis is on the woman respecting the man." Bridal showers problematize this teaching of silence, of tolerating violence, for "a woman is told to look out for signs of cheating or abuse, while in the village the woman is told to look away when the husband cheats."

The 2010 Gender-Based Violence Indicators Study of Botswana found that "Over two thirds of women in Botswana (67%) have experienced some form of gender violence in their lifetime, including partner and non-partner violence. A smaller but still high proportion of men (44%) admit to perpetrating violence against women (2010: 11). Similarly, Botswana Gender Barometer points out, "Up to two in three women in Botswana have experienced gender-based violence at some point in their lifetime. Sixty percent of women in Botswana reported experiencing intimate partner violence in their lifetime" (2012: 51). The recent BAIS IV results showed that "24.8% of females with early sexual debut reported not giving consent at the time of intercourse" (NACA, 2013: 15). Gaborone Bridal Shower insistence that intimate partner violence must be exposed than swept under the carpet is therefore an important part of dismantling patriarchal pillars in marriage and contributing towards national health.

The Setswana construction of a married man as a free bachelor (bull, axe) who is free to see other women is counteracted in the Gaborone Bridal showers. In the context of HIV and AIDS, Batswana married women and women in heterosexual relationships, be it cohabitation or at dating stage, were highly vulnerable to HIV infection with a patriarchal construction of a Motswana man as a perpetual bachelor (Dube 2015: 531-542). Indeed, HIV and AIDS statistics overwhelmingly indicate their vulnerability. *The SADC Gender Protocol 2012, Botswana Barometer* points out that, "Women and

girls are more vulnerable to HIV infection than men and boys due to biological and socio/cultural factors. These include multiple concurrent relationships, intergenerational relationships, unequal gender and power relations, early marriages and teenage pregnancy among girls" (2012: 71). Indeed the BAIS 1V 2013 report indicates that females are continuing to be the most adversely affected by HIV and AIDS in all its aspects, thirty-six years after the first discovery of the disease" (NACA, 2013: 8-10, 17, 19).

Multiple concurrent partners, voicelessness and powerlessness of women contribute towards their vulnerability. The Gaborone Bridal Shower twists in *go laya*-- their subversive take towards culturally tolerated unfaithfulness of husbands; their insistence that the married woman must retain her voice and hold her husband accountable to faithfulness is a very important one in the HIV and AIDS context. While research has shown that married women tend to be more vulnerable to HIV infection (Browning, 2014) than their single counterparts due to gender-based disempowerment—Gaborone Bridal Showers insist that being a married Motswana woman should not translate into signing oneself to death due to tolerance for multiple-concurrent partners in her husband's life. In the Gaborone Bridal showers *go laya*, a woman is counseled to hold a man accountable for his movements and must look out for signs of cheating. The teaching that *monna ga a botswe kwa a tswang* is not acceptable. In so doing,

their act and talk is a call for justice between genders (Dube, 2001:82-115).

In addition, Bridal showers discuss new topics that are not normally discussed in the cultural setting, namely, sexuality and finances. On sexuality, they do not only discuss and exchange ideas about bedroom tactics, but they also encourage a woman to enjoy herself—as an active participant, then only serving the pleasure of her husband. In other words, "there is fun in marriage—sex is important for both and styles of doing sex are many" observed one participant. The subject of finances comes up several times in the content of Gaborone Bridal Showers. They encourage the woman to hold the husband accountable in the finances of the home, partly because the wife is herself a working woman who contributes to the family finances. This contribution of the woman becomes a lever for negotiating for more power, for the held that "women offer financial support in the family" which legitimates "equal partnership." Clearly the Gaborone Bridal Showers make great efforts to stand up to their desire to create a space of 'outright freedom" by rewriting gender roles—they underline that if a woman becomes a wife, she must be a free wife—a woman with a voice.

The in-between spaces of Gaborone Bridal Showers

Nonetheless, whilst the paper may run the risk of sounding as if it was all subversive in the Gaborone bridal showers, and that the cultural counseling done in the villages and the Gaborone urban showers are two opposites, this should be best seen as a strategy

of presentation. Just as they both take up the role of *go laya,* they overlap. Just because in the cultural setting they teach a woman to be docile does not necessarily mean she is not resisting patriarchy in some way. Consequently, there are two more perspectives that need our brief attention from Gaborone Bridal Showers:

a. Those who stand in the in-between space, oscillating between the cultural end and the new boundaries created in the bridal shower, and.
b. The skeptical and critical voices against the subversive twists of the bridal shower.

To start with those who stand in-between and speak from the third space (Dube 2012), they probably represent the majority, for by giving household gifts, most bridal showers somewhat embrace the construction of a woman as one who belongs to the kitchen and manages the home, while creating a new shift. In the two-themed focus of this paper's analysis, namely, similarities and difference with *go laya* in the cultural space and changes brought by bridal showers, there were altogether 46 answers, five of which qualify as occupying in-between spaces. The latter perspective maintains a creative tension, oscillating between the cultural perspectives and the new ways inaugurated by urban bridal showers. So, concerning the theme of changes brought by bridal showers versus traditional ways, there were two answers that occupied this space. Here, the respondents held that, in Gaborone bridal showers a major change lies in opening an inclusive

space for all women, but insisted that concerning the content of g*o laya*, it is the same. On the question of "What roles have bridal showers changed or reproduced," there were three out of twenty-four answers whose response took the in-between space. They insisted that in bridal showers it is taught that "women should hold men more accountable on their whereabouts, but in most cases roles do not change." This creative tension is perhaps best captured by the following response:

> [The] Bride adopts new things during these showers. She learns about bedroom tactics. She is still the wife, but she has to take action in bed. Thus, her role is changed—no passivity now. She has to cook for him and take care of him as well. Traditional counselling speak of the obvious roles, but we teach her to be a contemporary wife (take charge in the bedroom) but also to cook, iron, so that you (a wife) has both the Setswana that is upgraded. In so doing, we don't live like *makgoa* (white people). Women's roles have changed a bit. A woman is still a woman, but she should take charge a bit in finances. Women work and have money. (Interview C).

In-betweeners are go-betweeners – chameleons who change colors as they cross various boundaries to trick the system (Dube, 2016:222-235). They are not what they seem or say they are. They are tricksters (Dube, 2015:890-900). Hence these respondents

repeatedly underline that she is still a wife, but her role is changed." If there is one thing in-betweeners surely attest to, it is the "unsettling" power of the Gaborone Bridal Showers, as well as the unsettling power of persistent patriarchy.

Critical and skeptical voices of the Gaborone Bridal Showers

There are some participants who are critical and skeptical of the changes inaugurated by bridal showers. Their sympathies lie with the traditional ways of *go laya.* Again, when invited to speak of the differences and similarities, one respondent said apart from the inclusivity of the bridal showers, their content of *go laya* is the same as the cultural one. The second critical respondent did not appreciate that single women are allowed to participate in counselling, pointing out that "*kana* this person *o bua fela ga a na* evidence. You need to talk from experience" (8:34). Her main criticism of single people's participation in *go laya* is that they do not have the necessary experience to counsel the bride-to-be. Experience here is equated with married women's experience. Women in co-habitation, divorced ones and single women in other heterosexual relationships are dismissed.

Concerning the question about changes inaugurated by Gaborone Bridal Showers, there were several critical respondents. Out of the twenty-four answers, ten denied that there were any particular changes introduced by bridal showers. Their answers to this question were characterized by "none" "not much"

or "*go tshwana fela*" (i.e., it is just the same) and that there is "no initiative" to bring change. Others asserted that "women should take care of their husbands; women are taught how to cook and to clean" while another held that "not much – women still must cook, take care of children and husband." Two respondents defended culture against the desire to seek change. One of them held that, "We are where we are because of our culture. People (women) should humble themselves. People need to understand their purpose; You are a woman; he is a man." Dismissing the proposed changes as unpractical bookish feminist myths, another asserted that "most of the time we affirm cultural activities," while the rest is, "*ke dilo tsa dibuka fela tsa bo tekatekanyo ya banna le basadi"* (8:36) that is, unproven feminist theories of equality. This respondent is backed by another who says, "*Ga rona fa ke ditoro,*" that is, changes proposed in bridal showers are nothing but daydreams. For another respondent, the problem was that bridal showers do not have the last word; rather the latter lies with the elderly married women who will do *go laya* during the wedding day. She asserted, "None [no changes are made]. *Kana* here at the shower we can say what we want to say but *kwa ba ya go mo apesa kobo le sekopelo,* that is what is going to work in their home. *E bile kana monna wa laiwa, rona fa re laya mosadi fela.* This cannot work *ko lapeng."*

These critical voices are a very important attestation to the unsettling of patriarchy in Gaborone Bridal Showers. The hard critic who says, "*ga rona ke*

ditoro fela;" namely, that bridal showers teachings and activities are tantamount to daydreaming, attests to see change in the teaching and act of the GBS. She certainly does not like what she hears and what is happening in comparison with the cultural space of *go laya*—but her critical words attest to the "unsettling of patriarchy," which she chooses to dismiss as mere daydreaming because it is too radical. So does the critic who says there is much bookish feminism which, according to her, is impracticable theory– "*ke dilo tsa dibuka fela tsa bo tekatekanyo ya banna le basadi.*" Her comment testifies that the content of Gaborone Bridal Showers does upset the patriarchal status quo. It unsettles patriarchy. The despair of the other critic is not the content itself, but rather that elderly married women will have the last word and even dress her up with the garb of married Motswana women (*"baya go mo apesa kobo le sekopelo"*), and that their words will prevail. Her comment does not deny that GBS shower content and process unsettle patriarchy. Although elderly married will drill the bride in silence, her silence is not equal to compliance. In her paper, "The liberative Power of Silent Agency," Alice Yafeh-Deigh (2012) insists that we should be aware that there is silent agency; namely, that subjects who remain silent without verbally expressing their dissent should not be taken to be unresisting subjects. Whether or not elderly married women's *go laya* overrides the words of urban showers is really a subject of another research, namely, to evaluate the impact of GBS on its

recipients. A follow-up longitudinal study will be in order.

Conclusion

Our analysis of data from Gaborone Bridal showers used theories of agency propounded by Avishai and Mahmood, drawn from religious women. They highlight "agency as resistance that might also appear as 'negotiation with oppressive social structures and partial compliance,' thereby indicating that "docility did not necessarily compromise agency" (Avishai, 2016: 267). Bridal showers are undoubtedly about women encouraging and accompanying another woman to enter a very patriarchal institution, namely, heterosexual marriage, so its agentic angle had to be examined carefully. The analysis of data asked the following questions from interview guides: How does *go laya* in the cultural setting and the urban-based bridal showers of Gaborone construct and deconstruct gender? How do they create new female spaces? How do the Gaborone Bridal showers problematize gender? And how do they maintain the status quo while they are remaking, rewriting and translating their world (Dube & Wafula 2017)? There are sufficient evidence-based conclusions that Gaborone Bridal showers are Botho-Ubuntu centred, for they seek to empower the other to live a humane and dignified life. But their Ubuntu-Botho is also unsettling to patriarchy. The context and content of the Gaborone bridal shower, with its insistence on "outright freedom" and that every woman is welcome to talk regardless of age and marital status, creates an inclusive space that resists equating

women's full humanity with heterosexual marriage. Even the most conservative voices acknowledged radical inclusivity as a change brought by Gaborone Bridal Showers in the *go laya* female space. Ubuntu-Botho, as embodied and practised by the Gaborone shower movement, does not uniliterally embrace all traditions and cultures, even when clearly dehumanizing.

Content wise, evidence-based findings indicate iconoclastic twists in *go laya*, insisting that a married woman must keep her voice, keep her friends, wear what she wants, hold the man accountable financially, insist on faithfulness, insist on shared household chores, watch out for intimate partner violence, enjoy her sexuality and pursue her profession. It is, therefore, not an exaggeration that Gaborone Bridal showers are unsettling patriarchy and practicing transformative Ubuntu/Botho. In their own words, they even refer to what they do as some form of feminism. For example, one respondent used the phrase "*Emang Basadi*" (Literary meaning "Stand Up, Women"), which is the name of the Botswana national women's/feminist movement. Gaborone Bridal showers also counteract poverty and contribute towards building justice-loving communities through their "peaceful feminism." By accompanying a young woman entering marriage materially and wisdom wise, they counteract poverty and lay foundation for a different family. A young woman starting a new family has household items for beginning a new home, including hard cash for other arising needs. In so

doing, the Gaborone Bridal Showers generate *Botho/Ubuntu*-centred families and communities that are intolerant to injustice and poverty. Indeed, where *Botho/Ubuntu* exists there should not be any discrimination and oppression. The Gaborone Bridal Showers practically demonstrate feminist perspectives of *Botho/Ubuntu* as an understanding that equates one's human identity with the capacity to respect, welcome, care for and empower the other.

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